

**INDIVIDUALITY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN IGBO INDIGENOUS
MUSIC PERFORMANCES**

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ABSTRACT

Generally, musical performance in Africa involves both group and individual participation. This is as a result of its nature and purpose, which border specifically on both individual and communal experiences and ownership. Group performances often evoke societal appeal more than individual expression due to the close association or interaction existing between the performers and the audience. Nevertheless, the society does not totally lose sight of some individuals who are so outstanding in playing certain musical roles. It is therefore against this background that this study delves into the different types of musical performances in Igbo setting with particular focus on individuality and identity construction with a view to highlighting its characteristics and significant contributions to the musical arts and society.

Introduction

Individuality and identity constitute major attributes or outstanding portraits evident in most traditional music performances and ensemble. This is applicable whether the musical experience happens within the context of a group or an individual performer. In a group performance, some individuals outshine others in displaying extra musical skills and as such distinguish or earn themselves such titles as lead performers or star performers. Specifically, the identity of the lead, such as lead dancer, lead drummer, lead instrumentalist, lead singer and so on, has become part of music register, especially when the performance is based on a fixed choreographic structure. This goes to validate Nzewi's statement that in a stylized formation, there still exists some measures of freedom for individual expressions and opportunity to add personal interpretative flairs to the existing pattern of movement. (112-3). It is a common observation that any individual who is gifted in any aspect of musical performance can engage or hold a large audience in an interesting show as long as possible. As K. Stein rightly pointed out, "creative individuals cannot create in a vacuum, for they necessarily require a social environment in which they find self-realization." (Idamoyibo, 43-4). It is these distinguishing traits found in different performing individuals that also inform the investigative thrust of this study.

Types of Musical Performances

Musical performances in Igbo traditional setting range from amateur/spontaneous group or what Ekwueme (49) terms "ad hoc performances" to a more organized group. Spontaneous group according to Ekwueme includes casual or impromptu performance (celebration) such as that emanating from a drinking spree, moonlight entertainment or

the celebration of a minor title (or some unexpected achievement). This aspect of performance does not require much effort or labour, neither does it require serious rehearsals nor membership. What is evidently required in this type of performance is the ability of the performer to improvise adequately a desired rhythmic accompaniment to already existing tune or add new text to his improvised accompaniment. The ultimate purpose of this type of performance is to create enjoyment at that material moment. An artistic depiction of spontaneous musical enjoyment is vividly captured by Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart* where he described Unoka as always wearing “haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute” (4). By implication drinking and playing music provides him a form of emotional relief at the moment of need. It can also be argued that spontaneous music or performance has much in common with incidental music due to their mode of expression. They are both unpremeditated. One major difference is that incidental music is mostly work oriented and this according to Dan Agu includes ‘tapper’s, blacksmith’s, goldsmith’s, carver’s songs’ (Music in the Nigerian Culture, 83). Another aspect of musical performance in Igbo traditional society is organized performance. This may be inform of a group /ensemble performance or a lone performance.

Lone Performance

A lone performer in Igbo tradition is more or less a professional chanter, raconteur or eulogist whose duties among other things include recital of funeral dirges, recounting of historical / genealogical events, epic poetry, praise singing and so on. Soloists are normally paid for his/her services and the society acknowledges and values the messages they carries along. This type of performance is akin to what Nketia observed among the Akan people of Ghana, Fang of Cameroon, Fon and Gun of Dahomey and so on, although Nketia emphasized that in some cases ‘what they generally provide is not detailed narration of events but brief allusions to significant incidents and genealogies’ (197). Giving of remuneration to such performers is a practice that is highly welcome even outside the frontiers of Igbo and African culture in general. It was for instance, recorded among the Java and in other areas of Indonesia and Southeast Asia that,

the fourteenth century poem *Nagara Kertagama* describes a female entertainer called *Juru ! Angin* (mistress of the wind) who dances and sings simultaneously ... After the performance she is showered with gifts of clothing and there upon is invited into the royal presence to drink liquor in the company of various notables (Sutton, 113).

It may be viewed that Sutton’s description presents a picture of Igbo contemporary art music performance whereby a soloist performs alongside accompanist. This new style of performance in Igbo culture is as a result of Western influence, which according to Agu constitutes part of ‘those qualities that have reshaped African music from its original forms to something different and new’ (‘Impact of Western Education’, 203).

Itinerant Performance

Itinerant performance or minstrelsy is another type of musical performance prevalent in Igbo Culture. A minstrel may decide to accompany himself with instruments such as

Ubo aka, (Thumb piano), *Une* (musical bow), *Ogene* (metal gong), or engage few instrumentalists who may also be required to supply chorus refrain at intervals. In this case there must be some periods of rehearsals for them to agree on the correct points of entry. Chief Moroco Maduka and Chief Akunwafor Ezigbo Obiligbo are some of the notable Igbo minstrels. Interestingly, Richard Okafor identifies some female minstrels among whom are Ahagwele and Ejim from Owerre-Ezukala, Anambra State and Nwanyinnia Okoroawa from Urualla Imo State all of Igbo extraction (84). Outside of Igbo culture, towards the north, one can identify prominent itinerant minstrels such as Kokoro the blind Minstrel, Dan Maraya, Muhamman Shata all from Hausa ethnic group. Minstrelsy is not a practice limited to Nigeria and Africa only. In Western culture, R. Kamien finds that, 'during the middle ages, wandering minstrels performed music and acrobatics in Castles, taverns and town square' (71). From these examples, one can aptly infer that there exist some cultural similarities among different ethnic groups, race or region in the area of musical performance.

Group Performance

Group performance is a highly cherished practice noted for its orchestral variety and richness in Igbo tradition. It can feature in different forms such as singing and dancing groups. These can also be split into men's group, women's group and mixed group performance. In each of these forms there is still an expression of individuality and identity. Some performers exhibit outstanding personal flairs, which distinguish them as lead singers, lead dancers and lead instrumentalists. These distinguishing qualities are what give variations and beauty to a group performance.

Singing group

Singing is a vocal rendition practiced all over the world. The difference in performance lies in the peculiarity of purpose and situation. In this type of performance the emphasis is on the texts, melodic and harmonic principles. Singing, as a group performance involves people of different vocal sonorities. Some are capable of singing high pitches while others are limited to songs in lower register. Also, some voices are stronger than others. All these are taken into consideration when group singing is performed so that each individual is placed where he/she is fitted in most. In Igbo choral tradition, voice selection or placement does not require special skill, each performer knows his/her voice range, and during rehearsals people of similar voice qualities form a part. Except in contemporary art music performance where pitch instruments such as keyboard, tuning fork or melodion are used in voice selection, otherwise voice selection in Igbo traditional setting is naturally determined. This method does not in any way constrain the harmonic qualities expected of a group singing. While describing the harmonic principles and styles of African songs Agu states:

Most African songs are performed in at least two parts the basic two parts are the primary and secondary (harmonizing) melodies. In some cases, the secondary melody is sung an octave lower, or at an interval of a minor third, perfect fourth or perfect fifth. In some vocal types, especially the cotemporary types, the secondary melody is sung a major third above the primary melody. (*Form and Analysis*, 44)

Therefore, group singing in Igbo tradition (except where otherwise stated such as unison or monotone) is normally presented in two basic parts of upper and lower register. The most common form of group singing is call and response, Where mixed group singing is applied, it becomes likely that males take the lower part while females sing the higher part. There are some abnormal or exceptional cases where males with feminine voices or females with masculine voices make a crossover from their supposed part to another of opposite part. This situation does not regularly occur. In the performance of group singing, the functions of a soloist or a caller are given to a performer who has strong and articulate voice while others sing the chorus. All these performance techniques enhance the aesthetic disposition of Igbo traditional group singing.

Dancing group

Dance is the outcome of rhythmic impulses generated from musical sounds. It takes a commanding lead in most of the social activities of man. Due to its universal appeal, all sexes both young and old perform it. thereby giving rise to different dancing groups that exist among different cultures of the world, Igbo inclusive. Dance is a means of communal expression, which message though may or may not synchronize with verbal interpretation, yet it is understood by people. Through gestures individual dancers communicate to the audience. Agawu confirms that, ‘the semantics of dance are not constrained in ways that would render each and every action taken by the dancer translatable into verbal language’ (10). Dance performance can be formally choreographed or informally open to all (freely performed).

Male’s dancing group

A dancing group that consists of males only is usually complex, vigorous and serious in nature. This is as a result of heavy instrumentation associated with men’s performance. At times singing occurs intermittently and when this happens, the complexity of instrumentation is reduced to allow proper audibility of words .In this type of group performance, individuals expression of selves is not over looked. People with special abilities perform special duties such as vocalist, lead dancer or lead instrumentalist, all working towards achieving a common goal - good performance. In group performance of this type although individual excellence is duly acknowledged, the central issue is the beauty of communality and or the ample illustration of togetherness as no performer functions in isolation in group performance.

Female’s dancing group

Women give greater prominence to singing than instrumentation during performance, unlike men who sing occasionally as the case may be. Women’s dance performance is not as serious and complex as men’s. This can be attributed to the type of instruments they use. They usually make use of light percussion instruments such as *Ogene* (metal gong), *Udu* (pot drum), *nkwa* (bamboo clappers), *Okpokoro* (woodblock), and even hand clapping is commonly associated with women’s dancing. Although women enrolment in men’s group performances is rare, Ekwueme asserts that,

It is however customary to find a man or two in women's dancing group ... (whose) duty is to help the group of women with disciplinary matters, doing certain things which women cannot, by tradition, do. He does not take part in singing or dancing although he may play an instrument. (48).

So women's performances are not absolutely exclusive *visa – vis* men's performances. Whatever that obtains in men's dancing group as regards individuality or expression of personal flair also obtains in women's group. Individuals are assigned special roles depending on their abilities. One outstanding feature about women's group performance is that it appears more colourful than the men's due to their choice of costumes.

Mixed group performance

This group has no restriction on gender. As a result, the strength and weakness of each group are taken into consideration. Both singing and instrumentation are employed but with moderation. The dancing pattern may be either in turns (one group after the other) or in juxtaposition. The type of instruments used are not restricted. The peculiarity of this type of performance is that, it is only meant for entertainment unlike the two groups discussed earlier which may either be for rituals, initiations or rites of passage. Normally, it is not uncommon to find a singer-dancer performer. This versatility is what makes difference in the level of individual's identity, creativity and musicianship. Mix group performance is common with peer groups, age grades associations, religious societies and ethnic associations based in urban centres. The musical performance often constitutes a rallying point for the performers (members) and a medium for the construction of group rather than individual identities.

Performance and Individuality

Performance is not as easy as it appears. Some have tried with little or no success while others have come out successfully. For any successful performance, so many things are involved and several conditions must be met. These conditions fundamentally concerned musical performances, and also relates to every other aspect of public performance. Therefore, for an individual to excel in public performance, the following factors have to be properly managed.

Natural ability

People are created differently, and so are they differently gifted. It is the ability of one to locate or discover one's innate ability that makes the difference. Today, G.F Handel, Michael Jackson and many others are household names in the field of music. In his book, *Music, an Appreciation*, R. Kamien writing on G. F. Handel states that 'he was not from a musical family- his father wanted him to study law- but by the time he is nine, his musical talent was so outstanding that he was allowed to study with local organist and composer' (135).

Similarly in one of the interviews on CNN after the death of Michael Jackson on August 10, 2009, Jermaine Jackson, the elder brother of Michael Jackson confessed that Michael started manifesting his musical ability early in life, which he later pursued and developed. With these few examples, one can easily conclude that these musical geniuses

identified their respective abilities and worked towards developing them. A performer who does not have for instance, a good voice and goes into vocal performance as a soloist or a lead singer of a group will never satisfy the audience, rather what he/she gets in return may be boos or minimal appreciation. Therefore discovering one's natural ability is the first step to a successful performance.

Commitment and Perseverance

Next to natural ability is commitment, and perseverance. Once the ability is there, hard work becomes imperative. Performers cannot optimize their innate ability without effort, devotion and perseverance. No audience is interested in the amount of time spent or effort applied before performers make their debut, yet that will not bring discouragement. As Lee Lacocca, a renowned public speaker, states 'you may have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them out, your brains won't get you anywhere' (Alimole, 3). So without commitment and perseverance, ones natural abilities will not shine out. In the same vein, Alimole goes further to quote Leonardo da Vinci as saying that 'Iron rusts from disuse, water loses its purity from stagnation and in cold weather becomes frozen, and even so does inaction sap the mind' (6). With these anecdotal instances, a performer should not be scared or discouraged by failures rather he or she should show more commitment and perseverance in order to achieve excellence or else become stagnant.

Confidence and focus

To make a successful performance, the performer must among other things have self-confidence, trust his or her ability and also be focused. Lack of confidence generates nervousness, which eventually is the hallmark of failure. Confidence is built through practice, dedication, patience, and consistence. A competent performer is not afraid of any size of audience and does not feel intimidated on stage. Furthermore, a performer should be focused, not allowing distraction, but try as much as possible to have the observers under control through competent display of creative ability. In such related situation, Sutton expatiates the expectations of Cangik concerning *pesindhén*-(a female singer) by stating that 'the *pesindhén* must be at home with her material. She must memorize many pieces and demonstrate accuracy in her pitch and pronunciation. For this, she must rehearse and not just spend her time performing to earn money' (116).

It is only when a performer is at home with his/her materials that confidence is ensured. And with confidence and mastery, a performer can arrest audience interest as long as possible.

Creativity and innovation

Among other qualities expected of a good performance, creativity and innovation are inevitable. As it is always said, "monotony kills interest". A performer who frequently comes to the stage with something new is sure to have/attract many interested spectators. It is this ability to create especially on the spur of moment that fosters performer-observer relationship. This is most appropriate in performances that involve singing. The vocalist may decide to include the praise names of some of the spectators while singing, thereby motivating their morale. These people may in turn reciprocate by either giving money, gift or show applause to the performer. The ability of performers to create new things and improve on the old ones makes them relevant in the society and also ensures

continuity. An artist or a performer is always appreciated except where he or she has nothing interesting to offer.

Conclusion

Performance in African perspective has several dimensional approaches. It can be spontaneous as well as organized. It can also be a group or individual performance. Although performance in Igbo culture is better appreciated as communal activity rather than solo shows, it should be admitted as well, that individual expression is of paramount importance for aesthetic valuation whether as a group or as a person. A performer's individuality and identity is enhanced when he or she takes into consideration most of the qualities necessary for good performance, particularly the expectations of the audience. Some of these qualities have been highlighted in the foregoing discourse. It is anticipated that if they are properly adhered to, performances especially as it concerns indigenous Igbo and African music in general will always be meaningful and enjoyable.

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