



## The Language of Bongo Music and the Igbo Concept of Enjoyment: A Thematic and Stylistic Assessment

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### ABSTRACT

Recognizing the need for verbal communication within the human community, the work identifies that language is present in virtually every aspect of man's existence. With language, music, as an aspect of entertainment which combines different notes to produce melody and pass information is composed. The work highlights that Bongo music is one cultural identity recognizable among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. The Igbo are generally hard working people who relax with music after each working day. Bongo music comes in handy in these relaxation centres. The Bongo music composer, aware of the importance of music in fulfilling the people's entertainment needs, crafts the lyrics of his songs, to capture the enjoyment-driven dispositions among the Igbo, bearing in mind the fact that in Ala Igbo, enjoyment is evidence of wealth. These tendencies serve as veritable links between the musician, audience and their roots. In crafting these songs the Bongo music composer brings to bear those very noticeable tendencies among the Igbo that serve to emphasize that wealth should be properly deployed to serve man's personal and social needs. Through this brand of music, the Bongo musicians in Ala Igbo clearly express the larger Igbo concept that any wealthy person who does not eat good food and drink choice wines to nourish his body and edify his spirit certainly does not realize the material/practical values of the wealth he/she possesses. As the Igbo say, that which you eat while alive is what sustains you to the world beyond. Through careful thematic and stylistic assessments, the work identifies that Bongo music in Ala Igbo emphasizes those cultural values that distinguish the Igbo as a unique social group that considers enjoyment as evidence of good living.

**Keywords:** *Language, Communication, Bongo Music, Cultural Values, Enjoyment.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The relevance and importance of music as a form of artistic expression in society cannot be overemphasized. As an art form, music touches the mind and helps it discover joy and happiness as varying forms of human emotions. Music itself is created and rendered through language. In other words, the language which a musician employs goes a long way to clearly establish both the musician and his music as belonging to the particular linguistic medium which gives him his peculiar means of expression. It is therefore imperative that the patterns of musical expressions and renditions are clear manifestations of the artist's orientations as well as his socio-cultural background. Exponents of the bongo music style in the Igbo nation of South-East Nigeria are clear reflections of this peculiar interaction between language and the people's cultural orientation as can be established in the musical works of two bongo music exponents, Dr Sir Foreigner and Mr Agbaso Obinna (aka) Ababa Nna.

### Bongo Music: A Background

The brand of music known and popularly regarded as bongo in the Nigerian environment is generally most evident in South-East and South-South Nigeria. It is a brand in which traditional musical instruments such as the drum, the metal and wooden gongs, and other locally-made musical instruments are dominantly used. On a general note, the bongo musical pattern de-emphasizes the use of foreign and mostly electronic gadgets like electronic guitars, percussions and cymbals. Irrespective of modernization efforts, virtually all bongo musical bands in Igbo land especially in the Owerri environment where the brand is most popular, express their musical talents with traditional and locally-made instruments dominating their band stands.

To a large extent, the exponents of the bongo music brand, mindful of their fundamental orientation, are essentially concerned with the advancement of the values and traditions of the Igbo people as a distinct cultural, group in the larger Nigerian environment. As has been noted by Vitalis C. Nwulu and Nina F. Nwulu[1], bongo music originated among Nigerian musicians during the colonial period as a reflection of the 'rising concept of freedom at the political terrain" and

clearly represented African "peoples attempt to affirm their traditional identities through musical songs and dances (199 - 200). Accordingly, the source asserts that:

The proponents of bongo music saw it as typically African and therefore an affirmation of African ideals that highlighted African norms and values. It also contrasted with foreign music brands like classical music, orchestra and soul popular among the European colonial officers (200).

The above clearly highlight the fact that the bongo music brand gained acceptability among the Igbo people as a unique pattern of identification with the people's values, norms and traditions. This is generally in conformity with J.C. Okoro's assessment that every musical performance gains acceptability because it reflects issues and practices prevalent within its world of existence and operation. According to Okoro[2]:

Expressive articulation of rhythmic sounds of music must relate to an ideal and comprehensive pictorial view of the prevailing circumstance bordering round the ethics, norms, and etiquette within the system (15).

This assertion thus explains why the proponents of the bongo music brand go for locally made (without condescension) instruments for their music. One can advance the fact that it must have started off as a form of protest against the colonial establishment itself. In other words, if the European colonial officers could derive joy and entertainment by listening and dancing to European music forms, Africans could not have simply watched and mimicked European styles. Bongo music brand can therefore be considered as the new musical development which home-grown and uniquely African. The only way to effectively establish the African people's belief in themselves was by developing their local talents in ways that clearly established African cultural patterns and traditional beliefs. It is actually from this unique perspective that the current research effort is directed at exploring how the language of the bongo brand of music is advancing peculiar Igbo cultural patterns, and how it clearly establishes the Igbo concept of enjoyment,

### **The Concept of Enjoyment in Alaigbo (Igbo Land)**

Ala Igbo is a unique blend of cultural patterns that highlight a people whose values cut across all aspects of human experiences. The Igbo believe in hard work, resilience and the fact that "*aka aja aja, n'ebute onu mmanu mmanu*" (The well-fed mouth is as a result of the hardworking hand). The ultimate perception is that whatever an individual becomes is a consequence of his ability. This society of the Igbo encourages hard work as a prelude to fine and purposeful livelihood. No one should appropriate the good things of life if he/she does not work hard to produce wealth. Conversely therefore the Igbo man's inability to effectively deploy his talents to fulfill his destiny is a mark of lousiness and is condemnable. These beliefs are clear manifestations of Ala Igbo philosophies and are reflected in the people's language. It is instructive that Okwu Igbo (Igbo language) is very rich in sound expressions and aphorisms such that the exponents of the bongo music brand are always filling their musical expressions with those values which help the Igbo personality to not only identify the relevance and necessity of hard work but also the fundamental necessity to enjoy the real good fruits of one's labour.

The foregoing expose is undoubtedly in conformity with the intellectual identification of the role of a people's language in the establishment and ultimate advancement of the people's cultural values and orientations. There is no gainsaying the fact that this is definitely one of the major values of language - a unique pattern of human communication medium. According to N. P. Hickerson[3], a people's language clearly advances their beliefs, practices, perceptions and their total philosophical orientations. Appropriately, such are the several dimensions of contemporary scholarship in the field of language. Through these approaches, Hickerson affirms language as a unique human attribute and an effective social marker. Hickerson indeed affirms that the several advances made in researches into the biological, and probably, social approaches to language, fully confirm that:

Researchers have learned a great deal about the anatomical and neurological endowment, and the inter-workings of these, which enable human beings to formulate messages of greater complexity, transmit them more rapidly and utilize them in a greater diversity of ways than do members of any other species (2)

In other words, human languages do not just define the human community, but also help man identify what makes the difference between him and other animal species. Hickerson's assertions above are thus well-grounded expressions of the use man makes of his language to fully highlight his culture, values, and traditions. And as Queen Ugochi Njemanze and Nina Felicia Nwulu[4] have recognized, human language "is *sine qua non* for the identification of a people" (118).

In identifying the Igbo concept of enjoyment, bongo musicians do not pretend that such perceptions are arbitrary and outlandish. Rather, they clearly establish the fact that every effect has a causal element. For example, in Ala Igbo, the proverbial expression "*O kpa aku eri eri, lema kwala k'onu di ndi nwuru anwu*" (He who does not make out time to enjoy his wealth, should watch the mouth of the dead). The Igbo concept of enjoyment therefore recognizes the fact that a hard working person who takes some time out to enjoy himself through good food, choice wines, and generally living a good

life is not engaging in anything negative. Such a one is indeed giving real value to life and existence. Every hard work encourages good and quality livelihood

The Igbo concept of enjoyment further presupposes that the individual would have worked hard to produce the wealth he is supposed to expend in taking care of himself and guaranteeing for himself and his dependents, a luxurious and good livelihood. The Igbo philosophy on work and its related engagements does not encourage laziness or lousiness especially among the male folk. This is because every man in Ala Igbo is expected to take care of himself, his family and other dependent relatives with the proceeds of his hard work. The Igbo society attaches so much value to a man's prowess at work and other professional engagements as that is the true test of manhood. It is a cultural milieu that is impatient with lazy folks, especially the men, who generally are regarded as loafers,. The Igbo world view has no place for so-called "blue blood". Rather, every man, irrespective of his background, becomes established in life, and is socially recognized, by his work ethics and orientation.

Closely related to the above-mentioned motif is another one that emphasizes the dangers inherent in any individual being careless with issues of good living. In Ala Igbo, it is said that "*A ghara ndu kpa aku, onye iro e rie ya*" (If one neglects healthy living in pursuit of wealth, one's enemy will likely enjoy one's wealth when one dies). This necessarily assumes that neglecting a healthy life-style is a dangerous attitude because such neglects will cause illness, and the illness may bring about death. Since the dead no longer sees nor hears, even one's enemies may covet ones wealth. No Igbo person ever wishes such experiences should come his way - that his perceived enemies should be the person(s) enjoying his hard-earned income or wealth. In order therefore to avoid even the contemplation of such a terribly hard fate, the Igbo personality is constantly encouraged to enjoy his wealth through living a healthy life-style by every definable standard. Accordingly, the Igbo say, *ihe onye riri k'obu ala mmuo* (whatever one eats while alive, is what sustains one in the hereafter).

One may necessarily find a link between this obvious Igbo orientation and the Epicurean values of the Western philosophy. To a large extent, the Epicurean orientation of western philosophy advances very similar values as the Igbo concept of enjoyment does. This striking similarity identifies that similarities may exist in diverse cultural backgrounds, as do this between the Igbo and the Greek. In fact, as William F. Lawhead[5] puts-

Epicurus believed that it was simply a psychological fact that pursuit of pleasure motivates all human action..... Every action you perform can be explained in terms of the pursuit of either physical or psychological pleasure (91).

It then implies that man's desire for the pleasurable things of life is indeed the further motivation for hard work in order to fulfill that deep yearning for goodness. In other words, if hard work can guarantee an individual the desired good life, physically, emotionally and psychologically, such reasonable existence correspondingly motivates further hard work. Good living excites the senses, then encourages more hard work, in order to perpetually enhance and sustain good livelihood, or even better.

Accordingly, the Igbo person who is diligent in his tasks and achieves results that are dependable, ensuring his well being through good living should not be considered as an aberration. It is therefore normal that one who works hard and is diligent in his life's endeavours should set aside a reasonable means to take care of the body and soul in order to sustain them for the great task of continuity in the pursuit of happiness and joy. As Epicurus puts it, "you do things because you want to do them, and you want to do them because they make life more pleasant", (91). By such considerations, the Igbo person believes that the pursuit of happiness becomes a further encouragement for the individual to strive towards greater achievements in his chosen endeavours.

It becomes very clear therefore that in Ala Igbo, the concept of enjoyment emphasizes the need for the individual to come to an understanding that life is good and thus encourage every action that can sustain this. This implies that the individual should devote time to nourish one's body and soul because it is the goodness in each entity that combines to make one healthy. One's good health consequently guarantees right thinking and right judgment which eventually enhance better life not just for the individual as a person but also for the society in which the individual belongs.

### **The Language of Bongo Music and the Igbo Concept of Enjoyment**

Every work of art is a reflection of a social experience. The artist - poet, novelist, playwright, musician, etc - is a member of society and draws inspiration from the society's experiences. When T. S. Eliot points out that "a large part of any poet's inspiration must come from his reading and from his knowledge of history", (2014), it follows that the artistic work does not come from nothing. It rather arises as a result of the totality of the experiences surrounding the writer and his society. N. G. Ogbé adds to the above assertion by pointing out that a people's cultural values and belief system inspire the creative works within such an environment. As Ogbé[6] puts it:

All literary works (not just poetry) require that we bring knowledge of a language with us in our reading, and to know a language is to know a culture and a part of the world (27).

The artist's work thus becomes a shining light which helps to illuminate the audience's understanding of the cultural background that has given rise to the work.

The Igbo musician is therefore a man of ideas representing the culture and values of his immediate society. He sings and performs in accordance with the prescribed and recommended modes of behaviour and cultural patterns of his immediate environment. He sings to draw his audience into a better and more appreciable understanding of what the immediate society accepts as standard norms and values. In consonance with this the selected music of Dr. Sir Foreigner (Eze Bongo), and Mr Obinna Agbaso (aka Ababa Nna) shall form the bases of our assessment of the Igbo concept of enjoyment in the bongo music brand.

### **The Music of Dr Sir Foreigner (Eze Bongo)**

Dr Sir Foreigner is one of the major bongo musicians in Ala Igbo. His music traverses all issues of social importance and he has clearly established himself as one of the major voices in the advancement of the bongo music brand in Ala Igbo. This involvement of Dr Sir Foreigner is probably the major factor behind his adoption as well as his popular acceptability among both his fellow bongo musicians and the listening audience as "*Eze Bongo*", (The King of Bongo).

One of Dr. Sir Foreigner's songs that is of major relevance to our current discussion on the language of bongo music and the Igbo concept of enjoyment is the title "*O nwere ego rima ego*;", (He who has wealth should really enjoy it). In the particular title in reference taken from the album "*Eje Ayo*". The musician extols the value of money and other indices of good life.

Dr. Sir Foreigner prefaces this major hit track with the sound Igbo aphorism on the wisdom inherent in any man of means taking good care of himself through a healthy livelihood. An excerpt from the particular hit track goes as follows:

*O nwere ego rima ego o*

*Ina wu o kpa aku e ri e ri? '*

(He who has money should enjoy o

Do you wish to be a wealthy man who does not enjoy his wealth?)

By prefacing the major song with the above mentioned aphorism, Dr Sir Foreigner draws the audience's attention to the foolishness of any person of means not taking good care of himself / herself. Conversely, the prefatory comment highlights the wisdom inherent in good living through quality food intake.

As the song progresses, the artist then launches into the major commentaries through the lyrics:

*O nwere ego ri ma ego*

*Onye nwere aku dekwala ya onu*

*Chi pu anyi uzo uwa atuola m ujo*

*Onye nwere ego ri ma ego*

*Onye nwere aku dekwala ya onu*

*Chi pu anyi uzo uwa a tugbuo la m ujo*

(He who has money should enjoy it.

He who has wealth should kiss it

God who is here before our arrival I'm fearful of this life

He who has money should enjoy

He who has wealth should kiss it

God who indeed is here before our arrival

I'm truly fearful of this life)

The lyrics of the song establish the social recognition of enjoyment as part of the evidence of good living. The artist calls on the individual of ample means to rise to the challenges and demands of good living by indulging himself, after all, if not for the individual's hard work, there will be no wealth. So, the song sees no reason why the person who has amassed wealth should not enjoy his wealth in good measure.

The last lines of each of the verses express the fears of the musician on the strange development that may afflict the individual in the absence of any conscious decision not to enjoy. The expression itself, "*chi pu anyi uzo, uwa a tuola m ujo*" is a clear reference to the fact that there ought to be no set time for the individual to enjoy the fruits of one's hard labour. In fact, by this assertion, the artist recognizes that anything can actually happen. For instance, a man may propose to use the wealth at his disposal to build a mansion but may not live to enjoy the accruing benefits of the edifice. As the Igbo say, "*ihe onye riri k'o bu ala mmuo*" (whatever one "has eaten is the only thing that follows one to the grave). In

other words, every other achievement one may record with the money at one's disposal exists on its own, only the food taken by the individual is that which the human body derives any direct benefit from. "*Uwa bu ofu mbia*" (we have only one life to live). Therefore, the individual must make the best use of the single-term livelihood.

The unique style through which Dr Sir Foreigner etches the different layers of meaning encapsulated in the above-stated verse of the song in the heart and soul of the audience is in the preface "*I na wu okpa aku e ri e ri*". The full text of the said aphorism is "*O kpa aku e ri e ri, lee kwala kp'onu di ndi nwuru*" (He who acquires wealth and does not enjoy himself, let him observe the mouth of the dead). The focus of this is to satirize those who believe that wealth is merely acquired in order to simply answer a rich man, when in fact such a person lives the experiences of poverty. Such are the persons usually referred to in the Nigerian Pidgin expression as "*money miss road*".

### **The Music of Obinna Agbaso (Ababa Nna)**

The Awaka, Owerri North born Obinna Agbaso, (aka Ababa Nna) is unarguably

one of the most prolific bongo musicians in Ala Igbo. Ababa Nna is also identified as one of the most enjoyment-conscious bongo musicians in Imo State, Nigeria. While his songs, like those of Dr Sir Foreigner, touch on virtually every aspect of the Igbo world view, his popularity as a bongo musician stems from the level of undisguised attention he gives to enjoyment-related concepts. It is in fact, for this reason that he is popularly called "*Ababa Nna*" which literally means "*man of great affluence*".

Ababa Nna made his debut into the bongo music scene with the album "*Ababa Nna*" in 2008. The songs in that single album are all hit tracks but the most popular among the eight songs in the album are those devoted to the celebration of people of means who make out time to deploy their financial resources in order to spread joy and happiness. Conversely, he also explores the experiences of those whose lack of adequate financial muscle has rendered them victims of the exploitative tendencies -of big time spenders/oppressors. The song "*Ego a kokwana m*" ("May I never lack money") is one of such songs:

*Shi ego a kokwana m*  
*Mmanu a turu na m love m wa*  
*Ego a kokwana m*  
*Mmanu a turu na m love m uwa*  
*Ego a kokwana m*  
*Mmanu a turu na m love m agbalaga*  
*The girl ori ihe nne jiri yo ahia*  
*Ego m g'enye nu love m ya kola m oo*

(May I never lack money  
Such that another man will take my love and run  
May I never lack money  
Such that another man will take my love and run  
May I never lack money  
Such that another man will take my love and run away  
The girl who eats what mum brought from the market  
May the money I can give my love never be lacking)

Ababa Nna goes on in the above song to bemoan how lack of money has made it possible for his love to jilt him in preference to his wealthier (elder) brother. The sense in the song is of course the very effective reminder of the importance of wealth in every man's life. If he had money, he would, of course, have taken care of his love, taking her out on memorable dates that she would not have fallen to the enticements of the musicians' wealthier brother. The lack of money in the life of the musician becomes the major factor that has rendered him vulnerable to the preying antics of his wealthier brother. To the musician, the major import of the song in question is the necessity for every man worth the name to have adequate means, and by extension to have wealth enough to take care of major needs especially servicing his love life. These are invariably very major aspects of enjoyment in Ala Igbo.

In extending his celebration of wealth as a major sustenance of livelihoods in Ala Igbo, Ababa Nna in the same album has a song entitled "*Onye shi m'arala ndu...*" The song more or less is intended to be a curse laid upon those who would wish that poverty should ever be his lot. As he therefore cancels out the negative vision of poverty, the musician literally ushers himself into affluence. According to the song, Ababa Nna wishes himself a life of goodness because he has worked and laboured-ferverently for the wealth he wishes to enjoy:

*Onye shi m'arala ndu ya nwuu kwa*  
*Lekwa ndu rara ma*  
*Shi gi onye shi m'arala ndu ya nwuu kwa*  
*Lekwa uyo ruru ma*  
*Shigi onye shi m'erila he ya nwuu kwa*  
*Lekwa he riri ma*

*Onye ruo ya e rie*  
*Onye ruo ya e rie*  
*Ebe m ruru a ga m so ri*  
*Egbe bere ugo bere*  
*Nke shi ibe ya ebi la, nku kwa ya*

(Whoever wishes that I should not enjoy should die  
Please enjoy life  
Whoever wishes that I should not build a house should die  
Please enjoy your building  
Whoever wishes that I should not eat should die  
Please enjoy your food  
Whoever works should eat / enjoy  
Whoever works should eat / enjoy  
Since I have worked/laboured I shall enjoy  
May the kite perch, may the eagle perch  
Whichever wishes the other not to perch. May its wing clip)

The song above is one that clearly celebrates the great legacies of hard working personalities. It draws out all the goodness of hard work and its resultant tendencies of solid enjoyment as the musician pours out his venom on all who wish him no enjoyment. In essence, Ababa Nna extols the virtues of enjoyment in the manner that the persona in the song considers it as the ultimate reward for hard work. The singer thus extols the virtues inherent in enjoyment as a major tonic for more work because the hand that works hard gives rise to the mouths that eat sumptuously.

It must not in any way be concluded that the musician is such a negatively-minded individual that conjures up the destructive spirit of death on his adversaries. Such considerations may not even be anywhere near contemplation by the artist. As a matter of fact, the Igbo generally believe that any normal individual should wish others goodness and divine protection as one of the conditions to attract same to himself and his family. The above song therefore begins from the perspective of the conditional statement, "*onye shi m'arala ndu ya nwuu kwa...*", as a way of justifying the curse of death upon such a person that wishes another such negative experiences. The artist thus assumes that every wish that would come his way will always be those of goodness and mercy which are ennobling and virtuous. For the artist, enjoyment would always come his way because through hard work, he has laid a solid foundation for sustainable economic progress that should guarantee regular enjoyment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The essay has been effectively devoted to extolling the virtues of hard work as a means of promoting the Igbo concept of enjoyment. The write-up has been able to point out the great value which the Igbo nation attaches to the sustaining livelihood made possible by a healthy lifestyle. All considered, the Igbo philosophical orientation in terms of enjoyment is an encouragement for good livelihood. It advances the sound reasoning that healthy lifestyles cannot be divorced from quality feeding. The Igbo believe in the fact that only a healthy body, properly nourished with quality food can effectively think positively.

A hungry man is an angry man, and an angry man cannot contribute positively to society's development. For there to be social progress therefore, the individual should treat his body and soul with healthy food that can guarantee sustainable existence in all its ramifications.

Music, like food edifies the soul and exercises the body. The Igbo bongo musician, fully conscious of these hard facts of life and existence, intersperses his musical rhythms with linguistic expressions that encourage attention to quality life and existence. The attention to the idea of enjoyment among the populace is a testimony to the desire for a healthy lifestyle among the Igbo. The bongo artist also believes that in drawing the audience's attention to these realities of existence, his own quality livelihood is further enhanced. As a reasonable, well-nourished audience listens to the language of the bongo musician, such a person invariably identifies wholly and entirely with the musicians performance. In such situations, the artist in question awakens the consciousness of the audience to the performance (especially in live

performances) and they in turn respond by spraying cash gifts on the musician, in recognition of the potency and relevance of his musical renditions. And the enjoyment invariably continues.

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