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Abstract

This article explores the quasi-religious manifestations in Nigerian popular music genres, using the performance style of the renowned musician, Lágbájá as a case study. The paper highlights the fusion of religious ideologies and music in Nigerian culture by examining how Lágbájá's music embodies elements of religious symbolism and ritualistic practices. By analyzing Lágbájá's performance style, this article aims to shed light on the intersection of music, religion, and identity in contemporary Nigerian society where at different points individual musicians have rejected, reflected or helped to (re)constitute sacred practices via their music practice. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part describes the musical types which can be referred to as Nigerian contemporary popular music. The second part discusses the developmental dynamism in Nigerian pop music. In answering the following questions what is the role of religion in lives of artists within the popular music genre? How is religious metaphor reflected in popular music's instrumentation and vocal arrangement? When does Fandom become a form of worship? The syncretism theory (Coplan, 1982) is used to examine Lágbájá's profile and performance style in the areas of stage showmanship and instrumentation. The research methodologies used in collecting the needed data for this paper are the participant observation and interview methods. The paper observes that the strong point of Lágbájá's performance style which although based on the Yorùbá traditional masked entertainers' features, also has a cosmopolitan outlook. This is achieved in the way he deliberately combines the musical experience from his cultural background with the new developments in instruments and recording technology which has made the music widely accepted at the international level. The paper, therefore, concludes that Nigerian popular music genres are veritable channels for inter-religious tolerance existence nationwide.

Keywords: Lágbájá, Developmental dynamism, Popular music, Quasi-religious tradition, Performance Style.

Introduction

The phrase "quasi-religious traditional performance" denotes the integration of religious and spiritual components from conventional belief systems into the realm of contemporary music and performance. Within the sphere of contemporary popular music in Nigeria, this integration may encompass allusions to native deities, spiritual ceremonies, and traditional rituals. Such components are frequently amalgamated into the music through the utilization of specific lyrical content, musical genres, and performance methodologies, thereby engendering a profound and emotionally resonant artistic encounter. One such element is Lágbájá, drawn from the Yorùbá traditional eégún (egúngún) masquerade belief systems and practices, which has been seamlessly woven into the fabric of Nigerian music, creating a unique and dynamic artistic expression.

Among the Yorùbá, the eégún (egúngún) masquerades, i.e. the ancestors' spirits, are a special class of spirits depicted as 'the living dead' in costumed figures. Unlike ghosts, these ancestors can be seen, speak, give commands, express emotions, and can sometimes, be touched. Ghosts are invisible spirits that will not ordinarily do or perform the things stated above. Hence, the eégún in Yorùbá cosmology is the spirit of departed relatives who serves as the intermediary between the gods, the ancestors and the mortal beings. According to Ìdòwú, the eégún cult in Yorùbá land ...is a manifestation of the people's belief in resurrection (or life after death) ... (1977:30). They are believed to be the souls of the departed relatives who come in the form of spirits to pay occasional visits to their living relatives and impart words of knowledge and wisdom to their adherents and descendants.

Usually, the eégún manifests physically in costumed figures, as the ancestral spirit of a family or guild of professionals like herbalists, warriors, hunters, and so on. In other situations, they may appear (either singly or in consort) as professional entertainers who dramatize societal issues and entertain members of the community

through acrobatics, magical feats and dances which are accompanied by songs, drumming and praise-poetry (èṣà or iwì-eégún). During such visitation rituals, which usually "... lasts seven, fourteen, seventeen, or twenty-one days..." (Babayemi, 1980, p.2), they show care for their loved ones; and in return, families remember them in the form of celebrations; and people feel more comfortable with them in memory and emotions (Aremu, et al, 2012).

These ancestral spirits or eégún (masquerades) usually put on special costumes and head-dresses or masks which conceal their identities. According to Yorùbá mystical tradition, these masquerades have both the supernatural and magical powers to appear in any way or form either to entertain or to bless their adherents. As the ancestral spirits of a family or guild of professionals (such as warriors, hunters, and so on), they possess some supernatural and magical powers with which they perform the intermediary role between human beings and the heavenly forces. This symbolic action shows that the departed spirits of the ancestors "are not sleeping" but are still interested in safeguarding the welfare of their descendants. Despite this cordial relationship between the Yorùbá and the personified spirits of their ancestors, it is only the eégún cult members who are responsible for worshipping these ancestors (Euba 1992:77). And no eégún masquerade worship is complete without music especially the dùndún and/or bàtá music as shall be discussed in detail later.

Suffice it to state that the post-independent urban Nigeria has other rich and diverse musical landscape that is enjoyed and appreciated by the general public; and which reflects the country's cultural, religious, and social dynamics. The musical types in the said landscape have undergone a lot of stylistic and structural innovations over the years due to the ingenuity of their practitioners; and, the socio-economic situations of their patrons and admirers.

In recent decades, one such innovation, which has exposed the contemporary popular music genres in Nigeria to a lot of

international recognition was Lágbájá, the masked musician, created by a skilled multi-instrumentalist and music producer, Bísádé Ológundé. It was this artiste who introduced the semblance of the Yorùbá eégún (masqueraders') pageant into his musical showmanship. His strategic use of the mask not only adds a layer of mystique to his public image but also serves as a protective barrier between his professional and private lives respectively, allowing him to navigate the realm of fame with a sense of privacy and anonymity. By embodying the character of Lágbájá, Bísádé has effectively carved out a unique niche in the music industry, enabling him to balance his artistic pursuits with a semblance of normalcy in his personal affairs.

Lágbájá's Profile

Lágbájá, the popular Nigerian masked musician, appeared on the music scene during the crises surrounding the annulment of the 1993 presidential election⁴ in the country. The manifestation of Lágbájá is based on the Yorùbá mythological belief of life after death whereby ancestors and dead loved ones come in the form of spirit-beings (ará-òrun) to visit their living relatives.

As it has been explained in the foregoing, the use of costumes and masks based on the Yorùbá eégún culture has already distinguished Lágbájá from other Nigerian (and indeed African) musicians.

However, more pervading is his syncretic music style which is very distinct from all other contemporary musical genres in Nigeria. Syncretism refers to the merging or blending of artistic or musical materials from different culture areas to form a new and qualitative idiom (Coplan 1982, p.119). It usually develops through the historical process of culture contact or acculturation where a particular society borrows or adopts certain aspects of the culture of another society. This cultural interaction involves communication and inter-relationships through trading, travelling and maintenance of diplomatic ties (Nketia 1982, p.6). In this work, we are focusing on the efforts of the masked musician, Lágbájá, in bridging the gap between the traditional and the

contemporary modern in his music and where the cultural materials adapted are in the area of music and music-making components. Meanwhile, the concept of musical performance style shows that it consists of ...a whole complex of features that [musicians] rely on to mark their identity... composed of symbols, forms and underlying value orientations (Royce 1977, p.157).

Lágbájá has thus been able to adapt and merge the features of the Yorùbá masquerade entertainers into his own contemporary popular music performances to carve a unique identity for his band in the Nigerian music scene.

The incorporation of this quasi-religious traditional performance element has had a profound impact on Nigerian popular music. By infusing his music with elements of Yorùbá traditional spirituality, Lágbájá has been able to connect with both local and international audiences on a deeper level, fostering a sense of cultural pride and identity. It has not only enriched the artistic landscape but also served as a means of preserving and promoting Yorùbá traditional cultural practices. He deployed this unique blend of quasi-religious traditional performance praxis with the interplay of the Yorùbá eégún (masqueraders') rituals and modern musical influences. He does this, both with the use of the Yorùbá word 'Lágbájá', which is loaded in meaning and with the use of different elaborate masks to hide his facade. This Yorùbá word, 'Lágbájá' can be used to represent 'somebody', anybody, and nobody, depending on the context in which it is being used. The two concepts of 'name and mask' perfectly depict the anonymity of the faceless and the voiceless "common man" in African society. They also symbolize an esoteric picture of transcendental dramatis personae that is found in the way the musician presents himself to his audience. The fact that the real identity of this artiste remains concealed behind a symbolic eégún mask arguably expands his circle of fandom. This circle of patrons and admirers regularly

thronged his performance arena, Motherlan' along Òpèbí-Allen, Ikeja, Lagos. Also, it makes most of his fans assume he is from the religious masqueraders' cult.

Furthermore, Lágbájá has been celebrated for his enigmatic persona and the thought-provoking lyrics of his music which not only entertain but also serve as a platform for social commentary and spiritual expression. The combining traits of both music and ritual stimulate the same reactions in the experience of members of the interpretive community in a certain way which is related to their traditional belief system and imbues them with certain characteristics of religious stimuli and musical activities that are the most effective facilitator of the desired effects of participation in such liturgical activities. This type of artistic creativity exposes the rate of developmental dynamism in Nigerian contemporary popular music has invariably brought about the global acceptance of Nigerian pop music. Thus, one might conclude that Lágbájá and his concealed identity developed dynamically from the Yorùbá *eégún*; and so, one could refer to him as the modern and contemporary *eégún aláré* (the masked entertainer).

The Developmental Dynamism in Nigeria Pop Music

The term 'developmental dynamism' connotes the continuous creative changes in the performance practice of contemporary popular music. For this study, the term 'contemporary' indicates the post-colonial period, which can be historically gauged from 1990 to 2005 in the new millennium. This has spanned about twenty-five years and although the musical culture therein has seen some major changes, which are in the form of innovations and modernization, the main feature, is still very constant.

Pop music in Nigeria has undergone so many changes and metamorphoses in recent times to the extent that it may be difficult to see the similarities between the way a musical type was initially played at its inception and how it is being performed in contemporary times.

This is to be expected because culture is ever dynamic and not static, there are bound to be some aspects of continuity and change both in the lifestyle and the social taste of the people in any given society, and the musicians within this society must necessarily adapt to these social tastes of their patrons.

This is more evident when one uses juju and highlife music as illustrations. In the beginning, juju was performed by a group consisting of three to four musicians using simple instruments to carry out their performances but nowadays, a professional juju band consists of about twenty-two members each having a different but complementary role to play to make the music acceptable to the band's patrons. Furthermore, it is not uncommon now to see a highlife band performing at social celebrations rather than nightclubs and concerts, as was the case in the past. Membership of a highlife band had also shrunk in size from what it used to be.

Apart from this, contemporary Nigerian popular musicians are trying to be national in their outlook. They do not want to be seen, generally, as belonging to a particular ethnic group. Hence, they make use of different Nigerian dialects and languages in their musical performances to accommodate a wider cross-section of the audience. This corroborates Coplan's assertion that:

...the selection, rejection or transformation of musical elements and compositional principles are greatly determined by emerging patterns of urban social organization and cultural classification and significance... (Coplan 1982, p.113).

Given the fact of acculturation and technological advancement of ...societies in disparate localities and regions, through physical movements of people from one place to another or through the electronic media... (Omíbíyí-Obidike 1994, p.6) people are brought together in close proximity, and musicians would naturally

respond by adjusting and incorporating new ideas that would cater for the new tastes. Thus, resulting in the hybridization of both the local and foreign musical ideas to bring out a unique and popularly accepted genre.

Nigerian Popular Music Genres

At this juncture, it is important to look at what popular music is, and the various typologies of music which can be found within its bracket. Many scholars have variously defined popular music: for instance, Euba (1976, p. 24), looking at it from the multicultural angle, said that it is the music ...in which elements of Western pop music are expressed in local idioms (or the) musical types imported with little change from Europe and the Americas. Omíbiyì (1981, p.63) on her part defined it as ...the corpus of music commonly liked by the generality of the people in a particular society... [which has] the objective of providing entertainment for the society.

Ekwueme (1986, p.2) defined it as the music or kind of music suited to the tastes, and educational level of the general Nigerian public, and the type of music liked and admired by them. Vidal (1993, p.2) referred to it as: *...the social music of the urban people with its new set of cultural values, aesthetics tastes and preferences; the westernised music of urban youths, the music of the new breeds [and] the product of a changing Nigeria.*

Ọmójolà (2006) described popular music as: ...musical performances that take place at night clubs, discos and parties...[where] such performances combine commercial and artistic objectives and are disseminated through the electronic media and the recording industry.

The foregoing definitions can be summed up as music that is widely spread among the people into which has been infused with elements of both Western/Islamic and local idioms. Thus, it can be concluded that foreign music cultures have a great impact on it through the process of 'musical

acculturation' which Adégbité (1995, p.1) defines as the cross-influences of Islamic, Christian, European; and Nigerian musical cultures upon one another in Nigeria. Therefore, in general, popular music is that music which appeals to a wide range of audiences of different socio-economic backgrounds who are exposed to it not only in the night-clubs, beer parlours and palm wine drinking bars but also at social celebrations, through radio, cassette/CD player, television, cinema and the social media. Although many factors contributed to the emergence of modern popular music in Nigeria (Ọmójolà, 2006, p.45), three of these factors are paramount in its subsequent growth and development. These are the activities of (i) European Christian missionaries, (ii) the colonial administrators and (iii) the contact with Islamic religion.

First, the incursion and the eventual activities of the British colonialists between 1861 and 1900 created a drastic change in the socio-cultural lives of Nigerians. These colonial masters came with their forms of musical entertainment like ballroom dance and concert music for their enjoyment. The educated Nigerian elites and middle-class citizens who had developed similar tastes for such musical entertainments joined the colonialists in the practice and appreciation of the new musical typologies. Also, Nigerian musicians who had originally copied the European style of music began to introduce their local musical forms into it (Akpabot 1986). This single action led to the emergence of popular music as these musicians started to form their own brass bands and dance orchestras which parodied the rhythmic structures of European marches, polka, waltzes etc. but with adaptations and fusions of their indigenous folk tunes.

Secondly, the church on its own, through the activities of the missionaries, helped in training Nigerians in both the applied rudiment and theory of Western music so that "...their school teachers, catechists and

priests [can] play simple Anglican chants and hymns from the staff notation on the harmonium..." (Sowande 1967, p.260). Many of these Western-educated musicians later became composers, band leaders and instrumentalists who actively took part in the foregoing musical activities.

The third factor is the contact with and the eventual adoption of the Islamic religion by the Arabs from the northern part of Africa. The initial contact was made through trading activities and the Jihad holy wars (Omíbiyì 1979). Evidence of such contact is manifested predominantly in the northern areas of Nigeria in their stylistic vocal productions and the introductions of musical instruments like the goje (the string fiddle), dundún (Yorùbá hour-glass tension drum), kakaki (the royal trumpet) and the Algaita (a double reed instrument common among the Hausa). All these foregoing contributing factors and many others are further discussed extensively later in this work.

Quasi-Religious Manifestations in Lágbájá's Music Performance Practice

Nigerian popular music has often been intertwined with religious themes and symbolism, reflecting the country's diverse religious landscape, which includes Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African spiritual traditions. Music has been an integral part of religious ceremonies and rituals in Nigeria, serving as a medium for connecting with the divine and expressing communal identity. In contemporary Nigerian popular music, artists have drawn inspiration from religious practices and beliefs, incorporating them into their artistic expressions. Lágbájá's music exemplifies this fusion of spirituality and entertainment, as he incorporates Yorùbá religious motifs and symbolism into his performances, creating a quasi-religious experience for his audience. For instance, the artiste makes use of the full range of both the bata and dundún ensembles; and these are musical instruments that are commonly deployed by the stakeholders in the Yoruba eégún cult.

Central to Lágbájá's performance style is his use of symbolism and ritualistic elements that evoke spiritual connotations. The iconic mask

worn by Lágbájá during his performances serves as a powerful symbol, representing anonymity and universality. The mask not only conceals the artist's identity but also transcends individuality, embodying a collective consciousness that resonates with traditional African notions of community and ancestral connections. Furthermore, Lágbájá's music often features chants, incantations, and rhythmic patterns reminiscent of traditional African religious ceremonies, creating an immersive sonic experience that blurs the boundaries between the secular and the sacred.

Lágbájá's performance style is based on the threshold of a re-interpretation, recombination and fusion of both the old traditional performance program of the Alárinjò theatre and contemporary modern African music elements. Adédèjì (1981) referred to this performance program as that of a variety show, but [which] invariably followed a particular regular pattern: the Ìjúbà, the Dance, the Drama Spectacles, Revue and Finale

Apart from the eégún mask and costumes which he has adopted, Lágbájá has also been able to synthesize the traditional Yorùbá bàtá and dundún rhythmic patterns and instrumentations with an infusion of jazz, highlife, afrobeat, funk, hip-hop, fùjì and àpàlà. He sometimes uses expressions from Yorùbá folklore that he utilizes metaphorically in his songs to enhance the social and political messages to his ardent fans and audience.

In his vocal presentations, Lágbájá does not use Yorùbá language exclusively but interchanges it with Standard English, pidgin as well as slang and phrases from other local Nigerian languages from time to time during any performance. The poetic chants (èṣà eégún), in which the chanter eulogises the musician's cognomens in the Yorùbá language, are always being rendered in the style of the alárinjò masked theatre practitioners. The lyrical content of Lágbájá's songs also reflects quasi-religious themes, addressing social issues, moral values, and existential questions. His

music conveys messages of hope, resilience, and spiritual awakening, drawing from indigenous wisdom traditions and contemporary realities. Through his performances, Lágbájá invites audiences to reflect on their place in the world and their relationship to the divine, fostering a sense of collective introspection and transcendence. Added to this potpourri of musical sound, he executes some intricate bàtá music dance steps (similar to those of the Yorùbá masked entertainers) and freely utilizes ideas from the older cosmopolitan music traditions like palm-wine guitar and àgídígbo music. To crown it all he uses a lot of polyphonic keyboard effects to bring out jazz-derived horn arrangements. The combination of all these foregoing styles and musical structures has made it very difficult for music critics, reviewers and even Lágbájá himself to categorize and give his music a particular brand name or label. This has also given him an edge over other popular musicians as being the first Nigerian musician to venture into the popular music scene with an incognito personality and uncategorized or unlabeled music type. But for this work, one can safely call it 'Afro-highlife' music especially when the heavy influence of Afrobeat and Highlife music within it is given proper consideration. Although the descriptions and definitions of both Highlife and Afrobeat had been stated by notable music scholars such as Aig-Imokhuede (1975), Omíbiyi (1981), Waterman (1990), Collins (1992), Agawu (2003), Ọmọjọlà, (2006) and many others, it will suffice here to just say that these two music types are among "those in which foreign and African musical elements intermingled" (Omíbiyi-Obidike 1994, p.1). Therefore, Lágbájá's music is reminiscent of Fẹlá's Afrobeat with its consistent and repetitive bass guitar part, a tight horn arrangement, insistent chanting in call and response pattern and vibrant and very rhythmic drumming. All these are done in a mid-tempo mood which is closely similar to Adéolú Akísànyà or Eddie Okonta's highlife music. Lágbájá uses his music to promote critiques of Nigeria's social and political activities (e.g. *Sùúrùlérè* from the album

'WE', 2000) and sometimes uses folktale songs to deliver his moralistic punch lines (*T'òun T'erin* from the album 'LÁGBÁJÁ', 2000). He believes he can use his music to ...send messages to all parts of society. One to the leaders who control... [and] to the people who are being led... to encourage [and]... essential social, political messages (Waterman 2002, p.27)

He also gives pieces of advice to enlighten Nigerians on how to tolerate one another and make this country a better place to live in (*Coolu Temper* from the album 'C'EST UN AFRICAN THING', 1996). Another thing which makes Lágbájá's musical presentations stand out and be different from other contemporary Yorùbá popular music is that while most of these others such as fùjì, jùjú, àpàlà, wákà, etc., rely heavily on complex patron-clientage network and praise singing (oríkì), Lágbájá does not do this. Instead of praise-singing, the lyrical messages of Lágbájá's music are about the deviant activities and undesirable habits within the society such as sugar daddies (*Nothing for You* from WE/ME album, 2000), lack of home training (*Àkẹbàjé* from the album 'LÁGBÁJÁ', 2000), talkative and habitual liars, political intolerance and bad leadership to mention a few.

This lyrical message, although, seemingly less confrontational than that of Fẹlá Aníkúlápó-Kúti (1938-1997), is heavily laced with traditional drums and percussions, proverbs and innuendoes presented with a powerful guttural voice of the Yorùbá eégún pageant. Despite this, Lágbájá still performs at marriages, birth, funeral or other social ceremonies and his concert arena, Motherlan', regularly. The comical lyrics of his songs are however aimed at the lighter side of life. These are used as sources of encouragement and motivation to the oppressed masses in the society and listening pleasures of the general populace.

The exploration of quasi-religious manifestations in Nigerian popular music, as exemplified by Lágbájá's performance style, has significant implications for our

understanding of the intersection between music, spirituality, and cultural identity. By recognizing the spiritual dimensions of popular music genres, we can gain insights into how artists negotiate tradition and modernity, sacred and profane, in their creative expressions. Future research could delve deeper into the specific religious influences on Nigerian popular music and examine how these manifestations contribute to shaping individual and collective consciousness.

Summary and Conclusion

Lágbájá's performance style serves as a compelling example of the quasi-religious manifestations in Nigerian popular music genres. His fusion of traditional African spirituality with contemporary musical forms exemplifies the enduring influence of religious symbolism and ritualistic practices in Nigerian culture. Ògúnsànyà (2007) states that although Lágbájá's music showmanship is based on Yorùbá masked entertainers' features, it also has a cosmopolitan outlook. Thus, the incorporation of quasi-religious traditional performance elements in Lágbájá's performance context is a testament to the enduring influence of Yorùbá traditional belief systems on contemporary artistic expression. The artiste's complex interplay between music, religion, and identity in contemporary Nigerian popular music is in light of cultural retrieval and resistance to post-colonial cultural assault on the Yorùbá nation. He, therefore, does this to recover and assert Yorùbá cultural identity to his fans, most of whom are already Christianized and Islamized.

By drawing on these elements in his music, Lágbájá has created a musical landscape that is both rooted in tradition and open to further innovations. In other words, as Nigerian popular music genres continue to evolve, the incorporation of quasi-religious traditional performance elements is likely to remain a prominent feature among various artistes. This presents an opportunity for artistes to further explore and celebrate the rich tapestry of Nigeria's cultural heritage through their music. Additionally, it offers a platform for cultural exchange and dialogue, as artists engage with diverse audiences both within Nigeria and on the global stage.

In addition, as his music continues to captivate audiences around the world, it also serves as a powerful reminder of the cultural richness and diversity of Nigeria. This he achieved through the use of different languages and dialects in his music and the acceptance of his music at the international level.

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