

THE NINE LIVES OF MEKI

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ABSTRACT

The life and works of Professor Meki Nzewi pose a challenge to both students and musicologists alike. However, I have chosen to x-ray this music icon and giant to portray his activities in the music world in order to bring forth those attributes that have been sources of inspiration to his students and colleagues alike. Hence, the title, *The Nine Lives of Meki* was born. This has been broken down under the following sub-headings: Meki, the teacher; Meki and the African music theory; the Nzewi School; Concertizing Meki; Meki, the Motivator; Meki and the African Theatre; Meki and Musicology; Meki: The Africanist and Meki: The Person.

INTRODUCTION

There is such diversity in the one man, Professor Meki Emeka Nzewi, that one cannot present him in one form and possibly like Pontius Pilate say *Ecce homo*-Behold the man. The plain fact is that Meki, as we like to call him, puts in all that he is to these diversities that we can call each province a life of Meki. I have therefore elected to call this short and simple article *The Nine Lives of Meki* because each of the road signs will point the way to one of these diversities. A woman I have read about provides me a useful alibi for when she was asked to state the age of her son, she said: 'physically 10, intellectually 14, emotionally 12.' It is my opinion that my road signs direct the readers to the different lives of Meki so that by focusing attention on them severally we shall together be in a position to compose the whole Meki.

Meki: The Teacher

One of my sign posts points to Meki, The Teacher. For nearly 40 years (his looks won't say so). He has engaged himself in musical pedagogy. Those of us here who have passed under his tutelage may have their recollections of him as a task master, guide or model. This much I know – that if Meki had been a mere run-of-the-mill music teacher, this conference would never have come to be. Indeed, many of us here can remember that for years there have been aborted plans to hold a Conference or a Memorial Lecture in honour of one of the pioneers of Igbo musical scholarship. But, the powers did not bless us with success, our bold visions and good intentions notwithstanding. Nevertheless, our visions came true in 2008 when a national conference was organised in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in honour of Professor Meki Nzewi.

Prof. Meki Nzewi encourages talents to develop and to contribute to musicology and music education. His strategy using master-musicians in the process of forming his students has been adopted and formalized into the *National Policy in Education*, which directs the same approach in music education from the primary to the tertiary level. All his students experience him as a powerful theorist who also makes very strong demands on practical musicianship. This has often brought him into conflict with some of his colleagues who accuse him of trying to turn Music Departments of Universities into Music Academies. He drives his students to research into African Music and to publish, thereby preparing them for later life as music academics. His musical pedagogy has reached from tertiary down to primary and secondary levels of education for which he has published some books for use by students and teachers alike. In addition to this, he shook up the traditional music education curriculum by proposing and insisting that the young pupil should begin by studying what is music in his own culture, certain that if he recognizes the intricacies of music in his own culture, he would recognize music of other cultures with their intricacies whenever he comes in contact with them.

As former Head of the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Meki employed master-musicians, knowledgeable musicians and literate informers to impact on the education of his students. It can be said, without any fear of contradiction that the graduates of that regime were practical, well-rounded or holistic and very versatile, and several of them have made their marks in the Nigerian society-musical academia, the media, and cultural activism.

Meki and the African Music Theory

There is a part of Meki that unsettled some scholars especially those who bask in the safe mediocrity of the past. This is the Meki that subjects the nomenclature and vocabulary of the musicology of yesteryear to re-examination, and sometimes to redefinition, based on the perspective of giving the African mind a role in composing the international vocabulary of the universal phenomenon known as music. He believes that so many definitions derive from the perspective of the Euro-American mind such that the owners of some cultural manifestations have been regarded as of no consequence in the formulation of musicological taxonomies, in such a way that their original ideas are sacrilegiously distorted. For example, the masquerade is so called because the Europeans liken those figures to shrouded humans, singing and dancing just as in their native masques. On the other hand, to the African mind, nothing masquerades but spirits manifest in those forms from the other dimension of life for interaction with people in the human order on the earth plane. So, Meki and some writers and scholars believe that based on this African philosophy, the correct terminology should be spirit-manifests.

For the obstinate African or bell pattern, Meki prefers phrase referent since all other instrumentalists refer to it in producing their own rhythms. When he felt dissatisfied with the limitations of the old notation in expressing the sounds and languages of the African drum, he devised his own notation, which he taught people of the non-African cultures to read and use in performing African music so that African drums sound and talk like African drums. Simply put, Meki in this way really devised an international notation that could enable

African drums to speak in many tongues. Meki thinks of the song, the instrumental music and the dance as so intertwined in African music that it would be better expressed by the term musical arts than merely as music since the African conceives song, musical instrument playing and kinetic movements or the dance as an integer - a three in one.

Some of his musical concepts include melo-rhythmic essence in Nigerian folk-music (1974) and phonic preferences and psychical tolerance (1983a). In phonic preferences, Meki identifies that music should have peculiarities which differentiate it from that of other cultures while psychical tolerance further models the peculiarities, effect, group and personal appreciation and the usage of music types.

The Nzewi School

Meki's idea and perspectives of African musicology are so fundamental and far-reaching that some researchers and musicologists admit that the term Nzewi School is not only appropriate and deserving but accurate and factual. In order to propagate his concept of African classical music, he has taken African musicians on concert tours to the five Continents (Africa, Americas, Europe, Oceania and Asia), winning audiences from many cultures to his perspective of the universality of music as one language with many dialects.

The Nzewi School soon began to carry Meki's musical philosophies beyond the Nigerian national frontiers. Joshua Uzoigwe took his African pianism and Ukom to the British Isles, the Americas, and Oceania. Christian Onyeji, a fine and talented flutist and composer, appeared with Meki for several years on the Concert Halls of Europe and Southern Africa. His *Symphonic Poem, Abigbo*, is testimony that African music, on its own validity, can make strong statements on Western classicism. Odyke Nzewi, a virtuoso drummer boy, kept the family flag flying in the tertiary institutions and concert stage of Nigeria, South Africa, Britain and Germany.

Concertizing Meki

The picture of one not-heavily-built man hanging his whole orchestra over his back and striding across airport terminals must be very familiar to the Immigration Services of many nations of Europe, Asia and the Americas. This is Meki on his concert tours carrying his *Ese* drums by himself as he makes his brand of music serve a two-fold purpose of entertainment and African musical evangelism – opening African music to the Euro-American and Asian minds. The wonder of Meki on the concert stage is that he is one man playing many parts but all his acts are not nine ages. One can recognize, looking at Meki that he seems to have discovered the elixir of life. He matures without ageing. All these notwithstanding, it would be wrong to link Meki with African musical insularism. His training as a musician followed the standard Western classical pattern. It was therefore not a surprise that his early performances between 1965 and 1986 were as a concert clarinetist. He composed and performed concerts and broadcasting his *Reverie for Clarinet and Piano*.

Nevertheless, Meki had a deep burning conviction that since music is a cultural expression, Africa must be her own interpreter of African music – an argument that can hardly be faulted. He totally agrees with Herndon (1976) who states:

What I may think does not in any way affect another group of people's ideas about their music. What they think of as music, and how they manipulate and develop those ideas, however, affects the form and substance of that music. (pp. 222-223)

Holding on to that conviction and burning with that Africanist philosophy, Meki burst on the world stage drumming his Africanist philosophy into the audiences and the music curriculum of several lands.

In 1989 Meki performed the *Ese* classical drum solos and *Ese/Saxophone* duet; Solo concert of *Ese* classical drum and *Ese* classical drum solos and *Ese/Mrin gandam* duet in Coburg, Herz, Nurnberg, Duisburg, Bonn, and Bayreuth – all in Germany. In the same year, he held a concert-jam session and concert of improvisations with both Charlie Marhiana (Saxophone/Flute) and Tunji Beier (Indian drums) at Erlangen and Bayreuth in Germany. It was also at this period that he published his *Ese Music Notation and Modern Concert Presentation* (1990) having found out that the old notation to which Western music is so much tied is incompetent to handle the sounds and rhythms of the drums of Africa.

On January 10 and 12, 1990, he performed his Drum Trio Concert – *Ese* Classical drum solo and drum improvisations at the German school and the Goethe Institute, Lagos. In the same year, he organized a concert of traditional drums pop music with drum singing with his Trado-Sound Ensemble on 1 January at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In 1991, he performed his *Ese* concert flute duets, Solo concert of *Ese* classical drum music and *Ese* classical drum solos at various countries including Germany, Belgium and the USA.

On 23 March, 1992, Meki performed in Munich and in April in London and Germany. Later that year, he also performed at the British Council, Enugu, on 25 June. And, under the auspices of the Nigerian Society for Music Education (NISMER), he performed the same *Ese* classical drum solo and drum poems with ululation at the Enugu State Broadcasting Service (ESBS), Enugu, on September 25. In 1993, Meki was more home-based with performances of his *Ese* drum solo and *Ese/Voice* duo at the Goethe Institute, Lagos, on 2 February and at the Hotel Presidential, Enugu, on 5 May.

His performances in 1994 could be likened to those of 1989 when in the months of January, September, November and December he organized many concerts on the *Ese* drums in Holland and Germany. Between 1995 and 2002, the story was the same. Meki continued his performances in Nigeria, Austria, South Africa and Germany. What a world man?

Meki: The Motivator

One of Meki's lives has been to motivate and spur others towards self discovery, self development, self realization, self actualization, and certain degrees of venture and entrepreneurship. When I was a Junior Fellow at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), in 1977, I applied and secured admissions to the British Columbia University, Vancouver, Canada, and Queen's University of Belfast for my Ph.D. Opinions were diverse, but when I contacted Meki, who was already at Queen's, with my plans, he replied in his typical unambiguous manner, virtually insisting that I come to Belfast: "Professor John Blacking

knows the music of your grandmother.” I went to Belfast, studied under Professor John Blacking and discovered that even Meki had understated the immense values that one derived from meeting the great John Blacking, as we used to call him.

Some of us in the Association of Nigerian Musicologists (ANIM) had the same experience as Meki spurred them to go to the University of Pretoria, South Africa, for their terminal degrees. Such persons include Dr. Christian Onyeji, Dr. (Mrs) Young-Sook Onyiuke, Dr. Adebowale Adeogun, and Dr. Ovaborhene Idamoyibo.

Prof. Meki Nzewi is one of the most widely published and travelled of Nigerian academic musicians. And, no one who has studied under him or been influenced by him has escaped being bitten by the Meki Nzewi bug. In the academic life of scholars, where the golden dictum is “publish or perish,” many of them have chalked up long and still lengthening lists of publications in national and international journals, as well as books on musicology and ethnomusicology.

Equally important, several of them stage musical concerts in other lands to broaden their experiences and expose their maturity in practical musicianship. In addition, Meki has produced lecturers, associate professors and professors, all of whom can credit their advancement to suggestions made by him in his usual brash manner that miraculously leaves no after taste.

Professor Nzewi’s mission of bringing the authentic African art to the world led him to found the AMA DIALOG FOUNDATION at Nsugbe in Anambra State, in 1993. The Institution, which has accommodation built in the traditional Igbo African architecture, has been listed as a destination for people who engage in art and cultural tourism. Every year, more than a score of tourists from Germany, the Netherlands, and other Western European countries spend their summer holidays in the huts of the Ama Dialog Foundation mixing with the rural population as they go to the farms, sing and dance for entertainment or as part of ceremonies. Indeed, some of the tourists have ordered the Construction of some African huts for themselves and their families.

In an age when most developing countries have charged globalization with the offence of using their enormously powerful technologies to crush their own cultures, Meki used the Ama Dialog Foundation to return the Euro-American cultural offensive, measure for measure. The Centre taught the local women to transfer their mud wall art to canvass art in the style which Meki named *UPAISM* (from *upa* or the red laterite). The paintings are then sent to Europe where they are sold and the money remitted to the village folk who find that what they do as part-time has economic value elsewhere. The money they made from each transaction keeps their families going for about a year during which they supplement their newly acquired higher standard of living from proceeds from peasant farming. An important by-product of the Ama Dialogy Foundation is that the visitors sometimes donate their one year’s earnings or so to the improvement of maternal and child healthcare in the village. Mark you! All this is not done in Meki’s hometown or village, Nnewi or Otolu. In dealing with persons or groups, the motto with Meki is “Talent without Borders.”

Meki and the African Theatre

There is a side of Meki that even some academics have never understood. It is the Meki of the Theatre who writes plays and musicals and produces them for the stage. When one theatre academic questioned Meki's right or competence to engage in theatre productions, Meki riposted that he had known one or two professors of theatre arts who also recorded and released popular hits and did not have to explain what they were doing dabbling into music. The fact is that Meki had always taught his students that the African concept of music involves three main activities, namely singing, playing instruments, and dancing or miming. All the three require spaces, actors and audiences or spectators – the very same things which are required for the artistic production that some people call theatre.

This has thrown Meki into the sphere of communication of ideas by theatre. Theatre, according to some authorities, has three main principles. First there must be an actor or actors. And, in the case of *mmanwu/mawu*, it is not only human actors but spirit and human actors. Then, there must be space, which does not have to be inside a building. It can be anywhere. Perhaps, we can take the village arena/square or anywhere that *mmanwu/mawu* performs to be the space. And, the third principle is that there must be an audience – people who will watch or listen to the actors or actresses. Enekwe (1987) gives an opinion that cannot be impeached:

However, I would like to add that theatre usually occurs in public space. If we conceive the audience as a community with shared values and emotions, then we can understand why theatre is usually public. These factors, therefore – actors consciously playing for the entertainment of others, an audience and public space, all of which imply one another – are the quintessential conditions that govern the theatre. (p. 35)

In the African context, public must have its own definition since African architecture caters for individual and public needs.

When the Federal Government of Nigeria wanted to communicate messages of rural and community development, they invited many artists who produced sketches and variety shows. When Meki designed his Road show, he chose to have the messages conveyed by the medium that rural Igbo Folk could not, and dare not doubt. He chose to have the messages sent by masquerades or spirit-manifests, and gave the production, the title of *Ozi MManwu – The Message from the Spirit-Manifests*. With that Design, he captured much of rural Igboland because he understood and engaged their psychology and psychic tolerance and accommodation. In further pursuance of his interest in the theatre, he founded and incorporated a professional Theatre and Cinema Company, made up of young boys and girls who were interested in making their living through the theatre and prepared, if possible, to go it alone without any support from the Government. That Company produced young dramatists some of who are today household names and very active in Nollywood as script writers, actors, and make-up artists.

His major artistic outburst in the theatre includes opera, music-dramas and musicals. **Opus 1: Music-Drama Works (Dialogue and Music score)** including *The Lost Finger*

(1980); *Ombudspirit on Politics* (1981); *The Third Coming*; *Kunje* (Danced Drama Theatre); *Regeneration*; and *the Rhyme of Sangoben* (Danced Drama Theater). **Opus 2: Musicals** including *Lazy Bones*; *A Drop of Honey*; *We The People*; *The Kola Cola kid*; *The Moonsage Hero*; *The Saviour Comes Again*; and *the Woman of Samaria*. **Opus 3: Operas** including *Adaora*; *Mystery is illusion*; and *Omaledo* (Children's Opera)

A whole point of Meki playing so many parts in public and academic life is that he does not approach whatever part from the perspective of the make-believe. He puts in all he is in such a way that, that part becomes and not only reflects Meki. No wonder he becomes an expert in a very short time.

In addition, he becomes the elephant, which was placed for identification by six Hindustani blind men. And one blind man caught its squirming tail in his groping hand and declared that the elephant was just like a snake. The blind man who touched its ear declared that even the blindest man would know that the wonder of the elephant was just like a fan, while the blind man who fell against the side of the humongous beast proclaimed to the world that it was just like a wall, just as the blind man who touched its leg said that the elephant was just like a tree. All the blind men went away in heated argument, everyone believing his own description. But, the naked truth is that everyone of them was wrong and everyone was right. So be it with Meki.

Meki and Musicology

Any friend or colleague of Meki's can easily testify that Meki does not complain. If he is not satisfied with the state of anything, he tries to do something about it to effect a change. For example, when he came into music academics, he was not satisfied to find that musicology existed in a strait jacket, constructed by Euro-American ethnocentrism, which provided the technologies and parameters for musical study and discourse. He was particularly distressed by the way in which African music was treated in this scheme – as a phenomenon which did not exist in its own right but had validity only if it flitted into the perspectives of European anthropologists, missionaries or colonial officers and traders.

With this idea of doing something positive in the scheme of African musicology, he broke the cherished rule in physics, which holds that like poles repel each other while unlike poles attract. He attracted like-minds like this writer, Professor Richard Okafor, the late Dr. Joshua Uzoigwe, Lawrence Emeka, Professor Dan Agu, Dr. Yemi Olaniyan, Dr. Christian Onyeji, Dr. Sam Chukwu and Dr. Bode Omojola, and in this way the Nzewi School was born. This idea has found acceptance, through A. M. Jones and Hugh Tracey, in East and Southern Africa – hitherto the citadel or shrine of the old style African musicology.

Meki invented his own notation for *Ese* tuned drums. On first looking at this notation, any simple literate mind could say that “Here is *nsibidi* or the old Egyptian hieroglyphic.” But, it works. Just hear them spring to life when Meki picks up his drum sticks and you could call them the miracle of the millennium.

A good book they say “is the precious life blood of a master spirit.” And for Fulton J. Sheen: “Books are readily available, and what companions they are. A good book is the same today as yesterday. It is never displeased when we put it down; it is always inspiring when we pick it up. It never fails us in times of adversity.” For Joseph Addison: “Books are the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation, as presents to the posterity of those who are yet unborn.” This is in synchrony with the great American statesman, writer, and sage, Benjamin Franklin, who stated: “If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading or do things worth the writing.”

Meki has shared his ideas with the world through several publications, which made their way to the bookstands on their own merit and the force of the ideas they convey. It is not difficult to find that many of them are radical or revolutionary – made to unsettle the starchy mind:

(1990). *Ese Music Notation and Modern Concert Presentation*.

(1997). *African Music: Theoretical Content and Creative Continuum*.

(2000). *Musicology vs. Ethnomusicology: African vs. the Contemporary Perspectives*.

(2003). *African musicology in the global thrust: redemption for disorienting human pulse*.

(2005). *Modern art music in African: whose modernism?*

(2006). *Growing in musical arts knowledge versus the role of the ignorant expert*.

(2007). *A Contemporary study of Musical Arts – Informed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Vol. 4)*.

Many of Meki’s past students affirm that he was the first person to teach them in a formal classroom-setting that masquerades are wrongly termed as such by Euro-American anthropologists and musicologists. And that they should be termed what they really are in African philosophy and systems – SPIRIT MANIFESTS – for according to the teaching of our fathers, our father’s fathers, and their fathers before them, what we see or hear perform are spirits, which come out through ant holes after appropriate sacrifices and rituals have been performed, and manifest themselves so that human beings can see and hear them. Indeed, in many an African system, nothing masquerades and there is no mask. Everything that appears is the spirit in that form and manner.

Meki: The Africanist

There is the story of a patriotic American who told his audience that Americans have achieved so much because the last four letters in American reads ‘I can,’ and so, Americans approach every enterprise or undertaking with the spirit of ‘I can.’ Someone in the audience politely reminded the speaker that African ends in the same letters as American and that it was in the same spirit of ‘I can’ that Africans founded the ancient Egyptian Civilization that produced the only Wonders of the Ancient World still standing as Wonders in spite of all that the third millennium science and technology can do. That man in the audience was not Meki Nzewi but might well have been. Hardly is there an academic whose whole life – academic and extra academic – symbolizes the African spirit more than Meki. Indeed, it is an understatement to say that Meki is a strong defender of African music. He has a holistic approach to African music and African culture. His is the life of holistic Africanity. The

wonder is that in its promotion and stout defence, Meki has not burnt himself out with apoplexy. Thank God that it is not only so but also that he gathers disciples and followers as he rolls along.

Meki: The Person

Professor Meki Emeka Nzewi was born 70 years ago to the Nzewi family of Umuanuka, Otolu village in Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria. Nnewi has a culture of producing hard-nosed business men, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists like Ekene Dili Chukwu. But, Meki did not and does not have any strain of Shylock on which many people have stood to amass their wealth or pelf. He is humane, gentle and generous, unstinting in providing help to his friends, and careless of discomfort in helping or inspiring others. When I was a Junior Fellow at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1976/77), Meki gave me his Boys' Quarters, free of charge, thereby providing an accommodation as well as an opportunity to be exposed to his philosophy, practice and life. And his kindness can also be seen in his wife, Philo, his three sons (Atuegwu, Odyke and Chimdi) and two daughters (Ogochukwu and Ifeoma). Meki's family is making excellent progress.

In addition, he is self-effacing and his status, age or rank easily melts away when he is working as a member of a team or in the company of his colleagues. He has the knack of creating his students into his colleagues or even mentors, since he does not care from whom or from where a good idea emanates. Again, "Talent Without Borders."

A thoroughbred academic, Meki has supervised many Ph.D. and Masters' Degree Candidates in Nigeria and the Diaspora. Prof. Meki Emeka Nzewi is the author of over 10 books and more than 60 book chapters and journal articles, most of them published overseas. Besides, he has attended and presented over 100 papers at both national and international musical arts conferences.

Professor Meki Emeka Nzewi is a member of many professional, national and international bodies, namely:

1. International Society for Music Education (ISME) – Member/Board Member, 2002 – 2004.
2. International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) – Member.
3. Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASME) – President, 2001 – 2005.
4. Society for Ethnomusicology – Full Member.
5. Founder and Centre/Programme Director for the Centre for Indigenous Instrumental Music and Dance Practices (CIIMDA).
6. The Nigerian Society for Music Education and Research (NISMER) – Founder/Member.
7. Ama Dialog Foundation, Nsugbe – Co-Founder/Director.
8. Association of Nigerian Musicologists (ANIM) – Member.

Many people who know about Meki's tenacity of purpose and doggedness in fighting for a cause he considers just will be surprised when they meet the Meki who will not push himself beyond a certain point in fighting for his entitlement. In this situation, the person of Meki

that takes over is the one which believes that justice will eventually be just, no matter how long or what it takes.

We have made, albeit, a cursory survey of Professor Meki Emeka Nzewi as an Africanist supremo, teacher, composer, dramatist, scholar, motivator, concertizer, and cultural entrepreneur. What we have heard, known and seen makes it all the more harder for us to say *Ecce homo* – Behold the man – and to present the person behind the personality.

A national feather of honour is added to the several ones already in Meki's cap. Many more honours are coming. The cap fits, the feathers adorn it and the head wears it well. When we have role models which we look up to, we strive harder. By standing on the shoulder of giants, we see farther.

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