

MUSIC ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDBIRTH: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN TRADITIONAL SONGS IN IGBO LAND

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ABSTRACT

One basic characteristic of Nigerian culture is the integration of music in their social life. The musical culture of the Igbo's in particular is rich and varied because it is associated with songs and dances, worship, occupation, rites of passages, rituals, childbirth and is functional. Women are special creation instituted by nature for caring and procreation of children; the society relies so much on them because "no woman no cry (child)." Music becomes a potential instrument in their hands for celebration of birth, entertainment and communication. This work is significant because the status of our mothers is enhanced, their efforts recognized and honoured. The thrust of this paper examines women's participation in traditional music associated with childbirth with a view to identifying them for posterity.

INTRODUCTION

Child bearing in Igbo land is part of the matrimonial rites for both parents. It is in the lyrics of the songs sung at childbirth that one sees not only the value the Igbo places on children, but also the Igbo Philosophy on motherhood and child bearing. Continuity, both of the family and the community, can only be ensured through children. Children must therefore be taken good care of and their mothers properly rewarded. On the above Okechukwu (1999) affirms "for the Igbo, to beget a child is to have fulfilled one self, and to have done the greatest service to the community. Thus, the basic and most essential function of the wife is to bear children ..." (p. 140). He further states that "Any wife who performs this duty effectively has, in the eyes of the Igbo, not only fulfilled herself, but done maximum service to her community. "Such women traditionally are held in high esteem even if they do nothing else for the up keep of the family".

In a situation of a woman without a child, she would block for her husband the most authentic means of establishing himself as a full-fledged member of his community. Women therefore, are highly honoured in our society. They were first teachers of music and usually encouraged young children to participate in folk lore and stories in songs. Women chant salutations to announce the birth of a child and afterwards sing lullabies to them. They also sing as they carry out their house hold chores. This helps to implant the musical cultures in their children and to ensure the continuity of Igbo music. This paper therefore, highlights women's participation in traditional music associated with childbirth in Igbo land.

▪ **Musical components and organization**

In Nigeria, the relationship between music and dance as inseparable communicative artistic models cannot be overemphasized. Music and dance therefore are two musical

components associated with childbirth. Every song goes with a particular dancing style. In some parts of Igbo land, these songs are accompanied with local musical instruments like small wooden gong (*okpokolo*), metal gong-single or double (*ogene*) membrane drum, (*igba*) pot drums and varieties of idiophone instruments. These instruments facilitate their dancing steps to rhythm. Peggy (1976) in describing the rhythm of dance states that:

The rhythmic patterns of Nigerian traditional dances consciously express the social identity of the performers and implicitly reflect the physical conditions in which they live. The nature of the country, the climate, the work that people do...which become heightened and intensified into the rhythmic movement of their dances (p. 2).

Writing on the imports of music and dance to an African, Amaduime (1987) declares that:

African women (especially during the traditional times) participated actively in public rituals and ceremonies that incorporated dances and songs. This active involvement not only enabled them ‘gain access to the medium of communication’, but also made them a part of the ideology making process (p. 62).

Dance and music as expressive tools of self realization and self-assertion that lend credence to them by their users moved spencer (1981), to put forward this suggestion of Bailey: “One might view dance (as) a highly Appropriate idiom (of expression), because it can display precisely, the power, initiative and coordinates discipline that gives strength,...it can be over-learning. (Akunna, 2006: 6)

Music and dance are highly sensitive; they invigorate life and act as stimulant for healthy bodies. In Igbo society, the organization for such ensemble is open for married women in every community. It is exclusively feminine in character and every village has a woman head and a soloist who directs and sensitizes others on their performance techniques. Their guidelines are simple norms, which each participant most adhere to. Where ever they go, kola nut and palm wine or mineral are presented to them with cash which people offer to them voluntarily.

The Relevance of the Songs and Dances

Music and dance are so functional in Igbo traditional societies that when any music or dance is being performed, there are events going on. The importance attached to birth songs is much to be enumerated; the music and dances do not only provide for the release of emotion but act as social and artistic medium of communication. It can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions. Enekwe (1998: 6) has rightly observed that “besides group dance offering an excellent social integration, it helps one gain new friends, strengthen family ties, develop group loyalty, social cohesion and group solidarity”. Members of such organization enjoy and cherish performing and sharing common bonds and offers opportunity in sharing in

creative experiences and a good avenue for the expression of group sentiments. Music and dance result in group participation; a forum for generating co-operation and sentiments. Dance offers opportunity for freedom of expression and imaginative interpretation of rhythmic movements. Music and dance of such promote cultural transmission and cultural identity. The people's imaginative potentials are transformed into kinetic energy through different dancing styles. Songs and dance help develop and maintain physical fitness, body suppleness and function of the body system.

Performance of Birth Songs/Discussions.

The level of arts in a society reflects the level of development in that society. Okafor (1994) added that “Any society that wishes to develop fully must go into partnership, true partnership of ethos, with the artiste” (p. 1-2). In Igbo musical culture, women have affiliations of two kinds, as married women to the village of their husbands and as daughters to the village where they were born. When a woman delivers a baby, women on the side of the husband alert the parents of the woman that gave birth to a child with a song No. 1. “Uma mee”. This is a signal tune. The mother-in-law of the woman will carry powder as she communicates to people that her wife has delivered. She dishes out the powder to any woman that comes her way. See music (song) 1.

Igbo	Translation
<i>Uma mee...</i>	A cry of joy for safety arrival of a baby.
<i>Eziuumamo</i>	Good thing has happened
<i>Uma ziere ogeri yeziere, di ya</i>	An interesting thing has happened for the wife and the husband
<i>Eziuma mee</i>	Good thing has happened
<i>Uma Nwoke wo</i>	Happy arrival of a baby boy
<i>Uma nwanyi wo</i>	Happy arrival of a baby girl!
<i>Ezi uma mee.</i>	A happy arrival of a baby.

The song is poetic, rhetoric and recitative. The soloist renders it in a declamatory style announcing the arrival of a new born baby. Traditionally, a day is fixed for the ensemble of women to chant their songs of joy not only to inform their in-laws for the safe delivery of their daughter but to celebrate the birth. The following songs are accompanied with their traditional instruments to enhance their performance.

For this paper, eight of these birth songs as practiced in Igbo culture have been carefully selected for study.

Song No. 1. As seen above “*uma mee*” is significant. It signifies joy and happiness, an arrival of a new born baby, a prayer that has been answered. Where the soloist meets two or more women, there would be yodeling and ululation to cadence their overwhelming outburst of joy.

Song No. 2 *Gini dim n’obi* (What is in my heart). In Igbo land, there is nothing that fulfils that objectivity of marriage than “a child”. An ideal woman feels alleviated and highly honoured when children come.

Igbo	Translation
Call: <i>Gini dim n’obi</i>	what fills my heart?
Resp: <i>Nma</i>	Joy
Call: <i>Emepotum obi</i>	if my heart is revealed
Resp: <i>Ihe oma dim n’obi Odighi nkojo na dim n’obi</i>	Good things fills my heart There is nothing bad in my heart.
<i>Nma</i>	Joy

Overflow of joy fills the heart of all people at birth. The celebration of the child is the ultimate. The dance choreography is in circular formation while the dancing steps are same. The sense of balance and style of dancing amongst participants are the same. The mode of teaching and learning is through participatory observation.

Song No. 3. *Onurakwa nwa gbata* (Whoever hears the cry of a baby should come).

Igbo	Translation
<i>Onuru akwa nwa Mengwa ngwa a-e</i>	Whoever hears the cry of a baby should hasten up a-e
<i>Onye nuru akwa nwa Me ngwa ngwa, obughi Otuonye new nwa</i>	whoever hears the cry of a baby should hasten up a-e Not only an individual owns a child.

Child-bearing is a universal phenomenon, therefore whoever hears the cry of a baby should respond. This song helps to portray the importance attached to child-bearing in the Igbo traditional society. Ownership of a child is not restricted to the mother alone but a collective responsibility of all.

Song No. 4. Titled “*Ihe ebuzo aju bu nwa*” (What is asked first is the child).

Igbo	Translation
Call: <i>Ihe ebuzo aju nwokorobia</i> <i>Ihe ebuzo aju n'obu nwa</i>	The first question to a young man is the child. The first question is the child.
Resp: <i>Ihebuzo ajuo, ihebuzo aju n'obu nwa</i>	The first question, the first question, is the child.
Call: <i>Ihe ebuzo aju nwa agboghobia</i> <i>Ihe buzo aju n' obu nwa</i>	The first question to a young maiden is the child. The first question is the child

In Igbo society, without the child there will be no family, no future generation, the future would be extinct. The child creates hope for continuity and becomes the essence of marriage. The song is in Solo/chorus refrain pattern. The poem *Ihe oma na-adi mma* (Good thing is good) is set in Solo/chorus refrain pattern on three count ($\frac{3}{4}$) time signature.

Igbo	Translation
<i>Ihe oma na-adi nma Ihe oma e</i> (DC)	Good thing is good. Yes, good thing (DC)
<i>Onwu egbula nwayi N'afoime, komutarayi Nwa</i>	Death should not kill a Pregnant woman so that she will deliver a child
<i>K'ayi taba okporoko nuba manya ngwo</i>	So that we will eat stock fish and drink palm wine

This song is a prayer offered to a pregnant woman so that she will deliver safely, to enable women eat and celebrate. The coming of a new baby promotes eating and drinking.

Song No. 6 “*Ezinne Agamuyamu*” (Good mother, I will deliver) depicts readiness of a pregnant woman to safely and willingly deliver her baby.

Igbo	Translation
Call: <i>Ezinne Agamuyamu</i>	Good mother I will deliver it
Resp: <i>Nwa biam nukwu A gamamu ya werere</i>	If the baby descends to my waist I will deliver it freely

Womanhood indicates maturity, courage and determination in family up-bringing. Conceiving and bearing a child demands readiness of a greater responsibility which are inbuilt in them by nature.

The lyrics, *Omuru nwa leta nwa ya anya*. (Whoever owns a child should take care of her.) This song indicates important position a child holds in the community.

Igbo	Translation
<i>O muru nwa</i>	Whoever bears a child
<i>Leta nwa ya anya</i>	Should look after the child
<i>Nwa b' uwa oma</i>	The child is a good fortune.
<i>Onye muru nwa</i>	Whoever bears a child
<i>Leta nwa ya' anya</i>	Should look after the child
<i>Nwa biar' ezije</i>	The child is welcomed.

The next song called *Ma obughi ma nwa, onye g'e-nyem?* (If not for the sake of the child, who will give me?) This song exuberantly presents a catalogue of gifts a wife can receive or expect to receive after childbirth from well wishers; name them all. Mothers are disposed to be honoured *Onye ga enyem* (*Who will give me?*) reminds the husbands of their position to reciprocate the supreme gift of a child with worthy gifts to the wife.

Igbo	Translation
Call: <i>Ma obughi ma nwa</i>	If not for the sake of the child
Resp: <i>Onye ge'nyem?</i>	Who will give me?
Call: <i>Ukwu George</i>	George wrapper
Resp: <i>Onye ge'nyem</i>	Who will give me?
Call: Pankeki	Power (Pancake)
Including other items as one can imagine	

Each of the above songs has peculiar dancing steps and the compositions of the songs are spontaneous; the composers of the songs are not known since they are handed down from one generation to the other through oral tradition; and the people live with the music. Structurally, most of the songs are in call and response, and solo/chorus refrain pattern.

▪ **Impact of Social Change.**

In some localities in Igbo land, the rendition of birth songs is in the decline owing to some religious beliefs, Western influence and modernization. Some religious believes abhor traditional dances and if the lyrics of songs are not Christian based, they are regarded as fetish practices. Western influence and modernization have affected our culture. Records, VCD players and jumbo box music players are used to play music in child celebrations. Lack of social interest in promoting our cultural heritage has deduced the imports of our social commitment. Our birth songs are gradually forgotten and no longer in full practice.

▪ **Birth Songs and National Development**

Every woman in the world is a potential singer. Women traditionally are happy when they deliver after nine months of pregnancy. Nigeria as a nation benefits greatly in women's procreative potency because the population is enlarged and our generation extended with greater hope for the next century. Women all over the tribes of Nigeria have opportunities not only to be recognized or united but have a co-ordinate effort in building our socio-cultural heritage which calls for unity, peaceful co-existence in our different enclaves irrespective of tribal sentiments. Because a child is a national cake that is celebrated by both sexes; more efforts should be made to promote child care, which would bring about reduction of infant mortality. Healthy children would give birth to a healthy nation. Birth songs should be part of traditional songs that are taught in schools, this will instill love and respect for mothers by pupils in schools.

Summary and Conclusion

Childbirth is a blessing from God. Every woman is satisfied because, the period of childbirth is a period of celebration, a period of plenty, a period of rest and comfort. Women express their feelings through the medium of birth songs that uplift their spirit. The role of women in the society and their inclination to music and dance engenders healthy children and faithful women of our land. Our cultural heritage should be propagated and maintained to ensure continuity and our regard for children inculcated.

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