



Trends of Opera in Nigeria from Pre-Colonial to Contemporary Modernism

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Abstract

Opera, an art form, came to Nigeria and met various forms of music-theatres among the Yoruba traditional societies during the colonial period. It subsequently developed trends and variants that can be referred to as Nigerian opera, evolving alongside modern advancements in Nigeria. The origins and analyses of Nigerian folk opera and post-independence Nigerian opera have been explored by scholars, but there exists a dearth of comprehensive studies charting the development of Nigerian opera up to the 21st century. Using Structuralism Theory, the present study focuses on a chronological view of Nigerian opera. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources, collated, and analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings reveal four operatic trends in Nigeria: the classical, folk, post-colonial, and contemporary operatic trends. The study concludes that Nigerian opera, as an established eclectic genre of music and theatre, requires collaborative efforts for further development so that it can be instituted as a national heritage beneficial to human, educational, cultural, artistic, scientific, and economic development at local, national, continental, and global levels.

Introduction

The presence of Europeans in Africa, particularly around the Western coast, introduced Western arts and culture. In Nigeria, one of the Western forms of art brought to Africa by Europe's infiltration of the continent is opera, among others. By definition, opera is a unified performance which combines various art forms, basically music and drama. It is succinctly described as drama whose lines are sung instead of spoken (Inanga & Inanga, 2003). As an elaborate art form, it exhibits a variety of artistic and cultural expressions, including songs, speeches, acting, dances, recitations, and the poetic and visual arts. These are interwoven and expressed as a holistic performance in musical cum theatrical expression. Even though opera, as a generic term, originated in Europe, it has taken on forms of performance in Africa that combine various artistic practices in traditional African societies under multiple names. These were inventions in ancient African cultures long before the coming of Europeans. Many Nigerian performing arts, just as in most African arts in different societies, exhibit eclectic art forms. One of the Yoruba experiences shared by Vidal (1977) describes forms of performance in the Adamu-Orisa play within Lagos' ancient tradition. These include: the exclamation - *Hu-Ha-Ha*, the recitation and ritual poems - *Ìdárò*, the singing - *Dídárin*, and the dance movements - *Ìgbésẹ̀*. All these come together as a unified performance. In a similar vein, he added the *Èfẹ̀* dance drama, which combines the *Ìpè-Ìkì-Èsẹ̀-Ìgbésẹ̀* (Call-Chant-Song-Dance respectively). While the exclamation in Adamu-Orisa and the call in Efe are speeches with dramatic action, they can be equated



with the dramatic in opera. The *idàrò* in the former and *Ese* in the latter express the singing that constitutes the opera, while the *igbese* in both is the dance usually displayed in operatic performances. *Iki* in Efe performance is a speech-song that reflects the recitative in Western opera. These forms of art are explicitly described by Nzewi (1991) as cited by Aluede and Eregare (2010, Pp 161) that 'in African cultures the performance of arts disciplines of music, dance, poetry, and costumes are hardly separated in creative thinking and performance practice of the people...'

Consequently, the introduction of Western opera to Africa has nevertheless brought about modifications to existing art forms and the expansion of artistic development. As European opera in Nigeria introduced Western ideas about music-theatre, it was accepted by the public and later developed into an advanced form of music-theatre. The ingenuity of the people took the art form beyond what was received from Europeans and made unique inventions as new forms. This involves the amalgamation of the European form with the indigenous music-theatre. With the development of urban centres, the art form emerged in performing halls and on stages, rather than in open spaces where African music-theatres took place. Therefore, the creation of the Nigerian form of opera, which has since expanded beyond the Western form, is the focus of this study.

The evolution of opera in Nigeria was a significant development, and its expansion demonstrates innovative progress from the colonial era to contemporary times. Despite historical documentation of its inception through the post-independence period, there remains a dearth of comprehensive studies of its overall development and implications for the modern period. The present research, therefore, focuses on the evolution and development of opera in Nigeria from the colonial period to the present day.

Examining operatic trends in Nigeria from the 19th to the 21st centuries will provide valuable insights into artistic innovation and the expansion of the genre, with implications for social and cultural development within Nigerian society. This will reveal great strides and development within the art form that have taken place and are still ongoing. In addition, the potential of the artistic genre can be determined by its future direction, which will be advantageous for human and societal development.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary research methods were employed. Interviews, literature reviews, and general surveys were used for data collection, while a descriptive method through critical discussion analysis was used for analysis, as this was qualitative research. Interviews were conducted with the following: Professor Josephine Mokunwei, Professor Bode Omojola, Dr David Bolaji and Dr Sam Amusan. The purposive sampling method was employed because the scholars are practitioners who have engaged in different types of opera as composers, performers, or producers. In addition, their scholarly contributions to Nigerian opera are significant to the genre's growth. While the literature review provided the study with documentation of the genre's development, the general survey proved helpful in examining its development across different periods and various forms. Furthermore, the research employed a descriptive qualitative method.

Theoretical Framework

Opera as a creative endeavour mirrors the dynamics of the society where the artist emanates, with different reflections it conveys, it expresses the experience of the composer or writer reflecting the social, cultural and musical background of the people where the 'creator'- composers/writer belongs. Structuralism by Claude Levi-Strauss in 1949 revealed that "Societies controlled the reasoning and morals of their citizens, and it is therefore societies as a whole that should be studied, in a rational, secular and scientific manner." Claude sees the structure of society as the true meaning of human



existence, and it is what creates the patterns that give rise to society's outputs. Sociology, linguistics and anthropology consider culture to be based upon fundamental structures. For example, the theory has been applied by scholars such as Jacques Lacan, Roman Jakobson, and Jean Piaget. While Jacques Lacan was a French Psychoanalyst and Psychiatrist who used it in psychoanalysis, Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist, related it to linguistics and Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, applied it to the study of psychology. From the linguists' point of view, this theory argues that there is a connection between society and the name given to an object, as perceived through people's culture. However, anthropologists stressed that the meaning derived in a culture arises from performances that confer significance. Levi-Strauss, being an anthropologist, experimented with mythology, kinship and food. The basic premise of structuralism is that individual and collective behaviour emerges from a fundamental structure. This study, therefore, based on the theory of structuralism, views the trends in the development of opera in Nigeria within the structure and development of Nigerian society. Socio-cultural, socio-religious, and socio-political structures shaped various trends in operatic development over time within the Nigerian state.

Assister (1984)¹⁴ lists notions considered common to forms of structuralism: each element of a whole is determined by a structure, every system has a structure, structural law focuses on co-existence rather than change, and structures are "real things" behind the surface or appearance of meaning. Operas in Nigeria are products of the ideals, values, ethos, and philosophy of the fundamental culture that produced them; therefore, Structuralism is a broad-based theory that views operas from a basic perspective on the structure of Nigerian society.

Literature Review

The musical terrain of Nigeria was aptly captured by Euba (1977, pp. 9-10) in his introduction to the subject. One of the new musical expressions he captured was theatre music. This he divided into four, namely: English-language plays which make extensive use of music; 'The folk opera'; Opera based on European styles; and Dance drama. On opera based on European styles, he emphasised 'maintained strong idiomatic links with the European grand opera' rather than other forms identified. While these practices were summarised, detailed development was left out.

Echeruo (1977, as cited in Vidal 2005, p. 18) revealed musical expression in 'Victorian Lagos'. Explaining the social and cultural reality within the growing cosmopolitan settlement, he identified the place of European opera as a mark of class among the educated locals. It was an affair among Nigerians who had imbibed European culture as a way of life. This was captured by Ogunbiyi (1981, pp.19-20), who corroborated the development among the 'elite class of Nigerians' during the late 19th century up to the early 20th century. Even though he did not state the operatic genre, he gave the nature of entertainment as laden with 'comic songs, love songs, duets, solos, glees and recitations. Both scholars complemented each other in establishing that the introduction of musical form laden with acting was a movement in the late 1800s into the 1900s. Omojola (1995, p. 14) explicitly described the socio-cultural terrain in Lagos, Nigeria, where European musical development had a strong foothold during the late 18th century. Owing to the multicultural composition of Lagos settlements, the educated class – composed of Europeans, Brazilians, slave returnees, and locally born elites who had studied in Europe and America – played a vital role in promoting European culture, particularly classical music and theatre, through performances in public halls and educational institutions. He emphasised that 'prominently featured in these programmes were songs, vocal duets, quartets, religious plays and musicals...excerpts from cantatas and oratorios...' Obviously, forms of opera became part of the music expressions that found their way into Nigeria. Experiences of the new



(European) musical expression were later combined with local musical-theatrical foundations to form Nigerian opera.

Western Classical Operatic Trend 1900 – 1930

In Nigeria, from around the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century, Western art music (classical) was gathering momentum. It was the period that introduced European music to people who were not yet fully identified as Nigerians until 1914, when Britain amalgamated the Southern and Northern protectorates of Nigeria. Western music, which was new to the natives, began to find its footing on the land. With the presence of Mission Churches and Schools, indigenes learned the latest music. In addition, Nigerians who had the opportunity to travel to Europe were soon returning to strengthen their knowledge of Western music. Western musical genres were introduced to the public, including opera. Vidal (2012, p. 14) aptly described the period as that of *Nuove Musiche*, or 'New Music', in Nigeria. Opera held a special place among the other forms of European music introduced. This was made clear when Echeruo (1977) revealed the position of opera during that period as a symbol of status and value within the society, which he called the Victorian Lagos. Music, being a product of societal development, is often expressed within the cultural milieu within which man exists. Europeans within the new society (African society) continued to exhibit Western culture and to transmit it to locals, and some began to imbibe it. Therefore, the trend in opera during this period was Europeanised. Omojola (1995, p. 18) clearly identified one of the operas presented during this era in discussing Nigerian art music. He offered graphic information about the cast that performed the *Pied Piper* in Lagos. This is a German opera performed in 1927.

It must be noted that Nigerian society at this period was expanding with various socio-cultural developments. Operatic growth, as a Western art form, emerged from the Western social and cultural setting within the nation, especially in Lagos, while other forms of music-theatrical development also continued to develop among different cultural groups within societies that were growing in parallel with the Western-oriented society. Western opera, with its elements such as aria, duet, recitative, chorus, and the symphonic orchestra that accompany it, developed. In addition, the Western opera was performed within the four walls of performance buildings. These were at variance with the traditional music-theatre experience, which was the societal practice often performed in the streets, open fields and sometimes within the courts. Western opera thrived among Nigerians who imbibed European culture taught in mission schools and Churches, and among some natives who served as domestic and official staff to Europeans at various levels of society.

Folk Operatic Trend 1930-1960

Nigerian society continued to expand in multicultural dimensions as a series of developments occurred across different areas. By the middle of the 20th century, diverse social statuses had developed, including the Western elite and learned, the Nigerian elite and learned, the Western learned but non-elite, the Nigerian traditional elite and learned/semi-learned, the Nigerian unlearned and non-elite, among others. All the statuses mingled and developed artistic expressions that reflected their social, cultural, and religious understanding within their statuses. The Western elite and learned were mostly the colonial administrators who decided the direction of modern Nigeria, which was growing. The Nigerian elite and learned were locals who had received a Western education, had already carved out nobility for themselves, and could match the European elite intellectually. This group of Nigerians agitated for independence and later became administrators of the regional government. In addition, the Nigerian traditional elite and the un- and semi-learned were the traditional rulers who led the people before the arrival of the Europeans. Some had acquired a Western education and aligned with Western influence. Such was the case of *Oba Adesoji Aderemi*, the 49th *Ooni*



of Ife. (The title of the king of Ile-Ife, the town acclaimed as the origin of the Yoruba people) who later became the Premier of the Western region in Nigeria. Nonetheless, while some traditional leaders were learned, some were unlearned in Western education, and some were probably semi-educated. There were the masses too, who were semi- or unlearned, and as society advanced, other social statuses emerged between them, as mentioned earlier. The implication resulted in numerous musical developments to satisfy the tastes and status of different people. This was succinctly described when Vidal (2005, P. 1) established the nature of music that ‘musical expression in Nigeria reflects the various characteristics of the cultures and tradition...’.

It was within this sociological terrain that Nigeria developed a type of local opera, marking the second trend of opera. Scenes within Nigerian society encouraged diverse artistic expressions in different directions. Expressions emerged from core rural cultures within the nation. Semi-urban as well as growing urbanised societies. Innovation by some artistes gave rise to the idea of the folk opera. The gradual development that began in the 19th century became more realistic in the 20th century, preparing the stage for the emergence of new forms in the performing arts. As some scholars have established, the religious scene gave rise to African churches, among them the *Aladura* Church, which introduced a new pattern of worship in the early years of the 20th century. (Ogunbiyi, 1981, as cited in Abe, 2021. P 43) stated that ‘the movement resorted to music, dance and songs as a means of impelling its members to express their religious experience’. The spark that lit the fire of African songs and dances from the *Aladura* church movements in the 1930s steered the wheel in the 1940s, marking the era of the folk opera in Nigeria. This sect of the Church adopted an unconventional mode of worship alien to Western Church services—the general public, mostly non-elite, identified with the movement. Ogunbiyi further narrated the flurry of African songs and dances that erupted during performances at the beginning of the 20th century. This art of worship became the forebear to the ‘native opera’ in the 1930s and ultimately the folk opera in Nigeria in the hands of Hubert Ogunde, who took it out of the Church to the larger society in the 1940s.

Growing from the Church, the Nigerian folk opera employed numerous traditional musical and dance forms to convey a story, plotted and presented theatrically on stage. At the initial stage, biblical themes were used, but eventually, it addressed societal issues. Clark (1979, P. 6) rightly disclosed Ogunde’s experience in the journey of his theatre career. His first ‘native opera’, as it was called, was titled ‘The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God’. She went further to give a preview on the day of the first opera performance that:

Mr. Hubert Ogunde, A.R. Mus C the talented police constable musician’ who ‘will once more demonstrate to the Lagos public his ingenuity as a composer of church music when the augmented choir of the Church of the Lord, Ebute-Metta will present tonight, Monday June 12, at the Glover Memorial Hall a Native Air Opera entitled The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God’.

Starting with operatic treatment in the Church, he moved into drama and, after a few attempts at public performances, boldly stepped into professional practice outside the Church. This bold step earned him the title of the father of Nigerian theatre. As Ogunde made exploits in Lagos, other artistes emerged from different locations within the Nigerian space and made the Nigerian folk opera a veritable art. Kola Ogunmola in Osogbo, then part of Oyo state (now Osun state), and Duro Ladiipo in the then Ekiti region of Ondo state (now Ekiti state). All were regions within the Southwestern states. Vidal (2012) recognised the trio as forces that popularised the folk opera in the 1940s and 1950s. They were composers, musicians, dramatists and theatre artists who established private organisations through which their creative ideas, artistic inventions, cultural promotion and social engineering were



deployed to advance society. Among their notable folk operas are 'Garden of Eden' by Herbert Ogunde, 'Oba koso' by Duro Ladiipo and 'Palm wine drinkard' by Kola Ogunmola.

Apart from the notable folk opera artistes, many other artistes were involved who, at one point or another, made significant contributions as composers, song artistes, drummers, dancers, actors, and directors. Few among them, as identified by Clark (1979, P. 7), included Ola Okeowo, Kotoye Osodi Adefeso, among others. The Silver Jubilee (25 years) of the 'Yoruba operatic theatre movement' was commemorated in 1970 at the University of Ibadan. The occasion brought together various artists involved in folk opera. They shared their accounts of experiences and relayed untold explorations. Adedeji and Ekwuazi (1981) documented the multiple experiences of the artistes who explored the Nigerian folk opera. It was vivid that the Nigerian folk opera became an established art form years before and after the nation's independence in 1960, establishing it as a unique style.

One striking characteristic of the early Nigerian folk opera is the absence of a standard published script and score. Perhaps the tradition on which early Nigerian folk opera composers and writers based their works was textual and scant on script, drawing heavily on oral tradition. The artistes depended on inherent talent rather than professional musical and dramatic training. Even though they had some formal education, they lacked professional training in the arts, which limited the proper documentation of their works.

Unfortunately, the bright exploration of the Nigerian folk opera later declined, especially when some of the opera artistes turned to drama production, which became more prominent in their later works. Rather than the profuse use of songs as lines and choruses required in the opera, artistes explored drama, which used textual dialogues with the interjection of songs and instrumental ensemble accompaniments. Boisterous arts of the music-theatre gave way to other genres of performing arts, especially drama, preferring what is termed 'total theatre'. Total theatre is an assemblage of all African art forms in a highly concentrated, heightened and dynamic theatre event (Osanyin, 1998, as cited in Anyira, 2021, p. 274). He further stressed that 'African total theatre explores the eclectic qualities of African indigenous theatrical forms in which music, dance and its topicalities are not only well blended but also explore the riches of African oral tradition...' As these artistes modified their productions, the decline of the operatic art form was experienced, favouring other forms of art till some years after 1960, when the third trend of opera became noticeable.

Post-Colonial Operatic Trend 1960 - 1999

Music higher education in Nigeria began with the establishment of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1960, as the first indigenous higher education institution in Nigeria. One of the purposes of her establishment was to address Nigeria's need to train graduates who could meet the country's growing needs. Idolor (2001, P. 138) revealed that 'with the establishment of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka...music was seen as an important study of Africa's life...' Other Universities and Colleges of education followed this. Nigerians, therefore, had the opportunity, in greater numbers, to study music as an academic and professional course within the country. Opportunities to produce scholarly and experienced specialists in the country emerged in the music field. Earlier-trained Nigerian composers and musicians who went to European and American conservatories, colleges, and universities to study music were employed alongside expatriates to train prospective music students at home. The seed of new music (Nigerian art music) that earlier-trained Nigerians had planted had a better chance to grow. It experienced rapid growth in different genres and directions. Part of the genres of music that evolved from the Nigerian form included vesicles and responses, introit, anthems, hymns, art song, opera, oratorio, cantata, chamber music, brass, and other forms of instrumental music.



Opera, however, did not seem commonplace. Few Nigerian trained artistes who fostered the composition of opera includes Adam Fiberesima, who 'introduced Western operatic style as a basis of writing operatic music in contrast to the folk style of Hubert Ogunde and others' (Vidal, 1993, P. 8). His known opera compositions are 'The rascals', 'Opu Jaja' and 'Orokuta' while Sam Akpabot was identified as a composer and conductor of Western operatic and musical form. His notable opera is 'Jaja of Opobo', composed in 1972. Omojola (1995, P. 142) identified Okechukwu Ndubisi with 'Vengeance of the Lizard' 1966 and 'Dr. Feeles' 1968. A few other Nigerian operas composed by Nigerians who were professionally trained musicians include 'Chaka' by Akin Euba, 'A night in Bethlehem' by Laz Ekweme, and 'A night of Miracles' by Ayo Bankole.

Of important note, one composer who influenced opera composition in Nigeria is Meki Nzewi. He is distinguished as a radical composer who worked with new materials. 'His creative philosophy and practice aim at continuing the traditional multi-disciplinary approach to creative, performance and presentation' (Uche and Okafor, 2011, P. 3). His music-dramatic works include five music-theatre works, seven musicals, three operas and three poetic-dance theatrical works, as stated by Uche and Okafor. His radicalism turned against the Eurocentric operatic productions at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to explore African resources in operatic productions. Aninwene (2011, P. 82) stressed that 'it was not until 1982-83 and 1983-84 academic sessions that the musical genius...Prof. Meki Nzewi took over operatic production. He emphasised that Nzewi indigenised it by adopting Nigerian folk opera in the department. His opera, among musicals and other numerous compositions, is 'Adora', 'Mystery', and 'Omaledo'. Meki belongs to the third generation of art musicians in Nigeria who employed mixed instrumental media of African and Western origin in their compositions, according to Bello (2014, P. 317).

Nigerian opera gained attention at higher institutions, where it is studied in music, performing arts, drama, or theatre arts departments. J. N. Mokwunyei (personal communication, October 20, 2019), in an interview, shared some of her experiences in opera production at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the late 1970s when she was a student at the Department of Music. 'Opera performance was a common experience at the department,' as she partook in its performances. Also, she noted Bode Omojola (now a professor of music), who usually accompanied on the piano during performances. B. Omojola (personal communication, August 31, 2019) also relayed his experience as a student at the same department. He emphasised that his interest in opera led him to attend most operas as an undergraduate, singing in the chorus or playing piano as an accompanist. Major characteristics of these operas are that they treated Nigerian themes and contents with local musical elements and were presented with libretto and music staff notation.

Contemporary Trend of Operatic Movements in Nigeria 2000-Date

The twenty-first century has seen remarkable development across many fields, including the arts, science, and technology. Opera has equally reflected some visible and novel developments in contemporary Nigeria. The trend of opera continues to expand as generations of Nigerians who are trained in performing arts – music as well as drama keep advancing the art form by writing operas and similar forms. More opportunities are emerging in its performances, while other art forms categorised as music-theatre are also expanding. The contemporary form, identical to the opera on Nigeria's contemporary performance stage, is 'The Musical'. While opera continues at higher institutions of learning, the musical, which shares many of its characteristics, continues to gain acceptance within and outside higher institutions. A good number of music-theatre creations in recent times is geared towards the musical. Musical is not entirely new in Nigeria as some of the composers in the post-colonial period wrote musicals along with opera. However, during the contemporary



trend, it has become more prominent among people being driven by private and individual initiatives. The similarities between opera and musicals include story, songs, dances, instrumental accompaniment (Western and African), and theatrical elements. In disparity, the musical allows freer artistic treatment in the elements that make up the artwork. In contrast to the opera, which is closer in form to Western opera, the musical employs a less rigid stylistic approach.

Both, however, show the music-theatrical genre in Nigeria growing in parallel within the Nigerian society. Equally notable is the continuation of other forms, such as the Nigerian folk opera, which is being fostered within certain circles that still embrace them in contemporary society as new creative forms continue to advance. Abe (2023, pp. 205-206) identified several Nigerian contemporary operas and musicals during this period. These operas are works of composers who emerged in the second decade of the 21st century. A few of the modern operas are *The Gods Have Spoken* (2012) and *Wanted* (2019) by Taiye Adeola, *Tani Mola* (2010), *Campus Life* (2016) by David Bolaji, and *Okonkwo*, an adaptation of Chinua Achebe's play *Things Fall Apart* (2016) by Ngobili Chijioke. Others include some musicals and similar art forms. These include *Fela and the Kalakuta Queens*, produced by Bolanle Austin-Peters in 2017; *Adesewa*, produced in the same year by Thespian Family Theatre and Production; *Speak out*, a poem written by Tony Marinho, which was adapted into a musical by Chuks Okoye; and *Dis loyal Judas* by Segun Adefila. These gave the Nigerian contemporary operatic trend a multi-dimensional advancement in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Nigerian operatic scene shows the systematic development of a people's ingenuity, multiplying the seed of creativity to produce hybrids of ingenious inventions. This paper reveals innovative strides by people who have continuously advanced the operatic genre, evolving an identity that can be called Nigerian opera. With different forms of operatic strides across layers of development, Nigeria has advanced global artistic innovation, infusing local and Western cultural and creative elements to create new art forms. These new forms of opera present unique and dynamic styles of music-theatre for human advancement and socio-cultural engineering within the global community.

As a work of art springing from the African continent, there is a need to continuously promote it as an African product beyond the continent in various dimensions. While modern societies in Africa seem to promote Western culture and Arts to a large extent, African arts, which reflect African values, call for greater promotion. These can be achieved through education, awareness, continuous orientation and opportunities for expression. Through these, Nigerian opera, as well as many other African artistic innovations, will rank high among the world's creative ingenuity.

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