

**TRADITIONAL MUSIC BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SOME FACTORS INFORMING MUSICAL APPRECIATION IN IGBO SOCIETY**

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**Abstract**

In a lay man's point of view, music is generally seen as nothing but one of the media available to fulfill man's innate desire for pleasure. This paper contends that music especially the traditional music has the potency of addressing the entire nature of man. The reality of its efficacy or effectiveness is most evident in the functions and usages which can never be divorced from man's daily existential experiences. The crux of this paper is to critically examine those factors inherent in traditional music which place it beyond mere entertainment medium and which inversely inform its aesthetic appreciation. This examination is facilitated through literatures, practical observations and personal experiences. The paper argues that the Igbo appreciate music based on its ability to conform, consolidate, propagate and reinforce the expected value system and philosophical concept of people. These are embroiled or located within the confines of performance styles as can be seen in the use of song-texts, dynamic application of rhythms, symbolic visual representations, aesthetic disposition of costumes, make-ups and other body adornments that give credence to traditional music performances. The paper therefore concludes that traditional music should not be viewed from mere entertainment perspectives rather from its functional relevance and applicability.

**Introduction**

Basically, music performance in Nigeria (which Igbo is a part) has two broad categories namely-traditional music and contemporary music. The paper discusses the two broad categories as well as their derivatives and attributes in order to bring out the inherent values that either informs or contradicts musical appreciation in Igbo culture. It also makes some comparative analysis between the traditional and non-traditional music (Western music) to establish their level of differences in aesthetic consideration. As an indigene of Igbo culture, the researcher has been exposed and involved in a number of musical activities right from infant to adult. In fact all the stages of human development is ritualized with one type of music or the other and through practical experiences and participant-observation it was obvious that the Igbo do not just make music merely for entertainment purposes but for other intrinsic values.

Traditional music as the name implies involves all the musical practices of a people which are supposedly devoid of external influences in functions and presentations. Many scholars such as, Okafor and Emeka, 2004, Anumihe, 2005, Oguoma, 2010, and so on, have defined traditional music as the indigenous music of a people. Discussing traditional Music in Nigerian context, Okwilagwe, (2002) asserts that it 'derives its origin and versatility from oral traditions or the folk lore of the different ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation' (105). Similarly, Forchu, (2012) cited Nketia thus, 'traditional music is affected and conditioned by environmental, historical, political and social circumstances of the various societies in which it emerges' (209).

Keke and Obiekwe, add that, ‘sometimes (traditional music) acts as a central force in promoting the culture of particular societies and provides avenues for musical expression through ceremonies, festivals and rituals’ (303). According to Agu, in Ibekwe (2013) traditional music refers to; “the folk music of a people which evolves as a corporate communal experience... handed down from generation to generation and continues expanding and enriching its resources as it evolves” (94). In summary, traditional music can be characterized as a preserver of traditional values, in other words, the custodian of people’s cultural, religious and traditional life styles, as well as avenue for relaxation and entertainment.

### **Traditional music classified**

Interestingly, this traditional music is categorized into three major groups namely- recreational, incidental and occasional. Recreational music includes all music that are meant for relaxation and entertainment such as children’s music, peer group or age grades, social groups and so on. Occasional music on the other hand involves all traditional music associated with rites and ceremonies such as festivals, religious worship, kingship, initiation or rites of passage such as birth, marriage, burial and funeral rites. Incidental music covers all occupational or unpremeditated music such as labourer’s songs, blacksmith’s, truck pusher’s, canoe paddler’s and so on.

All these classes of traditional music represent in totality people’s way of life. Ibekwe, (2013) posits that, ‘no traditional music operates outside its cultural stipulations, even in the wake of external manipulations; it does not entirely relinquish its identity’ (94). Unfortunately no culture exists which does not experience the impact of culture transfer and assimilation, hence the emergence of the contemporary music.

### **Contemporary music**

Agu in Ibekwe, (2013) defines contemporary music as, ‘a new music genre that has a completely new cultural orientation which is not, in any way, committed to the ideals of the traditional types like the intrinsic socio-political values and services, religious inclinations and functional ethos of the traditional types’. Therefore, he maintains that, ‘the contemporary music types, though derived from the traditional idiom, have no attachment to the tradition of the people and serve no purpose in the realization of their cultural life’. (94). Under this genre, three major groups are involved –Art music, Improvised vocal music, and Popular (Pop) music,

Discussing Art music type, Agu (1990) classifies it into secular type, concert type and traditional instrumental type. He discusses them thus,

Secular type consists of compositions structured for Western style choir, usually singing in all four parts or less. It is purely choral music type usually in vernacular and rooted in traditional styles. In other words, this genre is more or less a fusion of African and European musical ideas...the exponents are music graduates exposed to both the western and African music literature and creative techniques.

The concert type involves vocal solos and duets usually accompanied by western keyboard instrument like the piano or organ. The language could at times be English, but the context is based on African idiom...the composers are influenced by folk polyphonic devices.

The traditional instrumental type has been experimented upon by some academic music educators. The idea is based on the creation of new music style with the traditional instruments. The theme is usually based on the traditional concept and developed for the African audience...the composers of this type usually tries to recapture the traditional styles, either orchestrating the instruments for voices or creating a purely instrumental music which had no cultural attachment... (82-83)

Under Improvised music type, he refers to it as music composed by those musicians who cannot write down their music on paper. Their music are rather simple with short melodic structure which may be presented in call and response, solo and chorused refrain and mixed structural patterns. The texts are mostly vernacular, and in rare occasions in English. They are drawn mainly from indigenous or religious experiences of people.

### **Popular music**

This genre which is majorly commercial oriented in nature has in recent time gained much more popularity than the preceding genres. Okafor (1989) describes pop music as, 'music that deals with familiar themes and issues of the moment. It is understood and accepted by a lot of people, not as a topical reflection of their sentiments and current world view. Consequently, popular music is more subject to change than any other genre of music' (3). As a result of its ephemeral and commercial nature, Agu (1990) summarizes it as 'transient and amenable to innovation and alteration' (83)

Popular music has received a lot of concern from authors such as Onyeji, 2002; Okafor, 2005; Onwuegbuna, 2009 among others. Onyeji (2002) presents pop music as, 'a genre of music, encompassing several styles, that is readily comprehensible to a large proportions of the population; its appreciation requires little or no knowledge of musical theory or technique' (24). In essence, Popular music as the name implies denotes music of the masses. It appeals to both old and young but in this present time it was observed that due to lack of jobs many untalented musicians have taken to music making as their last option. The result is a total departure from traditional ideology to what is now termed modern (most visible in their use of song texts and costumes). Pop music seems to tilt more to the younger group thereby creating or generating a sort of divide between the young and old. The use of vulgar words especially coming from the younger sects does not promote societal valued ethics and thus does not make for general appreciation.

### **Traditional music and non-traditional music compared**

While traditional music are those that are indigenous to a given culture such as the Igbo, non-traditional music are those music alien to a particular culture. For this discourse we mean the western world. For the Westerners, entertainment programs and activities are never compromised or taken for granted. Musicians such as Johann Sebastian Bach, George Fredrick Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, (his prodigious acclamation notwithstanding) Joseph Haydn, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann just to mention a few made tremendous impact in the annals of western history. Their musical compositions and performances are fantastic and wonderful yet most of them did not receive befitting recognition and expected remuneration at certain periods of their musical experiences.

For them, musicians play the second fiddle in the scheme of things in most cases. Little wonder then, some of them died paupers as evidenced from the early history. They are basically admired and needed only in concert halls, king's courts and in churches just for entertainments and worships (as in masses, oratorios and requiems), and when they have challenges or their employers are not able to pay them for their services they settle for freelance performances in streets until the situation improves or are commissioned for another contract. This can be seen as recorded by Kamien Roger (1998). In his account, Joseph Haydn serves as a choir boy in the Cathedral of St Stephen but when his voice changed he was dismissed penniless and he struggled to survive by giving music lesson to children and playing violin in street bands. Another instance is the case of prodigious Mozart who became a freelance musician in Vienna when he could no longer tolerate being treated like a servant by a prince-archbishop of Salzburg. All these are possible when music is just seen as serving majorly entertainment purposes.

But traditional music making in Igbo culture for instance ritualizes every mile stone of human existence cum experiences and that is why it is always relevant to the people. Each music event is elaborately and greatly celebrated as the situation demands and that is why the Igbo do not joke with their traditional music exponents. They are held as the custodian of people's culture going by the definition of folk or traditional music. Asigbo, (2009) affirms, 'The society sees in the folk artist, a moral censor, a genealogist, a prophet cum visionary, a story teller and an entertainer all rolled into one' (21). All these attributes place them tall in the eyes of their admirers.

Again, for the westerners, individual performances and appreciation take precedence over communal effort as can be seen in their numerous solo pieces for pianos and voices. In fact, it may not be an over statement to say that lone performances receive or are accorded equal prominence with chorus and orchestra. Inversely, among the Igbo and Africa in general, music is most appreciated when communally performed. According to Ibekwe (2010), group performances in African context usually 'evoke societal appeal more than individual expressions due to the close association or interaction existing between the performers and the audience' (197). In the same direction, Onyeji, and Onyeji (2011) affirm that, 'fundamental to African music appreciation is the presence of group...group music making provides a relevant platform for the exhibition of individualized interpretations of the group concept which enriches the aesthetic output'(24).

By the nature of traditional music presentation however, music can never be performed out of context for mere entertainment purposes. This is another instance where African music and Western meet their point of departure or diversion in terms of music appreciation. Ugwu, (2011) emphasizes thus, 'from the African perspective there is no music for enjoyment rather its functionality determines the aesthetics...the beauty and meaningfulness of music is dependent on its usefulness' (131). For the Western, a particular music can serve many purposes irrespective of context. Take for instance, 'Halleluiah Chorus' by George Fredrick Handel. This song is a suitable rendition for any occasion be it sorrowful or joyful situation. The reason is that most times the content or the song texts are generally drawn from materials not related or attached to any particular event. With the exception of some music with religious concepts otherwise most of their music can be performed out of context. The Igbo pay much attention to the content and

suitability of any performance before it is appreciated. In fact this is the case with most African societies their heterogeneous status notwithstanding.

Western performances are always programmed to last for a specific period of time on a well prepared stage, unlike the traditional performances which are guided by the strength of performers, the ability to improvise and extemporize on a given text, phrases and instruments as well as audience interest, coupled with a very serene natural environment. According to Adedeji in Ugwu, (2011):

looking into the indigenous music of Africa itself one immediately finds its apodictic feature of realness, repetition, improvisation, extemporization, spontaneity creation and recreation, percussiveness, sacredness, boisterousness, integrative with other arts, audience participation and its unlimited world of sound” (131-132).

Invariably, the stage performance adopted in this contemporary time as a measure towards globalization has been a limiting factor against open place performance of traditional music. This is undoubtedly having a devastating effect on the performance and appreciation of indigenous music.

### **Factors informing music appreciation in Igbo and Africa in general**

It has been said that music appreciation in Africa and Igbo in particular depends on a number of factors which border on functions, purposes, usages and suitability. By implication, it hinges on the ability of such performance to mirror as well as transmit people’s cultural concept, such as their beliefs, ideology, norms and values, philosophy, and so on. Some of those factors include:-

#### **Use of song texts**

Music is most appreciated when the hearer understands the content of what is being performed. The use of understandable languages enhances the beauty of such piece. This paper is not saying that music performed in another language other than vernacular is not enjoyable; the truth is that the more meaningful a piece is the more tolerable and sensible it becomes to the hearer. The fact that the Igbo enjoy good music whether foreign or local does not imply that they share or accord the same level of appreciation to the genres. Umezinwa (2012) reports Basden thus,

European music, as they interpret it has not yet succeeded in gaining access to the inner being of the Ibo; it may have the form but it lacks the essence. He will sing hymns as continuously as formerly he chanted native lyrics but he is never carried away by them, however much he enjoy the singing. (677).

Therefore, a performance may sound very melodious but lack in-depth appreciation and sensibility. This is where early (old) popular genres differ immensely from the contemporary pop. The later is very much interested in the bourgeois sonic presentations that thrill the audience without considering the content of the music or how much message it conveys. Nzewi, (2007) maintains that, “Africa conceptualizes music in two primary and interconnected perspectives”. According to him,

A musical arts production and presentation that is accredited in the public space must have the qualification of:

- Making *musical sense*, which is an intellectual activity concerned with the conformations of sound, phonic resources, and artistic wholeness in musical arts theatre
- Making *musical meaning*, which mandates creative logic and grammar to accomplish philosophical and psychological intentions as well as strategize human-making structures and presentational dynamics. (115)

Therefore one can make bold to say that music is appreciated when it is sensible and meaningful as well as conforms to the cultural stipulations of a people; otherwise it becomes unproductive less communicative and less appreciated. Little then, Nketia (1974) earlier contends that,

The treatment of the song texts as a form of speech utterances arises not only from stylistic considerations or from consciousness of the analogous features of speech and music...(but) is also inspired by the importance of the song as an avenue of verbal communication, a medium for creative verbal expressions which can reflect both personal and social experiences. (189)

Therefore, the selection and use of song text in Igbo culture is normally predicated on its relevance, suitability and ability to communicate intelligibly on events and matters of common interest to the members of a given society.

### **Contextual suitability**

One outstanding feature of Igbo music and in fact Africa in general is the contextual applicability of performances. Music and events are apparently so compatible that any misappropriation mars the entire performance; it may either result in misconception or may provoke wrong impression on the observers. The performance contexts include such situations as birth, puberty, marriage, initiation, title taking, burial and funeral, royal, festival, leisure, ritual, work and activity and so on. In each of these occasions the texts, instrumentations and costumes are selected to capture the event so as to give it the desired meaning, anything more or short of that is rather contradictory. One is not expected to hear funeral songs where there is child's birth celebration or marriage event and vice versa. The fact that music types in Igbo culture are normally identified in relation to their context of performances make it that one can easily hear such concepts as *egwu nwa*- child birth song, *egwu onwa*- moon light song, *egwu onwu*-burial or funeral song, *egwu mmanwu*- spirit manifest song and so on and so forth, so that by name a particular performance is designated. In that direction, Nzewi, (1991) avers that, 'Igbo categories associate music with specific events or institutions, (and that) every music type, in its own merit as a specific product of specialized human behaviour, constitutes a species-specific activity by nature of its ideation and execution' (23). In summary, music is not performed out of context in Igbo society otherwise the meaning and intention becomes bastardized.

### **Rhythmic application and sensibility**

A.M. Jones in Chernoff (1979) reports that, 'rhythm is to Africa what harmony is to the European, and that it is in the complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns that he finds his greatest aesthetic satisfaction' (40). Senghor (in Chernoff) in his own view also avers that, 'rhythm is the basis of all African art'. Similarly Ibekwe, and Umezina, (2013) affirm that, 'the greatest attribute of African music lies in its rhythmic applications. Through the rhythmic

configuration of a particular music, an ethnic identity is established. That is to say, apart from language, rhythm is another factor that situates or gives bearing to a given culture'. (1)

In Igbo tradition, each performance has its peculiar rhythmic representation. A ritual, cult or initiation music normally employs strange and mystical rhythmic renditions that generate psychological feelings in the hearer. At times the rhythm in combination with vocal pronouncements sends dreadful signals in such a way that the hearer automatically designates the type of performance on display. Royal music is identified by its slow, less complex rhythm because of its noble and dignified carriage, while serious dance-conceived rhythm is always very complex and vibrant in nature. Tight rhythm suggests or is produced by notes of short durational values while notes of long durational values produce loose rhythms. If the rhythms are misrepresented the beauty and the aesthetic value is affected and therefore less appreciated. For instance, the beauty of *oji* (stamping iron bar) used by *mmanwu* -spirit manifests (masquerades) lies in its intervallic stamping and shaking, coupled with people's mythological concept about the nature of the instrument itself. *Oja* -notched flute is appreciated for its melodious message-laden renditions and its exhortation ability. Obviously rhythm classifies as well as gives meaning to a given performance.

Rhythm also affects vocal music, in which case we talk of free and strict rhythm. There are vocal performances that follow speech rhythms such as recitatives *-mbem*. Other examples include dirge, epics, and praise songs. In these cases the texts control the rhythm because what people are interested in is the words or messages and not the melody. Also children's folk and lullabies are in these categories. The nature of lullabies does not allow complex rhythm yet that does not reduce its beauty or importance in Igbo culture. According to Ibekwe, and Umezina, (2013),

it should be noted that the use of complex rhythm might not have been necessary considering the variables and factors that shape the performance of such genres. Some of the constraints include, the age of the recipient and the role the rhythm is meant to perform – to pacify and not to distract. Therefore rhythm is sparsely applied in lullabies to maximize its efficiency and effectiveness. (11)

But in a situation, where there is equal attention on both the melody and the text, there are adequate timing and tempo manipulations for better performance result and for appreciation.

### **Instrumentation and function specification**

African musical instruments are classified into membranophones, aerophones, idiophones and chordophones according to materials used for construction and their playing techniques. Chukwu (2007) even considers the utilitarian import as well as the abstract implications of some instruments in his own classification. As a result, he devices five distinct groups namely, materiaphones, onomatophones, utiliphones, abstractophones and mannerphones representing the materials for construction, the sound production or the way they are pronounced, the utility, the abstract appellations and manner of play. In Igbo tradition, instruments have varying uses and each is appreciated in relation to its specified function. Take for instance, instruments such as *ikolo/ikoro*, *ufie*, *oja*, *opi/odu* are very significant culture specific instruments, and their applications and or usages are highly exclusive. One cannot expect to hear *ufie* music in children's performance but it is quite suitable for royalty. Instruments that generate

psychological effects on hearers such as *oji* (a type of stamping idiophone instrument) are most vulnerable in cult activities.

Women are associated with light and movable percussion instruments. The type of instrument suggests the type of ensemble, that is to say, rhythm determines whether a performance is a serious one or a casual one. In Igbo tradition, sex is often one of the determinant factors in the use of instruments. There are instruments that are male exclusive with no solid reason other than exhibition of domineering influence of male over female or what we may term 'gender superiority syndrome'. Accordingly, Ibekwe, (2012) avers that, "they (women) employ few, simple portative musical instruments, in contradiction to the large orchestras associated with men. The choice of their instruments ... depends on the limitations associated with the playing of musical instruments". (109) Such limitations make women shy away from playing certain instruments. In some cases, and even when they attempt to play those restricted instruments some people would see it as an achievement, while others may see it as doing an odd or strange thing. But men use almost every type of instrument without any contention. Therefore the appreciation of musical instruments at times depends on function, usage and cultural conceptualization.

### **Costumes, make-ups and body adornment**

Costumes and make-ups play a very significant role not only in theatre but also in music. They sharpen as well as give meaning to performances in both indigenous and contemporary settings. The more colourful a performance setting the more likely it is suitable and open for public viewing. But the more serious, dreadful and less attractive a performance appears the more secluded and more exclusive the public viewing and even the age of spectators. Costumes and make-ups define roles in a given performance or acts as a pointer to specific functions just as in drama. Application of costumes outside the prescribed situations is terribly abnormal and misleading. A typical example can be drawn from *Egbenuoba* or *Obobdo-iduu* male ensemble. Describing the costume of *Obodo-Iduu* male ensemble of Akpo town in Aguata Local Government Area of Igbo Culture, Ibekwe, and Aluede (2010) gives the following picture,

The dressing code of *Obodo Iduu* dancers is not modern. It is unattractive in outlook. It is a pure camouflage or representation of forest life. It comprises materials from plants and animals such as leaves, hide and skin, feathers, horns, bones etc. There is no strict uniformity on the density or richness of individuals make up. It all depends on the ability of a dancer to collect materials enough to disguise ones outlook. The dancers paint their bodies with black mixture, wear tattered shorts or tie loin cloths with strips or band of cloths which are meant to hold the sheaths of their machetes firmly to their waists. Their head wears are old wigs decorated with cowries, feathers, bones and horns of animals. In absence of old wigs, dry banana leaves or cocoyam leaves are rolled up and designed to serve as head wears. Their necklaces are different types of materials such as beads, bones of animals and cowries. They tie rattling materials round their waist, ankles and wrists which in addition to emphasizing rhythmic intensity also make rattling sound that attracts attention as they move about. (214-215)

From the above descriptions it is evident that the ensemble in question is not a child's play but a very serious one which is purely meant to camouflage life in a jungle. According to Nwadiuwe



in Ibekwe, and Aluede (2010) when a performer ‘is fully dressed in the whimsical costumes, headpiece and accessories, he looks weird or similar to a character from another world’ (215). In other words, costumes mirror and portray the artistic construct of an artiste. It is therefore most appreciated when the image painted is the true picture of what it is expected to interpret in the performance.

### **Culture Relevance**

Culture as we understand it represents the sum total of people’s way of life which includes their belief system and philosophical ideologies. Normally, traditional music is to a large extent viewed as a culture carrier of any given society. Ibekwe, and Ojukwu, (2014) maintain that, ‘African music, no matter the ethnic inclination exhibits similar characteristics, which can be seen in the use of language and literature, social, historical and religious practices’ (296). Accordingly, Oguoma (2010) opines that, ‘music arts indicate clearly the folk thoughts, artistic creativity, social values, vision, mission, goals and cultural status of the people’. She stresses further that,

music practice (in Igbo culture 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, 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 people, promoting the mental and spiritual healing, celebrating life and finally mourning lost life. (136)

Still on the same or related dimension, Nosiri, , (2010) stresses that,

Music deals with philosophical and sometimes mystic reflections on life and nature, with organized and well arranged language, it dishes out incisive comments ranging from praises and criticisms, innovation and incantation, to satirize and laments about the good, the bad and the ugly events in the society. And most often, messages conveyed in music have made serious impacts on the lives of the people... (and) that music exalts the human spirit and calms down frayed nerves. (78)

All these submissions above validate the claim that traditional music of a people represents their culture. Bakare in Ibekwe, and Ojukwu (2014) even states that, “dance is a language which expresses the geographical locations, biological temperament, religious beliefs, political and historical experiences, social practice and economic peculiarities of the people that owns it”.(297) Also, Yerima (from the same source) while describing dance as a form of identity, says,

Dance represents the identity of the people. Through the body, dance uses the emphasis of areas of the body as metaphors and symbols. Specific parts of the body are used to reveal the history of the people, their occupational engagement, (and) their environment. For example, if they live by the river, the shapes, angles, the costumes, the music and even their colours, become symbol which emerges from the river or sea. If they live by the rocks, or hills, the feet movement, the jumps, the raising of the shoulders, the hand

gestures, all points to the immediate environment of mountain climbing or long years of surviving by the rocks. (297-298)

All these imply that whenever we are performing traditional music, some aspects of these traditional values are displayed which directly or indirectly provoke aesthetic appreciation of the spectators or rather the culture owners. It should be noted that whether we sing, dance or play instruments in Igbo indigenous setup a message is being communicated, also culture is rehearsed and perpetuated.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussions hitherto have tried to throw light on the traditional music and its derivatives which develops as a result of external influences which either positively or negatively provoke people's aesthetic appreciation. Obviously, The Igbo do not just make music for its own sake; music has a lot of accomplishments which edify its essence. According to Umezina, (2012) 'Igbo music conjures, reminds, articulates, imitates, affects moods, and change state of minds. It can trigger a feeling of joy, sorrow, grief or even togetherness. And the people understand something from the music' (678). Above all, music remains the purveyor of Igbo culture whether it is sung, danced or played instrumentally, there is people's culture crystallized and culminated in practical form. Little wonder then, Basden in Umezina (2012) reports of Igbo traditional music thus,

The more one listens to native music the more one is conscious of its vital power. It touches the chords of man's inmost being, and stirs his primal instincts. It demands the performer's whole attention and so, sways the individual as almost to divide asunder for the time being, mind and body. It is intensely passionate, and no great effort of the imagination is required to realize that such music could only have originated with the son of Cain. (677-678)

If a non native researcher could make such a pronouncement about the Igbo traditional music, one wonders then what could be the justification for branding or seeing our traditional music from the perspective of a mere entertainment avenue where its usefulness has gone beyond that.

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