

Women and Music in Igbo Culture: Power, Gender and Performance

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Abstract

Women and music in Igbo culture represent a crucial intersection of art, gender, and socio-political power. In traditional Igbo society, music functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural archive, a medium of communication, and an instrument of social control. While patriarchal structures have historically placed men in positions of overt political and ritual authority, Igbo women have creatively utilized music and performance as subtle yet powerful tools for negotiating gendered spaces, asserting agency, and sustaining community life. Through forms such as women's dance ensembles, ritual dirges, satirical songs, and performance during life-cycle ceremonies, women engage in cultural practices that affirm their voices in public discourse. Women's musical performances often embody resistance against marginalization, employing song as a form of protest and social commentary. For instance, satirical compositions, sometimes performed during communal disputes, serve to critique male dominance and highlight women's socio-economic contributions. This performance not only reinforces solidarity among women but also exposes the tensions inherent in Igbo gender relations. Moreover, women's ritual and festival songs, such as those associated with Omabe or Ikoro performances, play a critical role in community cohesion, while simultaneously positioning women as custodians of cultural memory. This paper therefore interrogates the dynamics of power, gender, and performance within Igbo women's musical traditions. It argues that music constitutes a transformative resource for women in redefining their roles, challenging patriarchal constraints, and preserving cultural heritage. By situating Igbo women's musical practices, within broader African feminist discourses, the study highlights how performance becomes a space of negotiation, identity construction, and empowerment. This research adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, relying on oral interviews, observation, and the review of relevant literature.

Key words: Music, Gender, Identity, Igbo, Women

Introduction

Music occupies a central position in African societies as a cultural expression, a tool of communication, and a repository of collective memory. Okafor, (2005.p.35) says that “Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, music and performance transcend entertainment; they are deeply connected to ritual, politics, economy, and social identity”, Forchu, (2023:45) also opines that “Women, despite the patriarchal structures that often confine them to domestic and reproductive roles, have consistently used music as a platform to negotiate power, affirm cultural belonging, and assert agency in both private and public spaces”. Okeke, (2020:98) writes that “Igbo women’s participation in music spans diverse contexts, from life-cycle ceremonies such as birth, initiation, and funerals to agricultural festivals, market performances, and protest movements”

The role of women in African societies has historically been complex, multidimensional, and sometimes marginalized due to patriarchy and colonial impositions. In Igbo culture, women have consistently occupied significant positions within musical traditions, both as performers and as custodians of cultural values. Music in Igbo society transcends entertainment, it serves as a tool for education, ritual, political commentary, socialization, and identity formation (Nzewi, 1991). (Eze, 2024) says that “Women’s performance practices illustrate how cultural expression becomes a means of resistance, resilience, and negotiation of social boundaries”. Within this cultural framework, women contribute uniquely through their involvement in genres, performances, and rituals that reflect their voices, agencies, and power in society. This paper examines the intersection of women, music, power, gender, and performance in Igbo culture, highlighting how women negotiate authority and express identity through music.

Concept of Music in Igbo culture

Music is not perceived only as entertainment but also as a cultural expression encompassing song, dance, rhythm, and performance in Igbo society. It serves as a binding force in communal life, marking significant events such as birth, marriage, festivals, farming and funerals. According to Nnamdi (2022), “The songs in addition to being sources of enjoyment, entertainment, and relaxation for all inculcates the peoples value in order to uphold and the vices to abhor for the harmonious existence of the community” (p.13). Music functions as both artistic practice and social pedagogy, transmitting cultural values across generation.

Women and Music in Igbo culture

Women in Igbo society have historically functioned not only as a passive receiver of music, but also as active composers, performers, and transmitters of knowledge. Their musical contributions often revolve around festivals, ceremonies, agricultural cycles, and socio-political events.

According to Ojukwu (2020:43) “Igbo music is gendered, some certain instruments, songs, and performance spaces are reserved for men, while others are predominantly occupied by women”. In our different ethnic groups, gender has a strong force on the type of musical performances. Men and women have their different type of music, though there exist mixed group performance as well. This mixed group is mainly for entertainment and recreation which is organized by the age grades of the community. In Igbo, men are much inclined to honor and social status which could attribute to why one could hear different types of royal music such *Ufie* music, *Nkwa* music, and other kinds of drum music like *Okanga* which is often symbolize authority, lineage, and ritual power.

Spirit manifest known as *manwu* in Igbo tradition is an embodiment of ancestral spirit in the physical realm and because of that, it is only meant to be performed by men who are qualified

to communicate with such supernatural being. Performance of music in this state is only for men except in few instances where some women of mature age are admitted into the group. In this situation, the masquerade concerned may likely be non-violent type. These masquerades function in varying capacities in which most of them are as well good dancers. They have names such as Ekpe, Adanma, and *manwu* Ugo. They all have their followers, and they are all men. Other areas where men have advantages over women in music performance include ritual music, wrestling music, hunting music, war music, initiation music, etc.

According to Nwachukwu, (2017:289) “women also use music to assert their voices in male dominated spheres, thereby shaping gender identity and challenging patriarchal hierarchies”. On the other hand, women excel in musical activities which focus mainly on the rites of passage due to their gender role. For example, from the time a child is born, till he becomes an adult, each stage of his or her development is accompanied with a suitable music, such as child birth music, known as *Egwu Nwa*, child outing music, known as *Egwu eji ekuputa nwa*, child weaning music, known as *Egwu eji alafu nwa*, and folktales and folksongs, known as *Egwu Ifo*. When a girl is mature enough to get married, she would be initiated into the system with such puberty music as *Egwu Umuagbogho*. Marriage activities have their own types of music as well as funerals.

Ojukwu, (2020) writes that

The classificatory sisters, known as *Umuada* and classificatory wife-mates known as *Inyom di* are among the women groups that employ music in most of their activities. Women’s collective singing in markets, rituals, or festivals creates solidarity, reinforcing their power as cultural agents. (P.43)

Music constitutes an important aspect of the life of the Igbo people, Emeka (2002) says that “music is integral with the lifelong educational system of the Igbo. It is known to possess

cultural and spiritual values”. According to Ekwueme (2004), “music accompanies the life of a black man from the womb to the tomb, being featured at celebrations, to announce the birth of a baby, at children’s games, at peer group functions, at work and as well in religion and death” (p.59). Agu (2011) further affirms that, “the musical tradition surrounding his birth begins as soon as he is born, from the age of two, he starts listening to, and enjoying music, especially, the lullabies the mother or the baby-sister sings to lull him to sleep” (p.2). All these are women roles in Igbo culture.

It is somehow in Igbo tradition for one to play a role contrary to one’s gender, for example, a childbirth song, weaning songs, or lullabies are mainly women’s work because of the 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 conduct.

It is equally unusual for women to engage in any music that is meant for men. In some societies, women are forbidden to watch such music let alone playing or participating in the performance. For example, in Nsukka, women are strictly banned to watch or participate in Egwu Omabe. It is not considered proper in Igbo tradition for Igbo 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 categorized group, male or female Bassow, (1991).

Power in Igbo culture is socially constructed and often gendered. Asigbo and Ibekwe (2015) say that:

In Igbo culture, because patriarchal institution is giving prominence in the scheme of things, most of their laws or traditions are gender discriminatory, hence, there is no equity and freedom. Dialogue most times is reduced to the barest minimum in matters that concern women since they are on a lower socio-political scale from men (p. 228).

According to Oikelome (2013 p.59) “While men dominate political and ritual spaces, women assert influence through musical performance, especially in spaces such as market songs, lamentations, praise singing, and protest music”. Gender, therefore, shapes how musical roles are assigned, but women constantly negotiate this through performance. Performance in Igbo musical culture is not merely artistic; it is social action. Nwachukwu (2014 p.123) noted that “Women’s performances communicate values, challenge power relations, and preserve collective memory”.

Female Musicians as Custodians of Oral traditions

Women are vital in preserving oral traditions through lullabies, dirges, folk songs, and storytelling. They encode history, values, and collective memory. Nnamdi (2022) notes that “Folk songs performed by women are veritable instruments of cultural preservation, as they transmit indigenous knowledge system to younger generations” (p.14). This role serves as cultural custodians to challenge the narrative of women’s invisibility by showing how they shape cultural continuity,

Some of the songs performed by women

Song 1. For newborn baby

Obu gi me nwa Onye genye m

Gote akpukpo Ukwu Onye genye m

Gote ichafu ishi Onye genye m

Gote Ukwu Joji Onye genye m

O BUGI ME NWA

CALL 

o bu gi me nwa go tea kpu kpu kwu go te i ye rin

RESPONSE 

o nye je nye m o nye je nye m

6 

chi go te ih o lu go te i cha fi shi



o nye je nye m o nye je nye m o nye je nye m

Song 2. Funeral song

O nwu chireze onwu chireze

O nwu chireze onye ga-abu eze onwu

O nwu chireze onwu chireze

O nwu chireze onye ga-abu eze onwu

O nwere anu bunegi o nwere anu bne gi

O nwere anu bunegi yane mgbada hao

ONWU CHIRE EZE

CALL 

o nwu chi re eze o onwu chi re eze o

RESPONSE 

o nwu chi re ezeo nye ja bue zeo

5 

nwe re a ni b ne gi o nwe ri a ni b ne gi



nwu o nwe re an i b ne go o ya nem gba da ha o.

Women, Music, and Ritual Power in Igbo Culture

In precolonial Igbo society, women's musical roles were tied to spirituality and ritual. Female-led songs were central in fertility rites, continuity, life force, and funeral ceremonies. For

example, during childbirth rituals, women perform songs to encourage safe delivery and invoke ancestral protection. Okagbue (2011p.67) says that “women songs and performances often serve as channels for communicating with spiritual forces, invoking blessings, or restoring social balance”. Women also played a very important role in music, where women gathered to sing abusive or satirical songs directed at oppressive men or leaders, thereby exercising socio-political power through performance.

Examples include:

- Omu and Umu Ada songs: These are sung by titled or elder women during cleansing rituals, burials, and conflict resolution ceremonies. Their performance is often believed to invoke ancestral presence or divine judgment.

For burial

O budonye bonye anyi n’edi	Ayooo
O budonye bonye anyi n’edi	Ayoo
Chiye ekwekogi mogbareka lare	Ayoo
Chiye ekwekogi mokwotazi chiye	Ayoo

onye anyi na acho

The musical score is written in 6/8 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of three systems of call and response. The first system starts with a 'call' line: 'o bu do nye-e bo nyea nyi na cho chi ye kwe ko'. The 'response' line is: 'a yo o'. The second system starts with a 'call' line: 'gi mo gba re ka la re chi ye kwe go'. The 'response' line is: 'a yo o'. The third system starts with a 'call' line: 'gi mo kwo ta zi chi ye'. The 'response' line is: 'a yo o'.

- Egwu n’ulo nwanyi: These are sung during communal labor, childbirth, and childrearing, these songs affirm women’s solidarity and their power in sustaining life and continuity.

For childbirth

Uju oto Uju Oto	onye atayiri blajule
Uju oto Uju Oto	onye atayiri blajule
O na tutoo	onye atayiri blajule
Oja bu ezigbo nwa	Onye atayiri blajule

UJU OTO UJU OTO

The musical score is written in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves: the top staff is labeled 'Call' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Response'. The lyrics for the Call part are 'u juo tu juo too' and for the Response part are 'o nya ta yi ri bu le'. The second system also has two staves. The top staff starts with a measure number '5' and has the lyrics 'o na tu too'. The bottom staff has the lyrics 'a ju le' and 'o nya ta yi ri bu le a ju le'.

Women, music and Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to how individuals perceive and express themselves as male, female, or otherwise within cultural and social contexts. Women's songs and performances also serve as sites for expressing gender identity and redefining femininity within a particular culture. Women assert their roles as mother, wives, and cultural custodians through birth songs, marriage songs and dirges. According to Ewuru (2020), "Birth songs enable women to express their collective identity as life-givers and to reinforce the value of motherhood in Igbo society" (p. 63). In Igbo culture, music is a powerful medium for negotiating identity, reinforcing cultural norms, and challenging gendered boundaries (Nwafor, 2019). Music always provide Igbo women with an avenue to express gendered identities. Women articulate values of motherhood, communal solidarity, and resilience through genres like *ekwe* drumming, *ikoro* chants, and also market songs. However, certain musical instruments like the *ikoro*, which is the slit drum and masquerade music were often restricted to men, reinforcing gender boundaries (Ekwueme, 2004). Oikelome (2017p.87) writes that "Despite these restrictions, women subverted norms by developing their own musical spaces such as *mgba* dance, *ekere* ensemble, and *ududu* clay pot drumming, which became markers of identity and creativity".

Socio-cultural Functions of Women's Music

Women's music plays a central role in rituals including festivals across Igbo communities. From childbirth and marriage rites to harvest festivals and funerals, women's songs frame the ritual process with meanings that reinforce social values. Ewurum (2020) says that "birth songs enable women to express solidarity, celebrate fertility, and also situate themselves as vital agents in the continuation of society" (p.63). Similarly, women's dirges at funerals both console the bereaved and also communicate moral lessons about life, death, and communal unity.

Women's songs also function as oral texts that preserve history and communal memory. Through lullabies, folk tunes, and chants, women transmit myths, proverbs and legends to younger generations. Nnamdi (2022: 14) says that "folk songs performed by women are veritable instruments of cultural preservation, as they transmit indigenous knowledge systems to younger generations". The songs serve as cultural archives, ensuring continuity of Igbo heritage. Women's music also performs didactic functions. Through proverbs, and moral lessons embedded in songs, younger generations learn community norms and values. According to Onyeji (2024:27), "Igbo rural women promote socio-economic solidarity that strengthens community cohesion and mutual survival through musical processing". Women's songs thus educate, socialize, and reinforce ethical behavior while simultaneously fostering community development.

Music as a tool for Women's Agency and Resistance

Historically, Igbo women have used music as a platform for resistance. For example, during the Aba women's war of 1929, protest songs played a major role in mobilizing women against colonial taxation and patriarchal oppression (Mba, 1982). These protest songs not only galvanized women's unity but as well challenged both colonial and indigenous male-dominated

authority structures. According to Nwafor (2019 p. 45) “The protest songs by women during communal conflicts, widowhood struggles, or even political marginalization invert gender hierarchies by using performance to shame, ridicule, or to call leaders to order”. Through this, music becomes a tool for redefining gender identity beyond submissiveness

In the domestic space, women used music as subtle resistance, satirical songs directed at irresponsible husbands or co-wives served as social control mechanisms, shaming offenders into acceptable behavior (Okafor, 2005). Thus, music became a form of “power-in-performance,” enabling women to contest and negotiate gender hierarchies.

Naturally, women are the birth givers, as a result, musical practices around childbirth, weaning, and other related activities are the sole responsibilities of women. Traditionally, women assumed different musical roles based on their different developmental status. Older people assume musical roles are different from those they had in their childhood years. In other words, roles and their associated music always change with age, nobody or society does the reverse.

Performance, Modernity, and Continuity

Nwachukwu writes that:

“In a contemporary Igbo society, women have transitioned into popular music and church music, extending their influence into modern performance spaces. Gospel singers like Onyeka Onwenu and Chioma Jesus represent the continuity of women’s voices in shaping cultural and spiritual discourse through music. Some of them blend indigenous performance with modern styles”. (Nwachukwu, 2014 p.123)

However, commercialization and urbanization have reshaped gender roles in music while female performers now enjoy wider recognition, they still face barriers of sexual objectification, underrepresentation, and structural inequality in the Nigerian music industry.

Conclusion

Women in Igbo culture are not mere appendages in musical traditions; they play vital roles, and they are vital bearers of cultural knowledge, spiritual mediators, and agents of social change. Through ritual performances, market songs, protest chants and modern music, women negotiate power, assert identity, and challenge gender inequalities. Igbo women's musical practices exemplify how performance becomes a site of cultural resilience, gender negotiation, and socio-political expression in African societies,

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