

## CHAPTER TWO ABIGBO MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

### 2.1 THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF ABIGBO MUSIC.

#### 2.1.1 The Epistemology of Abigbo

Many communities in Mbaise perform Abigbo music. This music type has developed to be the identifying music of the Mbaise Igbo. Abigbo is also performed by communities contiguous to Mbaise due to its popularity. These communities include Ngwa, Iriteuboma, and some parts of Umuahia. Abigbo is a choral genre that has a long local history.

Two definitions of Abigbo exist among the communities that perform Abigbo music. Abigbo, according to the musicians interviewed during the fieldwork in Mbaise, is a term coined from a compound word- Abi (Igbo word for wisdom, knowledge, satire) and Igbo (the name for the Igbo group). Uzoigwe's definition of Abigbo in Ngwa (a neighboring town, also in Igbo land), corroborates the above definition. He says:

The term 'Abigbo', which consists of two words: abi (wit or pun) and Igbo (the name of the society), literally means 'Igbo wit' or Igbo pun (i.e. Igbo gossip). These Abigbo songs, therefore, portray and celebrate those daily affairs that concern more the living members of the Igbo society than the dead ancestors. (1998:7).

"Abi Igbo", would be the correct name for this music type. But among the Igbo, a compound word such as Abi Igbo must conform with the natural ellipses that occurs in the Igbo language: the last vowel of the first word is normally dropped when the first and second words that constitute a compound word end and begin with vowel sounds respectively. Examples include:

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Ama Igbo pronounced Am'Igbo -Igbo place

Onye Ije pronounced Ony'ije -traveler

Abi Igbo, is therefore pronounced Ab'Igbo in order to conform to the Igbo phonetic system.

A slightly different definition of Abigbo exists in Ihituboma in Etiti Local Government Area. They say, "Abigbo is a term coined from a compound word "Abu Igbo", meaning Igbo chorus. This compound word also conforms to the natural ellipses of Igbo language. Hence the "u" in Abu was dropped. This gave rise to Ab'Igbo also.

The emphasis in the first definition is on the text (Abi), while the second one lays emphasis on the totality of the vocal creative output, with music as the center of interest (Abu). While both definitions are technically correct, the first definition is more reliable. Apart from being the acceptable definition among the Mbaise community that originated the music, and in other neighboring communities, it gives clue to the social genesis of Abigbo, which emphasizes Igbo wit, pun, jokes and satires. However, the Abigbo groups the writer had contact with, lay emphasis on the musicality as well as the socially contexted text.

It would be correct to write Abigbo thus: Ab'Igbo in order to represent the ellipsis. However, in Igbo written language also, such compound words are often represented as single words. This is mostly so when they are used for nouns. Examples are:

Ndu bu isi written Ndubisi\_ name of a person

Umu oku written Umoku\_ name of a village

Onye Ije written Onyije\_ traveler

Onye agha            written Onyagha\_- warrior

Chi na edu            written Chinedu\_- name of a person

In this work "Ab'igbo" would be written thus: Abigbo. Nzewi (1991) and Uzoigwe (1998) had earlier used Abigbo in the discussions of the music.

### 2.1.2 Origin of Abigbo music

Mr. Ugwuezumba Akwuruaha (about 67 years), an Abigbo musician, interviewed on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2001, stated that it is not now possible to trace the exact origin of Abigbo in Mbaise. He, however, is of the conviction that it originated in Ezinihite, an Mbaise community. His late brother, Mr. Boniface Akwuruaha introduced Abigbo into Okwuato, his own Mbaise community. His brother thus borrowed the music from Ezinihite. Akwuruaha maintained that it has been more than forty years since his brother brought the Abigbo music to Okwuato. The brother died about seventeen years ago after having played Abigbo for more than forty years.

The writer conducted research in Ezinihite in order to trace the origin of Abigbo. Mr. Nwala Ejenyoku of Umuguachara village, the former leader of Abigbo in Amuzu was interviewed. Mr. Daniel O.C Onwuka of Umuebenogu village, the present leader of Abigbo in Amuzu, Ezinihite in Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area was also interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2001. The two Abigbo music leaders, both in their seventies, said that the present day Abigbo was derived from two music types that have become extinct. One was the Nkwa Otile (Music for the buttock). Onwuka told the researcher that Nkwa Otile, according to his fore fathers, was danced naked. It was a nocturnal social music. Both players and dancers, males only, performed without any covering on the body. Members came to Nkwa Otile performances with

reverence, knowing that they are before God and the ancestors. Performing naked was a sign of respect and readiness to lay oneself bare for social scrutiny that was the essence of the performances. Members satirized themselves and made positive criticisms in the context of Nkwa Otile without attaching ill feelings. They, however, later felt the need to change the orientation and presentation of the music. It then evolved from Nkwa Otile to Nkwa Ogbo, social dance music for men of the same age grade.

The group, again all males, wore loincloth made from local Igbo textile. According to the two respondents, Nkwa Ogbo was essentially egwuregwu (musical fun/Jokes). Nkwa Ogbo was in vogue in Mbaise between 1910 and 1930. In the early 1930s, a man called Samson Onwuekwuikpe, the leader of Nkwa Ogbo at that time, was inspired in his dream to adapt Nkwa Ogbo. He told his people that a new type of music was taught to him in his dream. He taught his group the 'new' music, and called it Abigbo. The two interviewees say Nkwa Ogbo and Abigbo music types are based on entertainment oriented critiquing of the affairs of the community. They qualified Abigbo as "egwuregwu ejiri mara Igbo" (Abigbo is fun or play with which the Igbo people are identified). According to them Abigbo has since inception, admitted only male participants. It was from the Ezinihite group that Abigbo spread to other parts of Mbaise.

Other towns borrowed the music from Ezinihite after paying the prescribed fee as well as other material provisions. Although Abigbo originated in Amuzu Ezinihite, the group studied for this thesis was reorganized in 1955, and called Odiche Abigbo dance in Amuzu.

The leaders of Abigbo music in Amuzu, Ezinihite, informed the writer that there was a period before 1955 when misunderstanding occurred among Abigbo musicians in Amuzu that led to the dissolution of the group. For about ten years Abigbo was not performed in the community. In 1955, a group of men came together and formed the present group called Odiche Abigbo. (Abigbo with a difference). The leaders say that they have renewed vigour and commitment to Abigbo music. They have more active members and reliable leadership. The original musical interest and social orientation of Abigbo music is still sustained.

Okwuato community borrowed Abigbo from Ezinihite. Borrowing of music among Igbo communities and in Africa in general, is a normal practice. A community that finds a music genre or type belonging to another community interesting is free to borrow such music. The process would be to approach the community that owns the music, and to discuss the conditions for the teaching and learning of the music. The teaching and learning starts as soon as the conditions are met. The conditions, among the Igbo would normally include the provision of such customary items as kola nuts, kegs of palm wine, nzu (white chalk) and some amount of money. Often, the learning period is about eight market days. The procedure would be to send some representatives to teach the other group. In some instances, some representatives of the group that is desirous to learn the music would go to the other group to learn. Thereafter, they teach their members. In this wise, music is not hoarded by any community. A fact about borrowing of music among communities is that the borrowing community, more often than not, performs a modified version of the music borrowed. By introducing unique

creative/performance ingenuity, a modified version emerges. Modifying the borrowed music to fit cultural artistic tastes is normative. It constitutes a logical development or a creative continuum of such music. Nzewi earlier notes that "Borrowing of a music type could occur between any two groups from two different communities" (Nzewi 1991:53). Borrowing between communities and groups led to the spread of Abigbo music to all communities in Mbaise and beyond.

The fieldwork for this work concentrates on the Abigbo music of Okwuato community in Mbaise. The decision to use the group is informed by its popularity as a leading Abigbo music exponent in contemporary times. The group has also maintained continuity, unlike the Amuzu community where Abigbo music performance was stopped for a long period.

### **2.1.3 Abigbo in Okwuato Socio-Cultural Milieu**

Three villages make up the Okwuato autonomous community. They are Umuhu, Lagwa and Ibeku. These villages perform Abigbo jointly. The common subsistence occupations in Okwuato pursued by Abigbo musicians include farming, tailoring, bicycle repairing, mason/building, motor mechanic, schooling, etc. One member jocularly added "anyi ji kwatuwa nwanyi ime" (we also impregnate women in addition to our occupations.) This expression carries deeper connotation. Among the Igbo, it is normal for adults to occasionally express wits casually. The mode of expression could appear "obscene", but the socio-moral implication is deeper than the surface meaning. In the above expression, the Abigbo musician implies that they engage in so many other activities that cannot be enumerated. An illustrative Igbo proverb says "Echi di ime" (tomorrow is pregnant). Among the Igbo, this

is not understood in its literal/surface meaning. It means that the personified "tomorrow" will bring forth what nobody knows or can predict.

Mr. Ugwuezumba Akwuruha said since his late brother brought Abigbo to Okwuato, "it has remained very popular" (Abigbo na eshi ude). Okwuato indigenes, having acquired the artistic/aesthetic knowledge of the unique music genre have continued to "perform and make it grow" (Anyi n'aku ya, y'anakwa ni aganihu). For more than forty years Abigbo has been in Okwuato Mbaise, "doing well" (na a di nma), he said. Akwuruaha assents that there is no indigene of Okwuato who is not proud of Abigbo: Okwuato jiri Abigbo kporo ihe, "Okwuato places great value on Abigbo." Abigbo j'adianyi nma na nmkpuru obi, "Abigbo gives pleasure to our hearts." These testimonies are at the same time aesthetic, social and proprietary.

Nzewi (1991:31) categorized Igbo music into two creative intentions. These are the Music- event and the Event- music types. "Any music that has a principle of formulation not identified with any other context apart from the idea of music-making as a creative-aesthetic fulfillment is categorized under Music-Event subdivision."(33) Nzewi identified eighteen music types under the music-event category in a single Igbo community, Ngwaland. All music types that are identified according to the "contextual conceptions for which they were instituted"(26) are Event-Music. "As music types and presentations originated as well as organized for non-music-specific events or ideas they can broadly be classified as Event-Music."(Ibid.) There are twenty music types under this conceptual category in Ngwa land. Abigbo is in the music event category. This means that the Abigbo is not strictly speaking a context conceived/transacting music type. "The music [Abigbo] is light hearted as well

as dance for light occasions" (Nzewi1991: 37). Abigbo is primarily, a social entertainment music. Its musical and textual contents dwell more on the social issues of the living. The members say: "Abigbo wu ihe n'iji eme obioma" (Abigbo is for happiness.) Other writers that have discussed African music as featuring mostly within and during social occasions include Akpabot (1986) and Nketia (1974). Nzewi particularly asserts that "music has to engender a contextual atmosphere that promotes maximized social interaction at any given time and place. This atmosphere prompts responsive activities such as dance, drama, and verbalized reactions" (1991:93). It must be noted that in addition to its social orientation/conceptualization, Abigbo demands contemplative appreciation.

The performance situation provides opportunity for personal evaluation of the artistic/aesthetic merits of the creative artistry that at the same time coerces the general well being of the people. Performance thus provides opportunity for mass psychosocial therapy and the negotiation of emotional states of being. Abigbo engenders/promotes good social relations, and celebrates the general well being of a community. It employs the agency of entertainment to maintain the moral norms of the community, such as in the control of crime and deviant behaviours through the lyrics as well as performance dynamics. Using defaulters as the butt of the satiric text serves as deterrent to others.

Abigbo musicians proudly say that they contribute to social order in the community through their music. Abigbo is then a veritable instrument for social sanctions on erring members of the community. Agogbuo says, with respect to the social sanctions of anybody who misbehaves: Anyi tiile ya n'



Abigbo, ogawala (once we put it in Abigbo, it spreads in the community.) This means that any information transmitted/broadcast in an Abigbo music performance is disseminated to the whole community. By this, it is evident that Abigbo influences the moral and ethical tone of the community while the community influences Abigbo by providing creative inspiration/materials for Abigbo music. Adascalites notes that "both the individual and the community have a part to play in the creation of folk lore...Folk art is a communal art manifested by individuals... Anyone observing the creation of folklore at first hand realises that the experience of the predecessor is synthesised and actively employed by the individual creator. Already existing collective elements inform the act of individual creation"(1971:71).

The social and creative relevance of Abigbo music in Mbaise is founded on this symbiotic relationship between the community and Abigbo musicians.

Abigbo is a cultural art that is an integral part of the way of life of Mbaise people while laying emphasis on music and dance as aesthetic human creative genius. Abigbo has developed to be the identifying cultural musical art of Mbaise people.

#### **2.1.4 Membership**

Membership in Abigbo is open to all the males in the community. An ensemble could have as many as fifty or more members, irrespective of age and number. New members undergo participatory training by actively observing and engaging in Abigbo music. According to Mr. Everest Agogbuo, aged about 68yrs, the chairman and leader of Okwuato Abigbo, the group does not allow female membership. However all members of the community, irrespective of age or gender, are free to dance and act to the music of Abigbo

in the context of a performance. The women participate in dance, gestures or dramatic movements/actions. Among the Igbo, membership or participation in certain music types is based on age, status or gender. Hence, some music types are organized along age-grade levels or social cum meritorious/achievements prescriptions, while others emphasize gender restrictions. "The age-sex organizational criteria have six distinctions as follows: male, female, adult, youth, children, mixed (sex and/or age). (Nzewi 1991:29) Age-sex discrimination is a very important principle in Igbo music practice. It coerces respect for the age grades as well as musical creativity in all age grades and gender. It also specifies "what human category performs a music type and for what human category it is performed". (Ibid: 30) Similarly, Nketia notes that:

In African societies, participation in music may be a voluntary activity or an obligation imposed by one's membership in a social group. Such a social group may be a descent group (a group of people who trace their ancestry back to the same person), or it may be any group based on the broader societal classifications of age, sex, interest, or occupation.(1984:35)

In the organisation structure of Abigbo music group in Okwuato, Mr. Ernest Agogbuo is the chairman and lead singer. The executive includes representatives of every Ama (kindred or family lineage/groups). The inclusion in the executive of members of every Ama, according to the leader, is to ensure a democratic leadership in the strictest sense of giving each ama a fair opportunity to contribute equally to the administration and running of the jointly owned group. The Igbo recognise individual talents and abilities.

Hence, Abigbo members specialise as instrumentalists, dancers, singers and composers.

### 2.1.5 Composing Abigbo music

Abigbo lead singers are expected to compose new songs. Other members are free to compose songs and bring for acceptance. The leader of Abigbo says that they compose songs (iro egwu) and select from them to build a repertory for presentation. By this explanation it is evident that Abigbo musicians adopt critical procedure in musical creativity. The music is not chance-derived, even when it is not documented in written form. An Abigbo music composition follows this sequence: iro egwu (musical cogitation)- itule egwu (evaluation of the tune)- ihoro egwu (choosing the most appropriate tune/music).

This creative progression may not be exclusive to Abigbo, but it nevertheless demonstrates procedural logic based on clearly defined cognitive-creative principles determined by the musicians themselves. "No traditional African composition or performance, which is reckoned with as of cultural integrity, happened by chance. There will always be a definitive, creative intention, creative design and structural idiomatic content to validate a music product as an acceptable cultural achievement"(Nzewi 1996:3).

The term for composition as elicited from the Abigbo music discourse is Iro Egwu. This means textural construction/re-construction/re-formulation/re-finement, improvisation or extemporisation of music, text or dance. In the southern Igbo area also, this term stands for the process of composition of music, drama, imaginative plastic arts or poetry. Iro is the process of idiomizing the art, while Egwu is the creative product. In the Igbo creative arts

milieu, "Egwu is a term which telescopes the practice in Igbo music in the five artistic dimensions. Egwu is the Igbo word for music, for dance, for song, for play, for an impressive plastic arts display. In southern Igbo the term is used synonymously with egwu although there are secondary terms uri, and avu, which are occasionally preferred when it is necessary to specify melodic and vocal music respectively."(Nzewi 1991:24)

Abigbo musical instruments play different roles based on respective phonic/timbral qualities and possibilities. The instruments must blend and be pleasing to the ears in tone and sonority as well as in the phonic complementation of each other. This aesthetic principle informs the choice and number of instruments.

Abigbo is social, choric-dance music that is not strictly event-bound. The intention is to promote the social and cultural lives of the Mbaise people primarily within the Igbo interactional milieu.

## **2.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABIGBO MUSIC**

Abigbo choric-dance theatre has the following artistic features: the vocal, the instrumental and the dance. The vocal part is occasionally presented without instrumental accompaniment or explicit dancing. In such instances, stamping of the legs, movements such as swaying of the body and gestures occur with the singing. Instrumental interludes often inter-space the different songs. The Abigbo presentational form is a chain of songs with light instrumental accompaniment and dancing.

### 2.2.1 The Songs

A typical Abigbo song is essentially a mixture of responsorial forms. The general form for the chain of songs is ternary. Each presentation is often in three contrasting movements of different moods and tempi.

The first movement is a declaimed outline of the story line of the song that would follow. This is performed in free time. Instrumental interjections could occur in this section. Such instrumental compliment would be spontaneous and aleatory. It underlines pointed textual messages or heightens the mood of the vocal part or is simply a phonic echo of the elation of the performer. The music is limited to rolls, single sforzando strokes on an instrument or some melorhythmic drum messages.

The presentation is generally in solo call and chorus response structure. The mood is reflective. In a study of Ese music in Ngwa land, a contiguous community to Mbaïse, Nzewi (1987), reports the application of similar technique by Ese musicians. He says: "Ese music has five compartments or movements...Ilulu Nkwa is the first compartment of the Ese performance cycle...It is a prelude, in free time and tempo, played unaccompanied on the ese by the master musician."(94-96) The prelude is followed by other compartments in strict time.

The second movement of Abigbo music is usually in strict rhythm with instrumental accompaniment. It is performed in moderate tempo. It is gay in mood. The choral part keeps the call and response style with a continuously varied melodic and harmonic progression prompted by the text.

The third movement is essentially instrumental. However, the lead singer may declaim textual passages on the background music. It is performed in fast

tempo. The performance mood as well as the music is very warm and excitational. The movements generally flow into each other without pauses. Transitional devices such as vocal or instrumental cues are used to move from one movement to another.

### 2.2.2 The Instrumental Part

The instrumental ensemble of Abigbo music is made up of Nkwa-ukwu (large membrane drum), Nkwa etiti/mbiye nkwa (medium size membrane drum), Nkelebe (small size membrane drum). Other instruments are Oyo (basket rattle), Ekere (wooden knocker), Atani (brass bell /school bell), Igbugbo (medium size metal bell), and the Mkpo (small size metal bell) that is played by the lead singer. These constitute the instrumental accompaniment for the music. Some degree of extemporisation is allowed on the drums. Psychically tolerable repetition of themes occurs on some instruments.

The instrumental section maintains the tempo and mood of the composite sound of the ensemble. Because Abigbo is essentially a vocal ensemble, instruments are restricted to accompanimental role and interludes that link vocal sections of the music as well as the fast instrumental movement. Extemporisation is therefore kept at a minimal level in the vocal sections. Specific instruments re-enforce the pulse sense of the music and dance, as well as mark the phrasing of the choral part.

The selection of drums in Abigbo ensemble is guided by an indigenous harmonic thought. A high-toned drum is balanced with a deep toned drum. Also, a medium toned drum sounds between the high and low drums. The selection of these drums is based on relative intervallic relationships that are artistically and aesthetically rationalised. Hence drums for playing Abigbo

music are not randomly picked. The harmonic principle guides the selection and naming of the drums as Nkwa Ukwu (big/male voice), Nkwa Etiti or Mbiye Nkwa (Middle voice), and Nkelebe (female voice).

The harmonic thought exhibited in Abigbo music in the selection and naming of the drums is reflective of a more generic Igbo instrumental harmonic thought. "Igbo harmonic thought seems to have been derived from biosocial sources. Voice parts which constitute the foundation for chordal-harmonic constructs are theoretically rationalized in terms of male and female, Oke na nne. Oke na nne as conceived in Igbo musical harmony is not with regard to the sex of the singer or to the voice types, timbre or quality" (Nzewi 1991:125).

### 2.2.3 The Dance

Abigbo dance is a free medley dance in which everybody present is free to participate. A free medley dance type "encourages free, individualistic, choreographic elaboration on a given dance theme and motif during every dance occasion"(Nzewi1991: 111). The characterising motifs of Abigbo dance include supple hip/waist movement, alternate stepping forward or backward and vibrating of the body. Individual elaboration of these common motifs occurs. Abigbo dancers flick handkerchiefs in front of them while dancing.

Discussing the relationship between music and movement in folk dancing, Felix Hoerburger concludes that:

In the dance, movement and music are closely interwoven. They are the visible and audible expression of temporal arts, which combine to form the two-fold art of the dance. If one is inclined to think an implicit parallel of movement and music

result from these relationship and mutual influences, this is palpably an erroneous idea. From observation of folk dances and primitive dances of various races, it seems more likely that from the very beginning there are attitudes, which they adopt towards the music: either he dances "in time", or he dances "against time". In the one case, the body sways so to speak with the music; the symmetry of the accents intensifies this, most of all when the dancer becomes a musician himself by means of his own audible action (clapping, stamping, pendant-bell). In the other case, the music does not set the time, but is only the stimulus. The dancer is excited to bodily movement by the music without so much as recognising its accents as obligatory for the movements. (1979:70)

Attention must be called to the fact that it is derogatory to refer to any human creative out put as primitive. This is because every work of art is a manifestation of the creative genius of a given time or place. Referring to such creative product as primitive from the start negates its creative merits. There are, therefore, no primitive dances of any races. Dancing in and out of time is not only found in folk dancing. It is found in ballet, waltz, quickstep etc. While accepting the distinction between the two responses of the dancer to musical stimulation, it should be pointed out that they apply in all dances that are not pre-choreographed. Dancing "in" and "against the time" is a personal response to the music in a free-medley dance.



In Abigbo, the psychosocial interpretation and appreciation of the music determine a dancer's response. Dancing "in" and "against the time" is a matter of specific expression in any dance type.

#### **2.2.4 The Text**

The text of Abigbo songs is generally poetic. The themes derive from the social and cultural lives of the Mbaise people specifically, and Igboland as well as Nigeria in general. The subject matters are generally topical. The textual style is essentially in the nature of satires/lampoons, invectives, derision and praises, as well as general commentaries on communal/societal events. The idiomatic style involves extensive use of proverbs, allusions and figurative expressions.

Abigbo music is text based. It communicates matters of interest to the audience. While Abigbo draws from social occurrences in the community, text is sometimes extemporized in the context of a performance. The presentational style often involves re-composition of known story or textual theme in different contexts to accommodate the interest of particular audiences. Abigbo music text is taken into consideration in the choice of performance venues. This is to ensure that the audience hears the text in a performance. Instrumental accompaniment does not submerge the text in a presentation. In general, Abigbo gives equal prominence to text and music.

#### **2.2.5 Structural Features**

"All sub-Saharan African songs conform with the principles guiding the relationship between speech-tone and melody.

The Igbo language, like those of so many other African tribes,

has tonal levels. These tonal levels are called low, mid and high". (Agu 1999:40-41).

A word could have many meanings depending on its intonation, application and, of course, its function in a sentence. For a melody to convey an intelligible message, therefore, it should as much as possible correlate with the speech-tone of its text. Although Igbo songs as much as possible assume motions similar to the tonal movement of the text, there is evidence that the tone tune relationship is not rigidly applied in Abigbo music.

Akpabot concludes that "one factor, and certainly nothing else, determines the exactness of a melody's leap in pitch melody: that of saying the sentence with a correct inflection". (1986:80). While Abigbo melodies in principle conform to this norm, analyses of the music show that the expediency of creativity occasionally determines melodic leaps. Agawu's (1988) study of Northern Ewe music supports this observation. His contribution recommends critical reassessment of the hitherto widely assumed inflexible tone-tune relationship in African music through research studies.

Abigbo melodies are sometimes declaimed and sometimes sung. In Abigbo music, the starting pitch is arbitrary. The singers generally use pitch levels that are convenient for particular songs. A song could be stopped and restarted if the pitch level is too high or too low for the singers. In order to perform in a pitch level, a simple technique is employed. The lead singer starts and establishes a pitch level for a song before the chorus joins. The pitch of the lead singer guides pitching of the chorus singers. The lead singer starts a performance in any context, and the chorus singers adjust to the tonality of the lead singer.

Syllabic text setting to melodies is a norm in Abigbo music. Syllabic text setting is the use of one sound for a syllable of a song text. Other text settings are neumatic and melismatic. Neumatic text setting is the use of two or three sounds to a syllable while melismatic text setting is the use of many sounds to a text syllable. While syllabic text setting is normatively used in Abigbo music, it is not rigidly applied. Neumatic and melismatic text settings occur in Abogbo songs.

Abigbo music employs a combination of heterophonic, polyphonic, and polyphonic textures. At any given time, horizontally conceived independent melodies and melorhythmic statements are heard together. The harmonic result features chords of varying number of notes in the vertical relationship of the chorus part. The chords have two, three, or more notes. Intervals of third, fourth, fifth and sixth are used in parallel motion. Nketia (1984: 161) describes this as homophonic polyphony.

The essential technique of homophonic polyphony is the vertical relationship between the parts. In some traditions, the possibility of choice of melodic direction in certain positions permits extensions of the vertical relations by a further step of a third above or below, yielding three- or four part clusters here and there. (Ibid: 165)

The view of the writer is that homophony best describes the harmonic structure of Abigbo music where chords feature. At the conceptual level, harmony in Abigbo music is guided by an idiomatic sensibility that is culturally intuitive.

Abigbo music is performed with a peculiar vocal style that reaches out to the chest voice. There are features of melodic and harmonic ornamentation. The extent of ornamentation in a given song depends on the mood of the singer or, otherwise, contextual emotion/elation.

The instrumental part of Abigbo music employs multilinear polyphonic structures also. This consists of a combination of independent rhythmic and melorhythmic themes or statements played by different instruments. The combination of the vocal and instrumental polyphony produces dense sound texture.

## 2.3 PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

### 2.3.1 performance Engagement

Abigbo performances are normally staged during appropriate personal as well as communal social and political ceremonies such as title taking ceremonies, traditional marriages, launching ceremonies, naming ceremonies, visit of prominent government officials, funerals and during the seasonal Christmas and Easter celebrations. The Abigbo group is normally contracted for a performance. The group may, however, stage free performances in the village, especially during festive occasions such as Iri ji (new yam festival) Ichu afo (ceremony to bid farewell to a passing year and usher in a new year) and Christmas and Easter in contemporary times.

The chairman and his executive have the responsibility to negotiate performances for the group. A client intending to contract Abigbo is expected, to first, present four Igbo kola nuts and two gallons of palm wine through the chairman of Abigbo. These would be consumed in the course of negotiating a performance. The cash equivalent of the items could however, be acceptable.

The writer presented the preliminary requirements before an interview was granted. The main fee for hiring the group for any social event is currently a minimum of five thousand naira (about 40 dollars). In addition, transport would be provided where necessary, and some refreshment would be given at the end of the performance. Once the Executive concludes an agreement for a performance, it becomes a contract binding on all the members. In general, Abigbo performances as well as negotiations are preceded with the ritual of Igbo kola nut presentation and breaking that prompts prayers to the supreme Deity (Chineke) as well as evoke reverence to Abigbo music ancestors. Occasionally too, libations are poured. Abigbo members call all these Igo Ofo (prayer for unity peace and justice). They say it is important for them to pay homage to God and to their ancestors, particularly the deceased Abigbo performers whom they believe are always immanent at Abigbo performance environments.

### **2.3.2 Performance Organisation**

In Abigbo performance, there is a lead singer who is normally the chairman as well as the composer of new songs. One of the criteria for selecting a leader is expertise on composing Abigbo music. He assigns musical instruments and themes to members during rehearsals and performances. This is because most often more than one player of a given instrument could be present at any time. The lead singer starts Abigbo musical performances. He cues in the chorus and instrumentalists at the appropriate time in the course of the song. He performs within the semi circular space created by the formation of the instrumentalists. He is quite mobile and often dances while he sings. Quite often he moves between the

instrumentalists and the dancers. He uses the metal bell (mkpo) to signal to the performers changes to other songs. He also uses it to underline the pulse sense of the music while he sings. He interacts with the audience using textual expressions, movement gestures or dance sorties. The musical elaboration of a piece is guided by the contingencies of every specific context. Duration or content of a performance as such is not fixed.

Abigbo instrumentalists are eight in number. They form a semi-circle behind the lead singer. The drummers sit on low stools or on the log of the drum. The other instrumentalists may sit on chairs or stand. Except the three drummers, the other instrumentalists play light instruments. Some of such players sometimes stand and dance behind the lead singer as they play. All the instrumentalists join in singing the chorus. Age is no inhibition to participation in Abigbo music. The Igbo have a proverb drawing from this need for all to participate in music and dance. It says: Agadi nwanyi adighi aka nka n'egwu omara agba. "An aged woman is never too old to demonstrate a dance she does very well." The very elderly members of the group flank the instrumentalists on the right and left sides. They sing seated. They also join in the dance by swaying or nodding to the music. Abigbo dancers perform in front of the lead singer as well as participate in the singing of the chorus. There is normally no strict demarcation between the performers and the audience. The audience is free to join in the singing and dancing as the performance moves any member. At this juncture women are not excluded in the performance. Women are restricted in membership only.

### 2.3.3 Performance Education

Attendance at Abigbo performances is mandatory for all the members. Very young members are encouraged to participate actively, particularly in the playing of instruments even when adult players are available. This is an educational strategy that ensures continuity of practice: the young learn and take over from the old. Active participation enables the young to acquire intuitively, the theoretical, practical and philosophical underpinning of Abigbo music and dance.

In Igbo music practice, there are two methods of musical training: the participatory/observation method and the formal method of musical instruction. In the first method, a child is allowed to learn a music type in tradition by participating actively in the performance of such music. This gives him the opportunity to learn by observing other performers. Occasionally also, a role is assigned to him to enable him develop. This method is predominantly used. In the second method, a master musician would give periodic instructions to a learner on an instrument. This formal guidance instruction, which is aimed at individual and personal musical development, is often employed in very complex and event-music types such as Ese, Ukom, Mgba and Omabe music of Igbo people.

Nketia (1974:58-59) observes that:

Traditional instruction is not generally organised on a formal institutional basis, for it is believed that natural endowment and a person's ability to develop on his own are essentially what is needed--- the principle everywhere else seems to be that of learning through social experiences. Exposure to

musical situations and participation are emphasised more than formal teaching.

In Abigbo music, children learn to perform by participating in the music performances. Some corrective guidance is, however, given to the children during Abigbo rehearsals, or even in performance situations. Quite often, the strategy is to assign a phrasing referent instrument such as the wood block, metal bell, and shakers to a child. The leaders of the group say a child graduates to other instruments when he has acquired some musical discipline and concentration through sustaining a single musical idea. "The idea is to give confidence to the newcomer, child or adult, by assigning him/her a crucial ensemble responsibility...Sensibility for the phrasing-referent role becomes an inherent music factor of music thinking (phrasing sense) and composition as musicianship develops. (Nzewi 1998:459-60)

### **2.3.4 Venue**

Elsewhere, the writer notes that "the Nigerian traditional music setting, usually promotes freedom of use of space in the expression of feelings generated by the music in most cases, in dance or drama or both, or in general movement or gesture. Suitable venues for musical performances are usually open spaces, Village Square or any level land that can accommodate uninhibited movement "explosions"(Onyeji 1999:128).

Outdoor performances are preferred for Abigbo presentations. The performances do not necessitate special staging properties. What is basic is an open space that can accommodate emotions expressed in dance. Home environments are preferable for performances because it is a text-based music that coerces keen listening. Nevertheless performances could be

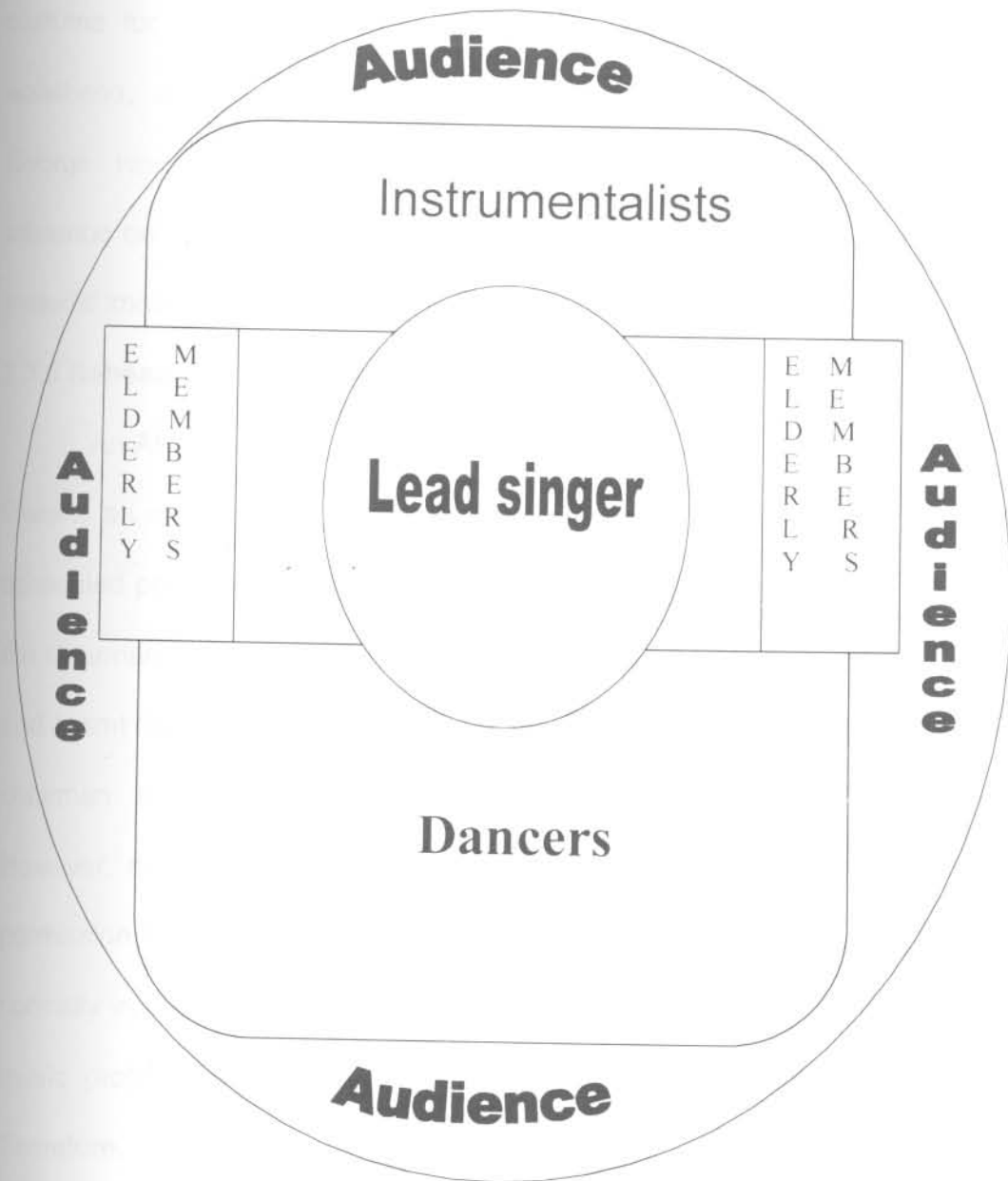


staged in large open spaces such as village squares or school field in contemporary times.

When they perform in a large open space, the singers adjust to the acoustic nature of the venue by projecting their voices. In such venues, the audience draws closer to the performers to get the message of the songs. Abigbo performances are normally staged in the daytime. When it must be performed at night, the host must ensure artificial lighting. This is because the indices of Abigbo appreciation include visual theatrical aspects- dance and movements. These are integral artistic/aesthetic components of Abigbo presentations. As such, although text is central, a total appreciation of the artistic product mandates as well, critical attention to the audio and visual dimensions.

Figure 1

Diagram showing Abigbo presentational stage blocking



### 2.3.5 Costume

The Christian background of the performers as well as modern cultural changes has influenced the choice of contemporary Abigbo costume. The members belong to different Christian denominations. The contemporary costume for Abigbo performances is a white tee shirt, a red and black waistband, a white handkerchief and a Hollandaise textile locally called George wrapper. They perform bare-footed. Before the contemporary influence on Abigbo costume, members wore loincloth made of Igbo textile material known as Akwete material. They performed bare bodied.

### 2.3.6 Rehearsal

An Abigbo group rehearses regularly. Rehearsals are intensified when there is an engagement ahead, and become less frequent when there is no scheduled performance. Rehearsal venue is normally the home/compound of the chairman. It is during rehearsals that new songs are presented, approved and learnt for public performance while the old pieces get retouched. The chairman maintained that rehearsals are mandatory for all members. However, anybody with genuine reason is excused as long as he obtains permission from the leader of the group to be absent. Abigbo rehearsals are normally in the evenings. The reason given is that members are not full-time music professionals. Members engage in other subsistence occupations. Therefore, the fixture of rehearsal takes into consideration the various subsistence occupations of members. The duration of a rehearsal is influenced by the administrative business transacted during a rehearsal meeting, and/or the technical demands of a new song.

### 2.3.7 Discipline

There is a code of conduct for Abigbo members. Members stated that there is a very strong sense of discipline during performances and rehearsals. The leaders and elders are accorded respect. Proceeds from engagements are fairly shared among all the members. Any erring member is strongly reprimanded. Further acts of indiscipline would be punished with dismissal. This may also attract the use of the person as the subject of a new satirical song. The younger members of Abigbo music group have the responsibility of arranging a performance stage as well as the setting up of the instruments. The chairman is however, the curator of the instruments. Every Abigbo member is responsible for the safe keeping of his costume. Each member ensures the cleanliness of his costume. Levies, when necessary, are mandatory for all members. Such levies however, take the student members into account. Levies become necessary when new instruments are to be procured or when members pay obligatory social visit to a bereaved member or during the celebration of a new child by a member. Other reasons for levies are marriage ceremonies by members, or visit when a member is sick.

## 2.4 Artistic criticisms and Performance aesthetics in Abigbo music appreciation

The Igbo word for the sublime in creativity is "nka" hence, omenka or okwanka, meaning craftsman or creative genius. Abigbo music is a sublime art – nka. It is a manifestation of human craftsmanship in the musical arts. Hence, the need to study and use the musical features for modern art music.

To understand, appreciate and make appropriate value judgement on the creative output of any traditional art, a listener or analyst needs an unbiased mind. This stance must transcend the emic-etic syndrome in the artistic/aesthetic evaluation of the artistic product. When the musicians say: "Okwuato jiri Abigbo kporo ihe."(Okwuato places great value on Abigbo), "Abigbo j'adi anyi mma na mkpuru obi."(Abigbo is very pleasing to our hearts), they speak for themselves and on behalf of the whole community. Indigenes of Okwuato the researcher sought their opinions corroborated the views of the performers.

Abigbo musicians verbalise aesthetic approval or otherwise of their creative and performance out put -self criticism. For instance, a good performance (vocal or instrumental extemporisations) is approved with such expressions as o wu ya, "that is it, very good or excellent", n'ede "sing/play on", or iji ya "you have it". When the rendition falls below expectation, the expression is, similarly, on the contrary. Such as Owughi ya "It is not it, not good" or Mba "Wrong". Non-verbal gestures are also used to express approval or otherwise of the creative product. Nodding the head or raising the right thumb to show approval may do these. Shaking the head or waving the hands could be used to show disapproval. A good performance attracts joyous ending expressed in exchange of hilarities and handshakes. Abigbo musicians are well aware of the aesthetic expectations of the audience. Critical expressions, verbal or gestural, used to approve or disapprove any creative out put or performance derive from normative cultural indices for music appreciation and assessment of creative merit.

The performers and the community that owns the musical product jointly assess the creative integrity of Abigbo musicians. Accepting or rejecting a creative output depends a great deal on its fulfilment of expected social cum cultural intentions within the community. Therefore, Abigbo musicians do not create without a critical audience in view. They necessarily need the community to stimulate creative ideas as well as validate and celebrate the artistic presentations. On the other hand, the community needs Abigbo music for social and cultural fulfilment. The artistic and aesthetic assessment of Abigbo music is with respect to its social functions as much as its contemplative content. While the former is objective in nature, the latter is subjective and open as per individualistic preferences. The social functions derive from the socio-cultural environment, whereas the contemplative merits of the music derive from the sonic and textual content.

The characteristics of Abigbo music and dance already discussed distinguish Abigbo music. At the sonic level of cultural-artistic evaluation Abigbo music is psychically tolerated and appreciated by the community in purely musical terms. Proper aesthetic assessment and appreciation of Abigbo and any other Igbo music is possible when a listener understands the creative philosophies and principles. The understanding of the style, melodic and harmonic, textual meaning and implications, presentational manifestations, contextual form, textural features and developmental techniques as well as social-cultural implications of the ensemble music are prerequisite to the appreciation of the artistic and aesthetic qualities of Abigbo music.

The knowledge of an artistic product from the perspective of the community that owns it must guide artistic criticism. Criticism in African music

discourse must then avoid unguarded comparisons such as between African music and Western classical music.

Abigbo is a manifestation of the human creative genius of the indigenous Igbo music tradition. It is a developed choral genre that deserves the research attention of knowledgeable African music researchers and composers for its creative continuum in contemporary idioms.

In this chapter, the writer attempted to present the general characteristics of Abigbo music and dance as cultural and creative arts, that contribute immensely to the transaction of social life of the Mbaise sub group in particular, and Igboland in general. In the next chapter, transcription and analyses of selected Abigbo pieces will be made to elicit specific information on the musicological features of Abigbo music.