TOWARDS A GLOBAL 21ST CENTURY AFRICAN POPULAR MUSIC: ASSATA BAND AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The world is increasingly becoming a global village, due mainly to the technological advancements of the 21st century and increased interactions and collaborations between peoples of the earth. Consequently, compartmentalization of cultures is fast giving way to the emergence of a 'global mass culture' with increasing cultural exchanges and adaptations. Musically, this has translated to increasing collaboration between African and Western musicians as seen in ASSATA; a French-Nigerian band. This paper seeks to identify the implications of this development for African music and musicians, with a view to reposition African music and musicians for the global challenges of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

Collin, while commenting on the impact of African and Afro-American music on world music postulated that "the music of the Americas (Black Americans most especially) and Africa are the nearest things this planet has to global 20th century sound and *lingua franca"* (Collin 1992:330). His postulation no doubt, is based on the perceived impact of Black African music on the development of world popular music; a power that emanates from the synthesis of Black African musical resources with those of the African Diaspora. In contemporary times, the West is beginning to appreciate all the more, the power of Black African rhythms amid the general rhythmic sterility of Western music. The ASSATA Band, put together by the French Cultural Centre, Lagos, toured major Nigerian cities in 2003 as an experiment aimed at breaking the cultural barriers that exist in the musical practices of Africa and the West, and promoting 'global music'.

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Using this band as a reference point, this paper aims at lending empirical credence to Collin postulation on the one hand, and examining the implications of this development for African music and musicians on the other. Materials for this paper were gathered primarily through participant observation method (this author worked with the band as an assistant Sound Engineer during their performances in Ilorin, West-central Nigeria) and personal interviews with band members and crew, and secondarily from related literature.

2. Cross cultural music in Africa

The idea of cross-cultural music is not a new concept in the popular music of African nations. Since the period of slavery when Africans were forcibly taken to Europe and the Americas, African music was taken out of its cultural context and forced to knuckle under an alien culture. As Bastide (1971:23) has rightly observed, "the slave ships carried not only men, women and children, but also their gods, beliefs and folklore". Considering the socio-religious utilities of music in African societies, it must have been difficult for the African slaves to forget the songs from home. While accepting those aspects of the master's culture which were either congenial to their past learning, or necessary for their survival, the retention of African attributes for which there were no substitutes laid the basis of cross-cultural musical hybridization in the Diaspora.

Du Bois (in Holt, 1980:6), while commenting on the Afro-American situation in the Diaspora, describes it as that of a continuing paradox of acculturation and alienation; a dual personality, which created a crisis of identity for the African slaves. With the abolition of slavery and the return of some ex-slaves to their homelands, the music of the African in the Diaspora found its way back to the motherland, leading to the development of various Afro-fusion bands experimenting with cross-border musical resources. Consequently, African popular music has witnessed increasing cross-fertilization of musical ideas between Africa and the West in contemporary times. This cross-current of musical ideas has come full circle with so many African musicians like Manu Dibango (from Cameroun). Baaba Maal (from Mali), Hugh Masekella (from South Africa) and Youssou N'Dour (from Senegal). Having their bases

abroad, they act as human agents of cross-cultural music between Africa and the West.

Within the African homeland itself, many internal and external factors have led to the emergence of cross-cultural musical forms and practices in African societies. As noted by Nketia (1975:6), internal factors were "population movements that followed territorial expansion, wars, famine and other crises that drove wedges into homogeneous groups and gave rise to a mixed population". The external factors could be said to have come mainly through the legacy of Islam and European contact through trade, Christianity and colonialism. These legacies brought foreign musical tastes and musical instruments which African musicians fused with traditional elements to form syncretic forms like Highlife, *Juju*, *Makossa* and the South African *Kwela* , to mention a few. Even in contemporary times, popular European musical styles like Hip Pop, Rapp, Dance Hall and Reggae have taken on regional identities in African societies. By adding traditional elements of text and instrumentation to these European styles, African popular musicians are rising to the cultural challenges of the West in the new millennium. Omojola (1995:22) has noted that: "by integrating the rhythmic vitality of African music with European tonal harmonies and by combining Nigerian musical instruments with European ones, Highlife (a popular genre) stands historically and structurally between the European-style band music and the neo-traditional".

In discussing cross-cultural music in Africa however, we must not limit ourselves to the use of non-African resources in the music of African musicians. Current discourses on cross-cultural music in Africa should begin to focus on collaborative efforts between African musicians and their European/American counterparts on the one hand, and between African musicians in the homeland and those in the Diaspora on the other. This has become necessary because the past few decades have witnessed phenomenal increase in collaborations between African and Western artistes in areas of performance and recordings. A few examples are cited here to buttress this point. In the 70s, the famous British drummer, Ginger Baker, featured prominently on stage with notable Nigerian musicians like Fela Kuti,Tee Mac and Segun Bucknor. In 1971,

the famous 'Soul to Soul' concert was held in Ghana which featured top American bands playing side by side with Ghanaian musicians (Collin 1992:64). It is important to recall here also that in 1984, King Sunny Ade, a celebrated Nigerian popular musician, collaborated with the legendary Stevie Wonder in the production of the album 'Aura' for Island Records in America; an album which was a mix of American pop and Nigerian *Juju* music.

Again, in 1987, American Folk/Country musician, Paul Simon flew into South Africa to work with Black township musicians and other international stars like Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekella in an experiment aimed at cross-cultural music featuring Western and African musicians. This effort culminated in the famous Grace land concert in Cape Town, South Africa, and the eventual release of the Grace land album and CD. Since the mid-90s also, South Africa has been home to various Afro-American gospel groups and artistes like Ron Kenoly and others working in concert with South African gospel musicians. Out of these efforts have come various recordings like 'Rejoice Africa' and others undertaken by the Integrity Music (U.S.A) project in South Africa.

The foregoing discourse gives just a few examples of cross-cultural collaborations between African and Western musicians on stage and in recordings. However, these examples and similar ones, like ASSATA band, which is our reference point in this paper, underscore the increasing interest in African music in the West, and how African music is being heavily relied upon to provide the driving force for global popular music. This view is supported by Randy Weston when he posited that: " the music of no other civilization can rival that of Africa in the complexity and subtlety of its rhythms, and that all modern music- Jazz, Soul, Latin, R&B and even modern pop is indebted to African rhythms" (Weston online 2003). With these eloquent testimonies, African music is gradually carving a niche for its self in the emerging global 21st century sound and *lingua franca*.

3. ASSATA Band

ASSATA as a band was formed in France in the early 1990s, playing essentially Black American Jazz. The name, ASSATA is derived from a Black American human activist Assata Shakur. According to the band leader, the French members of the band grew up in Marseille, in an environment full of Black American history and music and so they derived a lot of positive influences from these contacts. While the Band Leader did not explain what influences brought Afro-American history and music to Marseille, it is a historical fact that the American revolution, where a colony for the first time, proclaimed its independence from its rulers in 1776, provided an ideological backdrop and inspiration for the French revolution in 1789. With this backdrop, it is right to imagine that American history has for long been of great interest to the French people. Again, since the turn of the 20th century, the impact of American popular music (engineered mainly by Black American musicians) on world popular music, with its penchant for unparalleled creativity, experimentations and diversities of styles, has been tremendous. American music must have reached France through a process of cultural diffusion.

The three original members of ASSATA, Ulli, Yooli and Pierre came to Nigeria on the invitation of the French Cultural Centre, Lagos, to team up with other distinguished Nigerian professionals, to experiment on cross-cultural 'global music'. In Nigeria, the band featured seven members: three French and four Nigerians. Their profiles are as follows:

(1) Ulli (French) – saxophonist and bandleader.
(2) Yooli (born to Black parents from Nigeria and Togo, but nationalized as a French man) – drummer.
(3) Pierre (French) – stick bassist. (What the band calls 'stick' bass is actually an electric version of the double bass instrument).
(4) Aisha (Nigerian) – female singer. (Formerly with the 5&6 band, led by Yinka Davies in Lagos).
(5) Afolabi (Nigerian) – *Bata* drummer.
(6) Taiwo (Nigerian) – Trumpeter.
(7) Muri Ayangbola (Nigerian) – Talking drummer (using the Yoruba *Gangan* hourglass drum). Also the bandleader of *Gangan* band in Lagos.
(8) Ibrahim Sama (Togolese) – Sound engineer and road manager.

It is important to recall here that the French Cultural Centre, Lagos, has for a long time been promoting cultural exchanges between Africa and France and ASSATA as a fusion band should be seen against this backdrop.

According to the band leader Ulli, the band came from France with their repertoire of songs and music, which they fused with some Nigerian songs. They had just two weeks of rehearsals with their Nigerian counterparts before their nationwide tour which took them to Ibadan, Ilorin, Abuja,Jos, Enugu, Port Harcourt and Lagos. The band had two performances in Ilorin: one at the Banquet hall of Kwara hotels and the other at Africa hall, University of Ilorin. Both performances were in formal concert setting and so audience participation was restricted. Each concert lasted for about one-and-half hours and was well appreciated by the audience present. Considering the brief period of interaction and rehearsals with Nigerian musicians in the group, it does show that Nigerian (indeed African) musicians have come of age in terms of professionalism and musical competence.

The band's instrumental resources were: one saxophone, one stick bass (electric double bass), one trumpet, a set of *bata* and *gangan* (*hourglass*) drums and the Western trap drums. The African and Western percussion instruments mentioned above were essentially rhythmic instruments, not forgetting the multiple tones that the *gangan* is capable of producing. In terms of rhythms, it was observed in the performances that the regular duple and quadruple meter typical of Western music was maintained by the bass player, playing a kind of 'walking bass' and emphasizing the accents in the measure. This regular rhythm was overlaid with syncopations by the drummers, with the Nigerian *gangan* and *bata* players using triplets to support the basic pulse as in local traditional African music. The trumpet and saxophone represented the brass section of the *ensemble*, most times playing musical phrases in parallel 3rds and 6ths. A sampler was also used to create weird notes, phrases and noises. In most cases, the sound generated on the sampler was not exactly pitched in the same key as that for the horns and bass, thus creating a kind of 'neutral' feeling in the diatonic scale. The bandleader, Ulli could not provide a satisfactory musical explanation on

the use of the sampling device. His explanation was made more difficult because of language barrier. It is however probable that the use of the sampler was to create tonal ambiguity and harmonic tension.

In terms of composition, the songs in English, which were part of the repertoire of the visiting French musicians, were patterned along Black American styles like soul, blues and Jazz. As mentioned earlier, Black American music has been a great part of their musical experience in France and it is not surprising that their compositions reflected this influence greatly. The Yoruba songs performed were re-arranged folk songs (but made more jazzy and bluesy), as well as some personal compositions of the singer, Aisha. The songs were for solo voice only. Again, no reason was given for the absence of a chorus on stage. It is possible however, that because no harmonic instrument was used on stage, and due to the predominant neutral feeling in the diatonic scale in most of the songs, a chorus part(s) may have created more discords than concords.

The songs also, had no refrains or 'hook lines' that could easily stick to the head. In a way, the singing merely embellished the instrumental jam session. Again, since there were no harmonic instruments on stage, the singer had to rely on a perceived tonal center provided by the bass player and the brass section. This creative tension was further heightened the use of 'dubious notes' by the singer in a deliberate attempt to violate the tempered tuning of the Western diatonic scale in a style reminiscent of Afro-American blues singing . These notes, described also as 'blue notes' (usually the flattened 3rd and 7th notes of the scale) by Western musicians, violated the Western tempered scale. This practice had been earlier on been identified by the Nigerian musicologist and choir director, Professor Laz Ekwueme in his study on Igbo choral music when he commented that: " there is an apparent lack of an absolute tonal center in traditional African music, since there may be no melodically pitched instrument to determine the key". He submits further that "heterophony, a system of embellishing a note by wandering around its pitch, at the same time when other singers and players are maintaining the same fixed pitch is prevalent in some African groups" (Ekwueme 1993:23-24). Various researches into traditional African music has also shown that most African societies have two tonal centers to their music, rather than

one, as in Western music. This bi-tonality leads to tonal ambiguity. This may probably be the reason for using the neutral sound of the sampler mention earlier to create tonal ambiguity as in traditional African music.

The *gangan drummer* (talking drummer) on stage was given ample time for solo performances, where he displayed his mastery of the instrument and the drum language of the culture that produced the instrument. He made the drums 'talk' to an essentially Yoruba audience, to which they responded enthusiastically. It also amazed the few Western members of the audience and musicians who could not decode the communication between the African musicians and their audience in terms of drum language. In terms of rhythm therefore, the African drummers were essentially the energy behind the performances and it can be argued that the place of African music in the emerging 'global popular music' is in providing the rhythmic energy for world music and dance.

The performance practices of the band as observed were a combination of Western and African practices. For example, while the horns men played from written scores, the other musicians memorized their parts. While the tradition of playing from scores is essentially Western, African musicians do not keep to strict notations, but rather improvise and extemporize on the music in each performance. Consequently, it was observed that in the two nights of performance in Ilorin, there was marked difference in improvisational styles of the singer, Aisha and the African drummers in each context of performance. This is an essential feature of Afro-American Jazz to which these French musicians have been exposed for a long time. Occasionally, one could here the saxophonist humming or reminding the trumpeter of the next horn phrase or section on stage; a common performance practice among African musicians. There was also rapport between the singer and the master-talking drummer on stage. In a particular song the singer sang this phrase repeatedly: *oni bata mi, ni bo lo wa? I (*My *bata* drummer where are you?) and the talking drummer responded with varied patterns and solos on his drum in call and response.

The rhythmic vitality of the drums was further heightened by the emotional intensity of the vocalist. She sang with 'soul', repeating words in a stammering form, groaning, humming and yelling with vocal

dynamics reminiscent of the Afro-American blues and soul singer. Song texts were both in English and Yoruba and were based on a variety of themes, such as love, gender issues and motherhood.

4. Implications of 'Global Music' for African Music and Musicians

The first positive implication is that of rediscovery of African music by Western musicians, in the light of its rhythmic energy and consequently, the renewed interest in African music and musicians. From the pre-colonial period when Africa was labeled as a 'dark continent' with savage and barbaric cultural practices, up to the era of slavery and colonization, Western perception of African music has been very negative. African music was regarded as primitive and 'heathenistic', as a music that had no form, no musical theory and not worthy of scholarly discourse. As Akpabot has rightly observed, "such assertion of 'primitiveness' by some foreign scholars do not denote a period of history but the backwardness of that music" (Akpabot 1986:1).Scholars of this opinion must have looked at African music from the eye of the West, without due regard to the musical sensibilities and aesthetic sense of there African.

However, with the increasing collaboration between African and Western musicians in contemporary times, as seen in the ASSATA experience, Western musicians have begun to appreciate the power and dynamism of African music. This will lead to better perceptions of African music and musicians abroad and create an enabling environment for the cross-fertilization of musical ideas, as well as improving the African personality psychologically at home and abroad.

Increased collaboration will lead to a new status for African musicians artistically, socially and economically. However, one of the greatest challenges for the African artiste in the 21st century will the ability to constantly improve on his works, in line with the demands of a cross-cultural audience on the one hand and technological advances on the other.

One of the major problems facing the use of African musical instruments globally is the lack of standardization in tuning and construction procedures. Consequently, production of African musical instruments have not benefited from the massive technological growth of the

previous century. Now that African music is receiving global attention through intercultural collaborations, there is an urgent need to standardize and produce African musical instruments on a large scale, with standard tuning and construction procedures. One way of achieving this is by freeing African musical instruments from their traditional limitations and making it possible to use them in larger ensembles outside their traditional setting. One of the ways to achieve this is by making the instrument (especially the melodic ones) sound in tune with the Western tempered scale and conform to the universal concert pitch of 440Hz. Ephraim Amu, foremost Ghanaian musicologist, has achieved a reasonable degree of success in repositioning Ghanaian traditional musical instruments for concert use. Lo-Bamijoko (1982) reports that Amu has improved the construction the *antenben* flute by adding the missing notes, making it conform to the diatonic scale and therefore, adaptable to standardized tuning of wind instruments in Western music. Following the steps of Amu, Nana Abiam is carrying on similar efforts in repositioning traditional musical instruments for global use as seen in his Pan-African Orchestra project.

The emerging global appreciation of African musical instruments will stimulate a renewed interest in the standardization of African musical instruments, making them benefit from technological advancements. One of such benefits, as witnessed in the performance of ASSATA band, was the use of wireless microphones designed with special clamps, which were attached to the talking drums of the master drummer. This wireless system allowed the drummer much flexibility and freedom to pace around the stage, much the same way as a traditional African master drummer would do in a traditional setting. Applying Western technology to the construction and use of African musical instruments may not necessarily detract from the socio-cultural/religious significance of the instruments in African societies; rather it will put African musical instruments on the same level as musical instruments of the West and others in developed societies that have standard construction and tuning procedures. In the emerging global atmosphere, the construction and usage of African musical instruments need not be shrouded in mysteries any more, rather they should be available for all who care to purchase or play on them, whether Africans or non-Africans, much the same way as African musicians have learnt to play and sometimes, construct imitations of Western musical instruments.

On the negative side, it is probable that globalization of African music may lead to social disintegration of African societies. As Mudimbe (1988:4) has rightly pointed out: " one could regard the social disintegration of African societies as a result of a destabilization of customary organizations by forces of colonialism and Western cultural imperialism". Consequently, removing African music from its socio-religious context into a spiritual vacuum of 'art for art sake' may break the integrated cultural and religious schemas of African musical traditions. Commenting on the implications of globalization for African artistes, Yerima (2001:43) cautions that: "art is the soul of culture and culture is in turn, the soul of the people". If African music becomes a 'commodity' to be sold in the international market to the highest bidder, then African art (including music) may lose its soul.

Another major problem likely to be encountered in this regard is the fear of the African musician losing focus of his origin and his immediate society that is currently plagued by the malaise of corruption, heinous crimes, war, hunger, disease and other social vices. The new challenge of for the African artiste will be how to strike a delicate balance between composing and performing for an international audience, while at the same time directing his music towards addressing societal ills and the stark realities of life in contemporary Africa.

Again, a 'global' society where the 'soul' of African music has been sold on the international market may lead to the creation of an African society that is susceptible to Western cultural imperialism, with its attendant social disruptions, contradictions and ambiguities. The interplay of these forces may lead to a defenseless and isolated entity, which can be referred to as the 'new man' cut off from his roots and his social and communal foundations (Yerima 2001:43).

5. Repositioning African Music and Musicians

For the African to remain relevant in the new global sound, he or she will have to work extra hard to keep abreast of modern technological advancements and the ever changing musical styles of the West. The way and manner they respond to these challenges will determine the sustainability and continued relevance of African music and musicianship in this new global dispensation. This challenge is capable of producing a positive development for African music and musicians.

Again, the emerging global 21st century sound and *lingua franca* , with African musical resources at its core, has the potential of opening up new perspectives in African musicology. One will be a shift in emphasis of African musicology from a Western derived perspective of African art music to the popular music of African musicians at home and abroad. As Nketia (1986:244) has already observed, African musicology of the 21st century stands to be greatly enriched by the different perspectives and multidisciplinary approaches that African and non-African scholars will bring to bear on works by African musicians. This will be further complemented by the new insights gained from the global experiment of synthesizing African, American and European musical resources, alluded to in this paper as the 'emerging global 21st century popular music' Again, if the new global experiments in sound are recorded, documented and analyzed for scholarly purposes, materials collected may form the basis of a new framework for music education in African and non- African countries. Since the African popular musician cannot be said to have benefited much from music education in the formal school system, because of its colonial bias, this new development will shift emphasis from the colonial bias of African music education to a more functional one, that African music and musicians will greatly benefit from.

6. Recommendations

There is the need for more collaboration between African and Western musicians because of the benefits African music and musicians will derive from such experiences. We wish therefore, to recommend institutional support through such government agencies as the Ministry of Culture to provide an enabling environment for the continued interaction between Western and African musicians. The present efforts of the French Cultural Centre in Lagos should be complemented by a purposeful governmental cultural policy towards improving the lots of African musicians, while still enriching the instrumental and vocal resources of African music. One way of achieving this will be through sponsored exchange programmes for African musicians, much the same way as the French government does. Another way is through organizing annual or periodic regional festivals of popular music to bring together musicians, home and abroad in public performances.

There is also the need for scholarly support from academic musicians in the documentation and analysis of the new global African popular music. This will provide a theoretical framework for the emerging global sound as well as the basis for the study of popular music in African colleges and universities.

Right from its inception, popular music and musicians have been looked at with disdain. One reason for this disdain is the inferior status ascribed to popular music. Omojola submits that in the Western world, the term 'popular music' was coined in contradistinction to the elitist tradition of art or 'serious music' and the so-called 'sublime and innocent genre of traditional or folk music (Omojola 2006:1) Thus, when viewed from the perspectives of high art and the 'innocent' traditional music of the indigenous people, popular music stood as a kind of bastardization and contamination of both art and traditional music and was therefore dismissed with such derogative terms as 'popular', 'commercial' or even 'urban, (Blackings in Middleton,1990:30).

Closely related to the ascription of an inferior status to popular music is the notion that popular music audiences lack critical ability to react intelligently as put forward by Theodor Ardono and his mass culture theory , and also due to the fact that much of the popular music of the world today grew out of the music of African slaves in America. In their peculiar situation, spontaneous music making provided emotional release and strengthened communal relations among the slaves as they sang from their hearts, with little or no formal music training (see Middleton 1990:5, Larkin 1992:8-9).In the African situation, colonialism and colonial education ascribed a superior status to products of the formal school system with its emphasis on acquisition of European values, including knowledge and appreciation of European music. This European bias in music education, with its emphasis on the aristocratic/elitist tradition of European art music, created a dichotomy between the academic and the so-called 'street' or 'popular' musician, based on a perceived class structure between the 'educated' and the 'uneducated'; 'gentlemen musicians' of the English concert setting and the 'musical rascals' of the nightclub/hotel setting.

But rather than look at popular music and musicians with disdain, we

wish therefore, to recommend that popular music be taught in African schools and universities alongside European art music This is one way that African musicians who have shown aversion to the study of music in formal school can be attracted to the academia. The academia can also benefit from the experiences of performing musicians outside the academy.

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing discourse, it is clear that increased use of African musical resources globally and increased collaboration between African and Western musicians will expand the frontiers of African music and musicianship globally, both now and in the centuries to ahead. Consequently, African music stands to be greatly enriched by cross-cultural musical fertilization and the expertise of world musicians playing alongside African musicians. However, it is our opinion that while African popular music and musicians cannot be on-lookers in the new millennium, the African identity and communal relations should not be sacrificed on the altar of globalization. African popular music should retain essential African attributes and African popular musicians their 'Africaness'.

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