

Igbo Folk Music: A Thematic Study of Mike Ejeagha's *Igwe Okada*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to help in the preservation and reappraisal of one of Mike Ejeagha's works which has hitherto remained undocumented and thus disposing it to little study, research, accessibility, appreciation and reference. It seeks to revive the Igbo folk music, which modernity is fast eroding, and add it to the music repertoire of the world and by so doing give the Igbo people something to contribute to modernity and to the global family. The paper also aims at giving a new lease of life to the work of this music icon who has contributed a great deal in the preservation of the Igbo culture through his educative, informative and entertaining narratives that expose eternal truths of life and help in molding the character of the Igbo person. To achieve these objectives the researchers adopted a qualitative research design, conducting an interview to get the autobiography of Ejeagha and using an analytical method of musical research where the music is considered in its prosodic form with an attempt to note its thematic impact to the life of the Igbo society which originated it. It was discovered that the documentation and thematic study of folkloric compositions of the likes of Mike Ejeagha will go a long way not just to document our Igbo values that modernity is fast eroding, but also help in the rebirth of the Igbo values that mold the Igbo person. This work is recommended as a didactic tool for the exposition and preservation of some Igbo values.

Introduction

Folk music is a music that is peculiar to every culture as it is as diverse as it is distinguishing. It is deeply anchored in the culture and tradition of the people and the Igbo people have their own folk music. Folk music in Igbo land exists side by side with other brands of music but every tribe seems to cherish its own folk music more than the foreign music. This being the case the Igbo people should cherish their folk music.

Folk music belongs to oral tradition and is usually composed with the language of the originator. The disadvantage of it being formulated in autochthonous languages is that its use is only confined to the society that composed it. This linguistic barrier is a major setback in its propagation and documentation. Folk music is not just entertaining but also educative. This being the case anyone has the authority to manipulate the music to serve the person's didactic purpose. This being the case also, the earlier works were not copyrighted as the original composers have gone into oblivion together with the originals of such works.

The lack of documentation of these folklores has resulted in their disappearance and into the erroneous impression of the Western world that Africa is a continent without culture. But the truth is that Africa is a cultural continent. Africa is made up of people with varied cultures and its music is as diverse as the people that make it up. The Igbo people are an important ethnic group in Nigeria and they have composed a lot of folkloric songs, which though many have gone into oblivion, some have been preserved. Mike Ejeagha is one of those Igbo people who have gained prominence in the music industry by appropriating some traditional folktales which he has recorded into albums and to which he now claims copyright, and also constructing his own folktales. The need to further document these folklores and propagate them cannot be over emphasized.

Contrary to expectation, that the Igbo people would prefer their brand of music to the others, the Igbo people seem to relegate all that originates from them to the background, including their folk music. The result is that many of these folk musics go into extinction especially as they belong to the oral tradition which lacks documentation and so are easily forgotten. Due to the lack of interest in this brand of music

little effort has been geared towards its documentation. Neither has there been enough attempts to propagate nor immortalize these Igbo folk music by handing them down from generation to generation. Few Igbo musicians have tried to awaken the interest of the Igbo people to this Igbo folk music, but their efforts have not been enough to make the required impact as their efforts still remained in the domain of oral tradition with all its characteristic setbacks. This disenchantment in Igbo folk music having lingered for decades now, the vogue of imbibing what is foreign to the detriment of their own has seen the Igbo market flooded with foreign music with the Igbo folk music relegated to the background, along with their didactic imports.

This paper seeks to rebrand the Igbo folk music with a view to using it for a reorientation of the Igbo person by using the traditional values contained therein. It seeks to make it more meaningful, enjoyable and accessible to the young and old. It seeks to revive the Igbo folk music, which modernity is fast eroding, and add it to the music repertoire of the world and by so doing give the Igbo people something to contribute to modernity and to the global family. It also seeks to preserve and reappraise one of Mike Ejeagha's works which has hitherto remained undocumented and thus disposing it to little study, research, accessibility, appreciation and reference.

This research will give a new lease of life to this work and Mike Ejeagha, this music icon who has contributed a great deal in the preservation of the Igbo culture through his educative, informative and entertaining narratives that expose eternal truths of life and helped in molding the character of the Igbo person. Music lovers would be afforded the opportunity of learning this song through the lyrics of the song that this research would produce. Elders, teachers and all people involved in character molding would now have a reference tool that would help them to better exercise their duty. The making of the lyrics of the corpus is to enhance its accessibility and assessment and introduce it to more people and cultures for enjoyment and evaluation.

Folk music

Music is life. Onwuegbuna (2012) rightly noted that "The Nigerian [...] music industry has a lot to benefit[...] from cultural self expression and artistic diversification" (p.286). Folk music, which is the music of a people exposes their inspirations and aspirations. Folk music is an integral part of oral literature, also called oral tradition. This kind of literature is passed down through families and other small social groups.

Folk music is usually accompanied with prose narratives. Bascom (1965), has defined prose narrative as "an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art, which includes myths, legends, and folktales. These three forms are related to each other" (p.4).

Chuma-udeh(2014) further explained that

...the music of oral literature flows from the core essence of a people's existence. Here, it becomes a way of expression intricately tied to their social, cultural, economic and political aspirations and to a great extent becomes the determinant of the peaceful coexistence of the society of people that spawn it.(p.15)

The African folk music is participatory where listeners are supposed to be active and contribute to the narration through refrains and sometimes activities such as dancing, clapping or laughing which gives the required ambiance for the enjoyment of the narration.

In the modern times, though, people have relied on the screens to enjoy these folk narrations. The televisions, the handsets and several other modern gadgets have played major roles in the transmission of these folk narrations.

Ezenweke (2012), pointed out that "Africa has rich cultural values coated with sense of sacredness which aided African civilization and which seemed to have been swept off by the wind of globalization." (p.267).

In Nigeria like in many other parts of the world, folk music is fast disappearing as the youth of now no longer pay attention to their culture but have become more comfortable with foreign cultures and hence relegating their own culture to the back ground. Achebe quoted by Chinweizu(1981) rightly observed that “We are at cosmopolitan centres and the predominant cultures of these centres are from Europe. And so whatever your political or ideological positions might be. You very soon discover that your child is inheriting all kinds of nefarious ideas.” (p.31). But the culture of a man is what gives him identity. For no matter how a Nigerian mimics a European or any white man for that matter, he will still remain a Nigerian. But with this attitude of the Nigerian youths, the future of the Nigerian folk music is bleak and calls for concerted effort to turn this situation around. The popularization of folk music by Mike Ejagha is therefore a step towards the right direction.

Other folk musicians such as Ozoemena Nsugbe, Prince Morrocco Maduka, Christopher Asa , Akunwafor Ezigbo Obiligbo are also folk musicians of *egwu ekikpili* fame, who have contributed in no small measure to the propagation and development of the Igbo folk music.

Okorodudu(2014) while discussing the preservation of Urhobo culture hinted that “ ...like other cultures, the Urhobo has a rich cultural heritage which is preserved and disseminated through songs. Folktales amongst others.” (p.87) thus making it clear that music and folklores are very interwoven. Folkloric music as played by Mike Ejeagha not only performs these functions of preserving and disseminating folk music but also performs historical and entertaining functions. "The whole world is turning into a global village" is now a common parlance interpreted by many in their different ways, to suit their different purposes. However this parlance should not be misunderstood to mean that everything now goes. It should also not be understood as it is in Nigeria, to mean the acceptance of westernization as the only way of life. It should rather be understood to mean that the various cultures of the world have become more receptive to each other hence viewing each other with less prejudice and trying to decipher the good in the other and utilizing it for each other's wellbeing. It means that all the people of the world now contribute to build the world culture. The way Nigerians are going about it, it is as if it has been concluded that we have nothing to offer. But our culture, among numerous other things, is our legacy and our pride which we should not throw away but contribute to world civilization.

Onyiuke Y.S. (2006) hinted that “Through music, children can be led progressively to find more meaning in life about them”(p. 56) It then follows that if children are exposed to the wrong type of music they will also imbibe wrong values. That same way if Igbo children are exposed to only foreign music, the Igbo race will sooner or later lose these children to the cultures from where these foreign music originated. This will lead to acculturated children without roots.

The Igbo people

The folk music which forms the corpus of this study originated from the Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria. Amy McKenna **has this to say about the Igbo people.**

Igbo, also called **Ibo**, people living chiefly in southeastern Nigeria who speak Igbo, a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Igbo may be grouped into the following main cultural divisions: northern, southern, western, eastern or Cross River, and northeastern. Before European colonization, the Igbo were not united as a single people but lived in autonomous local communities. By the mid-20th century, however, a sense of ethnic identity was strongly developed, and the Igbo-dominated Eastern region of Nigeria tried to unilaterally secede from Nigeria in 1967 as the independent nation of Biafra. By the turn of the 21st century, the Igbo numbered some 20 million. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Igbo>)

Despite the geographical location where the traditional Igbo societies are located, the Igbo people are great travelers and in the present world, they can be found in the four corners of the planet. But even though they are great travelers, their music brand has not spread with them as they travelled.

Mike Ejeagha and folk music

The folk musician Mike Ejeagha and his likes should really be encouraged for they are crusaders that are striving to make Igbo music and society to survive.

Folk music should not be allowed to die due to its numerous benefits which Emenyeonu(1976) pointed out when he wrote that:”Imagination was developed through oral narratives; logic was inculcated through proverbs and riddles. Good speaking habits were learnt from experienced practitioners who clothed their language with imagery “(p.2).

Mike Ejeagha is one of the folk musicians popularized through the screen with the television programme *Akuko n’egwu* which he anchored in the 70’s and 80’s. One major characteristic of folk music is its anonymity but by bringing these rendition forward to NTA and Radio Nigeria and also by recording some of these folk narrations as albums Mike Ejeagha has now appropriated some of the traditional Igbo folk narrations and now claiming a copyright of these renditions.

One peculiarity of Mike Ejeagha’s work is the blend of Igbo proverbs that he uses to punctuate his narrations. Obiechina (1975) explained that proverbs “ contain the wisdom of the traditional people, they are the philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few word” (p.156) With these proverbs Mike Ejeagha inculcates in the Igbos the Igboness that should be in them and the uniqueness in being the people that they are.

Biography of Mike Ejeagha

Mike Ejeagha, is a prose narrative singer. Mike uses his guitar and voice to drive home his message, punctuating his work with heavy doses of morality, proverbs or riddles, ballads, poems, tongue twisters and other forms of verbal arts. He narrates both the traditional native folklores and modern ones which he makes up himself using the day to day happenings in today's Nigeria. Though he blends tradition with modernity he still does all this in Igbo his native language.

Better known as Gentleman Mike Ejeagha by his friends, he was born in April 1930 at Coal camp by a civil servant father then working at the Ministry of Health, Enugu. He hails from Imezi Owa in Ezeagu local government area of the present Enugu State. Mike attended St Patrick' s Primary School, Ogbete Enugu. He has continued to live at Enugu till date. It is said that he has been occupying his present residence for the past 45years.

An interview with Mike Ejeagha revealed that he has always been a great lover of music. He was a chorister, and as a little boy he used to follow musicians around anywhere he saw them performing. He however discovered his guitarist townsman by the name of Cyprian Ozo, who incidentally was living nearby and whom he continued visiting until he learnt to play the guitar.

Another important personality in the development of Mike the musician was Patrick Okwunazor, an Asaba man who was then doing a musical programme for the Nigerian Broadcasting service, now known as Radio Nigeria. The man though a broadcaster also had his musical group called the *Moonlight Orchestra*. Mike joined this troupe as a member of the band and gathered a lot of experience from it. Ejeagha was later engaged by radio Nigeria in the 50's and in 1955 he became the presenter of the programme *Guitar Playtime*. He was also called upon to join the Igbo theatre group of the same Radio Station where he not only participated in the play but also produced the signature tune. He continued with Radio Nigeria until 1967 when due to the disruption caused by the Nigerian civil war, the programme could only continue in a skeletal way. The programme did not survive the war as people fled for their dear lives.

But before the outbreak of the war, Ejeagha had already released some singles which he recorded with C.T. Onyekwelu of the Niger Phone Records. These singles include *the unfortunate lady* (1957), *Colliary Massacre* (1959) and *Ofu nwaanaa* (1959), produced the same year he got married to his first wife. His first wife died in 1963 after a brief illness, leaving Mike with three children- a boy and two girls. He however remarried in 1965 and the second marriage produced seven children (three boys and four girls all of whom are now happily married).

After the war, precisely in 1972, The Nigerian Television Authority invited him as a guest presenter for the Igbo programme *Akuko n 'egwu*, A programme that later became very popular. The programme featured folksongs which were very lyrically composed by Mike's group, a group of three then that produced songs that always had moral lessons for the young and old alike. This programme popularised Mike Ejeagha and even went into the Igbo lexicology as the expression *akuko n 'egwu Mike Ejeagha* is commonly used now in Igbo language even by youths who neither know Mike nor what he represents. The group continued to increase her albums as well as her members. Four of Ejeagha's sons: Emmanuel, Joseph, Mike Junior and David are members of his musical group though not on full time. Till date Mike Ejeagha has recorded over 23 singles among which are the following *Aneke Qtulukpa, Obiako nwa m, Onye Ori Utaba, Udeze nwa nne m, O di ka adi eme, Udo ka nma, Ome ka agu, Elulubelube, Rolu mbene, Makojo, Onye ga- anu Ugonma, Omekagu, Ojadili, Nnam Eze akputam enyi, Agbata obi onye bu nwanne ya, Igwe Okada, Uwa mgbede ka nma, Onye nwee o na-ebe onye enwero o na- ebe, and Gwogwogwongwo.*

Mike Ejeagha further revealed that he also worked with Radio Nigeria where he formulated several folk music but which he did not document

Ejeagha's inspirations

On how he got the stories he told, he said he lived a long time with elders and heard these stories as they were being narrated by them. Some he got under the tutelage of his own father. Some of the stories are real life stories as is the case of *The unfortunate lady* which was actually a real life account of the death of a prison wardress by the name of Mrs 'Agnes Onyia, The *Colliery massacre* which narrates the story of how the military bombed some Enugu coal workers.

While being engaged by the NTA it became necessary that folklore would be narrated every week in the programme. This forced Mike and his group into the villages where they engaged elders and storytellers to tell them the stories which they later gave a touch of expertise as they polished and made the stories lyrical for the viewers' and listeners' pleasure and great enjoyment. These storytellers were mainly found in farm settlements or in some rural communities in the Igbo states.

His wife also contributed to the success of the team through her criticisms and contributions to their rehearsals and productions.

He said he also coins his stories around existing proverbs which he finds to be big moral lessons. He never ceases to appreciate the late C.T. Onyekwere from Nawfia in the present Anambra State, owner of the first recording studio in the East, whom he said advised him to always try to make his songs have a message, as that was the secret of keeping the music always alive and stand the test of time as life's lessons know no temporal barriers. He said that he is often surprised when people called him to demand his albums that are over 30 years old.

Ejeagha' regrets

He regretted that the youths of today do not appreciate his music because they are impatient and always in a hurry and as such cannot sit down to listen to his music to the end. The attraction in his music, he noted, is the moral lesson and the youths are not patient to listen to them even when they are directed to them. He also regretted that that the youths of today are more interested in pop music and thus neglecting this folk music which is the cultural African music. He lamented that even his own children usually clean his tapes and CD's and use them to record their preferred kind of music.

He also lamented the handiwork of the pirates in the music industry which he said discouraged the artists who find themselves laboring in vain for the pirates. According to him the case of *Onye nwee o na-ebe* was very pathetic. The day the album was pushed into the market for the first time, it was noticed that it was already everywhere in the market due the handiwork of the pirates.

His awards

The outstanding contribution of Mike Ejeagha has won him some awards but he is yet to get any literary award to justify the level of his contribution towards the propagation and advancement of the oral African literature and the Nigerian national literature in particular. His contribution to the development of the Igbo language and culture and the advancement of the Igbo race is yet to be translated into awards. However, Polygram Records gave him an award for his album *Gwogwogwongwo* which sold over 50,000 copies. He received a certificate of honour from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka on the 16th of December 1980 for his contribution towards the development of African Music. On the 20th of October 2001 Mike got an outstanding performance award from Ezeagu Local Government council.

***Igwe Okada* in prose (An overview)**

Folk narratives are formulated in the language of the culture that originated them. Because the corpus is in Igbo language, it becomes imperative to give a summary of the song for its understanding and ease of analysis.

The song narrates a story of a promising young man called Imalewe, who was good, serviceable and selfless. These attributes endeared him to his people with the result that when the opportunity called, they did not hesitate to make him their representative and king. However, the virtues which his people found in him were short lived as coronation revealed the draconic, selfish, heartless, wicked and adamant part of him hitherto masked by his poor background. His impunity extended even to relatives on whom he also unleashed several atrocities. But his marrying a lady betrothed to a younger cousin was the straw that broke the camel's back. This young cousin effectively planned the dethronement and death of *Igwe Okada*, in a most dramatic manner. The moral lessons drawn from this narration are discussed below as thematic studies

Anthropological analysis through thematic study

The anthropological analysis of music concerns itself with the social functions of music and its relevance to the society that produced it. Every society thrives on values and norms which it seeks to maintain for the preservation of that society. Such values and norms, in the Igbo society can be propagated through this folk music. This paper focuses on the didactic merits of *Igwe Okada* which it treated through the following themes in the song;

The Igbo conception of Power

Power can be earned. It was the hard work, selfless service and humility of Imalewe that endeared him to his people and helped him to single himself out as a person worthy of trust, worthy enough for power and authority to be entrusted into his hands. But power belongs to the people, Thus, when the king "*Igwe okada*" started maltreating the people who unanimously selected him for the elevated *Igwe* position that he held, he was also dethroned by a subject, in consensus with the people.

When a righteous man is in power, the people rejoice. When Imalewe the king started being most unruly, his subjects became uncomfortable and pleaded with him for a change of heart which fell on deaf ears. Instead he kept intimidating the subjects until he had absolute power. But absolute power corrupts absolutely and consequently *Igwe Imalewe* exceeded his bounds and stepped on a lot of toes including the toes of relations without anyone daring to say or do anything. Retributive justice demands from a man in authority a commensurate responsibility and when this is not the case the culprit suffers for his actions and inactions. Imalewe acted irresponsibly by abusing power and so suffered rejection and dethronment for his excesses.

Power comes from God and is transient. No matter how much power one wields, there is always a day of reckoning. And when the day of reckoning comes, forces will join hands to oust the undesirable element: even non human factors will join to correct all anomalies. Thus on the day the subjects were planning the dethronement of *Igwe Imalewe*, there was such a heavy downpour that showed that even the heavens were in support of his dethronement and actually helped in speeding up the act by soaking him up and striking him with pneumonia that ended his life and his reign of terror.

Pride and dishonour

Pride is a killer. Humility is virtue. Imalewe's humility endeared him to people but his pride dishonoured and ended him. Had he remained as humble as he was before he was crowned, he would have continued to enjoy the support of his citizens. He would have been listening to advice. He wouldn't have coveted another person's wife. The citizens would have related with him with love and submission believing in their common good. But alas, pride spoilt everything and led him to a disgraceful end. Position and authority should not make one proud for there is dignity in service. A wise person who ascends to power through service continues to serve to maintain power. The most relevant person is usually the chief servant. No wonder some politicians jokingly call themselves "the chief servants of the States under their jurisdiction" That pride goes before a fall is also a common parlance.

Other themes such as nature abhors negativity, decency is a virtue, dignity in labour, being the best of oneself, unity is power, day of reckoning, respect is reciprocal, abound in this corpus and can all serve didactic purposes to people listening to or enjoying Mike Ejeagha" *Igwe Okada*.

Conclusion

Preserving the Igbo folk tales and music needs the concerted effort of every Igbo person. Failure to do this would result to the loss of the next Igbo generation to the foreign cultures: Asian and Western, that have continued to flood our social media, televisions and internet.

Mike Ejeagha is an Igbo folk musician who has helped in no small measure in the preservation of Igbo folktales and consequently helped to give relevance to the Igbo culture. His music is enjoyed by both the young and old. His folk music has both an educative and entertainment import which can serve positive purposes in the hands of teachers, parents scholars and a teaming generation of youths.

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