

**GENDER IDENTITY:
A Force in Igbo Traditional Musical Practices**

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Abstract

Right from the genesis of creation, God made them male and female. In the same vein, specific roles are assigned in relation to or in response to such gender distinction, either humanly ascribed or Divine. The type of role to a large extent determines the nature of musical involvement at any given situation. This essay views some of such gender ascribed roles as they concern Igbo traditional society and the type of musical performances associated with each of the roles. It also examines the implications of gender upon music performance in Igbo traditional society.

Introduction

Many scholars such as Bassow (1991), Sadiq (1996) Roldan and Beneria in Zapata (1997) and Marcela (1995) have defined gender and gender roles in various capacities. While Bassow describes gender as behaviour and attributes expected of a person based on being born a male or a female, Sadiq sees gender as a form of socio-cultural distinction in the individuals' physical out look Aluede (58) adds that "such roles structure our choices and guide our behaviour in acceptable manners within the community we operate".

Precisely, Gender is a state of being male or female. Igbo traditional society attaches much importance to this gender issue, where men and women operate in separate musical practices albeit, the same culture. The question then becomes, how does this gender ideology affect the societal musical practices? In trying to answer

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this question, one has to look into some of the variables or imbalances in role assignment. For instance, there are specific roles as well as general roles. The general roles do not select sexes while specific roles are meant to be the concern of a distinct group of either males or females.

Naturally, women are the birth-givers, as a result, musical practices around child birth; weaning and other related activities are the sole responsibilities of women. Similarly, there are roles which embody information or knowledge that men wish to possess or make exclusive to themselves. In such a situation, musical performances associated with such roles have some restrictions on women which even extend to the use of some musical instruments. For instance, ritual, cultic and esoteric affairs usually have male dominance and women are restricted from intruding or interfering. Therefore, it could be seen that both cultural conceived notions and biological sex differentiation are at play in gender role definition, which in turn influence musical performance typology.

Traditionally, people assumed certain musical roles based on their different developmental status. Older people assume musical roles different from those they had in their childhood years. In other words, roles and their associated music, chronologically change with age. No body or society does the reverse. That is the reason why music for different age groups exists in Igbo culture.

Gender Role Determinants

There are many factors that determine or contribute to gender role playing. These include: Natural factor, cultural factor, religious factor, societal value system/social factor etc. These factors are briefly discussed:

Natural/Biological Factor

Biological factor here literally implies a situation of being born a male or a female. The fact that a person sees himself/herself as a

man or a woman has automatically distinguished him/her from the opposite sex. This sex differentiation has some psychological effects on the bearer. A man will tend to think towards masculine responsibilities while a woman will aspire to meet up with her own feminine role. This factor is purely based on anatomical features or differences in individuals.

Cultural Factor

Culturally, Igbo society is patriarchal in nature, where men's decisions over issues are final and irrevocable. As a result, it is the men who say what should be and what should not be. The type of roles women should play in the society and those to be played by men. For instance, social custom upholds that women should not whistle and therefore, it is a rare practice for women. Women's devotion to home, family and domestic affairs also limit their public activities. Female mourners spend more time than their male counterparts in events of bereavement. Generally males overcome their sorrows with drinking and chatting at restaurants and even playing music, but women are confined for a certain period of time, under which they lament and sing dirges for their late relations. Even outside Africa, these gender distinctions persist. Auerbach (29) for example, notes that among some Greek communities.

The restrictions placed on men at the death of a relative are much less severe, of much shorter duration, and much less strictly enforced.

Men and women thus play contrasting roles due to their different dispositions to death and mourning. Women therefore tend to portray more emotions than men in situations of death and grief.

Masquerade (Spirit manifest) affairs are restricted to male membership and participation in Igbo culture. Titles like *Nze*, *Ozo*

and *Igwe* are not for women, though women can be *lolo* (a title given to the wife of an *Ozo* titled man). Ekwueme (231) maintains that:

Gender functions have been so arranged and segregated that men arrogate superior functions to themselves and inferior functions to women.

Over the years, these roles have been tolerated and assimilated by people and have become part of the people's customs and traditions.

Religious Factor

The Igbos believe that gods, deities and ancestral spirits have control over the living and as such worship or reverence them. In religious matters, men play more significant roles than women. They perform rituals, make dedications, consult oracles, make sacrifices and pour libations while women devotees are involved in menial tasks of painting, decorating and beautifying the walls of the shrines. They are also involved in singing and dancing during festivals in honour of the deities. In some ethnic groups, the scenario is the same. Akpan (51) reports about the *Bakor* New yam festival at Alok in Cross River State thus:

At about 8.00am, a procession of women who sang and danced was led by the priest - 'Ajomende' to the grounds where the monoliths are erected.

More significant roles could be identified in Yoruba tradition where women participate in *Sango* worship. According to Omibiyi (48-49):

Sango has been described as a deity in feminine dynasty... women occupy high official positions in *Sango* cult without any restriction arising from their gender.

Such instances notwithstanding, men's participations in religious matters are more pronounced than those of women.

Social Factor

There are activities and events that are basically meant for socialisation and recreation. The society values them and as such accords them special recognition. These include, festivals such as New Yam Festival, Cocoyam Festival, *Manwu* Festival; ceremonies such as marriages, coming of age ceremonies, funerals, Title taking, age grade activities and different classificatory associations; Others include sports such as wrestling and games, hunting and so on.

Each of the above events or activities has a specified group associated with it and a type of music that goes with their activities. Roles are so defined that each group knows what is expected of them.

Gender and Music

Gender has a strong force on the type of musical performances of any ethnic group or society. This is evident in gender defined roles. Men have their type of music and so do women though, mixed group performances also exist, which are devoid of any sort of restrictions. Mixed group performances are mainly for entertainment and recreation, normally – organised by the age grades, clubs and associations.

Men's visions and ideologies are well articulated in the type of music they perform. Igbo men are much inclined to honour and social status and this could attribute to is why one could hear different types of royal music such as *Ufie* music, *Nkwa* music, *Igbaeze* music, *Okonko* music and other kinds of drum music, which are purely prescribed for meritocratic positions.

Spirit manifest (*manwu*) according to Igbo tradition is an embodiment of ancestral spirit in the physical realm and for that, it is only the men who are qualified to communicate with such

supernatural beings. Music performance in this dimension is solely men's affair except in few instances where one or two women of mature age are admitted into the group. When this happens, the masquerade concerned may likely be a less serious or non violent type. These masquerades function in varying capacities. Most of them are good dancers (entertainers). They have names such as – *Ijele*, *Oji onu*, *Odegwu Anya Mmei*, *Ogba-Agu*, *Manwu Ugo*, *Adamma*, etc. All these masquerades have their followers and instrumentalists who are precisely men. There are other mystic types which are more cryptic and esoteric in nature. These groups can recite, lament, criticise or roar at night. They have the wits to terrify the uninitiated. The use of instrument is more or less very scanty as their mission is not specifically dance-conceived. Some of them can sing melodiously. Other areas where men have advantages over women in music performance include ritual music, wrestling music, hunting music, war music, initiation music and so on.

On the other hand, women excel in musical activities which focus mainly on the rites of passage due to their gender role. For instance from the time a child is born, till he becomes an adult, each stage of his development is accompanied with a suitable music, such as child birth music-*Egwu Nwa*; child outing music-*Egwu Nkuputa Nwa*; child weaning music (lullabies) – *Egwu Eji Alafukwa Nwa*; folktales and folksongs – *Egwu Ifo*. In the past, when a girl is mature enough to get married, she would be initiated into the system with such puberty music as *Egwu Mbibi* – *Uduokobe*, *Egwu-Obi/Egwu Umuagbogho* etc. Marriage activities have their own types of music as well as funerals. The classificatory sisters-*Umuada* and classificatory wife-mates – *Inyom Ona* are among the women groups that employ music in most of their activities.

Implications of Gender on Music Performances

Gender has been defined as a state of being male or female. It has some influences on the types of role one plays as an individual

or as a group, and invariably affects or has some implications on the type of musical performances engaged upon by either of the sexes. It is somehow uncommon in Igbo tradition for one to play a role contrary to one's gender, for instance, child birth songs, weaning songs and lullabies are purely women's business due to the type of bond that exists between mother and child and as such, any man who indulges in such type of performance may be seen as displaying abnormal behaviour. Domestic activities like scrubbing of the floor, grinding and pounding of spices and cooking of food are all women's responsibilities. In each of the activities, it is normally interspersed with a corresponding music which is purely for women.

Similarly, it is unusual for women to engage in any music that is solely utilised by men. Even in some societies women are forbidden to watch such music let alone playing or performing it. For instance, in *Egwu Omaba* of Nsukka - (Xylophone music) women are strictly banned from watching or taking part. It is not considered proper in Igbo tradition for women to overstep their boundaries or do the obvious in matters or roles strictly meant for males. All these put a check on the type of music being performed by any categorised group, male or female.

Conclusion

The above discussions have shown vividly that gender imposes great force or influence on musical performances in Igbo traditional society; and that there are forces which determine which roles to be played by a given gender group. The Igbo adhere strictly to this gender role sharing and non compliance to it is seen as abnormal and may warrant or attract either sanctions or cleansing as the case may be. These specifications are also considered to be more binding on women than men.

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