

INTERROGATING MUSIC IN FESTIVALS: ORU-OWERRE FESTIVAL OF OWERRI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL IN FOCUS

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Introduction

Music, is a cultural expression determined, moulded, interpreted and coloured by culture and the cultural environment of a people. It is generally defined as an organized sound. Its concept varies from one society to another, hence it is necessary to understand what sounds and kind of behaviour different societies regard as music. According to some school of thought, “sociologically, the concept of music is defined by the society and it is concerned with the organized way in which people behave toward one another when they listen, produce or reproduce those sounds which they perceive as music”. Music is an organized sound that is generally acceptable and appreciated by the populace. It enhances spatial intelligence in new-born and encourages self-discipline and diligence traits that carry over into intellectual pursuit that lead to effective study and work habits. Music is viewed as a product of the behaviour of any human group hence, the sound properties and non-sound elements organized from the human group behaviors are governed by the convention peculiar to the society.

Music at *Oru-owerre* Festival plays utilitarian role and covers social, political and religious events. No festival can be judged successful without an accompaniment of music which depicts the mood of the people in relation to the ceremony. Music as action in motion can be interpreted from the faces, the steps and gestures of the dancers and the celebrating community. Man’s need for entertainment through music is achieved when the content is meaningful. Nzewi (1993), posits that, “Musical meaning starts with making musical sense and ends

with effective or affective communication. Thus, musical sense is how the quality of the features of music conforms to prevalent models of texture, structure and form in any culture”(3). Okafor (2005), opines that, “people digest and consume music as entertainment while it leaves a mark on the psyche that redirects them towards a new personality and a new activity” (1-2) The above statement confirms the significance of music as a common medium of communication and expression in African cultures. Music is used in certain customary activities of a people in continuity of their yearly exercises. Music hence, re-establishes people’s relationship with their creator, ancestors, gods, heroes, etc. It expresses values through the song text and unravels secret languages of many hidden activities. In the African traditional music practice; music and dance complements each other. Ajewole (2011), opines that,

music may warn, counsel, decry, moralize, document, extol, mobilize or edify as the case may be. It may even engender healing revival and stabilization for the broken hearted and the psychologically disoriented. (169)

The significance of music and dance cannot be overemphasized. Okafor (2005), further states that, “as long as music in ceremonies is ancient in origin, music becomes a vital instrument for the transmission and continuity of the culture”. He also states that “without music, those ceremonies and rituals and festivals will not be complete and without music, there will be no easy way of passing on the dances and all the attendant parts of the dance”(3). He thus affirms that “music is a living social and cultural reality, which must be as relevant to the life and needs or aspirations or identity of the people as culture itself”(1). Onuora-Oguno (2006), makes it explicit that “music is part of culture in the sense that culture is understood more by the study of its music, and music better appreciated by the study of culture”(90-98).

A Brief on the History and Origin of Owerri People

Though many writers have written about the history of Owerri, but from the compilation of these writings, historically, Owerri was founded by Ekwem, the first Son of a well-known Chief Arugo, who had five sons and some daughters in the kindred of Umualum of Umuorri in Uratta town. The five sons of Arugo were the fore-fathers of the five towns of Alaenyi, namely Owerri, Awaka, Ihitte, Egbu and Naze. After the death of their father, as tradition demands, the costliest item for the

burial which is a cow must be provided by Ekwema, the first son. But since Ekwema was not rich enough to provide a cow, his brother Ndumoha did.

When parts of the victual were being shared, Ndumoha attempted to take the heart, the eyes and the ears, which were customarily, reserved portions for the head of the family. Ekwema, who would not sell his birth-right, pointed it out that he was the eldest son of Arugo and sued Ndu to the court of Oha-Uratta. Thus, the committee concluded that *Oji akulie nna ya, O wughi Nwaopara gburu ya* (whoever has the means should bury his father, it is not the first son that killed him) and awarded the right of claim of the heart, the eyes and the ears of the cow to Ekwema. When the decision was announced before all observers and the parties to the case, Ekwema declared: *Awu m owere, ewerela m lhemara m aka*, which means 'I am the taker, I have taken what rightly belongs to me'. He was henceforth known as and called Owerre. By which the town he founded is known until this day, but adulterated to Owerri by the British colonialist.

The Concept of Festival in Relation to Oru-Owerre

The concept of festivals has emerged from the desire of celebrating what we have in our hands and what we have achieved. The celebrations also display our hopes for what we want in future and in the time to come. The last day and the first day of a year in any calendar are celebrated all over the world. This signifies that something has ended and a new era is beginning. Vidal, T.(1989) defines festival as "an annual event or anniversary in remembrance or commemoration of the gods, spirits, ancestors, kings or a historical occurrence" (111-128). Ekwueme (2005) in explaining the concept of festival defines it as:

a celebration or a feast or an event featuring music, dance, theatre, masquerades and many others usually organized in the same venue once in a year. Furthermore, they are landmarks in all societies as they mark special and remarkable events that had occurred in the history of any community. (158-171)

Communities usually set aside important days for rest and in commemoration of certain events or heroes of their past. Festival in the context of this discussion, according to Ehiwario (2005), is referred to as "any event that is based on a group's communion that manifests the ceremonial behavioural ingenuities of an

interest group” (62-73). He went on to say that “... it is an occasion during which members of a society demonstrate their ingenuities in dancing, singing and artistic designs” (62-73). In *Oru-owerre* Festival men and women exhibit their talents through singing, dancing, costume designs, decorative and other creative arts. They serve aesthetic purposes in their culture. Mokwunyei (2005) in her explanation of the importance of *Aniocha Oshimili* Festival, explains that “the *Aniocha Oshimili* Festival is to ensure the preservation of the past that would otherwise be lost and forgotten” (45-51). She explains further that, “the past is embedded in a people’s history and for a whole society to lose its sense of history would be tantamount to giving up its civilization” (45-51). *Oru-owerre* Festival acts as a carrier of culture as observed in their songs which are filled with the cultural tradition of the Owerri community; and remind the younger ones of the need to preserve their old customs and transmit the values and beliefs of the people to future generation. The music performs the role of motivator by rallying the community during these traditional displays.

Oru-owerre, the most crowd pulling, important and colourful traditional annual festival in Owerre Nchi-ise, (literally the five compounds of Owerre town) is the very Owerri people’s national day, likened to the independence day of a nation. The Festival is a socio-cultural bond which exists between the celebrating groups and their ancestor, Ekwem Arugo, the founder of Owerri. The celebration of the Ekwem’s Passover with his family, though with sadness for being forced out of his ancestral land, and of joy for the divine salvation of his entire family from the bloody hands of those who supped with him, marked the institution of *Oru-owerre*. Music was used in their celebration and this stabilized and continued the culture to the present day. The *Oru-owerre* Festival, an action packed festival that is full of songs and dance, is one of such cultural events that reveals its great significance as religious ritual and potentialities in music and dance. The festival is very popular among the people of Owerri in Imo State. It is celebrated every year because it is an important cultural event in the lives of the people.

Role of Music in Oru-Owerre Festival

Music is indispensable because in it, life is meaningful and harmonious; activities move sweetly and smoothly and culture is felt. Members in a community act in harmony and unity in which by virtue music harmonizes. Music at *Oru-owerre* Festival provides family entertainment for audiences of different cultural

backgrounds and helps to achieve the Owerri growth and development strategies in the cultural development front. Music provides an entertainment function in all societies. For its symbolic representation, aesthetic enjoyment, communicative function, physical response (as in dance), it has a function of enforcing conformity to social norms which is found in their songs where members are called to order. *Oru-owerre* Festival of Owerri *Nchi-ise* is a mechanism with which the Owerri people protect their culture and belief from deterioration. They have things they live by: cherished traditions, sacred secrets and respected institutions that ensure that any member who violates any of them is severely punished. Through miming, costumes and other identifying marks, the community gets to know the hidden misdeed and offences, vile acts of some people they had held in esteem. Music in *Oru-owerre* festival is used as a paradigm in this regard.

Okafor, R.C. (2005) opines that “music is a living social and cultural reality, which must be as relevant to the life and needs or aspirations or identity of the people as culture itself” (1-28). *Oru-owerre* Festival acts as a carrier of culture as observed in their songs which are filled with the cultural tradition of the Owerri community; reminding the younger ones of the need to preserve their old customs and transmit the values and beliefs to future generation. The music performs the role of motivator by rallying the community during this traditional display.

Song Texts in Oru-Owerre Festival

In African music, song text can act as a historical commentary or culture indicator. Song texts comment on social issues in a clear statement to the understanding of all. The intelligible message the *Oru-owerre* song texts carry are made clear of through them and are important avenues for communication to the audience. Nketia, J.H.K.(1979) explains that “songs serve as an avenue of verbal communication, a medium of creating personal and social experience... themes of songs tend to centre around events and matter of common interest and concern to members of the community or social group within it”.(14)

One of the most obvious sources for the understanding of human behavior in connection with music is the song text. Texts are taken to mean language behavior rather than music sound itself but are an integral part of music that is clear-cut evidence that the language used in connection with music always differ from that of ordinary discourse. The importance in the discussion above is that

through song texts, thoughts and ideas are expressed freely and words which cannot be used in a normal situation, have license and information which is not easily accessible are obtained. The action embedded in *Oru-owerre* song texts, in an ordinary context, are not used as a day-to-day language but carefully during occasions especially at festivals to disseminate ideas/information to the members of the community. The songs take different forms. The subject matter may be a warning to evil-doers, advice, supplication, encouragement, ceremonial and educative, and those purely meant for entertainment. Songs in praise of chiefs fostered political loyalty. Songs in praise of places express the sentiments for the homeland. In a negative way, songs of ridicule and scandal were at once a punishment to culprits and a warning to others. Through song texts, myths, legends and history are found. The text provides the devices needed to connect the special features and concerns of a people's culture, thereby using music as a paradigm for providing a framework for permissive language. Idolor, E.(2002) observes that:

The didactic function of music is effective through logical organization of lyrics and performance practice. Some lyrics are presented in direct or indirect satire though such speech figures as simile, metaphor ... to convey an observation or/and opinion to a witness/audience.(1-9)

In other situation, other activities in performance, teach both viewers and participants the coded lessons. In a nutshell, *Oru-owerre* songs function as a didactic instrument.

Types of Music/Songs Performed in Oru-Owerre Festival

The music of Nigeria includes many kinds of folk and popular music, some of which are known worldwide. The style of each folk music is related to each ethnic group in the country, each with their own techniques, instruments and songs. Oguoma, (2010) posits that:

Music is not just a mere fun or experience but an integral part of man's life: identifying ethnic groups, building and educating the rustics, communicating social, and political developments, harnessing economic growth, expressing feelings of worship,

sacrifice, adoration, obedience and gratitude, spying, broadcasting, censoring or commending taboos and norms respectively, processing the power and cultural legacy of housing the history of the people, promoting the mental and spiritual healing, celebrating life and finally mourning lost life (139).

The types of music performed in *Oru-owerre* ranges from traditional highlife-bongo music, all having their unique characteristics. All the traditional music in Owerri are virtually dance music. A good number of them are *Alijah* and *Akwasa* cultural dance group, *Ojionu* masquerade dance, and other female adult music groups used in birth events. These songs are performed in Owerri dialect. According to Oguoma(2010). "The Owerri dialect is a tone language. The sound is colorfully romantic and the texts very philosophical. Their speech tone and melody blend well together, naturally musical and its message always intelligible"(145).

Some of the Songs Performed in Oru-Owerre Festival

Ojorima

annonymous

6

O-jo-ri-ma le - le - le, o-jo-ri-ma le - le - le o-ru kpoa-nyia-ga o-jo-ri-ma.

O-jo-ri ma le - le - le, o-jo-ri ma le - le - le o-rukpoayiaga o-jo-ri ma.

1. OJORIMA

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Ojorima le le le, ojorima le le le</i>	Ojorima le le le, ojorima le le le
<i>Oru kpo anyi aga, ojorima</i>	Oru is taking us along ojorima

Anyi duru ishi

anonymous

A - nyi du - ru - u ishi lee, u - mu'a - kae - kwe - ma, shio - nye
 mee ga - ni mee gbuo - nwe ya, a - kam a - kwu ya ma - ma Be - sien ua - nu - lao - lu m
 i - shi mee mee - kpo - lee, A - do - le - be ma - ne - beu - mua - kae - kwe -
 ma n - nuo - rii kpo - lee A - do - le - be ma - ne - beu - mua - kae - kwe - ma n - no - rii kpo - lee.

2. ANYI DURU NU ISHI (WE SWORE AN OATH)

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Anyi duru nu ishi lee umuaka Ekwema</i>	We swore an oat children of Ekwema
<i>Shi-onye mee gani mee gbuo</i>	That anyone who thus betrays himself, my hands are not part of it

<i>onwe ya aka m akwu ya</i>	
<i>Mama Besie unu anula olu muo</i>	Mama Besie have you heard my voice
<i>Ishi mmee kpole</i>	What do you want me to do
<i>Adol ebe, ma n'ebe</i>	Adol have cried, I have cried
<i>Umuaka ekwema nnu orii kpole?</i>	Ekwema's children how are you
<i>Adol ebe ma n'ebe umuaka Ekwema nnu orii kpole?</i>	Adol have cried I have cried Ekwema's children how are you

ORUE

anonymous

O-ru e, o-ru e, o-ru e, o-ru e, o-ru e, o-ru e

o-ru e, o-ru e, o-ru e, Andi ng'a-nyi kwu-ru shia-nyi wu ndi nma n-dia-gba-ra

cha. Orue, o rue, o rue, o rue, o rue, o rue

o rue, o rue, o rue, Andi ng'a-nyi kwuru shia nyi wu ndi nma n dia-gba ra-cha.

3. ORU EE

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Oru ee oru ee oru ee</i>	Oru ee oru ee oru ee
<i>Oru ee oru ee oru ee</i>	Oru ee oru ee oru ee

Oru ee oru ee oru ee	Oru ee oru ee oru ee
A ndi nga-anyi kwuru shii anyi wu ndi nma, ndi agbaracha	Our people said we are beautiful, people of glamour.

Omashila gi

anonymous

O-ma-shi-la gi o-ru e o-ma-shi-la gi o-ru e

8
e o-ma-shi-la gi o-r'u-muo-we-re

13
o-ma-shi-la gi, o-ru e

4. OMASHILA GI (DO YOU LIKE IT)

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Omashila gi oru ee</i>	Do you like it oru ee
<i>Omashila gi oru ee</i>	Do you like it oru ee
<i>Omashila gi oru umu Owerre</i>	Do you like it oru children of Owerre
<i>Omashila gi oru ndi-oma</i>	Do you like it oru of good people

Onye ya nwanne ya no nubo

anonymous

O-nye ya a nwa-nne ya no n'u-bo gwa-ka-la m'a - ri-na mgio-nye no n'a-ma e-je shi u-lo
 6 ma-ra nmafu-w'a - ma a rin ma gio-ny'e-zia-tu-gbuo-la m'u jo nwo hu n - shi a-ga-hu gin
 11 nye ma muo-nye wu nwa nne gi g'a-som-be - ma o-lo - lo - lo e

5. ONYE YAA NWANNE YA NO N' UBO

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Onye yaa nwanne ya no n'ubo</i>	Who is at malice with his brother
<i>Gwakalam ari nma gi o'onye no n'ama</i>	Tell me your relationship with a stranger
<i>oshi uyo mara nua fuma ama</i>	Charity begins at home
<i>nma gi n'onye ezi a tugbuolam ujo</i>	Your relationship with the stranger frightens me
<i>Nwo hu so nshi a gahu gi anye</i>	If they see poison they will give to you
<i>Ma muo onye wu nwanne gig a so mbema ololol ee</i>	And I your brother will be crying olololo ee.

Ole ndi eje elele

anonymous

8
O-len-di wun-d'e- j'e - le - le ee O-we-r'a-nyi wun-d'e-j'e - le - le e -

wo, e - le - lia nw'i - te ya gbo - ny'o - ku

12
hea - nyi son - so wu mba O - we - r'a - nyi nwea - vue.

6. OLEE NDI WU NDI EJI ELELE (GLAMOROUS PEOPLE)

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>O lee ndi wu ndi eji elele ee,</i>	which people are glamorous to behold
<i>owerre anyi wu ndi eji elele ewuo,</i>	our Owerre people are glamorous to behold
<i>elela nwa-ite y'agbo nyuoku iheanyi aso nso wu mba, Owerre anyi nwe avuo</i>	when the small pot is neglected, it quenches the fire.

A shi m'ekele ndi mma

Staff 1: A shi m'e-ke -le ndi nma A shi m'e-ke -le ndi nma

Staff 2: 5 A shim'e ke -le ndi nma A shim'e ke -le ndi nma u-nua-bia-duo-la

7. A SHIM MEKELE NDI NMA (I WANT TO GREET GOOD PEOPLE)

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>A shim mekele ndi nma</i>	I want to great those that are doing well
<i>A shim mekele ndi nma</i>	I want to great those that are doing well
<i>A shim mekele ndi nma</i>	I want to great those that are doing well
<i>Owerre wu owerre</i>	The real Owerri people
<i>A shi m mekele ndi nma</i>	I want to great those that are doing well
<i>N na-bia ruo la</i>	welcome

Brief Analysis of the Song Lyrics

(1) **Ojorima:** This song is borne out of the excitement and fora of the Oru-Owerre festival, as people are called to join in the merriment of the festival.

(2) **Anyi duru nu ishi (we swore to an oath):** This song explains the bonding of all sons and daughters of Owerre-nchi-ise. Having grown into adulthood and

belonging to a particular age grade in the community, there is then the compulsory need of oath taking by each member of every age grade with a firm resolve never to harm or hurt anyone in which ever form or guise.

(3) Oru ee: The song portrays the joyous mode exhibited by the Owerre people as they are being admired by audience/spectators while they process along the major streets of Owerri town in their colourfull and beautiful white lace and George wrapper attire.

(4) Omashila gi? (do you like it? / does it please you?): The song simply calls on people especially non-indigenes to come and join in the festivity of Oru-Owerre if it pleases them.

(5) Onye ya nwanne ya no n' ubo: The song is a song of unification and total reconciliation among brothers. Here, Umu-Owerre are advised/warned to be careful with the kind of friendship they keep with outsiders because charity begins at home.

(6) Olee ndi wu ndi eji elele (glamorous people): Like the Ojorima and the Oru ee songs, the song portrays the beauty and glamour of the Owerre people as they majestically process in a carnival float along major streets in town. The song also goes with a stern warning to both the unlookers and non-indigenes that, "when the small pot is neglected, it quenches the fire".

(7) A shim mekele ndi nma (I want to greet good people): Acknowledging one's achievement in life is one thing that the people of Owerre are known for. The song carries the message of appreciation to sons and daughters of Owerre-ndi-ise and environs who have achieved feats in life, especially those who used their wealth and positions to assist the community in any form and guise.

Conclusion

Music, which projects the life and cultural identity of a society, is a tool that enhances the physical, psychological, mental, social and aesthetic wellbeing of a people. This Study has stressed the importance of music in cultural festivals, using *Oru-owerre* Festival in Owerri as a paradigm. In the Study, music has proved itself

relevant in our social life and day-to-day activities. It was observed that *Oru-owerre* Festival is the most colourful and crowd pulling festival in Owerri. The Festival is a socio-cultural bond which exists between the celebrating groups and the founder of Owerri, Ekwe Arugo. Looking into the activities of the Festival, the music is arranged in such a way that it covers social, political, religious and economic events in the town. It is observed that the music and dance are used for entertainment and for transferring social and moral values. Through their moral songs, the people concerned are identified and it sustains them thereby providing the required result. The creditability of this research has been the examination of music in *Oru-owerre* Festival. It is quite clear that music cannot be overlooked in African society as it provides entertainment and also help people gain an insight into their culture. The study reveals that *Oru-owerre* Festival is a celebration of life and also an instrument of unity which bring about them sharing common interest.

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