

AFRICAN WOMEN AS VICTIMS OR HEROINES?: OBIWURUOTU WOMEN'S MUSIC,
GENDER, MARRIAGE, AND CULTURE AMONG THE IGBO IN NIGERIA

by

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African Women as Victims or Heroines?: Obiwuruotu Women's Music, Gender, Marriage, and
Culture among the Igbo in Nigeria

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In this dissertation, I examine the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group, a group of mostly women performers from Ihiagwa, in Imo state, Southeastern Nigeria, in order to understand how Igbo women negotiate changing gender roles through music. Through ethnographic and historical research, I explore the ways in which Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group uses music to create a workable space to resist traditional gender roles expected of them in Igbo society. As Igbo women are traditionally restricted to domestic musical practices, this group's widespread popularity as musicians throughout Igbo land is unprecedented and the group embodies many of the contradictions and conflicts that have been theorized in contemporary post-colonial African feminist discourse. While the group's musical performances both reflect, and challenge the double narrative of the African woman as either victim or heroine, the group is nevertheless still guided by traditional Igbo norms and values. Also unprecedented is the recent inclusion of men into this dance group that would normally be exclusively for married women. I focus on these tensions to understand the intersectionality between music and gender, class, motherhood, patriarchy and solidarity in Igbo culture.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all African Women.

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CONTENTS

Chapter

I. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF WEST AFRICAN WOMEN’S MUSIC.....	1
Prologue.....	1
Obiwuruotu Women’s Music and Gender Roles.....	5
Research on Women and Music in Africa.....	8
Ethnomusicological and African Feminism.....	8
Pan African theories: Afrocentricity.....	13
African Feminism and the Double Narrative.....	14
Motherhood.....	17
Solidarity.....	19
Class.....	20
Patriarchy.....	21
Performativity.....	22
The Igbos in Nigeria: <i>Omenaala na Ala Igbo</i>	24
Introducing the Igbo Woman.....	28
Music and Gender in Igbo Culture.....	34
Methodology.....	39
Entering the Field: A Stranger at Home.....	39
Fieldwork/Research Methods.....	40
Autoethnography.....	42
Relevance of Study.....	43
Organization.....	43

II.	THE VOICE THAT “RAISED” A COMMUNITY: CHIEF MRS ROSE NZURUIKE AND OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP.....	47
	History and Formation of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group.....	48
	Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike.....	54
	Singing Career.....	56
	Coronation.....	58
	The Death of Rose and the Fate of Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group	61
	Obiwuruotu Women as Role Models.....	64
	Solidarity Among Obiwuruotu Women.....	67
	Motherhood and Music Performance.....	68
	Performativity—Gender Roles in Obiwuruotu Women’s Music.....	70
	Patriarchy—Gender Struggles after Chief (Mrs.) Rose.....	72
	Caste and Class—The <i>Osu</i> and <i>Diala</i> Paradigm.....	74
	Community Support.....	75
	Continued Growth/Decline.....	77
	Summary and Conclusion.....	78
III.	THE PROCESS AND STYLES OF THE MUSIC OF OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP: GENDER IMPLICATIONS AND CHANGE...79	
	Obiwuruotu Women’s Music in a Constellation of Arts: Gender and Change	79
	Process of Song Creation and Gender Ideologies.....	80
	Gender and Communal Compositional Practice	81
	Gender Implications in the Adaptation of Folk and Religious Music	83

Gender Interplay: Form and Structure of the Songs of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group.....	84
Accompanying Instrumentation and Gender Roles.....	86
<i>Ogene</i> (Gong).....	87
<i>Ekwe</i> (Slit Drum)	90
<i>Udu</i> (Pot Drum)	91
<i>Oyo/Chaka chaka/Ichaka</i> (Rattle).....	94
<i>Ogwe</i> (Drums)	95
Harmonica.....	98
Rhythmic Motive and Gender Implications	99
Feminizing Singing.....	102
Romanticizing <i>Egwu-Ukwu</i> (Hip-Wiggling) Dance.....	105
Costumes	110
Traditional, Popular and Religious Music.....	114
OWDG as a Traditional Musical Genre.....	115
OWDG as a Popular Musical Genre.....	115
OWDG as a Religious Musical Genre.....	118
Effects of Colonization on Married Women’s Lives as Expressed by OWDG.....	120
Summary and Conclusion.....	125
IV. SONGS OF THE OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP.....	127
Obiwuruotu Women’s Song Functions.....	127
Song Analyses.....	134
Solidarity.....	134

	Motherhood.....	138
	Class.....	140
	Patriarchy and Gender Expectations.....	142
	Summary and Conclusion.....	151
V.	OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP TODAY: A SOLIDARITY TRIP TO AMANDUGBA.....	153
	Solidarity.....	153
	Costumes—Adapting to Change	154
	Victim of Motherhood.....	160
	Gender and Patriarchy.....	162
	Patriarchy in Kolanut Ritual in Igboland.....	164
	Syncretism of Traditional Religion and Christianity.....	169
	Collective Singing as an Act of Solidarity.....	171
	Instrumentation and Women’s Limitation.....	173
	Song Repertoires and Misplaced Social Functions.....	176
	Dancing the “Cacophony” and Gender Identity.....	177
	Conclusion.....	180
VI.	THE FUTURE OF OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP.....	182
	The future of Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group.....	183
	Future Research and Final Thoughts.....	189
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	191

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing the ethnic groups.....	24
Figure 2. Map of Igboland in Nigeria.....	26
Figure 3. Gender categories in Igbo musical performance.....	38
Figure 4. Map of Imo State, Nigeria, showing Ihiagwa town.....	48
Figure 5. Identified pioneer members of ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group.....	52
Figure 6. The basic rhythmic pattern in Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group.....	99
Figure 7. Instrumental Arrangement and their Gender Implications in OWDG's Music Performance.....	101
Figure 8. Lyrics and English translation of "Ochu Nwa Okuko Nwe Ada" (The Unjust Assailant)	120
Figure 9. Lyrics and English translation of "Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N'Uwa Mbu" (The Currency of our Forefathers)	122
Figure 10. Music Transcription of "Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N'Uwa Mbu".....	123
Figure 11. Chart showing functions of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group songs.....	131-133
Figure 12. Music transcription of "Anyi Abiala Ibee Onwu.".....	135
Figure 13. "Anyi Abiala Ibe Onwu" Lyrics with English translation".....	137
Figure 14. "Ezi Nne" Lyrics with English translation".....	138
Figure 15. "Ezuru Ezu Baa" (Is Wealth Common?) Lyrics with English translation.....	141
Figure 16. "Ezuru Ezu Baa" music transcription.....	142
Figure 17. "Nwanyi Ma Obi Di Ya" music transcription.....	143
Figure 18 "Nwanyi Ma Obi Diya" (A Woman After Her Husband's Heart) with English translation.....	144-147
Figure 19. Map of Imo State showing Ihiagwa and Amandugba.....	165
Figure 20. Bia Dinwenu Anyi Jesu with English Translation.....	170

Figure 21. Music Transcription of “Bia Dinwenu Anyi Jesu”	171
Figure 22. Rhythmic pattern played by Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group.....	175

TABLE OF PHOTOS

Photo 1. Women singing and dancing in solidarity.....	20
Photo 2. Mother, children and grandmother.....	29
Photo 3. Igbo bride’s parents “handing” their daughter over to the groom.....	32
Photo 4. Nne egwu in action.....	36
Photo 5. Instrumental arrangement of women's music.....	37
Photo 6. Me (Ruth Opara) and OWDG during my research, Summer 2015.....	40
Photo 7. Pioneer members of OWDG.....	53
Photo 8. Rose in the late 1970’s after she returned to Ihiagwa.....	55
Photo 9. Rose still singing in her 60s.....	60
Photo 10. Rose Nzuruike’s funeral program cover.....	63
Photo 11. Me (Ruth Opara) and the male members of OWDG.....	71
Photo 12. Oke <i>Ogene</i> (Male Gongs).....	88
Photo 13. Nne na oke <i>Ogene</i> (Female and Male gong).....	89
Photo 14. <i>Ekwe</i> (Slit Drum).....	91
Photo 15. OWDG ready to play the metal pot drum.....	92
Photo 16. Clay and metal pot drums.....	94
Photo 17. OWDG women playing the oyo.....	95
Photo 18. A set of <i>ogwe</i> (Drums).....	96
Photo 19. A male member of OWDG playing the <i>ogwe</i>	97
Photo 20. The president accompanying OWDG with the harmonica.....	98
Photo 21. Instrumental arrangement of the Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group.....	100
Photo 22. OWDG Women doing choreographed <i>egwu-ukwu</i> dance.....	106

Photo 23. OWDG dancing with the audience.....	107
Photo 24. <i>Egwu-ukwu</i> dance by OWDG.....	109
Photo 25. <i>Kirikiri star</i> (Small stars costume).....	111
Photo 26. <i>Mkpuruoka</i> (Corn seeds costume).....	111
Figure 27. Horse Costume.....	112
Photo 28. Members of OWDG in one of their costumes.....	113
Photo 29. Album cover featuring a younger Mrs. Rose Nzuruike.....	117
Photo 30. Album cover featuring Mrs. Rose Nzuruike at an older age.....	118
Photo 31. <i>Kirikiri star</i> costume.....	155
Photo 32. OWDG in their full <i>kirikiri star</i> costume.....	156
Photo 33. President in one of his performance outfits, playing the harmonica at Amandugba...	157
Photo 34. A male member in his daily clothing, playing the drum at Amandugba.....	158
Photo 35. Another male member playing the Slit drum and the Gong at Amandugba.....	159
Photo 36. Instruments and speakers tied onto a bus that conveyed OWDG to Amandugba.....	163
Photo 37. A section of the crowd gathered to appreciate the performers.....	167
Photo 38. Instrumental arrangement during the performance at Amandugba.....	174
Photo 39. OWDG dancing <i>egwu-ukwu</i>	177
Photo 40. A young man doing the <i>egwu-ukwu</i> dance.....	179

Chapter I

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF WEST AFRICAN WOMEN'S MUSIC

Prologue

The sound of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group OWDG and the "ringing voice"¹ of Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike filled the air in the cities and villages in Imo State, Nigeria especially in Owerri, the capital city, in the 1980s. This was the case in my home town, Amakohia Uratta in Owerri North Local Government Area, where I spent most of my childhood. Amakohia is about three miles from the capital city. OWDG was one of the people's favorite kinds of music in the 1980s in the area. The audio turntable record and cassette recording of the music was played at home, on the streets especially among audio cassette hawkers and on the radio.

The lyrics of the music suited civil servants, private business owners and laborers who after preparing for work every morning, walked to the road to wait for buses and taxis that conveyed them to work. These were mostly men who left their houses every morning in search of daily labor. As a girl, I saw men most of them either moving to the rhythm or joined in singing the Obiwuruotu Women's music whenever they heard the music playing during their busy morning schedules.

I also saw women, who were mostly housewives nodding their heads, moving to the rhythm or singing along the Obiwuruotu Women's music while doing the chores. Their chores primarily include helping their husbands prepare for work; giving baths and dressing their children up for school; and especially cooking breakfast and packing lunch for husbands and

¹ Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike's singing voice was described as "a ringing voice" amongst many Imo State indigenes and visitors who heard her singing on the radio, in the 1980s.

children. A few of them who were civil servants and teachers, as well as those who owned private businesses like beauty salons and tailoring shops came in contact with this music in the same way the men did. They also played it in their shops to attract admirers and customers. In the evenings and weekends, families enjoyed the music together while eating or during other forms of social gathering.

As a child, my siblings and I neither decided what played on the cassette player, nor when the radio was turned on or off. Most children and the youth, especially those who were still living with their parents had similar experience as ours. We enjoyed the music whenever it was on. Most of us liked it and we especially liked how our parents responded to the music. This was my first contact with OWDG's music.

I traveled to my maternal home—Okwu Uratta,² to complete my primary education when I was eight years old.³ There I realized the Obiwuruotu Women's music had a unique effect on villagers whose job were mostly farming at the time. Men and women who walked briskly to their farms most mornings responded to this music in different ways. On Saturdays, children joined their parents to farm because they were out of school and this added additional fervor to the ways their parents responded to Obiwuruotu Women's music. My grandmother had a little, but loud colorful cassette player that other villagers admired. She played this music most mornings before she went to the market where she traded. While I was always busy sweeping the

² Okwu Uratta is also in Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo State; about seven miles from my home town. It used to be a village but in recent times, is growing into a city.

³ My mother is an only child. After my grandfather died a few days before the birth of my immediate younger brother, my siblings and I took turns in staying with my grandmother in the village to ensure she was not lonely. On the one hand, my parents made sure one of us was there at all times to help her with chores while doing her business. At the time, she was a successful business woman. On the other hand, she helped my parents pay the school fees for any of my siblings that lived with her, like she did for me.

compound, men and women who walked to farms across my grandmother's compound occasionally stopped to acknowledge Obiwuruotu Women's music. Sometimes villagers waved at me especially⁴ and then, my grandmother; others gave us "thumbs up" for playing the music. When more than one man met in front of my grandmother's compound when this music was on, they shook hands and nodded in agreement to the music while hailing and thanking my grandmother for making their day with the music. The women sometimes stopped for a minute or two and danced the *egwu ukwu* (hip wiggling) that characterizes Obiwuruotu Women's dance. Children clapped for their mothers during the dance and mostly watched their fathers in excitement. The youth mostly lived in the cities where they were either going to school, learning a trade or a handiwork as well as working. Some of them visited home during the weekends and most came home during the Christmas holidays, and they especially came home in droves for *Onwa Oru Uratta* festival, where they enjoyed this music.⁵ During the evenings of these holidays, people drink a lot of palm wine and eat *ugba*⁶ with family, where mostly one will hear different sounds of Obiwuruotu Women's music in the background, sometimes very loud as people danced to its rhythms. This was my contact with Obiwuruotu Women's music in the

⁴ They wave at me because I am *nwa-nwa*, a special child in Igbo culture. *Nwa-nwa* literally means child's child. This means I am their child's child. In Igbo culture children are more appreciated in their maternal homes. It is also a tradition that if children are maltreated in their fatherland, they run to their motherland where they will always be well taken care of.

⁵ *Onwa Oru Uratta* is a thanksgiving festival that marks the end of the harvest season. Uratta indigenes, which include Okwu Uratta my maternal home, at this time congratulate themselves after working hard through the planting year. There is usually a lot of eating and drinking as well as music while guests are lavishly entertained. The most fascinating part is that Uratta first-born daughters are presented to *Obu Ozuzu*—a tree at the center of the market where it is celebrated.

⁶ *Ugba* is fermented Igbo oil bean seeds sliced and prepared with palm oil and any choice of protein—red meat, chicken, fish or shrimp. Sometimes they are combined. It is considered a delicacy in Igbo land and used to entertain visitors.

village, my maternal home. Growing up in both the city and the village offered me the opportunity to experience this music and its effect on listeners in unique ways.

I began to better appreciate and find words to describe this music when I started my musical journey. During my secondary school days, I belonged to church choirs and social choral groups that performed Obiwuruotu Women's music. Being a practitioner caused me to better appreciate their music considering how "difficult" it is to perform as well as how talented one needs to be, to be able to attempt reproducing their performances. When I began studying music education in college in Nigeria, I learned words in my Ethnomusicology and Musicology classes that helped me describe Obiwuruotu Women's music and I began to apply the vocabulary of music analysis.

I came to the United States of America in 2010 for graduate school and discovered more theory and vocabulary that helped illuminate my thought process, especially in analyzing African music. I began to experience Obiwuruotu Women's music in yet other ways that gave me a new perspective. Pan African Studies and Women and Gender Studies offered me theoretical tools that allowed me to see Obiwuruotu Women's music as a window into the Igbo woman's world. My studies in Ethnomusicology and Musicology have inspired me to look at African music, my music, through the lens of an outsider—the etic perspective. Thus, I was able to go into the field with this wealth of experiences and study Obiwuruotu Women's music with both an emic and an etic perspective.

These personal experiences are intended to inform the reader how I found different threads that helped in weaving together my musical analysis. These formative experiences include:

1. Obiwuruotu Women's music being part of my childhood at home;

2. the music being an integral part of people's everyday activities and events at my maternal home where I lived;
3. performing Obiwuruotu Women's music in my secondary school days;
4. my early description of Obiwuruotu Women's music in ethnomusicological terms;
5. being exposed to theoretical and historical tools that inform the analysis of African cultures and
6. being exposed to ethnomusicology and the notion of studying music as both an insider and an outsider.

These experiences that highlight how music functions in Igbo society make up the cultural and socio-political aspects of music. Thus, this dissertation focuses not only on the music but the cultural and socio-political aspects that inform and are a part of Obiwuruotu Women's music.

Obiwuruotu Women's Music and Gender Roles

Arguably, gender roles in Igbo Land, Nigeria have been largely defined by men. Some Igbo feminist scholars have argued that Igbo women had a certain degree of control over their roles in pre-colonial Igbo and were only made victims as a result of colonization, as opposed to some early Western feminist scholars who saw Igbo women already as victims in their pre-colonial, traditional roles. On the one hand, the narratives that pose Igbo women as victims are structured by the notion that many indigenous cultures "oppress" women. While a few African feminist scholars tend to agree, some of them challenge this notion by generally arguing that women do not necessarily see themselves as victims. On the other hand, many African feminist writers, in an effort to ameliorate the effects of victimhood in portraying the image of an African woman, have taken to an extreme position of describing the African woman as a heroine.

Whatever the case may be, Igbo women have been and still are guided by patriarchal norms and values of Igbo society. Having this double narrative in mind, this study shows that the life and role of the Igbo woman is not stagnant, but complex and goes beyond the double narrative of victim and heroine. As Igbo women's musical practices have had little scholarly attention, I use this medium to show how complex the life of the Igbo woman is, and how she adapts to changing situations.

Music is one medium⁷ Igbo women have used to negotiate gender roles. Focusing on Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group (OWDC), a group of mostly married women in Igbo Land, I explore ways in which they use music to create a workable space to resist traditional gender roles expected of them in Igbo society. As Igbo women are traditionally restricted to domestic musical practices, this group's widespread popularity as musicians throughout Igbo land is unprecedented and the group embodies many of the contradictions, complexities and conflicts that have been theorized in contemporary post-colonial African feminist discourse. While the group's musical performances both reflect and challenge the double narrative of the African woman as either victim or heroine, the group is nevertheless still guided by traditional Igbo norms and values. Also unprecedented is the recent inclusion of men into this dance group that would normally be exclusively for married women. I focus on these tensions in exploring how OWDC's music serves as a tool for gender negotiation, and an effort to understand how gender roles are changing in African societies through music.

⁷ Apart from music, Igbo women have negotiated gender roles in their daily activities by resisting traditional gender norms. These activities include domestic duties, economic roles and other various forms of labor. One example is Aba women's riot in 1929, when Igbo women protested against the warrant chiefs of the British colonial government, whom they accused to have restricted women's involvement in government. Other accounts show that Igbo women at this time also protested against tax wages imposed on them by the same government.

This dissertation, therefore, investigates several lines of inquiry:

- Who are these musicians and what are their roles?
- How is their music connected to everyday life in Igbo society?
- What type of knowledge do they produce through their musical performances?
- What aspects of gender roles have remained consistent, what aspects have changed and why?
- How does society perceive these changes?
- What are the gains and challenges of being part of this group?
- What were the social implications when this group was exclusively female and what are the effects of men's involvement in the group?
- How did this group generate such fame in Igbo land and how popular are they in recent times?
- How do they express power through their musical performances?

I utilize Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's history, music practices, songs, dance, costumes, instrumentation and everyday life in answering these questions while divulging how music can be a tool in negotiating gender roles.

In this study of Igbo women's music, I examine how cultural concepts such as gender, motherhood, solidarity, patriarchy and class are interconnected with Igbo married women's musical practices and I analyze Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group music through these lenses. The concepts of gender, motherhood, solidarity, patriarchy and class call for an interdisciplinary approach that is crucial in understanding married women's music in Igbo culture. These approaches stem from Ethnomusicology, Pan African Studies and Contemporary Feminisms in Africa.

Research on Women and Music in Africa

Theoretically, I employ ethnomusicology, Pan African and contemporary/post-colonial feminisms in Africa. Various levels of analyses, which include the musical and cultural aspects that inform musical practices in Africa, allow for interdisciplinary concepts necessary in my analysis of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group. Ethnomusicological theories inform my analysis, as well as contemporary feminisms in Africa and African gender discourse. I also draw on Pan-African theories of mostly African scholars across disciplines who encourage the study of African cultures in their own terms and cultural context, free from Western preconceived notions and modes of understanding. (Oyewúmi 2005, xi).

Ethnomusicological and African Feminism

In conjunction with music analysis, I employ historical research; gender and feminist issues, ethnicity and identity issues; postmodern, postcolonial and global issues. These theories aided my nuanced interpretation of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's music performances.

Ethnomusicological inquiries are grounded in theories that cut across disciplines, especially in the social sciences and humanities. "Theories underlie ethnomusicology inquiry and even implicit theories have a bearing on the analyses that result from fieldwork" (Stone 2008, xii). There are advantages and disadvantages of theoretical approaches in ethnomusicology. On the one hand, theories have at their best, explanatory powers that guide the researcher. They "overlap and interrelate in ways that complicate the best attempts to build tight categories" (ibid.). Thus, a cluster of theories aided me in my analysis. On the other hand, theories can limit

the researchers as theories might require strict rules in their application. Following an ideology that originates from a culture and trying to apply them on another culture can be problematic (ibid.). It is important for a researcher to be part of a culture as it helps to understand subtle differences between distinct cultures. Thus, I apply my emic and etic perspectives to address this problem.

Alan Merriam describes the divisions in ethnomusicology, of which the researcher must consider in investigating the music of a people. He states that ethnomusicology has two distinct parts— the musicological and the ethnological aspects. The musicological aspect addresses the “structure of music as sound and as a system in itself,” while the ethnological part “treats music as a functioning part of human culture and as an integral part of a wider whole” (Merriam 1964, 3). Both aspects are necessary for the study of music in and as culture. Thus, in music analysis, “ethnomusicology, then, makes its unique contribution in welding together aspects of social sciences and aspects of the humanities in such a way that each compliments the other and leads to a fuller understanding of both” (ibid. 7). Kwabena J. H. Nketia also explains African musicology focus.

In his article, “Perspectives on African Musicology.” in *Africa and the West: The Legacies of Empire*, Nketia while acknowledging different background, interest and perspectives, encourages

1. “Critical and analytical studies that examine or exemplify musicological issues in the light of field data;
2. Studies that take into account the history, archeology, and ethnology of the geocultural region of Africa or specific area in which field work is undertaken

3. Development studied that respond to the intellectual, sociocultural, or political environment in which music is cultivated and practiced; and
4. the dissemination of information and materials on African music both within and outside Africa—that is, wherever there is a readership and a public for live performances or recorded African Music.” (Nketia 1985, 216).

Feminist ethnomusicology further explains how musical sound is juxtaposed with gender discourse.

Ellen Koskoff explores how gender is a social construct that informs all aspects of human behavior including music. Thus, music is not just interpreted as social behavior but one that enacts and performs gender relations. It exposes ideologies and systems of power underlying gendered musical behaviors. Gender discourse in music reveals implicit and explicit gender codes embedded in music performances. While exposing how musical performances in societies reflect intergender relations, it uncovers societal gender ideologies and has its effect in gendered music making (Koskoff 2014, 27-32). While gender construct seems to exist in most societies, it functions in distinct ways, thus Afrocentrism is necessary in African gender discourse.

Many ethnomusicology scholars have addressed gender issues in African musical practices and their work informs my research. In the 1980s, some scholarly works were published on women and girl's songs traditions by early ethnomusicologists. These publications addressed the issues of birth, initiation, and fertility and other issues concerning African women in specific cultures. Ethnomusicologist Lester Monts, explores the conditions that caused imbalance in the roles of musicians along gender lines among the Vai in Liberia. He argues that the advent of Islam, the decline of the immense secret society, and the mass rural to urban migration after 1930s where mostly men sought labor, allowing women to adopt some of the

abandoned musical roles. He does this by comparing the roles of women in the past with their present-day roles in musical practices. This reveals the factors affecting continuity and change in women's musical participation. After exploring the Vai women's song types, the status and training, performance of instrumental music, performance in vocal ensembles and the role of women in ritual performance he concludes that women out of necessity have taken over musical roles from which they were once excluded. Therefore, "processes of musical adaptation reflect all other adaptive strategies in the wider realm of society (Monts 1989, 220-233)." My research is similar to this research as they both account for continuity and change as well as adaptation in gender roles and women's involvement in African traditional musical practices.

In her article, Cynthia E Schmidt explores women's roles in labor and in the Sande Secret Society, as well as musical ensemble roles and musicianship through their musical texts. She argues that "women pool their resources to achieve a common end in work and in song." While exploring work songs of the women in Kpelle, Liberia, she concludes that, the feminization of agriculture seems to correlate with feminization of music as women who use songs during work are becoming the preservers of cultural identity that is expressed through music performance. For example, in the *sande* secret society, which is based on age and sex, young girls are taught about womanhood and cultural values. It exposes solidarity among women, as they support each other to achieve personal goals. (Schmidt 1989, 237-263). Schmidt's research informed mine as they both account for gender roles in musical practices and solidarity. My research and hers also utilize simultaneously musical texts in analysis.

The study of African women's music has increased in recent times. In her book, Mack explores the singers and their world, which includes the life of the women singers, their songs, poems and the Islamic tradition, the metaphors and oral and written traditions and the social

functions of Hausa women's creativity. This book exposes "the extent of women's ability to negotiate their social roles within the context of Hausa tradition and Islamic tenets, which stipulates that men provide for the family while women bear and raise children as Muslims and oversee the domestic domain (Mack 2004, 5-6)". Mack's research informs mine as they both address how the women's musical practices are an integral part of their lives and traditions.

Kwasi Ampene's monograph, lays emphasis on the creative process, compositional conventions, forms and styles, social functions and contemporary issues in the Ghanaian context. He does this by presenting music as central to the study of culture, rather than music and culture as a whole. This monograph adds to the growing literature on women's musical practices as it reveals women's participation in society through music and how music influences their lives. Ampene's research, although lays emphasis on sound, addresses the creative process, forms, and styles as I explored in my research (Ampene 2005).

James Burns' monograph explores how music is used as social commentary as well as how dance drumming continues to be culturally and artistically relevant among Ewe women living in 21st-century Ghana. He does this by looking at a period of 10 years, addressing the history, emergence and significance of the group within its social and cultural context (Burns 2008, 1). Social commentary, as also used by Burns is a major part of my analysis. My research reveals how music is a tool for social commentary in Igbo society.

Marie-Agatha Ozah's article states that *Egwu Amala* is the main dance of the Ogbaru people as it vivifies and mirrors their traditions. The fascinating aspect of this musical practice is that it is used to elaborate the attributes and styles of womanhood. Like my research, this study reveals that this music was initially only for women but has in recent times opened up to males. Although men have joined this group to do women's dance, they still execute a man's role. This

research and mine, therefore, accounts for change in gender roles in African musical practices (Ozah 2010).

Stufflebeam Blankeship, in her dissertation, looked into the music performances of Dagbamba women, including their lives and cultural contexts in West Africa. Investigating the songs and lives of these women, she exposes how women actively participate in culture and tradition through music, the meaning of music in Dagbamba culture and how knowledge is transmitted through music. Her research reveals how music and dance function to negotiate traditional and contemporary values. She especially stressed the need to pay attention to individual women's voices. (Blankeship 2014, iii) Just like Blankeship's research I modeled my research to incorporate the lives and cultures that encompass African musical practices. My analysis is grounded in individual women's voices.

Pan African theories: Afrocentricity

Because Africa had been overlooked in the creation of social theory, for many years African philosophers and thinkers could only adopt theories constructed from a Western point of view. These theories "have been produced in relative and sometimes absolute ignorance of the majority of the humankind, i.e., those living in non-Western cultures" (Charkrabarty 1992, 338). In recent decades, a more Afrocentric approach to theory has developed that focuses on examining the state of Africa from an African perspective. It constitutes a new way in research while carrying with it assumptions about the state of the African world in space and in time. Asante states five characteristics of Afrocentrism that are rooted in African cosmology, axiology, epistemology and aesthetics:

- 1) Afrocentrism fosters “intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals and signs.”
- 2) Afrocentrism is committed “to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender and class.”
- 3) By doing so, African scholars are able to put up “a defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music and literature.”
- 4) When Africa is studied in context, it brings about “celebration of centeredness and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans and other people.”
- 5) With Afrocentrism, there is “a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people” (Asante, Mike and Yin 2014, 104-107).

Accordingly, this dissertation is African centered. While adopting universal theories, Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group is analyzed in an Igbo context.

African Feminism and the Double Narrative

African feminist gender discourse is central to my analysis of the OWDG. African postcolonial feminist concepts that inform my work include “motherism,” gender performativity and patriarchy, solidarity, and caste. African women have been depicted in two broad ways—as victims by mostly Western scholars, and as heroines by many African scholars. The misrepresentations by some early Western feminist scholars and the later emergence of African feminist scholars telling their stories triggered counter and contradictory narratives that accommodate African women’s voices in feminist scholarship. Catherine Acholonu argues that

“the representation of the African woman as oppressed, suppressed by a male dominated culture in which she has no rights, no respect and a status subordinate to that of the man, is a dangerous misrepresentation of the true state of affairs, a negation of the diversity and variety of issues surrounding her position and experience in the different cultures in which she finds herself” (Acholonu 1995, 3). While many postcolonial African feminist scholars have argued that the victimization of women is because of male dominance and Africa’s colonization by the West, a few have argued that many African cultures have always oppressed women. The effects of colonization on Igbo women’s gender roles is documented by Amdume: “Whereas indigenous concepts linked to flexible gender constructions in terms of access to power and authority mediated dual-sex divisions, the new Western concepts introduced through colonial conquest carried strong sex and class inequalities supported by rigid gender ideology and constructions; a woman was always female regardless of her social achievement or status” (Amdume 1987, 119).

Some African feminist scholars argue for a more complex view of the African woman than the twofold, seemingly contradictory, double narrative of the victim and the heroine. Ogudipe-Lislie Molaru argues, “All African women have multiple identities, evolving and accreting over time, enmeshed in one individual. Yet African women continue to be looked at and looked for in their coital and conjugal sites which seem to be a preoccupation of many Western analysts and feminism” (Molaru 1994, 251). Amina Mama argues that Western feminism’s frame of reference is completely irrelevant to African women’s interests and concerns (Imam, Amina and Fatou 1997, 72). Ata Aidoo proposes the adoption of a bifocal mode of studying African woman’s identity from inside their specific cultures to reveal women’s status in relation to their men, at the same time as adopting a more outsider perspective than how

Western scholars have viewed African women. She laments, “For years, some of us have been struggling to get the world to look at the African woman properly. Hoping that with some honesty it would be seen in actual fact, vis-a-vis the rest of the world, the position of African woman has not only not been that bad but in some African societies...she had been far better off than the others—and this would include the self-congratulatory West” (Nnaemeka 1998, 47-48). African feminist scholars agree that a woman’s status in African societies is different from that of the West and other cultures, but they disagree on how global feminism would contribute to African women’s struggles. My own research adopts Ata Aidoo’s bifocal mode of etic and emic perspectives in looking at Igbo women’s musical experiences to reveal contradictions that have characterized their experiences from the formative times to the present. I examine the effects of colonization in women’s musical practices to reveal the interplay of the victim and heroine as they affect women’s musical practices.

While Igbo women’s musical practices have received little scholarly attention, I argue that the idea of being a heroine or a victim is clearly evident in their musical practices. On the one hand, women could not be called musicians or music stars until recently when Igbo women emerged in the global market, making and selling traditional and popular music thereby having agency. On the other hand, women had a certain degree of control over the social system through music in pre-colonial Africa before Western colonization abolished and disrupted most traditional cultures in pre-colonial Africa. Although there were restrictive gender roles in music, women at least voiced the dominant ideology that gave them honor in society through music. Women’s music accompanied Igbo people from cradle to grave. Women sang about childbirth and the desire to have children, recreational and educational purposes for children, initiation and marriage, occupation, entertainment, festivals, funerals and addressed social issues through

music. Most of these musical practices and their cultures have become extinct, leaving only sexist and classist Western ideologies (Amadiume 1987, 72-73, 119). Ironically, while women musicians who have attained stardom are still regulated by the confines of traditional social structure, the cultures and musical practices that gave women power to voice societal ideologies have vanished. Zulu Sofola maintains that the African woman “has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional sociopolitical domain.” He describes the African traditional gender construct as follows:

The African perception of gender question is thus more healthy, positive and allows for a wholesome development of human society. Consequently, the woman has always had a vital place in the scheme of things within the African cosmology, the most relevant... being the dual-sex system of socio-political power sharing fully developed by African peoples and based on the following perception of womanhood 1) as the divine equal of man in essence, 2) as a daughter, 3) as a mother, 4) as a wife (Sofola in Oyewúmi 2005, 52-54).

Motherhood

In a quest to find an alternative feminism that would address specific cultural needs, African feminist scholars have suggested terms and ways that they argue would best address issues about the African woman. Acholonu argues that for global feminism to be inclusive, especially as it relates to the African woman, it must incorporate the matrix of motherhood, which is central to the African worldview. She posits Africa as the mother continent of humanity, with motherhood central to its arts, literature, traditional culture, psychology, oral traditions and philosophy. “Africa’s alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture.” She further explains, “Motherism is a multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavor” (Acholonu 1995, 110-111). By cooperating with nature, motherists become

humanists. The mother fulfills the functions of healing; protection of the family, children, and society at large, while seeing the whole world as her constituency. While motherists fight wars like malnutrition, political and economic exploitation, violence, child abuse, and inequality; they share love, tolerance and services; they embrace the whole gamut of the human struggle (ibid. 110-111). The centrality of motherhood is deep-rooted in Igbo culture and this is apparent in musical practices. Women in Igbo society depend on their children for security later in life as there are no functioning retirement benefits and there are no retirement homes in Igbo land. Children are expected to take care of their mothers during old age, but a woman who does not have a child is left to depend on relatives or other people's children for food and care in old age. Thus, Igbo women sing about how children are better than wealth and how childlessness might be a major problem that affects married women's existence in Igbo society. One traditional song is loosely translated thus:

*God give me children and wealth
Instead of wealth give me only children
Because I know when my children grow my wealth grows.*

Although replacing feminism with Acholonu's concept of motherism is problematic in that the focus on child bearing alienates women without children, motherist theory is a productive tool for analyzing music of the OWDG. Since motherhood is such an integral part of Igbo culture, my study of Igbo married women in *Ndom* Ihiagwa and the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group examines how motherhood affects musical performances and how gender roles are played out in musical practices.

Solidarity

Igbo women, especially the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group, gather primarily because of their status as married women, and bell hooks' concept of solidarity is crucial in understanding the music of Igbo women. While music performance is part of what they do, women's groups are not initially formed to perform music. Music becomes an integral part only when a community has talented musicians who are recognized in other communities. In her explanation of concept of solidarity as it relates to women, hooks insists that women must learn the true meaning of sisterhood and learn to live and work in solidarity in opposition to classism, sexism and other prejudices that arguably, characterized early feminism. She argues that solidarity enriches women and aids them in their struggle, especially when set on specific cultural terms. She further states that the bond between women must not be based on the ideology that women are victims but on the basis of shared strength and resources (hooks 1984, 44-46). In Igbo society, there are inequalities and women engage in activities that oppress other women. Some examples that affect married women's musical performances are mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, childlessness and the *osu* (outcast) caste system. Since the women bond on the basis of their marital status and motherhood, I utilize hooks' solidarity theory in understanding how their strengths and weaknesses affect their musical practice.



Photo 1. Women singing and dancing in solidarity

Class

Being a woman in Igbo society already places an individual in a certain gendered position; being a woman and an *osu* (outcast) further complicates women's issues as explained in chapter two. Some of the ways *osu* women have been effected in Igbo society exclusion or separation, hierarchy and interdependence. *Osu* is an imposed outcast identity by which Igbo people discriminate against each other. It could be attributed to individuals who were sacrificed to the gods, cult slaves, or untouchables, and it is considered an abominable act for a "freeborn" to marry an *osu* (Dike 2002, 1). Although no one is being sacrificed to the gods today,

generations of *osu* continue to suffer from social alienation. Since Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group includes outcasts, I examine how this socially imposed identity affects musical practices.

Patriarchy

One astonishing thing about Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group is that men are now part of a group that is supposed to be made up exclusively of women. Although hooks argues that men who understand their own privilege and actively use their power to fight for women are comrades and should not be considered enemies (hooks 1984, 82), it is crucial to examine the reason why men are now part of what had been an exclusively women's group to understand what their roles are—whether they are actually comrades or patriarchal overseers. Although some African feminist scholars argue that women had agency, especially in pre-colonial times, Igbo society is patriarchal. Some of the ways patriarchy has been theorized that are relevant in the analysis of Igbo women's music are “the system of patrilineal descent, whereby ancestry is traced through the male line and women assume first their father's then their husband's names, and to the system of patrimonial descent... where property and privilege pass from father to son... and not to a daughter” (Crossley 2005, 203). As this strongly affects the lives of Igbo women, the OWDG sing about this. Another way patriarchy affects women is how it interplays with motherhood. Most Igbo married men express dissatisfaction with wives who have not “given them” male children to maintain patrilineal lineage and this can have an effect on musical participation and performance by women. Even “star” musicians who have no male child are made to feel “incomplete” and their performance is affected.

Performativity

As Judith Butler explains, gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts; it is performed and for it to exist, it must be continuously repeated (Butler 1988, 519-531, 521). African music has been gendered since pre-colonial times, with different roles expected of men and women belonging to the same musical group. Although gender roles are still evolving, there are still expectations and limitations according to one's gender. Men and women are still considered to perform certain roles better—men are still considered better drummers and women considered to be the best in some dances, especially those involving *Egwu Ukwu* (hip-wiggling).

Amdume in contrast, argues that gender does not necessarily affect social roles and that “a flexible gender system mediated the dual-sex organization” in pre-colonial Igbo society, as opposed to the West where there are specific gender roles (Amdume 1987, 28). While this argument might be valid, it is important to note that in some African cultures like the BaAka “pigmies,”⁸ men do not necessarily want to be associated with dance as some dances function as women's commentary on sexual relationships, such as those involving humorous slants that mock men's genitals (Kisliuk 2000, 33).

Despite Amadiume's claim that adjectives associated with strength, wealth, and power are attributed to both genders, it is important to note that most women who attain high status are equated with men and not always seen as strong women on their own. This is especially true in Igbo music, as women who are especially good drummers are believed to be playing like men, and thereby attain higher status in society. Gender affects Igbo women's music practices in several ways. The fact that some musical genres are called women's music suggests that gender

⁸ The BaAka Pigmies are an ethnic group that lives in the Southern rain forests of Cameroon, northern republic of Congo, northern Gabon and southwestern Central African Republic. They do not wish to be called pigmies anymore because the term is derogatory.

roles affect music performances in general. However, gender roles have changed over time in this musical culture and many of those changes have been accepted by society. That is to say that there are no rigid rules guiding gender constructs as normative. Thus, performative theory is crucial in this study to support the argument that gender is indeed a social construct that can be adopted, adjusted and changed.

This dissertation is grounded in a feminist ethnomusicology of African society. Through the integration of musicological, anthropological, feminist and Pan Africanist discourses in analyzing Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's music, this unique approach balances these issues and illuminates how Igbo women negotiate changing gender roles through music.

The Igbos in Nigeria: *Omenaala na Ala Igbo* (The Igbo Land and Culture)

The term Igbo refers to a geographic region (*Ala Igbo*), a culture (*Omenaala Igbo*), and a language (*Asusu Igbo*). Igboland is the indigenous home of the Igbo people and it is situated in Southeastern Nigeria. It is one of the largest ethnic groups among the hundreds in Nigeria.

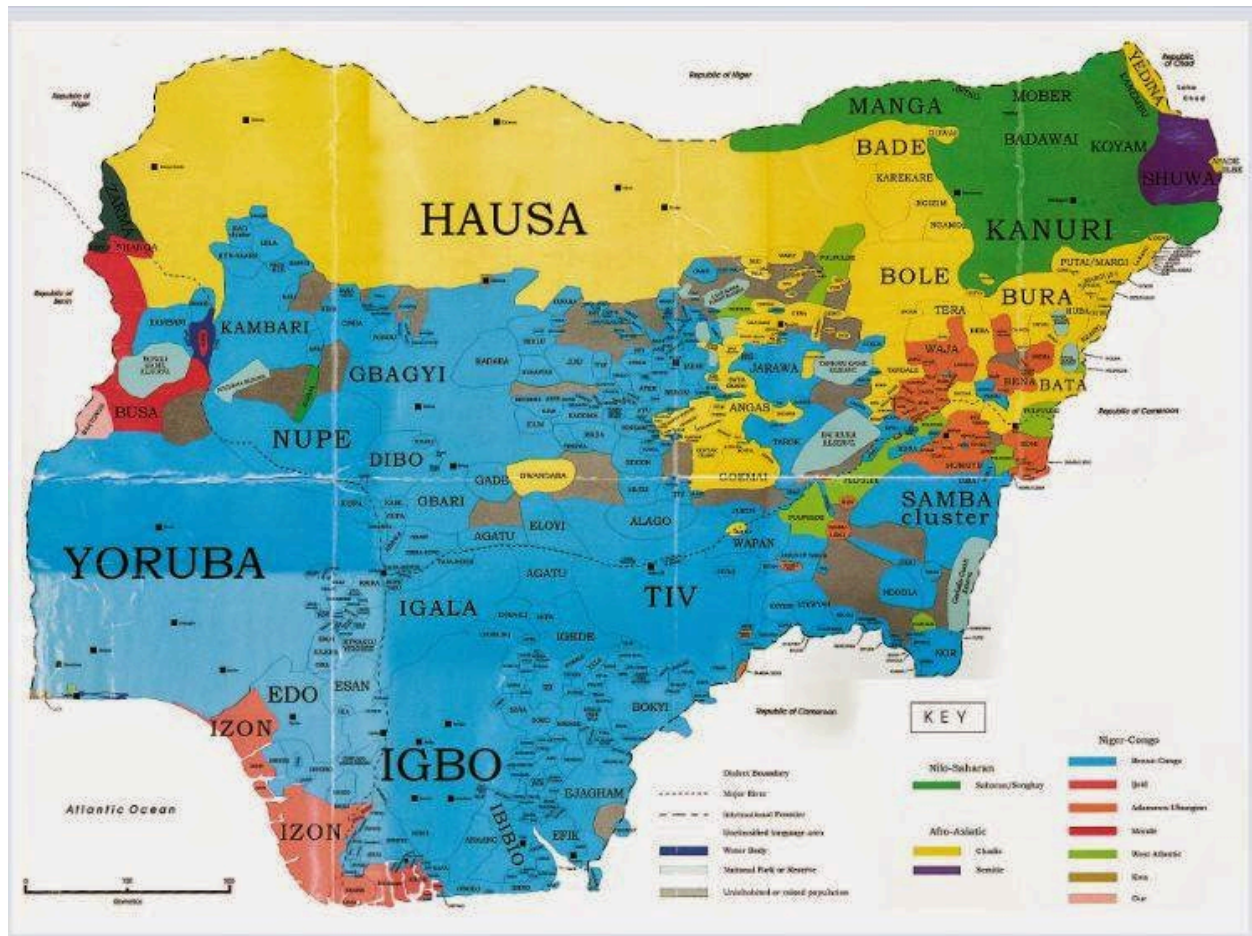


Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing the ethnic groups.⁹

Politically the Igbos are divided into local governments, sub-regions, zones and states. The traditional rulers govern the cultural subgroups while the governors govern the political

⁹ <https://biafrandotorg.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/nigeria-map8.jpg>

subdivisions. This dual system of government that exists simultaneously is due to the effect of colonization—the Igbos, just like many ethnic groups in Africa, were forced to adopt the British system of government. Igbos and their neighboring ethnic groups were amalgamated by the British colonial masters under an “umbrella” called The Republic of Nigeria in 1914. The effects of colonization necessitate a dual analysis of Igbo culture, one that considers the precolonial versus colonial Igbo, subsequently the postcolonial and neocolonial, the traditional versus modernity, and the rural versus urban. Analysis of music performances in rural areas pays attention to traditional culture, while music performances in the cities address urban cultures. Analysis of Igbo culture also require the analyses of syncretism, contradictions and conflicts that characterize colonization and contact with the West. This is also the case in music analysis.

The Igbos have a strong sense of identity, one that was especially expressed during the Nigerian Biafran civil war from 1967-1970 when they tried to secede from Nigeria. Even today many Igbos are still trying to secede from Nigeria. Their identity is reflected in their daily cultural activities as Igbos identify with specific towns, villages, clan, groups, gender, and class.

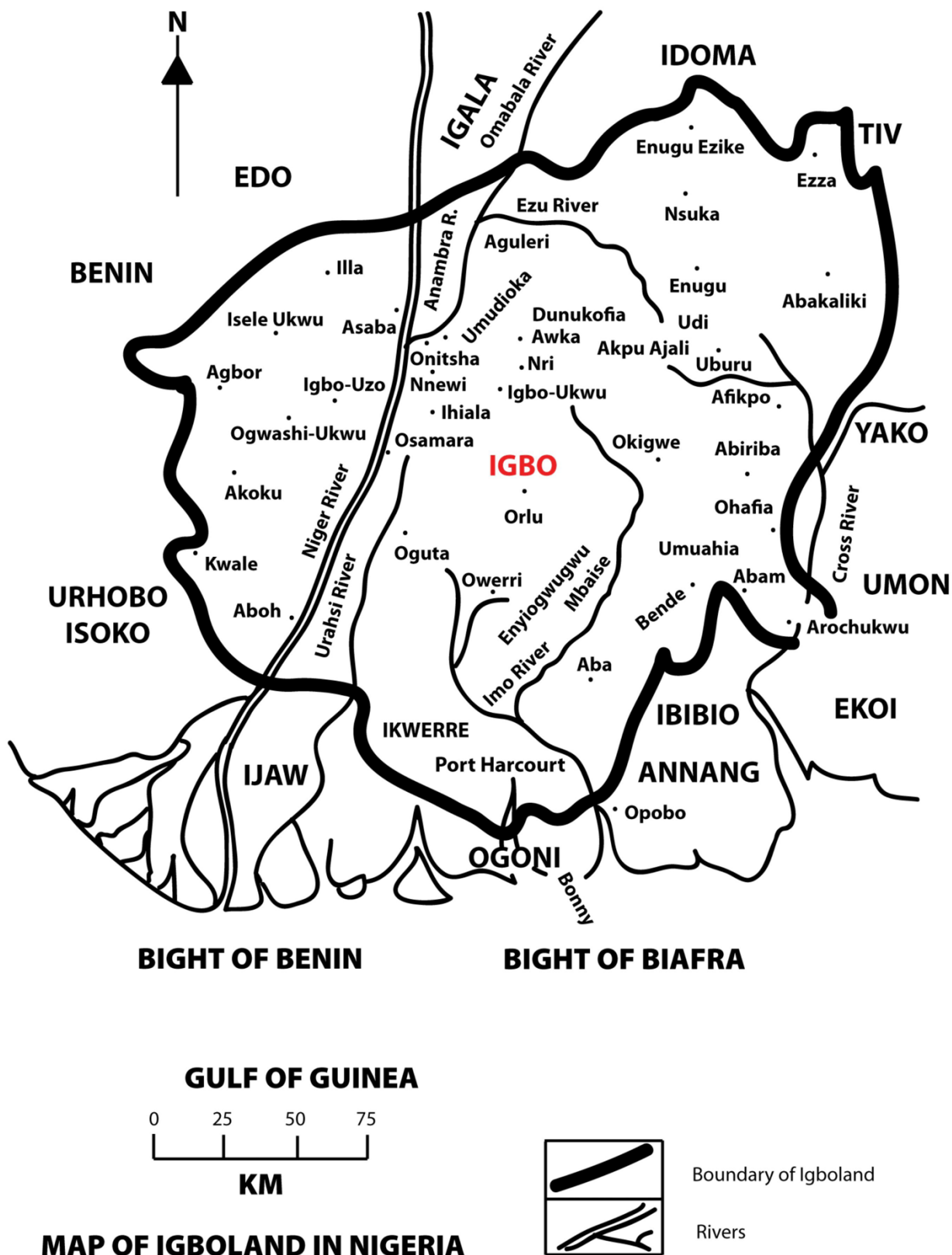


Figure 2. Map of Igboland in Nigeria

The Igbos have diverse cultures especially in religion and arts, and they are passed down from generation to generation, mostly through oral tradition. Their diverse cultures are evident wherever they live —both at home and in the diaspora. Due to slave trade and migration, many Igbos have settled in different places in the world where the Igbo culture has been sustained and renewed. They mostly practice traditional religion and Christianity. This is because while the Muslim jihad succeeded in the Northern part of Nigeria, the Christian missionaries came to the Southeastern and part of the Southwest to promote their religion, in 1800.

Igbo society is patriarchal and gendered, evident in their daily lives and culture—from art to music, attire, title, occupation, religion and other customs. The Igbos practice polygamy and some men today still practice polygamy. In precolonial times, Igbos were mostly farmers and traders with few potters and blacksmiths, but today pursue a diverse range of occupations. The traditional Igbo occupations have always been gendered. Men's work includes blacksmithing, fishing and hunting, and women's work includes weaving and braiding while men and women both are involved in trading. When both genders participate in the same work, distinct roles are expected of them. For example, in farming men cut the bushes and trees while women mostly do the planting and weeding. Although men and women can mostly do whatever work they choose to pursue in present times, there are still gender expectations in some occupations.

Introducing the Igbo Woman: Gender, Patriarchy, Class, Motherhood & Solidarity

Female gender categories in Owerri, Igboland consists of *Umuada* (girls), *mgbotu* (ladies), *ndom* married (women) and *oke mgoboto* old (unmarried women). For the purpose of this research, I address the *ndom* (Igbo married women). This is because Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group is made up of mostly married women in Igboland.

Typically, a woman who is married and has children is thought of as "a real woman" in Igbo culture as this is the primary way to attain legitimacy as a woman. No matter how successful a woman thinks she is as a single woman, Igbo society has reservations on how she is viewed because they consider the ultimate success of a woman as being married and having children, especially a male child. This is the foundation of womanhood in Igbo culture.



Photo 2. Mother, children and grandmother

Many scholars have defined the notion of womanhood and the role of women in relation to other women in specific societies. The most useful definitions come from indigenes or ethnographers who have immersed themselves in a particular culture and understand its tenets. I utilize the descriptions of two scholars—an outsider (Sylvia Leith-Ross), and an indigene (Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere) to introduce the Igbo woman. Emic and etic perspectives provide insight on how Igbo women are viewed differently.

Sylvia Leith-Ross, an English anthropologist who worked in Nigeria during colonial rule, travelled around the country studying Igbo women. In her book, *African Women: A Study of the*

Ibo of Nigeria, she states why she decided to study Igbo women after traveling and experiencing women from other ethnic groups in Nigeria,

In writing a book about Ibo women, the question that arises is: why the Ibo? The answer is: Because in Nigeria, the most populous and potentially the most important of our Crown Colonies, the Ibo speaking people are the most numerous, the most adaptable, the most go-ahead, the most virile, and at the same time the most primitive (Leith-Ross 1965: 19).

She further describes the Igbo woman,

The Ibo is ready to plunge into Western civilization—even as he has already begun to do. And the women, economically and politically, are at least the equal to men. ... The Ibo women in particular, by their number, their industry, their ambitions, their independence, are bound to play a leading part in the development of their country. ... Judging from my own experience, among various peoples of Nigeria, I am inclined to believe that their women, because of their economic importance both as mothers, farm cultivators, and traders, have rather more power than is generally thought and that therefore they must be taken into account in the framing of new legislation, or the introduction of new social or economic situations (Leith-Ross 1965, 19,21).

Leith-Ross's assessment of Igbo women stems from her experience of Igbo people especially those with whom she came in contact. Although she mentions that the Igbos are the most adaptable and at the same time the most primitive, her assertions suggest that her contact was limited to those Igbo women that have the privilege to be in public gatherings, meet with foreign workers and are considered to be as strong as their male counterparts. This would explain why she assumed that Igbo women are equal to their men. Nnoromele responded directly to Leith-Ross by stating that although some Igbo women had this privilege, they do not have equal status (Nnoromele 1998, 10). Leith-Ross's assessment was also informed by her comparisons with women from other ethnic groups who might have appeared timid. Believing in the predominate Western notion that African women are victims of a male-dominated society, Leith-Ross must have been surprised to learn that Igbo women could stand up, in solidarity, for themselves by repealing a law that imposed taxes on them through the Aba women's riot of

1929. Although Leith-Ross uses the word strong, Amadiume affirms this by asserting that Igbo women were regarded as militants and rebellious after challenging the British colonial government in 1929 (Amdume 1987, 13). Leith-Ross's status as a foreign worker in the colonial era, and later as a White woman who was "going around asking people questions" certainly limited the women she met and the information she got. Inasmuch as her notions are valid, her narrative omits Igbo women who are in positions of considerably less power, and therefore, could be victims.

In *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere, an Igbo woman, argues that women embody the basic principles of thought underlying indigenous notions in specific societies. In Igbo society, womanhood is associated with multiple roles depending on the woman's stage in life—she could be a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and aunt. She further describes women's roles on economic, social, political and religious levels. On an economic level, the woman is the main provider because she devotes more time to sustain the family and household; socially, she is continuously trained for self and for the community; she also promotes creative awareness of religious and political implications as well as interactions within the community. For all these reasons, she concludes that a woman is seen as a gift in Igbo communities (Agbasiere 2000, 6-8).

While these assertions might be valid, the problem with them is that they do not apply to all Igbo women. Some women do not perform these roles and Igbo society does not always see women who perform them as "a gift" to them. Working against such sweeping generalizations, my study will show how the Igbo woman is one with a unique identity full of complexities and contradictions, often defined by society yet changing over time.

The concept of marriage in Igbo culture is best described by Ifi Amadiume, an Igbo woman and a feminist scholar. In her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands Gender and Sex in African Societies*, she describes how marriage works in Nnobi, an Igbo town in Anambra State, Nigeria,

Nnobi choice of marriage settlement was the patrilocal system, whereby patrilineage men remained on the patrilineage land and guarded patrilineage property. They then sent their daughters off to serve as wives elsewhere, while they brought in non-lineage women for the purpose of procreation and domestic and economic labour. ... Through marriage exchange, daughters stepped into wifehood and motherhood and control over them passed from their natal to their marital lineage men (Amadiume 1987, 70).



Photo 3. Igbo bride's parents "handing" their daughter over to the groom

Marriage in Igboland favors men as they remain in their father's house while women come to live with them. In precolonial Igbo, although there have been a few cases of resistance, marriage was not by choice. This is also true in the present times because of social class and some customs that do not allow marriage between certain people. One example is the issue of class that is evident in the *osu* caste system. The *osu* is regarded as an outcast and families who consider themselves as "freeborn" do not allow their children to marry anyone from the *osu* family, no matter how in love they might be. A few young adults have resisted this custom through the help of some activists. However, men have benefited from this resistance more than women. Rich Igbo men who are from *osu* families tend to marry whoever they want because of their wealth, but it has been generally difficult for *osu* women to marry the "freeborn."

Childless marriages in Igbo culture are considered fruitless. The primary reason why Igbo couples get married is to have children as they are believed necessary to sustain the patrilineal posterity of the family. Male children are the custodians of the family property and retain the family name, while female children marry into other families. The emphasis on motherhood becomes a "burden" to those women who do not have male children, as there could be pressure from family members. Thus, a male child is generally preferred over a female child. In the article "Perception of Male Gender Preference Among Pregnant Igbo Women," Ohagwu C. C. and Co state that Igbo women are constantly seeking fetal gender at ultrasound. The reason why they want to know is directly linked to their status and security in their husband's homes. A recent study which focused on pregnant women in Igbo culture, reveals that "male gender preference is perceived by Igbo women irrespective of age, formal educational attainment, number of co-wives married by the husband, and number of male and female children already had" (Ohagwu & Co, 2014). They conclude that there is perceived loss of interest in the pregnancy when most

women discover that the fetus is female, and greater excitement when it is male. The reason for this behavior, they affirm, is significantly influenced by socio-demographic factors (ibid.).

In spite of these anxieties, Igbos married women do have social networks for communal support. Igbo married women have women's groups in every village in Igboland. These groups are organized to help women stand together, in solidarity for each other, in happy and difficult times. Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group is a product of married women's group as will be described in chapter two. Although women work together in solidarity with each other, my research shows that there are class distinctions and competitions among them. Some women may be considered rich, royal, freeborn, educated, or beautiful, while others may be considered poor, outcasts, illiterates or ugly. These distinctions make some women heroines and others victims and the fact that some women move from one situation to another could make them both victims and heroines at different times. I use the word victims to denote women who are in considerably less power or victimized by culture. Heroines are women who have some privileged or have attained some social status.

Music and Gender in Igbo Culture

Gender ideologies underlie most musical practices in Igbo musical culture. While thousands of musical genres exist, gender ideologies are reflected in many genres, performance practices and musical instruments. In the article "Music is a Woman," Meki Nzewi and Sello Galane describe the creative process, musicianship, performance and instrumentations in Igbo musical culture in relation to gender. The terms they use in describing music reflect the indigenous philosophies and perceptions about the nature of music in Igbo culture.

Nzewi and Galane explain that a competent musician of any special capabilities is discussed as *onye egwu*, which literally translate to “music/dance person.” In performance practice, the creative genius demonstrated by a contextual musician of any gender, in any area—singing, dancing, instrumentation or dramatization is discussed as *Nne egwu*— “the mother of music” or “the mother of creative genius” or “the mother of musicianship.” Using mothering in this context implies that the individuals create new musical ideas “in the same vein as every biological birth produces a different impression of basic human features.” *Nne egwu* is what Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike is to the Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group as described in Chapter Two. A second meaning of *nne egwu* refers to a matron of a musical group, “usually by virtue of being a senior woman of high social regard in the community.” The person does not have to be a performer, his or her primary role is administrative and supervisory (Nzewi and Galane 2005, 76). The diagram bellow shows “nne egwu” leading women in ululation before music performance.



Photo 4. Nne egwu in action

“African music ensemble is a metaphysical reference to human family mirroring the sociopolitical interactions in a nuclear family (Nzewi and Galane 2005, 76-77).” Instruments are paired lineally to produce an ensemble theme and they are discussed in terms of female and male qualities. The larger instrument with a deeper tone is usually called *nne*—mother. It organizes and directs the ensemble by playing speech surrogate. The role of *nne* is equated to the organizational role of mothers as the organizers and directors of the family. “Thus, sonically and metaphysically, the female spirit is the leader of the musical arts ensemble, even though a man may be the human surrogate playing the instrument and leading the group (ibid.).”



Photo 5. Instrumental arrangement of women's music

In terms of voice in Igbo musicological discourse, a male voice—*oke olu* is high while the female voice—*nne olu* is low. Both voices constitute basic harmonic thought in Igbo music. There might be a third middle voice or pitch that create a third part harmony. The female is the foundation of harmonic procedure. In connection with social political gender roles, men are visible in social political societal issues while women wield power and control (ibid. 78).

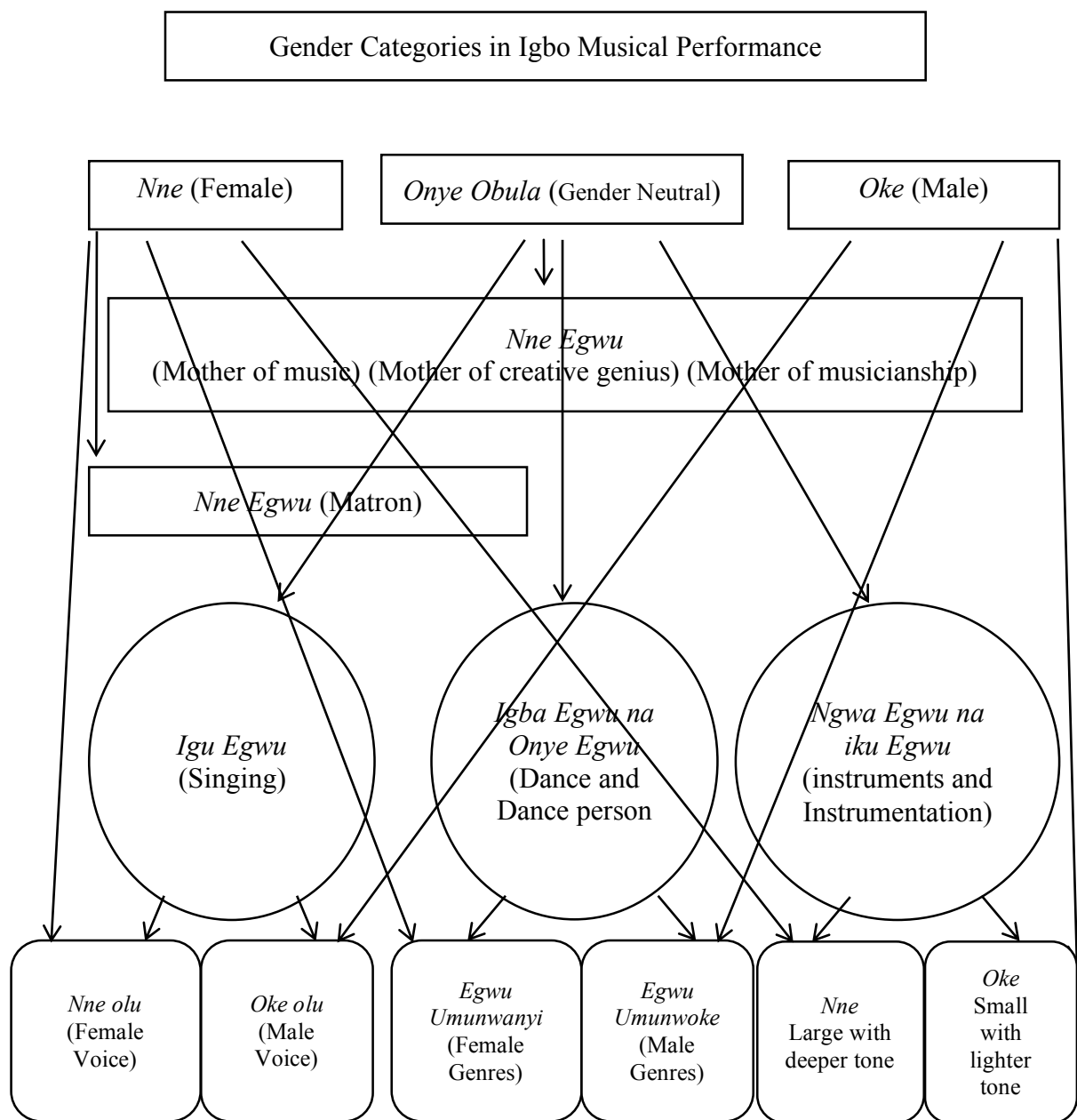


Figure 3. Gender categories in Igbo musical performance

The above diagram summaries how Igbo music is gendered.

Methodology

Entering the Field: A Stranger at Home

I had been in direct contact with Obiwuruotu women for over five years, although not as a researcher. I am a fan and have loved and appreciated their music since I was a child. Going back home for fieldwork opened up a new experience for me. I had called some of their members on the phone prior to my fieldwork and informed them I was coming. When I got there in the Summer of 2016, I suddenly found myself a stranger to them. These women who mostly did not understand Western education started telling me stories from the book *Things Fall Apart* written by Nigerian renowned author Chinua Achebe. They lectured me on how “White” people exploited them in colonial Africa. They further educated me on how the colonial masters and missionaries disrupted the Igbo culture, stole Igbo cultural values to make money in the West. I was patient yet astonished at their knowledge of history. After listening to such a long lecture, I thanked them and asked when I would do the *omenaala*—a ritual involving a list of things someone presents to the group before asking them to perform or do anything. They gave me the list and asked me to pay huge amounts of money before I could start my research. Their reasons for asking for huge amounts were that they thought I was going to make a lot of money with my documentation. I could not afford the amount they told me and I tried negotiating, but all to no avail. Although I look like them and I speak the same language, I became an absolute stranger. I drove back home in the night and told my dad. He suggested I go again with some elders and people who know about academic research. Since most of them are Catholics by faith confession, I decided to go with a Catholic priest and a professor in the Department of Music from one of the colleges located in the area. They were able to convince the women and they agreed to collect a lesser amount.



Photo 6. Me (Ruth Opara) and OWDG during my research, Summer 2015

Fieldwork/ Research Methods

This dissertation is based primarily on my fieldwork experience and data collected during that time. After my Masters Degree and PhD course work, I went back to Nigeria in the summer of 2016 and immersed myself in the culture, utilizing experience and knowledge I had gathered from my studies. During fieldwork, I primarily stayed in Ihiagwa, the home base of OWDG, where I collected data and engaged extensively in participant observation. I conducted a series of

formal and informal interviews as well as event feedback interviews in accordance with ethnomusicological and anthropological ideas of fieldwork (Barz and Cooley 2008, 4). With formal interviews, I asked structured questions that were open-ended, which allowed for further questions and answers depending on the response of the interviewees. I utilized informal interviews when necessary and asked questions as needed without appointment and set up. My informal interviews arose during performance and conversations. With event feedback interviews I was able to play back some old recordings of OWDG I had collected before I began my fieldwork¹⁰ and asked the interviewees questions. Many of my questions concerned their social and musical roles, specific musical performances, and how they consciously engage with the double narrative of African women as victims/heroines.

Performing with this group was an important component of my fieldwork. During this fieldwork, I participated in OWDG's rehearsals and public performances as well as being part of all the activities of the group including paying dues. I documented all my interactions through field notes, still photographs, video and audio recordings. All documentations were done in preparation to make musical and lyrical transcriptions of my recordings that supplemented already existing recordings. I utilized archival materials in form of photographs and recordings that facilitated historical background of this study.

¹⁰ They were fascinated with the older recordings and pointed at the pictures of their members while lamenting the death of some of them.

Autoethnography

Primary to the idea of autoethnography is the use of personal experience to examine or critique culture and to make a contribution to existing knowledge. In the process, the ethnographer embraces vulnerability with purpose, and finally creates the reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, 22).

Autoethnographers intentionally relate their experiences and stories to specific cultural practices in communicating their research, showing their personal knowledge of the past while seeking to contribute to the future. Sometimes the researcher claims vulnerability by disclosing secrets, such as exposing their own history and personal experiences. Autoethnographers call and seek contributions from audiences as a part of an ongoing process in autoethnography (ibid. 22-25).

What makes autoethnography compelling and relevant for this study are,

- 1) It disrupts norms of research practice and presentations,
- 2) it works from insider knowledge by maneuvering experiences in hopes of improving daily life, and
- 3) it can make research more accessible by giving voice to the ethnographer and the subject.

Autoethnographers disrupt norms of research by expressing feelings of conflict between already existing hegemonic ideas and personal lived experience. They create nuanced and detailed descriptions of cultural encounters that facilitate the understanding of their experiences. They wrestle with feelings as they write, while breaking silences surrounding experiences. By doing so, they produce a work that is free of jargon and accessible to a variety of audiences, including non-academics (ibid. 32-37).

Relevance of Study

My research strives to be relevant in the broader field of humanities. Apart from adding to the growing list of compilations of indigenous world music genres in the field of ethnomusicology, this study reveals how music functions specifically in Igbo society, especially regarding gender roles. Since Igbo music is mostly in a constellation of arts—a combination of songs, dances, instruments, costumes and sometimes drama (Stone 2008, 7), this research studies these elements as parts that make a greater whole, thereby contributing to the field of humanities.

Women's participation in musical practices reveals the limitations and confines of social structures surrounding Igbo women. It contributes to global comparative studies regarding women's roles and how they attain social status, and at the same time calls for cultural change and reform that will benefit women. This research contributes to the field of ethnomusicology with its timely focus on gender studies and applied studies.

Documenting and teaching this genre in world musics classes and ensembles would legitimize indigenous music that has gotten little international attention. I am also hopeful that the documentation of this study would circulate around the world so that others may learn about how women negotiate gender roles through music in Igbo culture.

Organization

In this dissertation, I have organized the chapters in a way to thoroughly describe my ethnographical experiences with Obiwuruotu women in relation to their music. This organization helped me in

- 1) documenting the music and texts,
- 2) revealing who the musicians are and what their roles are,
- 3) connecting music to everyday life,

- 4) divulging knowledge produced through musical performances,
- 5) outlining gender roles in music while accounting for change,
- 6) analyzing how society perceive changes in gender roles in music,
- 7) exploring the social implications in gender roles performed through music,
- 8) weighing their popularity since they started and their current popularity, and
- 9) exploring how they articulate power through music.

The chapters show the complexities and contradictions that characterize the life of the African woman. They are organized to counter the double narrative about African women being victims or heroines, and support the notion that Igbo women adapt to situations they find themselves in.

Chapter 2— The Voice that “Raised” a Community: Chief Mrs Rose Nzuruike and Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group

This chapter consists of a historical and ethnographic portrait of the Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group and their renowned lead singer, Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike. Based on my research and my experiences with the group, I explain how motherhood, patriarchy, solidarity and class are significant in the formative stages of this group and trace changes from the founding of the group to the present. Using data gathered in formal and informal interviews, I outline what is at stake for members of the group and how issues of gender have impacted their lives and performances. This chapter reveals the contradictions, complexities and conflicts that characterize the OWDG’s history. It shows how they have adapted to situations of a changing society in their formative stage.

Chapter 3— The Music of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group: Process and Styles

In this chapter, I examine the process of music creation and the musical styles of the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group. While revealing what music means for these women, this chapter examines the creative process and styles of various arts put together to produce what can be called women's music in Igbo culture. This chapter focuses on the gender ideologies, contradictions and complexities that characterize the process of music creation as well as how the group adapts process and style to any given situation. I explore how various arts are combined in music making, the process of song creation, instrumentation, musical genres and costumes as well as their gender implications.

Chapter 4— Songs of the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group

In this chapter I analyze the songs of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group according to five categories—Motherhood, Patriarchy, Solidarity, Class and Gender implications. I explore ways in which these themes are overtly and covertly embedded in OWDG songs. As this group has many repertoires, I focus on a few songs that address and illuminate the issues of gender, motherhood and patriarchy, solidarity, and class. This chapter reveals the functions and multiple meanings in their song repertoires and the contradictions and complexities that characterize them. It further reveals how the women adapt to the situations of a changing society as embedded in their song lyrics.

Chapter 5— Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group Today: A Solidarity Trip to Amandugba

This chapter is an event description of an OWDG solidarity trip to Amandugba— a village in the same state, where the group traveled to perform for a member who had lost her

mother. This chapter reveals the current historical and performance states of OWDG. It also reveals their struggles, roles and tensions as I saw them in the field, and how they adapt to a changing society.

Chapter 6 – The Future of Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group

Returning to the questions I raised in the Introduction, this chapter summarizes my arguments and findings in support of my argument that African women are neither victims nor heroines as the dominant narrative has led us to believe. Their history, life experiences and musical practices show that their life is full of complexities and contradictions as well as everyday conflicts. These women simply adapt to every situation in which they find themselves. I situate my research within the broader discourse of music and gender and state how my research contributes to the growing scholarship in African feminisms. This chapter explicitly exposes the future of this musical group as I incorporated narratives. Finally, I make conclusions and recommendations for future research in music and gender in Africa.

Chapter II

THE VOICE THAT “RAISED” A COMMUNITY: CHIEF MRS ROSE NZURUIKE AND OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP

This chapter focuses on an oral history of Obiwuruotu women to show how they struggle to negotiate gender roles even though they are considered “strong,” “successful” and talented women in Igbo society. In chapter one, I established that my main aim is to challenge the double narrative about African women being victims or heroines by using music as a lens to look into married women’s life in Igbo, Nigerian culture. This chapter focuses on the history of the OWDG to reveal the contradictions and complexities that characterize married women's lives and how they adapted to situations of a changing society, in their formative stage. The central figure in this history is Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike who has become iconic of Obiwuruotu. I demonstrate how her musical prowess led to the development of this group and how her presence has had a tremendous effect on the group’s performances and activities, even after her death. I establish that apart from musical performances, these women gather in solidarity to help each other in their struggles in daily life. I explain how motherhood, which is an integral part of Igbo culture, affects OWDG musical practices. As Igbo society is patriarchal, these women struggle with traditional gender constructs. Social status such as class, which is most transparent in Igbo *osu* and *diala* culture, also affects their musical practices. Despite these problems, they have been successful and toured many parts of Igbo land and Nigeria, especially when Mrs. Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike was alive. Although the group is still widely appreciated throughout the community, many individuals report feeling nostalgic for the years when the group was at its height.

This history of Obiwuruotu is culled from my interviews with members of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group, and some villagers as well as admirers. As this is an oral history, my informants told their stories from their personal experiences and there were sometimes arguments about the history of the group. Some members argued about the date the group started and especially about gender roles in their musical practices. Thus, my history of Obiwuruotu contains many diverse individual perspectives that sometimes conflict with one another.

History and Formation of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group was initially named Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group. It was a musical group made up of only women musicians married into Ihiagwa autonomous community, Owerri West Local Government Area, in Imo State, Nigeria. Ihiagwa is located 12 km south of the capital city of Owerri, the capital city of Imo state.



Figure 4. Map of Imo State, Nigeria, showing Ihiagwa town

Ihiagwa is a university town that is made up of about 10,000 indigenes who speak Owerri dialect with a unique accent and intonation. They practice traditional religion and Christianity. The Ihiagwa community has a rich and diverse culture that includes music and festivals, which led to the formation of OWDG. Just like most Igbo towns, Ihiagwa cultural practices are gendered. The Ihiagwa autonomous community is made up of eight villages: Iriamogu, Ibuzo, Nnkaraochie, Umuezeawula, Aku/Umunkwo, Mboke, Umuelem and Umuchima.¹¹ These villages have women's dance groups that have been in existence since precolonial times and the dance groups were created from women's groups called *Ndom*, which is the word for married women in Owerri dialect.

The concept of *ndom* in Igbo culture is best described by Christopher Chukwuma Ndulue. He describes the initiation into the association of all married women into their husband's place. Every newly married woman is expected to assimilate into their husband's home. She is expected to join the association of married women (*ndom*) and the membership is compulsory in most Igbo villages and towns. Joining the association can provide women a sense of belonging as any married woman who is not inducted into this group is considered to be a concubine. Excluded women lack solidarity with other women and do not participate in normal women's functions (Ndulue 1995, 88).

In 1979 during the annual women's August meeting¹², the community decided to form a women's dance group to represent the whole community. One reason for this decision was that

¹¹ These villages were grouped around the ancient market place of the Ihiagwa people.

¹² Every year, in August, Igbo married women, both at home and in diaspora gather at their husband's place for August meeting. Almost every community in Igbo land do this women's gathering. They discuss issues bothering them and how to better their lives, the lives of the children and the community in general. Music and dance is an integral part of the meeting/celebration. Women showcase new musical styles and costumes most times for entertainment and sometimes in competition. Their husbands who are considered "sons of the

they had eight women's dance groups and it had been overwhelming to invite all the dance groups to perform during general community gatherings and celebrations. Since they had to choose one, two, or more of the groups to perform each time, and sometimes all of them performed, this became a problem due to time constraints. Another reason was that the community identified women who were exceptionally gifted in music from different groups, of which Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike was one. The exceptionally gifted women did not belong to a particular village, but the traditional ruler and the community wished to have them perform for certain occasions. There was a need to bring these gifted women together to form a formidable musical group that would represent Ihiagwa community during gatherings, festivals, and celebrations, as well as represent them outside the community. This was during the reign of Eze John Anozie Ngoka, Nnaochie I, the traditional ruler of Ihiagwa community.

Eze Ngoka was born in 1905 and was one of the few Ihiagwa indigenes to receive a Western education in colonial Nigeria. His exposure and connections attracted development in the Ihiagwa community. Under his reign, the community built Ihiagwa Magistrate Court, Ihiagwa Secondary School, Nigeria Police Training School, and brought to the region a community market, electricity, pipe borne water, post office, Christian churches, and a university—Federal University of Technology, Owerri. Eze Ngoka expanded and maintained the village roads and remodeled primary schools. Eze Ngoka appreciated arts and encouraged talented artists in his community. He gave the order to form Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group

soil” are usually their guests of honor. They support the women by helping with funding and in making vital decisions.

in 1979, and encouraged Ndom Ihiagwa as they formed a musical force that was at the center of Igbo women's musical scene in the 1980s (Umunnakwe 1986, 21-24).

The Ihiagwa community, appointed a group of women who saw to the formation of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group in 1979, but that committee of women were not necessarily musicians. They were among the community women leaders appointed from different villages to make sure that musically talented women could be found and included in the group. Among the committee members were Mrs. Josephine Kamalu, Mrs. Edna Okoro, Mrs. Harriet Okoro, Mrs. Justina Ajoku, Mrs. Ejiato Nlumanze, Mrs. Katukoma Asoluka and other influential women in the community. Lolo Ngoka the *Ugoeze*— wife of the traditional ruler, was appointed to lead the committee.¹³ Most of these women are now deceased.

This committee of women worked effectively in choosing musically talented women. They asked the women's dance groups from the eight villages that make up the Ihiagwa community to submit five names respectively. They requested these women to choose the best five in singing, dancing and playing instruments. The women chose at least five musically gifted women that would represent them. Some accounts show that some villages had so many musically gifted women that they were allowed to submit six to eight names. Thus, the group started with about forty members and was named Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group under the leadership of Mrs. Maria Anokwu. The group's name translates to "The dance group of married women in Ihiagwa."

Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group emerged in 1979 with over forty members. Some of the initial members and their villages are:

¹³ At least one woman represented each village. They should be at least eight names but these seven names are the ones my interviewees could remember.

Villages	Names of Members
Aku/Umunkwo village	Mrs. Edna Nkwopara
Ibuzo village	None were identified
Iriamogu village	Mrs. Esther Anu and Mrs. Rose Eke
Mboke village	Mrs. Comfort Anumudu, Mrs. Angela Ako, Mrs. Monica Ofor, and Mrs. Marian Nkwopara
Nnkaraochie Village	Mrs. Maria Nkwo
Umuchima village	Mrs. Maria Anokwu, Mrs. Ann Anukam, Mrs. Cynthia Njemanze, Mrs. Felicia Ajoku, Mrs. Florence Enyinnaya, Mrs. Grace Udokporo, and Mrs. Philomena Onyenwa
Umuelem village	Mrs. Grace Emenyeonu, and Mrs. Margaret
Umuezeawula village	Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike, Mrs. Mercy Odu, Mrs. Juliana Unegbu, Mrs. Nwoloku Kamalu. Mrs. Martina Ekemma and Mrs. Ihejirika

¹⁴

Figure 5. Identified pioneer members of ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group

¹⁴ These villages are arranged in alphabetical order, not in the order of seniority.



Photo 7. Pioneer members of OWDG

Mrs. Maria Anokwu was the first president while Mrs. Ann Anukam was the first secretary.

Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group started performing in community festivals, celebrations, and other important gatherings and started making some money. After a few months, community leaders decided to appoint men to “help” the women manage their resources, presumably to exercise a greater amount of control over the women’s group. The two men appointed to the Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group were Mr. Zebulon U. Eke and Mr. Celestine Ukaegbu and were given important positions within the group. Mr. Eke was made the secretary of the group, displacing Mrs. Ann Anukam, and Mr. Ukaegbu was put in charge of media and external contacts as the women started getting media attention around Owerri the capital of Imo State.

Shortly after that, Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu, the lead vocalist whose voice attracted many admirers, took over the leadership of the group. Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group

flourished under her leadership and she changed the group's name to Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group, which literally means "Heart-to-be-one women's dance group."

Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike

Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike was born on 25th April in 1940. She was originally from Otabili in Okolochi community in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State Nigeria. She grew up under the tutelage of her parents, Joseph and Victoria Ekwebelem, and later proceeded to Okolochi Community School where she obtained her Standard Six Certificate (SSC) in 1958. This was in colonial Nigeria when Nigerians were still trying to adapt to Western education. SSC was revered and anyone who had this certificate was considered an educated person. They were able to communicate in British English fluently and thus, were held in high esteem.

At the age of twenty-two in 1962, Rose Nzuruike got married to her husband, Remigius Nzuruike of Umuezeawula, Ihiagwa. By being married into this community, she automatically became a *ndom* Ihiagwa. She and her husband lived in Lagos (the biggest city in Nigeria) after marriage, but she finally returned to Ihiagwa after the death of her husband in 1974. Things became difficult after the death of her husband, but she worked hard and raised her children as a single mother. Because of her numerous talents and especially her singing career, many men wanted to date or marry her. She refused to remarry because of her children whom she loved dearly, fearing they would not be taken care of in another man's home.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marrying after losing a husband in Igbo culture was not common for women until recently. Although most men remarry, one of the qualities of "a good woman" in this culture is for a woman to stay and take care of her children after the death of her husband. It is common for husbands to die first because they are usually much older than the women they marry.



Photo 8. Rose in the late 1970's after she returned to Ihiagwa

After Rose Nzuruike's return to Ihiagwa, she started petty trading in Ihiagwa market as well as farming. She immersed herself in religious, economic and social activities of the Ihiagwa people, and joined several groups in the community and the church where she represented women effectively. She is described as a woman with "a heart of gold" because of her love for

God and humanity. She is also described as a tough woman because of her doggedness. She was kind, but firm, extending her generosity to the poor, and defending widows in cases of family land disputes. Although she was a Catholic, she revered the gods of the land. While practicing Christianity, she sought protection from the gods of the land, especially during her singing career.

Singing Career

Rose Nzuruike's singing talent was noticed after she returned from Lagos. She joined the Saint Michael's Catholic Church choir, Ihiagwa and became one of the best soprano vocalists at the time. Shortly after joining the church choir, she became the lead vocalist for Umuezeawula women, where she was noticed by the traditional ruler and the community. Singing traditional music with a soprano voice at the time was not common. Although she produces a sound that might be described as nasal in Western musical culture, Ihiagwa, Igbo people and Nigerians describe her voice as "ringing." She had refused to sing socially, until her dead husband (as the story is told) appeared to her in a dream and gave his blessings, promising her that he will be with her through it all.

Rose Nzuruike was a pioneer member of Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group and was the first lead singer after its formation. Her "ringing voice," as many Igbos describe it, made OWDG widely popular. She led the group to many competitions and concerts around Nigeria. She also led them to recording studios where they recorded much of their repertoire, after which she began to be heard all over Owerri town and its villages, as well as other communities in Imo State and beyond. Their cassette was played on most radio stations, on TV channels and many people bought them.

In the 1980s Rose Nzuruike took over the leadership of OWDG from the men who had been appointed earlier. This was a controversial move as many men had described Rose as *agu nwanyi*, a term that has negative connotations. *Agu nwanyi* literally means a female lion which may suggest that the woman in question is not loyal, especially to men. In a positive way however, if a woman is called *agu nwanyi* in Igbo culture it means she has achieved what only men could achieve. Men who were part of the group when she was alive worked under her. She struggled to get their respect as the leader of the group and argued with them on almost every issue, especially on managing the group's finances, assigning roles and making vital decisions about the group. Apart from being the star of the group, she functioned as the president, treasurer and the public relations officer of OWDG until her death. This is partly because people who wanted to hire the group preferred to negotiate with her directly, not necessarily because of trust issues, but because it was considered an honor to meet her. Being the star and also managing the group was not something common in Igbo culture but it was acceptable in her case because she wielded the type of influence that seemed indispensable in the Ihiagwa community.

One of the controversial moves that got the public's attention was renaming the group from "Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group" to "Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group." When the group started making a lot of money there were issues about how to share money after performances. Initially, the group was accountable to the Ihiagwa community, but later decided they needed most of the money for themselves since they put in a lot of time practicing and performing around the country. They began to seek autonomy from the community and were no longer interested in answering to the name of Ndom Ihiagwa Dance Group. The community fought against their move toward greater independence, but Rose Nzuruike stood firm in the face of the controversy and succeeded in gaining this autonomy by renaming this group publicly during the

first of many subsequent interviews with Imo Broadcasting Cooperation in the 1980s. At the beginning of the interview she was asked the name of the group, and to everyone's surprise, she said "Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group." This act attracted a lot of criticism from Ihiagwa people, both at home and in the diaspora and the male-dominated Ihiagwa community leadership opposed this move. Nevertheless, she succeeded in attaining this autonomy and Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group became the name of the group.

Apart from Rose Nzuruike's singing talent and leadership skills, she was also very creative. She created all the songs of the group and claimed her husband "gave" her the songs in her dreams. Since her death OWDG has not composed any new songs. Rose popularized the incorporation of other local musical instruments. Up until that time, married women's musical performances in Owerri were mostly accompanied by an *ogene* (gong). Rose also belonged to the state and national musical and social clubs where she was one of the executives that piloted the affairs of the groups, which was rare for women at the time. She was also a member of the Performing Musical Association of Nigeria (PMAN) and was in charge of the Imo State chapter for a while.

Coronation

Despite all the struggles and challenges of leadership and stardom, Rose Nzuruike was respected, "feared," and loved by most people who knew her. She was said to give warmth wherever she went and she welcomed strangers. Ihiagwa people, in particular, revered her and always addressed her as a "proud wife of Ihiagwa." She received many awards from the Ihiagwa community, other communities, and the state.

To crown her efforts, on December 22, 2007, the traditional ruler, His Royal Highness Eze, Sir J. O. Muruako (KSJ) (JP) (Akawelitaramba I, Nnaochie II of Ihiagwa) and Ihiagwa community gave her a chieftaincy title, “Oluwelitaramba I of Ihiagwa” or “Olu Ejiejemba I of Ihiagwa.” Oluwelitaramba literally means “the voice that raised a community” while Olu Ejiejemba means “a voice one can travel with.” Metaphorically, both denote that Rose Nzuruike had a voice to be proud of and with her voice she had made the community and its women’s musical culture the best in the state and the most popular in Nigeria at the time.

Title holding is the highest social status a man or woman can attain in Igbo culture. It is rare for a woman to hold a chieftaincy title, as individuals who have them are considered political and social elites. It is given to individuals who deserve to be honored for their great, but unique achievements. Although individuals get this title for just being wealthy in today’s Igbo culture, Salome Nnoromele outlines three major ways women can obtain a title. First, “A village could pool its resources together and confer a title on a woman in appreciation of the work she performed for the community.” Secondly, “Children could bestow a title on their mother to show their appreciation and love.” Thirdly, a prosperous woman, with many descendants could register and legitimize her success by taking a title (Nnoromele 1998, 32).” Rose Nzuruike’s chieftaincy title was given to her by the community in appreciation for her work and the dignity she brought to them with her talent. His Royal Highness Eze, Sir J. O. Muruako affirms,

Late Chief Rose Nzuruike became the leader and soon Obiwuruotu became the best cultural entertainment group in Imo State. The sonorous rhythm of Obiwuruotu and the golden voice of Rose resounded in every significant function in Ihiagwa, Owerri and Imo State in general. The Obiwuruotu became a rallying point for Ihiagwa women and source of glory to the people of our great land. It was at this point in time that I as the traditional ruler of Ihiagwa honored our heroine with a chieftaincy title Oluwelitaramba I of Ihiagwa (Funeral Program).

Her coronation was a colorful ceremony that attracted musical and political dignitaries from all over the country and she showcased her talent once again at the age of sixty-seven. This was one of her last public performances before she became ill and finally passed on at the age of seventy-four in 2014.



Photo 9. Rose still singing in her 60s

The Death of Rose and the Fate of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group

Rose Nzuruike was cautious from when she started her singing career until her death. She was courageous and fearless, but at the same time was afraid that she could be killed because of her fearlessness. She had revelations in her dreams about men assassinating her and as a result consulted some traditional priests and priestesses seeking protection. At some point, one of the priests gave her a protection for her microphone and asked her to keep her private microphone for her use only in order to avoid diabolical attacks, which might result in her losing her voice or sudden death. She maintained this practice until her death.

Rose Nzuruike fell ill after her coronation in 2007 and Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group stopped performing. Although the group had singers who assisted her when she was healthy, the audience and people who hired them mostly did so because of Rose. Her illness was a major setback for Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group. However, when people started getting used to her not being there, the group started performing again, but only in Ihiagwa community. Since then it has been difficult for them to get hired outside Ihiagwa.

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group pooled their resources together and had what some people consider their "final" performance during the burial ceremony of Rose Nzuruike on the 11th of August, 2014. Just like her coronation, Rose Nzuruike's burial ceremony attracted so many musicians and government dignitaries across Nigeria, and Nigerians throughout the diaspora. Although members of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group believe they put on a spectacular performance that day, indigenes of Ihiagwa, though encouraging them, lamented that Rose will be missed.

During the funeral orations, many traditional rulers and government representatives expressed how much her singing and talent would be greatly missed. His Royal Highness Eze, Sir J. O. Muruako lamented,

Her creative musical idioms recount the glory of the ancient Ihiagwa. Tunes gave vent to the past glory of Ihiagwa, and Ihiagwa people everywhere enjoyed the euphoria of the land of the Otamiri.¹⁶ ... Like all mortal things, the end has come to our great artist. Yes, our great voice is now silent in death. Ihiagwa people will mourn the passing away of their musical legend. Ihiagwa will always live in the sorrowful nostalgia of her lady of songs and dance (Funeral Program).

Ihiagwa management committee added, “Through her voice and her leadership of the group, she made Ihiagwa well known beyond her boundaries. There is no doubt that by her death, Ihiagwa has lost one of her star performers.” Ihiagwa Welfare Association Women’s Wing (Home & Abroad) further affirms, “Her golden voice that has gone international, whoever hears her voice and saw her on stage will be magnet to move the limbs and body to the rhythm of her music. She has lifted Ihiagwa to the limelight with her golden voice and performances. Oh, Ndom Ihiagwa we’ve lost a rare gem! She will always be remembered.” The Commissioner for Industry and Non-Formal Sector, Barrister Lady Ugochi Nnanna-Okoro, representing Imo State government writes, “It is still unbelievable to me that Nda¹⁷ Rose is to be seen or heard no more. What a pain! Indeed, Imo State and the entire country will miss Nda Rose of the Golden voice. Till death, I know that we remain grateful to this genius of a woman and take solace in the Lord because we know that it is his will (Funeral Program).”

¹⁶ Otamiri is the name of the river in Ihiagwa.

¹⁷ Nda is a title the Owerri Igbos attach to the name of someone older than them. Igbos do not call their elders by their names. It is an act of respect.



Photo 10. Rose Nzuruike's funeral program cover

Although Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike has passed away, she lives through her recorded music that evokes nostalgic feelings of her aura and presence.

Obiwuruotu Women as Role Models

Recordings of the Obiwuruotu Women Dance's Group could be heard all over Owerri, Imo State during the 1980s. I remember my mother and grandmother singing along with the songs while they played. Most women who passed by as my family played this song, sang along and most times stopped to do a little *egwu ukwu* (hip-wiggling) dance that is part of the music. This kind of scene was common and not just limited to my family. During festive seasons like Easter, Christmas,¹⁸ New Year's Eve and indigenous festivals, women and men played Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group songs and sang along.

Soon after the sudden popularity of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group recordings, women and girls began to strive to perform like them. I heard the songs of Obiwuruotu Women Dance's Group in every ceremony I attended with my mother or grandmother where women's groups performed in villages and towns. The audience was always thrilled once they start singing the songs. Most times people might just be nodding to the music of the women, and once they change the song to one of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's repertoire, most people would jump up to dance. Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group was not just a special treat for female audiences, it also evoked a sense of pride and audacity among Igbo women.

All the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group songs are composed for the group with their name being part of many songs. What other women's groups did, and still do, is to remove

¹⁸ Igbo people are mostly Christians. A few practice traditional African religion. Most times, they practice both because African societies are traditionally set up to respect the gods of the land. One could practice traditional religion without being aware of it.

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's name and insert theirs while performing the songs. One example is an introductory song they usually sing after their "prayers" to introduce themselves to the audience. The song starts with *Anyi wu ndom Ihiagwa eeee, anyi abiala...* (We are married women of Ihiagwa, we have come...). I attended a festival with my grandmother and the female musicians representing Uratta women started their performance with the song thus: *Anyi wu ndom Uratta eeee, anyi abiala....* Expressions such as this among *ndom* groups in Imo state demonstrates the high level of respect for Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group.

It is important to note that *ndom* groups exist in most villages in Igboland as mentioned earlier. Music is an integral part of their activities and they use music primarily for communication and for social commentary. While women all over the state admire and love to perform like OWDG, the Owerri women and women married into Owerri who learn to speak Owerri dialect succeed in singing the songs well. Owerri dialect has been described as romantic and is often called French-Igbo. It is very difficult for Igbo people who speak other dialects to speak Owerri, but it has been generally easy for Owerri people to speak other Igbo dialects. Thus, women who are competent at performing OWDG songs are women from Owerri and women who are married into Owerri. Thus, music becomes an avenue to help improve dialects in Igbo culture.

Apart from just singing the songs, women lead singers began to try to sing like Rose Nzuruike. Some of them joined church choirs to improve their singing. Most of the time their voices did not sound like hers but they talked about it and felt they sounded like Rose. They felt satisfied with this feeling and felt more satisfied when they were told they sounded like Ndaa

Rose. As a girl and a lead singer of *Avu Udu*¹⁹ dance, I also tried to emulate the vocal style of Rose Nzuruike, but I stopped after I was ridiculed by my brothers.

The most common instrument used in accompanying traditional Owerri women's music was a small *ogene* (gong), and eventually sets of *ogene* were added. One of the reasons why OWDG performances and recordings were appreciated was their expanded instrumentation that came as a surprise to audiences. They added many local instruments that gave their music a unique timbre, different from what people were used to hearing when women play music. Other women's groups were inspired to incorporate a wider variety of musical instruments as well, having a significant influence on women's musical culture in the state.

Furthermore, OWDG had about five to seven different uniforms so they looked different for many performances and people admired them for this reason. Other women groups in Imo State choose often either the same wrapper, the same colors, or the same designs. The choice to have multiple uniforms for their various performances was not only innovative at the time, it also added color and glamor to every one of their performances.

Remarkably, one of the most important roles Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group played in the 1980s was to prove that married women can also become star musicians. This was a time period when popular musicians were mostly men, as few women were unmarried or separated. The songs of the likes of Miriam Makeba, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, and Brenda Fassie of South Africa were played constantly on the radios, but Obiwuruotu Women demonstrated that stardom was possible on the local level.

¹⁹ *Avu Udu* is a traditional dance for girls in Igbo Owerri culture, starting from the age of five to eighteen.

Solidarity among Obiwuruotu Women

Although performing music is the primary reason why Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group was created out of other women's group in Ihiagwa, the group is also important as a social support system for these women who look out for each other. In Igbo culture women are inducted into women's groups after marriage and this induction is celebrated with food and drinks. Married women belong to such groups for two reasons. First, they get exposed to rules of behavior in their new home, thereby facilitating their quick adjustment into the family and community at large. Secondly, they can get support from other women (Ndulue 1995, 88).

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group has a set of rules guiding them and this is primarily geared towards supporting each other. Members of this group enjoy many privileges. Apart from the prestige that comes from belonging to this well respected musical group, they also enjoy monetary and social benefits. Part of the money they make from performances is kept for this purpose. They give their members money for different ceremonies like childbirth or naming ceremonies and the death of a member's spouse, parents or child. Apart from the monetary aspect, Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group attends these ceremonies and performs pro bono. It is an honor to get Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group to play at one's ceremony. They visit their sick members and sometimes give financial assistance to members who cannot afford hospital bills through individual contribution. Sometimes, they extend this financial assistance to members from their general purse. They help each other in farming and support themselves in a trade by buying from each other. When Rose Nzuruike was alive she fought for the widows among them in family matters, especially cases of family land disputes. Land disputes are considered one of the most sensitive kinds of disputes in Igbo land. Families might even kill each other because of land ownership related issues. The widows are mostly the victims as they do

not have a husband in whose name a plot of land is usually secured. Thus, for Rose Nzuruike to get involved in such sensitive matters was quite bold. Members who do not have children sometimes get assistance from other members' children monetarily, as well as with farming and domestic works. This kind of support has been sustained over time.

Motherhood and Music Performance

Motherhood affects musical performance in Igbo culture because of the way society values children, with particular interest in the male child. Salome Nnoromele captures how motherhood functions in Igbo society.

In traditional Ibo society, the major function of a wife was to bear children. Companionship was all fine and dandy and love was good, but a childless marriage was no marriage at all.... women set greater store by their children than by their husbands. For it was only by becoming a mother that they felt truly fulfilled. Traditional Ibo mothers proudly called themselves "the trees that bear fruit." The phrase emphasized their procreative powers and recognized the fact that it was through the children they bore that the survival of individual families and the future of the entire community depended on. Even in contemporary society, many Ibo proverbs and phrases still express the value placed on children; for example, *onye nwe nwa ka onye nwe ego* (A person who has children is far greater than a person with monetary wealth) and *Nwa bu uba* (A child is a wealth) (Nnoromele 1998, 54).

Although a "childless" woman might be happy or at least pretend to be happy, having no children affects a woman in many ways. Traditional Igbo society is polygamous and the primary idea or justification for being polygamous was to have many children that would help acquire more wealth in the family. Children manage the trade and farmland given to their mother by their father. A childless woman most times does not even get a share because she has no child to train. When the father decides to have conversations with his children, a childless woman has no one to represent her. The male child is more valued because they are the ones that would inherit and sustain the family name. Meanwhile, the female child is expected to be married into another

community. In a situation where the “*nwanyi aga*” (childless woman) is constantly excluded and reminded by the culture that she was married to bear children; her whole life becomes affected. She usually becomes withdrawn and unhappy, as well as unfulfilled. The extroverts among them could become introverts. Music is an art that could be attributed to extroverts in Igbo culture. Since a married woman without a child feels incomplete, the musically talented among them withdraw from showcasing themselves in music performances, especially lead singing and dancing.

Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group has only a few members without children. I had a conversation with one who lamented on how she was a good singer and would have represented Rose Nzuruike when she passed, but she stopped singing after she tried once and got discouraged by her husband and mother-in-law. They reminded her after one performance that she should be busy thinking about how to have children and not projecting herself in public. She resorted to only playing the rattle after that conversation with her family.

One of the reasons why Rose Nzuruike succeeded in her career was because she had both male and female children. Although she was a talented woman, arguably she would have found it more difficult to attain the status she did if she did not have children. This is evident in her funeral orations when many sympathizers alluded to her being complete because of having children. They especially admired that she had children and raised them single-handedly after she lost her husband. The respect and sense of fulfillment that having children bring to married women in this culture are the reasons why nearly every Igbo woman strives to have a child in her husband’s home (Funeral Program 2014).

Performativity—Gender Roles in Obiwuruotu Women’s Music

Although many African feminist scholars have rightly argued that there was some kind of fluidity in gender roles in pre-colonial and some part of colonial Africa, this fluidity was not evident in all aspects of Igbo culture. Music in Igbo culture has always been highly gendered. There were clearly men’s music and women’s music and when both genders perform together, especially music for entertainment, there were clearly defined roles expected of them. These gender roles are an integral part of the life of the Igbos and follow individuals the entire lives. As scholars agree that some parts of traditional Igbo life are gendered, it is not surprising that musical genres are also highly gendered. OWDG feature what would be defined as women’s music, however, men were selected by the male dominated Ihiagwa community to “guide” the women under the assumption that women need male guidance.

As mentioned earlier, OWDG popularized the idea of incorporating other local instruments into Owerri Igbo women’s music, some of which were originally played by men. The *ogwe* (drums) and the *ekwe* (slit drum) were specifically played by men, but women started playing them before men joined the group. The two men (Mr. Zebulon U. Eke and Mr. Celestine Ukaegbu) who were appointed to the group took over and started playing these instruments because the community argued that men played them better. Mr. Eke was later made the secretary to pilot and monitor the affairs of the group. The women played all other instruments and did the dancing and singing. This made gender roles more fluid in OWDG, but they were nevertheless guided by the underlying gender roles in Igbo society.

Presently, three men belong to OWDG: Mr. Louis Nnaji is the group’s president who introduced and currently plays the harmonica; Mr. Godwin Njemanze plays the *ekwe* (slit drum) and *ogene* (gong), and Mr. Clement Uba plays the *ogwe* (drums). These instruments, except the

harmonica, are not exclusively played by men in this group as there are women who can play these instruments. It is important to note that at the beginning of every performance women play these instruments first, before handing them over to the men, symbolizing their ownership of the group. This has been a ritual part of performances since the men joined them. This kind of gesture of sharing with their male folks and accommodating them within a female group, while at the same time resisting the usual male dominance, is evident in some aspects of Igbo culture.



Photo 11. Me (Ruth Opara) and the male members of OWDG

The crossing over of gender roles may be seen as positive or negative. The audience is usually thrilled when a woman plays a man's role and vice versa. Arguably one of the reasons why this group has been successful is because it was not common for a woman to be a star musician in Igbo culture in the 1980s. A boy who did hip wiggling, a dance considered to be feminine in Igbo culture was part of one performance I attended of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group which will be described in chapter five. The boy refused to talk to me claiming that he was not a member of the group. Some people in the audience enjoyed his performance while some mocked him while he was dancing and called him *nda nwanyi*, a name given to a man that acts like a woman otherwise known as gay in Owerri dialect. He performs off and on with the group and they give him money each time he performs with them. Although Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group is women's music as the name implies, gender roles are fluid, but at the same time guided by traditional gender norms.

Patriarchy—Gender Struggles after Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike

Although Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group are considered strong and influential as women, there is evidence of influence and control by men in their day to day activities since the time the group was created until the present day. There was never any reason provided for the appointment of men to their group, as the idea is deeply rooted in Igbo culture that women always need the guidance and presence of men. Igbo women today are still expected to be under the guidance of men, no matter how strong they seem to be. Some scholars have argued that this is an effect of colonization, concluding that Igbo women's status was made worse by colonial masters and missionaries. Nwando Achebe argues that in the precolonial era, the Igbo woman's status was "complimentary rather than subordinate to that of men (Achebe 2005, 162)."

Philomena E. Okeke-Ihejirika, however, challenges this thought by concluding, “But whatever freedom women enjoyed in the precolonial era did not seem to permit any bold or outright confrontations with the underlying patriarchal principles on which social relations rested (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004, 14).” It is clear that Igbo women have struggled to negotiate gender roles within patriarchal Igbo culture from pre-colonial times until the present.

During my fieldwork, the first day I met with Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group for negotiation, which was the same day I had the first group interview with them, Mr. Louis (the president) told them to be very careful with what they say to me. He urged them to say only good things about the group and not say anything negative, reminding them that I will be writing about them in the United States of America. I inquired why he said that during my private interview with him and he explained that the reasons were personal. This made me more curious. When I visited some of the women at home for a private interview, I asked them many questions. Among the various issues they raised was the issue of trust while concluding that they are not comfortable with men leading them. The issue of trust played out during my trip with them as narrated in chapter five.

During OWDG performances today the men decide on the repertoire and the time for the performances. They also attend to anyone who has questions about the group. This was not the case when Rose Nzuruike was alive. While Rose was alive she struggled through the patriarchal Igbo society to manage Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group, but her absence has reduced the success she made in this regard. It has become more challenging because the members who were there during Rose Nzuruike’s reign have either passed on or are mostly inactive due to old age. Losing power to men supports the claim by mostly African feminist scholars as explained in chapter one that women continue to lose power in post-colonial Africa.

Caste and Class—The *Osu* and *Diala* Paradigm

What is mostly missing in African feminist scholars' narratives, especially the Igbos, is consideration of the *osu* caste system in Igbo culture. While scholars argue that the pre-colonial African woman was powerful and not a victim, they completely overlook females of the *osu* caste. Elijah Obinna describes the *osu* in Igbo culture as an ascribed identity, but one that is determined by one's birth in a particular family. "The term *osu* denotes that a person is a property of a deity and a living sacrifice," or a special priest (Obinna 2012, 112). Some scholars argue that "*osu* were not priests, rather, they assisted the ritual officiants in performing their duties" (ibid.). Others claim "that the *osu* were religious slaves, dedicated by individuals or lineages to local deities whose wrath could not be pacified by the sacrifices of ordinary animals" (ibid.). He further explains that "the *osu*, seen as a living sacrifice, were regarded with a mixture of fear and respect because of their supposed affinity to the supernatural. People were afraid of hurting or even offending them to avoid reprisals from the deities to which the *osu* belonged. The descendants of *osu* were thought to be infected pedigree and therefore carry a similar stigma (ibid.)." This outcast system, he argues "features hierarchical disjunction between status and power" (ibid.). It is characterized by divisions that see a group of people the (*diala*) as powerful, great and at the center, while the other group (*osu*) is seen as weak, small and at the margin (ibid. 111).

The *osu* have been discriminated against from precolonial times until today. Women are especially discriminated against as is evident in restrictions on choosing spouses. Obinna captures how this plays out in Igbo culture,

The prejudices against the *Osu* seem to have persisted mainly because of fear and uncertainty. For instance, if a *Diala* for his religious belief marries an *Osu*, he cannot be certain that the offspring of such a union would not be discriminated against by the *Diala*. Few people are ready to take such chances with the future of their children. Even

respected political and religious leaders advocate caution and prudence in matters of this nature. Even today many people relate stories of friends or family members who were courting someone only to find that they were *Osu* and then broke off the relationship. Others say that even though they do not have any particular vendetta against the *Osu*, they would not wish the status and ensuing difficulties upon themselves or their children and therefore would not marry one. Some people who are willing to marry an *Osu* are subsequently threatened with being cut off from their families for the rest of their lives (Obinna 2012, 114-115).

OWDG does have a few members who are considered *osu* in Ihiagwa. While these members were chosen because of their musical talent, they, nevertheless, suffer discrimination. One of them confided in me and I realized that no matter how much work she contributes through dancing and singing, she is constantly reminded that she belongs to the lower class in Ihiagwa community. This discrimination comes through verbal abuse from fellow group members and people from the community each time she has a misunderstanding with any of them. She laments that when she gets insulted in that way, she withdraws from music performance and re-joins after she feels better. *Osu* women are constantly marginalized in Igbo culture, and African feminist scholars have largely ignored them, weakening their claims that all Igbo women were powerful in precolonial African culture. The power Igbo women had in precolonial Africa depended on many factors and this power changed constantly.

Community Support

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group has received tremendous support from the Ihiagwa community, Owerri and Imo State. They have been the pride of the community and are mentioned as part of a cultural heritage each time the history of Ihiagwa is narrated. Ihiagwa community support seemed to decline after Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group became autonomous from the community, but the women's spectacular performances and popularity

have sustained them. Conflicts between the group and the community did not last as they have continued to make the Ihiagwa community proud.

The traditional rulers who have ruled Ihiagwa community during Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's time have supported them in many ways. They have been invited to the palace to perform several times and they have promoted the group throughout the state and the country. This promotion attracted many performance contracts outside the community. The traditional rulers have also supported the group monetarily. They have donated money towards their causes, especially their recordings and have provided transport for some of their performances. They also praise Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group in their speeches at home and abroad.

Apart from the traditional rulers, the successful daughters, and sons of Ihiagwa have done similar things for OWDG. A common way of showing appreciation of artists in Igbo culture is to "spray" money on them while they are performing. Because the group is greatly appreciated by the community, these women have made a lot of money through this practice. The greatest support they have ever received from the nation according to most of them was at the funeral ceremony of Rose Nzuruike in 2014. They all agree that although they were mourning, it was a great show of love from people all over the country. People showered praises on them for their achievements and urged them to continue. They were sprayed with enormous amounts of money while performing in tears. However, members of the group lament today that community support has declined and they are like "an only child."²⁰

²⁰ This is an expression used in Igbo culture to address loneliness. An only child is believed to be lonely because he or she lacks the support of siblings.

Continued Growth/Decline

Indeed, Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbanchefu Nzuruike is greatly missed by all, as is evident in the answers and facial expressions I witnessed during my fieldwork. It is most evident in the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's performances, their attitudes towards rehearsals and tours, and the group's prestige and solidarity. Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group has not created any new songs since her death.

The quality of their performances has also suffered. This is primarily because they lack good singers or singers who sing like Rose. Her voice is especially what is missed. They are constantly discouraged by fans who say they can never produce anything close to what they produced during Rose Nzuruike's reign. This has reduced the prestige they used to have when Rose was alive and, consequently, the support they get from the community.

They are hardly ever hired by outsiders, as people prefer listening to the compact disc recordings of the group featuring Rose more than the group itself performing without Rose. The performances I witnessed outside Ihiagwa were done in solidarity with OWDG members whose immediate family members passed away. I realized that even in these events their solidarity with each other has also diminished in the absence of Rose. Today they are struggling financially and are constantly striving to revive the group, but most members lack the motivation to continue. This is reflected in their less frequent rehearsals, which is explained by Mr. Louis who claims that "we do not rehearse because we know this music and do not need to rehearse." Despite the odds, I think they still make good music.

Summary and Conclusion

During my fieldwork, I realized that although Obiwuruotu women are considered “successful” and “liberated” musicians, they struggle to negotiate gender roles, both in their group, musical practices and in their everyday life. All of their struggles from their very beginning testify to the challenges facing African women in Igbo society: the struggles of Late Chief (Mrs.) Rose Ajuka Agbancheifu Nzuruike even though she was considered powerful and influential; their performance struggles especially over gender roles; struggles with motherhood among childless performers; maneuvering underlying patriarchal Igbo society; and caste and class issues. The formation and musical practices of OWDG are complex and cannot be reduced to the double narrative of Igbo women as victims or heroines. The history and ongoing struggles of Obiwuruotu women as narrated in this chapter show that although women can attain social status through music, they are still confined by societal norms and values. The gender struggles in the life of Igbo women no matter who they are, are more complex than suggested by the predominant victim/heroine narrative.

Having expressed the complexities and contradictions as well as gender implications that characterized the history and formative stage of OWDG, chapter three explores the women's musical practices, its complexities and contradictions as well as gender implications, while accounting for change.

Chapter III

THE PROCESS AND STYLES OF THE MUSIC OF OBIWURUOTU WOMEN DANCE GROUP: GENDER IMPLICATIONS AND CHANGE

In this chapter, I examine the process of music creation, music making, and styles of the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group to reveal gender ideologies embedded in their musical practices. While demonstrating what music means for these women, I examine the various arts put together to produce what can be called music in Igbo culture. Apart from the complexities and contradictions that characterize the lives of these women, their history and formation, as communicated in chapter two, this chapter primarily examines these contradictions and complexities as they characterize OWDG musical experiences. I also examine how their musical practices have changed over time, especially how they express these changes to reflect the effects of colonization and changes in society.

Obiwuruotu Women's Music in a Constellation of Arts: Gender and Change

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group combines various arts in music making. These arts include costumes, singing, dancing, and instrumentation. None of these arts are separated from each other during music performance, and therefore could be described as what Christopher Small calls "musicking" among Ihiagwa married women in Igbo culture (Small 1998, 12-13). These findings support Ruth Stone's claim that many African musical genres are in a constellation of arts. Stone describes African music as a "bundle of arts that are sometimes difficult to separate even for analysis" (Stone 2000, 7-8.) As these arts are performed together, it seems difficult for any single art form to function in a stand-alone performance. The combination of singing, dancing, playing instruments, masquerading, and dramatizing is what is often called

“music” in some African cultures. In addition, in the creation and performance of music in most African cultures, aspects of the historical, religious, social and political life of African people are usually an integral part of the process. Idioms, metaphors, proverbs and sounds, which are used frequently in African culture to stress or allude to the social life of African people, are also incorporated in music texts (ibid. 7-8).

Nevertheless, how these various arts are gendered in African musical practices have received little scholarly attention. The singing, dancing, instruments and instrumentation as well as costumes of OWDG are gendered. As their gender implications function in accordance with gender ideologies in Igbo life and culture, OWDG factor them in their music creation. These gender implications have changed over time primarily due to Igbo contact with other cultures, especially the West, and are a result of colonization and globalization. This chapter exposes the complexities and contradictions embedded in the gender ideologies.

Process of Song Creation and Gender Ideologies

The songs of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group were mostly created by the lead singer Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike, who claimed her dead husband “gave” her most of the songs in her dreams. This claim has been interpreted by current members and fans of OWDG in many ways. On the one hand, Rose could be telling the truth about where she got her inspiration. This ideology stems from the Igbo traditional religious belief that the dead communicate with the living, and the dead guide and guard their loved ones who are still alive. Since Rose’s husband loved and cherished her while he was alive, it is fair to say that he still guided her and wanted her to succeed when he became her ancestor. On the other hand, giving credit to her husband confirms the Igbo thought that no matter how successful a married woman is, she is expected to

be submissive to her husband. A married woman in Igbo society is expected to be humble and not gloat over her success without mentioning her husband, who is considered the head of the family even after his death. Although some men think Rose was very powerful and not submissive to men, giving her husband credit for her creativity was one of the reasons Ihiagwa community (included the same men) see Rose as a “good” woman. Thus, a good woman is one who is submissive to her husband in Igbo society. This is true in Igbo society even in present times. Giving her husband credit for her creativity contradicts the belief that Rose was not submissive to men. Nevertheless, Rose was the composer of all the songs the group recorded and was aided in her efforts by members of the OWDG. They also adapted some already existing folk and religious tunes and incorporated them into their songs and repertoire, which will be examined in the next chapter.

Gender and Communal Compositional Practice

Apart from getting inspiration from her dreams, members of the OWDG confirms that Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike song creations were also inspired by whatever was happening in society at the time, especially the changes in social values. Rose communicated her opinion on certain issues, especially issues concerning married women, world peace, and the effects of a changing society. Most OWDG songs came as a result of her zeal to educate the community while addressing societal issues in the Ihiagwa community and Igbo people in general.

Although Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike is given credit for composing most OWDG songs, founding members of the group also contributed to this process. Members communicated that she usually passed her songs down to other members during their rehearsals through oral tradition. While teaching these songs, Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike usually would ask for their

opinion and they especially contributed to the response. They helped in making the songs “sound better” while providing the harmony. Most of these women belonged to church choirs at the time and had some sense of Western music harmony. They grouped themselves into mostly three parts—treble, alto, and tenor, but sometimes they added a fourth part—bass. Each group was responsible for harmonizing each song and this is usually a third or fifth lower or higher. They agree with the response and the harmony before they continue singing. Their resolutions do not necessarily hold during performance, as women sometimes add or skip notes out of excitement during performances. Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike was solely responsible for her ad-lib, improvisation, and lyrics. Men were not part of this compositional process. They are still not interested in the singing even in present times.

Although these women have been taught that the tenor voice and the bass voice are primarily male parts in their church choirs,²¹ they adopted these voices into their singing in OWDG. The idea of men singing the lower notes contradicts the idea of harmony in Igbo musical practices. As explained in chapter 1, the lower register, especially in instrumentation, is attributed to female gender. Voices are described in terms of male or female which can either be high or low and they are only distinguished by the gender of the performer. Nevertheless, OWDG calls them tenor and bass voices, as they learned in churches, while implementing Igbo traditional voice gender categories.

²¹ According to the women, men sang these parts in their church choirs.

Gender Implications in the Adaptation of Folk and Religious Music

The origins and composers of folk songs of the Igbo people are not generally known. Some elders state that folk songs have been passed from generation to generation since precolonial times. Igbo musicians generally adapt folk tunes and make them their own. OWDG adopts Igbo folk music in two ways: first, by incorporating some parts of the lyrics or melody of folk songs in a newly composed song; secondly, by adopting the whole folk song but rearranging it in a unique way. In their song lyrics, they incorporate proverbs, idioms, and folk tales to address the subject of what they are trying to communicate. Some of their repertoires also include folk songs in their entirety. They sing them in their own way, adding unique styles including harmonies and instruments to accompany them.

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group also adapts religious songs in a similar way as they adapt folk music. Apart from just adapting these songs, Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group adapt the religious practices that accompany them. This is evident in their prayer before every performance, where prayers to the Christian God and libation to the gods of the land are offered simultaneously (see Chapter Five).

Because of their status as married women in Ihiagwa community and their Christian beliefs, these proverbs, idioms, and folktales are heavily invested in traditional gender connotations as well as Christian connotations. While OWDG songs feature social commentary on their role as women or mothers in traditional Igbo society, they especially adopt the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ as their role model. Sometimes traditional and Christian gender connotations are addressed in a single song, making the adaptation of folk and religious music a syncretic practice.

Gender Interplay: Form and Structure of the Songs of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group

The form of OWDG songs is basically call and response that usually happens in three ways. First, there is the short-phrase call and response, where the lead singer calls and the other women respond, both singing short phrases. Men might join in singing the response when they wish. Second, there is the long call and short response, in which the lead singer embarks on a long improvisation or ad-lib as long as she wants and then calls for the response, which is also a short phrase. This is when the lead singer shows her singing prowess, running social commentary and sometimes telling a story. The villagers confirmed that Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike was especially admired for this skill. Thirdly, there is the strophic form, where the lead singer calls by singing the whole verse and the other women respond by also singing the whole verse. The leader sometimes adds variations by distorting the melody but making sure that their singing is in sync with the rhythm. Sometimes a song is sung in each style and other times a song could be performed in the three styles. These go on until the end of the song while the instrumentation is steady with some intermittent improvisations. This whole process generates the song forms of the OWDG but only functions as a guide as OWDG changes forms at will during performances. When I asked why they do not have a steady form, they explained that they perform “as the spirit moves.”

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike, arguably, assumes the role of men while doing her long improvisation. This is because she utilizes the opportunity she has during improvisations to voice out her opinion and make assertions. Some elders explain that in Igbo traditional society, the man is the head of the family and makes assertions and rules about what happens in his family and Igbo society at large. He issues orders to his wife who is expected to respond accordingly without asking questions. A wife who is submissive to her husband in this way is regarded as “a

good wife,” while the wife who “questions” her husband’s orders is regarded as *oke nwanyi* (male woman). The concept of *oke nwanyi* has two meanings in Igbo society. First, it is a derogatory term used to describe “strong women.” When used this way—negatively, it means that the woman does not “respect” men in Igbo society. Second, when used in a “positive” sense it means that a woman has been able to achieve what only men could achieve in Igbo society. Chief Mrs. Rose was seen as *oke nwanyi* when she was alive in both ways, because some members of the community enjoyed the influence she had in the community while others detested it.

Symbolically, the caller of the song is the man while the women respond. This is because the caller has the opportunity to improvise and make social commentary. Rose utilized this medium to effect changes in society. With the above described structure, as explained by one of the elders of the Ihiagwa community, chief Mrs. Rose “issues order” as she voices her opinion during her long improvisation. Mr. Pat explains,

Rose was a man when she was alive. Because she was talented, she used her voice to tell us basically everything that happened in Ihiagwa community. She told us what to do each time something happens, and most of the times she gets away with it. Sometimes she praised people, other times she insulted people. Nobody could actually do anything to her because she was talented. We enjoyed her voice and wanted her to keep singing. She was the only woman who could do that in the 80s. Our *Eze* (King) loved her so much, so he basically closed his ears to all the negative compliments about her.... I really liked her too. But sometimes, she questioned authorities in a way that I did not like. In everything I miss her for being very strong (Pat, 2016).

The textures used by the Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group include mixed texture—a combination of monophony, polyphony, homophony and heterophony. During the prayer at the beginning of their performance, the lead singer starts with a solo without instrumental accompaniment, and then the women follow in unison; this creates a monophonic effect. After some time, the women usually break into parts, thereby creating a homophonic effect. When the

instrumentalists begin to play, they play simultaneous variations of the same line of the music—heterophony and independent polyphony. When they all play together, they create a polyphonic effect—the overlapping or juxtaposition of multiple lines of music – that can be homophony, independent polyphony, or heterophony. The singing, instrumentation and dancing all have gender implications as expressed below, and joining them together in their embedded symbolic functions makes OWDG music whole. Thus, the combinations of gendered instruments complement each other in creating the textures.

Accompanying Instrumentation and Gender Roles

Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group has a range of locally made instruments that accompany their music. These instruments have gender implications in their functions and arrangement, that are mostly evident in their sizes. They are *ekwe* or slit drum (usually two different sizes), sets of *ogene* or gongs (a small and a big gong), sets of *ogwe* or drums (three drums in different sizes), sets of *udu* or pot drum (a small and a big pot drum) and *oyo/chaka-chaka/ichaka* or rattle (usually two or more different sizes). The Western harmonica has also been recently added. These instruments are mainly idiophones, supporting Kwabena Nketia’s claim that idiophones are the most common sets of instruments in some African musical cultures because “they include the simplest as well as the most easily improvised sound producing objects” (Nketia 1974, 69). OWDG instruments have specific patterns that each instrument plays in accompanying each song. The patterns might be steady or changed intermittently in each song depending on the instrument and its function and, as the OWDG members say, “as the spirit moves.”

Ogene (Gong)

The *ogene* is considered the most important instrument in OWDG and Owerri women's dance groups in general. Most women's groups are accompanied by this instrument alone. Later women started adding more *ogene*, ranging from two to four. OWDG popularized the incorporation of more local musical instruments in Owerri women's music, as explained in chapter two. The *ogene* is made out of metal and its sound is produced in two ways—when it is struck with a stick or when the *ogene* itself is hit on a sandy floor with the hollowed part or tube. *Ogene* can, therefore, be considered a struck as well as stamped idiophone. The women play steady rhythmic patterns that change intermittently, improvise, and use the instrument to give cues to the lead singer, the dancers and other instrumentalists. The function of the instrument is to signal the dancers when to change dance steps, when to dance slower or faster, and cues the other instrumentalists when to slow down or play faster. Sometimes, though rarely, the instrument signals the singer to stop for more upbeat rhythmic patterns. Both women and men play this in the OWDG with women playing it first and then handing it over to Mr. Njemanze. OWDG uses two or more *ogene* that are of different sizes. The larger ones produce deeper sounds and they are used when the player wants to improvise with a deeper sounding *ogene*. These larger *ogene* are the *nne* (female). The small ones produce lighter sounds and they are considered *oke* (male), as well as used when their players want to improvise with a lighter sounding *ogene*.



Photo 12. Oke Ogene (Male Gongs)



Photo 13. Nne na oke Ogene (Female and Male gong)

It is interesting to note that men primarily play the female gong while the women play the male gong in OWDG as seen in the above pictures. These types of contradictions characterize their musical practices as it is the instrument itself that is gendered and not necessarily the player.

Ekwe (Slit Drum)

The *ekwe* has set patterns that are sometimes improvised. Like the *ogene* the patterns are generally steady but could change when the player wants to add more “color” to the music, or when it is time to give the dancers a cue, to either dance slowly, or faster, or change their dance step. The *ekwe* is an idiophone hollowed out from wood and struck with a wood-like stick. This instrument is common among the Igbo people in Nigeria and in the diaspora. Both women and men play this in OWDG with women playing it first and then handing it over to men, signifying women’s ownership of the group. Just like the *ogene*, OWDG sometimes have two slit drums, and the larger one—*nne* (female) produces deeper sound while the smaller one—*oke* (male) produces a higher pitched sound.



Photo 14. Ekwe (Slit Drum)

In many Igbo communities, as explained by some elders, the *ekwe* is considered to be the mouth of the gods. Even in contemporary times many villages use the *ekwe* to convene their members for important meetings and to communicate certain news to them. Only men performed this function in precolonial Igbo as well as in the present. It is called the *ikoro* in some villages when it performs this function. If the *ekwe* is adopted into the women's circle, as in OWDG, it becomes gender neutral.

Udu (Pot Drum)

The *udu* is a struck idiophone in the shape of a pot with a large hole. A bass sound is produced by hitting the hole with either the hand or a piece of carved foam attached to a wooden handle. OWDG uses a carved foam stick to play the *udu* which functions as a metronome in their music. This instrument is exclusively played by women in OWDG, sometimes in pairs. While

some of the members communicated that the larger pot is considered *nne* (female) and the smaller pot is *oke* (male), many of them argued that the pot is a female because it is a metronome instrument that produces the bass sound. This is because instruments that are ascribed to the female gender in traditional Igbo culture produce deeper sounds.



Photo 15. OWDG ready to play the metal pot drum.

Furthermore, the main reason why most of them argue that the pot drum belongs to the female gender stems from the precolonial and colonial eras when the *udu* was primarily molded from clay. It was an instrument primarily molded by women from clay soil. This instrument was

very popular among girls and used in women's musical genres at the time. Some genres like *Avu-Udu* Girl's (Pot-Drum Dance) exclusively made use of this musical instrument and a whistle. Girls and women who used this musical instrument went to the stream where they found clay soil very early in the mornings to mold *udu* they used for musical performances. They molded fresh *udu* for performances as they needed because, the *udu* was very fragile and broke easily. I had this experience in my *avu-udu* dance group while growing up.

Some elderly people (men and women) compared molding pot drums to the life of Igbo women. They explained that Igbo girls are molded into womanhood, and they are considered to be fragile. Molding a girl into womanhood denotes giving birth to a girl child and training her to be respectful and act feminine, ladylike, and train her for the "ultimate end"—marriage. Because women are expected to behave this way in Igbo society, they are considered delicate and fragile. Igbo people believe that a woman who is not "trained well" according to Igbo norms and values will find it difficult to get married and therefore be broken like a pot drum made out of clay. For this reason, many people in Ihiagwa community and other parts of Igbo land, especially in Owerri consider the pot drum as a female musical instrument.

However, in the present day many musical genres, both male and female, make use of the *udu* as a metronome and use an *udu* made out of durable metal that will be less fragile. While some people think that the ones made out of clay sound better, the pot drum made out of metal has a similar sound. Considering its bass sound and how it functions, the *udu* is considered a female instrument.



Photo 16. Clay and metal pot drums

Oyo, Chaka chaka, or Ichaka Rattle)

The *oyo* or *chaka-chaka* or *ichaka* rattle) is a spherical-shaped, shaken idiophone. The name differs among Igbo communities with different dialects. The *oyo* is held in the hands at its neck while being played. The spherical wooden part is covered with beads that sounds when shaken. This instrument plays a steady rhythm in OWDG and players can improvise, sometimes playing two at a time for a stronger effect. This instrument is exclusively played by women in OWDG. While this instrument is primarily associated with women who usually play it in musical genres that involve men and women, in the present day some men have perfected their skills in playing the *oyo*. The reason for primarily giving women this instrument to play is because, as some villagers explain, it is considered a “soft” instrument. Women have played this instrument since the precolonial era and have continued to play it in OWDG and it continues to be associated with the female gender.

²² <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/80/e2/83/80e283fa2b3a14c020844c3119e12c58--indian-musical-instruments-music-instruments.jpg>



Photo 17. OWDG women playing the oyo

Some of the villagers I spoke to attested that priestesses—sacred women that represent the gods, especially the gods of the river from precolonial times to the present day—use this instrument primarily for divinations. They walked around the communities shaking the *oyo* in accompaniment to their loud voices as they gave messages to the villagers. While the villagers acknowledge that the priestesses used a slightly different shape of *oyo*, they confirmed that it is an instrument that belongs to the female gender because of its use by priestesses.

Ogwe Drums)

Ogwe is a type of drum common in Igboland made of carved wood with an animal skin head and usually struck with the hands. The set of *ogwe* drums feature steady rhythms and players improvise when the music is louder or more upbeat. Both women and men play this in

Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group with women playing the drums first and then handing them over to men.



Photo 18. A set of ogwe (Drums)

The *ogwe* and how it functions in Igbo society is best described by the renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in his Award winning novel *Things Fall Apart*. He describes the drum as a symbol of unity as it enhances connections among communities in Igbo land. Villagers beat the drums in a persistent and unchanging manner so that every villager can recognize each distinct sound and what the drums are communicating. The *ogwe*, therefore, becomes part of the Igbo village life and acts as a metaphoric heartbeat that beats in unison uniting all the village members (Achebe 1994, 104).

The *ogwe* has been mostly played by men since precolonial times, when it was exclusively played by men, as explained by some elderly men. Although in the present day both men and women play the *ogwe* and some may consider the instrument to be gender neutral, its arrangement has gender implications. Like many of the other instruments, the drums are arranged according to sizes and the sounds they produce. They tend to be arranged in order from the largest drum to the smallest. However, drummers order the drums differently depending on whether they are right- or left-handed and on their personal playing style. The biggest drum produces the deepest sound and is considered a female drum while the smaller one produces a lighter sound and is considered a male drum.



Photo 19. A male member of OWDG playing the ogwe

Harmonica

The Western harmonica has been added to OWDG in recent years. Although the harmonica is thought of as a melodic instrument, it is used to create a percussive effect in Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's music. It is only played by the president—Mr. Louis Nnaji, especially when the lead singer stops singing.



Photo 20. The president accompanying OWDG with the harmonica

The women explain that the harmonica gives men the opportunity to lead while others dance and play. Since women have been lead singers who always attract attention from the audience since the group began, the incorporation of the harmonica allows men to also get some attention from the audience. This is especially true when Mr. Louis improvises on the harmonica, an example of men having direct control over certain moments in OWDG performances.

Rhythmic Patterns and Gender Implications

When these instruments sound together they produce polyrhythm, which is a characteristic feature of OWDG music. While playing as a group, individual players also improvise in accordance with the underlying rhythmic motive. Below is the basic rhythm produced when the instruments play together:

TIME	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Udu	X								X							
Ekwe	X			X			X		X			X			X	.
Ogwe		X	X			X	X			X	X			X	X	
Ogene	X			X	X				X			X	X			.
Oyo	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Figure 6. The basic rhythmic pattern in Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group

This rhythmic pattern underlies most OWDG songs. It usually starts slowly and gradually moves faster and is found in all the songs discussed in this dissertation. This rhythm does not show what exactly goes on rhythmically when the music starts; it is only a guide to what metamorphoses into more complex polyrhythms.

These instruments are usually arranged in an arc beside each other, according to their sizes, which also means according to their gender roles as illustrated below. The larger ones are considered *nne* (female) and they produce deeper sounds, while the smaller ones are considered *oke* (male) as they produce lighter sounds. The players sit together to be able to hear each other and to allow the converging rhythm to synchronize. The women play these instruments first during their prayer before handing them over to men as will be described in Chapter Five.



Photo 21. Instrumental arrangement of the Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group²³

²³ This picture does not have all the instruments as they alternate instrument during performances and according to the availability of instrumentalists during each performance.

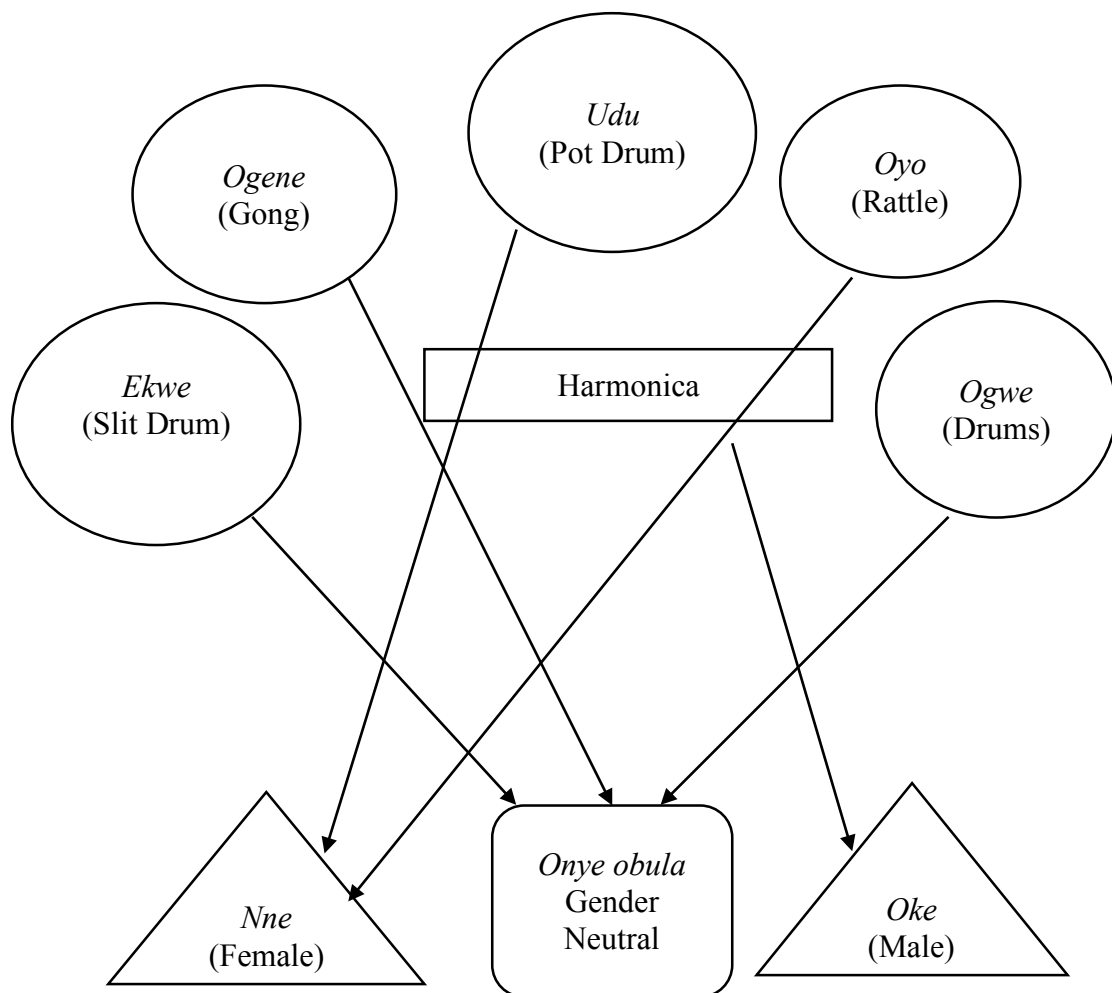


Figure 7. Instrumental Arrangement and their Gender Implications in OWDG's Music Performance

Although instruments have functioned differently in Igboland from the precolonial times to the present, OWDG has negotiated the functions of these instruments as regards to their gender roles. Some of the instruments such as the drum and the slit drum were not played by women at all in precolonial times and only in some parts of colonial Igbo. Today women play these instruments as shown in the diagram above. The above diagram shows the instrumental arrangement and who plays them in OWDG in the present day. The *ekwe* (slit drum) is played by a woman first before handing it over to a man, reaffirming women's ownership of the group. This is also the case with the *ogwe* (drum) and the *ogene* (gong), allowing them to become gender-neutral. The *udu* and *oyo* have always been played primarily by women and have maintained their gender association. The harmonica remains a male instrument and is the only innovation men brought to the group. No woman has ever played harmonica in OWDG or even touched one, reaffirming its strictly male gender connotations.

Feminine Singing

Although instrumentation adds up in attaining the desired richness in Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group's musical production, the primary reason why their music was widely appreciated was because of the singing prowess of Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike. Stone rightly argues that in some African musical cultures, "the voice is the concept that is prominent, whether an instrument is being played or a human is creating the sound directly. Within this concept, the possibility of variation is richly varied and nuanced. Richness is desired, attempted, and applauded within the timbral spectrum (Stone 2005, 54)." Apart from the sound the voice produces, it primarily communicates to the African people in a language that they understand. Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike's voice is described as "beautiful" and "ringing" by the villagers.

While her voice might be described as “nasal” in Western music terms, her voice “rings” in a way that the lyrics are well expressed, and thus, suits Ihiagwa, Imo State, and the Nigerian people. Bebey rightly expresses what it means to sing beautifully in African culture, a notion that is free from Western bias and standards, “A beautiful voice (again in a Western sense) may be a mere accident in the context of traditional African music. The objective of African music is not necessarily to produce sounds agreeable to the ear, but to translate everyday experiences into living sound. In a musical environment, whose constant purpose is to depict life, nature, or the supernatural, the musician wisely avoids using beauty as his criterion because no criterion could be more arbitrary (Bebey 1975, 115).”

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike’s primary role was to sing and communicate the social, political, and religious life of women by making social commentary on the happenings in the community through music. This is usually done through improvisation and ad-lib, using the texture of her voice, which is best described as a mixture of soprano and traditional voice. This mixture resulted in what Nigerian people describe as “ringing.” Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group songs are primarily call and response which is not always short as many African music scholars have asserted. Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike could engage in a long improvisation and ad-lib as long as she wants or “as the spirit moves” before giving other women cues for response. In most of her improvisations Rose praised and critiqued society, praising the gods of the land and the Christian God, educating her audience about societal morals, communicating women’s status and much more. Her improvised social commentary will be analyzed in Chapter Four on song analysis.

Rose Nzuruike represented the collective response of women in the way that OWDG singers responded to Rose during performances, usually by singing in harmony in a manner that resembles Bebey's description of vocal responsorial singing in Africa:

“African voices adapt themselves to their musical context—a mellow tone to welcome a bride; a husky voice to recount an indiscrete adventure; a satirical inflection for a teasing tone, with laughter bubbling up to compensate for mockery—they may be soft or harsh as circumstances demand. Any individual who has the urge to make his voice heard is given the liberty to do so; singing is not a specialized affair. Anyone can sing and, in practice, everyone does (ibid.).

The combination of the characteristics described by Bebey results in spectacular singing that thrills audiences listening to OWDG. In Chapter Five I will demonstrate how women adjust their voices to fit musical contexts.

This voice is especially appreciated in Igbo society as being beautiful for its feminine nature. The notion of a “ringing” sound is most often attributed to women's voices. Villagers confirmed that men especially found her voice attractive and many wanted to have an affair with her after she lost her husband. Some men told me that being able to express what was going on in society with a “ringing voice” was romantic. Being able to become a star singer in precolonial and colonial times was a difficult status for women to attain. Rose was one of the few women who were able to attain this status at the time. Although she faced great challenges on her path to stardom, she was honored greatly for being able to sing while taking a stance on social issues, especially those concerning married women and women in general.

Romanticizing *Egwu-Ukwu* (Hip-Wiggling) Dance

Patience Kwakwa, affirms the claim that dance is an integrated art in African music. She argues that although dance is an art on its own in some African communities, it could be seen as part of a constellation of arts—a combination of music, movements, costumes, make-up, ceremonial objects, rituals and much more (Kwakwa 2000, 56). This is the case in OWDG as dance is completely integrated into performance. OWDG dance is usually open to everyone shortly after the group begins dancing. It starts out formally as a choreographed performance and eventually ends informally. Their dances are usually interrupted by people who are moved to dance by the upbeat rhythms or people who want to spray money on them in celebratory appreciation for their performances.



Photo 22. OWDG Women doing choreographed egwu-ukwu dance



Photo 23. OWDG dancing with the audience

At the beginning of the dance, the group starts dancing in unison following the *ogene* beats and sometimes the *ekwe*. The *ogene* communicates to them as they dance to the rhythm in their movements. This usually happens during the singing and the dancing is usually calm at this time. The dancers at this time join in the chorus in responding to the lead singer.

At some point when the lead singer stops singing and the instrumentalists are playing louder and more upbeat rhythms, the dance steps double. It becomes freestyle and women begin to show their *egwu ukwu* skills. The audience usually joins at that point either to give them

money in a celebratory appreciation or to dance with them. Pearl Primus best describes audience participation in African dance,

When these people truly dance, there can be no observers, for those who seek to watch soon join... Either, numbed, bewildered, or frightened by the intensity of their own emotions they subconsciously remove themselves back to their comfortable living rooms and shut out the scene that their eyes unseeingly follow or they are snatched, plucked up by an invisible force and hurled into the ring of the dance, their own heartbeat matching the crescendo of pulsing sound, their body becoming one with the sweating dancers. For them, the magic of all life is experienced! Eternity captured! An initiation! A belief! A voyage into before and beyond! (Primus 1998, 3-4)

Egwu Ukwu (Hip-wiggling dance) is the primary dance that accompanies OWDG; the women add styles and different dancing steps to “spice it up,” prompting audiences to join in dancing *Egwu Ukwu* with the utmost excitement.



Photo 24. Egwu-ukwu dance by OWDG

Many contradictions and complexities characterizes the *egwu-ukwu* dance that accompanies the music of OWDG, as explained by many elders. While every Owerri daughter is expected to know how to dance the *egwu ukwu* well, society expects them not to indulge so much in shaking their hips because it is considered wayward. On the one hand, girls and woman who do the *egwu ukwu* dance very well are acknowledged and sometimes rewarded by society. This is because *egwu ukwu* is the primary women's dance movements in Owerri, Igbo culture. Since this dance accompanies most women's musical genres in this culture, women who learn or know how to do the dance moves are considered to be eminent women. Furthermore, men are

attracted to women who know how to do the *egwu ukwu* dance and sometimes get married to them because of this reason. On the other hand, women who are exceptionally good in doing the *egwu ukwu* dance are considered wayward in Igbo. This is because, their hips shake so much that men fantasize when they are doing the dance. According to the men in the community, women who do this dance well are very good in bed during sex, and therefore, are rumored to have sex with many men. Accounts show that women who are extraordinarily good in *egwu ukwu* have generally found it difficult to get married in Igbo society. While men fantasize about having sex with these women, they are generally reluctant to marry them as they believe it will be difficult to satisfy their sexual needs. Men, therefore, try to avoid marrying such women and prefer to have them as mistresses.

Costumes

Costumes are an integral part of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's performance as none of the performances happen without a well thought out idea and display of costume adding color to their performances. In her book *Music in West Africa*, while analyzing the cloth patterns of the Kpelle in Liberia, West Africa, Stone captures how costumes function in music performances in Africa:

Clothes, like music and speech often carries lexical meaning. That is, there are specific meanings for patterns and designs. And the combination of these patterns communicates proverbs. Women most frequently choose to wear particular clothes at certain times to communicate specific messages. These patterns communicate messages in everyday life, for ceremonies, or other special events. Thus, these faceted patterns are rich in communicative meaning (Stone 2005, 41-42).

In Igbo society, costumes function in similar ways. OWDG use many uniforms that are meant to serve specific purposes, and the group has used many since they began in 1979. The

darker ones are used during a funeral or sorrowful ceremonies. The brighter ones are for happy or special ceremonies. The brighter colors can also be used for the death of an elderly person because it is considered a blessing for people to die at a very old age. Some of the uniforms are used in the Ihiagwa community while others are used outside Ihiagwa. The patterns on the uniforms reflect their functions and they have names as shown below.



Photo 25. Kirikiri star (Small stars costume)

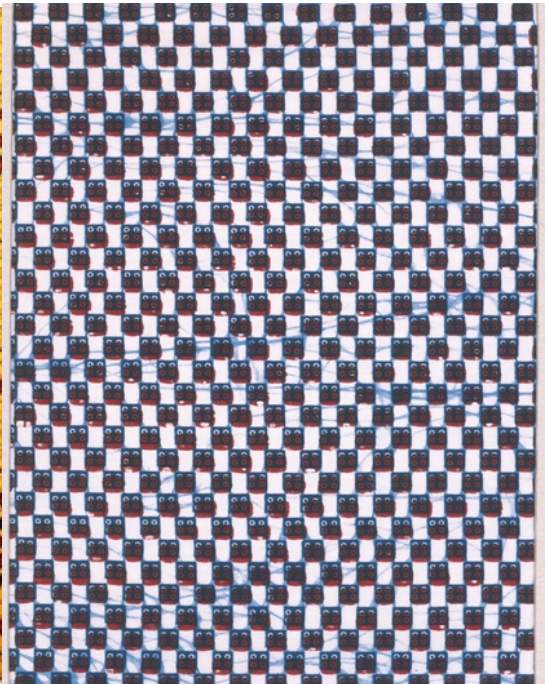


Photo 26. Mkpuruoka (Corn seeds)



Figure 27. Horse Costume



Photo 28. Members of OWDG in one of their costumes

In recent times OWDG women lack funds to acquire many costumes so they use whatever they have available for performances. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Their attire is a typical Igbo women's attire. The full regalia is made up of four parts—one white blouse, two wrappers (one is usually smaller), and one red hair tie. They usually put on the blouse first, and then tie the bigger wrapper under it. The hair tie follows and then they tie the smaller wrapper on top of the blouse and the bigger wrapper. Their uniforms are made to be a

little loose to make it comfortable for dancing. Members usually wear make-up and some jewelry to look “brighter.” Their costumes add color to their appearances and their audiences admire their fashion. Wearing this typical married women’s attire in Igboland as costume, communicates to their audience that they are married women from Igboland. Thus, traditional Igbo women’s attire accompanies them to all their performances.

Traditional, Popular and Religious Music

The music of OWDG includes traditional, popular and religious music. Furthermore, its religious aspect combines the traditional and Christian religions. As in many musical cultures in Africa, the difference between traditional, popular and religious music is blurred which is one of the effects of colonization and globalization. J. H. Kwabena Nketia outlines three major colonizing effects of transplanting Western music into Africa:

First, the continuity of traditional music in its unadulterated form outside the adopted Western institutions was unintentionally assured by the exclusion of traditional musicians and their music from the church and educational institutions, the most direct sources of Western musical influence.... Second, the exclusion of those who were systematically exposed to Western culture from participation in traditional music led to the emergence of new “communities of taste” Third, the creative urge of members of these new musical communities found an outlet in new compositions. (Nketia 1974, 16)

Thus, with rapid changes in culture due to colonization and globalization African music becomes “adulterated” as musicians strive to accommodate various beliefs and utilize their creative energies to “make music better,” that is, suitable and accessible to all audiences. OWDG evokes tradition while connecting listeners to the contemporary world.

OWDG as Traditional Music

OWDG's music is primarily a traditional women's music in Igboland. Apart from the subtle hybridity that characterizes the music, it evokes deep Igbo thoughts, values, life, traditions and sound. It functions as entertainment while taking a critical swipe on society through social commentary. Their musical practices reveal, among many things, the life, struggles, and status of the Igbo woman as well as gender roles in musical practices in Igboland, as will be examined in Chapter Four. The instruments are mostly Igbo traditional instruments and they produce complex polyrhythms that characterize Igbo traditional music. Their songs are mostly traditional and their costumes are typical of that of a traditional Igbo woman. Their compositional technique and transmission are characterized by oral tradition that is typical in Igbo music creation and performance.

OWDG as Popular Music

In his study of Yoruba *juju* music, Christopher Waterman argues that it is difficult to draw a sharp boundary between traditional and popular music in some African societies. This is because some musical genres meet the criteria that “formulate a cross-cultural definition of popular music—openness to change, syncretism, intertextuality, urban provenience, commodification (Waterman 2000, 214).” Roy Shuker further defines popular music, “Essentially, it consists of hybrid musical traditions, styles, and influences, with the only common element being that the music is characterized by a strong rhythmical component, and generally, if not exclusively, relies on electronic amplification (Shuker 2008, 7).” Some traits can be found in OWDG's musical practices.

OWDG fits into most of these cross-cultural definitions of popular music. From the history of the group, it is obvious that the group has been open to change by accepting fluidity in gender roles and the incorporation of the Western harmonica. The process of syncretism is evident in the synthesis of African traditional religion and Western religion in their musical practices. These women have toured both villages and urban cities in Nigeria performing to both audiences who are usually thrilled at their performances. They have performed communally and also on stages with their music amplified. The incorporation of the harmonica and its acceptance is evidence of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group's leaning towards popular music. The incorporation of Western musical instruments has become commonplace in African popular music.

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's music has been commercialized since the 1980s when they began recording and selling vinyl records, and cassettes. Eventually came the sale of compact discs of old recordings, which included photos of the women when they were younger, and the group produced video recordings for commercial use. The videos present Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group as popular music, incorporating young female and male dancers who were hired professionally and not part of the group. The group continues to reproduce old recordings that are widely sold as contemporary popular music.

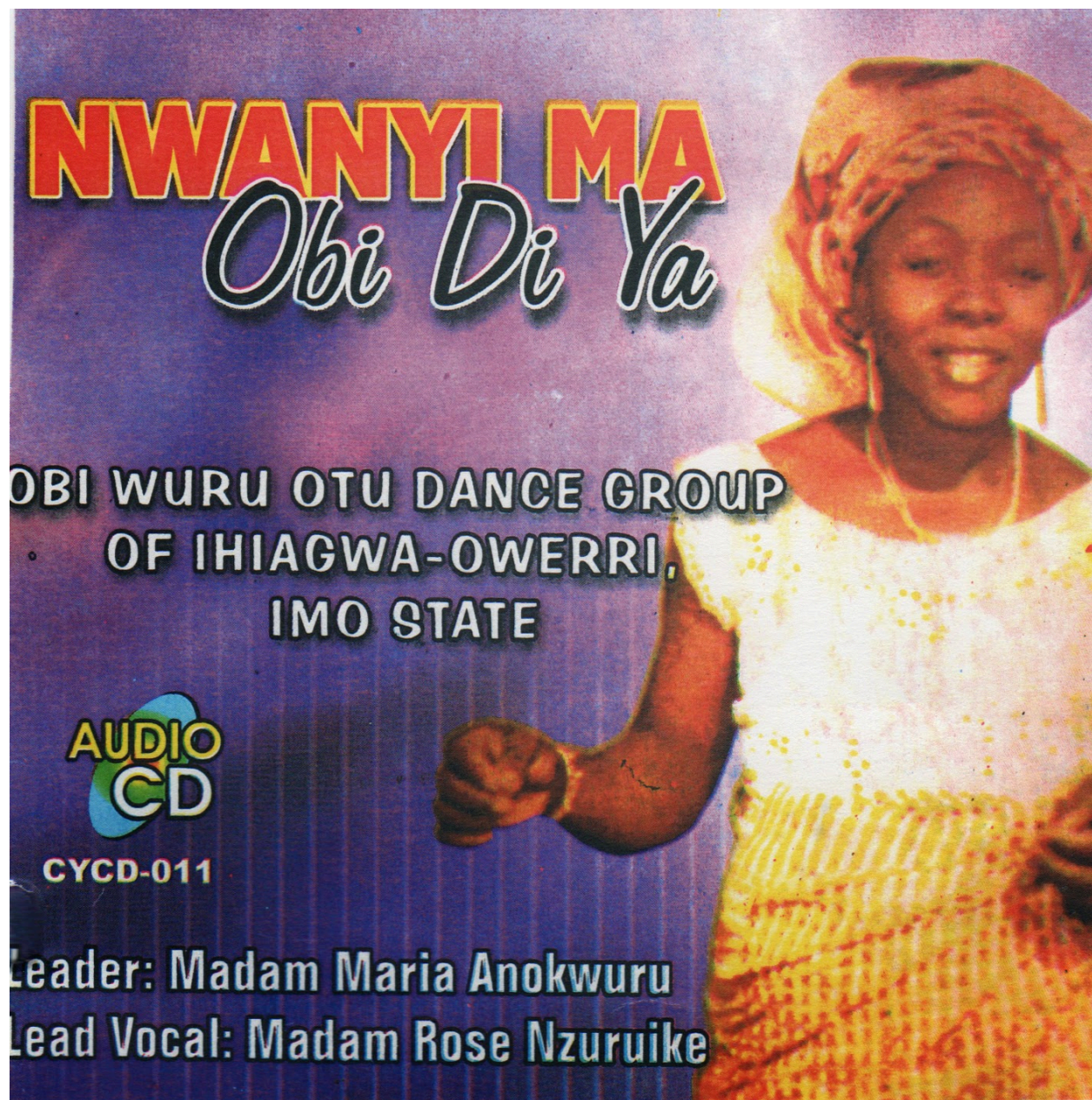


Photo 29. Album cover featuring a younger Mrs. Rose Nzuruike



Photo 30. Album cover featuring Mrs. Rose Nzurike at an older age

OWDG as Religious Music

In addition to social commentary, spirituality is an integral part of Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group's music. This is evident in their performance practice and song lyrics. The group starts their performances with prayers, praying to both the Christian God and the gods of the land simultaneously, as will be described in Chapter Five. This is because of how integral religion has

always been in the daily lives of Igbos since the precolonial times. They transferred the allegiance and reverence they have for the traditional gods and ancestors to the Christian God and saints. They seek help from the Christian God or the Igbo gods in virtually everything they do (Nwala 1985, 114, 229). Because of the way the Igbo community is set up and functions, it is difficult to isolate traditional religion from the lives of the people. Thus, just like OWDG, most Igbo Christians see themselves practicing both religions. Since the Igbos have many gods that represent all aspects of people's lives, musicians find it obligatory to revere them; sometimes they transfer the titles of the traditional gods to that of the Christian God. This is the rationale for incorporating both religions in Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group musical practices. There are some repertoires that depict religious music. Even when they sing about motherhood, solidarity and other social issues in Igbo society, most songs allude to Christian God or Igbo deities. They sing about how everything comes from God/the gods and how the gods will make everything beautiful in time.

One example is in the OWDG song *Ochu Nwa Okuko Nwe Ada* (The Unjust Assailant Falters). In this song, the women sing a proverb used in pouring libation to the gods while also referring to the Christian God. The first two lines, *Ochu Okuko nwe ada, Nwa Okuko nwe nwe nwe oso* (The unjust assailant falters, the victim always survives) is a proverb used in praying to the gods of the land. It is used when pouring libation to call on the gods for protection. In this song, OWDG asks for protection of an orphan. Towards the end of the refrain, they also call on the Christian God to protect the orphan, *Ma akpoma Messiah, Messiah iga ama mkpa anyi eee* (So, I call on Messiah, Messiah, you know our problems). The lead singer also does this when she sings along.

Igbo**English****Refrain**

<i>Ochu Okuko nwe ada</i>	The unjust assailant falters
<i>Nwa Okuko nwe nwe nwe oso</i>	The victim always survives
<i>Nwa mbia yaa onye Eze gbara mpi</i>	The orphan who engages in a fight with a king
<i>Nwa mbia atha gbuola onwe ya n'ahuhu</i>	suffers greatly
<i>Nwa mbia yaa onye Eze gbara mpi</i>	The orphan who engages in a fight with royalty
<i>Nwa mbia egegbuola onwe ya n'ilulu</i>	is mesmerized by proverbs
<i>Ma akpoma messiah</i>	So, I call on Messiah
<i>Messiah iga ama mkpa anyi eee</i>	Messiah, you know our problems

Rose

<i>A chi kere nwa mbia nonyere anyi</i>	The God/god who created the orphan is with them
<i>O mere onye isi ya ahu uzu</i>	He made the blind to see
<i>Messiah nuru olu anyi</i>	Hearken to our voice
<i>I mere onye ngworo eje e ije</i>	You made the lame to walk
<i>Jehovah nuru akwa anyi</i>	Jehovah listen to our cry
<i>Chi mere nwanyi aga amuo nwa</i>	The God who made the barren to bear a child
<i>Jehovah nuru olu anyi</i>	Jehovah hearken to our voice.

Figure 8. Lyrics and English translation of “Ochu Nwa Okuko Nwe Ada” (The Unjust Assailant)

The form of *Ochu Okuko nwe Ada* is AABBCB with each melody repeating once. This song uses a combination of polyphony, homophony, independent polyphony and heterophony.

Effects of Colonization on Married Woman as Expressed by OWDG

Although there were changes in musical practices in Igboland due to contact with other cultures, the most drastic change came when Igbo people had contact with the West through colonization, as with most ethnic groups in Africa. While the British government took over the leadership of Igbo communities, Christian missionaries built churches that disrupted Igbo traditional religion and cultures. Music is one of the cultures that was affected, as it is an integral

part of the life the Igbos. Although African music scholars have recorded changes in songs and dance moves, the effects of colonization in the musical practices of OWDG, as addressed above, are evident in the instruments and instrumentation as well as the songs. One major change is the addition of the harmonica in their instrumental ensemble. The harmonica adds new flavor to the rhythm of OWDG when played; this flavor makes their music sound popular—a new sound. The new sound pleases some of the audience while some (especially the elderly) think that the “Westernization” of the OWDG ensemble’s timbre is unpleasant. Another addition is the amplification of instruments since Igbo musical performance moved from a village setting to the stage. The music of OWDG was not amplified initially, but is now amplified because of larger audiences. Although amplification helps reach the audience, technical problems are now more common.

Many OWDG song texts address the effects of colonization and how the demise of the precolonial Igbo culture is adversely affecting Igbo people. One example is in the song *Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N’Uwa Mbu* (The Currency of our Forefathers):

Igbo**English****Refrain**

<i>Ego nna anyi kpara na uwa bu</i>	The money our forefathers used in the olden days
<i>Owu ego kiri kiri</i>	Was cowries
<i>Ego okpara mbu,</i>	The money they used in earlier days
<i>Ego ejiri luo nu nne muru anyi ni</i>	The money they used as dowry for our mothers
<i>Igbo jee akpo ya ojomma</i>	The Igbo call it Ojomma
<i>Owerri nnu ahu nna ego baala</i>	Now, money is everywhere, my people,
<i>Owu ozugbo mmanu bara aba</i>	But not all are rich
<i>Oye ogazhirirla, aya nwe mba</i>	Only the lucky have the say

Rose

<i>Onyinye Chukwu nyere onye owula ri nu iche iche na uwa</i>	God's gifts to everyone on earth varies
<i>Onyere nde eze</i>	Some are made Kings
<i>Nye nde omumu na aku na uba</i>	Some have children and wealth
<i>Onyer nde eluwa</i>	Some are given the whole earth
<i>Onye chi nyere eze ya nara nuo o</i>	If God crowns you King, receive it
<i>Owerri nnu ahunnaoo</i>	You see, Owerri, my people
<i>Ahy amara shi ego abaala oo</i>	We know money is everywhere
<i>Owu ozugbo mmanu bara aba</i>	But not all are rich
<i>Oye ogazhirirla, aya nwe mba</i>	Only the lucky have the say

Refrain 2

<i>Ee ego ee ego abaala</i>	Yes! Money; money is in abundance
<i>Onye enwee ego enwee ezhi uka eluwa</i>	One without wealth has no say no in this world
<i>Ona ri ma</i>	But, is it fair?

Rose

<i>Ee ego nu agbara mbo ego akola m ooo</i>	Let me not toil in vain for genuine money
<i>Onye enwee ego enwee ezhi uka eluwa</i>	Anyone without money has no say in this world
<i>Ona ri ma</i>	But is that good?
<i>Okoro enwee ego enwee ezhi uka eluwa</i>	A man without wealth has no say in this world
<i>Ogbenye enwe ego enwe ezhi uka eluwa</i>	The poor without wealth has no say in this world
<i>Ogbenye enwe nne enwe ezhi uka eluwa</i>	The poor without mother has no say in this world

Figure 9. Lyrics and English translation of “Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N’Uwa Mbu” (The Currency of our Forefathers)

Ego Nnanyi Kpara N'Uwa Mbu

Transcribed by Ruth Opara

The musical transcription is written on a single staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The lyrics are written below the staff, aligned with the notes. The piece is divided into six measures, each starting with a measure number (6, 11, 16, 21, 26) in the left margin.

Measure 6: E go nna anyi kpara n'uwa mbu o wu ego ki ri ki ri, E go nna anyi

Measure 11: kpa ra n'u wa mbu o wu ego ki ri ki ri E go okpara mbu e go

Measure 16: ji ri luo nu nne mu ru anyini E go okpara mbu e go ji ri luo nu nne

Measure 21: mu ru anyi ni I gbo je akpoya ojo mma I gbo je akpoya ojo mma

Measure 26: O we rri nnu ahu nna nnu ahu nna e go aba la O wu ozu gbo mma nu

Measure 31: ba ra aba O nye oga zhi ri la a ya nwe mba

Figure 10. Music Transcription of “Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N’Uwa Mbu”

The above song created by Rose and the OWDG takes a critical swipe on the Western currency introduced by the British colony during colonization. The lyrics also criticizes the concept of money in precolonial Igbo and how it has changed for the worse in colonial and post-colonial Igbo. Because cowries used for money during precolonial times were difficult to acquire, Igbo people primarily exchanged goods and labor—trade by barter— and did not need currency for most transactions. Most people lived a fulfilled life without having a lot of cowries.

Some elderly women explain that one of the few things the currency was used for was paying of the wedding dowry. The song expresses this when it says, *Ego okpara mbu, Ego ejiri luo nu nne muru anyi ni* (The money they used in earlier days, the money they used as dowry for our mothers). Although the concept of dowry has received enormous criticisms from African feminist scholars, OWDG and many elderly women believe that paying dowry with cowries made women special. Men also had to earn cowries to get married and those who worked hard were able to support their wives. But women who got pregnant during courtship were often forced to marry men who may not have had dowries and were not able to provide adequate support.

In the present day, Western currency seems to be everywhere, but many people still do not have enough money, as expressed in the song, *Owerri nnu ahu nna ego baala, Owuu ozugbo mmanu bara aba, Oye ogazhirirla, aya nwe mba* (Now, money is everywhere, my people, but not all are rich, Only the lucky have the say). According to some elderly women, they see money often but they do not have enough for their well-being. Only the rich who have a lot of money are able to get what they need and, as the song says, “have a say in this world.” Western money seems to have little value because one does not need to work very hard to earn money. This has a tremendous effect on married women’s lives. Because there are so many ways to get money such

as stealing and politicking (as expressed by some women), thieves are often able to marry any woman of their choice and mistreat them while their families are attracted mainly by the size of their dowries.

In her adlibs and in Refrain Two, Rose consoles poor people, including women, whom she asserts have no say in society, even in the midst of wealth— *Ee ego ee ego abiala Onye enwee ego enwee ezhi uka eluwa, Ona ri ma* (Yes! Money; money is in abundance, one without wealth has no say no in this world, But, is it fair?). Many elderly women agree that the introduction of Western currency made their lives worse than their mothers and grandmothers whom their husbands paid their dowries with cowries.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how various arts in OWDG music making have gender implications, such as singing, dancing, instrumentation and the use of costume. These arts have embedded symbolic gender ideologies and literal meanings that are complex and sometimes contradictory. The process of song creation involves individual composition as well as communal compositional technique. The decision about communal composition is solely made by the lead singer/composer as she decides when to incorporate other women's talent, as a result, there is no systematic compositional technique. The process of oral transmission further complicates music creation and performance by the OWDG. Although women agree on melody and especially harmony, they sing what they remember. The harmonies differ in various performances and there are subtle differences in the melody of some songs.

Contradictions and complexities are manifest in types of songs they create as they adapt folk and religious songs. The religious song lyrics revere both the Christian and traditional

gods—two spiritual beings seemingly in opposition. Although there are standard song forms, they vary during performance, based on the lead singer, audience participation, and audience reactions. Therefore, there are no fixed musical forms in most OWDG songs. The instruments and how they are combined have their musical and gender roles. Instrumentalists accompany songs by responding and syncing with the lead singer, who cues them with basic and improvised rhythms when to change tempo and dynamics. Their singing, which is based primarily on call and response lies solely at the discretion of the lead singer, whose voice is appreciated for being feminine. The *egwu-ukwu* (hip-wiggling) dancing starts off as choreographed dance that eventually breaks down as the audience joins the dance on stage. Men have also come to unfairly sexually objectify women who are skilled at this dance.

Because of the amalgamation of various musical cultures and styles, OWDG is a traditional music that is also a form of popular music. It is also religious in its reverence to both traditional Gods and the Christian God. The complexities and contradictions that characterize OWDG music is evident in these syncretic practices. Their response to audience reactions speaks to their adaptability of their music at any given time. Furthermore, their adaptation of the harmonica shows their openness to new musical cultures and ideas. Adapting to situations does not necessarily make them victims or heroines. As with the complexities that characterize their life, history and formation as expressed in Chapter Two, their musical practices are also complex and this chapter has shown numerous changes made as a result of colonization. In the next chapter, I will analyze OWDG songs to show how music translates to everyday experience of women in their roles as married women and mothers in Igbo society.

Chapter IV

SONGS OF THE OBIWURUOTU WOMEN'S DANCE GROUP

In this chapter, I analyze the songs of Obiwuruotu women's Dance Group, exploring the functions and multiple meanings in their song repertoires. The songs of the OWDG address the socio-cultural, political and religious aspects of the Igbo people's lives, including the many contradictions and complexities that characterize the lives of these women and, thereby, challenges the double narrative of African women as victims or heroines. This chapter reveals how issues of motherhood, patriarchy, class, solidarity and gender that are part of the lives and musical practices of OWDG members are also evident in OWDG song lyrics, in ways that may be overt and, in some cases, covert. I explore the general functions of OWDG songs and analyze the songs under the themes of solidarity, motherhood, class, patriarchy and gender. While incorporating OWDG and community perspectives, my analysis of these songs reveals meanings from Igbo language, thought, and philosophy as embedded in their proverbs, idioms and metaphors.

Obiwuruotu Women's Song Functions

Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group's songs are filled with social commentary that are intended to promote social change. Social changes advocated by OWDG in their songs are intended to improve the lives and experiences of married women in Ihiagwa and other Igbo communities. These social changes might be viewed positively or negatively depending on one's own perspective. OWDG have made tremendous progress in modifying or altering social values

through their song lyrics, especially as regards to their experience as married women in Ihiagwa and Igbo society. Sometimes taking a critical swipe on men's thought and privileges, they have received criticism from those who feel challenged by them and praise from supporters. Women who would benefit from the group's advocacy of women's well-being show their appreciation of OWDG while men feeling threatened with losing their male privileges sometimes challenge the group.

Most OWDG songs have multiple meanings, often addressing many issues in one song that could be contradictory and complex. Many songs seem to give conflicting views on Igbo life, such as affirming patriarchy while at the same time opposing it. After interviewing these women, I noted that they do not necessarily think they are supporting or opposing patriarchy, but think they are advocating for what is best for them based on their culture and experience.

The songs are mostly characterized by idioms, proverbs, metaphors, shouts and hollers inherent in Igbo people's language, culture, and everyday communications. The lyrics address social, cultural, political, historical and religious issues in Ihiagwa, Imo State, Igbo land and Nigeria. Apart from the issues these songs address, they also can be categorized according to their functions that follow the stages of life for most Igbo people:

Birth: OWDG sing about childbearing and its importance, motherhood, and the naming ceremony. Apart from singing about these, they also perform at birth, child dedication, and naming ceremonies. The gender of the child could affect song repertoires performed in these ceremonies due to the preference of the male child in Igbo culture. Apart from song repertoires, the child's gender could affect the zeal at which they perform in these occasions. For example, if a male child is born where the woman had given birth to only girls, the ceremony will be more

joyous and celebratory than if she gives birth to another girl. In any case, songs are selected accordingly to suit the occasion.

Recreation: OWDG has songs for recreational purposes for children and adults. These songs are meant to instill cultural values in members of the community while serving relaxation purposes. Recreational songs are filled with Igbo moral values that are geared toward making people better humans and are mostly in the form of didactic tales. Recreational songs are an essential part of the repertoire because OWDG members are mothers. One of the primary roles of mothers in Igbo culture is to instill moral and religious values in children and the youth who are expected to be future leaders. There is a popular saying in Igbo culture that “if a child is bad, the mother is blamed and if he or she is good the father is praised.” Married women are not respected if their children do not behave well or are not successful. Mothers, therefore, strive to train their children well in order to be respected in society. They carry out this duty at any opportunity and songs provide the platform to accomplish this task.

Initiation and Induction: In Igbo society, when children grow to a certain age, they are required to be initiated into adulthood. This was a compulsory ritual in the pre-colonial Igbo culture, but is optional in some villages in the present times. Women who are married into Ihiagwa and other parts of Igboland are inducted into the *ndom* group. As many age groups have initiation ceremonies and inductions in which music and dance are an integral part, OWDG are often invited to perform in such ceremonies and have songs that serve these purposes.

Love and Marriage: OWDG have songs that address the issues of wine carrying, paying of dowries, love, and marriages. These songs are filled with criticisms and messages about marriage in Igbo culture. The songs primarily address issues about love in marriage because, especially in the traditional Igbo society, the youth are not expected to engage in pre-marital or

extra marital affairs. As a result, their songs tend to lean towards love in connection with marriage and OWDG members' status as married women influences the content of these songs. Song lyrics that address issues of love and marriage can have contradictory messages. For example, in the song "*Nwanyi ma obi di ya,*" while criticizing husbands who treat their wives poorly, the same song tells a wife what she must do to make her husband happy and avoid poor treatment, thereby blaming the wife for not "behaving well."

Religion: OWDG has songs in the form of incantations, chants, praises, thanksgiving, and lamentation. Religious songs are used to revere either the gods of the land, the Christian God, or both in the syncretic manner of Igbo religious practices. Religion is such an integral part of the lives of the Igbos that most song types tend to incorporate some aspect of religion.

Festivals: Festivals are an integral part of the culture of the Igbos, and there are many of them that are done annually with music and dance being important aspects of these celebrations. OWDG has songs especially designed for festivals. Sometimes they use general festival songs, mostly folk songs popular in Igboland, and on a few occasions, they "formulate" one when they are invited to perform in a festival.

Occupational songs: These are songs that address or accompany Igbo people during work. In traditional Igbo society, these songs exclusively accompany the Igbos during work, but in the present times, they have been adopted to stage performance as an attempt to preserve traditional culture. Some of the work songs sung by OWDG address how work affects women, the Ihiagwa community, and Igboland.

Entertainment: Most OWDG songs function secondarily as entertainment songs. This is because the women adapt the songs for stage performances. Many songs educate the community and function as social commentary while at the same time provide entertainment for audiences.

Death: These OWGD songs address issues concerning death and are performed during funeral ceremonies. They are in the form of dirges, laments, chants, and praise songs, with choice of song form depending on who passed away and the circumstances that led to the death.

The chart below shows the multifunctional nature of some of OWDG songs. It reveals how a song could address many issues that include socio-political, cultural, historical and religious issues.

	Song Title	Category/ Genre	Social	Cultural	Historical
1	Nwanyi Ma Obi Di Ya	Marriage	Gender Patriarchy Farming Beauty Drumming Dancing Costume Solidarity	God Metaphor Idioms Morals	
2	Ego Nna Anyi Kpara N’Uwa Mbu	Education Recreation Entertainment	Wealth Class Justice Drumming Dancing Costume	Idioms Metaphors God	Precolonial Igbo currency

3	Odimegwu Nwa Ojukwu Iyola	Entertainment Recreation Education	Motherhood Drumming Dancing Costume	Morals Metaphor Idioms	Nigerian civil war
4	Ezuru Ezu Baa	Birth	Motherhood Wealth Class Drumming Dancing Costume	Morals Metaphor Idioms God	
5	Ochu Nwa Okuko Nwe Ada	Education Recreation Entertainment	Justice Class Drumming Dancing Costume	Proverb Morals Metaphor Idioms God	
6	Elu Uwa Were Obi Oma	Education Recreation Entertainment	Kinship Drumming Dancing Costume	Morals Metaphor Idioms	
7	N' Afa Nna	Religious	Praise Drumming Dancing Costume	God	

8	Anyi Abiala Ibe Onwu	Death	Solidarity Drumming Dancing Costume	Metaphor Idioms	
9	Ezi Nne	Birth	Motherhood Beauty Drumming Dancing Costume	Morals Metaphor Idioms	

Figure 11. Chart showing functions of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group songs

The above chart provides evidence that these OWDG songs have several functions and they use metaphors, idioms, proverbs in expressing the messages they convey. In his book, *The African Imagination in Music*, Kofi Agawu, while arguing that there is no word for music in African societies states that, "In navigating the semantic worlds linked to broadly comparable notions of 'music,' we encounter a colorful terrain in which explicit metalanguages and informal metaphors illuminate African thematizations of music as an expression of life (Agawu 2016, 32)." The multifunctional nature of the songs of OWDG reveals the complexities that characterize the women's songs in relation to their everyday lives.

Song Analysis

OWDG songs address issues concerning the everyday life of the Igbos, with special emphasis on issues related to married women and their experiences. In the following section I analyze songs concerning the themes of solidarity, motherhood, class, patriarchy, and gender.

Solidarity

In the previous chapters, while elucidating the concepts of solidarity and *ndom*, I explained how Igbo women gather primarily to help each other after being married into a community. For this purpose, Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group strives for solidarity in music making. For group members their singing together, including call and response, their collective instrumental playing, and their costumes are important aspects of their communal life and an expression of solidarity.

One song illustrating solidarity that addresses the issue of death is *Anyi Abiala Ibe Onwu* (We Have Come to Mourn Dead). This song is usually sung when a member loses someone, when the group loses a member, or when they are invited to perform at a funeral. They perform this song immediately after their prayers to communicate to their audience that they have come to mourn the dead with them.

Anyi Abiala Ibee Onwu

We have come to mourn the dead

Transcribed by Ruth Opara



Figure 12. Music transcription of “Anyi Abiala Ibee Onwu.”

The form of this song is AA¹B as the second phrase has part of the melody of the first phrase. The phonic structure is a combination of monophony, homophony, independent polyphony, and heterophony. The lead singer starts by singing this melody alone thereby creating a monophonic effect. The other women who respond add harmonies that are sometimes steady and sometimes vary, and in this way, are improvised. The instruments come in one after the other. The *udu* starts, followed by the *oyo*, then the *ekwe*, and once the *ogwe* and *ogene* join in, the music is set. Instrumentalists play the basic patterns illustrated earlier and usually improvise. The instruments create an independent polyphonic effect while the voices create a combination of monophony, homophony and heterophony simultaneously.

This song was performed on the “Solidarity Trip to Amandugba” which will be described in detail in Chapter Five. The lead singer sings the melody and the women repeat the melody along with the audience. The audience sometimes waits to only sing the last phrase *Ihe mee ee*. This happens for two reasons: first, this is the easiest part to follow. Other Igbo regions, ethnic

groups and foreigners who find it difficult to speak the Owerri dialect and Igbo language wait until it comes to this simple part before they all sing the *Ihe mee ee* phrase. The second reason lies in the meaning of this particular phrase. The phrase “*ihe mee ee*” is a sound used to express shock when something bad happens, in Owerri Igbo Language. The age of the person who died determines how the audience participates in singing this phrase. People usually stress and shout this phrase while crying when a young person suddenly dies. They tend to sing it normally if the deceased was elderly or had been critically ill for some time because the death did not come as a surprise to the community. How the community reacts to this phrase provides insight on how they feel about the death of that person.

After this melody has been sung and repeated as long as the lead singer chooses, she then follows with an ad-lib and improvisations, during which she laments about the dead. What the lead singer sings at this time depends on what she knows about the deceased, how people are reacting about the deceased, and what people are saying about the deceased. The lyrics are spontaneous and are created by observing the community and audience while performing. In this way, everyone present contributes to song creation.

In the process of ad lib and improvisation, the lead singer speaks to the dead about reincarnation and about how much they are missed. In the case of the death of an elderly individual, the lead singer usually praises the dead and urges him or her to reincarnate in the community and grow old again. She also sings about how the dead has become an ancestor whose work is to protect the family and community they left. If it is a sudden death or death of a young person, the lead singer reprimands the deceased. While she is singing, she stresses how the community and Igbo people will miss this person.

Igbo**English**

<i>Anyi abiaduola nu ibe onwu</i>	We have come to mourn the dead
<i>Obiwuruotu abiaduo lanu ibe onwu</i>	Obiwuruotu has come to mourn our dead
<i>Ihe mee ee</i>	What a shock!

Figure 13. “Anyi Abiala Ibe Onwu” Lyrics with English translation”

While functioning as a funeral song, *Anyi Abiaduola nu Ibe Onwu* addresses the culture of solidarity among OWDG members and Igbo married women in general. The phrase *Anyi abiaduola nu ibe onwu* (We have come to mourn the dead) speaks with emphasis on how every member mourns with the bereaved. It speaks to the concept of “*anyi*” (we) and how important it is in the lives of these women. The concept of “*anyi*” as it plays out in the lives of OWDG is best described by Nkonko M Kamwangamalu, in his article “Ubuntu in South Africa: A sociolinguistic perspective to a pan-African concept.” He describes the concept of “*Ubuntu*,” a Nguni term that translates as “personhood” or “humanness,” as a concept of “collective solidarity whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to the perception of others, that is, persons are perceived less as independent of one another, and more as interdependent of one another” (Kamwangamalu 1999, 25-26). Just like the “*Ubuntu*” the concept of “*anyi*” is central to the musical experiences of OWDG as communalism is their core value and OWDG depend on each other in happy and in hard times.

Motherhood

As Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group members are expected to be mothers in Igbo culture, they sing and take great pride in motherhood, even though such songs could negatively affect women without children. They sing about motherhood as a title and also about childbearing which is considered a married woman's primary responsibility. An example of the theme of motherhood is the song *Ezi Nne* (The Good Mother).

Igbo	English
<i>A nne a nne wu nne</i>	One's mother remains their mother
<i>Nne maa mma joo njo</i>	Beautiful or ugly (Good or bad)
<i>A nne a nne wu nne</i>	A mother remains a mother
<i>A nne wu ezi nne</i>	Every mother is a good mother

Figure 14. "Ezi Nne" Lyrics with English translation"

The lyrics of this song depict mothers as beautiful, whether they are physically beautiful or not. It has an underlying meaning that motherhood is a means to an end for married women in Igbo culture. The song suggests that a married woman's "ugliness" is "forgiven" by giving birth as this is the only way they are fully accepted in their husband's homes. This implies that an "ugly" married woman would still be considered "ugly" if she does not have a child. Igbo children are commonly seen as their mother's defenders, therefore, people tend to respect married women because of their children. A married woman becomes more vulnerable if she has

no child; people can call her “ugly” and get away with it. Another meaning is that, in Igbo culture, it is believed that the love of a mother is very special and that every mother is expected to love and take care of her children. Being a mother affords married women the opportunity to be good and, therefore, it becomes difficult for a mother to be “bad.” It is obvious that this song not only addresses the issue of motherhood, it symbolically speaks to the concept of beauty in the lives of Igbo married women and Igbo culture in general.

Ezi Nne

Good Mother

Transcribed by Ruth Opara

A nne a nne wu nne a nne maa mma joo njo a nne a nne

12
wu nne a nne wue zi nne.

Transcribed by Ruth Opara

This simple melody is repeated after the long or short improvisational singing by the lead singer. The form is ABAC. The structure is a combination of homophony and independent polyphony. The voices sing multiple lines that are not steady when repeated, but they express the same idea. The instruments play independent polyphony. Another song that addresses motherhood as well as class, *Ezuru Ezu Baa* (Is Wealth Common?), will be analyzed in the next section.

Class

Apart from the issue of *osu* and *diala* (outcast) as discussed in Chapter Two, there are class issues about the rich and the poor. While issues of wealth inequality seem not to be as grave as the problems of *osu* and *diala*, class as a result of economic inequality is a big issue in Igbo society as some people of higher status suppress the poor. Hence Obiwuruotu Women Dance Group sing about wealth in connection with motherhood.

Igbo

English

Refrain

<i>Ezuru ezu baa oolo</i>	Wealth is not common to all
<i>Ezuru ezu baa mm mm</i>	Wealth is not common
<i>Omumu shi aka Chukwu</i>	Child bearing is a gift from God
<i>Omumu wu onye ozhiri la</i>	If you deserve to have children, you beget children
<i>Jehovah God wu onye mma mma</i>	Jehovah God is a generous God
<i>Omumu shi aka Chukwu</i>	Child bearing is a gift from God
<i>Omumu wu onye omara la</i>	If you are fortunate, you beget children
<i>Jehovah God wu onye mma mma</i>	Jehovah God is a generous God

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Omumu shi aka Chukwu</i>	Child bearing is a gift from God
<i>Omumu wu onye ozhiri la</i>	If you are fortunate, you beget children
<i>Ejela azula nwa na ahia</i>	If a child were a market commodity

<i>Nde nwere ego na zuchaala nwa</i>	The rich would have bought every child
<i>Ejela ekwe la ya ike</i>	If child bearing was according to one's power
<i>Nde ka anyi ike na kere chaa la ya</i>	The powerful would have taken it all
<i>Ejela ama na ya na amamihe</i>	If it comes through knowledge and wisdom
<i>Nde amamihe na marachaa la nwa</i>	Only the knowledgeable ones would have had it all
<i>Omumu shi aka Chukwu</i>	Child bearing comes from God
<i>Jehovah God wu onye mma mma</i>	Jehovah God is a generous God

Figure 15. “Ezuru Ezu Baa” (*Is Wealth Common?*) Lyrics with English translation

While the refrain conveys that not everyone is rich and that a gift of a child is from God, Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike asserts that a child is not a commodity that only the rich and powerful can afford. One does not get a child by being wise or only the wise would have gotten children; it is a gift that only comes from God, which is a pre-colonial Igbo belief that modern Igbo people still believe, regardless of their awareness of the biological factors of childbearing.

Although these lyrics seem straightforward, they raise certain questions about childbearing. In the line *Omumu wu onye ozhiri la* (If you deserve to have children, you beget children), the song communicates that child bearing is only for those who deserve it. This means that people's social class or religious affiliations do not determine how many children they get, or if they can bear children at all. People are only able to bear children if they are “good” people. Since having a child is the best thing that could happen to a married couple in Igboland, as expressed by most OWGD members, child bearing becomes a gift that only God/the gods can give, negating any biological factors. Some questions that come to mind are: Does it mean that everyone who has a child is “good?” Are there no “barren” women who are good? How do the

Gods measure “goodness” in families, especially where you supposedly have a “good” husband and a “bad” wife or vice versa? Do the Gods “punish” a couple with barrenness, even when one of them is “good?”

Ezuru Ezu Baa

Transcribed by Ruth Opara

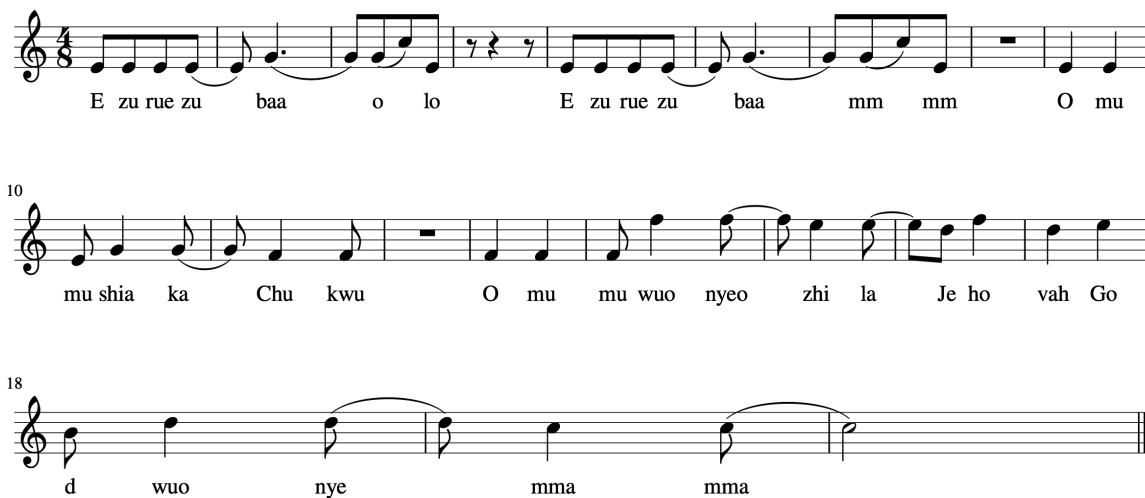


Figure 16. “Ezuru Ezu Baa” music transcription

This refrain, sung either in unison or harmony, is accompanied by instruments playing independent polyphony. The form is AABB¹.

Patriarchy and Gender Expectations

As discussed in Chapter Two, gender roles in Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group are fluid, but guided by the underlying patriarchal Igbo society. Although women might appear to be

victims in patriarchal societies, it is difficult to affirm their victimhood when they seem to endorse the culture that victimizes them. However, it is important to note that patriarchal societies have a way of making women believe that they are not victimized, but simply practicing the culture of the land. This idea is expressed in the song *Nwanyi Ma Obi Di Ya A* (Woman After Her Husband's Heart). In this song, OWDG pray and want to be loved by their husbands in order to be happy and accepted in society. However, this endorsement might be an effect of patriarchy—trying to be accepted by men in a society in which marriage seems to be a means to an end.



Figure 17. “Nwanyi Ma Obi Di Ya” music transcription

This melody is sung in harmony and sometimes in unison, women who respond add harmony at will. It is accompanied by instruments playing independent polyphony. The form is ABCD.

Igbo**English**

Refrain

<i>Nwanyi ma obi di ya</i>	A woman after her husband's heart
<i>Ijela ubi gi yo ma</i>	Your return from the farm is eagerly awaited
<i>Ogoli mara obi di ya leeee</i>	For the lady that understands her husband
<i>Ohunu agwa ya ka mma</i>	Is the preferred personality

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>A he anyi eje akpo nwanyi ma obi ya</i>	The one we address as the woman after the mind of the husband
<i>Nwanyi marala mma di ya no na mkpa</i>	is a woman who knows when the husband is in need
<i>Omarala mma okpa ego</i>	She knows when he has money
<i>Agwa wu mma ma imara</i>	For your information, good conduct is beauty

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Agara ilu nwanyi maka mma ya</i>	A woman would have been married for her beauty
<i>To God aluo ya maka umere ya</i>	But for God's sake, she is married for her attitude
<i>Ezhiokwu mi agwa nwanyi kamma</i>	Honestly, a woman's character is more important to her physical appearance

<i>Agwa wu mma ma imara</i>	And for your information, good conduct is beauty
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Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Nwanyi ugwu di hushiri anya</i>	A woman hated by her husband suffers a lot
<i>Eje apa mmi agbadula ya</i>	She is visited and consoled with wine
<i>Uwa na uwa ma ayola ugwu di akpola mu oo</i>	Let me never experience the hatred of my husband in all my reincarnation.
<i>Agwa wu mma ma imara</i>	And for your information, good conduct is beauty

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Nwanyi ugwu di jere Chukwu oo</i>	A hated wife went to consult with gods
<i>Ojere nga dibia</i>	Seeks divination from a seer
<i>Shi elenu ihe ya eme di ya ahuya anya</i>	Inquires what she has to do to enjoy the husband's love
<i>Ahu shie lam anya ma imara</i>	Acknowledging, "Honestly, I have really suffered!"

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Dibia agwanu ya</i>	The diviner tells her
<i>Shi ya gemanu ya nti ugbulaka</i>	To listen to him, now
<i>Aya ganu ite ya aja ma imara</i>	That he will divinize for her

<i>Ogoli kpashie agwa ma obiri</i>	“A new bride must behave well to be settled”
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Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Ogwu nwanyi gworola la di</i>	A woman’s charm for the husband
<i>Owunu omume ya ma imara</i>	Is, indeed, her character
<i>Onye kpa ke okpa kpashie ya ike</i>	Everyone must hold fast to what they have
<i>Okpu eze nwanyi na wu di nwe ya nu</i>	For a woman’s crown is her husband

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Rose Nzuruike lee</i>	Oh, Rose Nzuruike
<i>Ugwu nwanyi wu di oo</i>	A husband is a woman’s honor
<i>Onye kpa ke okpa kpashie ya ike</i>	Everyone must hold firm to what they have
<i>Okpu eze nwanyi na wu di nwe ya nu</i>	For a woman’s crown is her husband

Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Obiwuruotu agumana aguma nde ri mma</i>	Obiwuruotu group, you are counted among good people
<i>A nde ni mkporo taa ha emena m echi</i>	Always quick to respond to my needs.
<i>Onwanu eleme ukwu george nde ri mma</i>	You are highly admired for your beauty, good people
<i>A nde ni mkporo taa ha emena m echi</i>	Always quick to respond to my call
<i>Ogoli mara obi di ya yoma kwanu</i>	The lady after her husband’s heart please come back

<i>O shinu agwa gi ma imara</i>	Is due to your amiable personality
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Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike

<i>Janet wu nwanyi ma obi di ya</i>	Janet, a woman after the heart of her husband
<i>Kakwala rokoru nu bia zaa</i>	Please, respond in your elegance
<i>Ogoli mara obi di ya yoma kwanu</i>	The beautiful bride after the husband's heart please come home
<i>O shinu agwa gi ma imara</i>	Is due to your amiable personality

Figure 18 “Nwanyi Ma Obi Diya” (A Woman After Her Husband’s Heart) with English translation

This song communicates that a woman who pleases her husband is seen as being loyal and therefore a “good” woman in Igbo culture. It reveals gender expectations for married women and how they can successfully achieve them. The refrain “*Nwanyi ma obi di ya, Ijela ubi gi yo ma, Ogoli mara obi di ya leeee, Ohunu agwa ya ka mma,*” which literally translates to “A woman after her husband’s heart, your return from the farm is eagerly awaited, for the lady that understands her husband, is the preferred personality,” teaches married women how to “win” their husband’s heart. The concept of “*ubi*” (farm) here, as expressed by some elders, symbolically means “a married woman’s work place.” This concept stems from the pre-colonial Igbo when one of the married women’s primary work is to support the family by taking care of the family farm. Accounts show that married women also participated in trade and art. In the present times, Igbo married women are seen in most any kind of work, and their place of work is referred to as “*ubi*” in Owerri dialect. The Igbo society understands how important *ubi* is, but

requires the married woman to understand when she needs to be home to “take care” of her husband, no matter the type of work or her work place. Rose concludes with “that is a preferred personality.” Apart from literally communicating work, this song entails that a married woman should know when her husband is in need.

In the first ad lib, improvisation or verse, Rose takes the lyrics to the next level as she describes a married woman who knows the heart of her husband, “*A he anyi eje akpo nwanyi ma obi di ya, Nwanyi marala mma di ya no na mkpa, Omarala mma okpa ego, Agwa wu mma ma imara.*” (The one we address as the woman after the mind of the husband is a woman who knows when the husband is in need. She knows when he has money. For your information, good conduct is beauty). In these lyrics, she admonishes women on their roles as married women. Although, a man is primarily expected to provide for his family, a woman should be sensitive enough to know when he does not have money or when he is “in need.” A woman who is able to do this is the one Rose refers to as “a good woman.” Arguably, these lyrics put so much burden on the woman. She has to constantly figure out how her husband feels and make sure she is acting “right” to make him feel better. One would think that Rose would propose that a husband communicates how he feels to his wife.

Rose continues, “*Agara ilu nwanyi maka mma ya, To God aluo ya maka umere ya, Ezhiokwu mi agwa nwanyi ka mma, Agwa wu mma ma imara.*” (A woman would have been married for her beauty. But for God’s sake, she is married for her attitude. Honestly, a woman’s character is more important to her physical appearance. And for your information, good conduct is beauty). In these lyrics, she stresses that when a woman becomes a good woman (with the standard she set earlier), she automatically becomes beautiful. On the one hand, Rose becomes an advocate of women whom society has constantly judged harshly due to a standard of beauty

set by society. She urges husbands to look beyond physical beauty and embrace good character. On the other hand, these lyrics pose problems with the concept of being “good,” especially when it is geared towards satisfying men. The lyrics promote patriarchy as it ignores the fact that a married woman also has needs. The needs of both husband and wife can only be accomplished through gender equality.

In the next section of her adlib, Rose warns women about the effects of a husband’s hatred. “*Nwanyi ugwu di hushiri anya. Eje apa mmi agba dula ya. Uwa na uwa ma ayola ugwu di akpola mu oo. Agwa wu mma ma imara*”. (A woman hated by her husband suffers a lot. She is visited and consoled with wine. Let me never experience the hatred of my husband in all my reincarnation. And for your information, good conduct is beauty). In these lyrics, Rose equates a woman hated by her husband with a bereaved person. In Igbo culture, when an individual or family loses someone, friends and family as well as strangers visit them with wine to console them. By using this metaphor, Rose implies that if a married woman is hated by her husband, she would feel rejected to an extent that friends and family will come with wine to console her. She urges women to “behave well” so that their husbands will love them.

In the subsequent two sections, Rose tells a story of how a woman hated by her husband tries to resolve her problem by looking to divination for help, but the priest recommends her to support and “please” her husband. The first section reveals the woman’s actions: “*Nwanyi ugwu di jere Chukwu oo. Ojere nga dibia, Shi elenu ihe ya eme di ya ahuya anya. Ahu shie lam anya ma imara*. (A hated wife went to consult with gods. Seeks divination from a seer, enquires what she has to do to enjoy the husband’s love. Acknowledging, “Honestly, I have really suffered).” In the second section, Rose states the priest’s reply, “*Dibia agwanu ya, Shi ya gemanu ya nti ugbulaka, Aya ganu ite ya aja ma imara, Ogoli kpazhie agwa ma obiri*. ” (The diviner tells her,

to listen to him, now, that he will divinize for her, “A new bride must behave well to be settled.)” In Igbo culture, especially in precolonial times and to a great extent in the present, it is believed that the gods solve all problems. It is the last resort after people have tried to solve problems through other means. This song indicates that the gods could not solve the woman’s problem and that the only solution is for her to please her husband, revealing just how entrenched patriarchy is in Igboland. This is why Rose warns all women to behave well in their husband’s house, in order to be accepted in society.

After the last two sections, Rose advises married women, “*Ogwu nwanyi gworola la di, Owunu omume ya ma imara, Onye kpa ke okpa kpashie ya ike, Okpu eze nwanyi na wu di nwe ya nu.*” (A woman’s charm for the husband, is, indeed, her good character, everyone must hold fast to what they have, for a woman’s crown is her husband). Rose concludes that the best charm is for a woman to “please” her husband, rather than seeking help from a traditional priest. When a woman pleases her husband, she will be able to keep him. This idea stems from the fact that Igbo people still practice polygamy in the present times, and many Igbo married men have concubines/mistresses. If a man is not treated “well” by his wife, he can ignore her and get satisfaction from his mistress or marry another wife, or even send her back to her parent’s home through divorce. Divorced women are looked down upon in Igbo society and women are encouraged to stay in their marriage as it is easy for most men to remarry after getting a divorce, but very difficult for women. Thus, Rose sings, “A woman’s crown is her husband.”

In her subsequent adlibs, Rose went on to preach the need for married women to “behave well” by respecting and caring for their husbands because a woman’s honor or crown in Igboland is being and staying married. She also stresses the need for married women to guard their

husband jealously. This is because men can easily take or keep another woman. Rose tries to persuade women by giving them pet names as she calls groups and individual women's names.

Conclusion

From the analyses above, it is shown that OWDG uses song lyrics to address issues concerning the lives and experiences of married women in Igbo society around themes of solidarity, class, motherhood, patriarchy, and gender issues. Music provides them opportunity to reach out to other married women in Igboland. They also use this medium to communicate what cannot be spoken in daily discourse, what Reiland Rabaka argues is implicitly singing what cannot be explicitly said (Rabaka 2016, 71).

The contradictions and complexities that characterize the life of Igbo women is manifest in OWDG song lyrics. As these songs describe the ups and downs that characterize the lives and experience of married women in Igbo, it is difficult to characterize Igbo women as either victims or heroines. The multifunctional nature of these songs communicates somewhat complex ideas that seem contradictory at times. The issue of motherhood where OWDG songs imply that a married woman is only beautiful if she is able to have children puts women who cannot or do not have children in a difficult situation. Furthermore, the idea that pleasing a man should be the ultimate goal of married women in Igbo culture is absurd and too demanding for women. Knowing that men are allowed to marry new wives even though they may be pleased with their wives raises more questions about why women should make this their goal. It is even more disturbing that women are writing and singing lyrics that arguably promotes a patriarchy that leads to negative experiences in their married lives.

However, OWDG members believe that they mean well for married women. From the lyrics *Nwanyi Ma Obi Di Ya*, it is apparent that they understand that there is systematic patriarchy in Igbo society. According to OWDG women, they choose to “advise” women so they can have “good” experiences in their marriage. Systematic patriarchy is a cultural norm that is entrenched in the Igbo world. These women understand that it takes a lot to fight this system and have decided to focus on helping women adjust to this system. This is how complex an Igbo woman’s married life can be. The next chapter exposes the current state of OWDG and how their performance practices affect their own daily life experiences.

Chapter V

OBIWURUOTU WOMEN’S DANCE GROUP TODAY: A SOLIDARITY TRIP TO AMANDUGBA

In this chapter I describe a particular performance of Obiwuruotu Women’s Dance Group, as I saw them in the field, in order to show how the group and their musical practices resist the common narratives that African women are either victims or heroines. I focus on their use of costumes, the kolanut ritual, singing, song repertoire, dancing and instrumentation to understand the effects of the intersectionality between music and gender, performativity, patriarchy, class, solidarity and motherhood in Igbo culture. While previous chapters concern the history and music of OWDG, this chapter, describes the current state of OWDG, revealing the complexities and contradictions that characterize their musical performance practices in relation to their life as married women in Igbo culture and how it affects their daily lives.

Solidarity

I was in one of OWDG’s rehearsals when one of their members got the shocking news that her mother had passed away. She teared up as the other women rallied around her in consolation. The music stopped. The crowd of onlookers that usually gathers to watch the group’s rehearsals began to disperse as a few women escorted the bereaved woman home. After she left, there was silence for a few minutes and the president addressed the group, “It is a pity that our sister has lost her mother. We feel terrible! However, who are we to question God and the Gods of our land? It is their will that our sister’s mother should leave us at this time. We thank them in every situation. For us, the Obiwuruotu group, we know what this means for us. We will start paying our burial levy, start practicing for the burial, wash and iron our uniform and get ready to travel to Amandugba—the place of birth of our sister. We will go there and cry

with her. We will make her proud with our music...” The rehearsal ended after this speech. The group focused their subsequent rehearsals in preparation for the burial.

Costumes—Adapting to Change

The burial took place after eighteen days and the OWDG were there to support their group member. The costumes worn that day countered what one would expect based on existing research done on the function of costumes and uniforms in African musical practices. Brighter costumes tend to be used for happy ceremonies while the darker ones are used for sorrowful occasions. OWDG has used different costumes to perform at different occasions—happy and sad events respectfully, especially in their formative years.

Presently however, OWDG do not have many uniforms because of lack of funds. For this sorrowful occasion, they instead wore a uniform that was originally meant for “happy” events. The group wore *kirikiri* star (small stars)— a mostly bright yellow wrapper decorated with red and dark blue stars.

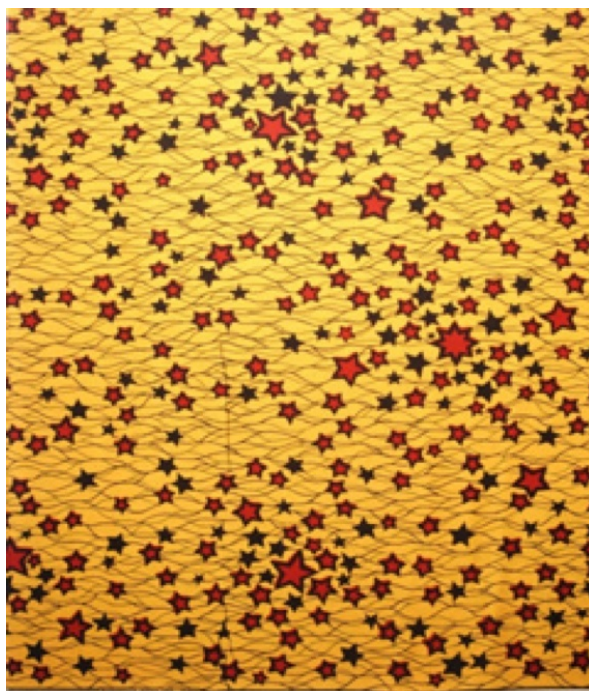


Photo 31. Kirikiri star costume

As OWDG members describe *kirikiri* star as one of their best uniforms in recent times, they often use it for performances outside the Ihiagwa community. They are no longer using their uniforms according to their social functions as they used to and now make their decisions based on the design and availability of the wrappers. The women looked very beautiful that day.



Photo 32. OWDG in their full kirikiri star costume

When Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike was alive she usually wore a different wrapper as a symbol of her leadership. Her wrapper was considered to be very sophisticated and she looked more stylish than the other women. The three men in the group do not wear the same costume with the women; they decide to either wear a different costume or their daily clothing.



Photo 33. President in one of his performance outfits, playing the harmonica at Amandugba



Photo 34. A male member in his daily clothing, playing the drum at Amandugba



Photo 35. Another male member playing the Slit drum and the Gong at Amandugba

The three men in the group wore different costumes than the women which was an indication that men are not “truly” part of the group, according to several OWDG members.

Wearing this uniform intended for “happy” events as a result of lack of fund shows how much things have changed. The group can no longer afford multiple uniforms to convey meanings African music scholars have argued characterize the use of costumes in African musical practices. They have adapted to their current situation of wearing what they have available, which does not necessarily make them heroines or victims, but simply speaks to the complexities and, especially adaptation, that characterizes the life of the Igbo woman.

Victim of Motherhood

We gathered at the Ihiagwa community primary school field to wait for the bus that would transport OWDG to Amandugba when the husband of one of the singers ran up to talk to his wife. He told her that she needed to stay home and take care of her six months old baby. The women tried to resist by explaining that her mother and older siblings would take good care of the baby. She also explained that she had prepared all the baby food (including breast milk), clothes and diapers, but her husband insisted that she stayed home. The husband further related that the baby was crying in her grandmother’s arm and that was the reason why he had come to stop her from traveling with OWDG to Amandugba. At this point most members started expressing their opinion on the issue. While a few thought that she should travel and perform with them because she is a good singer and dancer, and also because the baby's grandmother is taking care of him, most of the members were of the opinion that she should stay home and take care of her child. Their reason for the latter is primarily because, as they echoed, “your child is more important than this trip, our music, and the dead.” The woman was obviously in *omugwo* (maternity) and was expected to adhere to Igbo norms of motherhood.

Dehlia Umunna, in her article, “Rethinking the Neighborhood Watch: How Lessons from the Nigerian Village Can Creatively Empower the Community to Assist Poor, Single Mothers in America,” best describes the *omugwo* ritual and what Igbo society expects from women during post-natal care. *Omugwo* ritual is observed immediately after child birth. After child birth, the mother of the child and society in general focus on taking care of the child during infancy. Although the infancy period might range from birth to approximately two years old, many circumstances determine when an Igbo woman can leave her infant for work, school or music performance. During *omugwo*, the mother of the woman who gave birth is expected to go and stay with her daughter while she is nursing the grandchild. This is because the society believes that the grandmother has more experience and would help her daughter in the welfare of the newly born baby. The grandmother’s stay during this period is not necessarily compulsory nor considered as employment, but based on family ties as it helps strengthen family ties. However, society frowns on families who do not practice this norm and defying this is considered socially unacceptable. While the grandmother becomes the child care giver during this period—cooking, assisting with the birth, and cleaning—the mother of the child is expected to recuperate while breast feeding her baby (Umunna 2012, 855-856).

The length of the grandmother’s visit and support is not necessarily pre-determined. She could stay from one month to one year or more depending on the decision of the involved families. What is certain is that after a period of time, the mother of the child is allowed to participate in other activities, especially if the grandmother is still at her house and also if the woman has other children who are adult and, therefore, could help in doing household chores. In this case, this member of OWDG should have been able to travel with the group because her

mother and her other children were there to help take care of the baby. She sobbed and left the arena after her husband insisted and got support from most members.

This woman who is considered “fruitful” and respected for her fertility at this time became a victim of motherhood. Even her singing and dancing prowess within OWDG, the top women’s performing group in the area, could not save her. She was encouraged to go back to her domestic duties by both men and women, although they realized that she would be missed. Her own choice was to go for the performance because she was confident that her mother would take care of her child. Nevertheless, she had to respect the expectations of society against her own wishes. Patriarchy was clearly reinforced with most women in the group siding with the woman’s husband.

Gender and Patriarchy

An eighteen-seat bus arrived shortly after the woman left. As soon as the women saw the bus they murmured quietly that the bus was too small and hoped a second bus would come. When it was clear that it was the only bus provided, they spoke out and questioned why the leader got such a small bus when they had contributed enough money to hire a large bus. The President explained that part of the money would be used to pay the driver of the bus and buy gas, and the remainder would be given to the bereaved group member. Most of the women were not satisfied with his explanation. The bus could only transport eighteen members with the musical instruments, amplifiers and microphones tied on top of it.



Photo 36. Instruments and speakers tied onto a bus that conveyed OWDG to Amandugba

I gave three other women a ride in my car. About ten women went back to their houses very sad as they murmured about their monetary contributions being squandered by the President.

Throughout our journey the three women lamented on many issues including how they have trust issues with the men and how much they miss Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike. They stated that although they were not always sure how she spent their money, they were always sure of transportation that could adequately convey every member to a performance venue in times like that. They did not have to complain because she provided all they needed. “She took care of us,” they affirmed.

From my conversation with these women, it became clear to me that the OWDG women had more confidence in Rose Nzuruike than the men presently leading the group. One of the many reasons why Rose was trusted was because she made sure the women got everything they needed. She also had great bargaining power because she was so highly respected for her talent. Rose got a lot more money from people than the men who run things now. Under her management there was never any question how she managed the funds. Today OWDG members question every monetary activity because they feel that they do not get all they need for effective music performance. In addition, Rose sometimes explained how funds were used, but the male leaders today are much less transparent and seldom explain how funds are distributed. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the men's control of their operations.

Patriarchy in Kolanut Ritual in Igboland

As soon as OWDG arrived at Amandugba, the villagers welcomed them with loud cheers. The bereaved group member came out and welcomed them while sobbing. Members of OWDG hugged her one after the other and then burst into a popular ululation Igbo married women use in various ceremonies—this one is peculiar to married women in Owerri. Their ululations prompted more villagers to gather. Although the villagers knew that the OWDG were coming to perform, the women's ululations announced to everyone that they had arrived in town. Some of the villagers had heard about OWDG and their music, but had never seen them perform live. The villagers watched OWDG in admiration because Owerri women's music is quite different from theirs, even though as Igbo they belong to the same ethnic group.

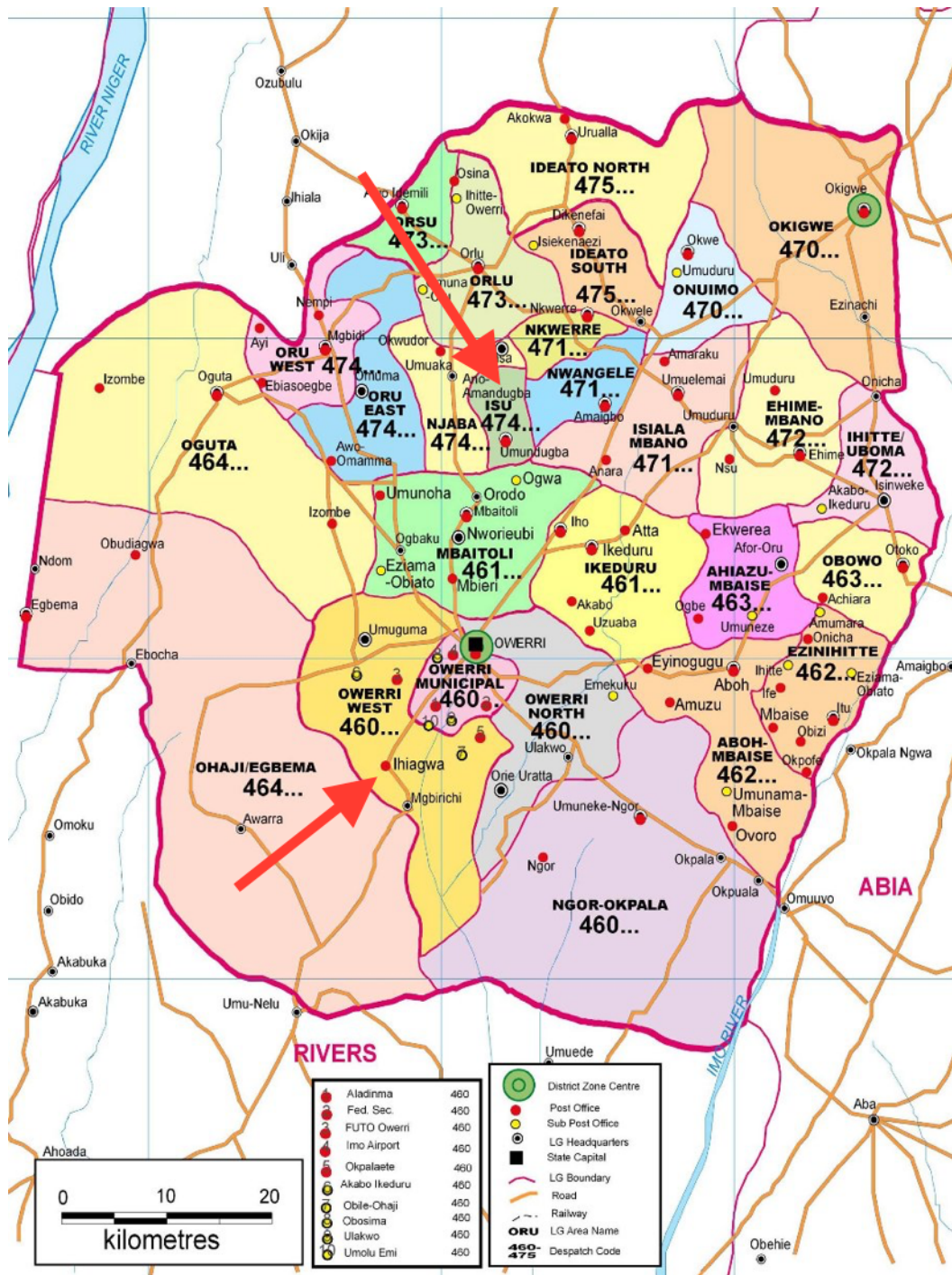


Figure 19. Map of Imo State showing Ihiagwa and Amandugba

Amandugba is an outskirts town in the Isu Local Government Area. It is a town in Imo State and a part of Igbo territory. Although they are in the same state with the Ihiagwa people,

and share some cultural commonalities, they have completely different women's musical genres. The difference in musical cultures is evident in their song styles, sung dialect, musical instruments, and especially in their rhythms. Having OWDG—the most popular women's music played on the radio in the 1980s—come to Amandugba was delightful to the villagers and from their reactions they had looked forward to it.

The bereaved group member led OWDG to the spot where they would perform their music. Before the women got there the family of the bereaved had arranged chairs under a canopy to shield the women from the sun. The chairs were arranged in an arc form. OWDG brought their musical instruments and arranged them in front of the chairs. Women and men who played the instruments sat behind the instruments while the other members sat in the other chairs and waited patiently for their turn.

There were other musical groups present and they took turns performing. The villagers waited patiently for OWDG because it was their first visit to Amandugba. All the other musical groups present came from within the Amandugba community and the villagers were obviously used to them. After a short while when it was their turn to perform, the master of ceremonies introduced OWDG in a special way, "I know some of you have heard the audio recording of these awesome Owerri women." The crowd cheered, "*Eeye!*" in agreement. He continued, "Very few of us have seen them perform live. They are the best in our state, our country, and the world." This time the crowd shouted along "*Eeeeye*" and the OWDG instrumentalists accompanied the crowd with loud sounding *ekwe*, *ogene*, *ogwe*, *oyo* and *udu*. The president ran out with his harmonica and played random loud sounds while moving to the sound of the harmonica. The crowd cheered more, as more people gathered to watch them perform.



Photo 37. A section of the crowd gathered to appreciate the performers

After the introduction, a man from the bereaved family presented kola in the form of *orji*—kolanut fruits, *mkpuru ofe*—garden eggs, and spirits (liquor) to OWDG. Kola nut is a nut from a tropical tree common in West and Central Africa. There are different species of the tree and the kola nut serves different functions in different ethnic regions. Apart from its medicinal capabilities, its most prominent role across ethnic groups is that it has been used to promote social interactions. Such interactions preserve cultures, sustain identity, and promote intercultural relationships. In Igbo culture the offering of kola is used to welcome visitors and is a sign of acceptance.

In addition, the Kola is also a concept used to describe whatever one offers their visitors—drinks, food, snacks, money, and kola nut itself. Kola nut will only be on the list of offerings if a man is one of the visitors. Kola nut is only offered to men and women are not allowed to touch it during the blessing. Maureen C. Duru outlines the four parts of kola nut ritual in Igbo, Owerri culture, *iche Orji*—the presentation of kola nut, *igo Orji*—blessing of the kola nut, *iwa Orji*—breaking of the kola nut and *ike Orji*—distribution of the kola nut. (Duru 2005, 203-204, 207).

The president accepted the kolanut and began the *igo orji* ritual—blessing of the kolanut, in Igbo language²⁴ with symbolic gestures that synchronized with the prayers, “The heavens look at *orji*, the earth looks at *orji*. Our ancestors look at *orji*. We thank you the creator for creating *orji*. He who brings *orji* brings life. Amandugba people have shown us that they are very happy that we are here. We accept this kola nut in gratitude. We invoke the spirit of our ancestors, especially Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike to come and be with us throughout this performance. As we eat this kola nut, let us eat life.” At this point the crowd began to respond “*isee*—Amen” after every phrase. He continues, “Let us eat wealth! Let us eat good health and long life! Let us eat protection! Let us eat fertility! Let us eat wisdom! Let our children not forget us! We do not look for people’s trouble, therefore let no one look for our trouble. It shall be well with all of us.” The crowd shouted their last “*isee*” and it continued for a while. The men broke the kola nuts and shared them among themselves, and gave women the garden eggs.

The kolanut ritual exemplifies how women have been subordinate to men and victimized in precolonial Igbo cultures. In addition, this ritual is still happening today. Although the group

²⁴ Igbo people believe that kola nut does not understand a foreign language. The blessing of the kolanut must always be in Igbo language, even in the diaspora.

belongs to the women and they have remained mostly the star performers, they are still limited by societal norms and values, as they are completely excluded in the kolanut ritual, which is an integral part of their music performance. It is important to stress that the president invoked the spirit of Rose Nzuruike, a woman during the ritual. This makes Rose a heroine even in death. However, she would not have touched the kolanut if she were alive and present at this ritual. While OWDG women maintained that they did not feel excluded as it has been the culture since pre-colonial Igbo, the exclusion of women in Igbo kolanut ritual has been a major discourse among Igbo feminist scholars, who have generally argued that it is part of patriarchy that characterizes the Igbo world.

Syncretism of Traditional Religion and Christianity

The coexistence of different religions in Igbo syncretic practice is an effect of colonization. The Igbo, like many other ethnic groups in Africa, have practiced two religions since the introduction of Western religion and this syncretism was evident in this performance by the OWDG. After performing the kola nut ritual, which is exclusively performed in respect to the traditional gods, OWDG began their music performance with prayers to the Gods of the land and the Christian God. They made offerings to the Gods of the land through libation. Another male member of OWDG used one of the spirits offered to them as kola for libation. He made a similar prayer to the blessing of the kola nut, but this time the prayer was offered in connection to their performance. He made this prayer and offering while pouring the sprits on the sandy, dusty soil, “Gods of our land, Gods of Amandugba, our ancestors, Chief Mrs. Rose Nzuruike, we offer you this spirit with humility, please accept our offering. We the OWDG have come to Amandugba to do what we usually do. You have guided us through these years. Please do it again today. Let our

voices not crack as we sing. Let our hands not hurt as we play. Let us not stumble as we dance. Let our music entice Amandugba people today. Let it continue to entice our audience wherever we go. It shall always be well with us.” The crowd, again heralded a long “iseeeee” to usher in the music. Women started ululating as the instrumentalist played random parts on their instruments.

The lead singer started singing to the Christian God with light instrumental accompaniment and gestures to call God into their midst.

<i>Bia Dinwenu anyi Jesu</i>	Come our Lord Jesus
<i>Bia anyi choro gi nna</i>	Come we want you Lord
<i>Bia ka iburu eze, n’etiti anyi nile</i>	Come and be king in our mist
<i>Onye isi nachi anyi</i>	The leader that leads us

Figure 20. Bia Dinwenu Anyi Jesu with English Translation

Bia Dinwenu Anyi Jesu

(Come Our Lord Jesus)

Transcribed by Ruth Opara



Figure 21. Music Transcription of “Bia Dinwenu Anyi Jesu”

After singing one more song similar to this one the main performance began.

Collective Singing as an Act of Solidarity

Many villagers watched in admiration as the lead singer began singing other songs. Their performance was new to most of the villagers who had seen them for the very first time that day, while some were already familiar with the group through audio recordings and video. Those who heard them for the first time gazed in awe at the sound of their music and told me simply how much they loved the music. However, some who were already familiar with their music told me they thought something was missing and felt that the group was no longer as strong as they used to be. When I asked why they thought so, they concluded that the “ringing” voice they used to hear on the radio sounded different. Some villagers asked me if the person singing that day was the voice they hear in the radio. They thought I would know because I came with them. I smiled

and went on to ask more questions. Although they were satisfied with the instrumentation and dance, and were appreciative of the group's singing that day, they nevertheless felt that the "ringing" voice they were familiar with from the recordings was missing.

The audience's focus on singing illustrates the importance of singing in most musical genres in Africa. Singing is central in African music and "the basic idea of sound quality is derived from the human voice (Stone 2005, 54)." While African music is in a constellation of arts, Africans seem to value singing the most; every other art that accompanies music compliments singing or is constructed to reconstitute singing. Frances Bebey affirms, "The prime motive of instruments is to reconstitute spoken or sung language." Singing is the common means of communication in African music, given that music communicates the social, political and religious life of most Africans in traditional society. This makes singing the essence of African music as Bebey argues. Furthermore, since music is a common property in Africa and a means of communication, it is important that music is communicated in a language that most indigenes understand (Bebey 1975, 115).

Although the absence of Rose Nzuruike was felt, after many years of her demise, OWDG managed to play good music through collective singing. There was no standard harmony as OWDG harmonized at will and changed parts depending on how they felt. Their singing was filled with spontaneity and no one knew what to expect. Collective singing improves group solidarity as the women lend their voices when needed to keep the songs "ringing" and communicate social messages. Although the audience had complained about quality they accepted the group's singing and moved to the rhythm of the music in spite of the absence of Rose Nzuruike.

Instrumentation and Women's Limitations

The instrumentation of OWDG confirms Nzewi and Galane's claim, "Thus, sonically and metaphysically, the female spirit is the leader of the musical arts ensemble, even though a man may be the human surrogate playing the instrument and leading the group (Nzewi and Galane 2005, 76). During the performance, the prayer was accompanied by "light" instrumentation played by women. It has been the standard practice of OWDG women to play the instruments first during prayers before handing over the *ogwe* and *ekwe* to men, symbolizing women's ownership of the group. Although women were excluded from the *kolanut* ritual which was a part of prayer, they took complete charge of the musical aspect of the prayer, as they played all the instruments and did the singing without the men.²⁵

The instruments were initially arranged according to their gender roles, according to their sizes. The larger ones that produce the deeper sounds, which are considered female, were either put on the left or the right depending on who was playing. Although Galane and Nzewi claim that instruments are paired lineally to produce an ensemble according to their female and male qualities, OWDG did not strictly follow this rule. The instrumentalists changed this arrangement intermittently especially during improvisations to articulate a specific idea or musical cue.

²⁵ When this prayer was going on, I sat behind OWDG to observe what was going on. The President came to me to stop me from videoing the group. I asked why he didn't want me to video the group and he replied that I needed to perform another *omenaala* before doing that. I promised to do it after we return so avoid interrupting the flow of music and he refused. He told me to give him some money and that would be enough. I was resisting to give him money privately when another male member showed up and asked what was going on. He claimed that everything was okay, but I told him what was going on. He rebuked him and told me that I can video the group because I have already done the *omenaala*. This incident confirms some women's lack of trust on their leader.



Photo 38. Instrumental arrangement during the performance at Amandugba

Traditionally these instruments primarily function as accompaniment to songs and dances, cueing the singers and dancers, and communicating to the performers and the audience (Agawu 2016, 127).

As soon as the prayer was over, the women handed over the *ogwe* (drums) and *ekwe* (slit drum) to the men as they started singing *Anyi Abia doula nu ibere onwu* (We Have Come to Mourn the Dead). The rhythm of the music changed, becoming faster and more upbeat with repeated polyrhythms and improvisations that underlie the basic rhythm:

TIME	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Udu	X								X							
Ekwe	X			X			X		X			X			X	.
Ogwe		X	X			X	X			X	X			X	X	
Ogene	X			X	X				X			X	X			.
Oyo	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Figure 22. Rhythmic pattern played by Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group

At this point the audience who gently moved to the rhythm when OWDG were praying started shouting in admiration. They came closer to the performance spot and gathered around OWDG. Most were moving vigorously to the rhythm, a few were moving gently and singing. Others watched in admiration and shortly after that almost everyone started clapping. The hand clapping came in various patterns, but synchronized with the basic rhythm. Many clapped the exact rhythm with the *oyo* (rattle) to accompany the music, some the *udu* (pot drum), some *ekwe* (slit drum) depending on their strength. The elderly ones barely managed to clap the *udu* part which acts as a metronome. Everyone adapted to what they could do as there was no stipulated pattern.

The reasons why the rhythm became more upbeat and vigorous were twofold. First, the women had been playing strictly to accompany the prayer which is usually played softly so people can concentrate on their prayers. Secondly, most people believed that men play the *ogwe* and *ekwe* better so it was assumed that the rhythm would change as soon as the men took over the instruments. It is hard to accept this belief in the rhythmic superiority of men, especially after I watched many OWDG rehearsals in which men were not present and the women clearly played as well as the men. Nevertheless, women instrumentalists today are limited to rehearsals and prayers because of gender stereotypes that men supposedly play those instruments better than women.

Song Repertoires and Misplaced Social Functions

Although OWDG started with funeral songs after their prayers, their repertoire included songs with several different kinds of functions and with a variety of meanings: birth songs, recreational songs for children and lullaby, initiation and induction songs, love and marriage songs, religious songs, songs used in festivals, occupational songs and songs for entertainment. Their songs were filled with proverbs, idioms and metaphors that characterize Igbo music in their Owerri dialect.

One of the reasons why OWDG and Owerri musical groups appeal to audiences outside Owerri is because they sing in the Owerri dialect. In Igbo language culture the Owerri dialect is considered quite romantic and very difficult for none Owerri indigenes to speak. Amandugba people were especially excited at the start of any new song and shouted the lyrics while messing up the intonation. They yelled for more, requesting popular songs that OWDG had recorded, most of which were not funeral songs.

Many African music scholars have expressed how music functions in different stages of the life of the African individual, as explained in Chapter Three. This OWDG performance however, featured an unexpected variety of song repertoire. Although OWDG traveled to Amandugba for a funeral and performed several funeral songs, the audience demanded more than just funeral songs. The primary reason for the demand was because that was the first visit of OWDG to Amandugba; the community was not sure when or if they would come back. They took advantage of the opportunity to hear more of their repertoire. Another reason was to hear OWDG's popular songs they usually hear on the radio performed live. OWDG adhered to the

demands of their audience and performed their most well-known songs, fulfilling an entertainment function.

Dancing the “Cacophony” and Gender Identity

As soon as the singing and instrumentation were established, the women started filing out with *egwu-ukwu* (hip-wiggling) dance steps.



Photo 39. OWDG dancing egwu-ukwu

Egwu-ukwu is a dance style that characterizes many musical genres among Owerri women including OWDG and it is cherished by other Igbo subgroups. This dance step enticed the crowd and they started shouting and later joined the dance. This move by the crowd scattered an organized choreographed dance that eventually ended in a cacophonic mixture of instruments, singing, clapping, shouting, talking, and dancing.

The uproar continued and increased when a young man emerged onto the stage to do the *egwu-ukwu* dance. At this point the audience's attitude changed with a mixture of astonishment and resentment. While some villagers stared in astonishment that a man could do the hip-wiggling so well, the successful hip-wiggling by a young man led to resentment from some audience members who accused him of being *ndaa nwanyi* (gay). It turned out that the deceased was his grandmother and his primary reason for dancing was to add flavor to OWDG's performance in honor of his grandmother.



Photo 40. A young man doing the egwu-ukwu dance

This young man is twenty-four years old and has followed OWDG to many performances. While he has been embarrassed by audience members in many performances about his gender identity, he tried to communicate that he is not gay. While a few members of OWDG avoided talking about him, his mother and most members affirmed that he is not gay.

There could be two reasons for the above answers I got while interviewing OWDG members. On the one hand, OWDG members may have decided to give him a chance to perform his identity, whether he is gay or straight, thereby supporting gender performativity. The reason why they might not talk about it is because of how oppressive Nigerian society is toward

homosexuals. Nigerian law forbids gay culture and being gay is a punishable offense. On the other hand, OWDG might not be aware of his identity and have been inviting him for performances because of his talent at dancing. If this is the case, his dancing may not be an act of gender performativity because it is not enacting any particular definition of gender.

Conclusion

As evident in this performance event, the musical culture of OWDG can be seen as complex and seemingly contradictory in several ways. The OWDG has shown an adaptability to change over time within a society that maintains strict cultural norms. In having to adapt to a tighter budget situation, the group has broken with traditional ways in which costumes convey meanings in African performance practices. Traditional functions of Igbo songs are also challenged by OWDG's status as a popular music group that entertains as well as performs in rituals. The enthusiastic Amandugba audience demanded to hear songs they were familiar with regardless of the appropriateness of their social function at a funeral. OWDG adapted to the situation by giving their audience exactly what they wanted. Even so, those who were already familiar with the group through recordings that featured Rose felt disappointed that the group no longer featured the distinctive ringing vocal sound they had come to expect.

This event also demonstrated how an Igbo woman can be viewed simultaneously as victim and heroine in the case of the nursing mother who was not allowed to attend this event. While culturally "victimized" by Igbo expectations that prevented her from performing, her personal sacrifice to stay behind was seen as heroic by fellow members of the group. The ritual performance context also demonstrated ways in which women of the OWDG are suppressed yet celebrated. Women are completely excluded from the kolanut ritual, yet the men evoked the

spirit of Rose, who is believed to be the most important ancestor looking over the group.

Although the group is considerably weaker after the death of Rose, OWDG are still able to unify through their collective singing and reinforce a sense of solidarity in the group. Through performance on musical instruments that are traditionally the domain of men, the women of OWDG symbolically express their ownership of the instruments, yet their instrumental performance is limited to rehearsal and prayer sections because the cultural assumption is that men play the instruments better than women.

Finally, while gender identity appears to be strictly controlled by Igbo cultural expectations, there is a certain degree of fluidity in the act of performance. Not only does OWDG challenge gender identity through the use of instruments that are traditionally in the male domain, they have encouraged at least one audience member to engage in a controversial and taboo expression of an alternative gender identity through dance. It is overly simplistic to reduce the musical practices of African women to one side of a dichotomy that portrays them as either victims or heroines. Such simplification undermines their achievements and does not adequately represent their personal struggles. The best way to represent the experience of an African woman is by carefully examining how she adapts to unique situations.

Chapter VI

THE FUTURE OF OBIWURUOTU WOMEN'S DANCE GROUP

Being born in Igboland, Nigerian culture offered me the privilege to experience OWDG and their musical practices from childhood to my present-day career as an ethnomusicologist. My Igbo heritage has given me the knowledge of Igbo culture and language, including the Igbo thought process and philosophy. My musical career equipped me with the necessary tools to look at the musical practices of OWDG with an outsider perspective. Through my experiences and research, I have been able to connect OWDG musical practices to their everyday experience as married women in Igbo culture.

I have experienced OWDG music differently throughout my career. As a child, what stood out for me was the rhythm and how people around me reacted to their music. When I started playing music all I wanted to do was to play their music and I tried many times to “scream” like Rose Nzuruike. At that time, I also tried my best to describe the music publicly as an introduction before performing. I also realized that the singing, dancing, instruments, and the costumes of OWDG perform multiple functions in how they interacted with the social functions of music and the roles they play in performance. The most fascinating thing I discovered from my recent fieldwork experience is that all these arts that make up what can be called music in Igbo culture have gender implications and deeper connotations embedded in them. It was also striking the extent to which OWDG women actively negotiate gender roles through music. I saw firsthand the ways in which these gender ideologies so integral to Igbo culture are negotiated through women's musical practices. I have come to appreciate Igbo married women's experiences, struggles, and sacrifices, especially how OWDG members live and adapt within a patriarchal society that at times seems to threaten the vibrancy and even the existence of the

group. The focus of this dissertation on married women's musical practice within OWDG is my response to African feminist discourse on the status of the contemporary African woman.

The future of Obiwuruotu Women's Dance Group

During my research with OWDG, I asked almost all of them, individually and collectively, to speculate about the future of the group. While a few of them were confident that the group would continue to perform, most of them worried that they might not be able to perform in the future. Based on their answers I found that the older women who are pioneering members from the earlier years of OWDG seem to be more worried than the younger women, while the men expressed few concerns. Below are some of the conversations I had with OWDG members about their future. I grouped them into three categories: responses from pioneer women members (PW), responses from younger women members (YW) and responses from the men (M).

I had the conversation below with an elderly woman who plays the *oyo* (rattle). She expressed her worries about the sound the group produces in recent times after many pioneer members had passed away:

Ruth: Hello mama, thank you for answering my questions. I appreciate your time. I have one more question, please.

PW: Go ahead my daughter.

Ruth: What do you think is the future of OWDG?

PW1: My daughter, I am very worried. You see, your mother (referring to herself) is almost gone (this means she is old and believes she will probably pass away soon). You have seen me play the *oyo* (rattle) many times. Did you see that I was really weak playing it?

Ruth: No mama, I think you have played very well since my stay with you.

PW1: You are very kind my daughter (smiling). Thank you! But I have to tell you I am really weak now, I used to play very well. I am especially worried that the younger ones are not able to play like me. I mean, they play as well as they can, but you have seen, my daughter, that when I handle the *oyo*, the music changes, as it sounds better. If I could play like this, you would have imagined how I played when I was younger. I got so much admiration from playing the *oyo*. It especially synchronized well with other instrumentalist members who have passed away. In recent times, even when I try to play very well on the *oyo*, other players drag me, Oh I miss the old members so much. Our music used to sound very good. The sound of music used to gather the whole community. You have been to our rehearsals so many times now, my daughter, how many people do you see? Nobody cares about our music anymore. Of course, I don't blame them we don't sound as good as we used to, we don't sing as well as we use to when Rose was alive. It is painful. I think our music will collapse soon, but I pray it happens after I am gone.

Another conversation I had with one of the older women shed light on the publicity and relevance of the group in recent times. She was worried about how they are no longer invited to perform all over Igboland and Nigeria as they used to when Rose was alive:

Ruth: Mama, thank you for your time. I appreciate you. I have one last question for you.

PW2: You are welcome my daughter, ask whatever you want, I will be willing to answer.

Ruth: Mama, what will you do to keep this group alive for a long time?

PW2: Oh, my daughter, we are dead already. I have no idea what to do. Nobody ever calls us to perform outside Ihiagwa community unless we traveled for a burial ceremony. This is because they don't like our music anymore.

Ruth: Mama, I think Amandugba people really liked your music.

PW2: Well, yes, my daughter, they were delighted that we could come. But my daughter we were able to go because our member lost her mother. What I am trying to communicate to you is that nobody pays us to come and perform. We no longer have money. We used to get a lot of money from performances when Rose was alive. I never thought I would lack money in this group. With the leadership of Rose, we traveled all

over the country, performing and making money, I mean so much money. Oh, I miss Rose, may she rest in peace. Amen!

This last conversation with a pioneer member touched on morality within the group. She was worried about lack of respect within the group in recent times and also complained about men's activities:

Ruth: Mama, I am grateful that you made out time to answer my questions. I have one last question for you.

PW3: Sure, my daughter I am enjoying talking about OWDG, as it brings so many memories.

Ruth: What do you think has changed in the group over the years, how do you perceive this change?

PW3: My dear daughter, we respected Rose a lot when she was alive, because she was our leader, and she was very fearless. She in return, respected women who were older than her. She gave them more money, and gave them food first.²⁶ She really honored them; I wasn't one of them but I envied being old. Today, look at me, I am old and nobody respects me in the group. All the younger ones grab food first; they don't even care if we the older ones have eaten something. It is terrible, my daughter. The worst are the men; all they want to do is to drink beer; they just drink beer and forget themselves. And when you try to complain, they insult you. This never happened when Rose was alive. It is only going to get worse, and I am worried about this group and where we are heading.

This group of women were very blunt in their worries and criticisms about the state of the group in present times. From their accounts, it is clear that things have changed drastically in the wake of Rose's demise and they care deeply about the welfare of OWDG.

²⁶ This stems from the Igbo idea that elders take food first and get more money when money is shared as a sign of respect. This culture is still practiced in Igboland in present times.

The second group of women I interviewed are the younger ones who had a similar response when I asked them about the future of OWDG. While most of them acknowledged that the group's popularity and relevance had declined in present times, they think they are doing their best, and they are confident that the group will survive. Below is a conversation I had with one of them:

Ruth: Thank you, aunty²⁷ for your time. I have one last question.

YW: Sure, dear, take your time.

Ruth: What do you think the future of OWDG will look like?

YW: Well, as you can see, we are really doing well. We have managed to maintain this group even after the death of Rose. I think we will continue to do as well, too. The elderly ones handed over this musical culture to us. We will continue to pass it to younger generations of married women in Ihiagwa. This way it will continue to be in existence. I must say that we have had challenges, but we are doing our best.

Ruth: Can you please talk about some of these challenges?

YW: Yes, our primary problem now is that we do not have money. We need money to keep this group going, we don't have many uniforms as we used to, most of our instruments are really old, and we do not have enough funds to buy new ones. We also need better amplifiers and microphones, but we just can't afford them. Some of the performances you traveled with us, you saw that we had technical problems. This affects our music production. Another problem is that members are no longer dedicated as they used to be when I joined the group. We used to get a lot of money from our performances, and I mean a lot of money; but now we hardly get money. So, because of these, members are really slacking. Apart from fund issues, we try our best to keep the music going.

²⁷ The younger women are addressed as aunties, while the elderly ones, mama. This is common in Igbo culture, as one does not need to be related to anyone to call them mother or aunty. It is simply a sign of respect; this is because Igbo society does not expect younger ones to address people older than them by name.

When I asked the men about the future of OWDG, they said everything would work out, as the President is unlikely to admit that the group is not thriving under his leadership:

Ruth: Thank you so much sir for the opportunity you have given me so far. What do you think will happen to this group in the future?

M: Well, nothing will happen to the group. We will continue to keep it going. My leadership is well appreciated and I have guided the women well over the years, since Rose passed away. I will continue to lead them well. We will go places and we will continue to make good music.

Ruth: Have you been going to places in recent times?

M: Yes! As you have seen since you have been with us, we have performed in some places. Am I not right about that?

Ruth: You are correct, sir, but what kind of performances are those? Were you paid to go and perform or did you travel on solidarity trips to identify with your members?

M: Does it really matter? The most important thing is that we are still performing.

Ruth: Again, sir, you are correct. But if any of your members did not have any ceremony, would you have traveled to perform?

M: Well, maybe not at this time but we have been performing. I mean, it is normal no musical group performs all the time.

Ruth: Correct, sir, but for how long have you not been paid by nonmembers to perform?

M: I cannot remember at this time, but it is okay.

Ruth: Do you not think that is a problem?

M: I mean, no, we will rise again soon. Like I said earlier, it happens in every group. It would be okay.

Ruth: Do you have any plans to get people to start inviting you again?

M: Not necessarily, we have been popular over the years. They will notice us soon enough, and they will come back to us. We are planning to make our music better, and this will attract so many.

Ruth: Does that mean that something is wrong with the music now?

M: Not really, we are just planning to experiment on many things. Do not worry so much; it will be a surprise.

Apart from individual interviews, I asked OWDG members questions when they were together as a group. It was obvious that some of them were afraid to speak up. The collective response I got was a mixture of affirmations and denials. The women were more comfortable speaking during private conversations. From my conversations and my research of OWDG, I realized that the elderly women who are the pioneer members are invested heavily in the group's welfare and continuous progress. They are mostly worried that the legacies of Rose are being mismanaged. While I agree with them, and disagree with men who are in denial that there is no problem, I conclude that some of the factors that led to the changes in the group are beyond their control. With the death of Rose Nzuruike, it is impossible for the group to remain the same. First, Rose's "ringing voice," which is what audiences appreciated the most, is gone. Secondly, Rose's talent, leadership skills, and influence, which attracted people to her and to the group, is gone. Thirdly, her fearlessness that led to her chieftaincy title and respect from men is also gone. These circumstances, therefore, affect OWDG musical production, popularity, and fame, as well as their general well-being. Thus, it is difficult to say what their future holds. Today it appears as if it may only get worse, unless the "secret plan" of the President is to revitalize the group in a way that would, once again, attract Igbo and Nigerian people in general. However, in spite of any new musical or performance elements, the group will still have to continue on without Rose Nzuruike as its leader.

Future Research and Final Thoughts

After having conveyed the history, music, and songs, as well as the current state of OWDG in Ihiagwa, I have identified several avenues for further research. These avenues would expand the knowledge about this group and the kind of knowledge they produce, in regards to their status as married women in Igbo life and culture.

1. Study other song lyrics to explore how they address other issues that are not addressed in this dissertation.
2. Continue to trace changes in their musical practices within the local Igbo and national Nigerian context to further understand how they continue to adapt to a changing society.
3. Study how Igbo society continues to perceive changing gender roles in their daily lives and musical practices.
4. Study how other groups, including women's musical groups, traditional musical groups, as well as popular musical groups, have adopted and revitalized some of the OWDG songs. This will provide insight on the influence OWDG still has in Igbo society.
5. Study how individual gender identity is performed in a homophobic and patriarchal Igbo society in Nigeria.

Future research should contribute to our understanding of African women and music making in a more nuanced way without falling into the cliché narratives of African women being characterized as either victims or heroines. Although I do concede that there are Igbo women who become victims of their gender and women who behave heroically in the face of such suppression, it is too simplistic to characterize Igbo women as either/or. An Igbo woman's situation can change over time and is more flexible than the double narrative implies. Some

individual women in OWDG could be identified as being both victimized and heroic at different stages of their life and in different social and musical contexts. The change is due to a number of social factors in Igbo society: family, talent, marriage, beauty, education, and age. The best way to represent the experience of the Igbo woman is to carefully examine how individual women adapt to unique situations. I have done this through working closely with these women and highlighting their voices through songs and interviews, answering the call from African feminists and some feminist ethnomusicologist (Blankenship, 2014) to pay more attention to the individual voices of women. In this way, we scholars can avoid monolithic, universal assumptions about gender in African culture and reveal how their experiences provide outlets and avenues for expression and the transmission of women's knowledge over time. I am hopeful that my research has created avenues for future studies of women's musical cultures in Igboland, other ethnic groups in Nigeria, and other women's groups that have been overlooked on the African continent.

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