

CHAPTER 48

THE SEMANTICS OF HIGHLIFE MUSIC IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF “FUNNY FUNNYIDENTITY” BY OLIVER DE COQUE

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Abstract

Numerous works have been done by academics on the study of acculturation and its effect on cultures. The study of indigenous musicians who have helped at different times in sustaining Nigerian music of different types has received numerous scholarly attention. There however remains a great deal of work still to be done, especially on the works of great renowned Nigerian highlife musicians. This work is geared towards analyzing Nigerian highlife songs. Although there are many components of Nigerian highlife songs like the lyrics, instruments and instrumentation, the harmony employed, costumes, etc, this study is focused on bringing to the knowledge of the general public, the meanings of the lyrics of Nigerian highlife music “funny funny identity”, as performed by the Artiste Oliver De Coque, one of the famous Nigerian highlife musicians. It was observed that “funny funny identity” as used by Oliver de Coque depicts the day-to-day experiences, events and occurrences a common man could possibly face. To him, those experiences could be funny in retrospect.

Key Words: Highlife, Semantics, Music, Funny Funny Identity, Oliver De Coque.

Introduction

Music is said to be a universal language, as it exists in every human culture, in different forms. Each culture tends to appreciate and explore music within their cultural avails and experiences. Music making in the traditional African setting (in its crude form) is quite different from music making in far Western Europe. The end product which can be either entertainment or functionality

might be the same, but the cultural materials that are employed in the making of the music are characteristically different.

Africa is blessed with multiple cultures, which have been the sources of its multicultural rich musical heritage. It is no news that the worldwide breeze of cultural interchange has seen different cultures of the world assimilate other cultures to form a not completely new culture, but a hybrid culture. This assimilation is also seen in musical cultures, especially in Africa, where Western musical traits and materials have been successfully imbibed and assimilated, to provide the new normal. This does not mean that the original African indigenous music has been completely changed, as there is still evidence of the existence of unadulterated indigenous music in some rural areas, being practised in its original state by the natural custodians.

This new hybrid music as seen everywhere in the 21st century can be explored and practised in various forms, worthy of mention is the Nigerian popular music genre known as the Highlife music. This genre of music was made popular in Nigeria by people like Chief (Dr.) Sunday Oliver Akanite (Oliver de Coque), Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe, Christogonus Ezebuio Obinna (Dr Sir Warrior), Chief Sunday Adeniyi Adegeye MFR (King Sunny Ade), Ebenezer Remilekun Arem Obey, etc.

Highlife music is attributed to Ghana, where it is believed to have originated before spreading to other parts of Africa, including Nigeria. Nigerian highlife, however, consists of a band which is made up of many musical instruments and is most of the time, led by the lead guitarist, who usually doubles as the lead vocalist too. This study is geared towards studying the semantics of Nigerian highlife music, with Oliver de Coque's "funny funny identity" as a case study.

Definition of terms.

Semantics

Semantics is simply the study of meaning. It is the study of words, and their intended meaning. According to Randolph Quirk (1978:1011), it is the study of the meanings of words and other parts of the language. And in general, connotes the study of signs and what they possibly stand for. According to Lederer in Konstantinovsky (2005)

Semantics is the study of meaning in context; it's the investigation of how words phrases and sentences evoke concepts and ideas in our minds. As we learn the language, we attach meanings to words, by learning what objects and concepts each word refer to (p.1)

In an attempt to give a broad description of semantics, Hauck (2008) writing on the simple definition of general semantics as the study of reactions to language says that:

Ultimately, people interested in general semantics pay attention to and focus on the reactions people have to language. This focus is

very broad and engaging, covering a wide range of topics important to everyday living. People interested in general semantics are also interested in: how people interpret language, how people behave based on how they interpret language and how people reply, based on the language they read or hear. People interested in general semantics also become interested in the relationship between one's speech and one's thinking". (p. 348)

Hauck's description of semantics was from the perspective of the reaction of the receiver of the language. To him, the semantics of a given language is whatever the receiver says it is. In other words, two or three persons with different geographical origins and sociocultural. For every spoken word, there backgrounds can deduce different perceived meanings from the same language. To Henderson in Konstantinovsky (2005), to have a semantics for a language is to be able to assign a meaning to every word in that language, and then to compute the meanings of sentences, based on the meanings of those words and how they are put together" is a meaning attached to it. This meaning could be denotative (as defined by the dictionary), connotative (the use of words which ordinarily mean something, but implies something else), Social meaning (meanings that are peculiar to certain cultures, especially since the same phrase can mean different things to different people).

Semantics can also be seen as a critical analysis which tends to evaluate the day-to-day activities which occur in our surroundings, and how we relate to those activities and happenings. The general way in which information and ideas are communicated and shared. From the reception to the interpretation to its conveyance to a third party, and a repetition of the endless cycle. To buttress the above point, Bhasker (2013:123-124) sees semantics as "a general theory of evaluation which takes into account, the interrelations among what is happening in ourselves and the world around us, how we get our information about those happenings, how we talk about such information and how we behave"

Highlife Music

Highlife is one of the West African acculturated musical genres of the present century. It is believed to have originated from West Africa, but carried with it Western influence, alongside its African traits. It combines African melody and rhythm, with European elements like musical instruments and harmony.

African highlife music originated in Ghana in the 20th century. It featured in notable clubs which were attended by mostly the elite class. The name "highlife" was coined from the notion that it was only available to prominent people who could afford to frequently attend those clubs at the time. It was otherwise known as the "music for elites". In their view on the characteristics of highlife music, Van der Geest & Asante-Darko (1982:1) posited that "it encompasses a variety of artistic

expressions, music, dancing, storytelling, and theatre... the songs can be about many different topics, rural or urban, modern or traditional, true events or stories. Generally, the songs deal with problems of everyday life: poverty, marriage problems, hatred, gossip, shame, sickness, and death.

As described by Masterclass (2021:1), there are two major types of highlife music. To him, the majority of West Africa's highlife bands fall into one of the two categories: dance bands and guitar bands.

1. **Highlife dance bands:** Dance bands—which are popular in urban areas of Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Nigeria—feature orchestras reminiscent of American brass bands. They combine West African traditional music with calypso, swing, and Afro-Cuban dance music imported from North America and the Caribbean.

2. **Highlife guitar bands:** Guitar bands, which are more popular in the rural parts of West African countries, emphasize guitar and other string instruments. Guitar-based highlife songs borrow from Black American blues traditions.

Theory of Meaning by Ogden and Richards

Ogden and Richard's theory of the meaning state that there is not a single correct meaning associated with each word. Simply, meaning does not reside in words. Meanings reside in people's minds. The meaning varies from person to person, because everyone has different levels of understanding, according to their standards, experience, region, relation, etc.

Meaning as presented by Ogden and Richard is relative to so many things. It is not fixed as some people will think. A word can mean different things to different people, depending on the above-listed factors like experience, standards, region, etc. Words, therefore, mean what our experiences tell us it means. It also means at any point, what our environment tells us it means.

“Funny funny identity” as analyzed here is from the meanings as would be given by any person of Nigerian decent, who is not challenged by the language barriers, and is conversant with the local languages in Nigeria, especially the *“pidgin language”*.

Biography of Oliver de Coque

Chief (Dr.) Sunday Oliver Akanite popularly referred to as Oliver de Coque was born on the 14th of April, 1947 to the late Chief. Julius Akanite and late Ezenwanyi Uchejigbo Akanite (Nee Nzediegwu) in Obinabor, Akabor-Umudiala in Ezinifite in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The 'Biri Kam Biri' (Live and let live) crooner had 3 wives and 12 children: 7 boys and 5 girls. He started playing music at the age of 17, with ekpili (rattles). He was a singer, lead (solo) guitarist, songwriter, record producer and record label owner (Ogene holdings). His music most often portrays the picture of affluence especially as enjoyed by the Igbo of Southeast

Nigeria, this is evident in the majority of his albums and chiefly of the album's 'Ana enwe obodo enwe (there are people that owns the town) the big shots, Nnukwu Nmanwu (Big masquerade), People's Club of Nigeria, Club National, Etoo Dike na nke o mere eme (omekwaa ozo), Ndi ogiliga walu na nwa (those who became rich from childhood) etc. He calls the names of who is who in Igbo land, acknowledging their accomplishments, their native titles, their investments and at times the extent to which they have alleviated their various communities all in his songs and the manner with which he calls and enumerates them, one will always want to be enlisted.

It was gathered that while growing up, Oliver was popularly known as the Game Master, this was because he was good at the game of draught, which in the Igbo language is 'Okwe.' He once mentioned and recognized some big shots as Etie okwe, and Erie okwe (those were men who made their living from games and gambling). People began to call him Oliver di ka okwe (referring to how good he was at playing the game of draught). Then, as a man who derives joy in turning things around him to suit his lifestyle, pleasure and even career, he change the name 'di ka okwe' to 'de Coque' and confused many as to where he hails from as many argued he was from Cameroon, some Zaire, others Congo but he hails from Ezinifite, Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State.

He loved maintaining his looks and affirmed that his beard was his signature look and it was from nature, as all of his surviving siblings have beards. According to Okafor (2019), he went to the salon twice a week and spent #30,000 naira on his beard, which was his signature look. (p.70). He also loved buying clothes and Italian shoes. As a former shoe trader at the old 'Ekeoha Aba' the market that got burnt in the early '70s with which he released his debut album Messiah-Messiah (Fire Disaster) in September 1976 precisely. He also derives pleasure in buying original shoes even after affirming that Aba-made shoes are good for Nigerian weather.

Amongst many of his albums which he recorded in quick succession not fewer than 73 which made him the most popular Highlife King in Africa, his inspiring Ogené style of highlife, which blends modern highlife and traditional Igbo music made him outstanding. The track 'Identity' released in 1980 remained on Radio Nigeria 2's Top Ten throughout most of 1981. His band group was known as the Ogené Super Sound of Africa (Expo-76). He fell ill towards the end of 2007 and later died on the 21st of June, 2008, at the age of 61 years.

THE MUSIC “FUNNY FUNNY IDENTITY”

Lyrics. The song 'Identity' has four (4) main stanzas and they all share the same refrain. Refrain. The refrain comes in call and response style (a basic form in African music according to Agu, 1999's Form and Analysis of African music). After each stanza comes to the refrain.

1. When I wake up in the morning, I go pray to my God
When I come back in the evening, I go pray to my God
Always believe in trying, nothing comes for nothing
Always do my best, and leave the rest to God

Refrain.

Call. Oh oooooo,

Response. Funny funny identity

Call. Oh mama eeee

Response. Funny funny identity

Call. Oh, oh, oh

Response. Funny funny identity

Call. Oh, oooo

Response. Funny funny identity.

2. My Mama advise me, make I play my music with honesty
My Papa advice me, make I respect all my seniors
I always cut my coat, according to my size
I no dey promise anything wey my power no reach
My yes is my yes, my no is my no
I no dey make inyanga, I'm a simple man by nature.

3. When coconut fall from up, e no dey harm anybody
Coconut get water, nobody knows from where it entered
If you do good to me, I go thank you for your favour
If you do bad to me, na you Sabi oooo

4. Sometimes when I dress, I dress like boyo-yo
Sometimes when I dress, I dress like chief of chiefs
I been get bear-bear, my bear-bear is from nature
Music is my talent, that's my identity.

Textual Analysis of “Funny Funny Identity”

Stanza-1

'When I wake up in the morning, I go pray to my God' (It is a normal exercise or routine for one who comes from a religious, and in this case, Christian background. As one who wakes up and sees another new day is indebted to God for the gift of life).

'When I come back in the evening, I go pray to my God' (at the end of the day's activities, one is also believed to show some level of gratitude to God/god, as the case might be.

"Always believe in trying, nothing comes for nothing" (he believed in the struggle for daily living and the routing of hustling to make ends meet, believing that nothing happens by chance),

'Always do my best, and leave the rest to God' (he also believed that one would have to put in all

possible efforts to achieve a good result, and whatever happens next will be determined by the will of the Almighty as the one who has the final say).

Stanza-2

"My Mama advice me make I play my music with honesty" - In the traditional family style of the Igbo people, it is believed and most of the times seen to be the paramount duty of the mothers to inculcate in their children the habit of telling the truth. In this case, the man Oliver de Coque referred to his mother's upbringing of telling the truth as advice, this could be true as some children whose mothers also trained to do the same never took the advice and suffice it to say that they do not tell the truth and some or most of them suffer grave consequences.

'My Papa advice me, make I respect all my seniors' (if the mother must inculcate in their children the habit of telling the truth, the father's duty is to inculcate in their children the habit of showing respect to their elders). In the traditional Igbo family setting, respect is an expensive commodity since it is deserved, it is also earned. So, children are encouraged to honour those who are elderly and deserving among them, bearing in mind that respect is always reciprocated.

'Always cut my coat according to my size' (the saying is cutting one's coat according to one's clothes, but, the representation of size in the place of cloth, brings the information closer to the common man. It serves as a pointer to many to make budgets, plans, and expenditures within the range of one's pocket.

'I no dey promise anything wey my power no reach' (not keeping to one's word or promise is one of the most abhorrent behaviours the Igbo people originally shuns. As anyone who is indulging in such becomes a dread and in most cases avoided even by his or her peers.

'My yes is my yes, my no is my no' (he was a man of his word, a character some people are yet to come to terms with).

'I no dey make Inyanga, I'm a simple man by nature' (for one who speaks the truth at all times, he does not need to brag about it, a habit he feels is simplicity in his own right), and all of these qualities is even, funny.

Stanza-3

'When coconut fall from up, e no dey harm anybody' (the adage, idioms of the coconut cannot be overemphasized by an average Igbo person. Coconut: a very large brown hard-shelled nutlike fruit from a tropical tree, having hard white flesh and a hollow centre filled with a milky juice. The Igbo people have a lot of idioms with the coconut, some say it is the only crop that climbs up with bare hands and comes down fetching water alongside (referring to the milky juice or water it contained as a mystery without any definite explanation till date). The coconut as used in the context of the song referred to the lifestyle of the man Oliver de Coque as a man whose ways remained a mystery to those who felt they have known him too well, a calm and calculated man in his own right.

'If you do good to me I go thank you for your favour, if you do bad to me, na you Sabi o' (his life remained that of one who shows appreciation for the things one must have done to/for him, but, he was quick to posit that one should not only look forward to receiving good things all the time, hence 'if you do bad to me, na you sabi' meaning that both good and bad things, all happens and should be expected.

Stanza-4

"Sometimes when I dress, I dress like boyo-yo", (he referred to the deceptive nature of one's attire as what could mislead, some might misconstrue the exact nature of a person if all they do is concentrate on the person's appearance, mode of dressing or and dress sense/code. As sometimes he (Oliver de Coque) looks younger than he was).

"Sometimes when I dress, I dress like chief of chiefs" (from his looks, one would conclude that he is already a chief)

"I been get bear-bear, my bear-bear is from nature, music is my talent, that's my identity': his beard made him not only unique but recognizably different, as one could tell it was him even from a distance, having concluded with his enumeration about what makes him different, he admitted that amongst them all music was what made him outstanding). His kind of music according to Okafor (2017:70), is a dance-inspiring ogene style of highlife, which blends modern highlife and traditional Igbo music. He emphatically referred to his music as Expo'76 (Exponent 1976) which translates to mean that he founded, supported and nurtured the ogene style of highlife music. His ogene inspiration derived from the music his mother (Ezenwanyi) priestess made with the ogene (metal gong) while consulting with the gods and offering sacrifices either appeasing, requesting or urging the gods to attend to one need or the other at the Riverside (Ulasi) the ancient river that demarcates or parted Ezinifite from Ihitenansa, making Ezinifite stay under Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State and Ihitenansa to stay under Orsu Local Government Area of Imo State.

Oliver De Coque's Musical Instruments and Instrumentation

An instrument in this context could mean any device used in the production of music, in this case, highlife music. Oliver de Coque, therefore, incorporated the following instruments into his band and music. Guitars (solo guitar, which he dominantly plays, lead guitar played by another skilled employee of his and in most cases either a Ghanaian or Congolese, and then, the rhythm guitar which was predominantly played by his younger brother Nze Eugene Akanite also known as Eugene de Coque, and the bass guitar played by Austin Anyazo also known as Safejo of blessed memory), horns (trumpet, tuba, trombone and saxophone), shakers (rattles, maracas) clapperless Bell or metal gong (ogene) from which he derived his music and label names (Ogene sound super expo '76). Bongo/conga drums and rhythm sticks, slit-wooden drum (ekwe) and woodblock

(uko/okpokoro), electric conventional drum set. His band could therefore be seen as having the main section of a dance band – the guitars (strings) as the frontline, the horns and the percussion. Sequel to Celestine Ukwu, Oliver de Coque made consistent and proper use of electronic amplification that gave added projection and power to his music while blending Western instruments with traditional instruments to give captivating character to his highlife kind of music. During performances, extemporization gives room for the display of virtuosity with all the counter-rhythms and poly-rhythms his band uses common syncopated highlife accompaniments played with rhythm sticks or castanets. The instrumentalists incorporate new ideas and thus the music is very much alive. It is also remarkable to note that in most of his music, each instrumentalist is allowed to extemporize or to play *obbligato*, (a prominent countermelody often written to be played or sung above the principal theme). This he and his brother does chiefly and regularly with their guitars. Other instrumentalists take to the stage when it's their turn too and by so doing every instrumentalist feels a sense of belonging and importance.

Instrumentation is the act of using or adapting instruments more so, it is the arrangement and manner of playing musical instruments. In African music, according to Akpabot (1998:59). Refers to the way musicians select different instruments for a performance. It is not enough to just show how these instruments are chosen, but, perhaps more importantly, why they are grouped that way. Part of what makes highlife a unique musical genre is its method of melding traditional and contemporary sounds from all corners of Africa and the world.

Conclusion

Having originated in Ghana, from where it spread to other parts of Africa, (Nigeria inclusive), highlife music became one of the prominent popular music genres which flourished and were initially mostly patronized by the elites. Its migration to Nigeria was welcomed, as popular musicians like Chief Dr Oliver Sunday Akanite known as Oliver de Coque, together with his contemporaries helped to establish and give more popularity to a brand which flourished in the early 90s and still exists today.

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