

Rethinking Nigerian Popular Musicology: the What, Why and How

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Abstract

Nigerian music scholarship began with indigenous music in 1890, popular music in 1962 and literary art music in 1967. Although the scholarly study of popular music began earlier than art music, it suffered neglect for several years that caused it to lag in the literature despite its rise in prominence as the most patronized music in Nigeria by the 1970s. Popular music eventually became part of the Nigerian music academy in 1981 at the instance of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan without addressing fundamental questions about what, why, and how it should be studied. That is what this paper addresses. Data for this study was obtained from literary sources and from experiences gleaned from being a participant observer at the Institute of African Studies between 1986 and 2009 and my interactions with two key lecturers (S. E. Akpabot, 1932 – 2000 and M. A. Omibiyi-Obidike, 1943 – 2016). This study indicates that popular music is entertainment music that is media-dependent and studied for its social significance with multidisciplinary methods. Given the foregoing, popular music is likely to become the most studied music category in Nigeria in the next two decades.

Keywords: Music studies, Popular music, Popular musicology, Nigerian music, Music research.

Introduction

It is generally agreed by music scholars (Euba, 1974, 1977; Ekwueme, 1983; Omibiyi, 1979, Nzewi, 1988) that indigenous or traditional music, literary or art music, and popular music are the three main categories of Nigerian music. The histories of the indigenous music of Nigeria's ethnic nationalities are as old as the nationalities. They have distinct cultural attributes that are intertwined with other aspects of culture such as language (poetry), dance, costume, body adornment, masque, religion, drama, history etc and they play prominent roles in the delineation of cultural and ethnic identities 'in culture'¹ or 'as culture.'² For centuries Nigerian ethnic nationalities have experienced the effects of the movement of people and ideas. Contact with north Africa in the northern parts of the country led to the introduction of new music, musical styles, and instruments (Euba, 1976; Omibiyi, 1981 and Adegbite, 1989) while interactions with Europeans on the Atlantic coast facilitated the introduction of literary music³ in the 1860s (Nzewi, 1988, Omojola, 1995) and Western band music in the 1920s (Ogisi, 2009).

Although Nigerian ethnic nationalities had practised their indigenous music for several centuries, their music was not studied scholarly until 1892 (MacGregor, 1892) when that aspect of musical knowledge began. However, between 1892 and the 1950s very few articles were published in Nigerian but after the African music society and its journal *African Music* were founded in 1961,

Nigerian music had more fora for publishing research findings after the African Music Society and its journal, *African music* was founded by Hugh Tracey in 1957 'with the primary object of encouraging research both in African music and its modern use in the rapidly changing social life throughout this continent' (Tracey 1957: 16) in Grahamstown, South Africa, after the *Nigeria Magazine* was transformed to a platform for publishing cultural matters in the 1940s, the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Nsukka Music School hereafter) was established in 1961. It held an annual seminar termed 'Music in Nigeria Seminar' in 1964 and 1965 and the proceedings were published as *Music in Nigeria 1964* and *Music in Nigeria 1965*. Nigerian indigenous music scholarship received a boost from the Nsukka Music School when in 1962 it set a trend whereby its scholars⁴ researched aspects of Nigerian indigenous music for higher degrees. It is noteworthy that all the scholars researched indigenous music

¹ Campbell, P. S. (1996). *Music in Cultural Context: Eight Views on World Music Education*. USA, Bloomington: Indiana University, Music Educators National Conference. Digitalized July 21, 2009.

² Herndon, M. and McLeod, N. (1982). *Music As Culture* United States of America: Norwood Editions. Darby, Pennsylvania

³ Also known as Classical music or Art music.

⁴ W. W. C. Echezona (an Igbo), *Ibo (sic) Musical Instruments*. M.Mus MSU 1962; *Ibo (sic) musical instruments in Ibo (sic) culture*. PhD MSU 1963; S E. Akpabot (an Ibibio) *Functional music of the Ibibio of Nigeria*. PhD MSU, 1975; Meki Nzewi (an Igbo) *Master musicians and the music of Ese, Ukom, and Mgba ensembles in Ngwa Igbo society*. PhD Queen's University, 1977. Azubike Ifionu (an Igbo) *Ifo: A study of an Igbo vocal genre*. PhD, London, 1979;

and established precedence for Nigerians to study their ethnic music for higher degrees. From then onwards, research in Nigerian music focused on Nigeria's indigenous music.

Although literary music was introduced to Nigeria in the 1860s, (Omojola, 1995) it did not receive scholarly attention until 1967 (Leonard, (1967) while popular music which emerged in the early 1920s⁵ had its first scholarly paper published in 1962 (Smith, 1962) followed by twenty-year silence before another article (Waterman, 1982) followed.

Background to the Study

Euba (1976) indicates that before the 1980s, traditional music was the most patronized music by Nigerians. However, the intense urbanization of the 1970s spurred by the massive building of infrastructure across Nigeria eased the movement of goods and services and transformed several Nigerian villages and towns into townships and cities respectively. The drastic change impacted popular music positively and by the early 1960s, popular music had become the dominant category of music in Nigeria. This derives from its commercial aspects, social conditions and its symbolic functions as a sub or counter-culture of youth identity and lifestyle in urban Nigeria. Because it depends on the media for dissemination, the explosion in media types especially cable broadcasting, webcasting, the internet, and digital technology have in recent times, heightened its impact on popular music in Nigerian society thus reaffirming its place as the dominant music genre in Nigeria. It also became a big-time business providing jobs for several persons in its value chain as musicians, record companies, record retailers, and even record pirates in utter contrast to its conditions during the early decades of the 20th century when the musicians recorded gratis (Waterman, 1982).

In recent years, popular musicians receive substantial financial returns for their music. Some of them have become super and mega stars whose lifestyles are role models for Nigerian youths. Contemporary Nigerian popular music is multi-ethnic, mostly patronized by youths and urban dwellers, technology-dependent, and creates jobs for those in the industry. However, despite its overwhelming popularity and acceptance by all strata of society, it was not until the early 1980s that it began to be tolerated in scholarly circles in Nigeria. This was rather late when compared with the strides made in traditional and art music scholarship.

Ironically, the recognition of its scholarly value was at the instance of sociologists in the 1970s that recognised its academic worth as a social phenomenon. However, the reaction of those in the music academy was the opposite. They questioned the rationale and the justification for accepting popular music as an academic discipline and were reluctant and slow to accept it as a subject worth scholarly attention. Despite the initial reluctance, the trend set by Smith (1962) caused the antagonistic music scholars to rethink their stance, and music scholars began to tolerate the presence of popular music in the academy. The first postgraduate degree in Nigerian popular music was by Alaja Brown (1985) who studied abroad. Meanwhile, on the world scene, the stylistic richness and robustness of popular music were more than the antagonistic music scholars anticipated as popular music studies was widely received by most members of the music academy as an area of scholarly investigation, speciality with taught courses within degree programs in some tertiary institutions worldwide.⁶

The response of the Nigerian music academy to the change was equally slow because it was fixated on other aspects of music scholarship. The change came largely from the postgraduate African music program of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan (IAS-UI) which included popular music which is an aspect of the course 'Nigerian music.'⁷ From 1980 when the program commenced program occupied a vantage point as the only higher institution in Nigeria that ran postgraduate music. The program influenced and re-oriented a generation of scholars who later came to leadership positions in the Nigerian music academy to acquiesce to the study of popular music in their institutions to the extent that some students opted to undertake their research in the area of popular music. This development increased popular music scholars. Since the mid-1980s, there has been remarkable progress in grounding popular music as a veritable area of music scholarship in Nigeria. At IAS-UI, postgraduate students are at liberty to undertake their theses in any of the categories of Nigerian music and most of them choose either Nigerian indigenous music or Nigerian literary music. However, in 1988 there was a change in the general trend when a student decided to conduct her M.A. thesis research on Nigerian popular music, the effort resulted in Okereke (1988). Thereafter it became normal for students to undertake their thesis in Nigerian popular music. In 2001 interest in Nigerian popular music progressed to the doctoral level with the following PhD theses - Idolor (2001), Loko (2009), Ogisi (2009), Oikelome

⁵ Ogisi, A. A. (2004). The significance of the Niger Coast Constabulary band of Calabar in Nigerian Highlife Music: a historical perspective. *Nigerian Music Review* 5 37-50.

⁶ Beginning at the Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool in 1988

⁷ The course covered the entire aspect of Nigerian music - indigenous music, literary music and popular music.

(2009), Olusoji (2009). Since then, popular music studies have witnessed impressive scholarly publications in journal articles and books. These achievements reflect a heightened interest in popular music and a positive change in the attitude of the Nigerian music academia to popular music studies.

In such a situation of rapid change, it is imperative to assess the progress made and the challenges that remain to intend to chart a pathway for the future.

Problem of Study

Despite its significance in the National scene, popular music did not easily receive academic attention because of reasons that were discussed elsewhere (Ogisi, 2008). Although popular music is gradually being accepted and integrated into mainstream music scholarship, fundamental issues such as what is popular music? why and how should it be studied remain.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to find answers to the following research questions. What is popular music? Why should it be studied? How should it be studied? and What are some abiding concerns that should be addressed?

Popular Music

The term popular music is generally misunderstood and attempts at defining it have been contentious because of its enigmatic nature and stylistic variants. It is against this background that Belz (1964) introduced the concept of 'experimentalism' (p. 1) by which he means that popular music is better experienced than defined. Instead of confronting the challenges posed by a definition, Browne (1969) opines that popular music is 'those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elastic and which are generally, though not necessarily, disseminated through the media' (p. 11). His specification of wide appeal is noteworthy as it contrasts the elitist stance of art music that is practised by and directed at a minute segment of Nigeria's demography. Arising from this concept is the notion that popular music has a wide appeal and requires a basic musical taste for appreciation. This reflects Hammel's (1972) definition of popular arts, as 'those arts that appeal to the masses and do not require a high level of intellectual or cultural refinement.'

One of the widely accepted definitions of popular music is Denisoff (1974, p. 146). Although it is highly technical, it regards popular music as the total of those taste units, organizational roles, and musical genres which coalesce along certain taste and preference similarities in a given space and time. This definition is rather confusing and does not lead to identifying the subject but the reference to heterogeneity is important.

To organize the various concepts that undergird the definitions of popular music, Birrer (1985, p. 106) opines that all definitions of popular music revolve around four concepts: the normative, the negative, the sociological and the technological-economic to which Nesbitt (2003, p. 2) adds the stylistic. Normative definitions are purely subjective and opinionated; negative definitions are stated in terms of what popular music is not; sociological definitions present popular music as a product of social groups; technological definitions present popular music from the means of distribution; economic definitions regard it in terms of a mass market; while stylistic definitions view it from its sonic, visual and kinetic presentations. Okafor (1989, p. 2) presents a definition that contains seven identifiable features of popular music. According to him,

Popular music is music that deals with familiar themes and issues of the moment. It is understood and accepted by a lot of people, not as a final solution to their sentiments and current worldview. Consequently, popular music is more subject to change than any other genre of music... popular music is therefore music with a broad, immediate and implicitly transient appeal. It is also social entertainment and dance-oriented and draws its core clientele from urban dwellers (p. 3-4).

It is relevant to add that popular music is inherently ephemeral that songs/ works that top the charts stay there for a few weeks before it declines in popularity. This phenomenon creates a continuous search and insatiable appetite for new songs/works which is the root of the worldwide industry. Popular music is also closely intertwined with fashion such as clothing, jewellery, tattoo and coiffeur. In popular music, the worth of a song is not determined solely by its artistic craftsmanship but by the dynamics of market forces that are fluid and unpredictable. Due to this, record companies invest heavily in marketing, promotion and public relations in a bid to push up sales. Popular music is also intricately connected to dance, movement and kinetics which are major determinants in the emergence and evolution of popular music vogue or craze. Popular music is intricately linked with the mass media symbiotically. Arising from this, it can be surmised that popular music is a heterogeneous, participatory music type that is prompted

by commercial success, dependent on the mass media for its dissemination and intended for entertainment.

Why Study Popular Music?

The main reason for studying music is because it exists as part of a culture, as it sheds light on the search for understanding humans as the creator of culture. Unlike other music types that are studied in the academy without question, popular music needs justification because of misgivings against it. (Ogisi, 2008, p. 52).

Some advocate its study based on its functionality in society in which Bennet (2001) deposes that 'it is a primary, leisure resource in late modern society' and due to which it meets the listening, entertainment, contemplative and meditative needs of society. It is in this process that it became the most preferred music type and the mainstay of the music industry worldwide. Such music deserves scholarly attention if not for any other reason than its social significance. It is therefore rational that music has such social relevance in the daily lives of the people being studied. In respect of this Fabian (1978) opines that it 'spurns relevance on our faces' (p. 315) because it challenges the long-held rationale for studying pure and high cultures which in most instances are far removed from our daily lives. For many people, popular music is fun and provides joy that humans cannot think of a life without it. For 'the fact that so many people can (and do) take pleasure in this music is precisely what makes it important enough for us to take it seriously' (Rodman and Lowe 2006).

Another reason advanced for its study is economic. It is estimated that revenue from the global music industry (which is dominated by popular music) will 'surpass 65 billion US dollars in 2023'⁸ with the money coming from ordinary people who purchase the products for their pleasure and enjoyment. For any sector of the economy to contribute that much speaks of its importance in society and therefore justifies its study. For Barber (1987) 'the most obvious reason for giving serious attention to the popular arts is their sheer undeniable assertive presence as social facts' (p. 4). Indeed popular music reveals the daily strife and aspirations of Nigerians as chronicled by the popular musician in his songs. It is in this regard that Okafor (1989) observes that

The Nigerian popular musician has always borne witness to the time he lives in. he praises, admonishes, the records event and he involves himself, through his music in the social and concrete problems of his land. In addition, he yearns for an ideal human relationship between people of various lands. He is aware of his time. His music is a social document (p. 9).

As a 'social document,' popular music strongly recommends itself for study. Unlike art music that is far removed from the daily lives of the average Nigerian and concentrates on the aesthetics theory of 'art for art's sake', popular music addresses germane existential issues of most Nigerians especially urban dwellers which attracts the populace to it. Fortunately, most Nigerians belong to this class and attend to what interests them.

Popular music deserves rigorous scholarly attention because of its communicative power. Barber (1987) asserts that the popular arts which include popular music 'are expressive at different levels... are important means through which consciousness is articulated and communicated' (p. 5). In so doing, 'the public is aware of the place and merits of the very visible 'pop' music and its practitioners in the social life, hence it relies on them for diplomatic expressions', (Nzewi, 1988, p. 20). Any music genre with such an influence cannot be ignored. This is an important factor among the factors that makes it the most preferred music category in Nigeria.

The How of Popular Musicology

The study of popular music can be approached using several paradigms and perspectives including, but not limited to, the philosophical, sociological (teleological), historical, psychological, marketing, political, technological, stylistic, structural, visual, kinetic, contextual, media, analytical, methodological, theoretical, conceptual, objective, subjective, anthropological, artistic, humanistic, subjective, and objective. It is part of the humanistic disciplines⁹ with critical theories such as semiotics, and phenomenology that are applicable. As music is essentially the deployment of sound for aesthetic satisfaction, it obeys the physical laws of sound and is amenable to scientific studies.¹⁰ It is on these bases that Hesbacher (1973) recommends:

⁸ Getting M. C. "Global music industry revenue 2012-2023". Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259979/global-music-industry-revenue> access on 29th December 2022.

⁹The humanities include the studies of foreign languages, history, philosophy, language arts (literature, writing, oratory, rhetoric, poetry, etc.), performing arts (theatre, music, dance, etc.), and visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, etc.). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanities> on December 10, 2022.

The tradition of music as fine art, its kinship with both humanistic studies and the social sciences and its importance as a central dimension of mass culture illustrate the myriad of perspectives which studies of popular music should take into account. This multidimensional nature of popular music presents analytical difficulties, however. Adequate understanding of this music requires a wide variety (of) resources, involving skills and abilities which cuts (sic) across disciplinary lines. Only the marshalling of these resources within an integrated perspective (sic) however will permit the study of popular music to become an area of respected scholarly inquiry (p. 307).

Sadly, this is not yet the case in Nigerian popular music studies. The multidisciplinary approach being advanced will lead to the convergence of perspectives in methods of data collection, robust analysis and interpretation of data resulting in far-reaching conclusions. It also presents options in research paradigms, methods, models and principles that could be employed in unravelling and explaining the phenomenon within the tradition of systematic and rigorous scholarship. Despite the ample opportunities that the multidisciplinary approach presents, the unilinear approach still holds attractions to some music scholars that undermine the realities and nature of popular music as a unique area of scholarly investigation. It is inevitable that as the discipline develops, there will be the quest for a more robust interpretation of data as Nigerian popular music scholars gravitate towards a multidisciplinary approach where research tools and techniques from closely related disciplines are deployed.

Observations and Concerns

It is worth noting that the early articles in Nigerian popular music were thrifts as the authors choose articles with a scope that they could not address in a single article. For example, in Smith's (1962) – *Popular music in West Africa*, the title is more suitable for a book than an article, so she barely scratched the surface of the features and the forms of the music in six and a half A4 pages.

Also, most of the articles utilized the sociological approach arising from the influence of the sociological-anthropological paradigm in Nigerian ethnomusicology that music scholars were mostly concerned with the origins of Nigerian popular music genres and biographies of the musicians. While these served some purposes, there is the need for histories that spans longer periods and enable their perspective to be put to the test.

Abiding Concerns

Aside from studies in origins, other aspects of the historiography of Nigerian popular music are yet to be addressed. Of uttermost importance is the issue of periodization as a prerequisite for a fruitful discussion of Nigerian popular music history. Unlike in western art music where the great man theory subsists, virtually all literature on Nigerian popular music employs the pluralistic theory of historical interpretation which is that no single factor is sufficient to explain historical events. For example, Nigerian popular music is documented by electronic and print media in the form of commercial recordings, radio and television programs, and newspaper and magazine publications. Waterman (1991) obtained and utilized data from several sources in studying juju music to great effect and avoided overdependence on the phenomenological approach that is insufficient to explain the history of Nigerian popular music. Using the technique enabled him to present a holistic history of juju music.

Nigerian popular music did not develop in isolation but there was inter and extra generic interaction that influenced its development within a historical continuum. It is noteworthy that some scholars (Waterman 1991, Collins 1976, 1977, Aig-imuokhuede 1975, Aladja-Browne 1985) employed eyewitnesses' accounts of some key players in their accounts of the history of Nigerian popular music industry to advantage while some scholars ignored it to their disadvantage.

Several scholars have ignored or were unaware of the role that Inter-typological and inter-generic interplay played in the history of Nigerian popular music and inadvertently adopted a linear isolationist approach that does a disservice to the data. Several studies on Nigerian popular music are based on secondary data resulting in findings that lack the veracity that results from the use of primary data. Apart from Waterman (1991) who utilized music transcriptions as historical data in his account, most literature failed to do so. The history of music no matter how well written is incomplete without the use of music data in the form of song text or a score. Furthermore, only a few of the literature state their research methods and the theories that under grits them. This is important because it sets the premise upon which the expressed ideas derive.

¹⁰As shown in the following journals – (1) The Journal of Music and Mathematics, (2) The Journal of Music and science, (3) Psychology of music, (4) Music Perception, (5) Applied Acoustics

Literature also reveals a preponderance of descriptive studies and a lack of analytical discourses (Omibiyi, 1979). Attending to this weakness in subsequent studies is critical to the development of popular music as a scholarly pursuit in the Nigerian music space. There is also a lack of theoretical framework in most studies. It is necessary to mention that the use of theoretical framework came into music scholarship via the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan. African studies being a bridge between the Humanities and Social Sciences, some practices of the social sciences such as the use of theoretical framework robbed of such as music. It became a challenge to the students as they have to search for theories from farfetched disciplines to anchor their research. As a result of the strategic position of the postgraduate programme at the University of Ibadan, the theoretical framework has become an expected component in theses and research papers in music. There is a need for studies that formulate theoretical frameworks for music as a phenomenon in its various dimensions.

Conclusion

In recent years, popular music studies have become a fledgling discipline that is grasping several basic questions about its definition, methods, and frameworks among other issues. It is heartwarming that within the few years of its existence, it had made remarkable strides, especially in the western world. However, in Nigeria scholastic output is relatively thin despite the growth in its consumption in society. Despite these shortcomings, its social import has caused several scholars to re-examine their stance and disposition towards it and it is now receiving considerable scholarly attention hitherto. In the Nigerian context, several issues relating to scholarship in popular music need attention. Chief of these is periodization, biographies of popular musicians, teleological concepts, and theoretical frameworks in popular music among others.

Most of the earlier studies on Nigerian popular music were based on secondary data resulting in findings that may be considered preliminary observations. There is therefore a pressing need to re-examine such findings in light of new field techniques. This will lead to alterations or reaffirmations of earlier findings and conclusions in the early writings. There is also the need to accelerate research in historical aspects, definitive issues, methodological theories and options, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks as a foundation for its development into a respectable area of music scholarship in Nigeria. Meanwhile, efforts should be intensified toward departure from surface to deep structures of Nigerian popular music. As was mentioned earlier, popular music is so broad and diversified field and a fertile platform for interdisciplinary studies in which the various perspectives¹¹ will interface.

The advent of popular music studies in Nigeria opened up opportunities for music scholars to address issues that are relevant to society in contradistinction to the erstwhile approach of researching the music of the elite. With such development departments of music in institutions of higher education in Nigeria should engage in research that is relevant to national development. It is plausible that within the next thirty years, popular music will become and remain for a considerable time, the leading frontier of music scholarship in Nigeria.

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¹¹ Philosophic, sociological, historical, economic, political, technological, psychological/scientific, linguistic, religious, visual, kinetic and the mediated

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