

'Egocentricism' Style or the thematic nub of Zimdancehall?

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Abstract

In Zimdancehall, egocentricism stands out prominent as the hub around which most themes of the songs are knitted on. Prominent Zimdancehall musicians stylistically utilise 'ego' defined around their stage names, abilities and celebrated glories in the industry as well as popularity in the country, to craft various themes that ultimately define various messages carried in their songs. Using stylistics, this article critiques selected popular Zimdancehall songs which exhibit the said characteristics showing how some critics have come to conclude that the genre either is bankrupt of in-depth creativity or that a new era of artistry in music has just been born in the country especially when it is drawn in comparison with Sungura or other genres that have been in existence prior to the popularisation of Zimdancehall.

Key Words: *Zimdancehall, egocentric, stylistics, fame, youth*

Introduction

The 21st century turn in Zimbabwe has seen major developments in various aspects of life in Zimbabwe most as influenced by political changes as well as subsequent policy shifts. The 21st century also coincided with the so called 3rd Chimurenga saw notions of indigenisation, redefinition and patriotic re-orientation manoeuvres foreseeing popularisation of, among others, cultural expressions which to some extent, the driving political leaders seemed not to have anticipated. Appropriation of new forms of technology catapulted by the character of the population in the country, the majority being the youth, music was not spared attention as a form of cultural (as well as political) expression from which a number of artists rose to fame as well as becoming authors of Zimbabwean culture in music.

The introduction of the 75% local content policy which the state broadcaster, ZBC, was expected to implement and the advantage of being the only broadcaster for radio and television at the time, played an obvious advantage for the dissemination of songs as well as exposing new young artist to the Zimbabwean audience. Music genres such as *Urban Grooves* (Viriri and Viriri, 2011) quickly became viral with much of the artists, if not all, being the youth singing for and

about the youth. Viriri and Viriri (2011) discuss at great length the broadcasting policy and the rise of new genres mostly *Urban Grooves*. Viriri and Viriri (2011) appear to treat *Urban Grooves* as an umbrella term to refer all genres popularised in the 21st century in Zimbabwe.

Thus, against the same broadcasting policy, *Zimdancehall* also began to take shape and following; changing the lives of the 'ghetto youth' artists, promoters and producers alike economically as production of music with these genres provided an alternative form of employment in a country where unemployment rate is estimated to be well above eighty-five percent and a considerable percentage of the youths from as early as the 1990s were leaving the country in search of opportunities in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and even far afield to European, American and Asian countries. Much of the songs began to be produced and recorded overnight in backyard and 'garage' studios. Technology did help in both production and dissemination of the songs.

Methodology

This article is part of an ongoing study and thus reports on some findings this far and the methodological approach is basically qualitative utilising much of content analysis. Selected songs were listened to and lyrics transcribed to allow content analysis. The study focused more on the lyrics sung in the selected *Zimdancehall* songs and using linguistic stylistics selected lines were further selected for presentation to explain the problems at hand. A number of youths who are mostly the fanatics and listeners of the genre were also engaged for interpretations of some expressions and a great deal of information was obtained surrounding the context within which most songs selected here are located.

A word on *Zimdancehall*

The concept of dancehall is traced to Jamaican realities (Cooper 2004). From as early as 1962 Jamaican youths migrated from rural Jamaica to Kingston in search of employment and betterment of their livelihoods. Kingston with time became over populated with youths most of whom failed to secure employment and they found themselves living in the ghettos. Without sources of income and the pressured nature of their livelihoods, most youths turned to crime and violence.

The injustices persisted even after Jamaica's independence and music continued to be the medium through which calls for justice were made. Reggae music was associated with the Rastafarianism, peaceful and subversive calls for recognition. The Jamaican ghetto youths, given their condition, vigorously agitated for

recognition and using music they reflected the naked picture of youths conditions, aspirations and so on through music. Hence, dancehall came to prominence as youths created gangs centred on fashion, music systems and various performative dance moves. Thus, following Cooper (2004) dancehall became not only a music genre, but a culture –a way of life.

The Jamaican dancehall culture thus influenced the rise of a number of musical genres in Africa. Niaah (2008) identified the South African *Kwaito* music as having been influenced by Jamaican dancehall. For Niaah dancehall is more than a musical genre. It is in fact ‘first a space in which adults meet to consume, celebrate, entertain and affirm group identity’ (Niaah, 2008:36). Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean youth were thus influenced by Jamaican youth music as well as the South African *Kwaito* among the already popular Western musical styles. *Zimdancehall* thus came to prominence along with its crop of youth artists. *Zimdancehall* is an offshoot of Jamaican Reggae popularised in the world by Jamaican artists like Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Gregory Isaacs, Shaggy, Buju Banton, Shabba Ranks, Bennie Man to name a few.

The Jamaican Reggae has over the years developed into dancehall prompting most African countries crafting ‘their’ more similar genres to which Zimbabweans prefixed ‘dancehall’ with ‘Zim’. This probably explains how much of the *Zimdancehall* rhythm is painfully cropped from Jamaican popular dancehall rhythms as such one rhythm is stylistically recreated with new lyrics in Shona, Ndebele, English or a mixture of the two or three, as well as urban lingo to provide a local flavour of *Zimdancehall*.

The language of *Zimdancehall*, which I shall call *Zimdancehall*-speak in this paper, is a key determiner of the genre as the rhythm behind the linguistic behaviour is largely recreated or borrowed from the Jamaican rhythms. Satyo (2008:91) studied what he termed kwaito-speak which is a language ‘variety that black people in South Africa created as a means of in-group communications....’ A similar notion is also realised with the language of *Zimdancehall* or *Zimdancehall*-speak which in itself is a variety of language made up of urban lingo to aid communication or as used in the day to day exchanges between the ghetto youths. *Zimdancehall* artists, not only are they users of the language, they are also creators and promoters of it. While *Zimdancehall*-speak is an area in itself requiring further linguistic interrogation, it will require an independent research to focus on it some other time. However, broadly we can therefore use *Zimdancehall*-speak to decipher the style of most artists from which various themes can be established.

But, what is crucial in most *Zimdancehall* songs? There have been various reactions to *Zimdancehall* songs as well as the whole genre at large. Some critics find the

genre as promoting songs that speak for as well as allow the youth to dialogue as artists reflect on the various challenges ghetto youths in Zimbabwe face such as drug abuse, crime, and various other social ills. Moreso, the same critics have advanced the notion that their creativity explains why the genre seem to have a specific audience, the youth, and has cut off the elderly largely because of the message as well as the language, *Zimdancehall*-speak, is loaded with lyrics largely characterised by heavy notions of urban lingo. The major criticism possibly lies in the thematic outlook of most songs which can be equated to the 'bubblegum' concept (Steingo, 2008) due to the perception of the music-messages being apolitically shallow given the amount of challenges facing the Zimbabwean youths which some critics feel require political change to the status quo.

Notwithstanding this fact, some popular artist have appeared to 'live' the messages they sing as reflected through abuse of drugs during shows or appearing in news reports as having failed to perform due to heavy intoxication with dangerous substances. Mukondiwa (2014) reported of popular *Zimdancehall* artist, Soul Jah Love, who was arrested because he had been caught 'high and dry', and openly smoking the banned marijuana. Violence during *Zimdancehall* shows has also been reported extensively in the news (*The Herald* 2014, *The NewsDay* 2014) prompting anti-*Zimdancehall* critics to point out that such developments not only confirmed their conclusions about the genre perpetrating 'violence' or disharmony but that the genre, as advanced by the artists, lacks the moral fibre.

Thus, to this group of critics, *Zimdancehall* not only does it promote violence through some of the songs, artist identities, dances, singing styles and behaviour. One merely needs to listen to or watch videos of some popular songs such as Lady Dee's 'Mpunduru' and 'Inomira', Soul Jah Love's 'Gum Kum', Freeman's 'Ndiratidze zvaunoita' which are heavily peppered with sexual indulgence messages. We also observe the 'Ninja-militant-gimick and identities like 'popopo', 'mabhanditi' as well as drinking practices as reflected by Shinsoman's 'Tasangana zvidhakwa'. Hence Gospel, *Sungura* and other traditional genres are advanced as being sensible genres providing social commentary as well as providing the expected cultural expressions the populace should adhere to.

Stylistics

Stylistics can be understood or taken as a method of linguistic inquiry or a theory on language use in a communicative situations (Saidi, 2015). Stylistics has been heavily used to appreciate literary works. This has to some extent made the approach seemingly literary and unable to apply to all other forms of art such as music. For as long as we can realise an artist's use of language either as spoken or written, we note that no artist, writer, singer, painter or dancer is immune to

specific styles that reveal ways in which they speak about their problems. Because language is involved, hence stylistics should come in handy in any situation of artistic criticism. Hence, we view stylistics as a 'method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language' (Simpson, 2004:2). For us, therefore, whether the linguistic items at the level of lexicon or discourse, it does not matter, especially as used in a song for a lexicon or the whole set of lyric becomes a text reflecting a visible pattern or style which we can interrogate further to appreciate the song. This then means a stylistic approach to language foresees lyrics, and in this case, as a functional text. And for style to be observed, 'rules of grammar' (Chomsky, 1965) and 'discursive rules' (Saidi, 2015:55) are bent, modified, ignored, invented, recreated or repeated deliberately to meet specific communicative ends.

Because musical lyrics are linguistic based and that a song is also a work of art parallels with literary arts can be drawn from which stylistics can be applied in the appreciation of songs. In other words, lyrics are a text as such bear linguistic characteristics. Hence, stylistics as a linguistic approach reveals within its centre of notions the utilisation of linguistic items, be they discursive, grammatical, lexical and so on, consciously used in a communicative situation in order to meet specific communicative goals. This makes stylistics a study or an approach in which 'the methods of selecting and implementing linguistic, extra-linguistic or artistic expressive means and devices in the process of communication are studied' (Missikova, 2003:14). Given its broad nature, this study sides mostly with stylistics as text analysis, 'a procedure which aims at the linguistic means and devices of a given text' (Missikova, 2003:15). The message, topic and content are however not directly subject to study but stylistics helps us get to the message and semantics of the text. The *style* in *stylistics* points towards the manner of expression or choices made in the use of the expressions, deviations from the linguistic-communicative norms based on the chosen linguistic features from the sum features available and these become the linguistic mannerisms of expressions deliberately employed for specific communicative ends.

Egocentricism and *Zimdancehall* -Selected Songs

This section discusses the observed central theme that makes up most of the *Zimdancehall* songs. Egocentricism is understood here as a deliberate process of self-elevation, analysis and modelling. This can further be regarded as a concept of its own characterising the artist is his/her battle to define his/her place within the world of *Zimdancehall* as well as mark out a unique brand within the same dictates of the genre. This concept can be equated to some extent to the notion of individualism in literary studies although in literary studies it appears to comment on the character and moral outlook of individuals represented by various characters used by the writer to reflect the said notion.

In *Zimdancehall*, we thus find this 'ndini' (I, I am, or my) concept very central in the artistic creations peppering the songs. Below are a few selected songs used in the study to demonstrate this concept. Few lines were selected from the selected songs that were felt would quite capture the ideas under discussion. The said lyrics are presented as sung mostly in Shona and attempt on some translations to English. Selected songs have also been chosen based on the popularity of the musicians or the songs, especially among the youth listeners and chanters.

Winky D. Mudhara Vauya (I) & Ndini ndaita kuti (II)

The song (I) speaks of how the artist's presence anywhere in the entertainment platforms defines not only his fame but his presence and genius. He says,

I

...Ini ndinotsvagisa vanhu pleasure kunge basa

(I make people look for entertainment as if they are looking for employment)

...Nhasi ipleasure na Biggy

...Kana kuenda kumba handidi

(Today is all pleasure with Biggy

I will not even return home)

II

...Ndini, ndini, ndini ndaita kuti zviite

Kunoku mangoma ndini ndomaita Yada SaMagaya

...Ndini ndaita kuti dhanzi ribude hutsi kunge hot rice

...Ndini ndafadza mazera ose moti Gaffer iri harisi right.

(It's me, it's me, it's me who has made it happen,

In this (music genre-world) it's me who makes songs popular like Yada (Tv) made popular by Magaya.

I am the one who has made the dance performances raise dust like 'hot rice'
I am the one who has entertained all ages and you say this Gaffer is not good 'right'

Song II above further comments on the artist's genius, fame, mastery of singing in *Zimdancehall* and thus making Winky D come out of it as a top notch entertainer loved by all as reflected by their responsive performances in dancing which is described as 'dhanzi ribude hutsi kunge hot rice.' In song I and II above, 'Biggy' and 'Gaffer' are further terms used to refer to Winky D's personal musical space in *Zimdancehall*.

From a linguistic stylistic perspective, we note that single lexicons are deliberately chosen and loaded with meanings meant to bring attention to the artist. In Winky D's instance above, the word 'ndini' (I am, it's me) calls forth no apologies to what the singer eventually means. The word itself while used in Shona language is

further repeated three times in one line in song II above where we note '*ndini, ndini, ndini....*' Such emphasis makes the whole message be drawn on the 'id' or the 'I' from which everything and anything meant or intended, said or unsaid, sung or unsung be projected on the 'I'.

Toky Vibes Ndini ndinorira (I) & Paakwira hameno akadzika (II)

Toky's *Ndini ndinorira (I)* reveals how the artist feels he has become the household name in as far as music is concerned. In the song he narrates his journey to fame and appears to be confirming his top place in *Zimdancehall*. Some of the lines say,

I

*Uchangondinzwa usingadi uchida,
Ungange uine radio kana hauna,
Unondizorora magetsi kusina
Panongorira, ndini ndinorira.*

(You are going to listen to my songs whether you like it or not.

Even if you have a radio or not

You will only rest when there is load shedding

Where there is a song playing, I am the one singing.)

II

*...Ndikati ghetto rese simudzai maoko vanosimudza,
Chese chandaita ndikachiisa mughetto haritani kuappreciata
...Toky uya aenda nenyika...paakwira mheni akadzika.
...Ndotoshaya kuti ndodini, vakunditevera vazhinji
...Ndakazvitarisa pagirazi haa, hazvimbopindirani, zvandiri izvi, ndingadiwa nani?
...Mhanzi yake haikuvadzi, ine order zvoita sezvadzora.*

(If I say to the ghetto raise your hands, the ghetto complies.

Every project I do if I expose it to the ghetto, it quickly supports and appreciates.

I don't even know what to do, those who are now following me are too many.
Looking at myself on the mirror, my physic and fame do not tally, who really can follow me?)

Once again we note the 'ndini', 'ini' concept being used by Toky. While it may not be as explicit as in the Winky D's direct '*ndini, ndini, ndini....*' Toky's 'id' is wrapped discursively around the narration of the realities behind his fame and ultimate success. Ironically, he appears to distance himself from 'himself' by egocentrically singing (in his song II above) '*Toky uya aenda nenyika*' (That Toky has gone around the world or Toky's fame has spread to the whole world/country). It is as though the singer is referring to another Toky yet, semantically the singer is the signified.

Squanda Fire Vanodavira (I), Ndinovhaira (II), Ndini (III)

Female *Zimdancehall* artists are not an exception in drawing the egocentric concept. Squanda Fire and Lady Bee exemplify this notion through some of their songs. In her song *Vanodavira* (I) she sings of her popularity and fame and how her fans respond positively to her music. She refers to herself as 'Igwe madam'. In *Ndinodavira* (II), Squanda sings of her success and how the seemingly jealous gossip about her and the songs appear to be her response to her 'haters' while *Ndini* (III) reaffirms her fame, success and popularity in singing. Some of the lines from the said songs are reproduced below;

I

Panonzi Squanda Fire, Chitungwiza inodavira
Pakazonzi ambassador wereggae, Mbare yose inshaura
Panonzi long long time ago, Zimbabwe yose inodavira
Ambassador makakosha

II

...Ndinofamba ndakagara vachifamba netsoka
...Vaudze...ngavasagwaute, vasatisemese, asvotwa ngaarutse.

III

Squanda Fire, zita rangu vakudaidza
...Batidza radio uteerere Squanda
...Pamangoma ndirigandanga
...Ari kupi Squanda Fire, Squanda atimhanyisa wire.

There is little doubt that attention is drawn to the artist through various lexical or choices of diction. In cases where lexical items work as names such as Squanda Fire or seemingly stage names, they are deliberately repeated and emphasised in order for the listener to concentrate without divergence to the song and ultimately the voice and person behind the song. This is thus characteristic of most *Zimdancehall* songs as reflected in the above songs.

With regard to Lady Bee controversy appears to be the determiner of her egocentricism. Like Squanda Fire she speaks of her success, fame and popularity as well as her top notch place in *Zimdancehall* however in very naked and controversial means. In her song *Vavengi* she rudely rubbishes *unhu* moral judgements drawn against her and turns what appear to be societal judgements as the lifeblood of her art.

I

Vavengi munondipa manyemwe
 Pamunondituka munondipa manyemwe
 ...Kano kara varume...zvine basa rei?
 Hakadi kupfeka...zvine basa rei?
 Kakasara mhani...zvine basa rei?
 Kanashudhisa bhinzi...zvine basa rei?
 ...Handidi hunhu ndagara ndiri munhu, usandiudza zvehunhu
 Kuda kwako sandikuda kwangu
 Kuri kurohwa ndakatindivara
 ...ndakatovhurika ehe handivharike
 Muchindivharazipi moti vhara zipi...

A closer look at the above examples do indicate a pattern in the manner in which the singers draw attention to their art, fame and popularity. In doing so they attempt to mark out their place within *Zimdancehall* world of fame. Each artist tries to carve a unique identity from which followers can easily follow. It is not by accident that the 'ndini' or 'I am' or 'Its me' or 'mine' notions pepper the songs. The world of *Zimdancehall* thrives on popularity and artists have to sell their artistry through songs. In other words, a song has to be marketed as it is sung. The idea of creating 'gangs' or a brand appears to be the key objective hence a stampede by these artists to claim who is most artistic than the other.

Lady Bee's violates in her lyrics discursive rules. It is believed in most cultures and communication situations that explicitness in referring to some socio-cultural matters be not voiced in public, if need arises they should be said as guided by such communicative rules. For Lady Bee in her song Vavengi, she questions how the word questions *unhu/ubuntu* or behaviour especially as expected from a woman. Using *Zimdancehall*-speak she creates a dialogue of how she is characterised and nakedly response without shame or regret to the comments especially in the following lines;

...Kano kara varume...zvine basa rei?
 Hakadi kupfeka...zvine basa rei?
 Kakasara mhani...zvine basa rei?
 Kanashudhisa bhinzi...zvine basa rei?
 (She greedily-desires men...Does it matter?
 She does not dress properly...Does it matter?
 Her ways and behaviour are outdated (not in touch with time)...Does it matter?
 She loosely and eagerly gives herself up for sex...Does it matter?)

What is at stake here is her responses through the rhetorical question 'zvive basa rei?' (Does it matter/Of what significance is it anyway), repeated four times as if without conscience that is as if some human-women behaviours are socially not expected to adhere to stipulated social and cultural norms and values. Thus, apart from violating discursive rules she also diverts from the cultural standards of behaviour as expected of a woman by seemingly downplaying a need to properly dress, to be morally upright and not subject oneself to being a sex provider. This is not to say however that the same culturally and socially and even religiously expected behaviours are not extended to men. This hence comes out from the linguistic wordings which draw much of attention to the artist as though she is responding to her critiques rudely.

Terms like 'Biggy', 'reggae ambassador', stage names or 'gang' names like Gaffer or 'Mabhanditi' or 'Musoja' and any such, further add emphasis on egocentric creations in the message. Viewed as a style of music, we can make a reasonable conclusion that while these artists appear to communicate various messages through their songs, they reveal shared circumstances as the youth. Music becomes a way of expressing the deep seated emotions and beliefs about life and success in a society which appears to have redefined notions of success or even social conduct. For these singers, fame, material possession, popularity and a considerable following appears to be the ultimate message directed towards their peers. If we draw parallels with Jamaican dancehall which following Cooper (2004) reveal the youth agitating for social justice at the same time revealing the conditions of the youth in terms of drug abuse and sex, we appreciate the political nature of the songs. For *Zimdancehall* the apolitical nature of the songs reveal the idea that the youth as individuals have to find means to acquire material possessions, define themselves and make names for themselves as individuals and only then can they have a following even if it means side stepping some expected social values.

This explains why messages are drawn mostly on the 'I', narrated and sung as such. This further reveal the collective identity the Zimbabwean youth have. While *Kwaito* can be seen to be the youth in South Africa celebrating the end of apartheid, a music calling for the youth to disengage from political agitation (Steingo, 2008), the Zimbabwean youth music cannot be said to be celebratory neither can it be said to be a medium of political agitation or activism calling for a change to their status quo in political collective means. In fact, the style unravels the pent up sentiments most youth unconsciously nurse. The artist in this case becomes a singer representing in the songs these sentiments and the songs play a soothing role.

We should also hasten to point out that the *Zimdancehall* world is a jungle where the fittest artists survive. As such, musicians struggle to balance personal lives and their professional work. At this point, we note that various issues that happen

behind the scenes in the lives of these musicians is brought to the attention of the world to hear in their songs. Hence, using the 'ndini' style as expressed above we can submit that *Zimdancehall* becomes a platform of these dialogues. The music becomes more like a tabloid exposing the behind the scenes situations. Listeners are thus forced to follow the 'beef' between artists or 'gangs' created. Affiliations are observed among the fans explaining the 2014 violent *Zimdancehall* show in Harare. *The NewsDay* (2014) and *The Herald* (2014) extensively reported the details on the violence that saw most people injured and one clearly sees the play out of artists and their fans. One can allude to the unprofessional reactions and behaviour of both artists and fans as embedded in the lifeblood of *Zimdacehall* which is the egocentric sensational drive behind the music.

Conclusion

Zimdancehall has become a reality and a musical genre characterised by mostly the Zimbabwean youth. While it can be argued that the genre has offered alternative forms of employment and entertainment there is a lot that we can read from the music. Musicians of the genre are found constantly working to out-do each other not necessarily by performance and creativity but through their songs. This has further created an edge by the artists to attempt marking their own special brands within the genre for recognition, survival and relevance. While this effort can be applauded as a creative style in most songs, it has had effects on the reception of the music by fans and critics. Questions that however need to be answered are how far does the music contributes to a radical shift in the conditions of the youth as close to 90% of them are unemployed? If pride, fame and popularity are the hub of the *Zimdancehall* music, how far does this reflect the collective situation of the youth in Zimbabwe? What solutions to collective youth challenges does the genre bring to the society? Is individualism as part of the solution detrimental to the character and nature of the society?

Fame, pride and popularity appear very central in crafting the songs revealing conclusions that the youth appear to be directed towards the search of fame through singing hence the constant 'mangoma' (a term referring to songs or singing or music) notion to a point where every youth appears to feel that the only remaining alternative to surviving is through singing hence the idea of singing about singing.

In conclusion this paper has therefore shown that there is a huge dosage of egocentricism in the linguistic and discursive style that make up the lyrics of most *Zimdancehall* songs. While the paper has used a few songs to advance the argument, the songs however exemplify the character of most songs. In other words, listening to most *Zimdancehall* songs one hears and feels the same linguistic and discursive

style peppering most songs. It is left to be seen whether with the growth of the genre the style will or might shift or perfected and if so to what ends.

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