

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: CHALLENGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN MUSICIANS

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### Abstract

The contact of African musicians with their foreign counterparts has in one way or the other influenced their musical style and genres. Nigeria, a prominent country in Africa seems to have taken an overdose of foreign culture which has indirectly and directly affected the modus operandi of the country's musical composition and performance by the artistes. The syncretism and hybridity of some of these musicians in adopting various foreign and indigenous musical styles and idioms bring about difficulty in placing such music to a specific genre or musical style. Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia happen to fall under such categories and these two are the foci of this paper. Lagbaja Christened Bisade Ologunde and his mask identity are driven by his philosophy. The name Lagbaja and the mask used depict and reflect the anonymity or facelessness of the so called 'common or voiceless man' in the society. His interaction with the late Fela Kuti music called *afro-beat* and highlife was said to have produced *Africano* which is peculiar to him (Lagbaja). Hitherto, the addition of other genres like salsa, calypso, makes it challenging in identifying such genre. Beautiful Nubia on the other hand was born into the Yoruba rich culture of oral poetry, theatre, music and folklores which has greatly influenced his music. The experiences and exposures of beautiful Nubia right from childhood made this music sophisticated and quite uneasy to pin him down to a specific musical genre. Folk and root, a musical genre peculiar to beautiful Nubia could simply be seen as a nomenclature and really not a musical genre. To create a musical identity, one has to overlook the aspect of musical style into the themes surrounding such artiste and his/her compositions.

**Keywords:** Identity, Challenges, Lagbaja, Beautiful Nubia, Africano, Folk & Root

### Introduction

Africans contact with foreign countries and cultures have one in way or the other influenced African general way of life. There has been cultural assimilation whereby, Africans essentially the Sub-Saharan Africans and other continents or countries have actually incorporated some values into their culture. Consequently, contacts with western culture especially through commerce, migration, and colonization (deliberate or otherwise) have debilitated the values for African culture and cultural identity. This however affects Nigeria a prominent country in Africa which seems to have taken an overdose of foreign culture which has indirectly down played its rich cultural heritage to an extent. Emielu (2002) observed that:

In recent times Nigeria has become a dumping ground for all genres of music ranging from rock 'n' roll to R & B, Soul, Jazz, Reggae, hip-pop, Rap, Dancehall and makossa. All these have had a concomitant negative impact on the indigenous music (P.46)

Emielu also identified two factors that have influenced the musical traditions of African societies which are internal and external. The internal factors which include population movement, migrations, wars, famine and other crisis that gave rise to a mixed population. Wherever the people went they took their

culture with them, including musical styles and instruments. Vidal (2012) identified two main external factors that has influenced Nigerian music namely: Islamic-Arabic and Euro-Christian. The Islamic-Arabic and the Euro-Christian forms of foreign influences may be described as transculturation for they involve the transplantation of foreign institutions and values into the Nigerian indigenous institutions and values with the resultant modification of the indigenous ones or their total eradication wherever they constitute an obstacle to the foreign ones. The introduction of European musical styles like hymns, foxtrot, waltz, rock 'n' roll, art music and so on to the country serve as prototype which has really influenced Nigerian musicians to produce distinctive typologies such as *highlife*, *juju*, *afro-rock*, *afro-beat*, *afro-pop* etc. Likewise, the contact of Nigerian music with the Arabic musical instruments and the melismatic singing and cantillation style brought about new musical genres like *were*, *waka*, *apala*, *sakara*, *fuji* and so on.

The foreign musical influence on Nigerian music has no doubt led to creation of new musical genres with various styles which are all subsumed under popular music. These include *highlife*, *juju*, *apalawaka*, *sakara*, *afro-beat*, *reggae*, *afro-jazz*, *rap*, *gospel* and so on. The foregoing identified musical genres have a stylistic format with definitive framework as well as defined performance style that could be easily identified and classified when one is played. However, the syncretism and hybridity of some musicians in the country in adopting various musical styles and idioms bring about a difficulty in placing such music to a specific genre or musical style. Such musicians include but not limited to Lagbaja and beautiful Nubia. This study is centered on these two musicians as case study.

### **Brief History of Lagbaja**

Lagbaja also called *Omo Baba mu'ko mu'ko* (the son of pap drinker) as heard in some of his music was christened as Bisade Ologunde by his parents. He was born in the year 1960 into a Baptist Christian family. Hailed from Odogun's compound, Ijagbo's community in Oyun Local Government Area of Kwara state. Before venturing into music as a profession, Lagbaja had former education up to a Master's degree in Business Administration.

Bisade (Lagbaja) debunked speculations like; he adopted both Lagbaja as his stage name and mask as identities because of how he started his music career. He was a 'church boy' and a member of the church choir. His parents are prominent Baptist members and are not in support of his kind of music as such can ridicule them because of their position in the church.

Lagbaja believes that, the name Lagbaja and the mask used as identity are driven by a philosophy. 'Lagbaja' is a Yoruba word that literally means someone, somebody, anybody, no one and nobody. Tactically the name depicts no one in particular and same goes with the mask he uses as another identity. It reflects the anonymity or facelessness of the so-called "common or voiceless man" in the society. Bisade

adopted the mask and the name to represent the faceless and the voiceless in the society, particularly in Africa.

### **Brief History of Beautiful Nubia**

Beautiful Nubia was born in Ibadan, Oyo state, Nigeria on 12<sup>th</sup> Nov., 1968 into a Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) family member. He started writing songs at a very tender age of nine. He was born into the Yoruba rich culture of oral poetry, theatre, music and folklores which greatly influenced his music. He was able to tap directly or indirectly from his parents' musical ingenuity as both parents are musically inclined. His mother is a song writer while his father sings tenor. Beautiful Nubia (2015) in one of the interviews with the researcher at the Nu Streams Conference and Culture Centre, Iyaganku road, Ibadan states:

I could not recalled when exactly I started playing musical instruments, local drums, *sekere* (gourd rattle), and *agogo* (bell) to be precise because it was what we find around always in the church, at school, different social and religious gathering and even in the neighborhood. (P. 25)

His versatility in playing different musical styles was early inspired from his father who used to own a small music store 'sounds of joy' in the 60s and 70s, and to attract customers; various kinds of music were played and projected on speakers. Also, on radio and television, African and Western music made the playlists and lots of drumming took place in ceremonies at Ibadan where he grew up. All these are of great inspiration and influenced the kind of music he performs which is not only restricted to traditional folk music. His early exposure to music influenced him in wanting to become a musician, therefore, he opted to study music or theatre arts but he was advised and persuaded by his teachers and mother not to take that as first choice but to learn as a professional trade at the university that he could fall back on when his artistic initiatives did not pay off.

Oje (2015) submits that, the artiste's stage name is made up of two different words; Beautiful and Nubia. These two words have great significance and influence on the life of the artiste which in turn affects the society at large. Segun Akinlolu asserts that Beautiful Nubia is not just a name he accidentally stumbled on but a name he decided to be called as an artiste and it is driven by a philosophy. He affirms that, the name has been his driving force which has helped him to remain focused in what he is doing. According to the artiste, Beautiful refers to a state he aspired for, a spiritual perfection that he seeks, a state where one is incapable of hatred, where one can see beyond face, colour, faith, gender or race. Where love to all race is prioritised. His definition of 'beautiful' therefore goes beyond what the senses can decipher or determine but a state where the spiritual rules over physical, where a 'Supreme force' controls what individual sees and feels which brings about spiritual perfection and undiluted love.

### The Challenges in Placing the Musical Style and Genre of Lagbaja

Lagbaja, who is also identified as ‘the mask man’ is a prominent Nigerian musical artiste who always appear on mask during his performances. The mask sometimes is decorated alongside with an *Egungun* (masquerade) costumes even while on stage. The music of Lagbaja is characterized by a reverberating percussion (which explained the rhythmic nature of African music), the sonorous rhythmic bass line and a lyrical melody from the voice, the lead guitar or both.

The challenges in placing Lagbaja’s musical genres can be noticed from his strong connection with the legendary Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s *afro-beat* and the early high-life musical style. Omojola (2006), believes:

It may be too early to associate Lagbaja’s style of music with a definite style. His music is still at an experimental stage, with each new major work reflecting the mind of an enterprising musician whose art is still ‘in progress’. Lagbaja seems to acknowledge the impact of *highlife*, *afro-beat* and traditional Yoruba idioms on his music. (P. 88)

Consequently, Omojola stated that, placing Lagbaja’s musical style to a specific genre can be likened to a task which is tending towards impossibility. However, identity like culture is dynamic and mobile, that is, musical identity is not a constant phenomenon but a changing one that seems to find its quotidian relevance in the day to day activities. Lagbaja’s musical style ranges from the *Afro-beat* style linked to the late Fela Anikulapo Kuti, *Highlife*, *Afro-pop*, *Hip-hop* to the Afro-Caribbean musical style of *Salsa*, and *Calypso*.

Adejube (2016) is of the opinion that the quest for identity and relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is responsible for the difficulty in placing such music artistes to a definite style and genre. He further explains:

Yoruba popular music persist in its form and style as it changes from time to time based on meeting the quotidian relevance of every day’s activities in the country. From *Fuji* to *juju*, *hip-hop* to *afro-beat*, *highlife* to *gospel*, there is a trend of hybridity and syncretism that occur in the performance practice of the music. Every artiste wants to influence and be effective in the global change and phenomenon of the country (P. 17).

Lagbaja’s musical style can be seen from the different musical genres in the country and beyond. Some of his tracks are a blend and hybrid of different musical styles. One of the tracks include *Did I* which was performed in English, Spanish and a little of Yoruba language.

The lyrics of the song; *Did I* by Lagbaja goes thus:

	<u>Translation</u>
<i>Es verdad, tedijequeteamaba</i>	True I said it, that I loved you
<i>Es verdad, te lo dije mil veces</i>	True I said it a thousand times
<i>Y siempre lo dije porque así lo sentía</i>	Each time I said it, I really meant it

<i>Desde el fondo de mi corazón</i>	From deep within my heart
<i>Esperaba que fuera una historia diferente</i>	I hoped it would be a different story
<i>De momentos de mi pasado</i>	From times in my past
<i>Pero fui cuidadosa con lo que decía</i>	Still I was careful picking my words
<i>Aterrado de decir por siempre</i>	Too scared to say forever

**Chorus:**        *Did I ever say I'd love you forever?*  
                  *Did I? Did I?*  
                  *Even if I ever said I'd love you forever*  
                  *I must have been out of my mind*

The above lyric is the beginning of the song *Did I*. The question to ask is how to place such music to a specific genre. With the introduction of the Spanish language vis-à-vis the introduction of a *salsa/country* beat fused with a *calypso* and *afro-beat*, also present Lagbaja's multiplicity in terms of musical style and genre or genres as the case may be. Hither-to, that is not the only track (music) in that particular album '*Sharp-sharp*'. There are other tracks in the musical album that has other forms and musical styles different from the *Did I* track.

Omojola (2006) illustrates that, Lagbaja seems to acknowledge the impact of *highlife*, *afro-beat* and traditional Yoruba idioms on his music. He further explains that Lagbaja ultimate goal is to create an original style, which *Africano* seems strategic in his quest towards an original style.

Lagbaja in Omojola (2006) said:

For many years now, people have categorized my music into different forms. They talked about *Afro-beat*, *highlife*, *afro-jazz* and *crossover*, but I always insisted that none of these was appropriate as I was digging for something more fundamental. However, no one could deny the impact our music had with its use of traditional African drums and percussion. Now, I christen that drum driven sound *Africano*, and wish to invite lovers of music to come on board for an exciting journey (P. 89).

Perhaps, Lagbaja and Femi Kuti (the son of the late Fela Anikulapo Kuti) were supposed to continue the *afro-beat* musical styles because of their interaction with the *afro-beat* crooner Fela Anikulapo Kuti. While Femi Kuti maintained the musical culture and identity of *afro-beat*, Lagbaja on the other hand adopted but added to the musical culture and identity of *afro-beat*. This was reflected in his music as Lagbaja adopts the *afro-beat* style coupled with the high-life musical tradition as part of the numerous musical styles and genres adopted in his musical identity. *Afro-beat*, as a musical genre was created and dominated by Fela between the late 1960s and early 1990s. Omojola explains the little impact of *afro-beat* but a greater influence of high-life in the music of Lagbaja. He explained:

Lagbaja has warned that the influence of *afro-beat* on his music should not be exaggerated. On the other hand he argues that highlife has a greater influence on his music than the *afro-beat*. In 2001, he went further to state that his style of music was higher-life, suggesting that his brand of music was a development on highlife as we used to know it. One striking feature of Lagbaja's music is its strong reliance on traditional Yoruba drums (P. 86).

The traditional Yoruba drumming is a paramount and recurring feature of the music of Lagbaja. The rhythmic and the percussive section of his instrumentation are so profound, whether in its heavy or light form and that is mostly regarded as the backbone of African traditional music. In most Lagbaja's music video, one will notice the prominence of Bata, talking drum and the bass guitar which represent rhythmic and percussive section of such music.

### **The Challenges in Placing the Musical Style and Genre of Beautiful Nubia**

Beautiful Nubia is no doubt a prolific singer, song-writer/arranger and a poet who has carved a niche for himself especially in the music industry, home and abroad with different accolades as proves showcasing his recognition and impact in the music industry and society at large.

However, classifying this eclectic musician's brand of music to a particular style or genre is a cumbersome and wearisome task in the sense that, he performs a mixture of folk/traditional music with fusion of Western and American musical genres such as, *Rhythm, Blues, Soul, Jazz, Rock & Roll, Reggae* and so forth. Omibiyi-Obidike (2007) refers to artistes that are without a well-defined musical genre as musicians that readily spurn attempts to classify them into specific genres and would rather exploit their creativity to extend beyond one particular style. This dilemma is what Emielu (2011) consider as inherent problem of genre labeling and categorization based on one hand on twin issues of historical relativity and historical specificity, and on the other hand on artistic autonomy and generational contextualization.

Obviously, the experiences and exposures of Beautiful Nubia right from childhood made this music sophisticated. In an interview with the artiste at NuStreams Conference and Culture Centre, Ibadan, he submits:

The music reflect who I am, I was born in Africa. The core of the rhythm is the folk rhythms of Africa, it is African music through and through but it is the music of humanity as well. Because, it is not like, you are not African; you cannot be part of it. No, everybody is welcome to it. The music is made from all kind of ingredients but the most important ingredient is me. It is what I bring into it, my experiences in life, things I'm expose to, how much have developed myself by reading, listening to (ancient wisdom and

knowledge) elders, how much sacrifice have been able to make, because it involves a lot of sacrifices (P. 22).

This, therefore, reveals the fact that, it is quite impossible to separate artiste's experiences or exposures from his or her work of arts. As a matter of fact, it's the experience and exposure of any artiste that forms his or her identity. Beautiful Nubia acknowledges that it is quite uneasy to pin him down to a specific musical genre because, as an artiste, he easily explores anything he finds around and cannot be limited because of his experiences and exposures. Beautiful Nubia submits:

I play a multi-genre kind of music but we try to call it 'folk and root' because if you go to any library, music library they always want to know, especially abroad they want to know where to put your music, is it *highlife*, *jazz*, *soul*, *reggae*, *folk* music, and so on. I think it is multi-genre kind of music but if you call it folk and root that is fine too at least for cataloguing (P. 21).

The artiste accepting the fact that he plays a diverse genres of music but decided to labeled it 'folk and root' for cataloguing sake, therefore suggests that 'folk and root' could simply be a nomenclature or at best, a generic name for a wide range of styles or genres which is an amalgam of African traditional music with European or the new world music just as Beautiful Nubia rightly said in an interview with the researcher at NuStreams Conference and Culture Centre, Ibadan; "My music is an amalgam of African traditional music with foreign music". In spite the clear evidence of European musical styles like jazz, reggae, funk R & B, etc. in his music, he christened his music folk and root music because of his belief that the driving force of his music heavily depends on African folk rhythm.

### **What Makes *Africano* and *Folk & Root* Genres of Music?**

On the backdrop of these duo artistes' (Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia) assertions above as regard labeling their rare genres of music, *Africano* and *Folk and Root* respectively, considering their reasons for christening their music genres, shall we say then, all music that is essentially influenced by African traditional drums and percussions is '*Africano*'?, or that has its core rhythm on African folk rhythm is 'root and folk' music?

Maybe, one could say based on the style of performance and identity of these artistes, any musician performing with his face masked and his music is built on African traditional drum is performing *Africano*, and any musician that performs variety of genres of music but the core of the music is built on African folk rhythm is performing Folk & Root music.

These assertions may not be correct as Akpabot (1986:5) observes that, singers sometimes use nonsense words to evoke a mood or describe something they cannot find a suitable word for. Many artistes in time past and present have created an identity for themselves by giving names to their style of music. Example

of these include: *synchro system* by Sunny Ade, *Afro-juju* by Shina Peters, *Juju-miliki* by Ebenezer Obey, *Bonsue-fuji* by Adewale Ayuba, *Jasa-gospel* by Femi Orun, *Tungba-gospel* by Yinka Ayefele and so on. Some of the identified styles only exist in names, whether it explains the elements that sum up the performance style is a discussion for another study.

Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia labeling their kind of music '*Africano* and folk & root' respectively are only being prescriptive and not descriptive in their explanations. This is because, both artistes were more interested in being unique in styles and genres, so to say by performing a multi-genres kind of music with their unique styles. However, they have not technically and tactically explained the germane features of what sum up their genres of music, and particularly described what makes their rare genres of music differ from the existing ones.

Nketia (2005) observes that:

One has to bear in mind that what a people say about their music and musical instruments or what they say about their genesis may not always tally with what they actually do in performance, or with the structural evidence in the music itself and details of the organology of the sound sources they use.

Emielu (2012) therefore explains why Nketia (2005) observation was so by pointing out reasons for not being definite in musical nomenclature and style by these artistes as a result of the influences Western Europe, America and Arab music, had on their music which account for the fluidity in their musical genres. Consequently, the challenges of not being definite in musical structural layout that is, stylistic form of these musicians (Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia) could lead to discontinuity in their creative works after the demise of these eclectic artistes because the success of any pioneer is to have successors. Other musical genres present in Nigeria till date exist because of continuity in their definitive framework though the performance style of each artistes may differ. This issue should, therefore, be of great concern to the musicians involved, musicologists, and other music experts as it beacons their quick interventions for posterity.

Taking Lagbaja's *Africano* into consideration, it was an off-shoot of Fela's *Afro-beat*. Nevertheless, Lagbaja refuses to stay with the musical elements such as rhythms, melody, and the percussion of the *afro-beat* of Fela alone but with a combination which comprises mainly of highlife and other musical styles and genres. The hybridity of combining *afro-beat*, highlife (which he likes to call higher life) and other musical genres brought about the challenges in identifying or placing a specific musical style to his (Lagbaja) music.

Perhaps, in explaining the African concept of the music of Lagbaja, one has to look away from the musical elements surrounding such music and examine the content which mostly serves as the lyrics. Adejube



(2016) explains that Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a foremost and forerunner of *afro-beat* music maintained a high theme with his politically influenced lyrics in his compositions such as *Zombie, Suffering and smiling*. He continues by explaining that African woman are all filled with political satirical influenced lyrics to tackle and engaged the political ‘chiefs’ and ‘gods’ of the country in the 1970s.

This assertion might be one of the many reasons of Lagbaja adopting the name ‘*Africano*’ so as to hide the many themes of his music. Omojola (2012) illustrates how Lagbaja uses the mask to speak in his role as an advocate for the faceless masses of Nigeria who experience economic hardship, political oppression and who lack the wherewithal to protect themselves.

He continues;

As a vital tool for reinforcing his role as a social mediator, *Lagbaja’s* music often draws on antecedent Yoruba styles that range from indigenous traditions to modern neo-traditional forms (P. 189).

Dissecting Beautiful Nubia’s *Folk & Root* music based on the content of his songs, Oje (2015) submits that Beautiful Nubia’s songs can be broadly categorized into six themes: folk/ traditional, educational, socio-political revolution, love, philosophical and general. Considering folk/traditional theme as one of the song themes identified by Oje, one cannot be far from the reality that Beautiful Nubia’s music is noted for a strong usage of native wisdom with Yoruba traditional songs that are transferred orally from one generation to the other. Examples of these songs are: *Elekodere, Mama Agba’s twilight treat, Jangbalajugbu, Lekeleke* among others. There is virtually none of his existing albums that the artiste has not sung at least one African folk song especially the Yoruba folk/traditional song. This could have resulted to one of the reasons why Beautiful Nubia christened his genre of music *folk & root*. However, he has not identified this as a reason for naming his rare genre because this alone does not suffice to name his vast and conglomeration of various musical genres *folk & root*.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusively, without mincing words, both artistes (Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia) are good entrepreneurs who are rooted in African culture and also know how best to satisfy their different categories or groups of fans which include the children, youths and the elders. It is evident through their albums that these duo artistes consciously and deliberately write and as well arrange songs that appeal to the interest of their target audience and also speak to socio-political issues. These may also have warranted their multiplicity in musical genres as they want to sustain the interest of their fans.

There is no gain saying that the best way to last long and as well remain relevant in the highly competitive world of entertainment is to be unique by going extra miles above one’s contemporaries and creating or bringing in innovations to the existing *modus operandi*. However, naming or in identifying a musical genre

or style goes beyond the musical elements, instrumentations, rhythm, melody and harmony to mention a few. The thematic development as it regards the themes propagated by the music should also be considered. Lagbaja and Beautiful Nubia are two musicians whose music is difficult in placing to a specific genre though they preferred to be labeled *Africano* and *Folk & Root* respectively.

This paper has attempted in describing the challenges in identifying their music with the different modus operandi of performing their music. Hence, a listener or scholar approaches to their music should be based not only on the musical elements but to other factors as both artistes seem to pass across the traditional, social, economics, politics, and current affairs themes in their lyrical content.

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