

Modeling the Total Man in Traditional Farming Practice: A Spatial-Dramatic Analysis of Folkloric Farming Songs

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Abstract

There are numerous forms of education in Africa societies with many deeply rooted in traditional vocations. A reassessment of the dramatic elements of some inspirational music in traditional farming practice reveals a continuous and emphatic value added technique in occupational farming. One of the least documented to date is nofiofio; employed as a stress free, work-play group farming technique known for speed and efficiency. This rejuvenated ancient guide employs dramatic techniques driven by instructive moral folk music. Findings reveal that nofiofio encourages occupational discipline, family cohesion and social bond toward occupational engagements. Although such folk music is no longer used in cotemporary farming practice but newer forms of youth music have. A reflection on their uses in the past has risen in recent times. Nofiofio in particular encouraged moral and strong character building among the youth population involved in traditional farming. This paper analyses the dramatic content of this popular farming music in Edo State of Nigeria for planting and harvesting. The study shows a structured and efficient matrix for time management, motivation and increased output.

Keywords: Education, Africa, Oral Tradition, Nofiofio, and Folk music.

1. Introduction

The 'total man' by way of definition in the context of this paper means a 'responsible' man who meets the expectations of his family and society. Traditionally, the total man is at the root of his community as well as a vital unit of a virile and stable traditional society. Traditional farming was usually the king of the various vocations but it required other ingredients to eliminate boredom, induce competition and drive output per-man hour. Occupational empowerment is viewed with pride in African societies. While some can be individually undertaken and executed for desired result, some cannot and would require group participation for maximum output. Many vocations in African societies such as carving and farming adopt group or collective approach for maximum impact. The training for these vocations is expected to produce the skills that will determine their livelihood in the future. Moral trainings are embedded in vocational trainings and both are taken seriously because they are key to occupational future.

Vocational training was the bedrock of occupational and professional life in traditional Africa. The method of dissemination notwithstanding, the purpose was not just to instruct, but also to inculcate enough cultural and moral value in the individual for occupational and cultural existence. The means of instructional training was neither professionalized (if weighed against today's standard of professionalism with structurally designed templates for time-bound orchestration or graduation) nor consistent with modern or western form of education. However, the adopted practice was consistent enough to hold the cultural and moral value together, a norm believed to be the alloy that bonds the fabric of traditional African Society. To achieve this, discipline was held in high esteem especially as a well-trained craftsman is a personal ambassador of his trainer. For instance, in the old Bendel State of Nigeria (Edo), known for its prowess in the art of woodcarving and bronze work, a trainee's years of apprenticeship is not fixed. In order words, it is determined by the trainee's ability to learn the skill. Thus the first to come is not always the first go graduate.

2. Group Learning Experience in Rustic Setting as a Foundation of Occupational Life

Occupational life, expectation and empowerment were at the root of youth training in African societies. Thus the continuous existence of ethnic communities relied strongly on communication from different occupational interests, especially in agrarian subsectors. Amongst the different channels of educating the African child in vocations was a persistent adherent to normative cultural practices of the day to day living of the people, which is inseparable with their expectations as adults or envisioned family heads. The celebration of various festivals, ritualistic performances, social events and even occupational practices formed the major channels of impacting these values on the young African child. Michael Omolewa in a 2007 study discussed the various strategies used as methods of education in pre-colonial Africa. He submits that:

Traditional African education is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community, which is stored in various forms and transmitted through various modes. Such modes include language, music, dance, oral tradition, proverbs, myths, stories, culture and religion. (2007:594)

Learning is by no means a function of language and communication. The various modes of transmitting educational values are not only purpose-driven but also encapsulate the lifestyle of the people to the extent of impacting on their occupational productivity. Language (all forms considered) in whatever form, be it verbal, sign or cybernetic is the primary source of communication by man for which result is intended vis-à-vis productivity or output as a feedback process. Scientific research has it that a child learns how to communicate naturally from as early as conception. Denise Mann in “WebMD Health News” supplies that a “new research suggests that babies began to absorb language when they are inside the womb during the 10th week of pregnancy”. As soon as a child learns to communicate in his/her mother’s tongue, which is after birth, he starts imitating and displaying everything learned from observing his immediate family and surroundings. He/she achieves this by simply verbalizing and transmitting back to that society in their mother tongue, using the tool of role-play. Dramatically, role-play is a vital talent that will become bendable as a multi-task instrument in later years. It is an identity tool for interactive personality building for group benefit. Children start role-play early in life through music and dance. This comes sometimes by mimicry of songs, and sometimes by deep imitational interest of something or someone so admired. The two acts require conscious input; hence each is accompanied by precise meaningful gestural act, or wholesome bodily movement, meant to impress or to show degree of adaptation to these acquired behaviours of society. Often, it gives the impression of readiness or eagerness to participate, or even compete.

Group activity such as farming and participation-spirit is a learned culture in African society even though it appears to be a communally inherited attribute. Bob W. White cites Moumouni Addou’s observation that a typical African child is communally taught by everyone other than his/her immediate family members. He posits that:

The most common traits of indigenous education in Africa is the presence of many ‘teacher’. Since learning occurs in a community setting, the child can have several teachers at any given stage of development. What the mother teaches is deferent from the lesson of the grand mother or the uncle, which is in turn different from the reinforcement provided by older siblings or members of the extended family (1996:10)

Addou’s “*different*” should not be misunderstood to mean contradiction. It actually connotes addictive learning that contributes to the total growth process of the child. As a child grows, anyone who is expected to play a part in his tutelage is quick to commend or rebuke him/her if a particular behaviour is either acceptable or contradictory to the moral and societal values in that given society. Yaroslav Senyshyn substantiates this fact by supplying that:

A particular society has the capability to define the... society’s positive ethical and moral expectations for that society.... the public good is then discerned in the music... if they are present along with the music, such as dance, lyrics, imagery, and so on, are validated ethically or morally along with the music as a whole experience if they support the moral expectations of society. (2008:191)

The holistic validating method of social behaviours extends beyond language; music; dance; lyrics; proverbs and folkloric expressions and thus encompasses the entire social and communal life of the people. This kind of schooling therefore becomes more than sufficient in training both the workforce and custodian of the various African societies from one generation to another. Farming creates one of the finest assemblies to deliver this occupational education through music and articulated movements (not necessarily dance). This is why families allow their children to freely offer their services to other members of the community during farming season to help in the communal act of cultivation or harvest.

2.1 Nofiofio as a Musical Note for the Conscience

In recent past, farming which was a subsistence occupation enabled the traditional Edo people to continuously have food all year long. During planting, the strength of the able-bodied work force comprising of men and women is put to the test. People would usually come out in-groups to assist their neighbors and family members. The gesture is to make the vast acres of land look small. The creative approach employed makes the technique of cultivation an art rather than labour. The process involves a whole day plan. To make the package interesting, some women would organize to prepare food for the workers either to be eaten in the farm, or at the end of the day’s work. It is a carefully planned system reflecting the common-sense of division of labour where the women cook, the family heads prepare their seedlings, the young girls go to the stream and the young boys answer the call of clearing impending obstacles coming between-logistics.

The gathering is usually in a big family compound. This act injects a lot of excitement into the social life of the people. For one reason, a day’s activity would end up in a convivial atmosphere of merriment where participants would gather to delicious and robust fun-parked-meal that is also accentuated with songs. From

planting to harvesting, different segment of communal labour is planned, each with a big feasting at the end. As the men march to their farm site, their churring includes dishing out educational idioms, proverbs, songs sporadic dance steps and tales. The women would have utilized their cooking time to educate younger maidens in the culture and tradition of the people. Folkloric songs also form popular methods of disseminating this kind of cultural schooling. In Asian this kind of song/farming tradition is practiced as well. The farmers are known to have including songs in every level of rice farming from nursing the seedlings as well as during the process of milling the rice for generations. According to Hahn Man-Young:

After the rice is dried, it is threshed; the threshed grains in turn are polished at various types of mills to produce edible rice. Various pounding songs are sung, varying according to the locale and the type of polishing mill. The rhythm of the song frequently matches the rhythmic sounds of the mill. (1978:23)

The whole essence of this kind of tutoring affirms and consolidates Sutton-Smiths argument cited by Barbara Morgan-Fleming (1999) that “play and other forms of inversion make existing social relationships tolerable and increase flexibility” (280). Parables and idiomatic expressions through music and dance allow farmers and young people in rural communities step in and out of roles during performance. During planting for instance, while songs are used to energize the planters and encourage work, they perform multiple functions of instructions and productivity enhancement while the intrinsic meaning of the songs relate to the immediate action of planting. The song usually would transit beyond the physical activity to link by inference, other challenges in life. So, while the songs are dramatized during planting, the sequence produces a stylized movement owing to the symmetry corresponding to the rhythmic value of the tune. Thus the dramatic space produces a performance, which is driven by an inner will to win a competition.

2.2 Moral and Spiritual Calls of Nofiofio

The farmers comprising of different age grades would march to the designated farm singing folkloric songs like nofiofio. Thus:

Chorus: Nofiofio Nofiofio Nofiofio Nagbonah (x2)
You reap what you sow in this world
Solo: Ukporan Nu ko ee
Nofiofio nagbonah ee (x2)
Chorus: Nofiofio Nofiofio Nofiofio Nagbonah (x2)
Whatever you plant you reap in this world.
Solo: Ugha kukporan Nosen Nofiofio Nagbonah ee (x2)
If you plant healthy seed, you reap healthy crop.
Chorus: Nofiofio Nofiofio Nofiofio Nagbonah (x2)
You reap what you sow in this world.

Nofiofio usually is the marching song that prepares the minds of the farmers spiritually and psychologically. It is the forerunner of other songs that follow. First, it hits the conscience of each participant. For instance, at the point of sowing, the sower is expected to remove every bad seedling or poorly cut ones. This is important because of the implication of poorly delivered finish. This is where the spiritual connotation of “whatever you plant you reap in this world” is based on. A poor finishing is not unlikely because the competitive nature deployed often encourage desperation. This is where the farm owner is cheated. However, a supervisor usually acts as the umpire before any declaration could be made. For instance, at the clearing stage, the participant is expected to clear the bush to the ground in order to expose the soil and allow the weak roots to die. Second, all trees obstructing the areas to be cultivated would be cut, and if possible, dig out the roots. This way, the job of tilling is made easier.

2.2 Nofiofio as a Time and target driven song for maximum output

The essence of gathering a group of young farmers is to accomplish a major task in maximum time. The participant’s conscience is usually put to test. One, every participant is expected to avoid waste. For this reason, seedlings given to everyone are counted to cover a distance of twenty feet. Two, it checks a participant from idling away only to participate at mealtime. Three, each group must complete its task. There is no second chance. Finally, each takes its position in order of completion, but is free to join and cheer the remaining groups.

2.3 Nofiofio Yardstick of Fair Judgment

The farming performance begins when first, about twenty feet distance is marked out and about three farmers or more are selected to make a group. Each group would then till the ground and dig their ridges. Sowing of the seeds is usually the third and final stage. The sequence is continuous thus producing an efficient matrix through this song driven competition for maximum output. A level of freedom is given. For instance, a group may select its choice of song from the popular folksong menu, but it must be of equal duration. The song is sung in

repetitive cycle. Thus a group's position is determined by the number of cycles a song is repeated before the ridges are fully sown with seeds.

2.4 Nofiofio as Energizer for Quantity Per Space-time

It can be seen that the allocation of definite space for each group provokes an inner interest and the power to compete and perhaps win. At this point, competition is in the air, and able farmers are conscious of the pride at stake. The competition is always a carry over from a previous one. Since the farmers work together, they know one another's abilities and how to pair themselves. In fact, before the farming occasion, familiar pairs would have chosen themselves ahead of time.

In the field, other medleys in the farmers' melody are linked together, evoking the spiritual guardians of human effort. The moral lesson opens up the opportunities that only men of strength can achieve. The song says that the womb of the earth is full of possibilities for those who are ready to cultivate it, and those who cultivate never lack when the season of harvest comes (line 1). But it also attempts to implore the spiritual guardians of the society to deny the lazy hands of harvest and deny them of the harvest of others (2). At this point, the chorus implores everyone to head to the farm so that there would be food for everyone.

(1) Agha rugbo ko, ebakole a rie2ce

When we cultivate mother earth, we reap what we sow

(2) Oria novba yugbo no ghe mie baile

Anyone who fails to plant, let him not get food to eat

(3) Ono yugbo ole mie baile

Only he who plants harvests food to eat.

The moral of building the total man in African society takes different shapes. The family would have given the child good tutelage about hard work and survival. However, different societies adopt different methods. Nofiofio adopts the collective style, which is a follow up of the foundation laid by the family. That is, work hard to distinguish one among their peers. In fact, nofiofio contrasts the personal style in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where a father personally teaches the son how to cut yam seedlings to produce the fattest yield.

Other planting songs used to facilitate farming activities takes into account the various food crops and vegetables on the menu of Edo people. The moral lesson is that nobody should have reason of not farming. Thus the variety of crops is enough for different people to engage in. Another popular song in the medley is (Wa ghia gha mu ugbo):

Wa ghia gha mu ugboooo2ce

Let us all farm!

na ghia mie baile

So we can produce enough to eat

solo:

wa ghia gha mu ugbo

Let's go farming

A miu ugbi ize....2ce

There is rice farm

A miu ugbi ikhiavbo

There is Okro Farm

A miu ugbi iyan

There is yam farm

A vbe miu ugbe ekhue!

There is also garden egg farm!

3. A Spatial Dramatic Analysis of Nofiofio a Traditional Model of Collective Farming Technique

When drama is mentioned, the art of imitation of actions comes to mind. Acting improves memory; it challenges our psychomotor, gives us confidence and keeps our brain intensely active. However, such imitations employ conscious calculations and rearrangement of corporate actions as we know them. These conscious actions are far from robotic experience; they are calculated, managed and filtered by human intelligence. Life is full of repeated experiences, when man is faced with challenges, the survival instinct activates the memory and recall process seeks solution. This is where role-play once more becomes an adult tool for competitive edge.

Unlike most traditionally based practices, nofiofio is flexible. In this notion of farming, nofiofio is not only a technique for driving speed it is like a game. Perhaps the type Lloyd (1977) refers to: (i) Because of the notion of game, a sense of sporting leisure can be expected. (ii) Because mechanization is far from their imagination, communal primitive belonging reduces the pressure of the notion of work. The space allotted to each group would normally range from 50ft to 100 feet (that is, between half a plot and one plot) for easy management. The width of the ridges, especially for yam could be up to 36 inches with heights of 30 inches. It is

believed that the bigger the mound the higher the yield especially for certain specie of yams. So part of the criteria for judgment includes meeting the minimum volume for every mound in each ridge. Sometimes, a ridge could stretch without interval of mounds, but the volume remains the same.

Since this is faming and not festival performance, a few improvisations are adopted. For instance, a knife and a hoe play the role of musical instrument. The competition begins when the umpire strikes the cutlass against the hoe. A second strike by the umpire means that a group has completed a half line of the 50feet distance and thus commenced the opposite line, which closes the 36feet width. The first to finish takes a rest or goes to another ridge. As way of adding excitement, a group member may spring out to dance briefly to the song if the group is far ahead of the rest. When a group completes a ridge, they would pierce a cutlass into the earth while another runs round the ridge as sign of victory while jubilating. Not left out of the dramatic gains of the song/faming experience are young women/maidens who usually served as chorus and also helped by rendering their sonorous voices that acted as balm through the tough and sunny African weather.

4. Conclusion

The dramatic functions of songs in traditional faming created spaces of moral and community stewardship that helped traditional communities hold their values and cultural heritage of farming to a high esteem and ensured continuity. Every one that engaged in communal farming practice was reminded of the sole essence of work and subsequently the gains of handwork and this resonated in the dramatic makeup of embellishing stylized movements and sing song dialogue in the tedious and laborious practice of subsistence farming that was practiced in the past. For as Shakespeare, and later Goffman cited in Victor Turner (1987) and Paul van der Grijp (2014), “all the world’s a stage”. This reinforces the dramatic gains that complement the rituals of reenacting procreation in the form of cultivating mother earth.

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Bio-Data

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