

DIDACTICS IN IGBO MINSTRELSY: CHRISTOPHER OKONKWO ASAH IN PERSPECTIVE

Daniel E. Eduzor

Post-graduate Student, Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Rev. Fr. Prof. Emmanuel C. Umezina

Peter University Achina-Onneh

Abstract

As food of the soul, music remains a veritable instrument for transformation. Music is used to pass crucial information, impart knowledge, soothe emotions, and affect lives. Four decades after the death of Christopher Okonkwo Asah (*Seven Seven*), this paper seeks to take a historical look at his life as a minstrel, who through the art of minstrelsy provided his audience with music that conveys moral messages. Comparing his music with that of the present day popular musicians and minstrels, the researcher came to a conclusion that music making for many is no longer about moral education but just to make money and market oneself for popularity. While pointing out the reasons why the situation is like that, he made recommendations for possible revitalization of Igbo minstrelsy as an avenue of teaching and counseling.

Introduction

Peaceful coexistence goes beyond living in peace with each other in a known geographical region or location, it incorporates the inclusiveness of all that it takes to maintain stable and healthy relationship in the society. Innumerable are the things that can nurture factors which can encourage peaceful coexistence in society. Music occupies a high rank on this. Being that music has the capacity to have either positive or negative effect on the character development of people, it becomes highly encouraging when music sheds positive influence on those who listen to it. With the positive influence of music on people who listen to it, instructing the people and moulding their character for the good of a given society becomes a very easy job. No doubt, the fact that music is known and understood in every culture of the world makes it a universal phenomenon. Music, therefore serves as a medium of values transfer from one generation to another.

For one to properly say that one has a sound knowledge of Christopher Okonkwo Asah as a minstrel in the music industry is a sure way of affirming that he was a traditional musician who employed a didactic approach to music making. In all things, *Seven Seven* leaves behind every of his music, viable lessons to be harvested by his audience. He had a dramatic way of using stories that are saturated with life-giving lessons to convey his messages through music.

This research is therefore aimed at giving a historical review of Okonkwo Asah's minstrelsy, outlining his strengths in the music industry as teacher and singer.

Statement of the Problem

Minstrelsy in Igboland was a revered art. Due to the special position in society, people took it seriously and as such, minstrels were well respected. With time however, the regard for minstrels began to dwindle, calling for change. It became not just expedient but a matter that demanded urgent attention such that the trappings of a near-beggar status are removed from the image of a minstrel.

The electronic media and Western popular music took a heavy toll off minstrelsy as it was practiced in the past. New minstrels began to make hybridizations to adjust to new trends.

Methodology

Data were gathered from different sources. These included conversational interviews, observations and review of related literature. Through interviews, conversations were held with the purpose of gathering data about the research study. These interviews have the least number of questions as they concentrated more on normal conversations but with an underlying motif.

Individual participants and few times, groups were gently approached to gain as much information as the researchers possibly could for the question at hand.

Description of Minstrelsy in Igboland

The word '*Minstrel*' originated from the Old French '*Menestrel*' which means 'entertainer' or 'servant', a derivative of Latin '*Ministerialis*' (servant), medieval understanding was that of a minstrel as musician or singer who travelled around and entertained noble families. In Europe, we first had people like this in the medieval ages. They were more of professional story tellers or poets who performed at places and gatherings. They were later co-opted and retained at the royal gardens and highly placed courtyards as servants as well as entertainers of the Lords and Masters. Down the lane of history and with the event of time, they were replaced by the Troubadours. As such having lost this previously held position, a good number of them became wandering minstrels who went about performing in the streets up until the middle of Renaissance period and beyond. Grout (1980) classifies them as professional musicians who wander either singly or in groups from place to place, gaining a precarious livelihood by singing, playing and performing tricks. In a bid to affirm that minstrelsy is now found globally, Orajaka & Unegbu, (2010) noted that minstrels now appear in societies as singers, musicians, or reciters of poems, with the characteristic of itinerancy for performances.

Minstrelsy was not differently viewed in Igboland. There was a trend in Igbo traditional music that has a perfect resemblance with the European minstrelsy. To this, Orajaka & Unegbu, (2010) when giving a description of the origin of Igbo Minstrelsy historically noted that the first instance may have begun at the turn of the twentieth century when solo musicians began travelling from place to place seeking for patronage and singing at festivals.

Apart from this, there existed another culture of musicians who perform on masks. Being behind the mask provided a high sense of protection and security for such musicians who use that platform to offer corrections to erring members of the community. However, this custom of enjoying the anonymity of being behind the mask while pouring tirades and admonitions on both the culpable, delinquent and errant members of the community lasted not for a long period of time. This was the values that emanated from the revered but tough stages of civilization. Consequently, as Igbo culture became more expressive and modern civil law provided some level of protection, some individuals were encouraged to openly make such criticisms which they earlier preferred to enjoy the comfort of being behind spirit mask while on same mission (Orajaka & Unegbu, 2010). They went ahead to say that a Minstrel in Igboland is a resourceful, knowledgeable and ambidextrous person who holds his audience spellbound and through his songs, issues moral words as well as warnings and advice to people (Orajaka & Unegbu, 2010). Minstrelsy is therefore not just a technical vocal art but also an important musical expression for most Igbo communities. Consequently, Okafor (2005) as cited in Nwobu (2017) noted that minstrelsy music was one of the earliest genres of vocal music known to the Igbo.

In her words, Nwobu in 2017 summarized it by saying that minstrelsy is an essential and effective agent for social engagements and other human activities (Nwobu, 2017). As a result, minstrels in the traditional Igbo society are spokespersons and custodians of law and order in the society. Simply put, minstrel music serves as an in-built cohesive force in the Igbo social organization. Hence, one can easily uncover from the stated facts about the Igbo culture and history, the reflection of that which was tagged minstrelsy in the European music of the Middle Ages.

Okonkwo Asah (*Seven Seven*) and his Musical Career

Christopher Okonkwo Asah popularly known as *Seven Seven* developed such an amiable musical talent very early in life. Facts readily available proved that he produced meaningful output in the domain of music to the level of an adult expert while still under the age of fifteen. With all that was seen in him, it became therefore clear that he had a burning talent in music, an art inherited from his parents who were renowned musicians. He was described as one who just within a short stint in his music career, began to blaze the trail, using his music to bring Enugwu Ukwu his home town, further to International limelight, particularly in the world of traditional high life music (Okoye, 2019).

In an interaction with one of his kinsmen, I was meant to understand that within a short period of time, one of his maiden album titled *'Long John'* was launched, thousands of copies were sold and due to his outstanding performance and mastery of the *'Egwu Ekpili'*, he was accorded the honour of "*Eze Egwu Ekpili*", the king of "*Ekpili Music*" (S. Onwudinjo, personal communication, January 20, 2022). He combined both local and foreign instruments, particularly guitar and *ekpili*, which differentiated his music from that of his contemporaries in the world of minstrelsy. Most of his instruments could not be seen anywhere because he constructed them himself, and that marked him out among his peers in the music industry. In all, he had over sixteen (16) albums before his demise.

History has it that his sweet and melodious musical career took him to many countries in the world. Indeed he was loved by many, as an entertainer, musician and a person with high sense of humour. Relying on a comprehensive knowledge of him, Okoye (2019) carefully noted that 'Christopher's flamboyance, creativity, aura, skilfulness, foresight, intelligence and humour made him a unique musician and contributed to his excellence in the music world, such that up till today, his music is still a delight to many'. Regrettably he died at the age of thirty five (35).

Okonkwo Asah's Path to Encouraging Quality Life through Music

For the Greek philosophers, music is a paradigm of harmonious order reflecting the cosmos and the human soul. Music is actually seen to have some therapeutic benefits, even medicinal powers over physical and mental illnesses (Lyravlos, 2017). This is a revelation of the fact that music could have a beneficial effect on both the mind and body of listeners. Consequently, Odunuga and Yekini-Ajenifuja (2018) rightly averred that good music is expected to stimulate the development of attentiveness, co-operation, relaxed and interactive listening, self-confidence, self-esteem, cultural values, interpersonal relationships, aesthetic sensitivity and evaluation. This is another way of saying that any music that does not enhance any of the listed values is not suitable for consumption (Odunuga and Yekini-Ajenifuja 2018). In other words, to ensure quality life and peaceful coexistence in the society nurtured and maintained by good music, appreciating music with such inherent values remains the watchword.

On this note, it is pertinent to mention that going down the lane of history in respect to reviewing Okonkwo Asah's music, one readily discovers that his music stimulates the development of attentiveness, co-operation, relaxed and interactive listening, self-confidence, self-esteem, cultural values, interpersonal relationships, aesthetic sensitivity and evaluation. In his music, one sees an indispensable tool for infusing patriotism, challenge, dynamism and animation, providing entertainment opportunities and encouraging social interaction. It can be deduced from the lyrics of his songs that his target was to bring about transformation in the society. He was out to bring about moral, psychological and social transformation through music. Hence, he spent time dishing out warnings to the erring members of the community. He also praised the good seen in people, a proper way of encouraging others. Hence, he offered his listeners the opportunity of receiving proper instructions through his music. In other words, he strove to let people be attuned with the reality of life while he dealt with life challenging issues like, poverty, sickness, hardship, barrenness, bitterness in marriage and death.

Review of Selected Compositions of Christopher Okonkwo Asah.

Right from the time he started developing his musical career, Okonkwo Asah steadily and with determined effort, continued to create great musical masterpieces. Below is the list of some of Okonkwo Asah's Minstrelsy music.

S/N	SONG TITLE	THEMATIC INTERPRATION
1	Egwu mu na Nnem	In support of the fact that no one is an Island. For peaceful coexistence, an honest contribution of everyone is important.
2	Power Mike	It pays to accompany hardwork with persistence, perseverance and trust in God.
3	Blackie and Joseph	It causes more harm than good to be desperate. Contentment is the key to success.
4	Okweluike na Nnebife	Repercussions of being evil
5	Ibu okuku Kalili	It is good to be part of the decision making process of your society. Being absent may entail settling for a decision that may affect you negatively.
6	Nwata Funanya Okwe	The evil of jealousy: It is evil to treat others badly especially the less privileged
7	Long John & Cycle Seller	The evil that men do live with them. Being mischievous does not benefit anyone.
8	Chadwick	The importance of fidelity in marriage
9	Augustine Na Mary	Family planning ensures the existence of relative peace in the family.
10	Veronica Na Okechukwu	There is danger in living a wayward life. Good to wise, applying self control in the things that has to do with the pleasures of the flesh.
11	Ije Seven Seven	Narrates the pain he encountered at the death of a bosom friend who was murdered.
12	Isi Asili	The danger of paying non critical attention to gossip.

13	Ife Njikoka Ji Bili	Appreciating his kinsmen who tirelessly worked hard to see that people got back on their feet after the civil war
14	Olobulu	The danger of making hasty decisions knowing full well that experience is the best teacher.
15	School boy na agadi	The reward of evil is evil
16	Chioze	Whatever is bad is bad (ife di njo di njo)

A Detailed Outline of Two Compositions of Christopher Okonkwo Asah

For the purpose of this study and for easy comprehension, I will only give in details the lyrics of two of Okonkwo Asah's works; 'Egwu mu na nnem' and 'Power Mike'

Egwu mu na Nnem

The song which is in a *Call and Response* structure comes with the response as notated here.

EGWU MU NA NNEM
(Response)

Doh is F
Andante ♩ = 120

Ome__ luigbo_ Nne mo n nem__ egbunemo

O melu Igbo Nnem oo, Nnem egbune mu o

Okonkwo Asah 2x

Response: Mama mu anwa go

My mother has done her best

Muta mu wee nye ndi Nigeria

She gave birth to me as a Nigerian

Na eche nti ka ihu ka mu na nnem si wee mee competition

Listen carefully to know how I engaged in a competition with my mother

O nwelu ofu ubosi emeketelu na uwa nwa nne mulu mu wee kpowa ni mu

On a very good day my mother called me

Mama o gini ka I na kpolu mu, nne mu wee si n'nya na agukali mu na egwu

And I asked to know why she was calling me, and she said she sings better than me

M si ya kedu ife iji si na gi nwa bu nwanyi na agukali mu n'egwu

I asked to know why she claimed to sing better than me

Nne mu si na nya nwa na agu egwu umu agbala

My Mother said she sings on the life of young women

M si ya thank you very much

And I thanked her for that

O si mu jee nodu ana nye mu order, n'onya na agukali mu na egwu

She ordered me to sit down, shunned me saying that she sings better than me

Nne mu si mu ife mu ji wee si na Seven Seven na agukali ya n'egwu

My mother asked to know why I am insisting that I sing better than her

M si ya na Seven Seven na agu egwu umu ikorobia

I told her that Seven Seven sings mostly on the life of young men

M si ya adi ama ama Nwoke gwoo ogwu, nwanyi gwoo ogwu fa na bo wee dolu

I said to her, in any case, if a man and a woman prepares a charm differently

Ogwu nwanyi gwolu nwee ike I no rue mgbe aro, aro na abo

A charm prepared by a woman lasts not more than two years

Ogwu nwoke gwolu na ele elekele kputumkpu
A charm prepared by a man lasts forever
Nwoke mu Edwin nyebe mu jita ka mu na aguli gi egwu
My friend Edwin please play to the guitar while I sing
Mu na nnem agutaka egwu na mpiti kwelu
We sang to the amazement of our audience
Ife nunwa kalia mu na nne mu anyi na abo wee menu competition
We sang to the point that we have to engage in a competition
A puta ubosi Nkwochi Ubaku onye obodo anyi na eme ozo na be fa
On a day that my kinsman Nkwochi Ubaku was to take the prestigious ozo title
Nkwochi Ubaku si na mu na nne mu ga abia egwu na be fa
Nkwochi Ubaku invited I and my mother to sing at the occasion in their residence
Mbosi mu na nne mu gulu nyabu egwu, in the year 1947
It was in the year 1947
Ndi be anyi o bu aro afu ka chi afu jiri na ehie
It was on that year we experienced eclipse of the sun
But I can't tell ma o bu mu na nne mu gunyuchalu anyanwu
But I can't tell if the eclipse happened because of our singing
Mu na nne mu agukata egwu na mpiti kwelu
We sang to the amazement of our audience
Nwoke anyi bialu be ya kwadebe ka nya nebe anyi egwu
Our host got prepared to appreciate us
O kpulu oke ehi n'owa nwa wee kpunye Nne mu
He gave my mother a bull
Ife oji kpunye nne mu ehi bu na umu nwanyi na elinu ajo anu
He gave my mother a bull because women are very good at consuming beef
Mu na nne mu agukata egwu na mpiti kwelu
We sang to the amazement of the people
Nwoke anyi bialu be ya kwadebe ka nya nebe anyi egwu
Our host got prepared to appreciate us
O wee bulu ugbo amala, na amala si mu bulu
He gave a boat as a gift
Afa nne mu bu Mmeri nwa Catechist na Adazi
My Mother's name is Mary from Adazi
Nya ka mu na nne mu ji wee gukata egwu mpiti kwelu
We sang to the amazement of the people
Mu na nne mu wee guchaa egwu afu wee kwadobenu una
At the end of competition, we got set to go home
Mu na nne mu wee naputa nu na ikpele mmili
We came to the bank of the river
M wee bulu ugbo mu wee bulu amala sugbunye nu na mmili nu
I took my boat into the river
I kilisie ka mu bu Seven Seven nwatakili anwa si akpa nya bu ugbo
You will be amazed at the expertise I exhibited in paddling the boat
Aka nni mu na ada sapalala, aka ekpe mu na ada so mmagwululu

*Both my right and left hand was so good at the art
M nyalu ugbo nyalu amala naba na uno 3x
I swiftly paddled my boat heading to my hometown
Nne mu wee nolu na enu ani wee kpokue nwa ya
At the bank of the river stood my mother who kept calling on me for assistance
Seven Seven nwa m na ilaputa mu oo 2x
Seven Seven my son, you have betrayed your mother
Welu ugbo afu I datalu bia yiri efi m datalu
Come down with your boat and pick me up with my bull
I raa mu na efi mu anyi ato ebe afu anyi jelu
If you abandon me and my bull here, I will have no option than to remain here
Nne mu akwakata akwa ebele je meruwe mu obu mu
My mother cried to the point that I began to feel for her
M tua reverse like this ka mu jee rite nne mu
I turned back to go and pick up my mother
M rue na ikpele mmiri si nne mu bata na ugbo
Getting at the bank of the river I asked her to enter the boat
Nne mu wee bulu efi ya bata n'ugbo afu m datalu
My mother came into the boat with the bull
M vulu nne mu na efi o datalu naba obodo anyi
I took my mother and her bull and headed to our hometown
M rue na mmili ndi Nawfia na akpo ezu nwa obunagu
I got to Nwaobunagu lake of Nawfia town
M takie time wee machie brake
I took time to dock my boat
Welu okpa na abo gbalu mu na nne mu afu na ani
I and my mother can down from the boat
Chee ka koolu unu ofu ife
Listen to my story
Mu na nne mu wee rue na obodo anyi ana akpo Enugwu-Ukwu
We arrive Enugwu Ukwu our town
Okwa nu Enugwu-Ukwu ka anyi na abo si jeenu
It was from our town Enugwu Ukwu that initially left for he journey
O bulu na mu eyitere nne mu, nne mu ato ebe afunu
If I did not pick up my mother, she would have remained there
O bulu na mu eyitere efi, efi afu ato ebe afu a datalu ya
If I did not pick up her bull, she would have remained there
O kwa etu afu ka munwa si wee meli nne mu emeli
That was how I defeated my mother in the competition*

Power Mike

*Ejegom egwu nwe na coal camp Enugu, nje succeedienye
I have performed this music at coal camp in Enugu and I succeeded
Webata egwu nwe n'Awkunanaw Enugu, nje succeedizieni
I brought this music to Awkunanaw Enugu, and I succeeded
Wee bata Asata Enugu a maro mu na ndi Asata bu ndi olu oyibo*

I came to Asata without the knowledge that the residents were more of civil servants

Ebe avu K'ubiamu no wee nyuom anya

That was where I suffered terrific lack

Kama na o nwerokwa ife melu ye, o nwerokwa ife melu ye

But there is nothing wrong at all, nothing at all

Because I can tell you,

If you try you no succeed, try to try again

By God's ability you can survive it

In the right hour and in you ..., Fada Ikegwuonu Benjamin na Oraukwu

Ife ike n'eme ebuka

The enormity of power is overwhelming

Power Mike na Neni

Power Mike of Neni

Power Mike of Nigeria

Even in the world as a whole - o

Nya na onye Greek gbalu mgbu na sports stadium na Enugu

He wrestled with a Greek in Enugu sports stadium

{fe ike na eme erike

The enormity of power is overwhelming

Na first round, fa na abo gbaa draw

In the first round, they had equal scores

Second round, fa na abo gbaa draw

In the second round, they had equal scores

Ife ike na eme erike

The enormity of power is overwhelming

To the third round, that onye Greek na akpa ajo ike

Third round: the Greek wrestler is overpowering

Hitie Power Michael, hitienye na the bad junction

Power Mike was badly injured by the Greek Wrestler

Wee puta na fourth round, Power Mike wee dinelu na ana wee bulu Greek n' isi

In the fourth round, Power Mike laid down and lifted the Greek Wrestler

Tuo nya na ana, ubulu onye Greek gbawaa

At the time he was struck, the Greek wrestler's sustained a serious brain damage

E dulu je na special hospital Enugu, ebe afu ka o no nawalu

They took him to a specialist hospital in Enugu where he gave up the ghost

Ife ike na eme erike nne

The enormity of power is overwhelming

Power Mike bu Alusi Odumodu

Power Mike is a great warrior from the gods

The Didactic Nature of Christopher Okonkwo Asah's Works

Okonkwo Asah made sure that none of his songs was published without a proper reflection of a moral lesson for his audience. He was more of an aficionado in the domain of Igbo minstrelsy. And so, even now that it is over four decades of his demise, people who knew him while he was active continued to testify that he was an exceptional singer whose musical talent was out of the ordinary. As regards

music, some of his contemporaries refer to him as a man with the golden lips, exhibiting an extraordinary power of expression and conviction. Consequently, he was respected, revered and adored by many because of his singleness of purpose, teaching and promoting morality through music. Accordingly, people listened to him not only to be fascinated and entertained but most apparently to acquire new perspectives, receive creative directives and gather fresh wisdom.

A clear review of his songs revealed that he was very skillful at pushing down his lessons for his audience with fictions that appear through storytelling, a best way for easy assimilation. In such a way, the values of the society were conveyed through words. He highlighted the values and culture of his people, *Ndi Enugwu-Ukwu* in some of his songs, a visible sign of patriotism. As a minstrel, his words determined the moral rectitude of actions, ethical and unethical behaviours, do's and don'ts as it affects the lives of people in a given community.

Following the rate at which people enthusiastically crave to listen to *Seven Seven's* song even now that it is already four decades after his death, one can rightly say that his words actually outlived him. Though absent, his presence is always felt in his music. The circumstances surrounding his sudden death in 1978 reflected the position Okafor took in 2005 when he succinctly averred that at times, authentic minstrels were hunted down and killed because of their truthful stance. Such threats to life come from perpetrators of the vices which the musicians oppose through their music (Okeke 2023). Be that as it may, at thirty five (35), one can boldly say that Okonkwo Asah contributed heavily to the promotion of Igbo minstrel music by making it the domain of cultural norms and ethos.

In a bid to offer social, psychological, spiritual and moral assistance to the people, it can easily be deduced from his songs that Okonkwo Asah was a promoter of just and honest sense of communality where the contribution of everyone is valued. As a result, he called for active participation of every member of any giving society in the decision making process of the society for being absent may entail settling for a decision that may affect one negatively. He believed so much in hard work especially when it is accompanied by persistence, perseverance and total trust in God. Hence, one who believes in contentment as the key to success finds it easier to understand that it causes more harm than good to be desperate. While considering the plight of the less privileged, he maintained that it is evil to treat others badly. And as such, he never failed to remind his audience that those who perpetrate evil do not go unpunished. Hence, there is no benefit in being mischievous. While speaking on family life, he stressed the importance of fidelity in marriage union, family planning as a guarantee to the existence of relative peace in the family. More still, he maintained that being wise entails applying self control in the things that have to do with the pleasures of the flesh. Unlike minstrels who naturally sought patronage in wealthy people, the role of criticism never became denuded in *Seven Seven*. He practically touched all facets of human life while trying to make sure that a good moral standard was maintained.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout his life time, minstrelsy in the hands of the gifted and talented Christopher Okonkwo Asah remained an avenue of teaching and counseling. He was very skilful at conveying the values of the society and insisting on keeping them through his music. Such a figure like Christopher played an important role in a society where people most likely sought for reasons to misbehave at the slightest opportunity. No doubt, the didactic nature of his songs singled him out as one out of many and so, his sudden death at the age of thirty five was a colossal loss to Igbo society

Regrettably, Igbo minstrelsy is presently at its low ebb. Hence, one may be forced to ask the following questions: What is the driving force behind those who take up music making as their profession today? What motivates listeners, and why do people listen to one kind of music or the other? Can one say that the music of the present day generation covers all ages and groups of people? Is it possible to produce a music that may cut across all age brackets? If it covers every age bracket, will it cover all contexts?

In answer to these questions, it must be understood that gone are the days when music making involved a clear touch on people's culture, reflected on what it means to live and die well and concentrated on all it takes to give meaning to human life. Music making for so many is no longer about giving meaning to life but about making money and marketing oneself for popularity. Consequently, so long as generation changes and people vary, music making will always appear in different shapes and forms, meeting up with certain needs of man and satisfying not all our quests and desires.

To arrive at that which will offer the best to the people irrespective of the changing times, we must have to seriously embark on the revitalization of the Igbo culture; a culture that emphasizes values such as communal life, family love, respect for elders, respect for life, and hospitality. In such an environment where these enduring values are appreciated and practiced, children grow up to protect the shared values in all areas of life they find themselves, music making not excluded. With such a renewal of interest in Igbo culture and language, young and talented artistes will be better inspired.

It is also possible to organize competitions in the art of minstrelsy in our local communities. So many talents are hidden, waiting to be fished out. Such persons can only be discovered for further training through some of these means.

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