

ORAL PERFORMANCE AS SIREN  
The Example of Ozoemena Nwa Nsugbe

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time. For the people of Omambla<sup>1</sup> (old Anambra L.G.A.) various types of music exist. By the nature of Egwu Ekpili music, it is best suited for purposes of extolling virtues and condemning deviance. This is because, the light instruments allow for maneuverability hence the musicians can follow whoever is their butt about. It is a form best suited for wandering minstrels in that it requires sparse instruments to complete the ensemble. A typical Egwu Ekpili requires Ekpili (Rattles), Igba (drum), Udu (water pot) and sometimes Ogidi (long wooden drum) and Ekwe (gong). The practitioners of Egwu Ekpili today are the last of the wandering minstrels.

It is this nature of Egwu Ekpili that makes it best suited for the propagation of new ideas and or condemning of deviant behavior. Fully aware of the potentials of his music, Ozoemena was able to turn his art into a mercantile venture by pandering to the wishes of wealthy clients through placing his wit at their disposal. In defending his penchant for praise singing, Ozoemena insists that a hungry stomach brooks no morals hence he must first fill his stomach before attempting to become the moral censor of the world.

By the order of things, Egwu Ekpili is music of the masses and uses images and idioms readily accessible to the people. It is this populist disposition of Ekpili music that Ozoemena adopted and adapted for commercial purposes. Ozoemena therefore does not just perform as is the custom of minstrels all over the world but waits to be commissioned. As it stands now, all performances by Ozoemena are command performances even though the nature of the occasion determines the content of his songs at any given instance. Thus if invited to a title taking ceremony, Ozoemena will reel out praises of his patron, if invited to a political rally, he sings of the emancipation of the Igbo race and so on. In fact, in Ozoemena the context determines the content.

**Abstract**

Marxist literature pioneered literature of commitment or what the French call “Literattu Engage”. Committed literature or art, presupposes that a work of art must be devoted to the espousal of a specific ideology; preferably that which furthers the cause of the down-trodden. Marxism influenced and is still influencing the works of the second generation Nigerian playwrights or those whose works gained ascendancy in the 1970s. During the 1970s also, Afro beat maestro, Fela Anikulapo- Kuti was using his music not only to lampoon the ruling oligarchy but also to raise the people’s consciousness.

With the structural adjustment programme of the 1980s, economic considerations forced some performers into peddling their art for the pleasures of the highest bidder. Thus, did another genre or strand of music evolve. This brand of music was peddled and is still being peddled by some performers that we have chosen to call sirens-hence the folk performer, as siren. This work therefore examines the phenomenon of praise-singing in Nigerian folk music industry, with special bias to works of Ozoemena Nwa Nsugbe.

**Introduction**

Music, especially folk music for the African, has always been seen as a functional and utilitarian activity. This is because, to the African, a folk musician is seen as a special breed who has the gift of prophesy and is therefore looked upon as a voice of vision of his

### The Folk Performer as Siren

I am an artist. I have my reasons for being sad. I want to change sadness. I want people to be happy. And I can do it by playing happy music and through happy music I tell them about the sadness of others. So that they will come to realize that "Oh we can be happy". With my music, I create change. I seek it. So really, I am using my music as a weapon. I play music as a weapon. The music is not coming from me as a sub-conscious thing. It's conscious. (Moore 260)

The role of folklore as a functional and utilitarian medium has never been in doubt. This is why in Africa, most especially in Igbo land, folk performers are regarded and treated with utmost respect. This is because, the society sees in the folk artist, a moral censor, a genealogist, a prophet cum visionary, a story teller and an entertainer all rolled into one. It is therefore not surprising that the material needs of the oral folk performer are most of the time supplied by the community.

In Anam as in the Anambra (Omambala) area for instance, wars are not embarked upon until raconteurs and praise singers have recounted the deeds of heroes dead and living in voices that enter men's blood and soul like virus. This accounts for the veneration usually bestowed on the folk performer since society sees in him a medium through which the gods transmit divine wisdom and messages to man. Men and even rulers do not therefore interfere or challenge them even when such rulers are clearly the butt of whatever song the folk performer finds himself singing.

Agreeing with our contentions on the visionary role of the folk artist, Iji (34) says:

The writer (*folk performer*) does not only function as the conscience of his society, he must also function as the recorder of the mores of his society, of his people, as well as project himself as the voice of vision of his own time. Emphasis- mine

Iji's postulations lend credence to the practice of folklore of vision as practiced by most marabouts and mediums. In fact, Ozoemena sees himself as some form of a revolutionary / prophet singer in the ilk of Bob Marley, Fela Anikulapo- Kuti and Udekwe Omambala. To him, truth must be told at all cost and by all means even though truth sometimes involves making certain predictions. In one of his albums for instance, he predicted that John Nebolisa will become the Igwe of Awkuzu and Nebolisa did become the Igwe.

Presently, artists, and social commentators are united in agreeing that Fela's timeless piece, *Suffering and smiling* released some years ago is only finding fulfillment in today's Nigeria under the rule of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and his predecessors. Thus, it will be noticed that Nigerians have been "tamed" to a state of docility hence the government can now come up with policies that are anti people without a shred of resistance from the masses.

In the Omambala area as in most parts of Igbo land, folklore of vision is extensively practiced. Thus, traditional festivals like *Igu aro* Nri and that of different communities are held where diviners are "raced ahead of time" through music. Such diviners and seers under the influence of this folk music can therefore predict the future. It is worthy of note to remark here that recently, a body-*Front for Defense of Igbo Heritage*<sup>2</sup>, led by Okpala Eze Nri has decided to make the *Igu Aro*, an intellectual exercise where lectures by scholars of Igbo history are delivered. The first of these lectures was delivered in 2001 by no less a person than the famous anthropologist Prof. Michael Angulu Onwuejeogwu<sup>3</sup>.

Again, in his album *Nwelu ochichi nye ndi Igbo* Ozoemena predicted that whichever Igbo son must rule the Nigerian nation must be ready to die. This prediction is no longer left to the whims of time for its fulfillment but can be linked to the recent death of Dr William Wilberforce Chuba Okadigbo, an Igbo son that was aspiring to the nations number two position. This notwithstanding, one can describe Ozoemena's commentaries on the position of the Igbo race in the Nigerian polity as incisive and revealing.

Functional and utilitarian art go beyond mere didacticism and entertainment. It is an uncanny attribute of being able to marry performance context to life lessons. This is where oral performers are driven to their wits and as they struggle to keep up with what Late Prof. Ola Rotimi described as the polaroid emotions of the African audience and at the same time pass messages that are relevant not only to the lives of the audience but also to the performance context. The mediating influence of the audience on the performer or for that matter, the performance context on the performance has been the subject of various studies in folkloristics. Thus, Georges maintains:

As a narrator characterizes and interrelates images through sounds and movements he or she not only stimulates auditors but is also stimulated by the responses, to which he or she in turn responds, resulting in the participants naturally generating sets of audible and visual stimuli and responses throughout the course of the story telling. The phenomenon which we conceive to be the "message" of the communicative act and identify as a story then has no existence in and of itself but is integral to and inseparable from the event during which it is generated. (323 -4)

This is therefore what makes the drama of folk performance as the creative symbiosis that exists between performer and audience is spontaneously exploited for edification and entertainment.

In a performance situation at the end of the last decade which this researcher witnessed for instance, Ozoemena while on stage was informed of the death of his host's relative. Right there on stage, Ozoemena made modifications on his popular number *Onye nwuru ozuluike*, "customising" it and making it relevant to the breaking news. He sang with such pathos about the dead man that tears were freely elicited from his captive audience. Right there on stage, aides will whisper names of outstanding members of the audience and he will immediately weave such names into his songs.

In analysing Ozoemena's music, one discovers that they are issue based. Thus, one can easily chronicle major events that happened not only in Igbo land but also in Nigeria from his music. Events like the Nigerian civil war, the June 12, 1993 imbroglio and even such national clichés as the marginalisation protests can all be found embedded in his songs. These and many other attributes combine to make Ozoemena not only functional but contemporal.

One funny, yet interesting attribute of most musicians is their inclination toward claiming to have been born with their music. Thus in interviews, such clauses like "... I started singing for as long as I can remember" and so on are always their answers when asked to comment on how they ventured into music. In fact, the famous Scandinavian quartet ABBA in one of their albums sang ... "mother says I can sing long before I could talk."

Ozoemena on his own part tells this romantic story about his musical career;

The day I was born, my mother went to the backyard, plucked kola nut and gave me to eat. The kola is called *Oji ugo*- bitter kola. I swallowed the kola instead and it stuck in my throat... that is the reason

why I sing with hoarse voice... so I would say my mother transferred her spirit of music into me.<sup>4</sup>

From Ozoemena's accounts, one notices that oral performers cherish being listed as coming from a long line of performers. This is reinforced by the opening chant of Djeli Mamadou Kouyate, a Mandingo griot;

I am a griot... son of Bintou Kouyate and of Djeli Kedian Kouyate, master of the art of speech. Since time immemorial the Kouyates have been at the service of the Keita princes... the art of speech has no secret for us... we are the memory of men... it is my father's word. It is my father's father's word. (Makward 21)

This romanticisation of talent is perhaps what makes artists in general and musicians in particular retain an air of the mystique around them.

Besides the romanticisation of his talents, Ozoemena believes that a major factor that pushed him into folk music is the need to speak out against injustice and oppression. He thus sees music as a weapon through which all forms of deviant behaviors can be castigated and removed. On his bias for Egwu Ekpili, he replies;

It is the music of the Omambala people which comprises Awkuzu, Ogbunike, Nando, Nkwelle Ezunaka, Nteje, Anam, Aguleri, Umuleri, Nsugbe and Igbariam . . . I believe it can change our society because it encourages, comforts and inspires people. It is used to remind people of their past, predict the future and also teach life lessons.<sup>5</sup>

However, a worrying aspect of not only folk music but music as a whole is the penchant for praise singing. From highlife to Juju and

to folk music, one discovers that the act of praise singing has been taken to a level akin to high art. To some people however, there is nothing wrong with it. In fact, such opinions contend that folk music cannot do without praise singing.

...Ekpili as a music is in the same category with country or folk music. So while singing you try to carry your listeners along... in doing that, you have to mention names, recognize people by way of praise... So praising people is not bad. (Maduka 19)

In fact, Egwu Kaalu, an Ohaofia singer of tales agrees with Maduka, when he says. . "In general, I begin my performance by eulogizing my host, after which I proceed to tell them about the life of their ancestors" (Azuonye 44). To Ozoemena however, praise singing is a purely mercantile affair. Thus, he maintains that he will praise anybody once the money is right. He explains;

It is not that I enjoy praising people. My brother in Japan brought some names for me and requested that I sing their praises. So I sang it merely on request and also for the money that followed. So for me it was a contract.<sup>6</sup>

Ejeagha however, tows a different line and insists that there is something inherently immoral in praising people. To him therefore, praising human beings will be like contradicting the scriptures which says; "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God". Ozoemena, in response to the Structural Adjustment Programme of the '80s, embraced mercantile art as a means of combating the economic crunch which SAP occasioned. In doing that however, Ozoemena can be said to have abdicated a sacred mandate- that of serving as a moral censor for society. How does one for instance explain Ozoemena's praises for Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju of Anambra State at a time when the

payment of salaries to civil servants could not be met by Mbadinuju.

In spite of these man made lapses however, folklore and folk performances still remain an apposite vehicle for inculcation of morals to a decaying and decadent society. This is because; folk music by its nature relies on symbols drawn from people's flora and fauna. The satires, verbal jibes and innuendos are driven home more easily since they are home grown, culture spurned and context defined.

A survey of the works of different folk musicians from Ejeagha's *Onye ori utaba* which chronicles the antics and travails of a snuff thief, Ausuma Malaika's *Ejoro ogene edu onye ujo* which tells the story of the biblical Joseph and his brothers, Ozoemena's *Nigerian Jews* which details the enterprising attributes of the Igbo race to Morocco Maduka's *Ochuba aku* which tells the story of a greedy and avaricious ex- soldier whose insatiable quest for wealth leads him to commit murder, one discovers that the medium is as much important as the message. This can be seen in the deliberate attempts of most folk performers to retain the Responsorial Antiphonal form of music. Responsorial antiphonal which simply means "call and response", encourages active audience participation hence the audience becomes indispensable in determining performance context which in turn helps determine performance content.

Again, in all these songs, one observes that the chief aim of the respective artists is didacticism. Thus, they always try to let us see in as short a time as possible, that virtue is rewarded while vice is punished. Thus, even while we enjoy the music, the terror of punishment is constantly kept at the back of our minds.

Returning to the issue of praise songs, one observes that folklore and praise singing are closely intertwined in pre-colonial Africa. It is thus common knowledge that war chiefs and emperors like Sundiata and Shaka Zulu have strings of praise names. In fact, Shaka is said to have as many as four hundred praise names by

which he is addressed. Thus, raconteurs and praise singers weave these names into folk songs and struggle to keep up the praises until the king signals them to stop. It was believed that a character could be killed if he runs out of praise names for the king hence they are driven to their wits end in their attempts to create more names. Normally, resourceful singers will resort to devices like parallelism or outright repetition<sup>7</sup>.

This tradition we dare say, is a common practice in many African societies. This is because, to the African, when a man is praised, he is encouraged to higher achievement. Thus, according to Finnegan (118):

Among many African people, drummers at a king's gate, play not only the king's praise name, but announce and honour important guests by drumming or piping their names as they enter the palace. A man's status is recognized and reaffirmed by the use of formalized praise name.

The Yoruba nation for instance is another race that has a special place for praise singing in what they call *Oriki*. Thus, every successful farmer, hunter or warrior as well as even outstanding animals have *Orikis* used in extolling their unique qualities.

Praise singing is therefore not intrinsically bad but is in fact, an art form geared towards spurring people to greater achievements. Praise singers use figures of speech like onomatopoeia, parallelism, hyperbole as well as various speech devices that serve to heighten the pathos or bathos of their story as the case may be. These views do not however detract from the fact that some folk artists due to economic reasons have reduced the art to the level of placing it at the service of the highest bidder without regard to the means through which such a patron acquired his or her wealth. A comparison of Ausuma Malaika's music and that of Morocco Maduka will make our points clearer. While

Ausuma still exercises some restraint, Maduka dedicates whole tracks to singing the praises of just one man.

In Ozoemena's career, one notices that a close observation will reveal that his music has evolved through time both in form and in content. Formulaically, one discovers that from the simple and unsophisticated local instruments like Rattle (EKPILI), Drum (IGBA), Gong (OGENE) Wooden Gong (EKWE) and Water pot (UDU), Ozoemena's music has evolved to the stage where the keyboard is used to replicate most of these sound sequences. Even in content, early Ozoemena told more of traditional folk stories. These stories are usually as simplified as is common with most folk tales. It is thus surprising to now see Ozoemena dabbling into contentious issues like the marginalization of the Igbo nation as well as proffer his own ideas on the vexed issue of Igbo genealogy in his music.

A comparison of Ozoemena's music with those of Goddy N' Achinkwa, Nwoye Udo, 77, Apama Boy or even Pericom Okoye will reveal that while the foregoing artistes have maintained a close touch with the flora and fauna of the Igbo in terms of the content of their songs, and even the choice of instruments, Ozoemena has been dynamic in trying to move with the spirit of the times.

Perhaps, this is where one will draw a line between the music of most Ohaofia singers of heroic tales and that of Ozoemena. While the Ohaofia singers are religiously given to their native instruments of Horn, Drum, Wooden Gong and sometimes Water pot, Ozoemena has played the prostitute by embracing foreign instruments; while Ohaofia singers devote themselves mainly but not exclusively to singing tales of origin and heroic deeds, Ozoemena dabbles into the politics of the day. Thus, while a renowned Ohaofia singer like Kaalu Igirigiri (Azuonye 42-79) may retain an air of the mystique around him, Ozoemena is seen just as another musician who comments on national issues. While Ozoemena's chief aim is to impact moral lessons, Igirigiri and his compatriots are more

devoted to chronicling the deeds of brave and extra ordinary men thereby inspiring other acts of bravery. Herein lies the difference between Amos Tutuola's *the palmwine drinkard* and perhaps, Homers *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The only artiste of Igbo extraction apart from the various uncelebrated local raconteurs to approximate the Ohaofia epic singer both in skill and in the content of his songs is perhaps the notorious singer cum Native Doctor, Pericom Okoye. Okoye, an accomplished Native Doctor and folk musician par excellence is perhaps one of the most popular folk performers east of the Niger. To this end, numerous folktales exist, chronicling his adventures both in this life and in the spirit world. In fact, Como's music and life reminds one of the fearless hunters adventures in D. O Fagunwa's *Ogboju ode ninu Igbo irumale* which Wole Soyinka has translated into *Forest of a thousand daemons*.

This comparison becomes necessary since Como's peculiar life style furnishes him with materials to practice what Gregory Gizelis (167) calls "real creation". In fact, one can conclude that Como is both a vendor and inspirer of "real creation". This is because the phantasmagorical stories which tell about his adventure in his music, though belonging to the people's cosmos are entirely his own creation. On the other hand, because Como is generally seen as an extra- ordinary human being other artistes including Home Video producers have come up with even more astounding stories on the life and adventures of Pericom Okoye.

Oral performance by its nature admits of a symbiotic relationship among the four factors of *Teller* (performer), *message* (Theme), *Medium* (channel) and of course *spectators* (audience). (Gizelis 167) (Emphasis, mine). In all instances, one observes that the interplay of the above factors will usually affect the performance context. Equally playing a powerful mediating role is the issue of cultural influence since folklore or for that matter, music is a cultural phenomenon. Ozoemena as an artist who is acutely aware of

societal changes and as a realist to boot manipulates these four factors to suit what one may call pecuniary or mercantile needs. His messages are therefore custom-made to suit the tastes of his wealthy clients even as he invokes the traditional origins of *Egwu Ekpili* in justifying his penchant for praise singing.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, one observes that commitment can be borne out of altruistic as well as selfish reasons. This is because, an artist reacting to the demands of his stomach can in a manner of speaking, be said to be committed to clear and present danger of saving himself and his dependants from the pangs of hunger just as the activist engaged in the task of fighting for a better society can be said to be altruistically committed. As a true and creative artist, Ozoemena utilizes his talents to secure a better future for himself and family. The moral of his action may elicit protests from people who see the folk performer as first and foremost, a public servant. Being a public servant presupposes that one should put public interest over and above pecuniary and selfish interests. It is only when an artist does this that he can be said to have fulfilled his sacred mandate to society

### Notes

1. Omambala-Old Anambra L.G.A is made up of Anam, Aguleri, Umuleri, Nteje, Awkuzu, Nsugbe, Ogbunike, Umunya, Igbariam, Nando and Nkwelle Ezunaka
2. Front for Defense of Igbo Heritage (FDIH) founded by Chukwuemeka I. Onyesoh, Okpala Eze Nri is devoted to ensuring both cultural and ethical renaissance among the Igbo.
3. Michael A. Onwuejeogwu.2001. *Igbo nwe eze: Igbo have kings: the evolutionary development of complexities in Igbo political system* Awka: FDIH.
4. Interview with Chief Akunwata Ozoemena Achikwu on the

- 26<sup>th</sup> of Oct. 2003 at Nsugbe, Anambra East L.G.A of Anambra State.
5. Interview with Ozoemena Nsugbe.
6. Interview with Ozoemena Nsugbe.

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