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## **Igbo Proverbs and the Emergence of a Metaphysical Model of Music Analysis (M<sup>3</sup>)**

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### **Abstract**

*The role of proverbs in the search for a model of analysis is the focus of this work. Igbo proverbs have continually offered access and insight into the thought patterns of Igbo people. Even though a collective consciousness may not be called a philosophy in the strict sense, an analysis of the thoughts, experiences and sayings of the Igbo concerning music has led to abstractions of real philosophical concepts that are presented here as categories for understanding and analyzing Igbo music. It is hoped that this approach will offer a new model of interpretation in Igbo music studies in particular and ethnomusicology in general.*

## Introduction

The need to search for basic philosophical principles and categories in Igbo musical thoughts has become imperative in the face of the challenge for Africans to re-invent functional education at every level. A collection of some Igbo proverbs relating to the musical art in one or more ways has been undertaken in this work. The purpose was to find beyond the proverbs, thoughts that could crystallize into philosophical categories for the purpose of understanding and interpreting various aspects of music. The methodology adopted was philosophical hermeneutics and the free abstraction of concepts from the given showed real philosophical categories that can serve various forms of interpretations in ethnomusicology.

### The Meaning Igbo Proverbs (Ilu Igbo)

Africans in general are known for the popularity of their proverbs, which are described in the Igbo language as the “oil with which words are eaten” (*mmanu e ji eri okwu*). And in fact, the work on Igbo proverbs written by Onwudufor (2007) is aptly titled *Mmanu e ji eri okwu*. In them are capsules of wisdom pertaining to practical life. They serve as conclusions that are borne out of life experiences without posing as absolutes in Igbo reasoning. The truth of a proverb can be challenged or even countered by another. In the hands of those who know them and apply them effectively, the use of proverbs is more than the employment of a part of speech to form a correct grammatical construction. In fact, proverbs are not a part of speech as we understand parts of speech in the English language. A proverb is a complete speech, raised to the status of art in Igbo speech art and culture. According to Amadiume (2000), “The beauty of Igbo language is anchored in the metaphorical and analogical expressions of our proverbs, which are the ready sources of the imagery and wit in Igbo oral poetry. They are as rich as quoting Socrates or Shakespeare” (p. vii).

*The Igbo-English Dictionary (okowa okwu)* by Eke (2001) defines a proverb as “popular short wise saying with word of advice or warning” (p.328). These proverbs offer us a very rare insight into the logic of Igbo music and its validity as a system of being and thought.

An exhaustive list of Igbo proverbs that relate to music is not an easy task. But effort is made here to present a wide range of proverbs, which offer a

glimpse into the mental categories that are implicated in Igbo thought and culture. Being fluid, their application is not limited to musical realities or experiences. Some of them are as follows:

- ***O di mma ka egwu buru n'ihu nkwa*** (it is good for the dancing to be performed in front of the drums). The first thing that comes to mind is the natural **integration** of music and dance in Igbo culture. As already shown, the word *egwu* translates both music and dance but in the context of the proverb above, *nkwa* has been used to avoid an unnecessary repetition of the word *egwu*. Why is the dance thought to be better if performed in front of the drum? The drum, no doubt, performs a central role in most Igbo music so much so that some people once thought African music as nothing but drumming. As major instruments, the drummers communicate to and with the dancers through the drums. Therefore, performance in front of the drum would lessen the possibilities of interference and wrong judgment.
- ***Nwata n'agba usurugada amaghi na usurugada bu egwu ndi mmuo*** (the child performing the *usurugada* dance does not know that *usurugada* is a dance for the spirits). This proverb does not tell us how the child even came to learn the dance in the first place. Being a child, however, exonerates him from being molested by the spirits who understand better, the lack of knowledge playing out in the child. This equally implies that the Igbo have types of dance and the spirit dance is just one of them. One thing clear to the Igbo is that even the spirits have their own dance. Dancing in Igbo music is an art that should go with the requisite **knowledge** about the reason, style and purpose of the dance as against the child's ignorance.
- ***Onye na-ekwere onye ara egwu so ya ayi*** (one who responds to the music of the mad man is his mad colleague). It is good to remember that Igbo music exists in different forms. One of the very well known forms is minstrelsy. Minstrels make extensive use of responders since the songs are for the most part arranged in the call and response form. These *okwe mgbe* as they are called, do the wonderful job of timing the response at regular intervals. They are common with music like the *ogene ikpachi*, and musicians like Mike Ejeagha, Ajana Obiligbo, Ozoemena Nsugbe and Morrocco

Maduka. This **participation** is an art that can be undertaken in complete sanity. But for a man to respond to a mad man's music means that both of them are operating at the same mental frequency. This proverb frowns at taking glory or pride or identifying with what is socially unacceptable.

- ***Afu nze, ebie okwu; afu ichie, ebie abia.*** (Every speech stops when an *nze* - titled man - enters an arena; but the drum stops when an *ichie* – a royal cabinet member- arrives). To stop either a speech, an address or a discussion in respect of an *nze* is a mark of **freedom, flexibility and spontaneity** in Igbo tradition. But when an art as complex as music can equally wait to herald the arrival of an *ichie*, now that is the highest expression of that freedom from the rigidities of performance. Respect for rulers and the highly placed is a well known Igbo value.

- ***The amuru amu ka ihe agworo agwo*** (a learned art is superior to a magical art). The Igbo know that almost anything can be learned as art including magic. The complex art of dance is placed above all magic since even magic may not produce the intricate dance steps and instrumentation that are associated with say the *Atilogwu* or *Egedege* music. Igbo music and dance gives an insight into the world of **order** in the Igbo universe. This comparative expression of the superiority of the music/dance art over magic or witchcraft pertains to the premium paid to the **learning** of music as **training** in diligence and discipline.

- ***Nwanne onye n'agba ajo egwu, oko iku ana ako ya*** (when a man's kinsman or kinswoman is doing a bad dance, the man keeps scratching his eyebrows in shame).The Igbo have a keen sense of music and dance; great musicians and especially dancers are highly respected and genuinely acknowledged. This does not, however, translate into any financial emoluments. When someone related to you (not necessarily from the same nuclear family), is mutilating the art, his kinsmen are ashamed of his performance. Or in another sense, when the music is so bad that nobody would want to associate with it, it is a source of communal shame if your own is found dancing to the rhythm of the evil music. This proverb pertains to the possibility of causing injury to the communal pride of a family

through an individual's wrong social behaviour. To be is to belong to a **community**.

- *Nnunu bere na ngige bu nnunu na-egwu, ngige na-egwu* (a bird perching on a wooden fence, keeps dancing as the fence keeps shaking). This is more of a description than a *translation*; the shaking of the fence is here the metaphor for dance and the rhythm of the shaking fence is seen as directly proportional to that of the bird. This sense of **proportion** in the relationship of action to reaction is an element that is derived from Igbo life experience and projected into their idea of music and dance.

- *Nwa nnunu n'agba egwu n'etiti iro, ihe n'akuru ya egwu no n'ime ohia* (when a small bird is dancing in the middle of the road, whatever is playing the music for it is in the bush close by). The road is not usually a perfect place for a dance, at least for human beings not to mention birds that take to flight at the slightest noise. The Igbo believe that for someone to persist in evil or something that is culturally perceived to be out of place or outright wrong, there is a very powerful force or purpose or gain which is motivating him even unto suicide. This **force** is fundamentally so irresistible that the danger of dancing in the middle of the road fades into insignificance.

- *Onye tufuru oja o ji akpo ummunna ya, ihe oja mee, o were onu kpoba* (if a man loses the flute with which he assembles his kinsmen, when the need arises, he must use his mouth). The flute is a highly important instrument in Igbo organology. It is used powerfully to communicate to the masquerade, other players of instruments, dancers and spectators alike. It is used to call people by their names and to praise them. The proverb above indicates that it is used to call people together. The shift to the use of mouth is an indication that the natural or traditional instrument for that **communication** is the flute. It is equally an indication that the *oja* has a natural alternative in the human voice, though a tough alternative for the function.

- *Onye chi ya kuwaara igba, ya gbawa* (if a man's *Chi* starts drumming for him, he should dance). The concept of *Chi* as a personal god is very common among the Igbo. This personal god is

responsible for the blessings and woes of its double (the human person) to whom it acts more like a guardian angel than an object of worship. This *Chi* is always assumed to intend well for its subject but it is easy to fall out of favour with this spirit and it can decide to be a redemptive as well as destructive force depending on the nature of an existing **relationship**. So, if this spirit decides to entertain its double, it should be a good omen. The freedom to choose the style for the dance will come from the individual and not from the spirit. The implication is that in the Igbo universe, the phenomenon of music does not entirely originate from the will of man. The idea of external unseen force moving men to create, organize and ritualize music is present.

- ***The ekwe na-ekwu bu o ma egwu puta ogbo*** (what the wooden gong is saying is “whoever knows how to dance should step into the arena”). Here, the wooden gong is attributed with the gift of speaking, which, properly speaking, belongs to humans. In Igbo organology, musical instruments are presumed to speak the **language** of the music owners; the playing of such instruments appears to imitate the tonal rise and fall of the Igbo language. To amplify the message of the *ekwe* shows that there are people who understand the language of the instruments better than others. The musical freedom of the Igbo comes to the fore in that statement “whoever knows how to dance”. There is the absence of restrictions and the abandoning of musical performance to only professionals which we often see in the West. This, however, does not preclude the recognition of such talented music makers and dancers in Igbo land; it only underscores the level at which integration fosters social coherence in the community. The essence of music in the Igbo world is communal participation.

- ***Eburu egwu ghara ala, a ga ano n’elu gbaa ya?*** (If music is not performed on land, will it be performed in the sky?) The establishment of **place** for the performance of music is very necessary. The land is of utmost significance in Igbo cosmology. To some, it is a greater deity than *Chukwu* (God). It is the natural setting for musical displays.

- ***Aka emetughi Igba, igba adighi aha onu*** (if no hand touches the drum, the drum does not sound). The drum is the work of man and as such, depends on the ingenuity of man to serve at its best. The hand that is supposed to touch or play the drum is a well trained hand, strong enough to envelop the arena with the sound. This proverb captures the Igbo concept of **causality**. This equally means that if the drum is not sounding right, or sounding loud and clear, the fault may be traced to the drummer who is doing a poor job.
- ***Mmuonwu ogba mgbada si na egwu rie ya isi, o naghi amazi oke ala*** (the *ogba mgbada* masquerade says that when the music gets into its head, it does no longer recognize land boundaries). The one effect that Igbo music creates in the players and dancers is that it has a way of absorbing their faculties so much so that a near-possession experience is created. In that state, freedom and spontaneity may lead to **ecstasy**. This is one saying that shows the capacity of Igbo music to affect the internal faculties of man.
- ***Mmadu anaghi ekolu igba na-eti onu*** (nobody uses the mouth to make drum-like sounds while the real drum is hanging down from his shoulders). This proverb describes something that can happen but which is out of place. The drum is not for fancy or display. It is meant to be beaten and enjoyed. It is highly ridiculous to dissipate over the unreal. Again, no amount of **imitation** can replace what in its nature is irreplaceable.
- ***Mmuonwu nwanyi n'afulu oja, n'awu aja muo*** (a masquerade that allows a woman to blow the *oja* for it usually jumps the fence of the spirits). The flute is not an instrument associated with women in the Igbo world. Even in the performance of an all-women dance, a man is usually employed to blow the *oja* for them. Again, initiates of the *mmuonwu* cult are men in Igbo culture (even though for a very strong reason, an elderly woman that has fulfilled some conditions can be initiated). The thought of a woman playing this instrument, not even for women dance, but for the masquerade, is the sure road to catastrophe and ugly events. The role of the flutist includes among other things, the giving of timely information to the masquerade about the environment and individuals, and to warn the masquerade about same. The effect of the *oja* on Igbo people is to

blame for the jumping of this fence. The flute has, in its sound, the capacity to stir into action those who have integrated into the culture. Some of such actions include bare footed climbing and walking on the spines of a tall palm tree, various kinds of jumps and somersaults and gestures that elicit moving cheers from spectators. Blowing the *oja*, which will cause the masquerade to cause trouble and create damage, should not be left to the discretion of women, who are considered less likely to know when to stop. Their knowledge of **balance** concerning emotional matters remains suspect among the men folk. The lesson here is the assumption that overdependence on the counsel, view or reasoning of a woman is sure to lead into disaster. The need for balance between inspiration and **intuition** is necessary.

- *Agadi nwanyi anaghi aka nka n'egwu o maara agba* (old age can never disturb an old woman who has always been an expert dancer). Old age is certainly a great burden for humans. But that burden is easily overcome by the figurative old woman anytime she is needed to display her dancing **skills**. The meaning of this proverb is not restricted to music in its social interpretation. It pertains to the **inspiration** and ease with which adepts ply their art or trade. It extols the supreme importance of expertise by showing how it scales the hurdles set in place by nature.

- *Onye e bu egwu abia be ya si si gbanye ya na ube okpoko* (the man to whose house dancers are coming has asked them to dance to the *okpoko* pear tree). The essence of outings and carols in Igbo culture is to enforce social cohesion through musical entertainment. It is a custom for dance groups to be seen going and dancing from house to house at festive periods when a lot of people come home for celebrations. Music and dance are considered wasted if nobody is there to watch them. It is, therefore, the height of disdain for the art to ask dancers to go to a corner where nobody appreciates them. The metaphor of the pear tree which naturally cannot be allowed to grow at the centre of the compound represents this disdain. The one thing that an artist needs is audience that can show **appreciation**.

- *Agbachaa egwu, onaa n'ukwu* (when all the dancing is done, the waist suffers the pains). The waist is central to the movement of the

body, especially in the art of dancing. As physical exercise, music can be tiresome painful at the joints. But, the severity of the **responsibility** with which the waist is entrusted is not enough to make humans shirk the responsibility of making music. The wisdom here is that there is always someone who remains responsible for every human action.

- *Ejighi abia ano egwu onwa* (the funeral drum is not used for moonlight plays). At play **time**, people do not like to be reminded about death. The *abia* is wont to do so if it is introduced during the moonlight plays when it is meant to be specifically for funeral rites. The moonlight play does not take place at all times. It happens only during those seasons when the sky is very clear at night like in the dry season. This equally shows that Igbo music is created for a particular **function**.

- *“Puu” bu isi opi* (the first note of the *opi* is *puu*). The *opi* is a well known instrument employed by various musicians like Afam Ogbuotobo and the different makers of the *Ejemmili* dance. The note here described is what could be regarded as the lead or tonic note which has to be established first before any other one. This **recognition** of this headship of the *puu* sound is important both to the musician and the audience. It gives **identity** to the instrument and pride to the instrumentalist.

- *Uzu amaghi akpu ogene, ya nee egbe anya na odu* (a blacksmith that does not know how to mould the *ogene* (clapperless bell) should look at the tail of the kite). One of the most prominent instruments of Igbo organology is the *ogene*. The physical shape looks very much like blacksmith’s imitation of a nature’s bird, the tail of the kite. The collaboration between the designs in nature and the **creativity** of the human spirit has been an old human habit.

### **A Hermeneutic Abstraction of Categories from Igbo Proverbs**

An exhaustive listing of Igbo proverbs that are related to music is impossible, at least within the scope of this work. But the much we have seen are enough to throw up some major references of meanings that are parcels of wisdom within the world of the culture owners. At the same time, an application of our investigative tool shows that the proverbs and the words that explain

them are keys that unlock the Igbo world of being and thought. A cursory look at the key words arising from the explanations of the proverbs above show the following: **integration, knowledge, participation, freedom, flexibility, spontaneity, order, learning, training, community, proportion, force, communication, language, place, causality, ecstasy, imitation, balance, intuition, skills, inspiration, appreciation, responsibility, time, season, function, recognition, identity and creativity.** An attempt has been made to arrange these words into different categories as they relate to the experience of making, playing or enjoying music. Curiously, these key concepts correspond to six major primary categories of being and thought by which Igbo music, of necessity, defines itself and freely defends its identity and logic. These six major categories form the bedrock of Igbo musical essence. They are: **conception, construction, instruction, presentation participation and satisfaction.** These categories contain in them, elements which are impossible to isolate as monoliths, but which cooperate in unique modes that cannot be reduced to mere material analysis. The elements of the different categories are properties that border on specific levels of consciousness and transcendence which can only be associated with humans. These elements offer insight into the dynamics for understanding and interpreting traditional music experiences. On account of the co-operation between the psychosomatic musical experiences and levels of human consciousness, this model of approach to analysis is termed the Metaphysical Model for Musical Interpretation (M<sup>3</sup>).

Conception	Construction	Instruction	Presentation	Participation	Satisfaction
Communication	Proportion	Knowledge	Freedom	Integration	Appreciation
Ecstasy	Balance	Learning	Flexibility	Participation	Responsibility
Force	Time	Training	Spontaneity	Community	Recognition
Inspiration	Causality	Skills	Function	Relationship	Identity
Intuition	Imitation	Language	Order	Place	Creativity

The six categories of being and thought are very important in understanding the identity, freedom and logic of Igbo music. But the elements that they entail are by no means exhausted here. The interesting feature about the elements is the fact that each is capable of invoking an independent concept while maintaining the interdependence which establishes them as a system.

Under the category of conception, there is communication, ecstasy, force, inspiration and intuition as the background activities that give birth to every musical material at any level of existence. Yet the nature of what is conceived is guided by its identity as being specifically Igbo be it the language, the instruments, the structure, the dance or the costume. It is guided by freedom which comes in different guises depending on its free association with the other categories. It is also guided by the modes of thought and speaking associated with the culture of the Igbo. This is the loose paraphrase for logic, which is made up of both the preconceptions and a posteriori reflections of the Igbo experience.

The elements of proportion, balance, time, causality and imitation are located within the category of construction. This element makes a unique use of the human common sense. They do not come about as the result of experimented theories. They are natural to the Igbo music maker. In writing about the 'Cipande' music of the Gogo heritage in Tanzania, Vallejo (2008) referred to this common sense as 'natural intelligence' to which Arom quickly objected and called it by its simple but universal name, logic.

Knowledge, learning, training, skills and language are the elements that are associated with instruction. Igbo music makes extensive application of the traditional method of informal and non-formal education. Igbo approach to knowledge is more practical than the version of education (formal) that is generally paraded in the country. The reason for saying this is simple. It has always been education for life as opposed to education for job. The essence of Igbo education is, therefore, beyond mere knowledge by which a human subject achieves sustenance or makes a living. Igbo education is aimed at wisdom by which a human agent is able to make a life. The non-inclusion of the informal and non-formal approaches learning into education has not gone down well with the advancement of Igbo music in particular and African music in general.

The category of presentation contains the elements of freedom, flexibility, spontaneity, function and order. The essence of art is satisfaction both of the artist and his audience. But more than material gains, an artist needs an audience. This is why the concept of presentation in Igbo music contains elements that explain both the why and the how of the presentation. The setting of Igbo music is usually within the atmosphere of function. Music fulfills roles in Igboland. It is not meant simply for the theatre in the absence of any event. Igbo music goes with purpose and that purpose must be

integrative in the sense that it has to involve many other activities that promote the internal cohesion of the people. Every presentation, therefore, carries the burden of this essence.

The category of participation communicates through the elements it implies, elements that are in themselves, essences. Thus, integration, participation, community, relationship and place are elements that are intrinsic to the issue of identity. The unseen power of Igbo music to generate these elements is an outstanding quality which makes it easy for people to associate or identify with the art. The communication that the elements engender is clearly beyond every mechanical arrangement. By this category, we are led into the reason why Igbo music is capable of speaking to all the external and internal faculties of man. Stokes (1997) has inquired into the nature of the relationship between music and place. In doing so, he adopted the definition of place advanced by Giddens (1990), as “the physical setting of social activity as situated geographically” (p. 18). He observes that there is a separation of space from place. The existence of this separation is described as ‘phantasmagoric’. Stokes’s (1997) main argument is this:

Music ...provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them...means by which ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilized....Music is what any social group consider it to be, contrary to the essentialist definitions and quests for musical ‘universals’ of 1960’s ethnomusicology or text-oriented techniques of musicological analysis Stokes (p.5).

The category of satisfaction is explained by the elements of appreciation, responsibility, recognition, identity and creativity. In a way, the immediate purpose of Igbo music is to guarantee a satisfactory use of time and talent. The elements which are implicated here cover a range of emotions that verge on the psychological and the sociological.

### **Conclusion**

The Metaphysical Model of Music analysis is a unique approach to the understanding of the unseen building blocks about a people’s musical art. This is supposed to boost existing approaches in ethno musicological analysis. The analysis proceeded from the explanation of Igbo proverbs which are seen as repositories of condensed experiences. They speak volumes about different aspects of life and this paper focused only on the

understanding of age-old sayings pertaining to musical arts, composing, dancing, playing, singing, and listening to music. This means that following the same method of abstracting concepts from Igbo proverbs, another focus might decide to understand the categories for explaining language, family, values, war, politics, kingship, death, religion and society. It is a model that is proposed to serve the arts and humanities in a new way that combines their contents to give birth to concise philosophical concepts.

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