

# Binary Structure in Selected Songs of Beautiful Nubia

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**Abstract:** Music is a means of communication and a representation of ideas, especially among Africans. The transmission of cultural beliefs from one generation to the next is facilitated by music. Music and poetry in general have been employed in traditional African civilization to unite the people, arouse their consciousness toward a liberalizing of their minds, and occasionally to adopt revolutionary methods against their oppressors. In this sense, music has served as a socialization and liberating instrument in modern society. The social realities of the average person continue to be reflected in the songs of contemporary musicians. Segun Akinlolu, better known by his stage name Beautiful Nubia, is one such musician who has employed his music as a powerful tool for informing and organizing the populace. Nigerian musician Beautiful Nubia is well-known for delving into the Yoruba cultural roots to depict the plight of the average man. As it is typical for some well-known Yoruba popular musicians to sing about “big guys” and “wealthy people”, as far as we are aware, Beautiful Nubia has never praised the powerful in any of his songs. Instead, Beautiful Nubia has persisted in using his songs as a tool to inform the general public about their conditions. To this end, this paper investigates the numerous distinctions among the various social groups as they are depicted in some selected songs from Beautiful Nubia. The Binary structure, a component of structuralist theory that contends that society is organized around oppositional structures such as rich vs poor, haves versus have-nots, etc., serves as the theoretical foundation for this paper. The study comes to the conclusion that music is a powerful tool for enlightening and liberating the masses.

**Keywords:** Music, Liberation, Binary Structure, Beautiful Nubia, Communication

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## 1. Introduction

Music, globally, have always been a medium of communication where knowledge and ideological spectrum of a community is transmitted from one generation to the other. Music employs the use of sound image in its realization of showcasing the identity of a people or a group of people. It is indeed expedient to note that music, specifically, in Africa, is imbued with various philosophical leanings which cuts across all aspect of existence.

Music in Africa could be referred to “as an art and a medium that pleasantly transmits the people’s ways of life”. The content of music in the African parlance can be seen as a way of resisting cultural hegemony and communicating African philosophical reflections of life [11]. The context of music in traditional African society is such that it serves as a forum through oral performers/artistes speak out their views on culture and politics. They often act as social critics who

offer thoughtful and critical insights into socio-cultural issues as it affects the people i.e the masses.

According to Opara, music generally can be seen as an integral part of a people’s culture and it serves as an expression of their art and aesthetics from birth to death [11]. In traditional African society, and even in contemporary times, music have continued to serve as a useful tool/instrument through which communal and national ties are exhibited for integration. Often, the communicative inter-relationship of message and content in African music is embedded in its lyrics.

Obeng opines that music can be described a some of the artistic forms that are often thought to provide communication where individuals and groups could easily express themselves [8]. In this regard, music can be used to discuss political issues as it affects the masses and their position against the highly placed people in the society. Apart from this, music can be used to serve as an inspirer of social justice between the oppressed and the oppressor.

Sociopolitical commentaries become a veritable platform through which the issues that concern the masses are discussed. Sociopolitical commentaries bring to the fore the kind of dichotomy that exist between the rich and the poor; high and low in the sense that issues that affect the masses are usually discussed in these art forms. Van der Geest and Asante Darko opine that art has a double face. The playfulness of art relies in the strength of entertaining and at the same time, satirizing the social ills in the society [14]. Obeng opines that music as an art is not an exemption from this reality [8]. Music in itself is a two edged sword that curtails, controls and at the same time entertains through melodious tunes.

Nketia notes that what cannot be said in speech can be stated in a song [7]. This is not to underscore the fact that music sometimes is a medium through which musicians who are on the side of the masses comment on sociopolitical realities. The manner in which music is produced and interpreted cannot be diffused from power relations in the areas of political, cultural, economic and gender. It is expedient to note that the in and outflow of power creates a dichotomy between the people which in turn connotes that two sections of people are created in the society – rich and poor, high class and low class etc.

Ogidan studied the Afro-beat musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti as a sociopolitical activist who uses his music to fight oppression in the society. Fela's music show a kind of relationship that exist between music and sociopolitical commentary and the part that musicians play [10].

Adedeji opines that music has gone far beyond the confines of artistic representation because in it are strands of messages that represent the way the artiste wants to be seen or who he is representing or what he stands for [1]. In a sense, popular music are imbued with messages that propagate the holistic representation of what the artistes stands to show to the world and in most cases, always on the side of the masses as against the high and the mighty in the society. The musician is also seen as an historian of sort. According to Adegaju, the musician should be seen as an archivist who is knowledgeable enough to probe into the past and present situation of his people. In this case, the probe into the past and the present is to align with the masses in whatever situation they may have found themselves [2].

Scholarly debates have rage over what constitutes modern songs': form, style, language form, style, and language of modern songs. Be it hip hop, Afrobeat, Juju, Fuji, Jazz or Raggae, the issue of style and content of these songs attest to their popularity. When it comes to the function of traditional African artists, modern-day artists have continued to rely extensively on orality as a source of information and inspiration. A musical artiste is frequently seen as society's conscience. Orality is the bedrock of modern day's songs. Furniss and Gunner see orality "as a vector of social life, religious beliefs, constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology and aesthetics" [5]. Songs serve as the platform through which the social life, religious beliefs, ideology and aesthetics of a society are reflected. Thus the relevancy of

any artiste depends on the extent to which he/she explores the cultural artifact of his/her society.

Any art form in the African oral traditional society is usually performed in a specific social setting. There is no such thing as a performance in a vacuum. Just as art is never made in a vacuum, a literary work must be relevant to the social environment in which it is placed, either directly or implicitly ([6, 9]). In African society, music or song poetry has always been employed as a vehicle for revolutionary transformation. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, for example, utilized his music to denounce harsh African political regimes. He condemned the Nigerian military's deceptive practices in one of his tunes, *Zombie*. Thus, this paper examines the representation of binary opposition in some selected songs of Beautiful Nubia who is known to bring to the fore the sociopolitical issues as it affects the masses/oppressed in the society.

## 2. Biography of Beautiful Nubia (Segun Akinlolu)

Segun Akinlolu was born in Ibadan in 1968. Beautiful Nubia is the performing name for Segun Akinlolu. He leads the Roots Renaissance Band. Roots Renaissance Band is Nigeria's foremost contemporary folk and roots music group. His first album was released in 1997. He graduated from the University of Ibadan with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree in 1992 and worked as a Vet Doctor for about (8) years, he holds a Postgraduate Diploma from the Nigerian Institute of Journalism.

Beautiful Nubia's songs are built on rich folklore traditions and native wisdom but his message is universal in thrust and theme: value of life, respect nature and learn to live in peace with others. The music speaks for the voiceless and champions the dream of a balanced society where individuals are truly free and equal. It preaches love and tolerance but also urges people to stand and defend their rights when trampled upon anywhere in the world. His albums include: "Seven Lives", "Voice from Heaven", "Fire on the Roff", "Jangbalajugbu", "Awilele", "Fere", "Kilokilo", "IrinAjo", "Sun No Dey Sleep", "Oriojori – Eternal Spirits", "Keere", "Soundbender" and "African Boy".

The biography of the artiste is necessary in order to examine how the background of the music artiste has influenced his songs.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

One of the most significant uses of structural and post-structural criticism, according to Cuddon is binary opposition, where everything's essence is revealed through the opposition with something that has no qualities at all and the perception of each subcategory is based on how it differs from another object. Opposition is perceived when making such a differentiation. Our understanding of things is influenced by our understanding of their opposites [4].

Stiver points out that Strauss's inquiry into cooking is built on oppositional concepts like raw and cooked, fresh and rotten, and rare and well done. Such linkages do not show they are imposed on the mind; rather, they show the frameworks that support the human mind's fundamental tendency to order the universe. Even if structure and meaning are present, they are not necessarily compatible [12]. There is a fundamental structure to all cultural endeavours, one that is reflected in the binary oppositions that underlie all mental processes.

According to Whitehead, the world is binary because it may be understood to be both ephemeral and everlasting. Because every truth in the cosmos requires investigation, the universe is binary. Because the formal pursuit and unity are always combined with the objective's independence, it is binary. Because it should ideally be broken down into different facts, the world is endless. The universe is distinctive due to its singularity and wholeness. Infinity and unity are this in conflict with one another. The unity of mutual affairs predominates on earth, which leads to resistance [15].

Man/Woman, Rich/Poor, Good/Bad, Boy/Girl, and other bi-polar structures are frequently used to categorize society. Binary opposition, according to the Structuralists, will aid in examining the relationship that exists between a system and another system for a deeper level of understanding of how systems operate in society. What, for example, could have been the social interaction between the rich and the poor? Comparing the rich and the poor in terms of power and economic systems will aid in understanding the link that exists between them. Tyson believes that "the world as we know it consists of two fundamental levels – one visible, the other invisible. The visible world consists of what might be called surface phenomena: all the countless objects, activities, behaviours we observe, participate in, and interact with every day. The invisible world consist of the structures that underline and organize all of these phenomena so that we can make sense of them" [13]. By implication, the social interaction in the world today is tactically based on two levels – the powerful and less power and it is one that controls the economic and social activities of the other. To corroborate this view, Ahmadi (2013) citing Caddon (1999) opines that one of the most important applications in structural and post-structural criticism is binary opposition in which the essence of everything is revealed through opposition with another thing that has no quality at all, and the perception of every subcategory is related to its distinction with another object [3]. This kind of distinction is interpreted as opposition. Our knowledge about things depends on our knowledge about what is in opposition with them.

#### 4. Analysis

This study pays attention to the analysis of binary opposition structures in Beautiful Nubia's lyrics in order to explicate the roots of emancipation in the music. The song

below gives an insight to our claim:

Àwon kan lè je  
Some have something to eat  
Àwon kan o ri  
Some cannot find anything to eat  
Àwon kan n wosò àsikò  
Some are wearing contemporary clothes  
Àwon kan ñ sùn sábé gádà  
Some are sleeping under the bridge  
Àwon kan ñ tolé jo bii isu  
Some are building houses upon houses like  
Heaps of yam  
Àwon kan n jòba  
Some are becoming kings  
Àwon kan ñ sèru  
Some are slaves  
Omódé oòjò ñ sálaisí  
A day old babies are dying  
Àwon kan sayé dà wá máí ló  
Some have turned this world to their permanent  
Home

In the song above, Beautiful Nubia gives an insight into the various dichotomies that exist between the haves and have not; between the oppressed and oppressor. A literary device prominently employed in this song is repetition. "Some" is used repetitively in the song to lay emphasis on the binary classification that exist in the society. It is also used to call the attention of the audience to the various categorisations that exist between the rich and the poor. The rich people occupy the centre while the poor people are pushed to the peripheral in which they cannot make decisions on their own. Their state of living is controlled by the people who occupy the centre. Another literary device employed by the artiste in the song is parallelism. Parallelism is a structural arrangement of parts of a sentence, sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of composition by which one element of equal importance with another is similarly developed and phrased. The condition of the poor is directly parallel to the condition of the rich. The artiste also employs simile to state a kind of comparison between the rich and the poor. Rich people build many houses while poor people sleep under the bridge. The choice of words used by the artiste also helps in portraying the categorisation between the rich and the poor. The choice of "kings" and "slaves" serve as a sort of binary opposition between the rich and the poor. "Kings" metaphorically represent the rich people and it also represents people in positions of leadership while slaves represent the poor people and people that can be termed as followers. He further states that:

Some people can't find a way  
Some people live by the day  
Some people have all the fun  
When will it be our turn?

The song above also reinforces the oppositional structures that exist between the rich and the poor. "Some" and "few" are also used in this song to state that not all the people have access to wealth of the society. The artiste employs the use of

rhetorical question to emphasise the wish of the 'have nots'. Can they (the poor) really occupy the position of power? This question can only be answered if the poor people stand up to fight for their rights. This song serves as a means through which the oppressed are geared to question the people who occupy the centre (positions of power). Another song that serves as a tool of emancipation and binary oppositional structure is stated below:

In my journey through the world  
Over land and over sea  
I see different cultures and different people's ways  
I was born where the sun never sets and never rises  
I was born where the heat is a second skin

The song above lends credence to the global nature of the musician's songs. The repetitive use of "I" in the song shows that the artiste is referring to himself. In other words, he uses himself as a point of reference. The repetitive use of "I" in the song also gives further claim to the exposition of the artiste. He also employs the use of simile to state the harsh weather condition of Africa, Nigerian context especially. "Heat" is foregrounded here to harsh economic conditions of most African countries. Most African countries are regarded as third world countries because the state of living is considered to be the poorest in the world. Therefore, the state of living is based on the survival of the fittest. He further states that:

Children crying on the streets, automobiles are making noise  
The land is growing dry and weak, spirits dying low  
The forefathers are calling me; never tire, never weaken  
The pride in me is bursting loose – I'm an African boy

This song is used to illustrate and explain the harsh economic conditions of where the artiste belongs, Nigeria. The first line is a metaphor used to illustrate the saddened state or depressed state of poor people. Children crying on the streets must have been as a result of hunger. Automobiles making noise can be used as a metaphor which symbolizes the poor state of poor people in Nigeria. The land growing dry and weak is also a metaphor used to describe the under/over utilization of the land and the resources embedded in it. Despite all these bad experiences, the artiste still finds pride in belonging to the African race. The "pride" been referred to in this song symbolizes hope. Though the African situation is often times a pathetic story, there is this pride that often comes up in an average African man – the will to survive and this preserve his identity at all cost. Identity in most postcolonial African nations can be sometimes problematic especially when one examines the hybridity status of an average African man.

Owó la mò  
We only know about money  
A ò fi ti wà se  
We do not take cognizance of good behaviour  
Ai fòtè silè ni ò jé ayé ó gún  
The world is not moving as it ought to because of racism  
Sè bójú là n wò  
We look at facial appearance

A ò fi tiisè se  
We do not take cognizance of tradition  
Òunleni ètè  
This is the reason why people of bad character  
Se n dère à jibo  
Are idols we worship

In the excerpt above, money is used as a metaphor to symbolise the priority the society places on materialism at the expense of good behaviours. Money is used as an indices of placing premium on who is who in the society. This further reinforces the concept of binary opposition obtainable in the society. Money is used as a tool to distinguish between the rich and the poor. Tradition is based on what the Yorubas term *omoluabi*. Facial appearance is a determining factor or indicator of wellness in the traditional African society and that is why people have abandoned tradition. Also, facial appearance is also a metaphor used to euphemize society's concentration on the outward appearance without patiently examining the virtues that are embedded therein. The following song explains the situation better:

È womo àdánù  
Look at children of perdition  
Tí n fi ná sábé òrùlé  
Putting fire under the roof  
Gbogbo èniyàn ẹ dáké  
Everybody keeps quiet  
È sì n wòran  
You are just watching  
Ta lolùgbàlà?  
Who is the saviour?  
Tí o yowa ninu òfò yi?  
That will rescue us from this destruction  
Qwó arawa la ó fi gbè rawa  
We will rescue ourselves

The direct address technique used in the excerpt above depicts the negligent attitude of the society. He challenges the status quo by urging the masses that can be often termed as the poor people in the society to take action against their oppressors. In this song-poetry, we can also see the binary opposition in which the society is premised on. The use of symbols in the song also reinforces the concept of binary opposition. As the people are oppressed in the society, there is an expected time herein which the Saviour is expected to rescue the people from their oppressors. The concept of the Saviour vs. the oppressed negates what the song writer is pointing our attention to here. He engages in the use of rhetorical question to drive home the point that the oppressed should not expect any Saviour rather they are expected to fight for themselves.

In *Tables will turn by Beautiful Nubia*, he also brings to bear on the binary structural opposition of how the society is detailed.

The young man standing laughing  
But he knows where the shoe dey pain am so  
He no fit do anything today  
But one day the tables will turn  
In the excerpt above, Beautiful Nubia points the attention

of his audience to a certain young man who knows the seriousness of the challenges facing him. “The young man” is a symbolic representation of the “poor people/masses” in the society, since the society is structurally divided alongside the spectrum of the rich versus the poor. “The young man”, who is a metaphor for representing the masses knows where the shoe pains him but he does not have power to take away his suffering because power does not belong to him. In other words, he does not wield such powers that can lift him out of suffering. His powerlessness is another depiction of the binary structures/opposition in the society. The society can also be said to tone within the sphere of “the powerful” versus “the powerless”. “The young man” being referred to in this song belongs to the realm of “the powerless”. As depicted in the song, “the young man” who symbolises “the powerless” cannot do anything against his suffering but there seems to be an agenda of hope pursued by the artiste. That trajectory of hope is “But one day, the table will turn”. “The table” here is a symbolic and metaphoric representation of the fact that 7 things can change for better. This could also be in tandem with a Yoruba proverb that says “Bírí bírí layé n yí, bó bá lò síwájú, á tún lò séyìn” – the world revolves, it moves forward and backward. Human challenges/status are likened to a table that can turn anytime and so the human status either as a rich/powerful or poor/powerless can change anytime. Pidgin English is also used in this song track to portray the acceptability of the song. The track is actually composed in English and it was then code-mixed with Pidgin English, which has a wider coverage and acceptability to some of Beautiful Nubia’s audience.

Another aspect of *Tables will turn* that is relevant to our study is analysed below:

The average man doesn’t ask for too much  
 He only wants what you and I want  
 A safe place to lay his head at night  
 Is that too much to ask?  
 He want his kids to go to good schools  
 So they can become somebody  
 He wants them to grow up healthy and strong  
 Is that too much to ask?  
 So when you build your mansions  
 And drive around in your fancy cars  
 Remember to think of the little man  
 ‘Cause one day the tables will turn

“An Average Man” is another classificatory paradigm and a metaphor used by Beautiful Nubia to depict the common man. For example, in most Nigerian Primary schools, the grading system reads – Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, Poor and Fail. Pupils that fall within the category of “average” can still be regarded as somewhat good in academics. What this depicts in this “binary opposition” discussion is that. “an Average Man” as referred to here is a middle class average worker/trader who is not after the luxury of life as it were, but to have a good place to sleep and been able to send his kids to good schools, not even the highbrow schools. Rhetorical question is used in the excerpt to generate potential answers from the mind of the audience

about this perpetual injustice against the “Average Man”. “Somebody” is another category of binary opposition used in the song. Generally, a common man is tagged a “nobody” in the society and as such he does not have any relevance and meaningful contribution to make to the society. In the society’s pictorial organogram, there is a tendency to move from the position of “nobody” to the status of “nobody” to becoming a “somebody”, otherwise known as moving from “grass to grace”. The technique of direct address is vividly used in the above excerpt. What this implies is that the rich ones are addressed as if they were presently staying with the song writer. The rich ones are advised to remember the “little ones” while building big mansions because the table can turn anytime. “The table” can also be a metaphor used to mean that the rich who is at the top of the ladder may drop to the bottom of the ladder tomorrow because the table could turn. Even death which is the beacon of finality in life is a symbolic representation of how the table can turn anytime. Both the rich and the poor can die anytime. There are cases where the rich die despite the fact that there are enough medical facilities to sustain them while the poor in such cases do not just die sheepishly as such. Death is a common denominator peculiar to both the rich and the poor and it will come when it will come.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined various thematic concern explored by Beautiful Nubia in the treatment of issues pertaining to the emancipation of the oppressed people in the society. The theoretical foundation of binary opposition was used to explore the fact that the society is strategically stratified along two wholesome praxis – the rich vs. the poor; the oppressor vs. the oppressed; the ruler vs. the ruled; the haves vs. the have not etc. The selected songs further showcase the various dimensions through which Beautiful Nubia responds to the condition of the oppressed in the society. This further supports the view that art cannot be created in a vacuum.

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