

An assessment of Nigeria urban youth music

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Introduction

Youth music has blossomed in Nigeria for over a decade, and the youth have been putting their suddenly discovered voice to extra-ordinary use in a nascent democratic dispensation. The global adoption of hip hop, for which the use of electronic musical gadgets by a novice suffices, and Nigeria's nascent democratic dispensation may have combined to boost youth involvement in music. Not having a genre they could call their own prior to the 1990s the youth discovered in an easy-to-manipulate technology a means of production that liberates potential musicians from former hegemonic apprenticeship that tied one to a master until fortune smiled on one. Youth musicians explore themes, mix rhythms and portray their inventiveness in music videos unrestrained. Cacophonies of sounds and visuals fill the nation's airwaves; but some of the adult population are apprehensive of the impact this trend on youth in a yet-to-develop nation.

How youth perceive youth music genre and its impact on society were investigated through a writing assignment in which third year undergraduate students were asked to express their views on youth music in an essay, especially with regard to violence. Identifying youth music as being current and enjoying currency, the students also indicated that in their excessiveness, the musicians contribute to decay in the society, while being unnecessarily vociferous in their attack of the country's leadership. They however agree with the musicians that the Nigerian system had been unjust to the youth, especially in not providing for their needs. This article presents a summary of students' assessment of the youth music scene in Nigeria, and then relates music content to the Nigerian society.

Literature review

The popular music scene in Nigeria today may not be unlike those of other countries in terms of active participants, method of development and rendition, fad and quality of song lyrics, particularly with reference to hip hop. Abati (2009: 70) in an article that provoked a debate opines that many Nigerian popular musicians “lack the patience to ... think through a subject to its logical end.” This is in line with Luvaas (2006:173) description of electronic dance music as “aesthetics of ambivalence” with “song lyrics [which] seem to painstakingly avoid subject matter with any pretence of depth.” In addition, Gregson (2006) contends that youth culture has the characteristics of edginess, profane content, and of being offbeat and “weird.”

Influenced by mass culture of consumerism (De Castro, 2007), and emphasising narratives of a carnivalised culture that promote unlimited satisfaction of impulse (Langman, 2003a), hip hop artistes model for the young: body beautification and commodification, ostentatious life style and a life where sexuality has become a question of aesthetics rather than ethics (Attwood, 2008). As it were, “the relaxation of sexual constraints erodes the power of communal moral codes to control the amoral unconscious” (Langman, 2003a: 285). Moreover, Basu (2008) avers that the “relationship between rap music and sexual attitudes, especially of black listeners to hip-hop, adversely affects sexual health decisions and attitudes.”

On the other hand, Niebur’s (2003) assertion that “music will inevitably continue to change and adapt to society at large” may imply that society is resilient to the indiscretions of some popular musicians. However, countering this view is Dolby’s (1999) observation that people’s world, youth in particular, is defined by images conveyed in global popular. It stands to reason that popular culture and society interact and influence each other; and the question of which has the greater force may depend on each context.

Youth music is not necessarily inimical to society’s wellbeing. To the contrary, De Castro’s (2007: 194) in fact notes that in Brazil musicians are using pop music in socially healing manner by creating emotional and social bond, as well as for social transformation. Further, “musical expression has become the ample, and perhaps the sole, cultural means whereby poor youth can voice and express the silent and perverse conditions to which they are subjected” (De Castro). Similar observation has been made of Ghana. However, in the spirit of the time, of satisfying today’s desires and impulse (Langman, 2003b) with little or no regard for the future, the

Ghanaian musicians indulge in “simultaneous celebration and condemnation of certain behavioural practices” (De Bruijn, 2008: 17).

Rap and hip hop provide the form. “Taking the basic tenets of the rap style, young people of differing ethnic backgrounds in cities and regions across the globe have reworked the rap text in ways that incorporate local knowledge and sensibilities...” (Bennett, 2001: 93). This could create a rallying point for youth and have a unifying influence on them, enabling them to create identities in contemporary societies where the young person “has fewer and fewer communities or institutions in which to find identity or values by which to live” (Strinati, 2004: 6).

Specifically, given poor living conditions – which in themselves could heighten conflict, crime and violence Winston (2004) – can youth music lead to or increase violence? Slater, Henry, Swaim and Anderson (2003) surmise that violent media content can heighten youth’s predisposition to violence, since youth who have violent predisposition tend to seek out violent media. Similarly, discontent and other violence-engendering messages that are encoded and propagated through music could have negative impact on listeners and society at large. According to McFarland and Kimmons (2008), many blacks lamented that “gangsta rap infested the youth with violence, meanness, sexism, and irresponsibility.”

To find out from those that relate closely with youth music what their perception is of violence content in Nigerian youth music an essay assignment requested third year students to assess youth music in Nigeria. They were however not given any restriction in their description of youth music in general, and the assessment of its possible and present impact on youth consumers. This report, however, offers an overview of their views on Nigerian youth music scene, and the interaction between music and society.

Methodology

Students of a developmental writing class were assigned to write an assessment of Nigerian youth music, with particular reference to violent content and its influence on violence. The essay was to be submitted within four weeks for grading as part of the overall score for the course. Thirty-five out of 48 students made submissions of which four failed to address the topic. The essays indicate that students presume that music reflects and may encourage different kinds of violence in society among

the youth, to wit: “Music on sex, drugs, bad leadership and money help to aggravate violent tendencies in youth and make them display more of these tendencies in their communities,” a student surmises. In addressing the issue of violence in, and as a product of, youth music, the students illustrated their perception of the music scene with examples. Put together, the essays give a picture of youth music scene in Nigeria as well as insight to the interaction between music and society, of which this article attempts to present.

Popular music scene in Nigerian: hip hop reigns

Although in no way restricted, the students focused mainly on hip hop music in their essays; probably because they were most familiar with this form. Also, hip hop is pervasive, notorious and cannot be ignored; it, in fact, seems to be drowning out other genres of popular music. It is markedly the music by youth and for the youth. Over the years, highlife and other forms of hybridised music had met the needs of the urban adult public; the youth were largely ignored, as children still are. Essentially, as highlife, youth music/popular culture is urban creation which targets urban youth. Prior to the recession of the 1980s, Nigerian youth were content with foreign music. However, the recession and subsequent austerity measures significantly reduced access to foreign cultural products, probably due to unprecedented devaluation of the naira (Nigerian currency) which caused the prices of foreign goods to shoot up beyond the reach of the ordinary person and broadcast media. Globalisation and increased access to satellite television provided the incentive for satiating the starvation of several years. Idle youth adopted the hip hop and rap genre which required the use of electronic instrument already available in the environment.

Until they discovered hip hop urban youth in Nigeria had no enduring local music of their own, created for or by them. Youth merely participated as chorus or played instruments for adult musicians. Today, the youth have taken advantage of technological innovations – and have identified with the global culture of postmodernism, especially exultation in the gratification of impulses – to create their own kind of music. In addition, a fortuitous nascent democratic dispensation permits them to infuse diverse messages about the frustrations experienced in the society. Of most concern, though, is that Nigerian youth musicians may escalate social maladies through graphic presentation of social taboos, using particularly the hip hop musical form.

In view of hip hop being the entry point of Nigerian urban youth into the music culture, it is understandable that today's youth see music differently from what adult generation knew or thought/think of it or its use. It is noteworthy that many of the musicians were groomed in Lagos ghettos. Their perception of life is in consonance with the environment they were familiar with, and this, the students observe, also reflects in their music; for example, the use of hooliganism and brute force as a means of settling scores. Their chaotic environment (and sometimes upbringing) compounded with limited education, is reflected in poor organisation of thought, choice of language and rendition of message.

Students assess some of the lyrics of today's youth music as far removed from what the Nigerian music consumers were familiar with. Prior to the onslaught of youth music, highlife, a blend of Western sound and African beats and instruments, served the purposes of entertainment (especially at ceremonies), exercise and relaxation, and they addressed societal issues. Interestingly, the students still see the lyrics of the time as nourishing to the soul and relaxing the mind; observing that even when they touched on political issues, the lyrics pontificated on doing what is right – with few exceptions. Contrarily, a student observes of today's youth musicians: "Ironically, these musicians reap a lot of wealth by corrupting the society through their music. Unlike Fela Kuti who oppressed the oppressor through music fearlessly and unrepentantly." The present-day youth do not explore music as a means of education or for sermonising on good behaviour. As it were, they discovered music at a time that the society has failed them and they are saying so, even in their celebration.

Hip hop is a product of globalisation, and these two phenomena are seen as being responsible for the introduction of presumed (media-carrying *unacceptable*) American way of life into the Nigerian society. Beats and lyrics indicate that, contrary to the belief of their forebears, tomorrow may not be important to the youth – today and now must be exploited for maximum pleasure. Emergent Nigerian hip hop artistes, in adopting the foreign genre, incorporate Nigerian elements to produce a vibrant and lively variety that has become popular among Nigerian youth. Not only are beats unique, but languages are combined to create effects, new coinages deliver restricted messages, and existing words are twisted to sing obscenity. The students (educated) in this study think that in addition to the social environment that formed them, the quality of education that some of these musicians had, or did not have, before going into music is a contributing factor to uncouth language use and lucid graphic presentation of unwholesome images.

Besides, discovering it as a short cut to fame and fortune, many youth that take to music have little time to give adequate thought to their composition.

These criticisms notwithstanding, it is observed that some hope to bring changes in society through their songs. Artistes have not relented in berating government over ineffectiveness. One (Eedris) upset the former president Olusegun Obasanjo with his lyric that describes Nigeria as being in disarray (“Nigeria scatter scatter”). But the musician is not alone in that belief as this excerpt from a student’s essay written with an aggressive tone indicates:

...some [Nigerian youths] venture into fraud popularly known as yahoo, yahoo. They dupe citizens of other countries, denting the image of their country, their own mother land. But why will this not happen? It will definitely happen because our ... *government has refused to wake up to her responsibilities* (emphasis mine).

Then again, students observe in their essays that the same musician may sing sense and senselessness, making it difficult to place a particular musician as a social crusader or a source of moral decadence in society. Ambivalence is probably an element of hip hop culture, and the message per se may not be as important as “being in.” Perhaps the ease with which hip hop is produced, requiring no training in musical skills (Bennett, 2001), and the acceptance of a celebration of the absurd lead to the creation of strange cacophonies of songs, beats and images, which promoters are eager to market for quick returns. Incidentally, it is obvious that obscenity and the absurd sell fast. Absurdity, charlatan attitudes and ineptitude are found more with male than female musicians (Nwanne, 2009).

Obviously, hip hop by its nature is accommodating of all sounds and messages, no matter where it finds a home and no matter what the intellectual capacity of the singer is. Contributory is the audience who is easily swayed by dexterity and uniqueness of the musical beats. Singing sense and senselessness, people from the low end of society perform to the admiration of the children of the relatively rich in society, even though the latter are spatially segregated and manifest behaviours and views of life that differ from those of their entertainers. In all, the children of the rich have access to big screens and satellite television, and most youths have devices with which to listen to their kind of music.

From another perspective, it is observed that youth generally accept artistes that seem to understand their plight. *Edris you promised say you go marry me* [But you promised me marriage] impressed ladies because it addressed their experience with failed love affairs. Fada Bassi’s *Say e easy* [Is it easy?] expressed the frustration of

having to roam the street after graduation and not finding a job. Similarly, Julius Agu's *Bend down boutique* appeals to many because a typical youth helplessly patronises second hand clothing corners due to poverty. In the long run, hip hop fills the void in the restive years of adolescence.

Beyond the shores of Nigeria, Nigerian hip hop artistes have gained international recognition through receiving top awards in competitions in which Nigerian musicians hitherto did not feature. In addition, Nigerian music is being used in popular films and dramas outside Nigeria [e.g. *African Queen* in *Phat Girlz*]. This trend impresses Nigerian youth, making music career attractive to them. Now, parents are less critical of the profession, which in the past was considered proper for only the wayward.

The music industry has created jobs for many youth: as musicians, disc jockeys, producers and song writers, as well as in allied businesses such as the fashion industry, with some artistes graduating from being patrons to setting up their own fashion labels. The music industry has in fact created fortune and fame for the fortunate. For example, while a hardworking youth may find it difficult to earn 150,000 naira per annum, a popular DJ earns over three million naira in a year and a popular hip hop musician can demand 1.5 million naira to perform at an event. Exotic cars and houses in choice areas in major cities set musicians apart as trendsetters and role models to youth. Thus, popular culture is now perceived by Nigerian youth as money making venture, just as the youth musicians are prepared to go to any extreme to satisfy the "carnavalesque dreamworlds" (Langman, 2003b) of their young audience.

It can be surmised that to some extent, hip hop music in Nigeria rebels against a society that fails to provide for its youth. Meaningless songs tend to suggest apathy to what is considered proper by society, especially in music extolling immoral sexuality. At another extreme are songs that actually put in words frustration with the system, government in particular.

Music and society

Students' essays indicate that Nigerian popular musicians respond to society, impact on society and sometimes are out of tune with what some portions of the listening and viewing audience expect of them. Hip hop artistes not only exhilarate

their audience with their beats, but some lyrics also request them to go overboard, for example, to get drunk or do the absurd. Lurid message but good beat, Faze's *Kolomental* thrilled youth and topped the chart.

Lyric (in Pidgin)

As you dey fall in oh
 Make you take note oh
 Say dis party oh
 Na for craz people oh
 Make you mental
 Make you display
 Show your madness
 Make you craz dey go
 Dance nonsense
 Na the concept oh
 Na the senseless
 See I don kolo
 Make una hold me oh
 If una no fit oh
 Na to join me kolo
 Make we mental

Translation

As you are falling in [i.e., As you join the party]
 Take note
 That this party
 Is for mad people
 Get mad
 Behave as a mad person
 Exhibit your mad behaviour
 Keep that act on
 Dance irrationally [i.e., as a mad person]
 That is the idea
 That is the senselessness
 See, I have already gone mad
 Take hold of me
 If you are not able to
 The best option is to join me in the madness
 Let us all get mad

The music video of the above lyric actually shows people acting as if mentally deranged. Students observed the impact this had on its audience: "people go all out of their way to behave madly whenever the song is played, throwing chairs, jumping on each other, behave[ing] like thugs, etc." Youth respond to the messages of the music they listen and dance to. Biggiano's *Shayo* encourages drinking to a stupor in parties, because the lyric says:

To attend my party you must *shayo* [get drunk].

You no fit try come my party make una no shayo [You can't attend my party without getting drunk]

All of una must *shayo* [All of you must get drunk]

Students observed that violent fighting and raping resulted from excessive drinking. Similarly, although banned some months after its release, *Konga* wrecked havoc in its promotion of indiscriminate sex. A line in the song says anyone at a

party who is not interested in indiscriminate sex should be sent out of the party. On a wider dimension, a student observed that the public noticed that Olu Maintain's *Yahoozee* increased cyber crime when it was the rave, but that that crime's rate subsided after the popularity of the track waned.

During the period under review, unacceptable music and behaviours it engendered were furthered by companies taking advantage of the popularity of musicians to promote their products in the media and at events targeted at selling products to youth. This is not to say that the companies supported the unacceptable lyrics, since most adults hardly realised many lyrics were out of tune with what they would want to be identified.

Even as it encourages the spread of consumerism alongside moral decadence on the one hand; on the other, hip hop attacks societal issues of injustice and inequity, and the incidence of poverty. Taking advantage of the hip hop musical form which affords agency for free expression, musicians easily vent youth's frustrations with the system that have failed to address the problem of increasing poverty and joblessness in urban families. Since the early 1980s the grassroots has been denied its share of the country's oil wealth but has borne the brunt of economic woes. The poverty that trailed unsuccessful austerity measures in the 1980s through the 1990s has not abated even though Nigeria recovered from her debt burdens in the following decade. Moreover, stable socio-economic infrastructures are yet to be firmly established, while physical infrastructures that have direct bearing on ordinary people's life continue to fail. Again, small and medium scale industries, as well as the middle class, which were almost extinguished during the military rule of 1984–1999, are yet to pick up. Meanwhile, petit trading, which could sustain families no longer guarantees a stable family income. Consequently, many youth are growing up deprived of basic daily needs and support for pursuing any life ambition – the future is bleak.

In the midst of these social problems, large scale corruption and embezzlement of national wealth by politicians and highly placed government officials continue to plague the system. Apparently, governance, economic management and administrative machineries have not developed adequately to check the recklessness of those in position to deliver public goods. Therefore, whereas Nigeria is rich, the larger portion of the society cannot access her oil wealth circulating within the country or taking flight to other countries where Nigerians acquire personal assets with the people's money. Moreover, manufacturing suffers under indeterminate infrastructure provision, forcing hitherto well established companies to relocate to

neighbouring countries. Consequently, jobs are lost and job opportunities continue to dwindle; and in the absence of infrastructures that can support self-driven wealth creation, families that cannot provide basic necessities of life for their youth are also losing grip on their discipline. The artiste African China sang: *Our government bad oh! They no want give ghetto man job. If ghetto man no get job my brother how he go take survive.*

Meanwhile, politicians earn wages and allowances that sound obscene in a country where over 70% are living below poverty level and unemployment has become a most demoralising factor for poor families that pitched their hope for a better life on their sons and daughters they scraped and pinched to see through higher education. In most cases, people's lives have not been touched in any meaningful ways since the inception of democratic government since 1999. The people see injustice, the people groan under injustice but the people cannot do much against injustice because they lack the means with which to fight injustice, such as media access and political education, and sometimes, basic education. But that situation is changing among youth who cannot afford the older generation's philosophy of "sit down and look" or "tomorrow will be better." A student cites Asa's metaphorical warning in the song lyric *Fire on the mountain*:

One day the river will overflow
And there'll be nowhere for us to go
And we will run, run
Wishing we had put out the fire

According to the student this song is particularly instructive because: "The youth are the future of Nigeria and the voices of the musicians are the cumulated voices of the youth." This voice is however vociferous in *Elewon* [Drive them] by Oritse Femi who boldly describes Nigerian politicians as rogues, thieves and liars that should be flogged and chased away:

Lyric (in English and Yoruba)

Everyone don vex o!
Politicians say dey want come give us bege
Den talk say they want come give us bege
Bayelsa dey wit alongi (gun) o
Niger Delta boys don dey provoke i o

Translation

Everyone is angry!
Politicians promised to improve our lot
They promised to improve our lot
(But) Bayelsa is replete with guns
The Niger Delta boys have been provoked

Benin go talk Ibawi (insult)
 A ni ema se laulau si wa o!
 Elewon !!!

Benin is ready for a showdown
 (Politicians) Please, don't pester us!
 (Let's) Drive them away!!!

Nigerian youth have discovered their voice and may discover that they can do a lot with their limbs to communicate their disgust with the system. It is hoped that the socio-political scene would continue to change in the right direction and that the musicians would direct their creativity and energy to other kinds of messages. Having succeeded in quelling the Niger Delta (Southern Nigeria) crisis through the continued offering of the carrot, the Nigerian government is now confronted with terrorism in the north. It must, however, avoid a nationwide revolution by its youth, by eliminating structural violence engendered by poor leadership and gross looting of the nation's treasury while the majority of the people look on.

Conclusion

Although hip hop, as earlier popular (adult) music, is a fusion of local with Western music and is created to entertain, the embodied messages of hip hop are strange to the older generation. Hip hop provides a means of self expression, but what self! Aesthetic and ambivalent (Bruinj, 2008 and Luvaas, 2006), hip hop becomes an agency for the pursuit and public celebration of "a 'carnival culture' of excess and license [that] permits all that had been forbidden, extols the expression of emotion over the constraints of the intellect, and erodes the very pursuit of excellence that is the basis of civilization" (Langman, 2003a: 290). Artistes, producers, DJs and others in the music industry celebrate fame and fortune at the expense of a society that has not developed enough to accommodate the influence of a rampaging culture. A student notes that "while crying for a change, musicians end up adding to the violence. [Moreover] They engage in dubious acts, such as drug trafficking, cultism and prostitution."

The students in this study feel that institutions in charge of censorship issues should be held responsible for letting musicians take control and "further corrupt the already corrupt minds of most Nigerian youth," a student volunteers. Some music videos and songs are banned, but a few after they had been seen by portions of the public. Youth freedom need not be allowed to corrode innocent minds through exposure to immorality before an innocent youth is matured to handle

media content. Further, the education system should be strengthened and good books provided for the education of the minds of youth so they can be in a vantage position to make premeditated choices.

The youth has told the nation that the society has no plans for them. Although this message of alienation has been on for some time now in youth music, the government is yet to listen to what the youth have been urging it to do. Rather, the society itself boasts of political violence, bad governance, injustice, immorality, corrupt practices in high places, etc. Whereas no society is devoid of these shortcomings, culpable behaviours among the adult population that should set example for the youth to follow remain unchecked. It is preposterous that some well-placed individuals still steal in order to educate their children in schools demanding exorbitant fees or overseas, whereas the Nigerian school system is in a deplorable state, encumbered with a plethora of perennial problems that are beginning to look insurmountable. Under such condition it becomes difficult to see how youthful minds can be groomed or transformed in today's modern world (and mass culture). Moreover, attending such schools, most Nigerian youth who are from low socio-economic backgrounds are deprived of functional education, and so cannot contest for few available job opportunities with the children of the rich who attended well provided-for private schools in the country and overseas. Therefore, musicians sing about different kinds of structural violence prevalent in the system.

Further, mediating social organisations need to provide for youngsters a direction, recreation and skills acquisition centres as necessities. Since Nigeria does not run a welfare programme for the socio-economically deprived, vulnerability to urban violence can increase if there is no avenue for recreation, self-development and self-actualisation. The country must prevent its youth from discovering that they can also take licence of other means of self-expression and get away with physical violence. For instance, kidnapping started in the Niger Delta region with youth taking in foreign oil workers, but this crime spread to other parts of the country with kidnappers, especially youth, kidnapping old, young and selves for a ransom. In some cases key figures in society have died in the process. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, some have tried to attribute the present Boko Haram [a Muslim terrorist group] attacks in northern Nigeria to lack of jobs, arguing that if the youth are gainfully employed they would not be attracted into the group. There is no doubt that equity, justice and other elements of sustainable development cannot be ignored in Nigeria's *reformation* or *transformation* journey. But the youth need to see themselves in government agenda.

The essay assignment from which this article was generated aimed at appraising youth's reaction to violence-laden music. Music content can suggest the mindset of its creators and consumers and therefore may forebode their future actions. Moreover, music is a potent instrument for mobilising people into action – be it student groups in tertiary institutions or warring parties, songs call to action, are empowering and quickly communicate messages to group members or targets. Even the Nigerian government uses music to its advantage to communicate diverse kinds of messages, such as national reorientation and health issues. This is probably due to the realisation that Nigerians love music, and that music has a characteristic of penetrating people's consciousness unhindered. Indeed many adults found themselves humming or dancing to youth music only to discover later that they were not in agreement with the lyrics, when deciphered.

Most students believe that music aggression could lead to violence (Slater et al., 2003). At the least, music is a window to the minds of its creators and consumers. Music comes from within the individual or people, carrying messages even as it entertains. If the government can use music to communicate its message, it should also listen to the music in society to hear what sections of the governed are saying. It can perhaps appreciate what the needs of Nigerian youth are, and that they deserve more out of society than it is presently offering – at the least, innocent youth need guidance, particularly information and grooming that will lead them to identify with desired social behaviour. This may also require messages or steps that counter inappropriate music content.

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Summary

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Music embodies culture, expressing relevant features of a people's life. Music is an integral aspect of African culture, occupying a special place in the celebration of birth and death and other events in-between. Indeed it is difficult to imagine life without music in traditional Nigerian society where all strata and age groups have their own music; a richness of life that urban communities failed to totally replicate, being that they are composites of ethno-linguistic fragments. Thus, the evolving youth popular music culture is significant in many respects, especially as it cuts across ethnic divides and provides entertainment for a group in heretofore largely ignored in Nigerian urban society. Its

potentials, and its retrogressive potency, in national development require that popular culture be studied to ascertain the message and mindset of active and passive participants. This article summarises aspects of youth music in Nigeria as assessed by undergraduate students.

Keywords: hip hop, popular music, society, song lyrics, youth