Rationalizing Popular Music Discourses in Contemporary Ghana: A Media and Communication Perspective

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Abstract:
This paper will attempt to discuss the issues that pervade the popular music sphere in contemporary Ghana. It will also attempt to answer the questions: What is popular music in Ghana? What is the cultural form of popular music in Ghana? What is the cultural environment impacted upon by popular music discourses? How can we study popular music in Ghana as an authentic field of media and communication? What is the functionality/dysfunctionality of popular music discourses in the contemporary Ghanaian socio-musical cultural space? It is also the thesis of this paper to look at popular music as a historical and social construct. The stance of this paper is that it is possible to analyse socio-cultural change, fathom new psycho-social perceptions by a holistic study of popular music.

The popular music space is, further, set off as the locus where the systemic world meets the life world for meaning and communication. This paper is informed by the notion that popular music consumption is not an obscure enterprise directed entirely to an exclusively esoteric audience with padded layers of sub-cultures. Its universality in the contemporary Ghanaian socio-cultural space is emphasized.

Keywords: Popular music, socio-cultural change, esoteric audience, cultural form, life world

1. Introduction

Popular music is used to denote a variety of musical styles and genres. Implicit in the phrase ‘popular music’ is quantitative success i.e., any musical style that sells sufficient numbers to an esoteric audience could be described as popular music. As Burnett (1990) asserts sufficient purchase by the youth audience defines what popular music is at any specific time. Denis of (1975) (quoted by Burnett, 1990) defines popular music as ‘the sum total of those taste units, social groups and musical genres which coalesce along certain taste and preference similarities in a given time and space’. Tagg (1982) also views popular music as occurring in industrial societies. But then it must be said that popular music appears in all kinds of societies, though it is primarily produced in the urban industrial epicentres and this is also evident in contemporary urban Ghana.

Popular music is thus self-defined i.e. music that is popular. It is directed at a self-selected audience i.e. the youth. It is prima facie that this audience essentially chooses what is popular with its listening time and money. Thus quantitatively, popular music is a recognized product. Box office popularity and success is determined by indices such as radio play, YouTube presence, musical clips on various TV channels, music TV, internet downloads, caller tunes on mobile phones, sufficient purchase by the youth audience and the numbers that attend a particular musical live performance and so on.

John Collins (2007; 2012) gives a historical overview of what corpora of music to include in terms of popular music discourses in Ghana. He stressed, inter alia,’ Despite the collapse of live popular entertainment during the late seventies and eighties, three new musical genres have emerged. One is related to imported techno-pop styles (like disco and rap). The second is, local church music, and the third is ‘folklorised’ performance encouraged by tourism’ (cf Matczynski, 2011).

These musical genres have recently emerged with artistes like Kidi, Shatta Wale, Stoneboy, Kwame Eugene, Dope Nation, Becca, Kwaw Kesse, Samini, Blakk Rasta, Kofi Kinaata, MzBel, Wendy Shay, Adina, Sarkodie among others.

It must be said that geographical space is important in the delineation of what is popular. The esoteric audience addressed may be different from society to society. What is mutual to all the geographical spaces in terms of popular culture is the fact that the youth are the paramount sociological categories and ‘taste units’ addressed (cf. Nikoi, 2020). The terrain of popular music in Ghana may, thus, be set off by the amount of internet downloads, producer mention and so on. Youth tastes are not monolithic; they are molded and impacted by numerous social forces around them, ranging from marital status, education, geographical location (cf. Burnett, 1990). The consumption of popular music in Ghana may thus be the space where the systemic forces meet the life world for meaning and communication (Habermas, 1989).

Contextual soundscapes also define what is popular. An industrial society with soundscapes of distant traffic, ventilators, refrigerators, underground railway stations, cracklings of computer networks and androids and fibre optic and...
space technologyetc will be metaphorically and literally different from a society characterized by an agora of hawkers, traffic jams, funeral ceremonies, outdoorings, school homecomings, bazaars, street carnivals and the ‘sakawa’ spatial (cybercrime kingpins). The Ghanian societal space is cluttered with scavengers of eco-unfriendly discarded computers, and discarded old refrigerators from western countries; coupled with a socio-cultural space with varied degrees of computer literacy, and varying coverage of tv and radio stations and internet, should be differentiated from other socio-cultural spaces. A lopsided penetration and interconnectivity of mobile phone companies and service deliverables (Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, zoom, Instagram, twitter, Netflix certainly makes the sonic landscape most industrialized country where rock music and classical music thrives.

It must be stressed that the listening mode is also important vis-à-vis popular music. Tagg (1990) talks about how listening modality is culturally acquired and not purely biological (for example one must be trained to enjoy classical music). Codal competence is therefore important when it comes to grasping the nuances of even popular music. How would a Ghanian appreciate Tunisian Nouba music or rock music or generally Arabian music? Such music have been conceived according to totally different principles of acoustic, cultural and social properties. The Ghanian may say ‘there is no tune’ when he collides with such music. African polyrythms have been noted to be problematic when it comes to their appreciation in the European/North American musical taste sphere. Although such artistes as Davido, Burna Boy, Yousouf Ndou, Magic Systems, Fela, Miriam Makeba, Angelique Kidjo, Salif Keita, Yvonne Chakachaka and the music and dance companies like Ujoma (South Africa) and Noyam (Ghana) have been noted to have achieved global acclaim and universal recognition. They help purvey the authentic African cultural reality.

It is necessary to mention here, in any case, that sound per se must pass through a culture filter. Symbolic meanings and onomatopoeic relationships that are exuded by music, in our case, popular music is therefore culturally specific. What is popular music is, therefore, delineated by the societal and cultural context of the popular music text. Gecau (1993) avers that ‘... it is clear the text provides a basis for discourse, interpretation and production. As such, the artistic and aesthetic aspects of the text as much as its more didactic content becomes means in a communicative process. This reinforces what the people already know and furthermore provides a basis for analysis, production of meanings and development of concepts, ideas, knowledge and feelings about the reality in which people live. This does not only happen at the mental level, but at the emotive one as well.’

It significant to reiterate that tastes, background and culture are important in the public life of society. Readership and listenership tastes can therefore be an outward expression of cultural and social identity (McQuail, 2010).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Music as a Cultural Form

It has been said in most literatures on music that music is in itself a cultural form. Through styles and genres, forms and signs it offers a symbolic system which can be used for interaction. Burnett (1990) asserts that music language relates to three levels a) objective reality b) norms and relations c) producing and expressing subjectivity. Burnett (1990) further talks about music per se with its signs and symbols and how they point to themselves or intertextually relate to other systems of meaning. Thus an aesthetic analysis may point to how symbols and styles of music relate to each other and what intertextualities exist between different musical works (for instance who influenced who-black Americans or Africans?).

It is also valid to say that by listening or playing, say hiplife or highlife music people learn how to use symbolic forms e.g., words, music, gestures, images and so on that are valid for self and others (Otchere & Dordzro, 2020).

Cultural learning is also social it has to be anchored in the individual as well as in the collective. Therefore, the cultural level demands intersubjectively shared interpretations of meaning. Sometimes symbolic communication through music can form propositional discourses (Burnett 1990). Bob Marley’s song ‘Stand up for your rights’ had been used in many African societal settings as propositional discursive formations in the course of its geopolitical history.

3. The Functionality of Popular Music Discourses

McQuail (2010) talks about a social functionalist theory of mass media in our case popular music; we can appropriate this in our ratiocination. This is an indication that popular music can be used for information purposes i.e. providing information about issues like diseases- Covid-19, ebola, lassa fever, aids, malaria, H1N1 flu, providing information about events and political situations, providing indicators as to the relations of power in the society viz. the rich and poor, the educated and the uneducated, the soldier and the civilian, the young and old, the female and the male and so on.(Plageman, 2013)

Popular music could also be used for consensus building, it can also be used for mobilization purposes in connection with campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, social work and sometimes religion.

Further, it quintessentially provides entertainment and by extension stability and integration. This is achieved by it providing amusement, diversion, escape and the means of relaxation. Here getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment helps in reducing social tension and filling the quotidian and psychologically offering emotional release and sometimes the lyrics may spark our sexual fantasies (like the song ‘Moses’ with its inherent profanity did in Ghana). This leads us to some of the dysfunctional elements inherent in the consumption of popular music. For instance, as McQuail (2010) stresses cultural or sub-cultural continuity may lead to intense suppression forms of the medium and deviant cultural visions. He, furthermore, reiterates the fact that entertainment may sometimes mean systematic...
trivialization and consciousness control. Sometimes under totalitarian conditions using popular music for mobilization purposes could be equated with coercion and music could also be used as an palpable political force as happened in Uganda where BobiWine marshalled musical apparatus to campaign in the 2021 presidential election.

The individual functionalist theory that McQuail (2010) talks about is an elaboration of the uses and gratifications theory. Here the questions of why people choose a particular media content, why people listen to popular music in the first place and what uses do the listeners of popular music put their attention to media (music) are in focus.

We can say that seeking information about relevant events and conditions in the immediate surroundings, society and the world, seeking advice on practical matters or opinion and decision choices as seen in proverbial citations, satisfying curiosity and general interest, self-education, thereby gaining a sense of security through knowledge are some of the specific individual functions of popular music.

Further, individuals turn to popular music for personal identity i.e. finding reinforcement of personal values, finding models of behaviour, identifying with the valued other here the composer or the musician.

Certain questions arise as a result of the interstitial functionality of popular music discourses, for example, is attention to popular music individual or collective in contemporary Ghana? Is the content of popular music limited in time and space? Is the use of popular music limited in the digital time or space? Is the supply/production of popular music managed at ‘source’?

This paper posits the point that music in Africa has a collective as well as a functional use as is indicated in its centripetalizing dynamics. In the internet age, popular music is heard on online, on tv, on the local FM stations and so on. The changes in the Ghanaian society have affected the flexibility of the use of music in Ghana. A look at internet downloads of music and the introduction of popular music caller tunes by mobile phone networks have enhanced the flexibility of the use of music. The introduction to the market of mp3’s, ipods, smart mobile phones and androids and so on has led to the accessibility of music being a fluid and dynamic one.

In this direction the dimensions of relations between the sender (of the music) and the receiver (of the music) in Ghana is set off. Attention is drawn to issues like-

- The individual use of music versus the collective experience.
- What is the location of the sender (of the music) to the receiver (of the music) in terms of space, time and the cultural location.
- The media (music) may be connected to the local community experience, national and regional experience. It must be noted that the more local the source of music the stronger the potential for a social relationship between the sender and receiver.
- There is also the dimension of ‘interactivity’ i.e. the degree to which a medium (popular music) allows for exchanges between sender and receiver (McQuail,2010)
  
McQuail (2010) further asserts the least managed tend to be the book and music. Which are not by coincidence also media of unitary content. They have content items which is rather free in time and space terms (both as to content and use). The question is ‘what is the relevance of this in the contemporary Ghanaian socio-cultural matrix?’

4. Discussion

4.1. Music as a Social Agent in Contemporary Ghana

Popular music could be a socializing agent as seen above (Nikio, 2020; Plageman, 2013) Fornas (1990) talks about how themes in microcultures relate to social life conditions and how music is used for the construction of individual and collective adolescent identities. Peer group learning i.e., socialization processes differ from those of the dominant institutions like the church and school or in our case the puberty rites like the Dipo among the Ga-Adangmes in Ghana. Sarpong (1974) talks about how the Ghanaian child, traditionally, is followed closely by the adults of his community in whatever he did, said or advised. He or she thus passes through initiation ceremonies to usher him/her into adulthood. But then, against the background of modernized everyday life music may induce certain learning processes among the youth. On the dance floor social contacts are made that cross traditional social boundaries (Reisman,1950), for instance the son of a chief or skin-head and the son of a labourer, or the rich and poor or the educated and the uneducated interact with abandon and without inhibitions. As already mentioned these social relations are fostered without regard to status or status symbols. At this level, youth discourses are directed towards lifting psycho-social stresses off their bodily systems and mundane situations. Here, we see discursive mechanisms like mode of dress, haircut, mode of speaking, the use of pidgin and patois and varieties of code-switching.

Discourses on popular music among the youth In Ghana may, therefore, be seen as channels of interpersonal communication. In sharing the common admiration of a particular popular music or hit-performer a mythology of social equality is purveyed and this may, in some respects, reduce any life world conflicts that may arise among them. At this level, intersubjective and face-to-face communication may help inspire meaning, create youth solidarity and identities. The redundant nature of popular music addresses itself to the sub-culture of the youth who may desire new social, communication and psychological challenges. It is the pressure of conformity with a particular youth group that probably impels an individual Ghanaian youth to turn to a particular genre of music. He might learn from the medium of popular music what the group expects and this may enable him identify with the group (or the valued other) by sharing a common perspective for discourse. The youth who are attracted particularly to reggae music can be cited as a case in point.

An examination of the socio-musical totality may reveal the fact that we can use music as a medium to read history. Music simulates the social order and the dissonances express marginalities. The code of music simulates the
accepted rules of society and engenders social dynamics that are far reaching (cf. Attali, 1985). Fornas (1990) also talks about macrolevel studies vis-à-vis popular music in relation to political forms of music. In this case music is involved in forming counter movements and resistance to dominant power structures and the manner in which rock music is used by such movement is an instance.

He also tries to address the questions relating to modernity, cultural critique and popular music. There is indeed the need to enter into the life world of the users and actors: listeners and musicians. People can and must use music to express and strengthen their position in social hierarchies. Individuals and groups using popular music are situated in a life world composed of culture, society and personalities, where they use intersubjective communication to develop meaning, solidarity and identities as already seen above. The question to ask in an African context is ‘what are the use values of popular music, learning processes and mobilizing potentials of popular music’. It can be said that music can lead to changes in the material, social, psychic and the cultural worlds (Otcere & Dordzro, 2020).

The Ghanaian youth are the fundamental sociological categories addressed by the unitary content of popular music and enjoyed communally. Social and communications relations are fostered at most social occasions. Adults also enjoy typically listen en masse to these popular music discourses at festivals, funerals and outdoorings (i.e., traditional naming ceremonies) organized for their socially centripetalizing force. It must be said that these adults and youth categories share intersubjectively shared norms and relations. In collectively consuming or producing music, groups have to handle conflicts and test solidarities. Thus, popular music is affected by and participates in the process of evolving ethical values and ideologies, relational structures of solidarity and sociality (Fornas, 1990).

The question is ‘how does the media of unitary content operate in a group-oriented society?’ In Ghana the processes of music consumption are dictated by the basic gemeinschaft orientation of the society. At funeral parades, the school fun fares, night clubs, at outdoorings, school homecomings the communal poise of the cultural environment that is impinged upon by popular music discourses is set off. The political elite only by constitutional means regulate music such that music de regueur must eschew profanity or risqué lyrics that may set off a particular ethnic group as de trop as was the case with the lyrics of the songs ‘Troboudoum’, A. B Certsul’s song ‘Moses’ or Senior Eddie Donkor’s song that talked about the Ewe tribe as ‘Number Nine’ (i.e., de trop). They caused the same stir as Julius Malema’s song ‘Shoot the Boer’ did in South Africa. Again, the charging of three Kenya musicians viz. Kamande WaKioi, Muigai WaNjoroge and John DeMathew in July 2012 for inciting hatred between the Kikuyu ethnic group and the Luo community of Prime Minister Odinga is another case in point.

McQuail (2010) further asserts that the book and music are also media of rather less direct interest to the state. This apparently differs from country to country. In Nigeria, for example, FelaAnkutulapo’s Kalakuta republic caused a lot of disconcerting moments for the regime of his days. In Ghana popular music is as important as inscriptions on mammy - trucks (commercialtro- tro vehicles). Its importance percolates down to the use of music in traditional terms. Sarpong (1974) states clearly that traditionally the use of even musical instruments is socially controlled. Some may be used only for chiefs. He cited examples, that the use of the nkofe horn is restricted to the Asantehene; the nginyini horns are used exclusively in singing praises of the skin-head of the Dagombastate. Thempintin and the Fontom from are played only behind the Akan Chiefs especially when they are borne aloft in palanquins.

The talking drum is also an important instrument used for hegemonic purposes. The atumpen of the Akans is the best known of these. It is found in pairs, male and female, one with a higher pitch than the other. The skilful drummer can make the two ‘say’ whatever he wants through a careful use of the five or so combinations of the two pitches. The above represents the traditional foundation of communal cohesion with its inherent hierarchies. Thus, the notion of the human inseparable from his social context is purveyed. This draws attention to a way of thinking and a world view evocative of fundamental cosmogenic acceptances that reflect the African social reality. Here anthropological specificities are thrust against private mythologies (Soyinka, 1976).

Here music is meant to express these proclivities. The esoteric world of symbols, ethics and values must originate from the authentic images of the African reality. Thereby, giving artists and artistes an imaginative liberation. A content analysis of the popular music content may reveal this.

5. Conclusion

The paper has stridently set off the discursive formations in the field of popular music and its impact on the cultural environment. It is obvious that the field of popular music can be studied as an autonomous field of media and communication in Ghana. It started with the rationalizing of what popular music is and its functional aspects. It was indeed seen that placing popular music within a cultural matrix is significant in terms of this functional perspective. It was also realized that the audience of popular music are a reflection of the socio-cultural landscape. Further, that a content analysis of popular music content may reveal the authentic images of the contemporary African social reality.

It was also seen that people use music for intersubjective communication. Music users also learn cognitive and practical skills from their reception of music. It was clear that a person’s taste in music sets off his/her desired position to the external environment.

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