

Influence of African Oral Tradition in Winning Jah's Reggae Music

Solomon Awuzie, PhD

Department of English, Edo University Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria

**Corresponding Author:* Solomon Awuzie, Department of English, Edo University Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Since Bob Marley's visit to Africa, the reggae music has become one of the music genres the African artistes imbibed. By joining in singing the reggae music, the African artistes have succeeded in spicing up the reggae music with the African oral tradition. Using Winning Jah's selected reggae songs the influence of African oral tradition on the African reggae music is revealed. The paper concludes that African reggae artistes, such as Winning Jah, have succeeded in adding African flavour to the reggae music. The essence of this is to make it fit as an instrument for African social and political correction.

Keywords: Reggae, Winning Jah, African Oral tradition, music

INTRODUCTION

Even though the popularity of the reggae music in Africa dates back to the 1980s when the Jamaican reggae stars, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Jimmy Cliff and others became known in the world for the reggae music. Bob Marley's trip to Zimbabwe, Burning Spear's trip to Senegal and Jimmy Cliff's journey to Senegal further made the reggae music known among the Africans and became an avenue to incorporate African artistes to the musical style. According to Fallou Ngom, "the popularity of the reggae" music in Africa is "partly ascribable to the fact" that many African "youngsters can easily relate to the social and political issues addressed in reggae songs by their brothers outside the continent" (106). By so doing, the reggae music became one of the music genres the African artistes imbibed, hence making the music one of "the popular musical [lives] of the African continent" (Alan Waters, 3). By joining in singing the reggae music, the African artistes have succeeded in spicing up the reggae music – so much so that the reggae music produced by the African artistes now seems to differ from the ones promoted by the Jamaican artistes. One of the things that make the African reggae music different from the ones originally produced by the Jamaican reggae artistes is the African oral tradition which has become one important "ingredient" of the music. As part of the musical "ingredient" that makes the African reggae music palatable, the African oral tradition has

also given the song the status of the symbol. It has musical makeup that has strong impact on the African reggae music and that has also distinguished it from other reggae music from around the world. Jasper Onuekwusi has argued that the African oral tradition "cannot exist outside music, melody and rhythm for the musical impulse often forms the base of [its] poetic composition" (118). Hence, the inclusion of the oral tradition in the reggae music also adds the poetic flavor to the music. And just as, to use the words of Jasper Onuekwusi, in African oral tradition "words and music are inseparable" (118), in African reggae music words blended with music are fashioned to express the artiste's views. This is so because in the African reggae music as well as in African oral tradition, words, which are also the carriers of thought, are chosen and arranged to provide sound. The orderly arrangement of the sound eventually produces music. This is also the reason, like the African oral tradition, the African reggae music is designed to be performed in order to emphasize that songs and music are important props of emotion.

F.B.O Akporobaro has also described African oral tradition as a poetic-song or song-poem which is also one of its important attributes that makes it easily absorbable into the reggae music. In the words of FBO Akporobaro, the African oral tradition is "an expression of a personal mood or thought sung simply or to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as

guitar, koras, drum, rattle, bottles or knocking of sticks” (228). This as a matter of fact accounts for the reason most African artistes are at home with the reggae music because it is one musical style where the African oral tradition can fully be expressed in contemporary time and to a larger audience. The influence of the African oral tradition on African reggae music is so enormous that without it the African reggae artistes may not be able to connect with the music. This is because the African reggae artistes are conversant and are in tune with oral traditional performances which have been established and made an integral part of the African reggae music.

The importance of performance in African oral tradition has been stressed by Ruth Finnegan. According to her, performance is central to African oral tradition. Hence, without performance, musical and verbal elements of the African oral tradition that the African reggae artiste import into the reggae music the African reggae artiste will lose that connection between the musical part of the African oral tradition and the African reggae music. Without it the African reggae music as well as the African oral tradition will be tantamount to, as Finnegan puts it, a mere “treasure store of manners and vocabulary, a reservoir of archetypes, an inexhaustible source for the historian, a training ground for the phonetician, a quarry for the anthropologist, a paradise for myth collectors”. And they will also remain the unexplored artistic territories (4).

With the influence of the African oral tradition on the African reggae music, the music now seems to share similar characteristics with the African oral tradition in varieties of ways. For instance, just as the African oral tradition combines the artiste's original voice with musical surrogates, in the cause of producing the African reggae music the artiste's natural voice is accompanied with musical instruments. This is what gives the music the profound resources of language for expressing feelings, thoughts, beliefs, philosophies, values and histories of the people. This also accounts for the aspects of culture such as prejudices, real or imaginary, social ethos, religious dogmas and all aspects of material and non-material culture which the people learn and perpetuate that are integral element of the African reggae music. In the reggae music, there is also a mutual set of expectations between the artist and his society. The society expects the artist to recreate the society through the use of his fine talent. It is for

this reason, the reggae music as well as the African oral tradition from where it picks its creative resources, represents an artistic creative presentation of the desire for survival against the background of the difficulties and fragility of life. In this sense the reggae music is an expressive art-form in which mythic and human experiences are projected spontaneously. The key poetic elements in the African reggae music are analogical imagery, mythic, motifs, allusions, symbolic and local experience and desires. These as weaving forms of the poetic imagination work in alliance with musical elements of rhythm performance and drumming to generate both feeling and form, and vision texture by the realities of the local language. Musicality and musical forms are invented with the intention to perform as additional communicative modes to imagery, constant dance and rhythm, all of which form an artistic complex of multi dimensional nature.

In order to demonstrate how African oral tradition has influenced the African reggae music, this paper has been divided into three subsections: African Reggae Music and Its Origin, African Oral Tradition in Winning Jah's Songs and then the Conclusion.

AFRICAN REGGAE MUSIC AND ITS ORIGIN

African reggae music is a strand of the popular reggae music. The popular reggae music genre originated in Jamaica in the late 1960s. It is coined from the term “rege-rege” which means “rags” or “ragged clothes”. The word reggae was first put to use in a popular song entitled “Do the Reggay” by Toots and the Maytals in 1968. The song effectively named the genre and introduced it to the global audience. When it started, reggae music was considered a Jamaican Mento and contemporary Jamaican Ska music, along with American jazz and rhythm & blues. However, the immediate origins of reggae were the Ska and Rocksteady. It is believed that reggae took over the use of the bass as a percussion instrument from Rocksteady. Some key Jamaican reggae musicians are Jackie Jackson from Toots and the Maytals, Carlton Barrett from Bob Marley and the Wailers, Lloyd Brevett from The Skatalites, Paul Douglas from Toots and the Maytals, Lloyd Knibb from The Skatalites, Winston Grennan, Sly Dunbar, and Anthony "Benbow" Creary from The Upsetters.

The genre of reggae music is led by the drum and bass. The bass guitar often plays the dominant role in reggae. The bass sound in reggae is thick and heavy, and equalized so that

the upper frequencies are removed and the lower frequencies emphasized. The guitar in reggae usually plays on the offbeat of the rhythm. It is common for reggae to be sung in Jamaican Patois, Jamaican English, and Iyarcic dialects. Reggae is noted for its tradition of social criticism and religion in its lyrics, although many reggae songs discuss lighter, more personal subjects, such as love and socializing. Besides its sound, reggae music is frequently associated with the common themes in its lyrics. The earliest reggae lyrics spoke mostly of love, specifically romantic love between a man and a woman.

Reggae has spread to many countries and continents across the world. As it travels to different countries of the world, it incorporates local instruments and fuses with other genres known to the countries and continents. For instance, Reggae en Espanol, a strand of reggae music, spread from the Spanish speaking Central American country of Panama to the mainland South American countries of Venezuela and Guyana then to the rest of South America. Reggae among the Caribbean has evolved into several subgenres and fusions. African reggae or reggae in Africa was boosted by the visit of Bob Marley to Zimbabwe in 1980. As Jamaican musicians bring the reggae music to Africa, the reggae music started taking on other themes. Now the love being sung about was not just romantic love, but cosmic, spiritual love, the love of one's fellow man, and of God, or "Jah". And when African reggae singers weren't singing about love, they were singing about rebellion and revolution against the forces impeding that love, like the extreme violence, poverty, racism, and government oppression they were witnessing or experiencing on a regular basis. African reggae or the reggae produced by African artistes usually relates news, social gossip, and political comment. The African reggae spread into a commercialized jazz field. It is instantly recognizable from the counterpoint between the bass and drum downbeat, and the offbeat rhythm section. Stylistically, African reggae incorporates some of the musical elements of jazz, African rhythm, African mento (a celebratory, African oral form that served its largely African rural audience as dance music), African native music, as well as other genres. The tempo of African reggae is usually slow paced than the original Jamaican reggae which pace is similar to Ska but faster than Rocksteady. The concept of call and response which are predominately a feature of

the African oral tradition can be found throughout African reggae music.

Africa has produced a lot of reggae artistes whose musical contents are celebrated all over the world. But for the purpose of this study, we are going to focus on the veteran African reggae artist, Kingsley Eno Osagie, popularly known as Winning Jah. As a professional reggae artist he enjoys playing djembe. He has hosted over hundred free djembe workshops in Italy for children and people with hearing disabilities, in collaboration with local and international nonprofit organizations. He has also worked as a reggae music therapist for aged people, in collaboration with various national health centres in Europe and Africa. With his reggae music he lampooned and stood against international non-governmental agencies fund raising fraud in Africa in collaboration with UNICEF and the United Nations in 2015 with a song he titled: "To Whom It May Concern". The song was released in three languages, such as French, English and Italian, to reach a larger audience.

To buttress some of the points that are expressed in his reggae music, Winning Jah founded a religion which he named "WinningJahrian". Like what his reggae music teaches, the "WinningJahrian" religion disagrees with materialism and discriminations of all kinds. The religion is meant to promote the act of kindness without seeking pay back and it is all out to fight against injustice, discourages materialism and violence, while also celebrating the need to have the fear of God which is often referred to as Jah. As the promoter of that religion, he has financially supported the constructions and renovations of schools in many African countries, such as Ghana, Mali, Benin and Nigeria. Winning Jah, who was earlier of the Rastafarian faith, saw the need to upgrade the world renowned Rastafarian faith. His reason is that "Major Rastas practice veganism" but in the WinningJahrian religion, it is not so. WinningJahrian is about Freedom. It is a religion that is founded to help ordinary persons. WinningJahrian is a non-violent or greedy religion: in the religion no book is sold to members, there is no place of Worship to avoid the cost of leasing or buying luxury, but the aim is to use the funds gathered from donors to establish vulnerable lives without due cause bureaucracy. Through its online platforms like WhatsApp groups, it has raised over 1000 worshippers and convert.

AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION IN WINNING JAH'S REGGAE SONGS

Winning Jah has produced a lot of reggae songs with variety of themes such as love (the love he sings about include the cosmic love, spiritual love, the love of one's fellow man, and the love of God or "Jah"), rebellion and revolution against the forces impeding that love (like the extreme violence, poverty, racism, and government oppression), news, social gossip, and political comments. For instance, in his debut songs "Mr Big Man", which was later banned by the Nigerian Police Force in the 1990s, Winning Jah challenge the corrupt African politicians and unveils the harm that has been done to the society. In the song, the artiste persona addresses the politicians with the popular African pseudo-name "The Big Man." He is of the view that the way politicians maltreat their people in Africa is very bad. This is done with the use of an apostrophe - repetitive call to the politicians as if they are present at the place, the same way it is done in African oral tradition - to stress the message of the song to the politicians. The song also employs the call and response technique that is popular with the African oral tradition to properly position the music for optimal entertainment and beauty. One of the distinguishing features of the song as an African reggae song is that it is spiced with elements of traditional Nigerian Edo oral tradition, which the artiste once called "Emababa". This term has come to be recently used in Africa by notable 21th century reggae musicians to give their music the richness it needs.

The theme of socio criticism that is the dominant theme of his "Mr Big Man" song is also noticed in his song entitled "Africa Inside me." The song is inspired by the need to make Africa a better place. It is a song that is born out of the concern for Africa's social development. In the song the artiste persona stresses the need to stand up to Africa's social and political challenges and to find a way of addressing African problems. It is of the view that it is only through addressing these challenges and solving the problems that Africa can compete for greatest among the continents of the world. The song, like the song entitled "Mr Big Man", also employs some elements of the African oral tradition in the dissemination of its message. One of the prominent elements of the African oral tradition contained in the song is in the use of African traditional allegory.

Unlike the above two songs, in "Coat of many colours" there is an outright condemnation of discrimination of every kind. The song is of the view that the African society and the world in general are indirectly promoting discrimination of every kind. The discrimination in African society comes in different guises such as tribalism, ethnicity and sexism. In the world today, discrimination comes in the form of racism etc. The song affirms that it is the act of discrimination that has placed the African society and the world in general in its present position. The song goes ahead to condemn every act of discrimination. The song employs didacticism as a technique to pass its message. The technique is also noticed to have been employed in the song entitled "Homeless world." "Homeless world" specifically advocates for love between man and his fellow man. In the song, the artiste persona is concerned about those who are living without shelter. The song promotes the need to help the less privilege and all those without shelter. The theme of the song is synonymous to that which is usually found in African oral tradition where the need to support the less privilege is highly advocated and promoted.

In the song entitled "Reasons" the need to always reason and listen before acting is seriously stressed. The song is of the view that most African politicians rarely listen to their people or reason before they take certain actions. This accounts for the reason they act out their folly most of the time. The song reveals that the voice of the people is the voice of God and that if African politicians listen to their people, most of the problems that are associated with contemporary African society would be solved. Like the other songs, the song entitled "Reason" is also didactic.

The song "Deap Sea" condemns the negligence that characterizes the African society. The artiste persona laments that in contemporary African society, people are beginning to be individualistic. This is expressed through the use of an allegorical story about the artiste persona drowning in the sea and there is no one to rescue him. The allegory is also an important feature of the African oral tradition. In "To whom it may concern," the artiste persona condemns the African NGOs who collect money from international donor organizations with the claim that they provide supports for African children needing education and good life. When the money is finally given to them, they divert it into private purse. The song has a pedagogical

Influence of African Oral Tradition in Winning Jah's Reggae Music

value. This is also one of the functions the African oral tradition plays in Africa.

In the song he entitled "Mr Cock", the artiste persona reveals that good friends are hard to find. He narrates an experience he had with a friend whom he called Mr Cock. One day, he says, he invited Mr Cock to his house. On arriving at his house, Mr Cock, ate all his maize and got his house burnt. The artiste persona proceeds to warn everyone to be careful of friends like Mr Cock. Like all other songs produced by Winning Jah, the song combines its allegorical function with its pedagogical function- a characteristic that is also associated with the African oral tradition. Through the use of the cock story, the artiste persona teaches the need to keep reasonable friends and to refrain from unreasonable ones.

CONCLUSION

The influence of African oral tradition on the African reggae music has been enormous. It is a popular belief that African society now produces virtually no oral artist. In that those who ought to become the oral artistes are diverting their talents into other kinds of art-forms, of which the reggae music is one of the leading art-forms among the lots. The artistes, in order to remain faithful to their African background, appropriate the African oral tradition as model for the production of their songs. This is because, like all other African songs, African reggae music has acquired the same repertoire that is often associated with the African oral tradition. The network between African oral tradition and the African reggae music creates a connection between the African reggae artistes' familiarity with the oral traditional forms such as lyric songs, praise

songs, ballad, religious songs, initiation songs, war songs, marriage songs etc, and their appropriation of the forms in the reggae music.

Through this paper, it has been revealed that even though the reggae music has its origin in Jamaica, African reggae artistes, such as Winning Jah, have succeeded in adding African flavour to it. This is done by allowing the African oral tradition to have a strong impact on the music. The impact of African oral tradition on the reggae music reflects on every aspects of the music. The essence of this is to make it fit as an instrument for African social and political correction. And of course, since African artistes joined their Jamaican counterparts in playing the music, the music has constantly been used as a counter hegemonic against bad political and social life-styles in Africa and against corrupt political leadership and organizations. The music would not have been able to do this if not for the indispensable influence of the African oral tradition.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akporobaro, F.B.O. Introduction to African Oral Literature. Lagos: Princeton Publishing Company, 2005
- [2] Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Literature in Africa. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970
- [3] Ngom, Fallon. "Popular Culture in Senegal: Blending the Secular and the Religious" In: Music, Performance and African Identities (eds) Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming. USA: Routledge 2012 p. 97-256
- [4] Onuekwusi, Jasper. Fundamentals of African Oral Literature. Owerri: Alphabet Nigeria Publishers, 2001
- [5] Water, Alan. Reggae Music in Africa. Evanston, IL: Program of African Studies, Northwestern University No. 8, 1994 pp. 3- 7

Citation: Solomon, A. Influence of African Oral Tradition in Winning Jah's Reggae Music. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 5(3), pp.11-15.

Copyright: © 2018 Solomon, A. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.