

IGBO MINSTRELS AS PATHFINDERS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: SOCIAL CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the origins and history of minstrelsy through to Igbo minstrelsy in the world. Then it settles down to ferret out the nature of Igbo minstrelsy today, given that the advent of western music and the effects of colonization have turned it around to no ends. The purpose of getting at the heart of its nature is to provide salvific paradigms for its resurrection from the doldrums of oblivion. With the heavy western popular music of Nigeria today, the study becomes very expedient as a drive towards preserving an aspect of Igbo culture which brings to the fore the art of pathfinding, social criticism and valve for public opinion, especially against leaders who are not attuned to taking advice from those they govern. The method of data collection is secondary documentary evidence, with a view to bringing out articles which have investigated through field research the minstrelsy of the past, knowing that such investigations today would be marred by confabulations and social changes. Recommendations are given for the restoration of Igbo minstrelsy to its popular position, and then a conditional forecast is made in the last sentence of the conclusion.

Key words: Minstrel, pathfinder, social change, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Minstrelsy is found globally. And minstrels have appeared in societies as singers, musicians, or reciters of poems, with the characteristic of itinerancy for performances. Normally, they compel awe and respect in such performances. In former times, the skills of the minstrels were seen as divine. The minstrels themselves were considered sacred. And they were invited by kings and “loaded with honours and awards” (Chappell, 1855-59:1).

The word minstrel was initially attributed to medieval European bards who performed songs that narrated stories of distant places and events, true or imaginary. Sometimes, the tales would be an enhancement from the ideas of other people. Frequently they were retained by royalty and high society as servants, entertaining the lords and courtiers with their skills. As the courts became more sophisticated, minstrels were eventually replaced at court by the troubadours, and many became wandering minstrels, performing in the streets and became well-liked until the middle of the Renaissance, despite a decline beginning in the late 15th century. Minstrelsy fed into later traditions of travelling entertainers, which continued to be moderately strong into the early 20th century, and which has some continuity down to today's buskers or street musicians. The term *minstrel* derives from Old French *ménéstrel* (also *menesterel*, *menestral*), which is a derivative from Italian *ministrello* (also *menestrello*), from Middle Latin *ministralis* "retainer," an adjective form of Latin *minister*, "attendant" from *minus*, "lesser". In Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest, the professional poet was known as a *scop* ("shaper" or "maker"), who composed his own poems, and sang them to the accompaniment of a harp. In a rank much beneath the *scop*, were the *gleemen*, who had no settled abode, but roamed about from place to place, earning what they could from their performances. Late in the 13th century, the term *minstrel* began to be used to designate a performer who amused his lord with music and song. (“Minstrel,” 2012).

In a complex way involving invasions, wars, conquests, etc., two categories of composers originated. Poets like Chaucer and John Gower appeared in one category wherein music was not a part. Minstrels, on the other hand, swarmed at feasts and festivals in great numbers with harps, fiddles, bagpipes, flutes, flageolets, citterns, and kettledrums. As early as 1321, the minstrels of Paris were formed into a guild. A guild of royal minstrels was organized in England in 1469. Minstrels were required to either join the guild or to abstain from practicing their craft. Some minstrels were retained by lords as jesters who, in some cases, also practiced the art of juggling. Some were women, or women who followed minstrels in their travels. Minstrels throughout

Europe also employed trained animals, such as bears. Minstrels in Europe died out slowly, having gone nearly extinct by about 1700, though isolated individuals working in the tradition existed even into the early 19th century (“Minstrel,” 2012).

In Igboland, there is a form of traditional music which is generally regarded as Igbo minstrelsy. Enekwe, Udechukwu and Okafọ (2002:386) citing Beckerman (1970:14) reveal:

Although this type of performance is inevitably peculiar to the Igbo in many essential details, it embodies the basic characteristics of minstrelsy as a universal, musical phenomenon. These include entertainment, education, dramatic imitation, and presentational activity- that form of performance which aims to appeal to the sense of wonder and admiration of the audience by sheer artistic skill, such as acrobatics, dance etc.

The origins of the Igbo minstrelsy may be adduced from two fronts: one, early modern influence of soli and patronage, and two, spirit-manifest tradition. The first instance may have begun at the turn of the twentieth century, that is, from the early 1900s shortly after the last British expeditions on Igbo villages and gradual migration of Igbo people to urban colonial places in the then Nigeria. The change in lifestyle from teamwork in farming to individual jobs that emphasized personal skills lent ideas to music. Musical troupes increasingly evolved from individual-effacing ensembles to those that emphasized soloists who dominate the foreground, leaving the rest of the ensemble in the background. Solo musicians began to travel from place to place seeking for patronage and singing in festivals etc. Then Igbo chiefs and kings began to acquire minstrels. An example was Chief Ozo Ejike of Aguobu-Owa, who had a favourite minstrel, Ugwuozo wa Ozo Mgbachi (alias Eze bu n’Eke), “for whom he found a wife, paid taxes and granted other favours. He even lent him to the Paramount Chief, Onyeama of Eke” (Okafor, 2005:117). The second front of origins is the masking tradition. Individuals behind spirit masks enjoyed anonymity when they poured diatribes on erring members of a community. “One can argue that in the remote past, nobody in Igboland could sing with the confidence and authority of minstrels outside of the mask” (Enekwe, Udechukwu and Okafọ, 2002:387). As Igbo culture became more expressive and modern civil law provided some level of protection, some individuals were encouraged to openly make such criticisms. An example is the *Ogene Anuka* group of Agulu Otu (Omambala LGA) which was part of a masquerade but later performed without the mask. (Okafor, 1980:74). The largest concentration of minstrels in Igboland may well be in Omambala LGA. It is worthy to note also that many of the Omambala minstrels were influenced by masquerades. The minstrels, in turn,

influenced other minstrels outside Omambala. Okonkwo Asaa (Seven-Seven) and Emeka Morocco Maduka (both from Njikoka LGA) must have been so influenced (Enekwe, Udechukwu and Okafọ, 2002:387)

The Igbo minstrel is supposedly a resourceful, knowledgeable and ambidextrous person who holds his audience spellbound and through his songs, moral words are issued and warnings and advices are given. This stance in minstrelsy is ubiquitous in many traditional minstrels in Igbo land. There are various types of minstrels in Igbo land corresponding to the type of instruments they use. The Igbo minstrel may go by the name *Onye egwu ubo*, *onye egwu une* or *onye egwu ekpili* and many more. The first name means one who produces music or song using *ubo*, which is a thumb piano or *mbira*. The first type is one who does so using *ekpili* rattles. The second type is one who does so using a musical bow or *une*. The Igbo minstrel, therefore, is defined according to the instrument he or she emphasizes. Having established that then, it will be appropriate to list some traditional musical instruments commonly used by the Igbo minstrels. They include, amongst others, the *kuku* or water pot drum, known as *udu* in Igbo land; the membranophones or instruments made from the membranes or skin of animals such as drum or *igba* or *nkwa*; the aerophones or wind instruments hollowed out from wood or from natural hollows such as flute or *oja*, animal horns or *opu* and gourds or *opu-eke*; the chordophones or string instruments such as the musical bow or *une*, zither or *ubo akwara*; and lastly, the idiophones which are the log xylophone (known in Ohafia as *mgbeleke*, *ngedegwu* or *igenyi*, in Ngwo, Nkanu and Mgbo-Ishielu as *ubo maa*, in Afigbo as *akwari*, in Nenwe as *ikwilikwo*, in Isele-Uku as *agogo*, in Idemmili as *ikwe-mgbo*, in Ngwa as *mbarimba*, in Owerri as *ngelenge*, in Maku as *oge*, in Mgbowo as *ikiri* and in Ekwuluobia as *ekere-mgba*), the slit drums known as *ikolo* etc, the clapperless bells or *ogene*, and the rattles of chaplet beads, basket, metal and berry or *ekpili* (Okafor, 2005:162). *Ekpili* rattles appear to be the most used instruments by Igbo minstrels. Many broken shells of *ekpili* or berries are strung together with a string in a bunch and shaken to produce idiophonic sounds. The Igbo minstrel was and is still enamored of this instrument. Okafor (2005:163) narrates:

Ekpili rattles are light and easy to carry. One can pocket them or enclose them in one's fist just as one goes along, and, when one sings, uses them to punctuate, stress and keep time. Most Igbo minstrels, I have studied, have underscored the importance of *ekpili* in minstrelsy. Some of them stated that it was the instrument that was initially associated with

minstrelsy music and was used extensively by most of the exponents of Igbo minstrelsy, who neither used the guitar nor the membrane drum in their singing.

The Igbo minstrel is therefore blessed with an ensemble of musical instrument. Over the years, there have arisen great minstrels from Igbo land. A minute list would include Chief Akunwafor Ezigbo Obiligbo of Nteje, who plays the *ubo* also known as *onye-egwu ubo*, Okonkwo Asaa (Seven-Seven) also known as *onye egwu ekpili*, Okechukwu Nwatu (*onye egwu une*), Ugwuozo wa Ozo Mgbachi (alias eze bu n'eke from Aguobu-owa), Odezulu Ikweze (from Aguobu Iwollo), Okona of Aguobu-Owa, Aniako Nwume of Mgbagbu-Owa (who plays the *ekpili* rattles), Chigbo Nwubenyi (alias Njaba from Olo), Nwoye Azodo of Okuzu, Okavo Ameke (alias Okavo Nwa Anaku), Nzekwesi of Umuleri, the spirit-manifest minstrel, *oku na agba achala*, Pius Chigbo (Eleven Eleven), Ajaana (son of Chief Obiligbo), Herbert Udemba, Israel Njemanze, Ozoemena Nwa Nsugbe, Afamefuna Okoye, Patrick Okwuniazor, Pericomo Okoye of Arondizuogu, Gentleman Mike Ejeagha of Imezi-Owa, Ekwegbalu Anyanwu, Emeka Morocco Maduka, Afam Ogbuotobo, Festus Ugwuanyaegbulam Amadi (alias area scatter) and so many more. (Okafor, 2005:41, 400) (Enekwe, Udechukwu and Okafo, 2002:387, 396, 397).

The opportunity of reverence for the minstrel enabled him to advise the society and to speak to the high and mighty who are supposedly the influence points of the society. When their advice is taken, their power grows, and invariably, they control the society, however subtle. This paper understudies the nature of the Igbo minstrel in the past, with regard to their power as pathfinders for the society. It further explores the limited and fast fading control they now possess in view of changes and challenges foisted by globalization and intense acculturation all over the globe.

MINSTRELS AS CLEAR PATHFINDERS IN THE PAST

Igbo minstrels were revered and their songs were taken seriously in the past. They were regarded as poets. This expectancy made them develop admirable cogency in eloquence and knowledge of words and proverbs. Concepts were reinvented and peddled in music. Nevertheless, there was an abhorrence of overused expressions. Proverbs were re-rendered in new ways. These new ways demanded being an aficionado of many strands of the Igbo culture, especially the Igbo language. Singing was the mainstay of the minstrel's job. A good voice was the beacon that attracted audiences who listened not only to be entertained but, most importantly, to gain new views, receive new instructions and garner new wisdom. Igbo minstrels relied more on their voice

than their instruments. And where the instruments were used, they would be easy to handle or play. The instruments were “subordinate to the voice” (Okafor, 1980:52). All facets of living were sung even to the depths of philosophy. The facets included the challenge of poverty, the bitterness of barrenness, the felicity in a marriage, the eminence of an individual, the reality of death and dying etc. The minstrel acted like a counselor, instructing and giving suggestions about ways to solve a problem. The situation in a given performance moment informed the minstrel on how to proceed. In a funeral, the minstrel displayed sorrow and sympathized with the bereaved as well as explored the nature of death and dying. In order to retain the interest of his audience, the minstrel continually invented new ways of singing the same song. Very interestingly, the minstrel was a historian, relaying lengthy oral tradition from the past. They were wonderful biographers, punctuating their descriptive biographies with pleasant phrases and hyperbolic statements that, most often, pamper the ego of and elicited pleasure from the biographee. Most importantly, the minstrel was an important social critic. In the art of criticisms, the minstrel acted as the megaphone of the society. Public opinion was given vent through his songs. The minstrel praised kings and rulers and in the commendation, infused bitter criticisms. Wise discerning leaders took the advice and everyone went home happy. An instance could be found in Okafor (2005:118) where Ugwuozo wa Ozo Mgbachi sang to Chief Onyeama, the most powerful ruler in Enugwu, thus:

Onyeama, wa Eze; uboshi njo n'mma : Onyeama [No one knows], King, day of evil and good

A pun is played with the king’s name, Onyeama, which means “no one knows”, at the same time, the sentence appeared to be addressed to Onyeama. Thus, it could mean, “No one knows the day of evil or good” or “King Onyeama, Day of evil and good”. The king who understood the drift did not counter the minstrel, but silently pondered on the feedback coming from public opinion of him through the mouth of the minstrel.

Okafor (2005:118) reported that Ozo Mgbachi sang to Chief Agana of Olo thus:

<i>Agana wa ochi-agma</i>	Agana, the war-leader
<i>Agana nkoghe</i>	Agana, the proud
<i>Agana, aghanakwa olu ji</i>	Agana, don’t leave behind farm work
<i>Ghu shi n’ubo na-aga</i>	Because you hear music.

The admonition is obvious. The ruler learns that duties took precedence over perkiness. And he becomes aware that the society might have noticed some level of unseriousness in him and wanted him to be vigilant and serious.

A minstrel group, Obeama Mbaise, advised the then administrator of the East Central State, Ukpabi Asika, to “consider whether things are in order” after the Nigerian Civil war when Federal troops were still roaming about the east and causing untold embarrassments to the people.

Achebe and Udechukwu (1982:19) reports:

<i>Asika gewekwela nti</i>	Asika, listen attentively
<i>Anyi agachaala ni oku ha evughara</i>	The fruits of our fishing, they have carried away
<i>Ngwongwo no n'ulo ha evughara</i>	The property in our houses they have carried away
<i>Owu otu anyi ji awu otu?</i>	Is this how to be one?
<i>Asika, lee</i>	Asika, pray
<i>Lewekwele me o dicaala mma</i>	Consider whether things are in order

The minstrel conveyed the values of the society. His words determined what was right or wrong in the daily lives of persons in a given community. To Okafor (2005:123):

Ridicule in song is dreaded by village folk, and hence, the minstrel is an important mechanism for social control. He is supposed to be aloof, and without sentiment. He stands up, and sings about the woman who abandons her children, the young man who errs from accepted norms, the girl who indulges in sexual laxity or practices abortion; or he may criticize her for wearing a style of dress of which the community does not approve. The minstrel is the conscience of the people; their judge of right and wrong. Moreover, his gift of poetry and music may cause his words to outlive himself.

Sometimes, because of his truthful stance, however, the minstrel was hunted down and killed, though this happened rarely. (Okafor, 2005:118).

Minstrelsy in Igboland was revered. People took them seriously. But with time, the regard for minstrels began to ebb. There was need for change. It became expedient to remove the trappings of a near-beggar from the image of the minstrel. The electronic media and western popular music took a heavy toll off minstrelsy as it was practiced in the past. New minstrels began to make hybridizations to adjust to new trends.

STRUGGLES BY MINSTRELS TO REASSUME THE PATHFINDING TRADITION: CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Globally, minstrelsy is changing along with society. On a closer look, it is the cultures of societies that are directly being transmogrified. Minstrelsy, which is part of ethnomusical culture, is not left out of the moving pictures. And an aspect of culture is like a state of water, say ice, in a large barrel of water of other different states, including hot and lukewarm. The ice melts gradually to become like its surroundings. The more ideas and people move around like molecules in water, the more a culture acquires new ways and jettisons old ones, especially in modern times.

Undiluted Igbo minstrelsy may have flowered in the colonial era, but the same colonial era contaminated it. The colonial era fostered discordance in values in communities. It gave rise to “layering of strands of discourse on traditional music as against its honest, firm and moral principles that were united as one whole that kept the cultural integrity of the people intact” (Agawu, 2003:20) (Keke and Obiekwe, 2012). There arose, therefrom, the challenge of laxity in ethics and morals. Traditional rulers were no longer as influential as they were in the past because of colonial corruption. The issue of the families of former warrant chiefs evolving into royal Igwe families brought discomfort in many Igbo towns, who often felt that the royalty had to rotate amongst the villages that confederated to form a given town. Towns whose extant kingship institutions survived long from pre-contact times were more accepting of dynasties in families long known for such leadership. Material wealth became more valuable and influenced decisions and directions in villages. Minstrels naturally sought patronage in wealthy people. The role of criticism became denuded. The disconnection in urban areas ensured that criticisms in songs were not taken as serious as they used to in close-knit villages, despite the fact that such songs went through great distances because of the then new electronic media. “Because of the impact of western culture, the Igbo who live in urban centers no longer have the opportunity of telling and listening to ... folk tales” (Okafor, 2005:329). Foreign western music was injected into churches, schools, bands etc. Traditional music was termed obsolete. Popular music overtook the stage. It was a hybrid that arose from the introduction of foreign music. Young people were carried away by popular music. Many popular musicians arose, acquiring the national identity status and overshadowing the humble minstrelsy in rural areas. Music forms arose. Nigeria began to admire people like Sir Victor Uwaifo, Rex Jim Lawson, Eddie Okonta, Dr. Victor Olaiya, Zeal Onyia, Cliff Richard, Jimmy Cliff, Fats Domino, Jim Reeves, Victor Sylvester etc. Soon, there was *juju* advocated by King Sunny Ade, Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, Sir Shina Peters etc. And Highlife carried by Oliver de Coque, Muddy Ibe, Bright Chimezie, Adolph Ahanotu, Chief Stephen Osadebe etc.

Afro-beat boasted Fela Anikulapo Kuti etc. There was need for Igbo minstrelsy to reposition itself and compete favourably with popular music.

Therefore, minstrelsy in Igboland took a new form. The defining point, roughly from the 1940's, was to mass produce the songs in electronic media, especially on LP records and cartridges. The early electronic media minstrels included Emeka Morocco Maduka, Gentleman Mike Ejeagha, Pericom Okoye, Prophet Afam Ogbuotobo, Nelson Ejinduaka, Nmanwu Egbe la Ugo cultural troupe, Rose Nzuruike and her Obiwuruotu traditional dance group, Chief Ozoemene Okeke and his Ikpachi Ogene of Nri, Gold Wokocha, Godwin Ugwu, Omaba Ntuebi Ndibe Nwoke and his Nkakwu Masquerade club of Inyi in Oji River LGA, Aboh Women cultural dance group, Israel Anyanwu and his Ukom group etc. (Ojiako, 1994).

The changes in the musical scene were explosive. Former ragtag performers were becoming instant millionaires because of the mass production of a single performance in LP records and cassettes. The minstrels themselves were becoming affluent. The contemporary minstrels like Paddy Okwuniazor tried to fill this lacuna by singing folk tales in the then Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), now Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), Enugu. The challenge from popular music led Igbo minstrels like Mike Ejeagha to emerge with *akuko n'egwu* popular minstrel strand of minstrelsy. Emerging from playing in the 1950's ensemble of his boss, Patrick Okwuniazor, Ejeagha of Imezi-Owa took off on his own to pay the *akuko n'egwu*. Okafor (2005:400) narrates:

The foundation of this style can be traced to the traditional narration of folk tales, some of which were punctuated with music and song. Many of these Igbo folk tales have children as audience and were designed to serve as character building instruments. He continues to attract appreciative audiences with his relaxed and pleasant Igbo rural music. His lyrics are full of proverbs and folk tales and he appears often on radio and television... His chorus singers play the *petite* slit drum (*ekwe*) and the shaker (*oyo*).... By his choice of words and idioms and the enlargement or variation of existing tales, it is clear that he is addressing a different audience, perhaps the middle class young Igbo man or woman striving to make a living through the prevalent network of social intercourse, economic fluctuations and achievement objectives.

Ejeagha brought in the path finding role of the minstrel into the post-independence music scene. In one of his songs, *anyi fulu ozu ene* or “we’ve seen the carcass of an antelope”, he warns the big man who isolates himself from former friends, saying that “*ebi sina ife ya ji pusie aka we rapulu umu-nnia onu ya bu ka fa fu ebe faga ejide ya ka*” (the porcupine said why it left only its neck bare after covering its body with spikes was for its kin to find where to hold it”. Mike Ejeagha was not alone in creating the popular minstrelsy. Ekwegbalu Anyanwu, Emeka Morocco, Okonkwo Asaa “Seven-Seven” (who died in 1978) etc, were also some of the advocates of popular minstrelsy which evolved from the rural Igbo minstrelsy. Averagely, many were primary school leavers. They used sound amplifiers, microphones, electric guitars and in some cases, large orchestras. Several instruments outside Igbo land were used too for exoticness. They then reached out to wider audiences than their predecessors did (Enekwe, Udechukwu and Okafọ, 2002:396). By the 1990s, they were at their peak and began to ebb by the 2000 because of a new flush of young musicians and young audience response to them from the early 2000. There is, today, again, an ebb in Igbo minstrelsy because of the popular music of young people which is in the front burner. There is a greater emphasis on the music of indigenous Nigerian musicians who are leading in today’s popular music that is heavily western. The musicians include Innocent Ugah Idibia (aka 2face Idibia), Dapo Daniel Oyebanjo (D’Banj), Michael Collins Ajereh (Don Jazzy), Naetochukwu Chikwe (Naeto C), Jude Lemfani Abaga (MI- Mr. Incredible), TY Bello, David Adeleke (DAVIDO), Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun (WIZKID), Chukie Edozien (LYNXX), Paul Play Dairo, Olumide Ayeni (Ghost) and Wale Davies (Tec), Olu Maintain etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The Igbo minstrelsy is at its ebb due to the avalanche of younger artistes in the Nigerian music industry who are themselves cut off from their roots. There has to be, then,

One, a renewal of interest in Igbo culture, before talented artistes can be inspired to use the information they have garnered about Igbo culture in their songs.

Two, concerted efforts by the governments to establish Igbo music education in the curricula across government schools and tertiary institutions.

Three, competitions should be instituted to promote Igbo minstrelsy by young musicians. The value of awards would attract talents across Igbo land.

Four, festivals in which minstrels would be invited have to be created so that from here a great interest in Igbo culture may be rekindled.

Five, hybridization process can be done, whereby newer forms of western music in Nigeria can be combined with Igbo minstrelsy, even rap may have to come in, since culture is not static and so far as the information is passed across, it does not matter much how it is passed across in this ultra modern times.

In conclusion, every aspect of Igbo culture is undergoing great changes due to emphasis on eclecticism in global culture. Information is passed across all over the world in such a way that suggests that nowhere is isolated anymore. Therefore, there should be a conscious effort by governments and non-governmental bodies concerned with Igbo culture to project, preserve, promote and export the culture through popular minstrelsy to the world. If it catches fire out there globally, then its tide may well come again. Yes.

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