

COMPOSITION FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS WHO USE TRADITIONAL TUNES

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ABSTRACT

Music composition in Kenya has been undertaken alongside Western classical traditions comprising compositional techniques, styles, forms, and harmonies. This phenomenon also manifests itself in traditional music arrangements by various artists. Most of the composers are products of Western classical music tradition because this music education curriculum is the one in use in Kenyan institutions of higher learning. Traditional music in Kenya does not have an agreed method of representing musical notes on paper apart from the Western oriented methods of transcription. In this view, it is important for contemporary composers to discover elements of traditional music that would characterise the music of a community before writing it. The approach will assist in maintaining the musical whole of a society including functional roles thus assisting the audience to participate and identify themselves with the created music. This paper is based on research work that was carried out on art music created from traditional music of the Samia community of Busia County in Kenya. The paper discusses traditional music creations for societal use and suggests ways in which contemporary artists composing in traditional styles may work in the music idiom of a community. There is non-consideration of musical components that are important in the Samia traditional culture by contemporary artists; which include syllabic intonation, scales and speech rhythm. If not taken care of, the end result is a distorted melodic flow, with misplaced accents in the syllables of words of the Samia songs. A format that contemporary composers could use while working in traditional music style is proposed.

Key Words: Traditional composers, Contemporary artist/composers, Culture, Creativity, Idiom, Information, Adaptation and arrangement, Afro-classics.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional musicians in Kenyan communities like in other African societies create music as a social activity. Music is considered a product of the society and direct ownership as such is rarely an important issue. This is supported by Herbst, Zaidel-Rudolph and Onyeji (2003) who argue that compositions in traditional context should build the cultural and philosophical reference of a community, and not for individual aggrandisement or self-recognition. Herbst et al. (2003) observe that music is composed because it is required for religious rituals, ceremonies, social events, and entertainment. They add that, 'each occasion demands its own

musical structure and gestalt.’ Traditional composers take this into mind as they work. Maconie (1990) points out that music is also a form of non verbal communication and due to its universality only those involved understand it. Oehrle and Emeka (2003) argue that the African concept of music is the sound and all actions and activities developing or deriving from it. Therefore, African music in principle as well as practice or performance is a phenomenon embracing sound, dance, patterned gestures and progressions. In this paper, tradition is conceptualised as a belief, way of doing things by a people which depicts their customs either cultural or religious. On the other hand, traditional means being part of the traditions, beliefs, and customs. This could also be a way of life of a people. Community is considered a group of people living in a particular area having similar cultural practices while Idiom is used in this paper as expressions and sayings of a particular group of people.

Musungu (2010) contends that the Samia define music as *okhwemba* (singing), *okhukhina* (dancing), and *obubeni* (playing instruments). Since the three go hand in hand, the Samia do not have one word for music. Nyakiti (1988) writing about the Luo music confirms that there is no definite word for music in the community. In the Western tradition, several definitions are used. Akuno (2000) quoting Swanwick (1988) and Apel (1972) notes that music is made up of sound; that rhythm and melody make up musical sound. Reimer (1989) argues that from the aesthetic position of the formalists and expressionists, music is a work of art. In essence, the meaning of music from the cultural context assists in understanding experiences involved in its performance and the role it plays in the lives of the people in society.

As already stated music is a social activity. Chernoff (1979) contends that music reveals a group of people organising and involving themselves in relation to their community. In context then, music is an experience and an event that sends messages to community members. Kartoumi (1981) points out that music is a symbol of expressing culture; that each

community has a way of doing this and thus bringing out characteristic features of a musical culture. Akuno (2000), states that music in traditional African societies is a multi-media event involving singing, dancing, and playing music instruments. She asserts further that music involves performers and listeners who also join in dance/shouts/ululations and responses; creating two types of musicians, active and passive performers. She adds that music making provides an avenue for creativity. In each performance there is improvisation and extemporisation as already stated by Musungu (2010) who notes that this kind of performance is also found in music of the Samia community; while Auma (2016) in an interview about the Samia music observes that new text may be fitted to an existing tune depending on the function thus revealing an element of improvisation and creativity in traditional performance.

Herbst et al. (2003) argue that one of the reasons for composing is to build onto and contribute to the body of music that exists with a social artistic, cultural reference; and that traditional composers do this because the music belongs to the people. In support of these sentiments, Musungu (2010) points out that the Samia traditional composers believe that their created music belongs to the community. As a result, in traditional communities, music operates under certain regulations that guide the performances within the cultural norms or musical culture. It is from these norms that those seeking knowledge about traditional music performance will unlock the mysteries surrounding the music of a particular community for study and use in their compositional works.

The created traditional music plays a big role in the lives of the community members, and therefore it needs to promote unity to assist the consumers relate to themselves, their neighbours, community and the surroundings. The function of music has then to be seen in accordance with the consumers' experiences and community ideals. For example in

traditional contexts, Floyd (1996) observes that the function of music may be recreational and ritual. Floyd adds that the ritual role of music is to facilitate relationship with the surroundings and the greater society. This involves self-expression to the almighty, to our friends and leaders, to show love, fear, worship, adoration and submission. While in recreation music facilitates relaxation, expression of emotions, views, and realisation of one's potential. This double function can be found in the traditional music of most communities, whether instrumental, dance or songs. The dances articulate the functions in formations, movements, and gestures. In instrumental music it is the rhythmic and melodic idiom; while in the songs it is the lyrics. The role of music is seen in the messages, past thoughts, and ideas that are communicated to the society and passed on to the youth. Those who create music in traditional style need to bring out these functional aspects of music clearly in their compositions to communicate with the consumers. This paper therefore proposes a framework from which contemporary artists will seek guidance while composing using traditional music styles in context.

RATIONALE

According to Musungu (2010) the music education curriculum in Kenya is skewed towards Western music; that traditional music is not given prominence by contemporary art composers, most of whom are educated in Western music tradition. In Western music tradition, the concept of music making is not similar to that held in African music culture. Musicians in the West are categorised as listeners, composers, critics, and performers; this has allowed room for objectivity in each of the music making areas.

Nketia (1992) asserts that in traditional African music, no marked distinction is given to music makers, but there are specialist musicians identified as lead singers, lead dancers, and instrumentalists. In some instances a lead singer may also be an instrumentalist or a dancer.

By extemporisation the audience also participates in a performance as already stated; which is viewed as an act of improvisation or creativity by a passive group. Like in other African societies, Kenyan traditional music is functional, i.e. it is created for a particular occasion in the lives of the communities that make it. The lyrics and dance movements reveal each occasion of the songs, affirming that music in Africa is part of the very important traditional activities. Ochenjo (2016) in an interview observes that music for a Samia traditional marriage ceremony (*esidialo*) may not be performed in any other occasion. If this happens then the songs lose their socio-cultural functions. Similarly Fung (1995b), points out that music for a rite (cultural or religious) is assigned to specific activities and when performed outside their environment, they lose meaning.

Research observation shows that traditional Samia composers create music in terms of how the community understands the meanings vide the social function of each song. Writing about the Venda of South Africa, Blacking (1967) contends that the meaning of music performance can only be understood with reference to a function in context. This view is important to contemporary artists who compose in traditional style. They need to know the cultural background and concepts of music in a community so that they may present their compositions appropriately.

Musungu (2010) observes that because of Christianity and literacy, music making that characterised traditional ceremonies has declined due to alternative avenues of providing music. Ceremonies such as marriage, circumcision, and child naming do not use new traditional songs as in earlier days. In most cases they use hymns and some sacred songs from Independent Churches. Creating new songs for these occasions is an issue of the past. Musungu (2010) adds that most Churches in Kenya annually hold some kind of retreat for the youth in which they are taught issues about growth and sexuality; thereafter the boys are

taken to hospital for circumcision. Initiation as a rite of passage is deprived off the liveliness of traditional song and dance. This scenario has also made the youth ignore traditional music making avenues and therefore may end up with little or no cultural experiences from their communities. In this case traditional composers are being rendered obsolete because of the kind of music being used.

Likewise, marriage ceremonies have also been affected by this state of affairs. Ochenjo (2016), in an interview states that the Samia traditional marriages had been drastically influenced by Christianity. She added that most if not all the songs performed were hymns or some sort of sacred songs. That the traditional flavour of sending off a bride to her new home had been lost and no new traditional songs were being created for this occasion. From the above information, contemporary artists could fill the gap left by the above scenario and in the process new traditional songs will be continuously made available for community use.

MUSICIANS AND CREATIVITY

Akuno (2000), quoting Swanwick (1979) notes that a musician is one who has ability to act musically. This includes creating, performing, and actively associating oneself with music. In traditional African music, one may have to possess all the stated abilities to qualify as a musician including being accepted as one by the society. Nketia (1992) argues that in most instances traditional musicians are trained by specialists (professionals) in various music fields as laid down in the criteria for producing one such 'artist.' The environment and personal experiences are vital in the 'curriculum' for training. These new musicians then undergo tests in community music making avenues for them to be accepted as such.

Nketia (1992) referring to the Akan musicians of Ghana observes that a good singer must have command of the language, be able to improvise texts, set tunes to new words and have

the right quality of voice. These musicians being traditional creators get enhanced community recognition and respect for their work. Nzewi (2003) states that in traditional communities, a competent musician is likely also to be a lyricist, a dancer, a soloist, and at times even an instrumentalist. Such a musician is hence an all-round performer and the various experiences assist them to be in control of music making activities in their communities. The sentiments above are similar to those found among the traditional Samia musicians during research.

Oehrle and Emeka (2003) contend that musicians do not create music in a vacuum but that their ideas and thoughts emerge from the culture from which they come. There is a basis on which traditional composition is held which assists the consumers to associate with it as one of their own. Further, Blacking (1967) states that among the Venda, everyone has the ability to perform and make music but some are better because they are committed or work harder. The latter group constitutes the music specialists who take care of the music making activities in the community. The Samia too, have specialists for various musical activities.

Traditional music instruments when played, talk the language of the community involved because they are culture specific. In most cases they play melodic or rhythmic roles that are very essential in local performances. Some play the role of *soli* in a presentation and add instrumental harmonies in the idiom of the music played. This was also evident in the Samia traditional music. Consequently, instrumentation where necessary, should be incorporated in the performance of the created music to enhance the overall effect of the music.

Arnold (1996) defines composition as both an activity and result of that activity. He adds that it involves a process of construction, a creative putting together, a working out, and carrying through of an initial conception or inspiration; a process of creating new music. Njoora (2005) observes that it is not easy finding a term that encompasses all the elements and activities that involve composition. He adds that, 'the creative world may be likened to a

“stage” where art works are displayed, negotiated, and put to use by various consumers.’ BaileyShea (2007) contends that practically, music composition is an activity of putting musical ideas together and representing them on paper; the music is then performed and appreciated by an audience. These sentiments have three common elements; creativity, performance, and the audience as a consumer of the end product. Just as members of a community accept creations in traditional African presentations so is the audience in Western music tradition.

Traditional African musicians learn the art of creativity through association with cultural events by participating as active or passive performers. Therefore, according to Akuno (2000) the environment in which they are exposed provides them with musical experiences, and their musicality is then shaped by music making activities. Nyakiti (2004) notes that creativity in the Luo traditional music world is through talent or hereditary tendencies. Nyakiti adds that some musicians may have ‘super natural influence;’ while others got instructions in song and dance activities and also through participatory observation. Eventually, these musicians play a role in music creativity in the Luo community just like in other African societies.

Strumpf, Anku, Kondwani, and Mnukwana (2003) argue that in African cultures, the composer and performer are one; an individual with great responsibilities. The compositions are taken as a shared experience by the community and only modified during the course of trial performances and subsequent transmission. No single individual is credited as a sole creator of the music. They add that in many of these African communities, text is the most significant element in music, the creator of the text is often regarded as the composer of the music. It is apparent that views about a composer in Western tradition are not similar to those about traditional African music composers. It is also clear that due to cultural differences, the processes of creating music, its use and functions are not similar; the Samia music included.

Musungu (2010) notes that contemporary composers have reasons for creating new songs which include; meeting the demands and needs of employers, sponsors, or an audience. They may also be writing music for educational study purposes and adding to their collection of music repertoire. On the other hand they may be writing music for a festival performance. This is quite the opposite of music creativity in traditional African societies whose music is based on community requirements and aspirations. Herbst et al. (2003) observe that contemporary art music is an emerging genre of music in Africa and it needs to draw from the wealth and richness of the oral traditions of the communities for it to remain relevant. Even in manipulations and blending with Western tradition, the local idiom of the music in form of rhythm, melody and text setting should be identifiable. On the same point, Euba (2000) argues that compositions are classified as ‘more African’ when the connection between the new composition and its traditional prototype is clear. It should not be overwhelmed by the Western tradition elements in the work. The local community needs to associate itself with the compositions to accept them as part of their traditional repertoire. For this view to be practical, “African idioms must be used in abundance in modern works, both from a conceptual and structural perspective, for an authentic national tradition to emerge” (Omojola, 1995, p. 47).

Many composers have borrowed from folk traditions of their countries. Grout and Palisca (1996) state that Western tradition composers like R. Bartók (1881-1945) used Hungarian tunes; F. Chopin (1810-1849) had Polish dances, and A. Dvořák (1841-1904) incorporated Slavonic dance idiom. The most important issue was maintaining the traditional idiom of their communities. Njoora (2000) argues that using folk songs in arrangements provides instructional, entertainment, historical, and artistic links for contrasting situations. For instance, the given examples below show the transcriptions of two songs and the errors that

were committed interfering with the idiom of the community involved. The first is *Amalwakechupa* and the second *Mbiri*:

i) *Amalwakechupa*

A ma lwa ke i chu pa ka le ra bu so lo

The rhythmic pattern used by the arranger of the above contradicts the speech rhythm of the Samia language. In the third bar the first beat is slightly longer.

A ma lwa ke i chu pa ka le ra bu so lo

The arranger of the second rhythmic pattern is the same as the speech rhythm of the spoken Samia language. The syllabic accents fall in the correct places except the first beat of the third bar just like the first arranger is slightly longer.

A ma lwa ke chu pa ka le to 'bu so lo

The last rhythmic pattern has correct syllables, accents in the right places as in the speech rhythm and intonation. The arranger here communicates very well with the local people.

ii) *Mbiri*

Mbi ri we mbi ri na lo ba nga e he Mbi ri na lo..

Mbi ri ee ee mbi ri na lu ba nga ee Mbi ri na lu...

The transcriptions of the two *Mbiri* rhythmic patterns are not similar. The first one even has wrong text. *Mbiri nalobanga...* meaning *Mbiri* was fishing. *Mbiri naluvanga...* means *Mbiri* of the *luvanga* clan; which is the correct presentation of the song.

The arrangers of the songs given above from the Samia community have differed in transcription and final presentation of the music; a problem that exists in some arrangements by contemporary artists. The following are some arrangements of the current generation of contemporary musicians; Sylvester Otieno ‘*Ogumbe*,’ Frankline Etyang’ ‘*Mbiri Nalubanga*,’ Gabriel Musungu ‘*Mulamwa Abwori*,’ Humphrey Kisia ‘*Awesyo Mbole*,’ Stephen Chole ‘*Sabatia*,’ Edward Omulupi ‘*Wakhola Shi?*’ among others. Their music communicates issues from Kenyan traditional societies, but the problem may be sustaining the traditional music features that characterise the idiom of the communities’ involved vis a vis Western tradition compositional techniques.

Akuno (2000) asserts that aptitude, the ability for music is important for the development of musical skills which assist in making of specialist musicians. Aptitude may be expressed through instrumental, vocal and dance avenues. Therefore, the involvement or exposure of a musician in musical activities will always enhance the skills that make one a specialist in a particular musical area. Some of the novice musicians underwent special training from specialist musicians. Nketia (1992) adds that this offered a kind of formal training for the novices apart from the earlier stated methods. Nyakiti (2004) observes that the songs and dances created survived only if they met the consumers’ popularity. In this case the songs and dances had to be continuously performed so that they may survive. It is through the same

consumers that compositions underwent change or development. Njooora (2005) points out that the creative process may be enhanced by solitude, nature, environment, and even personality traits such as fluency, flexibility, originality, ability to elaborate, ability to transform meaning. These features are essential as a composer has to understand music composition principles, instrumental capabilities, and other related issues to be able to write music in Western classical tradition. Kenyan contemporary artists need these elements for their creative ventures as they work in traditional folk styles. This style of creativity should therefore be used as an avenue to higher ideals while contributing folk music to “art music.” The tastes of those that are Western tradition oriented will also be taken care of as folk music is taken a notch higher.

Campbell and Scott-Kanner (1995) in Andang’o (2005) argue that exploration and discovery of musical ideas, improvisation of known musical ideas and composition are steps to creativity. Therefore, during the creation of traditional music, the stated aspects are very important. Other creative and musical aspects include (but not limited) to the following:

a) *Exploration and discovery*—There is free exploration which leads to building of sound repertoire that is used to make artistic and musical decisions. Traditional music is drawn out of sounds of everyday life, denoting that creativity has grown naturally out of what is already there. Creativity therefore exists in the life of a traditional musician from their surroundings and experiences.

b) *Improvisation*—The art of improvisation is one that can be developed and is evident through performance techniques combined with deep knowledge of the idiom of the community. According to Achieno (2016) in an interview, musicians in the Samia community display this prowess in oral traditions (music included) which are learned by listening and memorisation. This is later brought out in performances while keeping to the local idiom.

Improvisation is also evident with lead singers in text manipulations and with instrumentalists in a new mode of playing. This art can be developed through participant observation and experience of the composers.

c) *Composition*—This is an act of planned realisation of the creative process.

‘Composition provides opportunities for crafting a piece of art for reflection and revision,’ (Campbell & Scott-Kanner, 1995, p. 253). They state further that, traditional music being rich in subject matter is an appropriate choice from which to draw ideas for composition. On the same point, ‘the art of composition is an avenue for exploring the depth and breadth of creativity..., and a means of creating novel ideas which are generally shaped by the environment in which the creator grows in’ (Njoora, 2010, p. 56). The traditional idiom of Kenyan and other African communities found in the environment of art composers is an attribute that needs to be upheld to assist in the recognition of the local traditional music. In this line, contemporary artists have plenty of subject matter from which to identify their compositional materials. They will be contributing repertoire of art songs intraditional styles for local consumption.

COMPOSITIONAL FRAMEWORK

In creating music, the traditional Samia musicians consider traditional functions for the music composed and the Samia idiom in which the songs are performed. Therefore traditional music being functional, there are reasons for its creation in the local community. The researcher calls this Traditional Creativity Idiomatic Function (TCIF), a model of traditional creativity. This view is similar to one held by Floyd (1999) on Maasai music pointing out that the music highlights the basis of individual and communal experience that requires individual ‘creativity within a recognised reputable framework.’ These sentiments recognise the fact that there is a criterion for traditional music creativity within a community. The products of these

activities need to communicate in the idiom of the community. Akuno (2000) affirms that the end product, a work of art, a composition or a performance item is what is judged. In this case its judgement depends on the consumer, how they perceive the work and what they consider as music in their culture.

Contemporary art composers need to specifically identify the community, occasion, find out the music features that make the local idiom, and then create music. This will enable the end products to be consistent with the idiom of the community whose music is used. The product will also be identified with socio-cultural functions of a community. While quoting Euba, Herbst et al. (2003) note that composition in traditional style should clearly show African elements so as to be identified as traditional. If it does not, then the connection with traditional music is obscured especially when traditional elements are lost.

The performers of these creations will always present the music as written or as intended by the composers; by translating the composer's work to a live performance. One major factor that determines the composer's thoughts is information; this is the knowledge that the artist exhibits in the music. This consists of the Western tradition classical music elements, and compositional techniques that are acquired knowledge. The contemporary art composers have already had this training and only need to shape it in cultural context.

Alongside this information and knowledge, composers need to find out the traditional features that characterise the folk songs they use. Musungu (2010) points out that these features include; tonality, melodic contour, phrase lengths, speech/melodic relationships, harmony, rhythmic patterns, tempo, and rests. Lastly, the folk songs have to be accurately transcribed and represented. Every community has its own features that allow music to communicate in the local idiom and need to be adhered to. The composers will then have an end product that 'talks' the language of the community involved. Swanwick and Taylor

(1982), state that being creative is an inherent component in musical experiences which include composition. This is important in shaping melodies in relation to text especially in Western tradition music practice. Composers could apply this artistically alongside traditional music features and still maintain the features that characterise African music. In consideration therefore, the following framework is advanced to assist contemporary composers when merging traditional African music and Western tradition classical music elements in a kind of Afro-classic venture. This is a contribution to the artists who relevantly work with traditional music.

Culture – represents traditional African music

Information – represents Western classical music elements

Creativity – represents the new musical creation of contemporary art which is a merger between culture and information as shown in Figure 1.

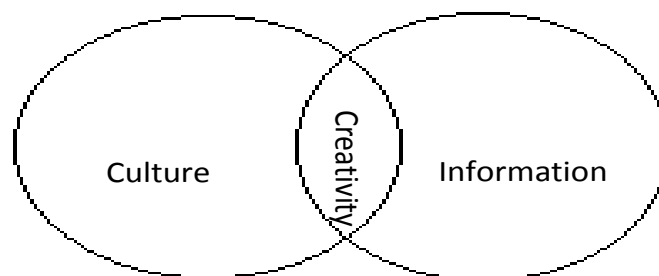


Figure 1: Creativity Model

As shown in the model, **Culture** consists of the local idiom inherent in the traditional music of a community. It is found in the musical sounds, activities, uses, and functions in the occasions of music making. The musical qualities are found in the environment and are acquired unconsciously by the composers through experience. **Information** consists of the Western classical music elements and other musical techniques that are acquired knowledge. This is the formal training that composers undergo in institutions and also that which is received by apprentice musician. Culture shapes up this knowledge and therefore the

composer's artistic and compositional experiences. At times acquired knowledge affects an artist's way of perceiving his culture and this may lead to one rejecting or questioning the norms and beliefs of his community. In this case the artist will not be stable in cultural context but keep going round it in the information circle. **Creativity** in a society's idiom may be achieved with a traditional function in mind to communicate effectively. Traditional music features when highlighted and utilised appropriately will assist composers do this. The melodic, rhythmic and textural elements of the adapted folk tunes will be validated. The contemporary art work will be a hybrid at the point of convergence between culture and information as shown in the diagram. The composer will thence work within the cultural and information points to come up with a piece of art work that is acceptable to a community's traditional musical norms. In the process new songs will be created within the traditions of various communities for any activity that requires the use of music. This model will assist contemporary artists to work within the culture of a community whose music they use.

CONCLUSION

In making music, traditional musicians do not work in isolation but within a community's cultural bearing. The created music elicits performance and listening interest from members and the society at large. Composing music also gives the community repertoire from which to choose music for later use. The created music is based on the musicians' cultural experiences and acquired knowledge about their environment. For the community to accept created music as their own they need to be associated with it in idiom and function; and this should be taken into account by the composers.

Music creativity among the contemporary musicians revolves around understanding music through information which is acquired knowledge; and through culture which is gained from the artist's experience. Creativity is therefore a product of information and culture or

knowledge and the environment. Music creativity should be undertaken within the parameters of the community culture to communicate effectively in its tradition. This can be effective if contemporary composers familiarise themselves with the music elements of the idiom involved before using the folk tunes. Contemporary artists need to use traditional music of a community to find out its structure as well as compositional methods that will help maintain the local idiom in their works. In doing so, artists will assist in giving the music identity and keeping to its cultural context. The model given is relevant to artists who arrange traditional music using Western tradition music techniques.

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APPENDIX

The Samia Traditional Musicians Interviewed (December 2016)

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| 1. Auma Nbiang'u | Singer and dancer |
| 2. Anjilina Ochenjo | Singer and dancer |
| 3. Ouma Kanasaye | Player of drum/string fiddle (<i>engabe//okungulo</i>) |
| 4. BwireAuma | Singer and dancer |
| 5. Naburi Oduya | Singer, dancer and <i>pekee</i> player |
| 6. Achieno Albert | Group leader |

About the Author

Gabriel Musungu holds a Doctoral degree in Musicology (University of South Africa, Pretoria), Master of Arts- Music composition and B Ed. (Arts) from Kenyatta University. He has several years of teaching music at high school and on part time basis at university level in Kenya. Currently he is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Music and Performing Arts at The Technical University of Kenya, Nairobi. His research is concerned with identification of music elements that characterise the music of the Samia community in Busia County for the purpose of proposing a framework for use by contemporary music composers.