



## **The Tonal Inflection of Igbo Language and Its Influence on Indigenous Music Composition**

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### **ABSTRACT**

African language is a tonal language and Igbo language is not an exception. Although the advent of Christianity had much influence on the language of the Igbo as regards indigenous church music, composers seem to make some efforts towards bringing the meaning of the language as near as possible to the music. However, in spite of the efforts, there are still glaring and nagging problems that face the Igbo language as a means of communication in the area of composition. The writer discusses some compositional techniques with a view to highlighting some of the nagging problems of tonal inflection of the language in the area of composition.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is a very important icon of identity of a group of people. Every aspect of life is expressed in the language of the people. These aspects of life include their beliefs, values, philosophy of life, social relationships, ways of food production, building houses and most importantly their music. This is the most important aspect of people's culture because music and language go hand-in-hand. Culture has been described as the learned and shared patterns of information that a group uses to generate meaning among its members. These patterns encompass non-verbal language and material goods. (Kaiser, 2003). Any given culture makes use of her language in her musical compositions. In other words, the Language of the people is expressed in their music. Hornby (2000:662) defined language as "The system of sounds and words, used by human to express their thoughts and feelings." Language has been defined by Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2009 as:

Communication among human beings that is characterized by the use of arbitrary spoken or written symbols with agreed upon-meanings. More broadly, language can be defined as communication in general; it is regarded by some linguists as a form of knowledge, that is, of thought or cognition (p.2).

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He also went on to explain that spoken-gesture-signalled communication involves the same process for all humans, and any human language can convey any human thought; nevertheless, the actual languages spoken in the world are numerous, and they differ vastly in their sound systems and grammatical structures. In his views on the relationship of language and culture Kramsch (2010) said:

Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. The words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words also reflect their author's attitudes and beliefs, their point of view that are also those of others. In both cases, language expresses cultural identity (p.3).

There are many African languages indigenous to the African continent. More than 2,000 different languages according to Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 are spoken in Africa. Apart from Arabic which is not confined to Africa, the most spoken African tongues are Swahili (about 35 million speakers) and Hausa (about 39 million speakers), both of which are used over wide areas as lingua franca. Several languages (often inaccurately termed dialects simply because they have few users or are under-researched) are spoken by only a few thousand people. Although very few African languages have written literature, the majority have long-standing traditions of oral literature.

Nigeria is known for a heavy proportion of languages in comparison to other African countries. Of an estimated 2,058 languages in Africa, 500 are thought to be spoken in Nigeria. The official language is English (first taken to Nigeria by European traders before colonization), used in educational, governmental, business, the media, and other official domains. Multilingualism is common among Nigerians through daily interactions and trade. The names of the three main peoples in Nigeria (the Hausa, the Igbo and the Yoruba) correspond to the languages spoken by these people. Yoruba and Hausa are the most widely spoken languages (with over 18.5 million speakers of each in Nigeria itself), followed by Igbo (around 18 million), and the Fulfulde (over 7.5 million) and Kanuri (3 million). Edo, Efik, Idoma are also important national languages. Many Nigerians also speak Nigerian Pidgin English (creolized in some areas), which is mutually intelligible with some other West African pidgins. This acts as a lingua franca across the many languages spoken in Nigeria and its use is growing in literature, advertising, television, and radio. Writing on the Igbo as an ethnic group, Okafor (2005) said:

The Igbo, one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, dominate the once-forest zone of south eastern Nigeria and the fringes of the Niger delta west of the river. Igbo people are basically, farmers, traders and craft men, their religion is animism. Their social life flows with the rhythm of festivals,

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ceremonies, rituals and work. Several types of music dominate Igbo life: Social music used for entertainment, didactic tales, narration of topical events, transmissions of clan, chronologies, social control; and work music which include lullabies, canoe songs etc. (p. 26).

### **Origin of Igbo Ethnic group**

Writing on the Igbo myth of origin Hanny, (1990) and Okoroafor (1993) in Obiajulu (2003) said:

Igbos are believed to have descended from Eri, who landed from Aguleri from Heaven. According to this myth, this category of Igbos inhabits the upland area of Igbo land Agukwu-Nri, Awka, Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe and Arochukwu. They are core Igbo areas and differ from the riverhine Igbo namely Onitsha, Onitsha Olona, Onitsha Ugbo, Asaba, Osomari, Ogbahu, etc.

This myth according to him explains some cultural practices among the Igbo. Yam, (a highly valued food among the Igbo) permeated Igbo land from Aguleri. The *Ifejioke* (new yam festival) is celebrated amongst the people, to keep the covenant, which the Eri people made with its descendants. Failure to observe it may lead to a poor harvest. For aiding other Igbo towns to have food crops like yam, cocoyam, bread-fruit, palm oil and kernel, Nri people have the cultural preserve of cleansing an Igbo village of abomination as the need arises.

On his views on Igbo ethnic, group. Agu (2003:33) said “Igbos inhabit the south eastern part of Nigeria. They inhabit predominantly the Nigerian states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, parts of Delta, Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Cross River”. Cultural variations amongst them exist in the form of dialects, religious rituals and symbolism. The democratic claim of most Igbo societies stem from the fact that under normal circumstances every free born Igbo will ultimately be involved in the government of his community.

### **Igbo Language and Tonal Inflection**

Tonal inflection refers to the rising and falling tones of a language. Inflection has been defined by Hornby (2000:610) as “making the voice higher or lower in pitch.” The Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria speak Igbo language. A characteristic feature of the Igbo language like other African languages is adhering strictly to the tonal inflection of the words. Writing on language and tonal inflection, Onwuekwe (1994) said:

Although in Nigeria the languages are different, the music of the various languages is controlled by the tonal inflection of the word. Linguistic approach to studies in African music is indispensable because of the tonal characteristics of every African language. As a tone language, the relative pitch at which a syllable is altered (or

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the inflection given to it) may affect the meaning of the syllable (p.6).

A word may have one meaning if altered at a relatively high pitch, and another meaning if altered at a relatively low pitch, with a third and possibly fourth meaning if altered with either downward or upward inflection. In line with the above view, Agu (1999) said:

All sub Saharan African songs conform to the principles guiding the relationship between speech tone and melody. The Igbo language like those of so many other African tribes has tonal levels; while others have just two levels. The Zulu for instance, have two levels high and low. We may identify the speech tones thus (/) High, (\) Low, (-) Mid. (p. 40-41).

He went further to explain that a word could have many meanings depending on its intonation, application and, of course, its function in a sentence. For example the word *akwa* means “bed” or “bridge”. Here again the intended meaning depends on the application of the word, and its context in a phrase, or statement. Writing on the tonal inflection of Igbo language, Onwuekwe, (1994:9) said: “Among the Igbo of Nigeria the word *akwa* has different meanings depending on the tone markings of each syllable of the word, thus we have: ákwà = cloth, ákwá = cry, àkwá = egg, àkwà = bed/bridge”.

The above examples show why tonal inflection in any African language is indispensable in the music when it is recognized that most monosyllabic and disyllabic words have several meanings according to their tonal accents. In line with the above view, Udoh (2004:8) said: “Even the government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. Harmonic patterns are influenced by the culture of the people”

### **Relationship between music and language**

Music and language are interwoven. It has earlier on been said that indigenous vocal music of any community makes use of the language as a means of communication. It is the music of the people expressed through their language that brings out the beliefs and values, in fact the culture of the society. Whenever a vocal music is composed, it is associated with a particular language which has its characteristic rising and falling tones. Writing on the relationship between music and language Ogugua (2003) said:

Music conveys meaning, at times more than a word or sentence in a language can convey because of the problem of language and the “music” for language to obey the rules of syntax and grammar which music does not always obey yet conveys meaning (p.119).

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Expressing his views on the relationship between music and language, Randel (2001) explained that music and language are closely associated in the vocal music of all cultures, yet in Africa, the connection is particularly significant. Spoken or declaimed speeches of praise may be accompanied by drums and horns. Songs are sung by raconteur and audience, usually in responsorial fashion, in the telling of folk tales. Music is an important symbol of mythology and folklore. Among the Bashi, flute pieces are said to have texts that are not sung or spoken but are known to and taught by the player. Composition of vocal melodies may be limited by the pitch movement required in the text.

On her views on the relationships between music and language, Mokwunyei (2005) said: Melody is also a function of text, due to the inflectional nature of the language. It therefore follows the intonation and contour of the speech. Each syllable of the melody represents a note, such that a word containing three syllables is delivered in three notes. The particular note assigned to each syllable is also determined by the speech contour, to ensure that the meaning is not otherwise altered. (p. 45).

No wonder then that Nketia (1974) said:

Attention is paid as far as possible to the intonation of phrases or the tones of words might create problems for the listener, for many African languages are 'tone languages', that is, languages in which tone is phonemic, or serves to distinguish words in much the same way as do vowels and consonants (p.184).

Highlighting the relationship between music and language Mokwunyei (2005) explained that the Aniocha-Igbo language is a tone language, with contrastive but relative pitch on each syllable. There are two basic tones; high and low, consequently each word begins with a high or low tone. What might be considered a third is the step-down or mid tone. In his views on the relationship between music and language, Uzoigwe (2001) said:

What composers of African art music therefore need most is to establish a language which is comparable to that of African literature. It would be observed for instant that even though the later may be in English, French or Portuguese language, in essence it still retains its African identity (p.161).

**Some Compositional Techniques of Indigenous Music Composers:**

Indigenous music composers use different compositional techniques in their music compositions. These techniques include call and response, which involves a solo call and response by the group. It is a form of conversation between the solo and the group. Another kind of compositional technique used is that of imitation and repetition. As the name implies, certain phrases are repeated and or imitated within the course of the composition. Writing on imitation as a compositional technique; Randel (2001) said:

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The statement of a single motive or melody by two or more parts or voices in succession, each part continuing as the others enter in turns. If successive statements are at the same pitch level, the imitation is said to take place at the unison. Imitation often takes place at different pitch levels. (p. 390).

He also explains that especially common is a regular pitching level and statements at the interval of a fifth above or a fourth below. The distance in time between successive statements may vary, but it often remains constant within any one set of statements. Imitation is generally classified as belonging to one of three types – canon, fugue and free imitation – depending upon the nature of the motive or melody and the preciseness of the restatement. Indigenous Igbo music composers use imitation as a valuable compositional technique in their compositions.

Augmentation and diminution are compositional techniques which involve the statement of a theme in uniformly longer or shorter note-values, respectively, than those originally associated with it. Thus if the ratio between old and new values is 2 to 1, in augmentation what was originally a quarter note becomes a half note that is a crotchet becomes a minim in other words, an increase in the note values. Diminution on the other hand involves a decrease in the original note value A quarter note crotchet, can now become an eighth note quaver. Other compositional techniques used by indigenous music composers include inversion and retrograde inversion. The last may adversely affect the tonal inflection of the words since it involves backward movement of the musical notes beginning with the last note and ending with the first

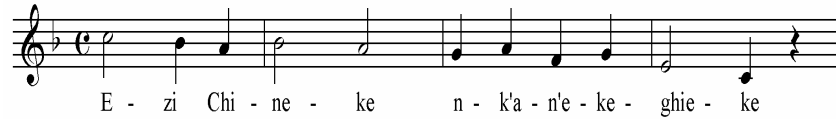
### **The Effects of Tonal Inflection of Igbo language on Music composition**

The rising and falling tones of Igbo language in no small way affect the meaning of the words. A sentence in Igbo language might have one meaning, but when set to music, a totally different meaning is obtained. This can cause a lot of embarrassment to both the composers and the audience listening to the music. The early Christian missionaries made serious efforts to bring the gospel to the people. In their efforts, they trained catechists with a view to interpreting the message of Christ to the people. The interpretation was all embracing as every aspect of the teachings of Christ was involved, including the music itself. In one of the songs in one of the Christian churches a part of the music runs as:

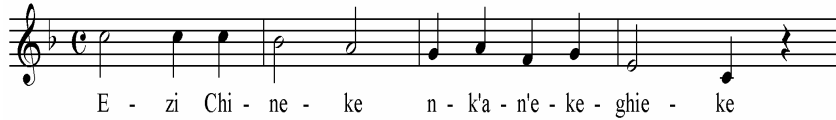


An attempt was made to interpret the above song in Igbo language thus.

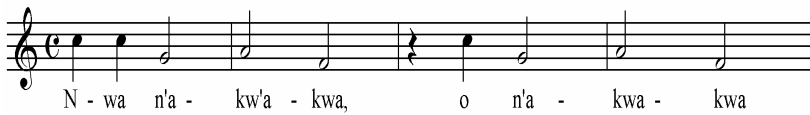
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From the above music, the meaning of the words is 'God's pig that was not shared.' It will be better to put the music thus:



The music of the above gives the meaning to the words which reads, "True God, begotten not created". It has earlier on been pointed out that the Igbo word *akwa* has about four meanings thus: *ákwà* = cloth, *ákwá* = cry, *àkwá* = egg, *àkwà* = bed/bridge. When setting any sentence that involves any of the words to music, the composer must be very careful otherwise he would want to say something but finds himself saying another thing through the music. Take for instance, a composer might want to say "Nwa na-akwa akwa, o na-akwa akwa. (The baby is crying, he is crying) He now sets it to music thus:



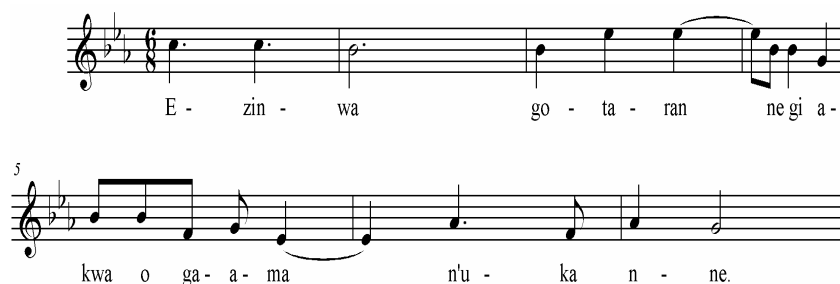
The meaning that the above music has given to the sentence is that the baby is sewing a cloth. One wonders how a baby who is supposed to be crying can now turn out to sew a cloth. The music that will portray the baby as crying should rather run thus:



In the next musical example, the composer intends to advise a good child to buy a cloth or wrapper that the mother will wear on mother's Sunday. The song runs thus:

**Ezi Nwa (Good Child)**

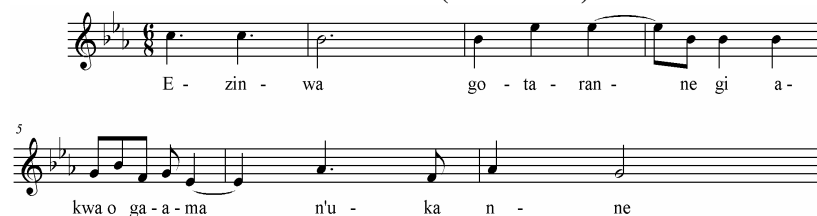
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E - zin - wa go - ta - ran ne gi a -  
5  
kwa o ga - a - ma n'u - ka n - ne.

Instead of the above advice, the composer now succeeds in asking a good child to buy an egg that the mother will put on during the mother's Sunday. The music should rather run thus to put the message across to the good child.

### **Ezi Nwa (Good Child)**



E - zin - wa go - ta - ran - ne gi a -  
5  
kwa o ga - a - ma n'u - ka n - ne

One can go on and on to bring out the effects of tonal inflection of the words to indigenous music composition.

### **Implications of Tonal Inflection of the Indigenous Words to the Composer**

Tonal inflection of the indigenous words has a lot of implications to the composer. In the first place, the composer should understand the language of his music before he sets out to compose. He should know the rising and the falling tones of the words so that it can also be reflected in the music. Otherwise, he might want to say one thing but finds himself saying another thing through his music. If a composer is not used to a language but is faced with the necessity of composing or setting music to the words of a language he does not really understand, he should find out the meaning of the words from one who understands the language. He should also find out the rising and falling tones of the words he wants to set to music.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The tonal inflection of Igbo language has a lot of influence on Indigenous music composition. The paper highlighted the importance of any language in



relation to music composition. The origin of Igbo as an ethnic group was discussed. The relationship between music and language was discussed. The compositional techniques employed by composers were pointed out which include call and response, call and refrain, augmentation and diminution among others. The effects of tonal inflection of Igbo language on music composition were given. Some musical examples to illustrate the wrong application of the music to the words were given. The implications of tonal inflection of the indigenous words to the composer were also highlighted.

In all the above, the composer is regarded as a creative individual who should make use of his initiative as he composes his music. Emphasis should be laid on the meaning of the words before setting it to music since the meaning of the words will send the message across to the people the music is meant for.

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