

## **THE PLACE OF THE FEMALE GENDER IN CULTURAL MUSIC MAKING AND PERFORMANCE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: TOWARDS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*Music is a nucleus of culture and constitutes the vehicular body by which traditions are transmitted from one generation to generation. From the beginning of time, up to the present, people are usually and permanently ascribed duties that are unique to their sex group (ie male or female) due to biological nature and sexual anatomy. Some roles are ascribed to the female folks and some to the male folks as they concerned to Igbo traditional society and the type of musical performances associated with each of the roles. Therefore, this paper focuses on the developments in the literature of culture, female gender, and music making and its performance in Igbo traditional society.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Music Making, Performance, Igbo Traditional Society and National Development.

### **Introduction**

Tradition and culture are dynamic. This means that their specific aspects never remain the same for long. New realities emerge to supplant what was known in the past, and if they are not replaced wholly to tilt them to produce different faces. Sometimes older attitudes or values are modified; sometimes they are jettisoned completely or when they remain, their valuation is completely altered. This is a constant feature of the human world. Traditions emerge and to some extent assume another form. All so often appeal is made to tradition when the reality being defended is far from being traditional. Sure the culture of any people is heavily marked by some elements of their tradition but indiscriminating appeal to the past is often tainted by the disjunction between these past and the currently accepted practices in the particular society. Culture which can be taken to embrace both continuity and change in any society appears to be more import. But again what is even more significant is the interpretation of the institutions, the practices, the convictions, the values and counter values of the very particular culture. It is pertinent to enhance our appreciation of the issues at stake in this paper by clarifying the place of the female gender which forms the fundamental basis of the concept expressed. Let us begin by looking at Basden's definition of culture as the value system, customs, education and knowledge of a people. Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts, the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values, culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action. Culture is the vehicle through which knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits of a society are transmitted to members of that society from one generation to another generation. It is clear that culture is designed to assist those living in a society to realize their collective aspirations as well as potential benefit of every member. In a functional society which has regards for its culture every member contributes to its welfare and development. No section is marginalized or 'looked down' on as the inferior that should not be given the chance to express

opinion on matters affecting their lives.

It is in this regard that the work shall briefly highlight the essence of female nature in Igbo traditional society as concerned music making and also briefly pinpoints how some traditional practices rubbed the Igbo women of their glory in the society. Culturally, Igbo society is a society dominated by men who make the rules that produce masculine values which suffocates the person and abilities of women. The female gender is marginalized to the point of being inhibited from advancing freely in life like her male counterpart. This situation arises due to some cultural observances fashioned and sustained by male dominated society to perpetually control women and subjugate them to their wishes in the guise of practicing their culture and tradition. An experience has also shown that culture is supposed to be an accepted way of life by a group of people living within the same geographical area. However, this has ironically been used as an instrument of oppression against the female gender. In general, the Igbo expresses in their sayings, proverb, and idioms that the fact that the male is the superior gender. One word that expresses masculinity is *Oke*. This word is also used in Igbo as a prefix for superiority or excellence. Thus in order to describe a superior, beautiful, special house for instance, one only needs to prefix the word *Oke* to the word *Uno*. *Oke Uno* thus stands for a house which is special or superior. It is the same with all objects, *Oke Osisi* means big tree, *Oke mmadu* means a special or important person, *Oke nwanyi* means a superior or important woman. The extension of this adjective *Oke* to stand for superiority is derived directly from Igbo conception of the superiority of the male gender. It can also be argued that the use of *Oke* to designate the male gender originally derive from the adjective for superiority *Oke*. Thus a child is *Nwa*. *Nwa Oke* is simply the male child and implication also the superior child. The superior conception of maleness also extends to many Igbo sayings, idioms, proverbs and folktales. It is remarkable that this conception of superiority is consistent that there is hardly any saying or proverb in the Igbo language which adjudges the female gender as such superior to the male. This is because of the patriarchal nature of the Igbo traditional society.

Igbo traditional society is highly associated with rituals and ceremonies which is being preceded by music. Music announces the dawn and the dusk of the day in Igbo traditional society. The big village drum or gong, the flute or animal horn sounds its music, saluting the morning sun, and in the evening, it sounds again, saluting the setting sun. Music is culture and with it one gives meaning to other cultural things. The involvement of music in Igbo culture is striking, the Igbo culture is deeply rooted in its music, while indigenous musical activities are ritualized and intended to link the visible world with the invisible. The musical culture of the Igbo is rich and varied, because it is associated with their worship, occupation, homeland, and rites of passage, and is an integral part of their life. Music gives life and character to Igbo festivals and culture and the involvement or the participation of women in some music making and musical performances during these festivals or rituals has been overlooked by virtue of their gender and because of some several cultural norms, beliefs, and harmful traditional practices which denies women their rights in full participation in music making and performances in Igbo traditional society. Igbo traditional society attaches much importance to the view that there is a female nature or female essence, and that of male nature, where men and women operate in separate musical practices albeit, same culture, because roles are ascribed to them based on their sex not necessarily their status. There are roles which embody information or knowledge that men wish to possess or make exclusive to them, in such situation, musical performances associated with such roles have some restrictions on women who even extend to the use of some musical instruments especially instruments believed to be associated with power and assertiveness.

Therefore, it could be seen that women have been conceptualized as mothers and wives, and from birth, they are expected to prepare themselves for these roles by cultural conditioning, societal attitudes, values and expectations.

### **Music Making In Igbo Society**

The nature and scope of music making is generally related to the aims and purpose of a specific social/cultural event or to the needs of the performers. Music making also is an integral part of communal life in Igbo societies and through music Igbos articulate and objectify their philosophical beliefs. As in many cultures, music making may be organized as a concurrent activity, that is, as incidental or background music for other events such as games, wrestling, matches, walking parties, processions, beer parties, and feast. On the same basis, music may be related to the needs of performers in a variety of ways.

On ceremonial and ritual occasions, music making may similarly go hand in hand with set sequences of symbolic actions, performed with or without props by specific people playing given/specific roles. These actions, which are dramatic in character, take place in the presence of some participants or spectators. Music may be integrated with the event, either to set the mood for the actions or to provide an outlet for expressing the feelings they generate. It may also be used to continue or heighten the dramatic action; hence, it may punctuate statements or prayers, or provide a continuous background of ordered sounds. When a traditional ruler or a titled man dies in Igbo traditional society, for example, some stages in the funeral are marked by music designed to perform various dramatic functions. The funeral announcement includes drumming of big drum or playing of large slit-wooden drum (*Ikoró*), usually placed at a place believed to be the center or the village square, the drum associated with the office of a chief can convey the message in a more forceful and dramatic manner to the community. The drum sounds to announce the death of a king, murder, land has been defiled, there is an outbreak of war, a calamity has befallen the community etc. In some communities the big drum is turned upside down and when such happens, it means death has befallen the community and it's that of a traditional ruler or a chief.

The second approach is to organize music as a terminal activity or as an activity preceding a major event. Thus in some traditional societies, the use of musical sounds made for flushing animals from cover during hunting is differentiated from the music performed after the hunt and women cannot participate in the music making because hunting in Igbo society is reserved or kept for the male folk.

### **Performance Settings**

Since the traditional approach to music making makes it a part of the institutional life of a community, the physical setting for performances can be any spot suitable for collective activity. It may be public place or a private area to which only those intimately concerned with the event are admitted, the regular place of worship, such as shrine, a sacred spot, a grove, mausoleum, the courtyard of the house where the ceremony is taking place, or the area behind it, the scene of communal labour, the corner of a street habitually used by social groups for music and dancing, market place and a specific enclosure or space at the center of the village known as the village square used for recreational singing, dancing, and special ritual.

When music making is ritually connected, the participation of women is limited; this is referred to as the Indoor setting and would generally be reserved for restricted audience such as Kings, patrons, and chiefs, which constitutes mostly men. In some Igbo society, during these rituals, rites and initiations, women does mostly all the singing but in enclosure not fully participating in the rituals or initiations by virtue of their gender.

### **Gender Roles in Igbo Traditional Society**

Gender roles in the Igbo society shape the way that its men and women live and interact in their everyday lives. Our society is not strictly differentiated by gender. There are not really any aspects of society in which men and women are not allowed to participate. In some societies, though, this is not the case. We see very strict gender roles, or functions and social positions performed and held specifically and only by one of the two sexes.

In Igbo traditional society, as a female child/daughter, then as a wife and mother. It seems a universal observation that the female children are loved and cherished by their fathers, while the males are cherished by their mothers. This perhaps is not a function of the Oedipus complex as many may wish to suggest. It is however due to the understanding that in-laws are very important members of the Igbo extended family system, and because men think more of their old age and death/burial ceremonies, they always pray to have their female children protected married out to competent males for the roles traditionally set for them at the ending of life (Anatogu 2000). On the other hand, males bring in the women's helping hand after she has 'lost' the first one; her girl-child! The daughter(s) in law become(s) a companion/companions: It is therefore not correct/or empirically evidenced that men love the boys more than the girls. Nonetheless, almost every Igbo man would want to have at least a son, more so in these days of Christian-Igbo culture. The boys are mainly sought to assist the man in his trade and family upkeep as well as territorial security. The forgoing is further buttressed by the common names: males are called *Ikem, Ezeaputa, Ikemefuna, Amaefuna, Orji, Afamefuna, Onyeogu*, etc, while sample female names among Igbo include *Ngozi, Amaka, Obianuju, Nwakaego, Nwando, Akwaugo, Obiageli, and Apunawu* (market days excluded), while wives/are addressed as *Oriaku* (meant to consume wealth). Note also that unmarried men were regarded as irresponsible and not admitted to policy making meetings.

In Igbo traditional society, the roles ascribed to females by common traditions may include religious roles or participation in domestic chores, continuation of existential functions (child bearing), child education, economic growth in the society through agricultural living. Women are expected to take on tasks that are associated with domesticity and child-rearing. These tasks include taking care of chickens and small garden patches, bearing and rearing of children, and serving dinner as a chore to their respective husbands. Women participate actively in various musical activities in Igbo society. Women occupy special positions in musical performances during traditional events. Women are the first people to introduce a child to music, where they chants salutation to announce the birth of a child, sing lullabies and some other songs as they go about their domestic chores, such as scrubbing the floor and walls, grinding pepper and corn. This helps to implant the musical culture in their children and ensure the continuity of Igbo music and its performance. Their roles in musical activities does not end there, it also extended to ceremonies and festivals, such as marriage, cocoyam festival, naming ceremonies, title taking, chasing of year and so forth, religious activities as well as minstrelsy.

Whereas men are expected to take on tasks that protects the land and provide for their families. One of the most important roles that men have is preparing and growing yams. Yams are considered a “male crop,” and men are primarily responsible for providing them. Men are expected to take part in sports such as wrestling. They also participate in religious ceremonies in various roles. Men also climb and tap tress for palm wine. A man's skill in tapping tress for palm wine signifies his manliness.

Indeed, it is the misguided or misunderstood Christian or emerging Igbo culture: the one that is a

mixture of cultures, or adulterated foreign and Igbo custom(s) that 'hyperbole' the place of the male child against the female child. Originally, capable Igbo men were traditionally polygamous hence, many a time, there were no issues about male and female children. However, in the rather few instances where a man died without a son, no property of his was taken over by anybody because: the wife could accept to become 'married to her husband's brother, a female child of the man could be retained to bear children in her father's name, or the woman/wife marries another wife on her husband's behalf. Most times, many a second or third wife in those days were married by the first wife after years of infertility (primary or secondary, or for gender mix) hence most polygamous families lived in peace. These were methods of adoption of children among Igbos. Unfortunately, many of these customs have been 'criminalized' by the foreign culture mix that confused the place of pride of the girl child among Igbos for discrimination.

### **Women in Igbo Traditional Society**

In the Igbo traditional society, women are solely seen as second class to men, they are seen as people who have little or nothing to contribute in the largely patriarchal Igbo traditional society. They maintain that “women are to be seen but not to be heard”. Despite the fact that women play larger roles in decision making in most families and societies, they have been portrayed and regarded as weak from time immemorial till date in our societies. Historically, women have helped in ensuring stability, progress and long-term development of nations. Like all human societies, Ndigbo have their cultural definition of the woman. They designated roles to women, politically, economically and socially differently from the menfolk. A critical look at the Igbo conception of woman reveal respect, power, influence, limitations, discrimination or differentiation and even ornamentation of the womenfolk. The Igbo woman was not an oppressed species. She was certainly powerful and significantly had a say in the running of the Igbo society. Culturally, she was capable of fighting injustice and did in deed resist perceived injustice. Women in Igbo society certainly did not fare worse than her counterparts in other cultures in the past. Although she certainly faced certain economic, political and cultural limitations, she did in fact enjoy respect and even veneration in the things in Igbo ontology.

### **Women and Nation Building**

The contributions that women make to the building of any nation generally and in particular cannot be overemphasized. The role women play in ensuring national development through their musical arts is dual. First is its role as a contributor to human resource development. In other words, its contribution to the development of knowledge, skills, capacities, intelligence and so on as well as the provision of employment and entertainment for different people within the society. The second is its role as contributor to national resources and national building.

Galindo, (2009), appreciating and expressing the importance of music opines that art and music are basic human functions. Humankind and art cannot function without another. We have the burning desire to create, whatever it may be and however tiny and grand. The interaction with sound is unavoidable, either to make it or take pleasure in it. People have always found music significant in their lives, whether for enjoyment in listening, the emotional response, performing or creating.

Women can be described as indispensable group in the development of any nation. Writing on women's population, Masha (2001:1) said: “The 1991 population census put the number of Nigerian women at about 44 million which is almost fifty percent of the total population 88,514,501million.” Apart from their numeral strength, women have great potentials necessary for economic, social, political, educational and moral development, which will sustain nation building. Several records reveal overwhelming evidence of the women folk's contribution in the

Nigerian's historical development. The following highlights women's activities in Nigeria in the past and present:

**1. Women as Transmitters of Values:**

The task of building a nation (Nigeria) requires a re-orientation of the citizens. It requires the inculcation of our cherished values and norms. Women are indispensable factors/instruments in the transmission of these cherished values and norms to the younger generation. Women are rightly said to be the custodians of the future. Ogbuigwe (1996:10) remarks that, not only because they bear and rear children but because they are by nature endowed with much potential to nurture succeeding generations of the nation.

**2. Women in Homes:**

Women are responsible for the early training of their children. Our traditional education provides adequate rural training for women who in turn pass it down through music as instructions to their children. They care in so many ways as keeping and sustaining human life, ensuring that the child conforms to the accepted social norms. They ensure also that the child achieves success and develops into a responsible being.

**3. Women as culture preservers:**

The role women play in ensuring continuity of Igbo culture cannot be overemphasized. Ibekwe (2012), points out the indispensability of African women with reference to their contributions in the existential functioning of man and humanities at large. She insist that their job exceed child bearing and extends to sustenance of Igbo cultural practices such as language, communality, body adornment, dedication to gods and goddesses, child rearing practices, artistry and so forth.

**4. Women as Mobilizers:**

Moving Nigeria forward politically requires creating awareness through mobilization. Onifade (2003:9) notes that, “historical evidence shows that women are good mobilizers. Example of these are Mrs. Fumilayo Ransom Kuti who played important role in mobilizing people during the struggle for independence. The Aba Women's Riot of 1929 is another example of women mobilizing against obnoxious colonial policies. It is well known fact that when people mobilize for a common purpose, irrespective of differences in their backgrounds, they become more united, speaks with one voice and co-operate to achieve their purpose.

**5. Women in Education:**

Educated women, particularly in Nigeria have been playing dynamic roles in the various fields and endeavors- from legal profession to medical, engineering, surveying, education, aeronautics, and also in politics where many of them have sometimes proved the saying that “what a man can do, a woman can do even more better.” The outstanding contributions of women in education cannot be over-emphasized. Some of them have held positions in our tertiary institutions. Prof. Allele Williams, former Vice Chancellor, University of Benin, Prof. Jadesola Akande, Vice Chancellor, Lagos State University are two examples of such. There are other women professors and doctors in the different fields of education contributing to human development in Nigeria which aims towards national development.

**6. Women in Medical Fields:**

In the medical field, women are not left behind in their contributions to nation building in Nigeria. Prof. Dora Akuyili of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and Prof. Abiose of the Guinness Eye Center Kaduna are examples. Women doctors, surgeons, consultants, and specialists in pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and other parts of medical field are helping to bring about the quality of longevity of live to millions of Nigerians

through their sciences. Many of them helps in enlightenment campaign against HIV/AIDS and other killer diseases.

### **7. Women in Politics:**

In Nigeria, women have featured prominently not only mobilizing others but also have participated actively in politics in Nigeria. Women have occupied the post of deputy Governors in some States of the Federation, people like Alhaja S. Badeu of Ogun State, Yeye Erelu of Osun State, Dame Virgy Etiaba of Anambra State. Indeed women like Sarah Jibril have dared the men in contesting the presidential position. Women ministry like Kema Chinwe, formal minister of Aviation has proved that given the right education, there is nothing impossible for them.

Among prominent women who played vital roles in the country's political development were Mrs. Margaret Ekpo and Mrs. Elizabeth Adekogbe who were at the Constitutional Conference in London in the late 1950s. Even in Northern Nigeria, where fewer women dare to raise the voices, a prominent woman Hajia Bambo, played crucial role with men, socially and politically. The creation of the position of the first lady has placed a lot of responsibilities on our women and has given convincing evidences of what women can do if given the opportunity. There are also women senators who are really rubbing shoulders with their men counterparts in the National Assembly contributing effectively to debates. With the current women empowerment, hope is bright that women can hold any position including the presidency.

### **8. Women as Music-Makers in Nigeria:**

The education of an individual begins right at birth and doesn't stop until death. Music is a very strong force and a vital factor in education in Nigeria. The education begins with the life-rites-the birth rites, the child rearing practices, the initiation ceremonies etc, here music is both a medium of instruction and a lesson itself. It is central to the educational process. Okafor (1989: 23) remarks that: the chants that are raised at the birth of a child or at the circumcision of a child may not be of great use to the child- the child may not really understand at all but it rallies the community it also means that the women raising the chants have fitted into the normal practices of the society.

In traditional ceremonies like festivals, title taking, funerals, and others, we find music to be the core of the occasion. Women are majorly involved as music makers. Some of the chants, dances and songs used are in the prerogative of women. Not only that, women dominate in the performance because they are the main custodians. It is the women who must perform them. It is the women who will let the society move and by looking at the theme(s) of the songs used in the ceremonies, they are things that edifies the society, excite, and move the people and motivates them. Music, therefore, plays a cardinal role in moving the society throughout the life-rites and women are often the music makers.

In many cultures of the world and in many literatures of the world, the power of a woman to criticize, to decide, and to speak striking words are very easily recognized. In the Nigerian society, the woman's tongue has been harnessed for the betterment of the society. There are ceremonies in some parts of the country where once in a year or a stated times, the whole society does a poetic and song review of what has happened- those who had misbehaved throughout the preceding year, those who are doing something bad in secret places those who are stepping out line. Women lead the songs and they have been known to start gossips that were mainly corrective in nature. Some of the gossip started in saloons or in the hair-weaving places, in public streams, in the markets or even within high-walled compounds have motivated women to go on their march either to build or to destroy so as to draw attention of the elders to what have been

irking them in the society or to forcefully tell errant wife or husband that enough was enough. It is known that it was through this medium and through the medium of their songs that they had, in some areas, been able to erect schools and maternity or hospitals, to get certain laws, customs, modified or abolished, to children. All these are facts that are known to the insider and perhaps less to the outsider. And that is why the outsider concentrates on the passive role or the supposedly passive role of the women in the organization. Social control is a cardinal part of the corrective system of society and women often, have their hand on the lever.

Okafor (1989) notes that:

There are many instances of the value or the nuisance value of women's dancing groups and musical-groups in the communities but we cannot deny that women are great organizers of these. They make the necessary law-binding laws, and they have the necessary organizational structure to move a whole community-husbands and relations, friends, kinsfolk and the general town's people (p. 24).

When women's dancing group for instance is performing in the village, virtually all the village is on the move and the proceeds of the show may be for desired purposes. Perhaps, in these days, we should take account that many of these group have contributed to the building of bridges, maternity hospitals, post offices, sinking of boreholes, erection of primary health care facilities or even improvement of existing structures like tearing down of ceiling of schools and churches and putting new ones. Other organizations have found these women's group invaluable in the fact that it is not only what they can do but what they can attract others to do that end up in the final result.

### **Women Musicians in Nigeria**

A phenomenon of the Nigerian musical scene in modern times has been the upsurge of women's activities in musical performances. There are several Nigerian women musicians, some of them trained in the classical idioms and some of them talented artists. It is also well known that these people have turned their attention to the events in the society. They have therefore been able to compete with men and indeed come out better in performing music. In support of this assertion, Okafor (1989:25) notes that, “women used music to rally round in given national cause or goal, to mobilize people towards a central attitude or action, and even to correct some of the common misconceptions in the society.”

The mass mobilization program has attracted comments and songs from Nigerian women such as Nelly Uchendu, Veno Marioghae, Bunmi Olajubu, Mandi Ojugbana, Martha Ulaeto, Uche Ibeto, Christy Essien Igbokwe, Onyeka Onwenu, Joy Lo-Bamijoko, George Gold, Edana Ogholi, Funmi Adams etc. From merely singing about emotional events, women have suddenly burst out into patriotic favour that points the way to the future.

Patriotic music is another area in which women have been making great contributions in modern times. Popular among them are Veno Merioghae, Nelly Uchendu. Women have also shown political awareness when they express their sentiments over situations in their parts of African-Nelson Mandela, Apartheid and Western Imperialism, for example Onyeka Onwenu and Joy Lo-Bamijoko's compositions.

The Nigerian women singers such as Ulaeto, Funmi Adams, Christy Essien Igbokwe, Carmen Ezuma, Sharon (Shato), Comfort Omoge, Princess Mojisola Balogun, Evangelist (Dr.) Sister Bola Are, Fasoyin, Funmi Aragbaye, Toun Soetan, Mercy Michael (Ife) to mention but a few have used their various styles/type of music such as calypso, reggae, pop, traditional folk songs,



gospel, sekere, juju, fuji etc, for strengthening and pushing Nigerian music to the international scene.

Many women in music have occupied the post of lectureship in many Nigerian institution of learning. Women in music have proved that given the right musical education, there is nothing impossible for them in promoting Nigerian musical culture as well as fostering national development.

### Conclusion

Women participate actively in various musical activities in Igbo society. The fact that their roles are most outstanding in most traditional activities ranging from rites of passage, entertainment, initiation, social control to death and towards national development cannot be over-emphasized. According to Ibekwe (2012), there is no community in Igbo society that exists without various groups of women performers or dancers, (p. 116). Women are nation builders and this paper affirms that women are essential resources to nation building in social, political, family, religious, economic and educational fields. They are vital to the progress of the nation; their potentials are for the good of the society. Nigerian women have proved that they can be in control of the minds of men and as long as they use their arts especially music in the powerful way and in the right direction, can move the nation forward.

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