

## FOLK MUSIC IN NIGERIA: A COMMUNION

*by*

MEKI NZEWI

Folk music in Nigeria evolved as a corporate communal experience. It has been sustained as such, and continues to expand and enrich its resources as it crumbles ethnic barriers, incorporating broader geographical communities as it extends its ethnic identity. By this is postulated that folk music had narrow ethnic identities. Then through human tendencies of social interaction, direct borrowing and unconscious assimilation folk music began to identify larger ethnic unions in style and content. More recently, as a result of improved communication, education, other agencies of modern civilisation and neo-cultural aspirations, folk music areas in Nigeria are diffusing more and more into one another to form larger homogeneous blocks.

More than ever before, styles and contents which identified specific folk music units can now be found in other previously unrelated folk music areas, especially in instrumentation, visual art (including costume and masquerades), dance and even musicological content. Language and its inevitable imposition on melodic structure seems to be the strongest differential nowadays that identifies original Nigerian folk music areas. Even the textual communications and source-themes of folk music areas are now sharing common inspirations. This should probably not be a surprise since topical inspirations have always formed a sizeable proportion of the folk music source-themes of any people. And Nigerian ethnic groups continue to share more and more a unified topical inspiration for artistic creativity.

Folk music in Nigeria happens not to be a communion of the living only. It is equally a communion between the living and their dead, manifest in the preference for the cryptic potencies of inherited ancient instruments, costumery, symbols and formulae; the reverential deference to traditional modes and rituals, including libation and sacrifice; and in the characterised dance and dramatic representations of ancestral masquerades.

Folk music is also a direct psychical communion between the people and deities/spirits who are characterised and who manifest themselves in some dances and masquerades. It is equally a communion between the people and the mythified phenomena of nature: the thunderstorms, the lightnings, tornadoes, the sky, the mother earth, the sun, the moon; the nature spirits. All these are manifest in the instruments, their performance requirements and implications; in the music types, forms and textures, in the performance rites and language.

Finally, folk music is an identity with the environment as witnessed in the imitation of animal sounds in folk music, the characterisation of animal behaviours in mime, masquerade and other forms; the folk thought that determines choice of material for instrument building with regard for the latent and imbued tone quality, resonance and cryptic potentials; the use of water for toning, resonance and tuning

of some instruments; the various dance motifs that are inspired by bird and animal movements; most of all in the folk music worship and laudation of some of these life forms and nature.

It could be said that every culturally rooted Nigerian is a folk musician/dancer/dramatist in as much as folk music practice involves every member of the community at one time or the other either as a committed spectator-participant or as a performing artist-participant. Though folk music has a general ethnic involvement, there is traditional recognition of accomplished exponents: the raconteur, the soloist singer, the master instrumentalist, the accomplished dancer, the skilled costumer, the imaginative carver, the ingenious mime-actor, the absorbing dramatist, the prolific composer, the witty extemporiser.

In his capacity as any, some, or even all of the above (most artists specialise in more than one aspect), the talented folk musician has a ready wit (often incisive) to enliven his power and style of delivery. Wit becomes an invaluable asset especially when the artist is required to extemporise. The folk musician possesses abundant gift of melodic and rhythmic innovativeness which accentuates the expressiveness of his texts and movements. A declamatory or singing voice (vocal or instrumental) that satisfies the ethnic concept of admirable voice quality is cherished and respected. Above all a confident grasp of the language of folk music in all its dimensions, and a resourceful talent, sharp on improvisation on any theme (whether of song, text, dance, dramatic hint or instrumental melorhythms) distinguish the masters from the generality. Though there may be no recognised subsistence professionals per se in most Nigerian ethnic cultures, there are amateur professionals



Talents are discovered early in life and could develop into maturity at tender age

who are renowned exponents in spite of their other subsistence occupations. Subsistence professionals, where they are found, are more often palace/court musicians and are generally regarded as members of the ruler's household. Some Nigerian ethnic groups also have professionals who operate as itinerant minstrels and versatile praise singers. These itinerant professionals depend on alms and gifts rather than professional artist fees for their livelihood.

Every Nigerian ethnic society recognises the need for the perpetuation of its cultural heritage. The society is therefore concerned that there should be no dearth of specialists and masters as a result of the retirement or decease of the older generation (though retirement due to old age is not common. Most healthy aged artists continue in active participation until death).

Talent and expertise are therefore acclaimed and sought for. Uninhibited scope for the development of budding artists is provided through opportunity for constant practice and self development, apprenticeship and coaching. Talents are discovered early in life and are encouraged through constant surveillance, and could develop into artistic maturity even at a tender age.

Folk music artists emerge as a result of various circumstances of birth or upbringing. He could be a spotted talent in children's groups who is immediately elevated to adult groups for more intensive and purposeful coaching.

Some folk artists acquire skill and dexterity as a result of inescapable social impositions. Such could be bondsmen, servants or priests of certain shrines, gods or other religious and temporal institutions who in consequence thereof also serve as musicians to the cult, shrine or institution. They are thus freed from care or chore to aspire towards proficiency in whatever aspect of folk music activity is demanded of them.

Proficiency in folk music performance could be acquired through birth or heritage. The children, born into musical families (drum families, raconteur or historic singing families, families that are personal musicians of courts or stately personages etc.), have little scope or choice of deviating from their parents' professions or social status. They get absorbed assisting their parents and grow up stepping into their profession specialisation.

There could also be other environmental, occupational or social impositions demanding or encouraging the acquisition of musical skill by those affected. Boredom, it could be argued, pushes most women, especially secluded harem women of moslem courts and families, to engage in the acquisition of peculiar music skills. *Shantu* is a typical harem music which takes its name from the instrument *shantu* played by the women. Music making becomes a major diversion that alleviates the otherwise unrelieved doldrums of harem boredom. It could be hypothesised that boredom, after early man's spare subsistence engagements, must have been one of the earliest birth causes of folk music making. Boredom up to this day helps to sustain the growth of music generally. (Most folk music and cultural celebrations are planned to fall within the lull periods in traditional agricultural calendars.)

The physical nature and environmental circumstances of certain occupations have made folk musicians with peculiar musical styles, forms and textures, of people in certain professions like voyaging fishermen and canoe transporters, labourers in the field and prisoners cutting grass in the fields.

More recently educational circumstances and facilities have directly or indirectly encouraged proficiency in folk music skills through deliberate practical training of

children of school age. Other agencies include organised performance competitions and more recently an overwhelming cultural nationalism.

The tempo and temper of this cultural nationalism has given rise to export folk music<sup>1</sup> styles which, though based on the artistic principles and disciplines of traditional folk types, have a completely new cultural orientation. This eruption of new cultural orientation that has no commitment to the ideals of the traditional types has supplanted the intrinsic socio-political values and services, spiritual sustenance and functional import of the old traditional folk art. Encouraged by Nigeria's new national value system, the export folk music types have at the same time shed most of the ethnic spiritual, social, moral, aesthetic and artistic implications and communions that gave vitality to their traditional sources. It is only to be hoped that soon the motivations, the zeal of this vague but flamboyant cultural nationalism that inspires and promotes export traditional art, would also inspire Nigerians to pause, look inwards and analyse some new trends for sense of direction. The export traditional arts have lots of potentialities and recommendations. But it might be necessary to ponder whether the emphasized aesthetics need to be reimbued with the salutary ethical values and implications of traditional folk art. These values which gave folk music essence and commitment also gave meaning and identity to the lives of our fore-fathers and might equally help the present and future generations of Nigerians search for meaning (of life and its essence) and identity (cultural, national, political, spiritual and ethical).

Nigerian folk music as an ethnic cultural communion is variously involved as an essence in the life and livingness of its ethnic societies as follows:

#### **Folk music as festival**

A festival could be defined as any event based on group communion, that exuberates the communal expressive ingenuities (artistic and ceremonial) of the group.

The theme and atmosphere of the communion could be solemn, joyous or sad. Whatever the mood the theme of a folk festival is contained and alive in, determined and expressed by, its music accompaniment/commentator/orchestrator. There are therefore different types of music belonging to and identifying various themes, moods, conduct and expressions of folk festivals. There are also general types of folk music that adjust to, and are employed to enrich and enliven each differentiation of festival mood.

Festival for an average Nigerian ethnic community is usually copious in scope (though these days some are rather thematically scanty in ceremonial/ritual observance). This vast scope, which gives festivals deeper and wider commitment and communion, is fulfilled by folk music in all its elements.

Remove folk music (both the special festival-theme types and the general festive types) from a festival, and what would be left of the conduct of the theme to make a festival? There would be no unified assertion of the interests of the involved group. There would be neither atmosphere nor mood for the expression of community involvement. Worse still, since practically all folk festival themes identify, regenerate and reaffirm the people's life commitments and aspirations, the essential committed participation of their gods and spirits that ensure them would be missed. To fraternize with men the gods and spirits demand an atmosphere psychically elevated and ionized above mere human life frequencies. In the absence

of folk music which provides the atmosphere, these gods/spirits would not be aroused to accept oblations and obligations. Folk music is the prime agency through which the bond between the living and the gods and ancestors is articulated and reaffirmed during and after satisfactory offerings and sacrifices. It is folk music in all its aspects that attests publicly and eternally to the communion between the living of the same interest-commitment; and between the living and the manifold operative supernatural interests. This public attestation in all its ceremonial, artistic and spiritual scope constitutes festival.

#### Illustrative sketches

1. In Abua, Rivers State, the timing of *Onwuema*, the all embracing and most important spiritual masquerade festival, coincides

with the high water periods when the guardian spirits enter the town with the high tide. Their participation is essential because they team up with the people in performing the spiritual task of *Onwuema*: purification of the entire town of the evils and misfortunes of the passing year, before *Eyal* – festival of the ancestors. The accompanying folk music making and other festivities are therefore a communion in which the living, the spirits and the ancestors are involved participants. The *Eyal* festival itself is centred at the group shrine, *Eruk ogboko*, where a hut houses the god of Abua, Ake-Abua, which is represented as a massive carved talking drum. When, therefore, the drum resounds during the ritual celebrations, it is Ake-Abua talking on behalf of the gods and ancestors, while the people contribute their parallel rejoinder in the chorus chants of the women in front of the shrine. After the communion between the people and the ultra mundane agencies, the people gather in the village square to adumbrate their communal fellowship and solidarity in further folk music pulsated celebrations.<sup>2</sup>

2. The New Yam festival is probably the most widespread festival in a great majority of Nigerian ethnic groups. It is usually an elaborate festival marked by harvesting-the-new-yam-ritual. (There could be established severe penalties in a community for harvesting new yam before this ritual.) Feasting (on variously prepared dishes of new yam) and abundant variety of communal folk music activities are common features of this celebration in all communities that observe it. In some communities, it equally marks the traditional New Year. In Egbema, the



Festival atmosphere: the esoteric spirits materialise to commune with the humans

festival lasts for two traditional weeks (eight days) with specific activities marking each day and involving communal participation in one form or the other. For instance, there is a special 'peace day'; wrestling day; days prohibiting any form of farm labour; and days in which farm labour and fishing could take place despite the prescribed festival activities.

### Folk music as worship

Folk worship comes as both active, spontaneous and deliberated expressions of feelings towards the superior, the overwhelming or the intangibles that affect the lives of, and are credited with mystifying responsibilities in the lives of the individual or the community. The feelings could be of sacrifice, adoration, obeisance, thanksgiving, supplication, dedication, imploration, inquiry etc. Worship finds its most respectful and satisfying mode of address in music. More so when it takes the form of powerful communal invocation. Not only do the forms of speech change, but also the tone and style of delivery differ from that of everyday communication. Even the proper mood for the response (verbally or visually manifested), acceptance or involvement of the addressee has to be further induced through the accompanying incidence of dancing, music-making and often theatricalisms. These could come as intermittent channels to enhance the desired atmosphere and accentuate the address proper. Or they, as folk music theatre, could constitute the essential persistent channel of devotional rapport. The verbal address proper comes in such music/language forms as speech-song, narrative-recitative, or declamatory-recitative.

The art of invocation is practised when the society wishes to commune with a deity or spirit. It is believed that the particular deity/spirit would give verbal or demonstrative answer to the demands of its worshippers. For this purpose, human mediums, whom the spirits or the deities will possess, are at times necessary. On being possessed, such a medium undergoes a personality switch and is expected to act the deity/spirit that has displaced his individuality. That is, his identity ceases to be his, and becomes that of the deity he is serving. Folk music is the dominant feature of these worships. A deity or spirit may even have its own special folk music which depicts its character, and which alone can summon its presence. The medium is expected to mime the character of the possessing deity/spirit through dances or dance-drama. For instance, a rough, volatile-spirited deity/spirit would be worshipped with eruptive and sometimes dangerous mime-manoeuvres. Medium-dancing or mime-dancing has more recently developed outside the environment of functional deity-worship, and has acquired additional utility of providing public entertainments.

Worship becomes a festival when the demands of the purpose of worship call for celebrations carried beyond the precincts and rituals of worship. In the ritual of worship, there is usually provision for a communal psychic communion with the invisible addressees of the worship through folk music. It could be a provision for animated dancing chorus of participants elevating the atmosphere for the attendance and participation of the invisible partners, as well as inspiration for the rituals of worship within the sanctuary of the precincts. It could be in the form of the officiating priest's solo deliveries on behalf of the agog community punctuated with chorus responses – elaborate, embryonic or interjectory; rehearsed or extemporised; with instrumental action-rhythm accompaniments. The community spirit of the

worshippers must be aroused, committed and enhanced through active participation in order to achieve the reciprocal involvement, communion and response of the attendant deities/spirits.

Folk music, therefore, in all its elements and applications has latent psychological, psychical and spiritualizing essence: it is an ethnic communion that portrays group spirit, thoughts, myths and aspirations. At the same time it is a bond, the umbilical cord that links the group with the ultra-terrestrial forces whose potencies are made manifest in various awe-inspiring, phenomenal and unpredictable ways in their lives. Folk music is, therefore, an expression, the vehicle as well as the worship, of folk myth.

#### Some illustrations

1. In the worship of Obatala in Ede, Yoruba, the *oriki* of the *orisa* is sung by the women before the ritual sacrifice. Then the day's festivity is concluded with procession and dancing, with the king leading. The ceremonial fight between the Ajagemo (Chief Priest of Obatala) and Jagun (another priest) forms the main spectacle of the second day of worship and is conducted throughout in music, dance and mime. The deep spiritual passion which pervades the entire celebrations and affects the celebrants and spectators alike is evoked through the involved folk music presence which in fact conducts the essentials of the worship.<sup>3</sup>

2. The annual ceremonial rituals of divine kingship of the Oba of Benin include a festive ceremonial worship, in public, in memory of the spirit of the refounding Oba – Eweka II. In a procession to Ugha Erhoba the reigning Oba is preceded, escorted, cheered, praised and directed by folk music. As the sacrifices to various temperaments of spirits, the late Obas and mother earth are being performed by the priests, a catalogue of folk music activities involving the Oba, his chiefs and the people as a corporate ethnic entity, keeps a communal rapport between the recipients of the sacrifice and the entity offering them.

After a night of folk music festival which keeps vigil in the palace grounds till dawn, the *Igue* rites of the divine person of the reigning Oba are performed. The officiating priest conducts the elaborate ritual in songs, in full view of the public.

The final ceremony of *Ugie-Ewere* (a jubilant conclusion of the annual kingship rites) would equally be bare, meaningless, unacceptable and depersonalised if attempted as a non-folk-music-realised ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

3. In the annual worships of the Agemo deity in Ijebu, Yoruba, music of persistent rhythm accompanies the rituals. The festivities last for thirteen or seventeen days depending on the decision of the conference of Agemo priests. At each stage of the festival and worship, there are folk music activities involving the Awujale, the priests and the people at one time or the other as either action-participants or audience participants. Whether performed in homes or in groves of the *orisa* where his image is housed, the powerful Agemo deity is a spirit presence, in communion with his people. Earlier on, as a preliminary to the festival and worship, the gates of the town had been opened to the deity in the ceremony of *Ireku*.

### Folk music as social commentator

Every society has a system of laws, social ethics and precepts. Every member of the society is bound to conform to certain obligations and codes of conduct within the society. Modern societies use modern institutional agencies to promulgate and maintain law and order, and for binding people to their social and moral obligations.

Prior to these, the Nigerian folk societies had traditional institutions for the purpose. But then they used folk music as an accredited ubiquitous ombudsman, the uninhibited news agent and watchdog overseeing the operation of the society's traditional laws. In short, folk music tactics kept every citizen on his guard and alive to society's expectations of him. It ensured that all obligations were observed by all classes and functionaries of citizenry. Folk music spied, spotted, investigated, broadcast, censured and satirized defaulters, malcontents, criminals, immorality and constituted the organ for their indelible social ostracism. On the other hand, folk music equally exemplified and commended good citizenship.

Folk music was also a powerful public information medium. It broadcast all forms of news, made public announcements (through message drums and town criers), helped to organise public occasions and functions; kept a watchful ear on gossip and newsworthy occurrences which would eventually be newscast in reviews



A popular dancer-raconteur and an assistant surrounded by his audience



of the event.

In order to perform this essential public service, folk music as a public servant was by its institution traditionally above and beyond pressure, corruption and intimidation. Folk music was protected by the society from acts of recrimination. It would not be held responsible in any way for any damages – practical or psychological – suffered by its victims. The society protected folk music in order that folk music would fearlessly criticise its systems and conduct, thus protecting the society from itself.

It is primarily through its language that folk music performs its role as social commentator. Folk music voices its commentary as satires, sarcasms, puns, allegories, innuendoes, or simply as bare comments. The language could be direct or indirect, personal or oblique depending on the subtleties of delivery favoured by the performing group; the effect desired on the subject as well as on the audience; the substance and lesson of the comment vis-à-vis acceptable social decorum.

The costume of the delivery itself could present the artists as masked or unmasked. The theatre could be seen or concealed from public view in order to excite mystification as well as provide additional protection from harassment to the group's identity. Such secret groups therefore perform mainly at night or as occult groups. The theatre of delivery preferred by a group is dependent on the nature and gravity of issues to be handled, the sex of the group (female groups with few exceptions prefer unmasked deliveries) and other functions of the group in the society.

In its task of unstinted public and self criticism, folk music provides a communal basis for propagating and protecting the society's ideals and precepts. There is however need to mention here that no matter to whatever function it commits itself folk music almost always retains its very basic essence as an entertainer.

#### Some illustrations

1. *Ekpri Akata* is a mobile musician-masquerade in Calabar, Efik. With his followers, he specialises in vigorously publicising current rumours and gossips in the society. His style could be crude, but his role has a social corrective or inhibitory impact on the community. He walks the village at nights singing his exposé, but could visit homes to drive home his messages. Traditionally, *Ekpri Akata* is above any form of vengeful action from social offenders thus exposed, no matter of what status. *Ekpri Akata's* password is an adage: "He who says what he sees is not a rumour pedlar".<sup>5</sup>

2. The *Onyekulie* folk music group in Idemili, Igbo, performs at night. It is a group that specialises in social comments and current gossips. Their deliveries come in stinging, though humorous coinages. If they have to perform in the day time, the musicians usually move around in a completely covered grass dome.

Its prototype, the *Mmanwu abani* group in Nnewi, Igbo, performs to a night audience of seated villagers. The venue could be an open square or the court yard of their host – when specially invited. Lighting is usually the moonlight or dull flickers of terra cotta oil lamps. Though regarded as an entertainment group with pithy hilarious language style, and though the scantily masked performers may be known to village members in the audience, the lead singer and his chorus freely expose,

chastise, scorn, satirize and lacerate in poignant language (though employing mirliton voice-masking) the community and its members whether present or absent from the performance (more so if present), whose conducts in the community have transgressed ethnic mores. Though using set melodic structures, the raconteur (of abundant abrasive wit and humour) has to be an ingenious extemporiser as well.

3. *Mbom Uzo Umunwany* is a special day during the *Mbom uzo* traditional rites in Ezeoke, Igbo, set aside for the rites of married Ezeoke womanhood. A female town crier goes round the town to warn the community of the date. In the evening of this special day, while the married women troop down to Urashi stream for the exclusive, very intimate initiation rites which are performed on the new wives of Ezeoke, the men stay indoors. After the rites at the stream, the women jubilantly move back to the village square, to sing and dance till night. The texts of their songs on this occasion pay little heed to decorum. They discuss feminine intimacies in such lusty intimate language that even though there is no traditional ban on men being spectators at this stage, their menfolk usually never have the face to stand up to the feminine wisecracks. Nevertheless, the language of the songs serves as instructions, advice and folk-womanhood-philosophies for the benefits and guidance of the new wives of Ezeoke who have just undergone initiation rites and have thereby been accepted with full credentials into Ezeoke womanhood. Thereafter, these new wives would be free to sit in women's meetings and participate in the women's affairs of the town.

4. Amongst the Kanuri, the marriage event (*nyia*) is heralded the night previous by a jamboree of *bala* drumming and female chorus singing. In the morning, the *dila* ceremony (the traditional kneeling and standing of the bride to the further accompaniment of calabash music) enriches the *bala* drumming and chorus singing. *Bala* music activities continue from that evening till the following morning while the new bride is in confinement getting instructions on married life. After the marriage ceremony the second morning (the actual rite of marriage is conducted by proxy), *bala* drumming and bridesmaids' songs resume to orchestrate the other ceremonies, and finally conduct the bride to her husband's house. That night, a 'bloody' marriage consummation is announced to the town by an exultant music-making band of bridesmaids beating pans. The following morning, *bala* drumming and singing accompany the final ceremonies of these elaborate marriage proceedings.<sup>6</sup>

### Folk music in community polity

Folk music is an ubiquitous society organiser. It supervises the operation of established government; checks the abuse of the machinery of government; assists in the maintenance of the laws of the land; safeguards and perpetuates tradition; discourages the degeneration of personal or corporate morals; promotes social equity and fights injustice; crowns rulers; welcomes birth, buries the dead; enforces public health programmes; generally organises and enlivens all purposes of communal get-together.

Folk music assists the folk governmental system in collecting dues and fines; in promoting and marshalling community and group labour. It celebrates communal accomplishments; officiates in the administration and execution of justice; extols

and popularises good, progressive government while it warns, exposes, heckles, as well as being instrumental in correcting or overthrowing unpopular government. Folk music rallies the community.

Folk thought recognises that between deities, spirits, men and the cosmic forces there must be constant fellowship to celebrate contracts mutually binding and respected by any parties involved. Thus there is allocation and definition of duties and obligations. Each obliger no matter how high or lowly, revered or feared, weak or strong, destructive or constructive, human or intangible must discharge its assigned obligations to the other/s for a smooth and harmonious functioning of the cosmos.

There are provisions prescribed by men (the society) for acknowledging the contributions, favours and even formal discharge of obligations by any of the forces in mutual communion with living partners. Equally, there are also provisions for querying or discrediting publicly any dereliction of duty. The folk philosophy is that the eagle and the hawk (even if incompatible) must perch: let ill befall the selfish or uncooperative party. So also in all their interactions: whoever obliges, defaults, oversteps or disappoints whether intentionally or unintentionally is appropriately acknowledged, disowned, reprobated, or cautioned as the case may be. In all these arrangements, the channel for communication and the acceptable venue for occasional or seasonal communion of relevant parties, tangible or intangible, is folk music.

Folk music is the perpetuator of the people's systems and beliefs; a repository of their folk philosophy, historical records, world and general knowledge; the recorder of their mores; the gazette of their past and current life and events; the archive of folk instructions; an educational agent for moral, spiritual, artistic, aesthetic, matrimonial lessons; for instructions on sex, propriety, self control, self discipline and physical fitness.

All these are traditional prescriptions that enhance a healthy polity.

Some illustrations

1. *Anko* music in Calabar, though highly esoteric (it belongs to *Anko* cult) is a purification



Water spirits and monstrous animal shapes continue to inform folk music practices

music which is performed about midnight whenever there is need to purge or purify the community of any form or threat of evil affliction or pollution like epidemic, abominable death etc. Because *Anko* music is believed to drive away demons and evil spirits that cause such afflictions, whenever it is played people keep their houses and cooking utensils clean. No cooked food is left overnight. These precautions are mandatory for self and group protection. Otherwise the fleeing demons, it is believed, would take refuge in unclean household property or in left-over meals. As an extra personal precaution, people are expected to sleep with their faces and bellies flat on their beds when *Anko* music is played.<sup>7</sup>

2. Folk tale songs relate mythical and legendary exploits, and illustrate morals, using human characters or their animal prototypes to instruct the children on the expected and acceptable codes of behaviour demanded by the society. Application of wit as an essential weapon of survival is stressed. Compensations for patience, humility, good deeds, perseverance are vividly remarked. Punishments and ill fortunes for disobedience, disrespect, haughtiness, immodesty, greediness, intemperance, laziness, selfishness, inordinate ambition and other social, moral or religious malbehaviours are emphatically stressed by the tales and songs. The interaction, conflict, fellowship between the deities, the spirits, the elements and the humans are features of most tales, which are passed on in folk music form, or narratives punctuated with choruses. Thus from childhood the younger members learn to respect these relationships, and model their conducts and ambitions on the lessons of folk tales. In most instances a moral concludes and summarises each tale or song.

### Folk music as a palliative

There are modes of folk music which affect the psyches of the owners in various ways. Some folk musics have palliative effects on the sick. Some, like the type used by broken-bone menders, are believed to aid the healing of wounds. Some aid mental and spiritual healing. Some induce soporific states ideal for the administration of certain cures and treatments. But more generally, folk music acts as a palliative in healing conditions and environments, and affects various states of mental disquietude.

Palliative music could be self administered, that is when the sick reaches out for succour by playing or singing to himself certain moods or prescriptions of music that would alleviate mental stress or state. Generally it is played in prescribed manners in prescribed venues and states of sickness. The performance could be by a specialised group or artist. It could involve active group participation using set pieces. It could be provided by the medicine man himself with or without the aid of his assistants, especially in instances that do not prescribe healing in public view. The sick could be an active physical participant or a physically passive but psychically active participant in the music-making. Palliative music could employ special instruments ascribed with potent therapeutic qualities when played.

Folk music could condition the mind for occult healing arts without being credited as the curative element. It could induce a possession state required for communicating curative processes and often for driving away aggressive or unwelcome spirits. Folk music could also be used to spiritualize a medium that would undertake tasks of certain religious or occult nature without disrupting the mental

equilibrium of the victim thereafter. In such cases, invocative and affective music is employed to effect the required personality displacement or reorganisation for psychomancy.

To a great extent, dirges and other funeral music types act as prescribed palliative therapy to the emotionally afflicted minds of the living. Moreover, in Nigerian societies, generally, an individual's sorrow is usually a community's sorrow. It is communally shared through music. The affected takes courage in the knowledge that his community is sharing in his grief. Conversely, fortune or good news coming to an individual is equally communally shared and celebrated through folk music.

#### Some illustrations

1. Circumcision rites in Bille graduate young males into manhood. After the three months of preparation which include instructions in folk music and dancing, the ceremonies start with *Trek of Death* conducted by a choir of flutes. The *trek* is swelled by a throng of relations and sympathisers whose moods and expressions prognosticate the ordeal awaiting the fearless looking boy-initiates. The initiates themselves are equipped with musical pipes on which they viciously blast away at any stage of the rites when they feel too consumed by emotions and wish to give spate to their pent-up anger and fear. Prior to the circumcision itself, and to supplement the initiation dances, there is a musically animated pain-scorning test of manhood: a mutual whipping match among the youths.

In this ceremonial rite of boyhood circumcision, folk music activities set the moods and translate the corporate emotions of the community in a painful ordeal which physically involves a few, but emotionally wraps the society as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

2. *Ekpeti* music in Ovwo-Olomu, Urhobo, belongs to the *Ekpeti* deity who has a healer-herbalist as his chief priest. Apart from a routine gathering of worshippers and the sick, there are annual *Ekpeti* festivals. Whether for healing-worship, or for the annual festival, the music itself is eruptive, transporting, and at the same time supplicatory with invocative solos by the healer/leader, while occasional excited possession-shouts emanate from inspired supplicants receiving the answering warmth of the invisible but evoked and responding healing deity.

#### Folk music as activator and reactionist

The role of folk music as an aggressive agent provoking group action – often intemperate in execution – should not be overlooked. Even in such an assignment of organised disorder, folk music still remains a communion: vocal of the bond of purpose that binds and identifies the action group with its ethnic origin on the one hand, and the non-physically participating members on the other.

As an activator folk music gives drive and solidarity to riot; provokes and sanctions plunder; mobs and assaults the enemy. It becomes a psychomotor that dopes, intoxicates and activates daredevilry. Folk music instigates, catalyses and perpetuates clashes, physical, verbal or mental. As in its palliative roles, activator folk music favours peculiar texts and textures. It is generally erratic in its rhythms and intervals; incisive and inciting in its language selection and manipulation.

Folk music as a reactionist could serve disciplined protagonists. Folk warriors and

combatants (in wrestling or flogging matches for instance) generally are not drugged. Rather, folk music works them up to the mental and physical conditioning that launches them into encounter, oblivious of danger or failure. They could however get treated by medicine men prior to the event and could carry charms visible or cut into the body. Such treatments are not intended to induce false courage, rather to aid the application of the full faculties of the combatants while in action. Rather than drugs, folk combatants are subjected to strict, often severe disciplinary physical and mental preparations before action. They could undergo a period of retreat and grooming, often camped away from such distracting and debilitating influences as association with women, worse still menstruating women.

On the arrival of the event, it is folk music that fires the competitive spirits and buoys the morale, the mental and physical stamina of the participants. To achieve this, folk music, in addition to its selection of mood, deploys its language in various reactionist and psychological strategies: propagandist, ideological or inspirational ideations that coerce, induce, inspire, incite or excite; demoralise, intimidate or discredit the protagonists as appropriate.

Activator and reactionist folk music could be provided by the participants themselves in conjunction with a music group. In some cases, there could be a non-combatant but participating music group with whom the combatants are in empathic communion. In the same way, the supporters where present are in communion with the action group through the music which thus represents the total group involvement in the activity.

Activator and reactionist folk music could have specialised types, e.g. music for war, wrestling or hunting. Otherwise the action could be orchestrated by some generally appropriate music type with suitable mood and language. Or, depending on the structure of this type, special language adaptations or improvisations could be made to suit the occasion.

#### Some illustrations

1. Ekumo village in Koton-Karfe, Kwara, has hunting festivals in which rites are performed with music before the guild of hunters takes to the bush to hunt bush cows. The hunting expedition could take the form of a sport in which a hunter undertakes a physical encounter with the bush cow while his mates play music to spur him on. When he has caught the bull by the horns, his mates then move in to dispatch the beast with bows and arrows or den gun. A successful expedition returns to the village with their kills and music.

Similarly *Garaya* music is music for hunters in Katsina and is played to inspire hunters to demonstrate physical prowess and near magic feats before and after a hunting expedition.

2. The Ohanze community in Ngwa, Igbo, use such folk music texts as 'Our neighbours, haven't they been warned of our prowess and exploits?' to strike fear into their opponents when they are marching towards a battle or any other combative encounter.

3. During *Sharo*, a marriage-qualifying test of manhood and endurance among the Nomadic Fulani youths, folk music involving both would-be action-participants and

the audience sensitize the arena until the stage and mood is set for the flogging ritual. The tempo of the music orders the clearing of the arena and thereafter climaxes the excitement that propels a participant to abandon his torso to the intense slashes of the cane whip mercilessly dealt by his mate.<sup>9</sup>

4. The night before the *Amagba* rite every traditional new year in Kula, Ijo, the *akuma* drummer, as representative of the Kalabari ethnic spirit, plays the *akuma* drum a specified number of times. He does not just drum. He calls on the deities, the ancestors and the water spirits to enter the village in the wake of his cryptic rhythms and assist the community in their new year rites of cleansing the town and of chasing out the evils and misfortunes of the past year. During the rite itself, the *akuma* drummer paces the preliminaries and invocations. At the climax he races the tempo, to the accompaniment of the rattle rhythm played by the human medium who would carry the collective evils of the community in a miniature canoe to the paddlers waiting down the shore. Both the *akuma* drumming and the rattle rhythm hot up, conjuring and driving the forces of evil into the miniature canoe, while urging the favourable village spirits into the agitating medium's psyche. This continues with intensity until the participating favourable village deities/spirits take full possession of the medium's psyche and frame, and propel him with speed to the waterside where he deposits his load of the passing year's evils. While all this is going on, the whole community is tensed up, empathically and spiritually sharing in the triumph, as the medium races down to the waterside; a signal that good tidings will now visit the village. Thereafter, they break up into their various groups for more relaxed jubilation and communal fellowship through music, dancing, drinking and feasting.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Although folk music originates as the gifted composer's personal expression of an experience in performance, folk music becomes the group's communal expression of their group experience. It becomes their communion with their common identity; their communion with their 'living' dead – the ancestors; their medium of communication and fraternization with their deities, with other spirits and forces that inspirit the animate and inanimate, the natural or mystifying phenomena and the other operative intangibles.

Folk music does not charge gate fees because it is a communal property in which the performers and the audience are involved participants. But folk music could and does accept spontaneous compensatory appreciation. It could be invited within or outside its community after the fulfilment of prescribed customary rites which may or may not include a kind of purse. Thereafter, the hosts have no more exclusive rights to any kind of involvement with the music than the spectators.

Whether merely as entertainment; as the expression or representation of ethnic thought or feeling of the group, the individual, the psychical, the philosophical, the cosmological; whether as the soul, the orchestrator or the marshal of a ceremony, a ritual or any other event, folk music in Nigeria inspires and demands total involvement and commitment of its owners. It is their acceptance, understanding and expression of life. It is their philosophy about life. The folk music of a Nigerian ethnic group is life: the identity, the fellowship, the essence of its ethnic cosmos.

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## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

- Meki Nzewi, Dr.:** Nigerian musicologist, Nsukka University, Ph.D. dissertation at Queens University, Belfast, N. Ireland.
- Alan Lomax:** American musicologist and collector of folk music in America and Europe, developed Cantometrics and Choreometrics, systems for the comparative study of world song and dance. Address: Columbia University, New York, U.S.A.
- David Locke, Dr.:** American performer and musicologist, Ph.D. dissertation on Eve war dances, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
- Godwin Kwasi Agbeli:** Ghanaian performer, choreographer, dance teacher, researcher in Ghana, Togo, Benin, Tanzania and Senegal. Address: Tema Food Complex Corp., P.O. Box 282, Tema, Ghana.
- Pie-Claude Ngumu:** Cameroonian musicologist, former maître de chapelle at the Yaoundé cathedral, founder of the Maître des Chanteurs à la Croix d'Ebène. Address: Wetterskamp 1, 45 Osnabrück, W. Germany.
- A.M. Jones, Rev. Dr. (late):** English missionary for many years in Zambia, author of many groundbreaking theoretical works on African music.
- Gerhard Kubik, Dr.:** Austrian musicologist with many years of field experience in Africa, numerous publications. Address: Musikwissenschaftliches Institut der Universität, Vienna.
- Laz, E.N. Ekwueme, Dr.:** Nigerian musicologist, Head of Music Department, University of Lagos, Nigeria.
- Wim van Zanten, Dr.:** Dutch mathematician and musician, taught at University of Malawi and did musical fieldwork, also in Java. Address: Institute of Cultural and Social Studies, Stationsplein 10, P.O. Box 9507, The Netherlands.
- Howard Olson:** American missionary in Tanzania since 1947, Ph.D. in anthropology and linguistics, Hartford Seminary Foundation, Vice-Principal, Lutheran Theological College, Box 55, Usa River, Tanzania.