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## ECHOES OF NATURE: REAPPRAISING THE ECO-RELEVANCE OF NIGERIAN POPULAR MUSIC IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Music today in Nigeria has become a universal phenomenon not only for the enrichment of the nation's expressive cultural index but also a major export product. Over the years we have seen Nigerian popular music undergo several metamorphoses to regain a place of prime in the nation's entertainment industry enjoying popularity and acceptability that cuts across almost all strata of society. Amidst these high sounding accolades is the big question of how relevant is Nigerian pop music to one of the worst human challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the global ecological crisis. This paper therefore seeks to provide answers to this question by x-raying Nigerian music artistes and their response to the growing need for sustainable development by providing ideals that will engender a safe earth. The paper identifies music as a tool of non-formal education that can be deployed in creating the much needed awareness about a safe environment in which any meaningful sustainable development can thrive.

### INTRODUCTION

Climate change, global warming, ozone depletion – all these have become popular clichés that have characterized various global summits aimed at confronting the environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nations of the earth have risen in one testament – The Earth's Charter to forge a common cause aimed at addressing a reality that stares all in the face – a human race under peril due to the absolute disregard for nature. The first paragraph of that document reads:

*We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must stand together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations (the echarter.org).*

As we write this paper, natural and man-made disasters of catastrophic magnitude ravages the entire globe. From flash floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, forest fires, draught, hurricanes, erosions, desert encroachments, air and water pollution, oil spills, every part of the earth share in one sad story or the other. In Africa, humans have to grapple with the twin-devils of both natural and man-made disasters as well as conflicts and its attendant natural consequences of hunger, destitution, disease and poverty. Amidst these

realities is the question of the role of music in addressing the ecological concerns of the earth. As stated by Chaudhuri, ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present and the arts and humanities must play a role (Chaudhuri). McKibben equally adds his voice to this believing that playwrights, poets and artists need to create works which will place climate change deeply in the imagination (Ashden). Music holds the power to help us see "something about ourselves" by touching some parts of our identity construct. Music is life – a reflection of who we are and what we do. Humans cannot be disconnected from the environment and hence, music needs and ought to reveal the common reality of the earth – the home of all human beings. This is more apt as "our human identity and the identification of what we refer to as nature, are now forever intertwined and dependent upon one another" (McKibben 11).

To understand the relationship of music and nature one must first refigure the relationships between 'culture' and 'nature' that all humans inevitably inherit. Modernist traditions of European 'enlightenment' pitched nature and culture, 'man' and the environment against each other in what Kershaw says has turned out to be a potentially disastrous opposition (12). Nature is human and humanity forms the whole ensemble that nature represents. Since music is life, then it only amounts to the fact that all human life is sung and dramatised, including, crucially, its interactions with other species and the environment. The performance paradigm was thus a major generative force of an age of ecology that emerged in the final five decades of the second millennium (Kershaw 14). The world's economy as it stands today is largely driven by forces that put both man and nature under peril. Gaseous emissions from industries and exploitation of forest reserves can only be checked by an absolute change of not only attitudes but also of institutions that perpetuate this trend. Green theorist Schnaiberg supports this crucial element by reminding us that "all environmental problems are social problems regarding both their causes and effects" (Schnaiberg 17). Marine biologist Rachel Carson, previously a noted author of marine life books, stated the following:

*As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but the life that shares it with him. The history of the recent centuries has its black environment passages. Now to these and others like them, we are adding a new chapter and a new kind of havoc, the question is whether any civilization can wage such relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized (Sale 3).*

Today, more than fifty years after, the world is stunned by the truth of Carson's prediction. Humans now turned predators preying on their own kind as conflicts ravage the entire globe. The quest for the relics of life has been a major catalyst for war and other genocidal killings especially in Africa not to mention the complete disregard for the environment in the wake of continued plunder of natural resources. African efforts at sustainable development have been targeted at fighting poverty by enriching scarce resources. For Africa, the only way to guarantee peace which is one of the goals of sustainable development is by meeting the needs of the current generations without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. This was the motivation for Wangari when she founded the Green Belt Movement that succeeded in planting 30 million trees in an

effort to halt deforestation in Kenya. For her, "people are fighting over water, over food and over other natural resources. When our resources become scarce, we fight over them. In managing our resources and in sustainable development, we plant the seeds of peace" (Wangari).

Glover's analysis of Escobar's work captures the current contraptions of sustainable development which he said are: 1) a 'saving the world mentality', which promotes the global at the expense of the local; 2) a belief that the world's poor create environmental problems, but which ignores how capitalism creates poverty in the first place; 3) a faith that capitalism's market structures can resolve ecological problems (Glover 54). To overturn these structures and engender a pathway for development that is Africa friendly, drama is and should be seen to be in the forefront to secure an environment of peace that guarantees the wellbeing of all peoples of the earth.

### **Ecopedagogy: Contextual and Theoretical Overview**

We live in a world where humans must struggle to regain their humanity by going back to history to locate their connection with nature and redefine their civilization. As the world now yearns for a new civilization that underscores our common heritage in mother earth and life, a critical understanding of issues in ecoliteracy becomes imperative. The other dimension that gives amplification to this new zeal is the fact that the poorest regions of the world have the worst ecological problems. The poorest regions of the world are or have been the most exploited regions in terms of human and natural resources. The poorest regions of the world are also the regions that have seen the worst conflicts angst by growing poverty, social injustice and the scramble for scarce resources.

Ecopedagogy hence, emanates from these contentions as a body of scholarly discourses in the field of critical pedagogy. It is an outgrowth that is not older than 30 years and owes a lot to works done by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. It has been at the centre of efforts "to construct social alternatives that are both credible and compelling. This has included creating new social contexts and encounters that value alternative meanings, knowledge and actions" (Martin and Te Riele 23). Environmental education is a multidiscursive field. It is a space of both struggle and opportunity for the reconstruction of a web of relations between humans and the environment and with each other. This web has faded with the advance of civilization, but could enable us to develop new treaties between cultures, societies and nature and give rise to new values, languages, and meanings that could lead us responsibly to the social change that is so critical at this time (Selby 14).

Ecopedagogy is also a form of non-formal popular education which Kahn (5) says is borne out of developed ideas and practices of environmental preservation and conservation that centres on self-consciousness, awareness and the need for action by self-realization. As an outgrowth of critical pedagogy, it questions the status quo, and liberates the mind towards change from dehumanization to humanization. The world's economic structure as well as the adoption of globalized capitalism has no doubt created a serious dichotomy not only in the distribution of wealth but also in the human environment. In the same earth, we have those who live in affluence and comfort and those who battle with diseases every day. Such is the dehumanization which Freire (44) says marks not only

those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it. This he said, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human and "this distortion occurs within history; but it is not a historical vocation" (Freire 44). He further believes that the world as we have come to terms with it today is engaged in a struggle led by the oppressed peoples of the earth against those who made them less human and was quick to advise that this struggle to regain their humanity must not turn the oppressed to become oppressors of the oppressors. This is quite reminiscent of the flashes of several agitations we have seen in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The militarization of the struggle and the seeming criminality this struggle takes all in a bid to free the area of further exploitation takes the wind off the sail of genuine efforts at resolving the evident eco-crisis in the region. For Freire, both the oppressed and the oppressor have lost their humanity and the struggle should be aimed at restoring the humanity of both (Freire 44). This is one area ecopedagogy and ecoliteracy seeks to address.

One strong strand of the concept of ecopedagogy is the love of all 'life'. The last three decades have been a seemingly wake up call for all peoples of the Earth to consciously embrace lifestyles and attitudes that promotes the sacredness of life. But every where we look "social relations of oppression and contempt for human dignity abound" (McLaren 22). For McLaren, gobbling up the global lifeworld in the quest for an endless accumulation of surplus value has produced some world – historical excretory excesses, turning the world into a global toilet of toxic waste while adding legions of Marx's reserve army of labour (20). While this remains the true story of many developing nations, the arts in most cases have celebrated the apollonian heights humans have achieved but at the expense of a dying earth. This is what brings to light the need for an ecoliteracy that is place – efficient and can serve the needs of local communities. Nanda and Warms in this light draw us to the position that national narratives show history as a march of progress:

*They celebrate the founding and development of corporations rather than the violence that often accompanied such events. They focus on the lives of the wealthy and powerful or sometimes, the infamous. The lives, the struggles of families, of members of ethnic and religious minorities, of women, and of children are often omitted from the record. Their voices are silenced (343).*

Such is the scenario when we have an art that is not only classicist but marks the semblance of the ethos of a bourgeois society. Ecopedagogy hence seeks the reversal of this trend and pursues the emergence of a new body of knowledge and the awakening of a multi-disciplinary approach to peace, safe earth and sustainable development. As the world continues to grapple with the reality of depleting resources, the battle rages on for the remaining natural resources and Standlee (1) believes that an unprecedented expansion of human population coupled with an America-styled propagation of unlimited economic "growth paradigm" is forcing a critical historic transition portrayed by ruthless competition over Earth's remaining natural resources. "It is unlikely that the current state of affairs and the rate of greed and acquisition, especially characterising American economic consumption, will prevail at this pace without forcing severe environmental and social conflict and chaos" (Standlee 1). It is quite obvious as recent global events have proven that where there is oil, there is war. Where there is diamond, there is blood. We cannot extricate the world's deadliest conflicts from the quest and struggle for natural

resources as exemplified in Nigeria's Delta regions and elsewhere in other African countries as well as the Gulf nations. The politics of these conflicts have been the continued desperate quest especially by Western nations for these resources. Sadly enough, these conflicts or war have left in its wake environmental havoc of the worst kind not to mention the devastation the continued exploitation of these resources brings to local communities.

### **Nigerian Popular Music and the Quest for Sustainable Development**

This is an age where the relevance of arts to global developmental goals is under serious scrutiny. Scholars have risen to the challenge by bringing to the front burner of developmental objectives the implications of art. They have advocated that the arts is not subservient to other forms of societal transformation but that arts have served as a catalyst for development. Umezinwa (58) gives credence to this saying that "music is a central force of social cohesion – it brings people together". In other climes and indeed Africa, we have seen the role music plays in throwing up issues and contradictions within society. This is more so in contemporary times where popular music has served as a tool for creating awareness and educating the populace. Yanni, a non-lyrical jazz artiste used his music to draw the attention of the world to the beauty and magnificence of nature as well as the communality of all human beings. Yanni was not only eclectic but his musical pieces served as a voice for nature. This we find in *Nightingale, A walk in the Rain, Rainmaker, The Rain Must Fall, November Sky, Highland*, etc. World acclaimed King of Pop – Michael Jackson also sang for the Earth in *Earth's Song* and *Heal the World*, where he drew the attention of the world to the devastation being done not only in the jungles of Africa but elsewhere through war, drought and exploitation.

Popular music in Nigeria no doubt has engaged the spectrum of the Nigerian society, bringing to light ills perpetrated in the society. Ogaga (51) believes that Nigerian artistes have insisted on not only foregrounding the pedagogical province of art, but have equally captured the realities of everyday existence in postcolonial Nigeria. Adeola (81) also adds his voice to these accolades saying; "popular music has been an important tool in the march towards the growth and development of the nation". He strongly believes popular music has been used over the years to move the nation forward or otherwise at different stages. This is seemingly true when the music of legendary artistes like Fela Anikulapo Kuti Onyeka Onwenu, Christie Essien Igbokwe, Sonny Okosuns and the likes are considered.

However, a closer view of the present day pop musicians in Nigeria speaks volumes of a generation in search of its song. There seems to be a yawning gap between the artiste and the realities of the society. While the music of the 1970s and 1980s marked a struggle for the emancipation of the grovelling masses in the hands of ruling overlords, this present day pop musicians lack depth of ideology. As corroborated by Ogaga (54), the typical Nigerian guerrilla hip hop does not engage in any conversation with the 'centre', but it dialogues with and confronts the politics of everyday life in Nigeria. This is rather disturbingly unrealistic in present day Nigerian popular music where the penchant for profit voices almost anything but sustainable development. It is rare to find any song that captures the ideals of nature and the richly endowed Nigerian landscape. It is equally rare to find any Nigerian piece of music that reveals the structural and institutional

disequilibria that gives ambivalence to the drive for a safe earth. What we have today are songs verbosely laced with images of 'fire'.

## **CONCLUSION**

The advent of globalization and the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria have opened up new issues and challenges for the Nigerian music industry. As the world grapples with the effects of a warming planet, the challenge before Nigerian music is how to engage local communities on the need for peace, tranquillity and a safe earth. Music according to Martins (11) is a social product, social resource and social practice. It is not autonomous but is created and performed by real people in particular times and places and doing so, they reveal much about themselves and their societies. Nigerian music should be seen to serve this all important function of engendering sustainable development. Arts no doubt reflects society and the world should see who Nigerians are and share in their experiences. Nigerian popular music should serve as the catalyst for the promotion of peace and a safe earth without which any form of sustainable development can thrive.

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