

CHAPTER 3

PROFESSOR AGATHA ONWUEKWE AND THE QUEST FOR AN AUTHENTIC AFRICAN IDENTITY

Akioya, Innocent Iyabosa (PhD)

Abstract

African history records a time when the Western Powers colonized the continent. This paper disparages that period and the effort by the colonialists to obliterate the African identity, especially her cultural practices. It then takes a swipe at the activities of the early African musically literate and Western-educated precursors. Thereafter, it takes us through a maze of efforts by African activists, musicians and musicologists in their quests to indigenize their musical output: a move which is established was spurred by the activities of the colonialists. It gingerly examines Professor Agatha Ijeoma Onwuekwe's exploits in this direction. The paper notes her conviction that this could be achieved through the sourcing of African music idioms. It asserted that this well-known teacher of music composition focused her attention on the need to develop a style of composition that would be uniquely African. This writer based his work on a personal interaction with the Professor and cited one of her works entitled 'Akwankwa' in support of this assertion. While highlighting the fact that Professor Onwuekwe is a woman of many parts, it examines the process she engaged in to achieve her point. The paper identified with the position of the Professor that one way forward for the African composer is to delve into his roots for enduring inspiration. The method which may be considered ethno-musical has shown the capacity for showcasing the rich and varied African musical heritage to the world. Information from personal interaction, the internet and journals make up the content of this paper.

Keywords: Indigenous, African, Akwankwa, and heritage.

Introduction

The colonizers of West Africa had a mission to subjugate the tradition of the people they met on the ground. They include the Portuguese, the British and the French. They came with their religion, commerce, education, politics and culture. While the French had the policy of

Assimilation, the British had that of Indirect Rule. In all these, everything African especially the mode of dressing and that of worship was discouraged and described in the worst terms. Even the local gin produced by the people for gingering occasions was described as illicit. The indigenous music of the people was not spared. The dept and devastating effect of this colonial effrontery was so deep that its effect is felt even in recent times. Not too long ago, a music graduate and musicologist who is a Bini by ethnicity refused to put on the Bini traditional outfit because according to him “it is demonic.” This is a classic case of colonial/religious indoctrination. To this same musicologist, the wearing of beads was taboo. His attitude is a clear indication that the efforts by the colonial occupiers to obliterate and alienate Africans from their own culture achieved a high level of success.

Africans are deeply religious people. This area also manifested the influence of the colonial occupiers as evidenced in the outfit of religious worshippers especially those of the Orthodox Churches. Included in this group are the Priests, Choristers and members of the congregation. The Priest puts on layers of cloth to be 'properly' dressed. We all know that our African environment can sometimes be equated to the oven in terms of heat. For instance, an Orthodox Church chorister will dress from home with Singlet and Shirt and sometimes Coat and when he gets to church puts on the Cassock and the Surplice. All these are in addition to the clothes from home. They got themselves almost roasted just to meet up with the expectations of the colonialists.

The 'Pentecostal' churches have not fared better. Though they were not known for putting on the aforementioned outfit, they indeed went on to put on Suits. In the opinion of this writer, this is not any better. Evidence now shows that some of the mission heads popularly referred to as General Overseers (GO) wear the same outfit as the Bishops of the Orthodox churches.

Let us at this point take brief explanatory notes on the keywords as well as some other words whose understanding is germane to a proper understanding of the content of this paper. Indigenous as used in this paper refers to those things that are part and parcel of the African people and their culture. The setting for this paper is Nigeria, a geographical reference to a people living in a land mass situated and known as a part of the African continent. According to nationsonline.org, Africa is the second-largest continent in the world in both area and population. It is an almost entirely isolated landmass with only a small land bridge in the northeast, connecting the African Mainland with Western Asia.

Music as a concept has taken on an exciting connotation in recent times in Nigeria. This development is a result of musicologists' effort to input an attitudinal dimension to the activities of music theory and practice. A dimension coloured by the African experience. Music is a product of human activities, behaviours and experiences, Ibekwe (2011) declares that music provides an enabling ground for the transmission of formidable cultural traits. Her assertion makes music a source of authentic African music identity. Considering the extensive discourse of Akpabot (1986), on the significance of music in culture when he affirmed that one method of finding out about the culture of a people is to examine how they conceptualize their music, one may be led to

see music as a capsule encoding the veritable pathway to the authentic cultural practices of a people.

Art music has been described by collinsdictionary.com as music written by a composer rather than passed on by oral tradition while Jennifer (2022) posits that art music should have a rather more complex structure than popular music thereby demanding more attention from the listener. Oral tradition and its mode of transmission referred to here are the hallmarks of folk music.

In the understanding of this writer, the word 'folk' is a friendly word used to fondly refer to a people of amiable disposition. In a way, the word 'folk' also refers to a society of people who have an affinity with each other without the usual complication of imposed sophistication that is prevalent in today's society. In simple words, folks refer to related people in a society whose lives are devoid of obvious pretence. When people say something like 'my folks', the reference is to the great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions, and superstitions from generation to generation (Merriam-webster.com). Part of folk tradition is the folk song.

A folk song has been described as a song originating among the people of a country or area, passed by oral tradition from one singer or generation to the next, often existing in several versions, and marked generally by simple, modal melody and stanza-ic, narrative verse (dictionary.com).

The fact that folk songs are generally products of oral traditions makes them unique. Unique in the sense that as it passes from one narrator to another, the personal idiosyncrasies of each narrator will affect the song. Studies of these folk songs in whatever guise and for whatever reason will assist in their preservation and decelerate the chameleonic nature of the songs. In all these, folk songs are a veritable source of materials for this paper.

Indigenous Music Idioms refer to music idioms that are unique to a people. It can be extracted from the traditional music practices of a people. The desire for an African identity is partly what led to the quest by Nigerian musicologists to seek indigenous music idioms. Efforts in this scintillating musical horizon have succeeded in unveiling a huge unexplored area of possibilities leading to the development and expansion of World music knowledge. Nketia (1964) gave a hint of this vast possibility when he stated that there are as many traditional and contemporary idioms as there are linguistic groups which exist as cultural units.

Many African musicologists have fortunately become involved in this effort to explore African musical practices for possible indigenous musical idioms. Reference can readily be made to concepts like African Pianism by Akin Euba and the importance attached to the tonal qualities of African languages while composing African lyrics.

Resistance

The African proverb says 'when one stays long in the dark, one begins to see.' The euphoria of Western education and philosophies soon began to wane and some Africans began to question the rationale behind the new-look African identity. This developing awareness led to resistance

against this move at obliterating everything cultural to the Africans. Concerning this awareness, Nketia (2016) quoted Eric von Hornbostel (1903) as saying:

The danger is great that the rapid dissemination of European culture will destroy the remaining traces of ethnic singing and saying. We must save whatever can be saved before the airship is added to the automobile and the electric express train, and before we hear 'tararabumdieh' in all of Africa, and in the South Seas, that quaint song about little Kohn.

As at the time, Eric expressed these fears, they were genuine. However, the resistance grew and evidence of such resistance could be found for example in the movement known as Negritude. According to Britannica.com, this was a literary movement of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation.

One prominent exponent of this movement was Leopold Sedar Senghor. According to African Journal Online, in his search for African heritage and identity, he wrote that “Negritude contained in its vision a new African personality, African world-view, and a path to an authentic black existence

Musicianship

The resultant issue of this unfortunate historical incident is that Art music composition in our Nigerian environment became coloured by our colonial experience and musical training. Even the notation and performance of our traditional musical practices got affected by this experience. The history of music in Nigeria is replete with Nigerians composing art music in a style that reflects Western influence. The names were given to such compositions and the style all betray Western influence. Examples of some Nigerian music practitioners and their music that exemplified this influence are culled from African Journals Online as follows:

Fela Sowande whose full name is Chief Olufela Obafunmilayo “Fela” Sowande MBE (1905 - 1987). He was a Nigerian *musician* and composer. Considered the father of modern Nigerian art music, Sowande is perhaps the most internationally known African composer of works in the European “classical” idiom. Some of his selected works are:-

1945 – Ka Mura, Chappell, London; 1952 – Pastourelle (for organ), Chappell, London;

1955 – Jesu Olugbala, C. L.; Four Sketches for full orchestra, 1953; African Suite for string orchestra, 1955; C. L., Folk Symphony for full orchestra, 1960. Olatunji Akin Euba (1935 - 2020) was a Nigerian composer, musicologist, and pianist. His works include 1956 – Introduction and Allegro, orchestra; 1963 – *Five Pieces for English Horn and Piano* for Derek Bell; 1970 – *Ice Cubes*, string orchestra.

In terms of instrumentation, Akin Euba came up with what is today known as 'African Pianism', a style of piano music which derives its characteristic idiom from the procedures of African percussion music as exemplified in bell patterns, drumming, xylophone and *Mbira* music. In his contribution, Fela Anikulapo Kuti also known as Abami Eda, a Nigerian musician, bandleader, composer, political activist and Pan-Africanist pioneered Afrobeat. This is a music genre that combines West African music with American funk and jazz.

Church Music Rendition

To date, some of the most revered music rendered in churches is classical music from the Western Hemisphere. The most popular and anthem-ic one is George Frederick Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus'. Hymns formed the bulk of worship songs until recently. Instruments of music in worship centres were for a long time and are still majorly Western-oriented. Only recently were local instruments allowed in some churches. What is trendy in both songs and instrumentation is a hybrid of Western and African materials.

More efforts aimed at correcting some of this rape of identity have been ongoing for some time. These efforts which are in the public domain are worthy of mention. In the area of names, certain national figures like the first ceremonial President of Nigeria Dr Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe later dropped the English name and retained only the African names. When he died, he was acknowledged only as Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. The same goes for Chief Jeremiah Obafemi Awolowo who also later dropped the name, Jeremiah. Even the present governor of Anambra State in Nigeria while he was the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, dropped the name Charles and stuck only to the name Chukwuemeka Soludo. In the field of music, an icon like Fela Ransome-Kuti dropped the Ransome and replaced it with 'Anikulapo', an indigenous Yoruba name. In his musical practice, he made the effort of combining the Western idiom of Jazz with African idioms to create what he called Afrobeat music. Fela as he was popularly called combined Western instruments especially the Saxophone with African musical instruments for his performances. In line with these efforts comes the quest by musicologists like Professor Ijeoma Agatha Onwuekwe to source indigenous African idioms as a pedestal for composing music.

Professor Onwuekwe's quest for indigenously generated music idioms is akin to the quest by Kunta Kinte for his real identity in the famous 'ROOTS', an odyssey by Alex Haley. In the work, Kunta Kinte refused to have his mind and name colonized. He insisted that his name is Kunta Kinte, in the process rejecting the name given to him by his adopters. His insistence later led to an effort to trace his original birthplace.

The music Professor's approach to Africanizing music composition entails the researcher getting involved in the cultural activities of the people to extract the needed information. This approach also helps to preserve the heritage of the people as the legacy bequeathed by the forebears of a particular generation.

Africa has a rich cultural heritage and Nigeria is part of this. The map by google.com and collaborated by nations encyclopedia.com shows that Nigeria is bordered in the west by Benin Republic and in the east by Cameroon. Situated in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria has many natural landmarks and wildlife reserves. Abuja is the capital city. With a population of 218,339,758 (based on Worldometer.info elaboration of the latest United Nations data), several States at 36 including Abuja and a land mass of 910,770 km square, the music Professor amid this rich cultural heritage, based her work on Igbo dance music found in the South-East of the country. According to her, *Akwankwa* is an Igbo dance music found in Ekwulobia and other towns in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State (Nigeria).

An Encounter with Professor Agatha Onwuekwe

The writer's first encounter with the music composition guru was when he got admitted to reading the doctoral programme at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. She was listed in his form as a supervisor for the programme. From the first encounter, she cut a picture of a woman of great wisdom, always patiently willing to listen and guard. Her approach to the handling of her assignment was motherly and scholastic. Her body language was able to communicate without so many words that she had so much confidence in the ability of her student to ably handle the stress of the programme. She removed stress from the handbook of the programme. The writer immediately felt humbled and challenged to learn from this woman of untold intellectual sagacity. She never refused a call. Always ready to listen and advise. The writer felt blessed by her motherly disposition. This positive influence of Professor Onwuekwe on her student was evidenced in the desire to please her academically and at least live up to her expectations. This was the easiest thing to do. When face to face with her, she had this searching gaze as if she was trying to gauge the student's mindset with a view of eliciting the best out of it.

This woman with a soft touch to her job happened to be a successful mother, having raised children that any parent would be proud of. These children included both biological children and academic children. This writer learnt that she had tutored many academic caterpillars and bulldozers some of whom are now professors also in music.

Onwuekwe's desire for extracted African idioms can only be achieved through involvement in the folk songs and music of the people. According to her and as contained in Akioya (2019), "Working as an insider gave me the added advantage of penetrating beyond manifest behaviour to the inner patterns of creating." An armchair musicologist may not be able to achieve the same result with the same conviction.

To this writer, the essence of Onwuekwe's interest is the recognition, preservation and expansion of indigenous African music idioms. These idioms exist unlike what the colonialists tried to make people believe that Africans had no culture worth considering. This invigorated drive is also aimed at ensuring that the legacies of our forefathers do not go into oblivion. The issue of traditional musical practices getting distorted and gradually becoming extinct has become a recurrent decimal in contemporary musical discourse and research.

Akpakpan (2011) identified this sad development and acknowledged that it can be traced to the impact of African people's contact with other cultures. In his work entitled "Contemporary Compositional Approach to the Creation of Ekpo Spirit-Manifest Music of the Annang People", he wrote:

Most traditional institutions in Africa are facing extinction due to the people's contact with the outer world and their craving for foreign cultural models. Annang people are on the same bandwagon as their other African counterparts relegating their cultural practices to the extreme of the background. p. xv

He arrived at this conclusion after a study of the musical genre associated with the *Ekpo* Spirit-

Manifest. To reverse this trend, he "explored inherent traits found in *Ekpo* Spirit-Manifest music for a compositional model that will 'among other things' protect Annang culture. The Annang society can be found in Akwa-Ibom State in the South-South region of Nigeria. For effective outcomes, Akpakpan adopted a multidimensional approach including the ethnography of the people.

Working on the trending issue of fast-disappearing indigenous music practices among the people of Africa, Onwuekwe (2019) while discussing *Nkwankwa* as an Igbo dance music found in Ekwulobia and other towns in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State (Nigeria) said, "If this study is not made, it is feared that the music would die and this would mean losing a very valuable musical heritage." This is an opinion shared by this researcher. In her paper entitled "*Nkwankwa*, an Igbo Dance Music as a Resource Material for Indigenous Music Compositions: *Nkwankwa*, for Flute and Traditional Ensemble, Onwuekwe made it clear that the lucidity of her work emanated from her musical experiences, knowledge of composition and participation in musical performances. According to her, "Working as an insider gave me the added advantage of penetrating beyond manifest behaviour to the inner patterns of creating. Appreciating and performing traditional dances gave her an insight into the impact created by various musical instruments on people. Apart from discovering the roles of the various musical instruments, the close study also acquainted her with "the rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and structural patterns for easy recording and notation" of a musical practice that had never been notated in any form (tonic or sol-fa).

In her recommendation, she made this iconic statement as follows: "to enhance indigenous knowledge systems, composers should base their compositions on indigenous music that abound in Nigeria and Africa by extracting the folk music idioms for their original compositions."

Contributions to Knowledge

The goal of establishing an authentic African identity in music is boosted by efforts at sourcing indigenous musical idioms. This has resulted in certain significant contributions to academic knowledge and nudges for African musical activities to begin to develop in a new direction. This new direction will showcase the rich African cultural heritage to the world. This development will also move traditional African music away from its present state to the status of art music.

Conclusion

Professor Agatha Ijeoma Onwuekwe as a foremost professor of music has been highlighted as one of the frontrunners in the quest for indigenous musical idioms to set a novel direction for the expansion of African music compositions. These indigenous African musical idioms promise to be in abundance in the vast and under-explored field of African musical heritage. The efforts made so far by scholars like Onwuekwe should spur musicologists all over the world especially musicologists of African extraction to develop an interest in exploring the huge opportunities presented by the new horizon domiciled in ethnic groups all over the continent.

References

- Akioya, I.I. (2019). *Ovbio'ha zowere: An arrangement of traditional Bini marriage songs for voice and instrumental accompaniment*. An Unpublished PhD Dissertation submitted to the Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Akpakpan, J. J. (2011). *Contemporary compositional approach to the creation of Ekpo Spirit-manifest music of the Annang people*. An unpublished dissertation presented to the Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Akpabot, S.E (1986). *Foundations of Nigerian traditional music*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Front Matter. (1964). *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 16, 34-37.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/835053>
- Haley, A. (1976). *Roots. The saga of an American family*. <https://www.goodreads.com>
- Voight, J. (2022). *Art Music*. <https://www.musicaexpert.org>
- Ibekwe, E. (2011). Music and language: Two dominant factors of cultural identity. *Obodom Journal of Music and Aesthetics (JOMA)*, 1(2),
- Nketia, J.H.K. (1994). *African Pianism: Twelve Pedagogical Pieces*. <https://www.amazon.com>
- Nketia, J.H.K (2016). Dondology Revisited. *Reinstating Traditional Music in Contemporary contexts*. Regnum Africa.
- Omojola, Bode (2001). African pianism as an intercultural compositional framework: A study of the piano works of Akin Euba. *Research in African Literatures*, 32(2), 153-174.
- Onwuekwe, A. (2019). *Nkankwa, an Igbo dance music as a resource material for indigenous music compositions: Nkankwa, for Flute and Traditional Ensemble*
- Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, (2023). *Akin Euba*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akin_Euba.
<https://www.folksonline.com/folksong>
[nationsonline.org/Africa](https://www.nationsonline.org/Africa)
<https://www.books.openedition.org>
<https://www.britannica.com>
<https://www.cambridge.org/traditional>.
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/artmusic>
<https://www.jsto.org>