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## **The Various Levels of Musical Activities of The Igbo Children in Igbo Culture of Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The life of the Igbo children of Eastern Nigeria is surrounded by music and musical activities. The aim of this research is to survey the various levels of involvement of the Igbo children (from childhood to adolescence), in music learning and performance. The socio-cultural activities and similar occasions, on which these children's music and musical activities rotate, were investigated. Some of the children's music genres focus on entertainment, ordinary games, labour execution, character formation, learning (education) and so on. The benefits derived from performance of these genres are very rewarding. They range from making the children socially fit, to making them culturally, mentally and physically sound. The methods of imparting all musical knowledge vary according to age and music type. This research attempts the classification of these methods and brings to bare, their approaches and effectiveness as regards competence and excellence.

**Key words:** Education, Igbo culture, Igbo children, Musical development, Organization, Creativity, Performance

### Introduction

The Igbo are one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the other two being Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba. The estimated population of the Igbo is about thirty million. Located in the South-eastern part of Nigeria, mainly to the East of the river Niger, the Igbo nation situates

within five States of Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi. These States lie between latitudes five and seven degrees north; and longitudes six and eight degrees east, covering an area of about 15,800 square miles.

(Green (1964, p. 13) described the Igbo as, ‘a collection of villages bound together by certain ties, but each one, at any rate...largely managing its own affairs’. Although the Igbo possess no central tribal authority, tribal identity has been maintained through a common language and culture. As a matter of fact, there are broad similarities in their culture and religious beliefs.

The Eastern Igbo is bounded in the south by the Ijaw, Kalabari, and Ogoni tribes of the Rivers and Bayelsa States. In the west, a natural boundary is created by the River Niger. Across the River Niger are the western Igbo, which constitute part of Delta State. In the north, the Eastern Igbo is bounded by the Igala and Tiv of Benue State.

The discussion of this paper is centred on the Eastern Igbo of Nigeria located across River Niger. The Igbo Communities of Nigeria have provided adequate musical activities and training for their children. As a result, the lives of the Igbo children are surrounded with music and music-making. The nature, scope and quality of the training are efficient enough and offer adequate knowledge, which lead the gifted and hardworking ones to create and perform music with ease. Agu, (2011, p. 2) remarked that, “music plays an important role in the life of an Igbo child. It is rather an essential part of every facet of his daily life. He is exposed to folktale songs and games performed by other children.”

In addition to the acquisition of musical skills and competence through the established music tradition, the Igbo traditional music education greatly emphasizes character formation and starts early to acculturate the young into those values, behaviours, attitudes, speech, action and traditions that are character moulding and considered necessary for the making of a person in a given environment (Emeka 2002, pp. 205-225). Nwokenna, (2012, p. 25) asserted:

There is no doubt that music plays vital role in the education of children from birth. At this early phase of children’s life, they tend to develop high level of curiosity and inquisitiveness, wanting to know what, why and how so many things happen around them.

Among the Igbo, it is believed that music-making among the children serves, not only as a medium for entertainment and social relationship, but as an intricate part of the development of their mind, body and soul. It is assumed that the laws of the land and the history of the tribe are learnt through songs. And the accepted behavioural patterns in the society are all assimilated by children through music and dance. As a result of this concept, Igbo children are initiated into active involvement in musical activities and performances right from infancy.

The usefulness of music, the freedom and frequency of its performance (within the ambit of the socio-cultural limitations), are known to promote musical ability in all and expertise in the talented. These factors also affect the choice of cultural concepts and materials utilized for music compositions and the construction of musical instruments. The musical life of the African children, like that of the Igbo children, have been variously discussed by eminent scholars and researchers (e.g. Blacking 1965; Ifionu 1979; Nzewi 1980, 1991, 2003; Agu 1984; Okafor 1989,

2000; Emeka 2002; Udensi 2004). These have served as valuable contributions on the musical activities of the Igbo, as well as the African child.

In Igbo setting, the child learns about everything around him, the culture, the history of the land, general knowledge, and moral instructions through songs. And music, serving as a pivot on which the impact of education rotates in Igbo culture, plays a vital role in the process of cultural transmission. Okunade (2011: 139) expatiates that, "one of the means of transmitting norms, ethics and virtues to the members of the society is through the texts of the songs used within the community". Therefore, all music types designated for children's education are categorized with due consideration to their age group, attention span and level of musical development. This arrangement exposes the Igbo child to varieties of music and musical activities at each stage or level of development.

### **The Purpose of Study**

It is intended that the findings of this research will lead to answers to the following pertinent questions:

1. Who introduces the children to music?
2. Who educates the children musically and what constitutes the content of the teaching and learning process at the various levels of growth?
3. Who composes the music performed by the children?
4. What types of instruments are available to the children and who constructs them?
5. What benefits do the children derive from musical training and musical activities?

It is the intention of this paper, however to investigate the musical life of the Igbo children from birth through adolescent, focusing on the types of music they perform at each stage of their developmental growth, who introduces them to music, who educates them musically and what are contents and values of their musical education? Apart from performing or participating in music making, how do they create/compose music and construct musical instruments? In all, how do their musical involvements generally affect them as living souls?

### **Methodology**

The researchers were born of Igbo parents and were bred in Igbo community where they were exposed to active participation in various musical activities from the toddler to adolescent age.

The main materials that form the basis of this research are therefore empirical.

In recent times, we conducted research in some aspects of music and musical activities of Igbo children, covering fifteen Igbo villages within Anambra State of Nigeria. The fieldwork comprised recordings, oral interviews, personal observations and photographs taken. Participants for the study were Igbo children between the ages of 2 and 21 years, located outside the cities. The outcome of the research among others constitutes the report hereby presented. It is hoped that the study would arouse more research interests in the music and musical activities of Igbo children beyond the limits of this report.

### **The Developmental Stages of Igbo Children**

For better approach to these pertinent questions and for the purpose of this paper, the developmental stages of Igbo children are categorized or classified in accordance with the Igbo classification system in Igbo culture as follows:

1. Pre-birth to toddler age.
2. Child of 2 to 11 years old.
3. Adolescent age of 12-21 years old.

### ***Pre-Birth to Toddler Age***

The Igbo strongly believe that the child is introduced to rhythmical movements right from the womb through the mother's continuous participation in a number of musical activities during pregnancy. After the baby is born, it is welcomed into the world with songs. Every other ceremony surrounding his birth at this point in time (e.g. naming, circumcision etc), go with singing, dancing and merry-making. Also the baby gradually becomes acquainted with musical sound through lullabies sung by its mother or nursemaid as she cradles it to lull it to sleep. The baby is also exposed to musical sound and rhythmic movements through the mother's continuous involvement in musical activities, with the baby firmly strapped at her back.

Okpara (2016, p. 196) gave a summary of their musical involvement thus:

Pregnant women in their condition, being the baby's prenatal stage are expected to decongest their hearts from burden by singing often for the normal growth of the baby. The baby in the womb reacts positively to the song by kicking well. At the infancy stage, the Igbo child is exposed to lullabies. At the childhood stage, he is exposed to folk songs, games songs and other didactic songs because he can understand the message being passed across to him. At the adolescent stage, the child learns more folk songs and other educative songs.

The above account appears to have answered the question: Who introduces the child to music? Apart from mothers however, Igbo children, as from the age of two years and above, are introduced to participation in music and musical activities by their peer groups, especially those who are more advanced in age than they are. At this age, they speak their language fairly well and are capable of walking or running around.

### ***Children of 2 to 11 years***

From the ages of two to eleven years, the Igbo children spend less time with their mothers and more time with their peers. The situation here equates with Blacking's observation (1965:24) that the African child begins to participate in music making when he spends less time with his mother and moves with other children. At this stage of development and interaction, the children's musical activities increase and they gradually develop concepts of casual relationships, the power to discriminate, to make judgments, analyse situations and events, synthesize, imagine and formulate ideas. These benefits are derived through observation, imitation and active participation in music, musical games/plays and dances.

One would ask; what kind of music the child participates in at this stage of development? The Igbo children participate more in singing folksongs, lullabies, emotional or plaintive songs, moral instruction songs, work songs and games or play songs. In addition to these, they also indulge in instrument playing, organized and unorganized dances, including initiation dances. Among these music types, only dances that require precise movements and uniformity in diversity, including instrumentation and also initiation music are strictly organized and directed by adults and professional musicians. The performances of the other music types are organized by the senior and talented members of the peer groups. To add to the assertions above, Sunday-Kanu (2014, p. 23), posited:

In African culture, every new stage of life attained by a growing child receives celebrations with varieties of folk music. When a child is born, music accompanies him or her. When a child starts standing, taking steps to walking, folk songs are sung to accompany these special occasions of the child's life. Gradually as the children mature, they are introduced to the playing of musical instruments.

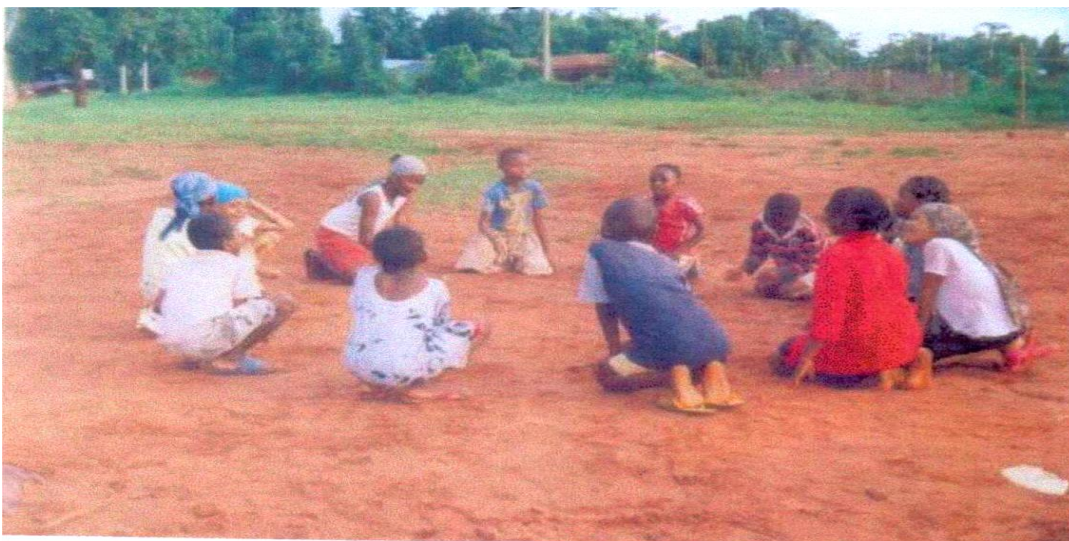
### Organization of Musical Activities

Within this age bracket, children usually come together, especially when adults have gone for work, and also during full moon, to sing songs, dance and play music games. These activities are usually organized by the senior ones in the peer groups. The senior and talented ones naturally assume positions of leadership, educating the younger ones and ensuring that every activity is orderly and peacefully presented. In some occasions, adults monitor the activities and make comments if the need arises.

Because children are musically active within this age bracket, musical activities occupy most part of their spare time. The male children start improvising their own miniature instruments with which they accompany their music, dances and songs. Such instruments include the *oja* (flute), *igba* (membrane drum), *ekwe* (slit wooden gong), *oyo* (rattles). They also start experimenting on simple instrumental and choral compositions.

Nzewi (1991, p. 91) rightly summarized their musical activities thus:

Children organize themselves in the playground and groves to play categorizeable children's music or imitations of adult music until they are typically qualified by age or recognized skill to join adult groups.



**Plate 1: Children playing one of their favourite Games Songs- (*Okereke, Okereke*) in a village in Uga in Aguata L.G. A**

At this stage too, children's musical activities are centred on experimentation. They try to discover and harness their creative, and performance talents. Ajewole (2011: 169) informs that "music is a medium for promoting creativity and imagination in children." As they observe and imitate the adults, they experiment and finally subject their skills to test. This approach helps in formulating music character and tradition. The enthusiastic and gifted children go the extra mile to listen to and watch with intent and keen interest as adults perform.



**Plate 2: Above are Children playing Game songs in Uga Village square Anambra State 2005**

***Children of Age Bracket: 12-21 years (Adolescents)***

Within this age bracket, the Igbo children are introduced to more organized and complex musical activities, which include instrumentation, and stylized dances that require group activity as well as discipline under the close supervision of adults and professionals who teach and administer the group. In conversation with Patrick Azodo, one of the best-known professional musicians who has been handling a group of adolescents “*Etiliogwu*” dancers from Adazi-Nnukwu, Anambra State, since 1964, he informed that music education at this level is formal. According to him, emphasis is on acquisition of skills on singing, playing and dancing. In the process, the children are exposed to well-oriented organized and disciplined musical activities. They are taught to respond favourably to unity in diversity and to fully develop social attributes and sense of belonging.

Dancing and virtually all musical activities at this level are categorized and well organized according to age, sex and social ratings. Okafor (2005, p. 69) had earlier observed that:

The Igbo traditional society organizes children born over a conventional period into the *ogbo* (age groups/age set, or age grade). The community uses the age-group system as an agency for collective exposure of peers to certain life experiences...

The girls are separated from the boys. This arrangement helps the community to monitor and regulate progress within each classified group. This order agrees with Nzewi’s observation (2003, p.17) which stated thus: “Sex education and gender decorum are routinely transacted in the language and theatre of musical arts performances. Sex education may be metaphorical allusions or, otherwise, explicitly stated in lyrics.”



**Plate 3: Young dancers from Abatete, Anambra State dancing the *Etilogwu* dance**

There are many dances for children and adolescents. Most of these dances are purely for entertainment. They are also itinerant groups that move from village to village or house to house during Igbo festivals or Christian festivals. In recent times, a good number of these dances have featured in National music and cultural festivals. A few of them have also been taken beyond the Nigerian borders.

Some of these dances include the *etilogwu* dance, *mkpokiti* dance *igbaga* dance, *ikorodo* dance (for the males); *egwu torchi*, *egwu obi*, *nkwa Umuagbogho*, *egwu inyanga* (all maiden dances). There are few dances in which both sexes are grouped together. Example is the *egwu egedege* (egedegede dance music).

All dances involve elaborate rehearsals geared towards acquisition of musical skills and competence. Emeka (2002, p. 206) noted that:

This kind of traditional music training ‘puts the greatest emphasis on character formation to acculturate the young into those values, behaviour, attitudes, speech, action and traditions that are considered necessary for the making of a person in a given environment’.



**Plate 4: Young children playing one of the commonest Igbo Game Songs (*akpankolo*)**

## Music Types

### *Folktale Songs*

Igbo Folktale songs serve for social and moral education of the child. They also serve for relaxation, as entertainment, as a medium through which idioms and proverbs are learnt and as a channel through which noble ideals and vices are acknowledged or condemned, encouraged or discouraged, (Agu 1992:21). In addition, Okafor 2005:61), asserts that “folktale songs make profound impact on the child listener, stimulate his imagination as well as serve as character building instrument. Performance of folksongs is organized by children in such a way that the storytellers who are also the lead singers take their turns while others sit quietly with rapt attention to grasp the message in the story. The listeners join in the chorus of the song at the appropriate time. One of the outstanding advantages of folktale songs is that they contribute immensely in improving the language skills of the children. It also enables them to express their creative self with ease as well as perfecting and retaining their indigenous language. As the child participates in singing folktale songs, ‘he imbibes cultural values, customs, moral codes, social and religious institutions’ Bascom (1965:475).

The folksongs have short melodic motifs, the response in most cases being a one-word answer or a very short phrase. The structure is based on the Call and Response or Call and Refrain pattern.



**Plate 5: Children organising themselves to start Game songs and other musical activities**

### *Lullabies*

Igbo lullabies, like the folktale songs, are informally and orally transmitted. They are more common among nursemaids and nursing mothers, but other children sing a good number of them. The singing is not organized in any way. (See musical example “*Nwan’ebe Akwa*”).

### *Emotional or Plaintive Songs*

This song type is mostly derived from Igbo folktale songs. They are rather sympathetic representative of emotional cry of a maltreated orphan, house servant or nursemaid. The texts bother on deprivation, subjugation, hatred and wickedness against the defenceless and helpless. (See appendix for, *Nwa enwe Nne*).



### ***Moral Instruction Songs***

At all levels of the Igbo children education, moral songs, which contribute in moulding their character, are relevant and therefore continuously introduced. Okpara, (2015:17) adds that, “the Igbo is rich in culture and through her indigenous songs, the children are exposed to moral education.”

Such songs stimulate their imagination and arouse their humaneness. Children are made to always sing them often to remind them of their responsibilities as good and obedient children. (Example of a moral song “*Ezi Omume*” in appendix).

### ***Work songs***

It is common phenomenon for children to imitate the adults in musical activities and performances. The adult Igbo apply music to aid physical activities and some professional activities like boat rowing, wine tapping, bellowing, road construction, house building etc. Such songs are believed to motivate and inspire the user. Igbo children consequently make use of work songs during manual labour like grass-cutting, fencing and domestic chores.

### ***Games or Play Songs***

From the age of four years and above, the role of Igbo children in musical activities changes from passive to active one. They now become active participants in Games and Play Songs. From this age too, there is sex awareness among children. The female children separate from the male ones to play some classified games for both sexes. While the girls engage themselves in the *ikpo uga* game, the boys might engage themselves in singing war songs, for example:



**Plate 6: Young Girls from Obosi enjoying the *ikpo oga* musical game**

### ***Initiation Music***

Initiation music is not common. It remains exclusive reserve for the initiates. In virtually all Igbo communities, the adolescent males are initiated into membership of masquerade groups (spirit manifests). In some Igbo communities, the *Iwa-ogodo* (putting on loin-cloth) is an organised ceremony in which the involved young men are excluded from the community for a stipulated period under which they are subjected to various training including music making.

Other communities also initiate female adolescents into womanhood through ceremonies like, *iru mgbede*. During this period, the girls are put away and trained on various aspects of womanhood, motherhood and marriage. The end of all these trainings and ceremonies is heralded with elaborate musical activities including dancing and singing, performed only by the initiates.

### **Who composes music performed by the children?**

Information gathered from the elders, state that the folksongs, which the child starts with, have been in place over several hundreds of years, and are transmitted orally from generation to generation. But most songs, instrumental music and dance performed by children within the age bracket of 2-11 years, are their own creations which are derived from the dances and music of the adults, while some are composed by adults.

At the adolescent age, the child is exposed to more serious and complex music, which require the professional touch of experienced composers, talented and renowned musicians. Although the adolescents make some inputs on the structure, rhythm or dance steps and other areas such as instrumentation, nevertheless, experts in composition, choreography, instrumentation, dance and administration, are usually in full control of the education and supervision of musical activities at this level.

### **The Instruments**

Simple instruments are available for the children's musical performances. But the first musical instrument they employ is hand clapping, with which they accompany most singing and dancing. From the age of five, when the fingers are capable of gripping things, they are introduced to the use of light and simple instruments like clappers, bells, rattles and small gongs. Between the ages of six and eleven years, the children confidently handle all the light instruments designed for this age bracket. The instruments include miniature slit wooden gongs, miniature membrane drums, metal gongs, rattles of different shapes, miniature horns and flutes, small sized xylophones and clappers etc.

At the adolescent stage, the talented children, especially those from artistic music families, are capable of constructing instruments like drums, flutes, wooden and metal gongs, rattles and xylophones, for their age group dances. In most cases, instruments constructed by children are used by children of two and eleven years. The adolescents use similar instruments as adults. There may be differences in sizes, especially the drums; to enable the young adolescents carry such instruments along as they perform.

### **Conclusion**

The power of music is fully recognized by the Igbo and they often utilize it fully. Our discussion has shown that music making and musical activities among the Igbo are not exclusive reserve of the adults. Igbo children grow up and play music together, improvising their language and number skills in the process. Consequently, they develop mentally and physically with sound moral sense of judgment and commonly accepted virtues. In addition, they imbibe social traits, creative and performance skills. These attributes are benefits that have contributed immensely to all round development of Igbo children.

The Igbo concept of not educating the children formally from onset, but rather allowing them to absorb and acquire musical knowledge through observation and imitation is no doubt very rewarding. This accounts for the rapid musical competence attained by them through active participation in music. It also promotes mental and socio-cultural growth of the Igbo society.

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APPENDIX

- 1. *Nwa Na-ebeAkwa* -The Weeping Child
- 2. *NwaEnweNne* -The Motherless Child
- 3. *EziOmume* - Good behaviour

**NWA N'EBE AKWA (THE CRYING BABY)**  
(Derived from Obosi Folk Tune)

Arr. Dan C. C. Agu

Duet

O - nye mu - lu n - wa n' - e - be\_a - kwa? n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a -  
 O - nye, O - nye, n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a -  
 kwa. O - nye mu - lu nwa n' - e - be\_a - kwa? n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a -  
 kwa. O - nye mu - lu - nwa n' - e - be\_a - kwa? n - nwa - e n' - e - be\_a -  
 kwa. O bu E - gbe mu - lu nwa n' - e - be\_a - kwa, n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a -  
 kwa. n - wa e n' - e - be\_a -  
 kwa. We - t' u - zi - za we - to - se, we - t' a - ma\_n - go - lo - lo' -  
 kwa.  
 16 fe. we - t' u - zi - za we - to - se, we - t' a - ma\_n - go - lo - lo'  
 20 fe. U - mu n - nu - nu la - cha ya, o - kpo tu - tu kpo - gbue  
 o - kpo tu - tu kpo - gbue  
 24 fa, u - mu - n nu - nu la - cha ya, o - kpo - du - du kpo - gbue  
 fa. o - kpo - du - du kpo - gbue

*Nwa N'ebe Akwa* Arr. Dan C. C. Agu  
 28 fa. n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a - kwa.  
 fa. n - nwa - e n' - e - be\_a - kwa.  
 32 n - nwa e n' - e - be\_a - kwa.  
 n - nwa - e n' - e - be\_a - kwa.

### NWA ENWE NNE (The Motherless Child)

Arr. Dan C. C. Agu

1 *Andante*

Call

Resp.

E - je - b'o - lu, a - kpo - kue Nwa\_e - nwe Nne,  
U - ne, U -

5  
e - je - b'o - lu, a - kpo - kue Nwa\_e - nwe Nne,  
ne U - ne U -

9  
e - je - be\_n - ku, a - kpo - kue Nwa\_e - nwe Nne,  
ne, U - ne, U - ne, U -

13  
E - chu - be\_m - mi - li, a - kpo - kue Nwa\_e - nwe nne,  
ne, U - ne, U - ne, U -

17  
I - fe si - b'i - ke, a - kpo - kue nwa\_e - nwe nne,  
ne, U - ne, U - ne, U -

37  
ne, U - ne, U - ne.  
ne, U - ne, U - ne.

**EZI OMUME**  
(Igbo Moral Instruction Song) Arr. Dan C. C. Agu  
Oct, 1984

Voice *Moderato*

1 E - zi\_o - mu - m'e - zi\_o - mu - m'e - zi\_o - mu - me,

5 Yi - r'e - zi\_o - mu - me di - k'u - we.

9 E - zi\_o - mu - m'e - zi\_o - mu - m'e - zi\_o - mu - me,

13 yi - r'e - zi\_o - mu - me di - k'u - we.

17 Gi e - zu - n'o - ri, e - zu - na o - ri,

21 gi a - gba - n'a - mu - gha, a - gba - n'a - m'u - gha,

25 Gi hu nwa nne gi n'a - nya ma nke ka - cha - si,

29 yi - r'e - zi\_o - mu - me di - k'u - we.