

Oral Performance as Therapy: the Example of Perry-Como Okoye

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Introduction

Life, especially for the African, is made up of the material and immaterial: in other words, the world of the living and that of the dead – the spirits and disembodied entities. To live at peace with himself and his environment therefore, the African is expected not only to be in tune with the physical world but also to be properly aligned to the super mundane. It is when both worlds and dimensions are aligned that we can speak of balance in the true sense of the word.

However, both worlds do not (spiritually speaking) align fortuitously, as balance is usually brought about by a conscious effort on the part of man. In an attempt to bring about balance man relies on a number of factors– ritual, music, art, and so on. It is in keeping with the above views that Pierre Deliaeye (1984:42) insists that;

Since his beginnings, man has produced art; gests and works in some way bound to the essence of man's existence; gests and works grafted onto the epidermis of the world, yet gests and works for transcending the immediate givens, for understanding veiled realities and future possibilities; gests and works of global apprehension, brought about and nourished through the ages by elementary needs, by visceral fears, by existential hopes.

Since man is a complex being, occurrences or events in his life are usually multidimensional. This implies that for order and balance to be imposed on an otherwise chaotic world, art or in a manner of speaking music is required to mediate the chaotic milieu that is man's life. In the task of man's inner orientation therefore, music and chants hold a special

place in the African worldview just as the Hindu religion values meditation. Indeed, it is not only the African that values music. In the traditional Hebrew society, the power of music to restore order and harmony especially to a troubled soul is affirmed. Thus the Holy Bible reports:

From then on, whenever the evil spirit sent by God came on Saul, David would get his harp and play it. The evil spirit would leave, and Saul would feel better and be all right. (1 Samuel 16:23).

This statement from the Holy Bible, underlines my stand that music has therapeutic functions. However just as music can calm down tempestuous souls, it equally has the potential and ability to incite and excite otherwise calm souls into acts and dispositions that can be disruptive. This is why in most traditional societies, war music and chants exist to help put warriors into brave and murderous frames of mind. Commenting on the many uses of music/songs in Africa, Nketia states:

For the African, music and life are inseparable for there is music for many of the activities of everyday life, as well as music whose verbal texts express the African attitude to life, his hopes and fears, his thoughts and beliefs. Music is said to “sweeten” his labours, to comfort him when bereaved, to keep up his morale at the battle front, to assist him in the worship of his gods. In short, music in his culture has a markedly utilitarian function. (1955:317).

Nketia’s observations above are a reaffirmation of the all pervasive functions of music as therapy in Africa. It equally goes to show that beyond the exhibition of virtuoso, music can be employed as therapy to aid man either in celebration of life’s successes or lift up his spirit when he is depressed. Music can equally connect man to the spirit world as can be observed from the *Bori* spirit mediumship dance of the Hausa people as well as Wole Soyinka’s use of drum language in his play *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) to encourage Elesin Oba on his perilous journey to the ancestral world, or in fact help him tame and subdue otherwise malevolent spirits. In *Death and the King’s Horseman* for instance, one notices that Elesin Oba is guided through the perilous maze by ritual music which ironically, an outsider like Simon Pilkings interprets as noise.

Perry-Como Okoye's Music as Therapy

Since it is generally agreed that life is made up of both the temporal and spiritual dimensions, it follows therefore that for a symbiotic relationship between the two worlds to exist a channel of communication must be in place. It is this channel of communication which acts as a bridge between the worlds that music and other varieties of art, represent. Music for inner or spiritual orientation is however not an all comer's engagement. Its performance as well as participation is usually exclusive as Nwachukwu observed;

By the nature of things, there are special music and dance reserved for some rituals, ceremonies and parts of festivals which exclude mass participation. Such musics, dances and even musical instruments add up to status symbols for those to whom the community has given the privilege of participation. (2001:2).

Perry-Como Okoye's music clearly falls into the category described above. It is undoubtedly music for inner orientation or spiritual alignment. Since Okoye's music talks about matters of the spirit and encounters with supernatural beings, it impliedly excludes mass participation since it requires a certain amount of spiritual literacy to appreciate and enjoy it. Indeed, by deliberately naming his music masquerade music or music for calling out of masquerades, he seems to be telling us that his music goes beyond the mundane to the super mundane. Since masquerades/masked spirits or spirit manifests in Igbo cosmology are seen as dead ancestors that assume semi concrete forms in order to felicitate with mortals or nature beings who are on a temporary sally with earth beings; it follows that in form, masquerades are not on the same plane with human beings.

Describing the nature of masquerades, Okwori says that they are externalizations of ancestral spirits from somewhere in the cosmos on a temporary sojourn with mortals. (1998:16). Agreeing with Okwori's contentions on the immaterial-material nature of ancestors, Illah maintains:

...the ancestors are believed to travel back to the living, through the mediant persona...to partake and celebrate with their living offspring, in a re-invigoration of their relationship. (1983:8).

Ancestors or spirit beings are usually not just called forth through the banal_or spoken word. Their calling forth is usually done through the evocative qualities of music which Soyinka describes as;

...highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic...The forms of music are not correspondences at such moments to the physical world...The singer is a mouthpiece of the chthonic forces of the matrix. (1976:144).

In discussing the Igbo cosmology through his music, Como does this with an air of the mystique. What he does through his songs can be likened to what Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa do with their stories. Thus, he talks of encounters with the queen of the coast, not from the negative perspective of the Pentecostal Christians, but as a home grown African who in line with African traditional religion, does not judge the belief systems of other people. The queen of the coast is therefore portrayed, not as an evil spirit, but as an earth mother and guardian of the cosmos who tests the children of the earth for enduring virtues before dealing out rewards. He sings about magic, about blind sheep grazing in the dead of night- symbolic of spiritual awareness. He is tried with riddles and apparitions and he in turn answers and appeases the queen with eggs and native chalk, which elicits blessings and fortifications from the queen.

Music at this level becomes something akin to the Western art music- for the spiritually pure and emotionally literate. African or Igbo worldview does not conceive of beings in the mould of the Christian devil. Malevolent spirits can be tamed or appeased with music and offerings and bribed into yielding blessings and powers that can prove beneficial to the general well being of humanity. Supporting this, Chinweizu et al say; "...in...African pantheon, good gods are thanked, difficult ones are appeased, bad ones are bribed, and so on" (1980:190). The Igbo spiritual space is thus conceived of as an environment where nothing is entirely bad as each creature or being has a place in the scheme of things. This is why an Igbo prayer runs thus;

Let the water not be poisoned;
Let the fish not die.
We know there are myriad snakes in the forest-
But we do not pray for their death.
Our only prayer is-
Let them not assail our thresh-hold.
Let the kite perch,
Let the eagle perch.

From the above, one will immediately deduce that Igbo worldview advocates a spiritual and physical space founded on symbiosis and mutual tolerance as a basis for harmonious living.

Perry-Como's songs as performance are therefore foregrounded against the background of Igbo cultural matrix and spiritual outlook on issues. Thus, while some of the songs have the potential to incite, others call for restraint while yet others preach brotherly love and fraternity. In doing all these however, people are always kept constantly aware of the fact that it is spiritual music they are hearing. This is done not only through the use of flutes but also through the lyrics. Flute which I have described elsewhere as "performing the same kind of function in Igbo land which the talking drum performs in Yoruba land" and as having an "uncanny ability to stir the soul", (Asigbo, 2003:174-175) is an indispensable musical instrument in Igbo music ensemble.

In general, Perry-Como starts his music by praising his native land-Arondizuogu as a land of strong *dibias* (medicine men). He goes further to reel out his own qualifications as a strong *dibia* by mentioning the names of other renowned medicine men in Igbo land that he has interacted and exchanged charms with and equally throws challenges to anybody who feels he is strong enough spiritually. Como's music is set against the background of the *Ikeji* Festival of Arondizuogu which is essentially a masquerade festival. *Ikeji* is structured to be a contest among various masquerades/masquerade groups. A goat is usually the star prize and the strongest masquerade or group is that which walks up to where the goat is tethered, unties and walks away with it. To buoy up their spirit, chants, invocations, incantations, flutes and songs are used. In the Igbo mystical space;

There are...points in life when Igbo worlds interact. Life in the land of the living is organized in much the same way as life in the land of spirits. When men talk or sing, spirits and gods hear. When gods and spirits speak, only gifted and learned people hear and understand. The spirits and deities have powerful influence on the affairs of men. Therefore, there are festivals and ceremonies to thank, placate, request, honour and invoke the spirits and other superior powers. (Obielozie, 2003: 13-14).

Since only men or women with a certain degree of spiritual literacy may understand the spirits, it follows that only such people may communicate with them in languages that are potent enough to invoke and lure the dwellers of the nether regions into doing certain favours for the children of the earth. Also just as songs can control the emotions of

men in a number of ways so can they possess spirit powers, control, placate or incense them. In performing his brand of music therefore Como takes care to include chants and incantations as well as straight songs appositely structured to manipulate not only temporal hearts and emotions but also spiritual beings and spirit manifests. To fully understand the spiritual dimensions of Como's music, a sample survey and analysis of some of his songs in the album *Oderigwugwu* is here attempted.

Performance as Fortification/Spiritual Awareness

Igbo cosmology conceives of sight from two dimensions- physical sight and spiritual (in)sight. Physical sight is banal, restricted and mundane and can see only the obvious. Spiritual sight on the other hand is super mundane, deep, penetrating, mystical and unrestricted and can see beyond the surface. That is why in the track *Aka N'esu Ogwu*, Como talks about *ndeeli*, midnight, which in Igbo cosmology is regarded as a time of heightened spiritual activity; the magic hour, when spirits come out to sally. He represents the magnificence of spiritual sight through the blind sheep which he says, comes out to graze at midnight. The symbol of the blind sheep is a clear denigration of physical sight. This is why in Igbo spiritual space, charms for spiritual sight or awareness or "third" eye is usually prepared with *nkpo onye isi* (blind man's walking stick). The stick though inanimate does the job of *otulumuzo* (pathfinder) for the blind man, hence it embodies spiritual insight.

Another theme that can be found in *Aka N'esu Ogwu* is that of preparatory fortification. In Igbo temporal and spiritual space, preparation is essential to success. That is why the Igbo say that *nkwucha aburo ujo*, preparedness is not cowardice. *Aka N'esu...* is a chronicle of such preparations undertaken by Como both on the temporal and spiritual spaces. His visitations to all the renowned medicine men in Olu and Igbo as well as to the queen of the coast are meant to prepare him for the task of claiming the star prize during the Ikeji festival of magic. He could thus foretell the strength of opponents, (since he already has spiritual insight) and know which incantations to use in order to neutralize their charms.

Performance as Justice, Fair-play and Love

The Igbo temporal and spiritual space is founded on firm principles of justice and fairplay. This is exemplified in the saying *egbe belu ugo belu*,

let the kite perch, let the eagle perch. In the song, *izu kanma* Como talks of how he fell out with his brother, but brotherly love restrained him from overreacting. He sings;

Ataram ose buo nwanne n'obi
Otasia nkeya bukpo m anya!
Eje mu were nma kamje gbuo nwanne
Obi nwanne mere muo!
Eje num were egbe kamje gbuo nwanne
Obi nwanne mere muo!
Nwe nyara n'akpa ogwu, kamje gbuo nwanne
Obi nwanne mere muo!

[I chewed pepper and spat at my brother's chest
He chewed his and spat into my eyes
I took my machete to go and kill my brother
But brotherly love stopped me!
I took my gun to go and kill my brother
But brotherly love stopped me!
I took my charms to go and kill my brother
But brotherly love stopped me!]

The above lyrics recognize that there could be transgressions, but counsels for forgiveness and love. The Igbo nation has always believed that man is imperfect but with tolerance and understanding, society will be a harmonious entity. Indeed, this is why Como sings;

Dike elighi ariri
Nani ya ebiri!

If the brave refuses to stomach insults
He will live alone!

The above lines clearly show the Igbo obsession for kinship and communal existence. For the Igbo, no man is an island unto himself hence the demographic data of the South East being the most densely populated. This is because the Igbo believe that a brave deed or a cowardly act must be witnessed to by people for it to have meaning. This accounts for the saying *agwo ofu onye fulu bu eke*, the snake seen by one person is a python. It stresses the importance of group witnessing as panacea to exaggeration. Being an essentially mercantile and itinerant people, the Igbo have an uncanny ability to adapt to any situation they find themselves in. They however, have a very acute sense of justice

hence the prayer, *nke sibe ya ebena, nku kwa ya-* the one who refuses to allow others to perch, may its wings break.

Performance as Competition/Challenge

The Igbo are a highly competitive people. This is why personal achievement is always venerated among the Igbo. Perhaps this can be traced to their republican nature and to the fact that to the Igbo, master-servant relationship is almost non-existent. However even though achievement is venerated and applauded, pedigree is equally not neglected. This could account for why in spite of Okonkwo's achievements in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; we are constantly reminded of who his father was. To challenge and intimidate his opponents therefore, Perry-Como reels out his pedigree as a successful medicine man by recounting his encounters with other renowned medicine men as well as spirits. Appropriate incantations are used while throwing challenges so that the chicken-hearted might abandon the contest. As a prelude to the Ikeji, Como calls on the youths to prepare for *mbosi aka k'aka ga agbaji aka-* the day a hand that is stronger than another (hand) will break that weaker hand. Challenges in Igbo cosmology are psycho-spiritual as well as physical. Opponents are thus intimidated through *amansi* (bravado or swashbuckling displays) before the actual contest. Igbo spiritual as well as physical contest are always steeped in alliterative poetry which sometimes, comprises tongue twisters and riddles. Indeed, if an opponent fails to solve a riddle thrown by a fellow contestant, such a challenger is believed to have already lost the contest even before it actually begins.

The operative tactics in Igbo social and spiritual contest is to strike your opponent when he least expects it because, "*mbelede nyili dike-mbelede k'iji ama dike*"; surprise beats the brave- surprise also reveals the brave. On the arena of contest, even the "star prize" may not be spared as defeated opponents may vent their spleen on the goat by cursing it to death. However, any performer worth his salt must possess the power of foresight hence diviners spirits are always raced ahead of time through music. In these trance situations, these performers can foretell the future hence they can accurately predict their opponents next move. This ability comes under what the Igbo call folklore of prophesy. These conflict and tension situations are what Perry-Como captures in his music. His music can therefore be regarded as dramatic and metaphysical even as Como can be described as a practitioner of what Gizelis calls "real creation" (1973:167). This is because the phantasmagorical stories which tell about

his adventures though belonging to the people's cosmos may not be easily verifiable. His peculiar lifestyle however, furnishes other singers and even some Nollywood (refers to the Nigerian Video Movies) producers with materials for their works.

When finally, he asks those who may be ill disposed to his masquerading and masquerade music why they bear him grudges, one cannot help but observe that here is a man committed to preserving his people's way of life but is misunderstood by an ignorant public. The Igbo man is nothing and can be nothing in the real sense of the word without his culture and tradition, otherwise known as *Omenani* and *Odinani*. Perry-Como Okoye is a celebrated culture crusader, musician and native healer per excellence. In skill, he rivals most Igbo oral performers who in fact use him as inspiration for their songs and creative endeavours. That music can control not only humans but also spirits is not in doubt. In fact the potency of music as a tool for controlling creatures is exemplified by the fact that even snake charmers use it to control snakes just as the children of Israel used it time and again to elicit favours from Yahweh. Como's instruments are simple drums, flutes, gong and xylophone all combined appositely to produce melodious music. Most times, the flute is used to set the pace of the music as well as charge Como's spirit and put him in the mood to throw challenges to opponents.

Como's music can be said to raise important questions on the value of human life and relationship as a civilized entity. He appears to be restating certain age old truths. To him, life is nothing without morality and fair play. The Igbo for instance say that "an okro tree cannot be taller than the one who planted it". This simply goes to show the Igbo insistence on obedience to the laws of the land; hence everybody must bow before the law. Como captures this in his song by saying that the tree he planted cannot kill him since he can always hack it down. The tree this time stands for one of his cousins that he trained (who incidentally is a Professor) and who because of the acquisition of Western education started opposing Como's indulgence in masquerading to the extent that the police were brought in to settle the matter. In justifying his stand on this issue, Como insists that the innocent will always be vindicated both by the living and the dead. Traditional Igbo society believes so much in giving honour to whomever it is due. This is why in his preparations for the *Ikeji* festival, Como first of all goes round the abodes of other medicine men and then offers sacrifices to various spirits and nature gods. In justifying this, the Igbo say; *Ojeko eje kene Eze, onatava anata nya kene Eze*, if on your way going you salute the king, remember to salute

him while returning. It is not only the Igbo who observe this etiquette. The Holy Bible tells us the story of the three wise men who saluted Herod as was custom on their way to visit the infant Jesus but had to go back through another route to avoid disclosing the identity of Jesus to Herod. (Mathew 2:7-12).

Other issues that could be deduced from Como's songs would be those of loyalty and obedience to benefactors. In the Nigerian political space today, stories abound of godfathers falling out with their supposed godsons. The Jim Nwobodo- Chimaroke Nnamani saga; the Chris Ubah- Chris Ngige imbroglio as well as the Lamidu Adedibu-Rashidi Ladoja stand off are a few of the instances in Nigeria's political drama where the masses suffered as a result of the quarrel between these political gladiators. In all these instances, music always played a prominent role in the conflict as opponents are mocked through that medium. The *si haraya* song by the Chimaroke Nnamani camp is a case in point here. *Si haraya* or 'leave it for him' was a propaganda song used by the Nnamani camp in his campaign for second term, to incite the Enugu State public against supposed enemies of the state as well as sell Nnamani as an achiever. The song became so popular that the "poor" artiste who composed the song was even attacked by political opponents.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, one observes that Como's music is an encapsulation of the Igbo cosmos both as it is and as it should be. Music to the Igbo plays a highly utilitarian role. This is why almost every facet of Igbo life is steeped in music. However, music can come in two categories. That which relaxes, charges or orients us socially and that which connects us to the great essence, in other words, ritual or spiritual music. Perry-Como Okoye's music belongs to both categories as it can charge us as well as connect us to the great essence. Music from the beginning of time has been used by man either to atone for past misdeeds or elicit blessings and favours from the supernatural. The Biblical book of Psalms fulfilled and is still fulfilling this need for both the Judaic as well as the Christian religions.

In the final analysis, one observes that music as therapy is a primordial practice of man, invented to help him worship his god, commune with nature and live at peace with his environment. With music, he can race his spirit ahead of time and predict things yet to happen. With music also, he can psyche himself up to face otherwise formidable and intimidating foes. With music he can bear life's many

trials and sorrows as well as enjoy the little successes and achievements of life. With music, he can fall in love and express same to the opposite sex. Como's music when all is said and done, keeps the Igbo in tune with their world. His music is therefore temporal and spiritual at the same time. It is ritual as well as social.

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