

MUSIC IN IGBO TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CEREMONY: A CASE OF EGWU-NNEOGBO IN UGWULANGWU COMMUNITY, EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the roles of music in traditional marriage ceremonies within the Ugwulangwu community of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Focusing on the Igbo cultural context, the study investigates how music shapes ritual practices, conveys cultural values, and fosters social cohesion. Drawing on ethnographic methods, including field interviews and participant observation, the research explores the contribution of the community's vocal music tradition to each phase of their traditional marriage ceremony. The findings reveal that music in Ugwulangwu serves multifaceted functions: it facilitates communication, affirms communal identity, and ritualizes the transitions associated with marriage. It extends beyond entertainment to reinforce moral values and enact ritual processes. The study also highlights music's role in intergenerational knowledge transfer and its resilience amid social change. By situating music as a central element in ceremonial life, the paper underscores its enduring significance in the preservation and performance of Igbo cultural heritage.

Keywords: Music, Ethnomusicology, Ugwulangwu Community, Traditional Marriage Ceremony, Igbo Culture.

Introduction

Marriage ceremonies in African traditional societies are deeply cultural events that go beyond legal union, functioning as community affirmations and spiritual rites. In Igbo culture, particularly within Ugwulangwu in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, music plays a central role in the enactment and interpretation of these ceremonies. This study explores how music articulates cultural identity, mediates relationships, and gives structure to marital rites. It seeks to understand the performative, symbolic, and communicative functions of music during marriage ceremonies and how these reflect broader Igbo cosmological and social values.

African traditional music has been widely acknowledged as an indispensable component of ritual life. Scholars like Nketia (1974) and Nzewi (2007) emphasize music as both a spiritual and social tool in African cultures. In Igbo land, music accompanies every significant stage of life—from birth to death, and marriage ceremonies are no exception.

Musicin Ugwulangwu Traditional Marriage Ceremonies

Ugwulangwu traditional society shares common boundaries with Okposi, Onicha, Oshiri, Ezza and Ukawu communities in Ohaozara local government area of Ebonyi state, Southeast, Nigeria. The major occupations of the Ugwulangwu people are farming and palm wine tapping.

The traditional music performed during marriage ceremonies in the community is strictly vocal music, generally referred to as '*Egwu-Nneogbo*' (music for mother of junior), with lyrics filled with proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Though for entertainment purposes, some segments of the ceremony are now accompanied by a Disc Jockey (DJ) music. This is to allow for a glamorous funfair and artistic display by the bride and her friends. But the main music – the one we are concerned about in this paper – is the '*Egwu-Nneogbo*' (music for mother of junior). The '*Nne-ogbo*' in that context is deeper than its mere meaning (mother of junior). The junior here refers to the reincarnation (as a newborn baby) of both the dead and the elderly ones in the families of the bride and the bridegroom.

Marriage, Childbirth and Belief System in Ugwulangwu Community

In the community, there exists a general belief that the first male child born in every home is the reincarnation of his grandfather from the father's side, the second male child for the grandfather from his mother's side, and the third male child is his father's junior (*Ogbonna*). The same applies to the first female child being the reincarnation of the grandmother from the father's side, the second, grandmother from the mother's side, and the third, the mother's junior, a.k.a '*ogbonne*'. This belief system is so strong and highly convincing because the newborn kids grow up portraying the image of the person they reincarnate in both physical structure, characteristic behaviour and general traits. If any family give birth to more than three sons or daughters, only the first three are taken, for the fourth and above, the father and the mother observe the child's growth and compare his or her physical structure and characteristic behaviour to that of any of their relations, whoever is the closest to the child's physical structure and behaviour, becomes the '*ogbo*', and the child, his or her junior. As a result of the above, the joy on the faces of the elderly ones knows no bounds whenever a man takes a wife

because the hope of seeing their reincarnation before they leave this world is becoming a reality. This joy is usually expressed in songs and dancing, which forms the major concern of this paper.

Gender roles are embedded in musical practices. Women often perform the songs of womanhood, which advise and instruct the bride, while men sit back and contemplate the glamorous beauty of the bride and her friends, the body gestures, and the overall aesthetics of the performances for their listening and viewing pleasure.

Traditional Marriage Process

The marriage process in Ugwulangwu Community takes different stages, starting from proposal through traditional marriage ceremony and eventual return of the bride to her new home. The stages are as follows:

1. *NjùtáÚkà* Friendly visit and discussion among parents.
2. *MmẹẹÓgbàràgwù* Official visit and discussion with the entire family.
3. *ÍgbáNkwú* Traditional Marriage Ceremony.

Before all the outlined stages above, there is one very important event that marks the beginning of the relationship, and that is what is generally known as a proposal. This is a period in which a full-grown man makes his intention known to a mature damsel that he has feelings for. This does not require kneeling down as it is done in Western culture; it can happen while sitting together, standing, or even while taking a walk together, then the man pops up the question. The man is not expecting a yes, no, give me some time nor I will think about it answer as it is with western culture proposal, because the young ladies in the community were taught not to believe any promise from the young men, rather verify it to ascertain the sincerity of the man in question. So, no matter the level of love the lady may have developed toward a man, she cannot say yes to his proposal; rather, she replies to the question with a question, 'are you serious?' It is still the man who popped the question that is going to be the first to answer 'yes, I am serious' to her question. That still not enough, she goes further in her verification expedition to ask the man 'if you are serious, then come see my parents'. That alone give hope to the man but to the lady, she is still herself not hoping for anything from the conversation because she still does not believe the man. But seeing the man come to see her parents in a company of a friend and an elderly person who could be his father or uncle, establishes a strong conviction about the seriousness of the man. That visit marks the first stage in the marriage process known as *NjùtáÚkà*.

Stage 1 : *NjùtáÚkà* (Friendly visit and discussion among parents)

This is similar to what we know in western culture as inviting someone over for a dinner, either alone or with the company of a friend or family member for a serious discussion. The difference here is that whatever edible that the host present at the dinner is what everybody will eat, but in Ugwulangwu community marriage visit, certain items are required from the visitors. They include: 4 gallons of palm wine, 1 carton of small stout, 1 carton of beer, 2 pieces of cola-nuts.

The above items are not refundable; it is seen as friendly visit and whatever is brought is with the intention of creating a friendly and happy mood before making intentions known. It is done outside the house within the premises that even a male passer-by is allowed to participate. The lady in question is not allowed to be part of the gathering so it can be done in her absence and if she is around, she can only come out to exchange pleasantries and return back indoors because the items for merriment are not for young lady's consumption, they are all alcoholic drinks. In the peak of the merriment, the visitors make known their intention and the reason for the visit. This is easily decoded by the host and expressed with a smile, laughter or nodding of the head. At the end everyone goes home happily because the first objective has been achieved and that is a friendly relationship between the two families. This is followed by a thorough background check from both families, family A against family B and vice versa to determine family image and reputation. If both families got green flags from the background check, the process is taken to the next stage, but if not, the process ends there.

2. *MmẹẹÓgbàràgwù* Official visit and discussion with the entire family.

This is similar to the stage one above but more elaborate with the entire families of the two engaged people present. Usually well planned and all family members both male and female, young and old notified. The items for this second stage are more because of the number of people expected to be present and provisions for ladies and younger ones who are not allowed to take alcohol. The items are: 4 Gallons of palm wine, 2 Cartons of small stout, 1 Carton of Malta Guinness, 1 Crate of soft drink, 2 Pieces of cola-nuts, 2 Raps of *Isi-enuru* (tobacco), 1 Hot drink (501 medium size).

The main objectives of this second stage are to bring the two families together for closer integration, collaboration and foster intimacy among members. This is similar to family get-together of western culture in an elaborate way. This stage is also marked with the appointment of an *ovuru-uzor* to represent the bridegroom in all the negotiation processes. The *ovuru-uzor* who must be a member of the family of the bride, not any of her brothers from the same parent but from the extended family is appointed to act on behalf of the bridegroom.

The *Ovuru-uzor* and his duties

The *Ovuru-uzor* is a man appointed by the bride's family to act on behalf of the bridegroom from the stage two in which he is appointed till the end of the entire ceremony and as long as the relationship last. The appointment

is ones in a life time because he remains the mediator between the two couples. Any issue arising from the relationship must get to him first and his duty is to ensure amicable resolution of the matter. Once appointment is made, the first thing he is to do is to visit the bridegroom in the company of his friend(s) to demand for his entitlements and necessary settlement. The items for his settlement include: 1 Carton of Small Stout, 1 Rap of *Isi-enuru* (Local Tobacco), 2 Cartons of Malta Guinness, 2 pieces of Cola-nuts, 1 life Chicken, N50,000 Fifty Thousand Naira (negotiable).

Once the listed items are provided and the settlement concluded, the *Ovuru-uzor* automatically becomes the mouth-piece of the bridegroom speaking in favour of the bridegroom against his own family. Whatever conclusion he has had with the bridegroom in their private discussion on what he can afford for all the negotiable items, that is what he comes back to his people to impose on them, and that makes the process easier especially in a situation in which the bridegroom is not an indigene.

3. *IgbáNkwú* Traditional Marriage Ceremony.

This is the third and final stage of the traditional marriage ceremony in the community.

Unlike other Igbo communities, Ugwulangwu People do not base their marriage on monetary gains but on strong inter-family relationships, intimacy, love and above all, procreation. They have a fixed bride price which – according to OnwosiOke (2024), a village historian – was originally one - and - half kobo (1.5K). It was later increased to one naira fifty kobo (N1.50k), but presently, bride price in Ugwulangwu community is one hundred and fifty naira (N150.00). As long as you can afford that amount, you are qualified to get married. The family members of the lady may get more money from the would-be in-law on the negotiation day, depending on the financial status of the man but not compulsory. After a successful negotiation, a date is fixed for the traditional marriage proper. Items for the marriage ceremony include: 15 Gallons of palm wine, 6. Carton of Small Stout, 2. Cartons of Gulder, 2. cartons of Beer (Star), 2. Cartons of Malta Guinness, 12 pieces of cola-nuts, 2 Raps of *Isi-enuru* (Local Tobacco), 1 Bag of Rice, 1 Goat, 2 Packs of Cigarette, 1 Hot drink (501 Big).

In addition, settlement for *Umu-ada* (Daughters), *Umu-okorobia* (Sons/Youths), *UnwanyiUnuhu* (Compound Women), and *EgirimaUnuhu* (Children). Details of which are contained in the family list sample below.



Stage 1. Njuta Uka		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Palm-wine	4 gls
2	Small Stout	1ct.
3	Beer (Star/Gulder)	1ct
4	Cola-nut	2pcs

Stage 3. Igba Nkwú		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Palm-wine	15 gls
2	Small Stout	6cts
3	Gulder	2cts
4	Beer (Star)	2cts
5	Malta Guinness	2cts
6	Cola-nut	12pcs
7	Isi-enuru (Otaba)	2raps
8	Rice	1bg
9	Goat (Big one)	1
10	Cigerate	2pks
11	Hot-drink (501 Big)	1

Umu Ada		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Malta Guinness	1ct
2	Mineral drink)	1 crate
3	N30,000 (negotiable)	

Stage 2. Mmē Ogbaragwu		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Palm-wine	4 gls
2	Small Stout	2cts.
3	Malt Guinness	1ct
4	Cola-nut	2pcs
5	Isi-enuru (Otaba)	2raps
6	Hot-drink (501 medium)	1

Ovuru Uzor		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Small Stout	1ct.
2	Isi-enuru (Otaba)	1rap
3	Malt Guinness	2cts
4	Cola-nut	2pcs
5	Life Chicken (Oke-okuko)	1
6	N50,000 (negotiable)	

Youths		
S/N	Items	Quantity
1	Palm-wine	2gls
2	Beer (Star)	1ct
3	N30,000 (negotiable)	

- Bride-Prize (negotiable): Agreed amount with your to-be father in-law plus the prevailing Ezeoke-chima official bride prize which is currently (N150.00) one hundred and fifty naira only.
- All can be done at once and can as well be done in stages as outlined above, but all must be completed on or before the stage 3, 'Igba-nkwu' (Traditional Wedding) day.
- Any of the Items can be monetised if not readily available or can't be provided by our in-law to-be.
- If our to-be in-law wishes to do every thing at once, most of the items shall be monetised.
- Next after Traditional wedding are: 1. 'Ije Ulo Nne' and 2. 'Ihe Nna'. These are strictly between our would-be in-law and his Mother-in-law and father-in-law.

Signed: _____

Sample of Family Marriage List in Ugwulangwu Community

The peak of the ceremony is marked by the bride's official presentation to her father, the person she has decided to spend the rest of her life with. This is done by presenting a cup of palm wine from her father to him before everyone present. He (the bridegroom) drinks the wine and both return to the bride's father for breaking of the cola-nut and blessing of the union, after which they are declared husband and wife. After the ceremony, the bride returns to her new home for another round of musical ritual and ceremony similar to a marriage reception in Western culture.

Egwu-Nneogbo Dance Ritual

At the peak of the celebration at the bride's new home, the mother-in-law, accompanied by other married women, signals the DJ to turn off the music as they welcome the new wife. The new wife will stand and move to the centre of the compound with a tray containing powder. The women will sing and dance around her while she rubs the powder on their faces, signifying that she has come to beautify them. It is these songs – generally known as 'Egwu-Nneogbo' – that this paper is primarily concerned about. Other songs and instrumental music that accompany different stages of the ceremony have faded into obscurity, replaced by popular music and DJ music. However, these women's songs (Egwu-Nneogbo) have defied all external influences because of a traditional belief that any woman married into any family in the community must undergo the dance ritual to be accepted as a wife.

Some of the songs for the dance rituals are as follows:-

Translation of the women's ritual songs

Igbo

1. E nweta m

E nweta m onyekwogota m
namgbogidi, yo! yo!

2. NneOgbo m

Nneogbo m waranta o,
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!
Mu naonyenweoma o,
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!
Mu naginwe o ma o
Yamaraeme o, yaamaghieme o,
s'obukwarari, s'akpozi je,
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!

3. EziNwanyi

Ezinwanyiokoron'obi di ya,
Uwameengelomeje,
iheome, iheoma,
Uwameengelomeje,

English (direct interpretation)

1. I've Gotten

I have gotten someone to help me
across life's huddles yo! yo!

2. The Mother of My Namesake

The mother of my namesake has come today
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!
who and I own this?
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!
You and I own this
If she knows how to do, or she does not know how to do,
Let her stay, let's be correcting her,
iyoho! Iyo he! Iyo!

3 Good Woman

Good woman lies at the bosom of her husband,
Nature, do as it usually does,
good thing, good thing
Nature, do as it usually does.

Structural Analysis of the Songs

The first song, 'E nweta m', features a short, interesting, and engaging melody in two phrases.



Shape: The shape, unlike the Western tune—which, according to Ekwueme (2004), begins on a comfortable (low) pitch and meanders smoothly up or down, reaching a climax and then gradually returning to a comfortable end—can generally be described as having a downward movement. He also stated that this is the shape of many Igbo folk tunes. The second bar is a complete imitation of the first bar in an interval of a third lower. The highest note of the tune occurred in the first bar, and the lowest note in the last bar.

Range: Though the shape is said to be of a downward movement, the level of the movement is slight. There is only one downward movement to a third between the first and the second bar, the third bar is steady, and a big leap of an interval of a compound third at the last bar. The interval covered the range of the melody in a glissando style, though the lowest note (G) is just the doubling of the second line G, and sometimes, it is performed as an indefinite pitch. In conclusion, the melody is of a restricted range.

Interval employment: The tune employed four intervals other than unison. They are as follows:-

- Major 3rd ascending (once), descending (once) in bar one.
- Minor 3rd ascending (once), descending (once) in bar two.
- Perfect 5th ascending (once) between bars three and four.
- Compound 3rd ascending (once), descending (twice) all in bar four.

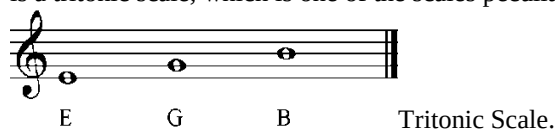
Almost all the intervals seemed to appear only once, except the compound third, which appeared twice at the last bar, but that was just a repetition in a sequence manner. Therefore, the only interval dominating the tune is unison.

Phrase: There are two phrases in the song, with the first one being longer than the second. The first and second bars of the first phrase consist of two sequences.

Resting note: The resting note of this tune can be said to be 'E' for the following reasons: -

- It marked the end of the major phrase in the song,
- It is also the longest note in the tune,
- It appeared three times in the cadence of the major phrase in the song.

Scale: The three major notes as used in this tune are E, G, and B. The 'G' on the ledger line below the staff is just a repetition of the second line 'G' as stated earlier. In conclusion, it can be deduced that the scale of the tune is a tritonic scale, which is one of the scales peculiar to African music.



NneOgbo m

Lead Singer

Chorus

mf Nne o-gbo m wa-ra nta o

l yo ho i ya ho i

mu n'o-nye nwe o ma o

yo! l yo ho i ya ho i yo! mu na gi

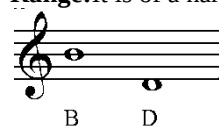
ya ma-ra eme o y'a ma-ghi eme o so bu-kwa-ra ri sa kpo-zi - je

nwe o ma o

e. l yo ho i ya ho i yo

Shape: This, like the first song, is of a downward movement with some little differences. Unlike the first song, it started with the highest pitch in the entire song. This, according to Ekwueme (2004), is the common feature (shape) of Igbo folk tunes. Many of the phrases started with the highest note and ended with the lowest note. The tune is also of a call-and-response form, but unlike the general belief that the call is usually longer than the response, the tune has a longer chorus. It is also observed that in bars 17 to 20, the chorus singers were the ones who made the call, which was responded to by both the lead singer and the chorus singers in unison.

Range: It is of a narrow range, major 6th, having the highest note as B and the lowest as D.



The first phrase covered the entire range, and other phrases followed within the range till the end; therefore, the tune is of a restricted range.

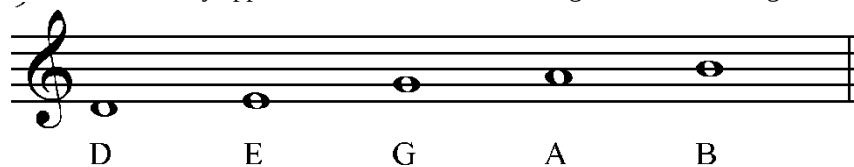
Interval employment: The widest interval employed is a major 6th, from D to B upward. It appeared only once, and that in bar 20. Another interval that occurred only once is a minor 3rd, from G to E downward. It occurred between the last note of bar 27 and the first note of bar 28. Other intervals employed include- major 2nd, major 3rd, perfect 4th, and perfect 5th, which occurred both descending and ascending. The intervallic structure of the song may be summarised as follows:-

- Major 2nd ascending and descending
- Minor 3rd descending only
- Major 3rd ascending and descending
- Perfect 4th „ „ „
- Perfect 5th „ „ „
- Major 6th ascending only.

Phrase: The song employed about 15 phrases, with the lead singer(call) taking a longer phrase and the chorus (response) replying with about 2 phrases of a short length. In conclusion, the song consists of phrases of different lengths.

Resting note: The Majority of the phrases started from note B and ended on note D, but there is a constant repetition of note G in the body of the song and each of the phrases. It also carries the longest note in the song. Many of the phrases ended on D, the longest interval also moved from D to B in bar 20, and the major interval in the song, which is a perfect 5th, is between A and D downward. Based on the above observations, it is deduced that G and D are the resting notes.

Scale: Having observed that five notes (D, E, G, A & B) are prominent in this song, but four of them are more constant. Note E only appeared once in bar 28. If arranged in an ascending order, it will appear like this below.



With the above illustration on the staff, it's clear that it is a pentatonic scale, which is the most popular and common type found in African music and can be played on the five black keys of the piano keyboard.

EziNwanyi

Lead Singer *mf* E - zi nwa - nyi pio - ko-ro n'o - bi di - a

Chorus U - wa mee nga-lo - me - gie, i - he

6 E - zi nwa - nyi pio - ko-ro n'o - bi di - a

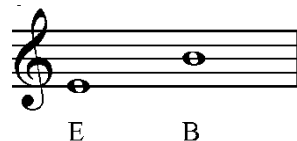
6 oma, i - he oma, u - wa mee nga-lo - me - gie U - wa

12 mee nga-lo - me - gie, i - he oma, i - he oma, u - wa mee nga-lo - me - gie

Shape: This, like other songs already discoursed, is of a downward movement. The highest note in the song is sounded as the first note and repeated many times before a major third downward movement and a quick return to the highest note again in the second bar of the lead voice. The up and down movement continued till bar 4

when the lowest note was reached and was repeated more and more in bars 5 and 6. Repetition of the same process continued till the end of the song.

Range: It is also of a narrow range in the sense that, within the first four bars, all the notes of the song have been used. All other notes that followed were within the range E to B (a perfect 5th).



In conclusion, the song is of a restricted range.

Interval employment: Three intervals other than unison were used in this song; none of them could be said to have dominated the tune in the sense that all of them appeared many times in the tune. The intervallic structure of the song may be summarised as follows:- Major 2nd, minor 3rd, and major 3rd all in ascending and descending order.

Phrase: The song is made up of two major phrases ending with a crotchet note, which is the longest note in the song. Others are just the repetition of the first two. Unlike other Igbo folk songs that are in call-and-response form, the lead voice (call) phrase is shorter than the chorus (response) phrase.

Resting note: The resting note of the tune is G in the sense that all the phrases ended on it, and the longest note of the song is also G. It is approached in the first phrase by a major 2nd descending and in the 2nd phrase by a minor 3rd ascending.

Scale: The four notes used in this tune are E, G, A, and B. If we arrange them in ascending order, they will appear like this: -



From the foregoing, it is obvious that the scale is a tetratonic scale.

General Observations

The folk songs of the UgwuLangwu people, like other folk songs in Igbo culture, are typically short, consisting of about two phrases, although they can sometimes be longer, extending up to twelve phrases. The lead voice (call) is usually shorter than the chorus (response). Their songs include many repetitions, although these are sometimes varied. The melodies have a limited range, with short intervals and no long leaps, making them easy to sing. Many of their tunes are in duple time and sometimes feature falling tones that typically descend on an indefinite pitch.

Conclusion

One of the key findings is the role of music in cultural continuity. Elders teach younger generations through performances, ensuring that musical knowledge, along with its associated customs and meanings, is preserved. In this way, music becomes both a heritage and a pedagogical tool. This study has shown that music in UgwuLangwu marriage ceremonies is a complex, multifunctional cultural phenomenon. It is both a medium and a message—embodying tradition, expressing values, and shaping community experience. As traditional practices face pressures from modernization, the sustained role of music in traditional ceremonies like marriage illustrates its enduring cultural relevance.

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