



## MUSIC AS IMPERIALISM?

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### *Abstract*

*There are uncountable but subtle ways through which imperialism still finds expression in developing nations long after they have celebrated political freedom. Music is one such way and much as this might sound startling, the ample evidence which suggests so, may not be dismissed without dishonesty or neglected without scandal. It is the position of this paper that music has become a veritable sociological tool for more than cultural expression. It equally serves as machinery for cultural expansion and domination from the conception of its subject matter to the 'standardized' methods of its teaching and learning. The universal character of music as a phenomenon contrasts with the restricted meaning and application of terms which are meaningful within a limited geographical expression. The overt cultural specifics which make world music uniquely one and many have been threatened by the unrelenting bid to impose, albeit without suspicion, a mono-cultural interpretation to the universal experience called music. As long and often as this happens, music assumes all the destructive darts and barbs of imperialism.*

### **Introduction**

Let me start this article with a statement that could be criticized as being a hasty generalization.

Our approach to formal education in Africa is wrong, ineffective and totally misleading.

Imperialism is used here in Claude Ake's two senses, one is broad and the other narrow.



*According to the broader usage, imperialism is the subordination of one country to another or at any rate the attempt to subordinate one country to another in order to maintain a relationship of unequal exchange. The subordination may be military, economic, political, cultural, or some combination of these. Hence we talk of political, cultural, military, and economic imperialism. The stricter usage of the term, owed to Lenin makes it an economic phenomenon. In this sense, imperialism is a stage in the development of the capitalist mode of production. According to Lenin, imperialism is capitalism in that state of development in which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital has established itself....the broader and the more technical definitions of imperialism are closely related, they may be considered different ways of stating the same thing.*

### **The Nature of the Problem**

Even though the specific interest of this work is to show that music as understood, taught and presented in our schools especially the university is an assignment, unwittingly undertaken to perpetuate western imperialism, the general problem is that education as we know it today in many African nations is pure fraud, a stinking mountain of truths and untruths, a powerful institution that was contrived on a horrible foundation. At the mere mention of music as a subject of study even from the *ota akara* (Igbo version of the nursery school), the content and teaching method create the impression that every child has to learn the piano or any of the Western instruments following the usual first seven letters of the English alphabet, learn the white and black keys, and of course many English rhymes like ‘London bridge is falling down’, ‘my grandfather’s clock’, and so on. Those who study music further at the secondary school level or



the university will go ahead and learn the scale, intervals, chords and their inversions, counterpoint, Western history of music, orchestration, choral music and conducting. This goes on for the four or five years of study. Recently, an appreciable time began to be allotted to the study of African music, whatever it means. The concept of African music is funny in what it purports to stand for. What is called African music pretends to speak for Africa, the second largest continent on the planet, with multi-cultural currents. What is called African music which is merely accommodated in the curriculum of study and timetable is a mockery as taught and portrayed. So, the term music suffers a conceptional hijack when it actually means Euro-American music. Why can't there be full blown courses in the music of African experience? Why must the study of Law be understood to mean British Common Law? Or economics become the study of British economic theories and econometrics? What single contribution has Nigerians made to the practice of law based on their traditional paradigms for justice and equity? This fraud is committed in history, philosophy, most of the liberal arts and humanities, social sciences and environmental sciences. The same is true of medicine and pharmacy too. Education has become a veritable tool for the prolonged subjugation of the African mind to socio-cultural and anthropological superiority which rational merit even going by the standards of their so called scientific evidence.

### **Music as a Universal Phenomenon**

It has become a cliché to say that music is a universal language. This could be very embarrassing to a questioning mind. The concept of music, its appreciation, its interpretation and uses are not evidently universal. The more appropriate position to hold seems to be that music is a universal phenomenon. But as a universal language, the burden of proof lies with the fact that such a language is not easily understood by all in the same measure. A language is the human vehicle for communication. But what the arts, like music, communicate is usually different from person to person. What a particular musical



phrase or chord says to a hundred people in a room will differ from one person to another. And this is a unique characteristic of the arts. When music goes beyond its cultural borders, the communication is even more complicated. But the fact of music and its ability to communicate to human mind and feeling is undeniable. Yet, as an aspect of metaphor, we can endure the statement that music is a universal language. A cursory look at some of the properties and elements of music do not lead to an obvious conclusion that music is indeed a language universally understood. However, if the universe referred to, is a culturally homogenous enclave, then a restricted use or qualified use of the term is imperative. Different cultures have different ways of understanding sound, rhythm, dynamics, duration, style, aesthetics, tonality, polyrhythm, melorhythm, timbre and texture.

In many senses, however, the music of different cultures may bear all the marks of similarity more than differences. The basic need to sing, play and the irresistible urge to dance are all human and in that sense, yes, are universal. Again, every form of music is about the element called sound. In fact, music is a human art and in this sense, it is a natural, cultural and universal phenomenon. The exciting thing about a cross-cultural study of musical experiences is the fact that a concept in Western musical tradition could be understood in various ways in other non-European cultures. This has a great deal of implications for cultural, anthropological, philosophical and psychological studies. Let us consider the cultural nuances in the conceptualization of the basic elements of music as outlined in Western tradition: pitch, duration/rhythm, dynamics and timbre. These are regarded as the four natural components of music because they jointly constitute a musical sound (Ahanotu, 2001: 4-5). Let us have a quick glance at the similarities and dissimilarities inherent in the conception of the natural components of sound in the Western and non-Western musical traditions.

**Pitch** has been understood, according to the Western tradition, as the height or depth of sound. This has evolved through the scale system which makes use of the first seven letters of the alphabet known as



keys. These depend on a well-tempered system of tuning the keys arranged in a tone – semitone intervallic pattern. The intervals in turn depend on the properties of sound and culturally acceptable aesthetics.

In non-Western cultures, the idea of sound and intervals has been noticed but they have come up with various shapes of scales among which are the pentatonic types. This makes an octave out of five notes against the traditional eight notes. In Uganda, an instrument called the *akadinda* is built on the pentatonic scale. It is this type of tradition that was responsible for the evolution of the blues scale among African-Americans who made an amalgam of African intervallic and rhythmic styles with European scale and came up with something peculiarly American. But how does the lead singer in a traditional Igbo or Ashanti dance of Africa understand pitch? Very many cultures outside Europe and America do not even speak of pitch nor do the active musicians engage in long discussions about pitch, frequency, vibrations per second and all the musical concepts associated with Western music. They just sing, play or dance and the singer does not need the assistance of a keyboard or any melodic instrument so as to “pitch well”. This means that a song can be performed on different keys on different days without disorganizing structure or the performance. Should the opportunity present itself for a comment about the singer’s pitch, all that the Igbo can say is either *olu ya di mma* (his/her voice is good) or *olu ya adighi mma* (his/her voice is not good). An analysis of such a generalized evaluation shows that pitch is not the only issue implicated. It is a judgment that transcends mere assessment of pitch. It includes vocal range and agility, texture (whether it is velvet, lyrical or golden). Commenting on the nature of scales in Gamelan music of Bali and Indonesia, Pen (1992, 269) said:

*each step is slightly larger than the whole step of the Western system. In addition, there is no uniformly agreed-upon standard pitch. Thus, while an A (440 vibrations per second)*



*would be the same in any Euro-American music, in gamelan, each orchestra is tuned to a different basic pitch. No two gamelan orchestras can play together.*

On the face value, this looks like a description of cacophony or a musical disorder. But it is not. It is the clearest expression of the philosophy of one and many, unity in diversity.

Another aspect of the scale systems which shows marked differences is the idea of semitones and microtones. The semitone is the smallest interval in the Western tone system but in India, Japan and some African countries, there are microtones which require a paradigmatic shift either in the tuning of the instruments or in the aural perception of the sound by the audience. In the non-Western climes, these microtones pose no problems since they form part of the people's everyday musical expressions. But to someone from the Western tradition, the prospects of inventing new notes in the existing diatonic scale could be frustrating. It is, therefore, easier to see them as non-musical. The northern Indian concept of raga is even more intriguing. Ragas are not just scales; they represent both musical content and emotions. Each scale has its unique embellishments and time of the day or year or mood which it represents. They are expressive conventions culturally understood in Indian music. And there are hundreds of them.

### **Time**

A basic understanding of the concept of time in the West and other African and Asian cultures is very indispensable to the idea of time in music. Time in say Britain or the United States is a one way phenomenon which is the reckoning of units of phases and events expressed in terms of past, present and future. It is a continuum through which an unintermittible sequence or succession of events is viewed. It moves in a straight line; there is birthday and then, a sequence of events and activities coming together to make up one's life history up till death. But elsewhere like in Africa, time is not merely about a chronological ordering of events. It is more complex and more comprehensive. Time is not linear; it is cyclical. It moves in a circle not in a straight line. African nations and other oriental cultures express the



saying, 'what goes around comes around'. The morning today will come back tomorrow; so, the morning has not gone. The dead are not really dead because they come back in another life in the lives of new born babies. The world is not on a linear movement but on a circular rotation. This even conforms better with the scientific concepts of planetary rotation and revolution. Even Christian conceptions of time support this. The phrase, "liturgical cycle" and the theology of death expressed in these words "tu enim fidelibus, vita mutatur non tollitur" (for your faithful people, life is changed not ended) show that cyclic coming and going is an ancient insight.

This background explains why time in Euro-American music is understood as a mathematical or statistical reality. It is called divisive time because it literally divides a piece of music into proportions of time like 4/4, 2/2, 2/4, 3/4, 6/8. These fractions of time alter musical movements in terms of speed. But African and Asian music have little consideration for the mathematical or statistical representation of musical time. These cultures do not necessarily divide time in terms of meters. They create rhythms by adding beats in very "regular cycles of accented and unaccented values" (Pen, 266). This form of rhythmic asymmetry is unique and said to be additive. Pen reports about Western African musicians that:

*organize their sense of time around layers of beat rhythmic ostinatos (short repeated melodic patterns) that are all performed continuously in relation to a specific pattern. These patterns or "time line"... are not restricted to duple or triple meter, but are usually an asymmetrical mix of meters. Western notation does not accurately reflect this music (267).*

In Indian music, the organization of time is called *tala*. It is a cycle involving the shortest conception of time to infinity. Beats are grouped into regularly occurring cycles called *talas*. There used to be hundreds of them in theory but today, Carnatic music has four *talas*: *adi tala* (corresponding to 8 beats),



*rupaka tala* (3 beats), *khanda chapu tala* (5 beats), and *misra chapu tala* (7 beats). In Indonesian music, the idea of rhythmic cycles equally dominates. The gong called *kempur* is sounded every sixteen beats to signal a cycle. But there are equally musical forms that adopt free rhythm, being neither divisive nor additive. It is found in Indian as well as African music. The Igbo have “mbem”- a chant form which adopts free time. Sometimes a piece of music may combine all the time forms too.

What this means is that a general or universal conception of time in music is a misrepresentation of reality. But how much of this is considered when ‘time’ as an element of sound is taught to students from even non-Western musical cultures? These students have to struggle to comprehend the conceptual clash between their temporal order of things and Western perception of time.

**Dynamics** is a word used to describe the loudness or softness of sound. It comes from the Greek word, ‘*dunamis*’ meaning power. Many authors uphold that it is the most general of all the elements of sound in various cultures. The rise and fall of sound in performance is seen to communicate. It is Pen’s view that Western music is more dynamically expressed than non-Western music. This view is equally corroborated by experience since most musical cultures play and perform works at a relatively stable dynamic level. Western music history shows that baroque music expressed affection and contrasts of mood. The romantics expanded the dynamic range of musical works so that a full fortissimo of a Wagnerian opera would clearly express the freedom of the age but a West African percussion dance group does not even necessarily show that dynamics receives such attention.

**Timbre** is another element of sound which is culture-bound in its expressions. Instruments of Western origin sound different from those of India, China, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ghana e .t. c. The tone colours of instruments differ and in fact make them recognizable. Even the most common of instruments – the human voice, sounds different from one part of the world to another. The use of words to express





meanings in the West receives added usage in non-Western cultures like native American songs and Africa where singables or vocables (syllables which are not words) are sung to express various feelings.

### **Conclusion**

So, is music `conceived and as taught in our schools and universities caught up in the throes of serving the imperialist agenda? As long as it is seen as ordained by the Western tradition, and as long as music as we make it, and as part of our inextricable identity is treated as lower version of ‘the music’, the answer to the concluding question is unfortunately in the affirmative. Unless something is done fast to reverse the trend, our study of music will remain at crossroads without any perceivable advancement in the direction of independence or at least equality of status for Western music and the so called African music? This means that the misnomer, “African music” requires a redefinition by scholars who have both the courage and intellectual capacity to begin the discussion.

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