

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

TRADITIONAL SACRED MUSIC AND GENDER ISSUES: NMONWU MUSIC OF IHIALA AND EZINIFITE CULTURES IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

In most Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria and beyond, women are not allowed to have the liberty of making some type of traditional music, especially that type of music that has some ritual/sacred implications. They may as a matter of chance or opportunity see or behold and could perhaps enjoy that music but will not be allowed to be members of such groups that perform that music. In Ihiala and Ezinifite towns, both in Anambra South Senatorial district of Anambra state, women are not allowed to perform traditional sacred music (*Egwu nmonwu* or *Egwu muo*). Therefore, it is uncalled for and believed or seen to be out of place to have women amidst those making the musical rituals of *nmonwu*. It is referred to as 'nso' (taboo), a practice that is unacceptable, sacrilegious in these communities. *Nmonwu* secret cult is, therefore, a masculine affair that excludes women from being performers and from the findings of this paper, there appears to be nothing that can be done about it as to accommodate the general women, only those aged women referred to as 'Mmarigo' whose age and experience have allowed to be initiated, who are the only females permitted to partake in the *nmonwu* rituals, and not the music-making.

Keywords: Nmonwu, adukwu, ogbodu, ekwuru nmonwu, women (mmarigo), nso, music.

Introduction

Tradition has been defined as a belief or custom handed down from one generation to another (Oxford English mini dictionary). Wikipedia buttresses it further by saying "Tradition is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past". According to Odimegwu in Uche (2009), tradition is described as "the body of opinions, beliefs and practices of a society handed down from one generation to another". Sacred on the other hand means venerated as connected to God, god or religion. Tradition is a thing not to be tampered with, something dedicated or consecrated. According to Agu in Esimone (2014), music is an aesthetic art of combining or putting together sounds that are pleasant to the ear (p.65). Blacking (1973) opines that music is a 'humanly organized sound' (p.57). According to Ekwueme (2008), "Music can be described as a phenomenon using the medium of sound which is organized and manipulated into socially accepted patterns that communicate intelligibly and meaningfully, verbally or non-verbally, ideas, feelings, emotions and events to people" (p.1). Waje (2013), defined music as "A language, which involves a lot of expressions and to be able to express yourself properly, you have to paint a picture for your viewers to understand". Traditional sacred music, therefore, could be said to mean venerated or solemn music handed down from the ancestors (the believed custodians of norms and values) to the present generation.

Speaking about ancestors, Uche (2009) opined that:

Ancestors are described as the living dead in Africa. They constitute sources of African traditional religious ethics. In collaborating the efforts of other beings, ancestors preserve the moral traditions of the Supreme Being; provide the ethical requirement for their own respective families. It is significant to note that what ancestors aid are held to constitute a pattern of conduct, which is inculcated in society (p.70).

Nmonwu is the spirit manifest of the dead, a sacred and serious deity that bedevils the 'Ogbodu' (non-initiates) and those who knew nothing about it or are yet to become *adukwu* (initiates). In Ihiala and Ezinifite communities/towns, *nmonwu* is revered and considered a phenomenon that deserves utmost regard, the discussion that pertains to *nmonwu* is only exclusive to the *adukwu* (initiates) non-initiates (ogbodu) don't dare discuss it. If by any chance they are caught or perceived, they will endanger their parent's livestock and properties. *Nmonwu* will appear in their compound by either evening or early in the morning and the *adukwu* will chase and catch any readily available livestock. And in the case where there is no livestock available, any valuable item will be carried from inside the house to the abode of the spirits (*Ekwuru nmonwu*).

The mystique surrounding *nmonwu* is one of the key components of the Igbo culture that survived Western influence.

According to Achebe (1959), Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had a springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. (P.72). The same has been the plight of the women folk in the Ihiala and Ezinifite communities of Anambra state. Women cannot speak of or about the *nmonwu* in the public or where an *adukwu* will hear of it as such adventure would land them in trouble. If *anadukwu* mistakenly stumbles upon women having such a discussion, he will close his ears and claim innocence by saying '*Okeke nwanyi di nti njo, nwata mara nmonwu o mara onwu ja egbu ya*'. These are common expressions that would exonerate such *adukwu* from the sacrilege those women are committing by discussing the secret of our fathers (*nna anyi*).

Asigbo (2012), has this to say about *nmonwu* although he used the term 'masquerade':

To non-Africans, the sight of a "masked man" might be interpreted to mean a simple disguise, an eccentric or in fact, a clown catching his fun; but to the African, masking is a serious engagement that requires not only mental and physical alertness but also, spiritual fortification. This is because ancestral masks or spirit manifests are not merely human beings but manifestations from the spirit realm – of the ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communion with a mortal. This is why masked spirits depending on their purpose and function possess attributes ranging from spiritual (in) sight, clairvoyance, agility, unusual strength, and soon.

Asigbo (2012), finally submits that: spirit manifests command ultimate respect not just because of their ethereal or delicate presence but because they are believed to embody supernatural wisdom, strength and purity hence they are above imperfections of mundane man.

Utoh-Ezeajugh (2009) humbly submits that:

The secrets of the masquerade society are rigorously guarded and members restrained individual behaviour and enforced compliance employing a wide range of taboos and norms. In Igbo culture, a sense of tradition is highly significant. Masquerade performances are often a celebration of manliness, providing the opportunity for people to exhibit their strengths and talents, which are sometimes expressed through dancing, acrobatic displays and inter-flogging sessions (p.37).

Going by Utoh-Ezeajugh's submission above, one would detect that women are excluded from masquerade/spirit-manifest activities and performances not because they are not human beings but because the involvements and requirements avoid the women (nso nwanyi). In a village called umu-apani in Okija, Ihiala LGA, their masquerade performance involved a display with an inter-flogging session where two adukwu (two initiates) will engage each other with a very long cane. They will be flogging themselves simultaneously until the canes are either weakened or broken, while this flogging session is on, the rest of the adukwu will be chanting, clapping, dancing, enchanting, and invoking the spirits. Watching that particular session of *iti nmonwu* is already dreaded to the common man much more of a woman. Women cannot probe into the Nmonwu nor would they harbour the thought. Nmonwu being the spirit manifest of the dead fathers is held that women can neither be accommodated nor contain the secrets therewith. Even with the current wave of change in the 21st century in areas of art, music, exposure, belief and practices there seem to be nothing that could be done to include women in the traditional sacred music-making of the *nmonwu*.

Origin of Nmonwu

Nmonwu came from Oru in the present day Delta State of Nigeria, and moved from Oru down to Atani, from Atani down to Oraifite. From Oraifite *nmonwu* moved down to Ozubulu to Ihembosi, to Okija. From Okija *nmonwu* moved down to Ihiala and its environs comprising of Uli, Amorka, Ubuluisiuzor, Isseke, Orsumoghu, Azia, Lilu, Ihitenansa, Utuh, Ukpok, Amichi, Ebenator, Orsumenyi and Ezinifite. The *nmonwu* still moved to Oguta, Egbema, Ibacheke, Ohaji, Ozarra, Mgbidi, Awo-Omamma, Oturu, Amiri, Omuma, Eleh, Nempi, Akatta, Atta, Umutanze, Ihioma, Amannachi, Awo-Idemili, Orsu-Ihiteukwa, Eziawa, Umuhu-Okabia, Asa-ubiriele, Amaruru, Okwuabala, Ihioma, Orlu, Eziama Obire, Nkwerre, Ihite Owere, Obibi-Ochasi. The movement of *Nmonwu* from faraway Oru in the present-day Delta state down to these communities listed refers to the adoption of *Nmonwu* by these communities and begat the saying 'Oru na Igbo'.

Reasons for The Adoption of Nmonwu

According to the information gathered from a chieftain and custodian of Awor-Ezinifite in Nnewi South LGA, Anambra state the account holds thus. "In the olden days there used to be wars, inter-communal fighting, quarrelling among brothers and family members, abduction for ritual purposes and ceremonial rites. For example, when a king dies in most communities then it is customary to bury him with human heads. Those heads would be generated from neighbouring communities and perhaps families that are unguarded. These practices and happenings persisted, people were being abducted for ritual killings, young and old, remaining a virgin was taboo because that sexual status stood with great risk as they are always vulnerable to ritual killings and sacrifices.

Lawlessness increased as the day goes by and a panacea was sought after; hence the *nmonwu*. On its arrival, the *nmonwu* served both as a cult and an institution that salvaged these communities

from ritual abductions, lawlessness and infighting. The *nmonwu* served as the community's police and the court as well. Those who default in certain obligations would have the *nmonwu* spell out their punishment for them and also appease the *nmonwu* after they had met their bail conditions.

On the arrival of the white man, it appeared as if the powers of the *nmonwu* was undermined or reduced because the white man came and introduced courts, the police system and the church. But, in most communities to date, *nmonwu* serves the same purpose it has been serving since its adoption. In those communities when any of their roads are no longer durable and unkempt, *nmonwu* initiates repair exercises and fines those who abscond. In families where fighting and quarrelling persists between brothers or in most cases between their wives, *nmonwu* would delve in and resolve the contention and by virtue of *nmonwu* being involved, his decisions are final. As the decision of *nmonwu* can neither be refuted nor revoked.

A woman that is fond of preparing late-night meals for the husband and family would be risking her life savings in paying fines and appeasing the spirits should the *nmonwu* appear in her compound. Because the appearance of *nmonwu* attracts a fine of one big cock (*oke-okpa*).

There are and have been instances where one party were not satisfied with the judgement *nmonwu* gave and sought redress in the white man's court or a neighbouring community's customary court. If the party that sought redress gets the same verdict on the same case as that of the *nmonwu*. On arrival back to the community that party must appease the *nmonwu* for outright contempt or risk ostracism or have his compound raised down with fire. (This fire would rain down just at the pointing of *Ezenmou's* left finger)

The Distinct Nature Of *Nmonwu*

Nmonwu remains a mystery (*ama ama, amacha amacha*). As it is with the *Adukwu* or *Umunkwu*, so it is with the *Ogbodu*. Nobody has been able to unravel the whole mystery and perhaps none will. That one is an initiate (*adukwu*) does not accord him the audacity to engage or confront *nmonwu* one on one. Meaning when an *adukwu* is confronted by *nmonwu*, as one who belongs he (*adukwu*) bends down making sure that your hand or a finger touches the ground in respect to *ndi nmuo* (*nmonwu*) and refers to him (*nmonwu*) as “*nna anyi*” meaning our father '*aka eruom ala*' my hand has touched the ground. And there are some questions an *adukwu* may not attempt to answer as failure to those questions would have serious consequences. Under such circumstances, the *adukwu* can exonerate himself by saying “*nna anyi aka eruom ala*” meaning our father I am loyal. *Nmonwu* would call an initiate thus '*ada Okonkwo ee or aru Okonkwo nwa m ee*' and the *adukwu* would respond '*nna anyi* I'm with his hand touching the ground. Even as an *adukwu*, 'silence is golden. If an *adukwu* refuses to do the needful, and proceeds to answer most of the questions and fails in one, what he has done is referred to as “*ikpo ntù* or *itikwe isi nmonwu*” and the consequence are grave. “*Ikpo ntù* or *itikwe isi nmonwu* are both sacrilege and cannot go unpunished. Anyone guilty of any of those is already in trouble and must appease the spirits through rituals and sacrifices. And suppose an *adukwu* commits any of the two gross sacrilege and holds unto his right to the membership he is risking his life and properties and that of his parents too.

As for the *ogbodu*, such a scene cannot be created as there is no business with the spirits and *ogbodu*. The sight of the *nmonwu* alone is a dread to those who do not belong. *Nmonwu* has but one language. In all of these communities, irrespective of the size and shape and the location, *nmonwu* speaks one language and every *adukwu* or *umunkwu* (initiates) understands it. By implication, if one *adukwu* travel from *Ihiala* to *Ezinifite* or *Oraifite* and meets any *nmonwu* on his way when the *nmonwu* speaks or throws a question, the *adukwu* must respond with just the same language.

The language uniformity buttresses the spirituality and the aura of mystery that surrounds the *nmonwu* institution. The way *nmonwu* calls one *adukwu's* name in Okija is the same way another *nmonwu* will call that same *adukwu* if he sees himself in Omuma. And the response one *adukwu* gives in Oguta is the same response another *adukwu* will give in *ihitenansa* etc.

The Authenticity Of The *Nmonwu* and Its Superiority To Other Masked Beings

Nmonwu can foretell what will happen. There abound instances of such foretelling being fulfilled and this has made the *adukwu's* to believe and hold the utterances of *nmonwu* in high esteem amongst communities that adopted the *nmonwu*. Ordinary masked beings and dances cannot foretell and do not make serious utterances. Every community that adopted *nmonwu* have other masked beings (*Egwu or ihe eworo ewo*) they include *Odowgu Anya mmee, Okporompi, Aja-kpo ego oku, Okpoka, Otakiri, Okonkor, Ogba mgbada*. Even the revered *Ijele* in all the communities that make and have *nmonwu* is referred to as “*Egwu*”. *Ijele* may be referred to as “spirit dance” in communities that does not make *nmonwu*. *Nmonwu* is believed to be *Ozor-ebini* in all the communities that have it and as the name implies, it debar women from being initiates and involved. *Nmonwu* cannot manifest without a reasonable orchestration and music which must include chanting and with the beating of instruments like the *ekwe* (wooden drum), **ogene** (metal gong), *oja* (flute) and incantations and speeches that connote its dreadful nature as dead spirit. *Umu adukwu* revere the final manifestation of the *nmonwu* with so much shouting and clapping. As *nmonwu* begins its journey (*ije-nmonwu*) it makes reasonable music and initiates songs which the *adukwus* have to respond seriously to with vigour and manliness. At some point, the *nmonwu* stops depending on the type and performs some dance that most of the time fuels the energy of the *adukwus* to action. This dance also attracts its faraway observers and draws their attention and most times make them follow, although from a distance. Just as the onlookers (*ogbodu*) get attracted the *adukwu's* are not left behind. As some would engage in serious hand-clapping, shouting and some would transform into the ghost mode and engage in some sophisticated dancing and gymnastics/acrobatic displays like one-leg leaping, back flipping and somersault.

Types of *Nmonwu*

There are three (3) major types of *Nmonwu*

- *Ezenmuo* (Spirit King)
- *Otiaba* (Head Masquerade)
- *Ukwu nmuo* (Small but mighty)

Eze nmuo

This spirit king is referred to as the most supreme and its decision is final. Whatever spell it casts cannot be revoked or undone except in very rare circumstances. Before its spell is undone or revoked, another *Ezenmuo* from another *Ekwuru nmonwu* (spirit's abode) must be involved.

Otiaba

As the name indicates, this spirit manifest makes use of its head for obvious things. It maintains peace and order with its head, disciplines offenders with the same head and at some point entertain the onlookers with the same head.

Ukwunmuo

This species of *nmonwu* is a dread to both the *adukwu* or *umunkwu* and the *ogbodu* alike. This species of *nmonwu* is usually short in size and vibrant or flexible in operation. Every *ukwunmuo* is known for swift movements, running and being in pursuit, jumping when necessary and its activities are always disastrous and fearful. Most *ukwunmuo* make use of weapons like axe,

matches, bottles, spears, logs, batons, etc. Although it just does not attack people with these weapons except when the need arises.

Three categories of people in the Nmonwu belief system

Adukwu or Umunkwu

These are the initiates or the faithful

Ogbodu

They comprise non-initiates, men and boys.

Efulefu

These refer to those who are termed "good for nothing" and most of the time comprise of those men who refused to do the needful, those who are weak and lazy and those who are seen as women in men's guise.

Reasons For Women's Exclusion in Nmonwu

Nmonwu is believed to be a spirit. The requirements for invoking the spirits to manifest are masculine sensitive. And the items involved are materials that women generally in Igbo tradition do not have any business with. They include *nsi egbe* (gun powder), *akwa okuko igbo* (native egg), *omu nkwu* (palmfrond).

In virtually all the communities in Igboland, women are not entitled to climb trees. Such belief and practice to date still hold sway. The logic remains that if women do not climb trees, especially the palm trees from whence the palm frond a major instrument in *nmonwu* making is derived, they (women) cannot participate in the same. Then *nmonwu* evolves from *onu agbisi* (ant holes) that belief and practice cannot also contain women as they cannot keep the secrets within.

In these communities, they believe that women have the natural endowment to neutralize mysteries and sophistication. In the Igbo language, it is referred to as "imeru ihe" to defile something.

So generally in all the communities that make *nmonwu*, it is believed that women can neutralize and defy the efficacy of the *nmonwu*. In these communities, their story contains tales of soldiers who met and engaged with naked women on their way to battle and afterwards were either defeated or captured. But, *nmonwu* has remained the only thing, belief, institution that women's neutralizing endowment and prowess could not penetrate; although there are cases where women have been initiated.

The Place Of Women in Nmonwu Institution Or Society

If *nmonwu* appears and disappears from one's compound, it is called '*ida-ala*' by implication every married woman in such compound as a matter of necessity would be initiated. Those women who gain adoption/initiation are referred to as "*Mmarigo*."

Although their initiations or inclusion into the *nmonwu* cult does not accord them equal standing with their male counterparts nor will they be addressed as *adukwu* or *umunkwu* rather *mmarigo*. They cannot confront nor engage *nmonwu* one on one but by their being initiated, a married woman would now have the singular privilege to pass through the same path with *nmonwu* at the same time. And should *nmonwu* decide to verify the courage of a woman passing through the same lane as he does and throws along an utterance the woman's feedback would identify her as a true initiate and gain her right to passage.

And when such a transaction is ongoing between *nmonwu* and a woman in all reverence and humility the woman would not lift her head while talking to the spirit and would have her right hand on the ground as a sign of respect to the spirit. She will do all the talking bowing her head with her right hand on the ground.

The accurate and humble response of every *mmarigo* saves her from harassment and molestation. Communities that designates special day(s) for the *nmonwu* demonstration would have a section of the village square separated with *omu* for the *mmarigos*.

The *mmarigo's* would on that day sit in the *omu*-enclosed area with their "*nwanyi noduru okwu*" (kitchen stool). And at some point, they may have the privilege of having the *nmonwu* in most cases *Otiaba* come around and entertain them with a song and perhaps a dance display that would not exceed three to four minutes. They (*mmarigo's*) would shout and clap in reciprocity to the *nmonwu* that would hurriedly leave the scene for some serious business of the day. Akpabot in Akpabot (1998), noted that "clapping is perhaps the best form of accompaniment used by women and children" (72). This perhaps remains the only traditional sacred music women perform or participate in communities that make *Nmonwu*. According to Idamoyibo in Okpeki (2011), two oguru female ensemble leaders Amukeye Okodibe and Titi Ovren confirmed that their ensembles comprise only female members, but include male drummers; the reason has been that in okpe culture women are not allowed to beat drums (235).

It is worthy of note to state that the *omu* identifies the women at such spots as *mmarigos*. This implies that even younger boys who are yet to become *adukwu* (initiates) can gain protection by running into the *omu* enclosed area. Any woman who fails to get into the *omu* enclosed area stands a great risk and damage if peradventure she is met by the spirit. Although younger and daring girls may join in the company of the *mmarigo's* every woman in the *omu* enclosed spot or shade (must) cover her hair.

Initiation Into The *Nmonwu* Cult Or Society

Before one becomes an *adukwu* (initiate), he must be of age, although there have been slight changes to that effect. But, any man who wishes to belong must be one who can fend for himself and perhaps his family. By implication, if a boy can fend for himself at/from the age of 17 years and above he is eligible to be initiated. The initiation is done at the *Ekwuru* (abode of the spirits) by night. The person who initiates one into the *nmonwu* fraternity is called "Ota-ala".

Conclusion

Women cannot make *nmonwu* that is, they cannot be properly initiated into the *nmonwu* secret cult as their male counterparts. They cannot be allowed to play nor touch any of the paraphernalia used in the *nmonwu* music-making as doing so would be teemed desecration and attracts grave punishments. They may behold the bag and not is inside the bag. There are abound expressions that have made that school of thought obvious. They include:

- *Okeke-nwanyi di nti njo*, meaning where the woman assumes the rights of a man is unheard of and unseemly
- *Agwo emeghi ihe ojiri buru agwo*, meaning if the snake never reacts the tendency of using it as a rope to tie firewood will be imminent
- *Nwanyi ama ife di n'ime akpa*, the secret of the spirits cannot be left out of the bag
- *Nmonwu di nso achoro nwanyi n'ahu nso*, because of women's menstrual nature their inclusion would desecrate then *monwu*.

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