

The Rhythm of Communal Identity

On the Maintenance of Language and Culture through Music

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Abstract

The relationship between language, music and cultural identity has always been of special interest in the social sciences, especially in the areas of anthropology, social psychology and ethnomusicology. The main argument revolves on how language reflected through music positively impacts on the identity of a social group, and what happens where this is lacking. Cultures die and languages go into extinction when there are no creative ways of keeping them alive. The aim of this essay is to investigate how the culture and language of a particular society could be safeguarded through music. Beyond the theoretical framework, I shall substantiate this investigation with the example of the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, whose cultural identity is seriously threatened by the lack of interest in the local language among the people. Part of this disinterest is caused by the unique tendency of Igbo people to travel outside their original communities and to culturally adapt in their diaspora communities. This essay therefore aims at a) addressing this problem of identity through a sociological analysis of communal identity, and b) seeking how identity could be rediscovered through music that is delivered in a local language, illustrated with the example of Igbo cultural group. It is hoped that such analysis would aid in presenting another means of safeguarding endangered local languages, which invariably has a lot of implications for the cultural identity of the group involved. Of course, the analysis that is advanced here is not limited to the Igbo since the argument is based on a general epistemological function of music and language with respect to cultural identity.

Keywords

Identity – music – language – Igbo – epistemology – community – culture

1 Introduction

"Is Igbo an endangered language?" asks Herbert Igboanusi, a professor of Linguistics at the University of Ibadan.¹ This question comes at the backdrop of the UNESCO report that lists Igbo among endangered languages which has generated a lot of responses.² What does this question portend for the cultural identity of the over 30 million members of this ethnic group? Recent scholarship has shown that language ought not be simply understood as merely reflecting the culture and identity of a social group, rather language remains "a fundamental resource for cultural production" and as such "a fundamental resource for identity production."³ Language, because of its epistemological function, therefore, should be taken seriously since a threat to language is a threat to cultural identity. By 'epistemology' I mean the fact that through music we can come to *know* or *learn* something in a way that is similar to how knowledge is obtained in general. This understanding of epistemology is similar to Stanley Hoffman's application of the concept as "a set of assumptions about information and about the nature of knowing applicable in a given situation."⁴ The ethnomusicologist's use of the concept goes beyond the role of music in shaping meaning, emotions and art to the conveying of information, such as language and culture. In line with this, the main thrust of this essay is to approach language through music in order to show how music performed in the local language, becomes in itself an epistemological resource for cultural identity. For the purposes of this essay I shall use Igbo music as an analytical framework. By this, I mean any music that is performed wholly or partially in Igbo language. In other words, such music is not limited to traditional Igbo genre which refers to a particular category of local music that is specifically performed in the local language. This music genre lacks contemporary appeal and as such does not resonate with the young people who are mostly not interested in the language.

1 Herbert Igboanusi, "Is Igbo an Endangered Language?" *Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication* 25, no. 4 (2006): 443–452; p. 443.

2 UNESCO, *Red Book on Endangered Languages* (Geneva: UNESCO, 1995). Igbo is the language of the Igbo ethnic group, found in the southeastern Nigeria but with significant presence in all parts of Nigeria and even beyond. Igbo is one of the major ethnic groups in the multiethnic Nigeria. Since the UNESCO assessment, there have been publications, conferences and workshops organized on preserving and promoting Igbo language by institutions such as, *Igbo Studies Association* (Dominican University, Illinois), *Centre of African Studies* (SOAS, University of London), *Igbo World Congress*, and so on.

3 Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Language and Identity," 369–394 in Alessandro Duranti, *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 382.

4 Stanley Brian Hoffman, "Epistemology and Music: A Javanese Example," *Ethnomusicology* 22, no. 1 (1978): 69–88; p. 69.

By not limiting the genre to peculiar traditional music, I intend to expand the sphere of impact, given the renewed interest in some traditional forms of music. It would therefore be inappropriate to ignore the continued influence and emotive content of such genres like *Bongo*, *Ekwe*, *Ogene*, and *Highlife* even among the youth of today. Hence, the broader concept “Igbo music” would have the following attributes: a) It is performed in Igbo language, b) It focuses on the cultural norms of the Igbo; c) It relives the customary practices of the Igbo through its performative and narrative content; d) It features both in traditional genres like *Bongo*, *Egwu-ekpili*, *Ogene*, as well as in contemporary music like Rap, Hip-pop, etc.

To address the concern on cultural identity within the context of language and Igbo music, I shall in this essay, do the following: a) offer a sociological account of identity and communal identity, b) describe the Igbo communal identity as one that is founded on certain cultural norms and practices including language and music, c) show how this cultural/communal identity is threatened by the decreasing patronage to Igbo language, and d) explain how Igbo music could help in reviving Igbo language, and subsequently the cultural identity of Igbo as well. In doing this, the epistemological value of music as well as the nexus between music and language would be explored. At the end, it is hoped that this essay will show how identity could be positively enhanced by music with its sociological, linguistic, epistemological and cultural characteristics.

2 Identity and Community

Generally, identity could be described as dealing with a certain form of uniqueness. It refers to the distinguishing characteristic of an entity. In the process of describing such distinguishing characteristics, many ideas have been imposed on the concept of identity as if it is something that is immediately self-evident. It is therefore important to begin this discourse on the premise that the issue of identity remains enigmatic. The question of “who is who?” and “what is what?” cannot be answered by simply pointing to “this” or “that” person or item. Identity thus is not something that one can either feel or touch or perceive by the senses of smell or taste. In other words, it is a concept which is neither tangible nor visible.⁵ Moreover, identity is also about the meaning of the questions of

5 Siniša Malešević, *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 13.

“Who am I?” or “What am I?” These questions are further complicated by the fact that an individual can assume multiple identities over the course of his or her life. One can be identified as a student or a spinster or a philosopher or a mother or a Christian at different times. Some of these identities could also be combined, for example where a certain Mrs. X is, at once, a wife, a mother of two kids, an Igbo, a physician, and a Nigerian. This confirms identity as a complex issue. The distinguished professor of Sociology at the University College, Dublin, Siniša Malešević, points out the difficulty in determining what identity actually denotes. He argues that though the question of whether identity exists or not is not debatable, the shape of its existence is constantly contested.⁶ Thus while identity enjoys a universal acceptance, it ironically lacks necessary clarity.

In the face of this crisis of clarity, the concept of identity in the social sciences⁷ further confronts us with the ambiguities that it carries along. The theme of identity, which was first introduced by Erik Erikson in the field of social sciences,⁸ reveals the ambiguity of a simple conceptual approach in the social sciences. For instance, if the word ‘Igbo’ stands for some form of identity, ‘Igbo’ as a ‘thing’ or ‘person(s)’ does not exist as such. Thus, one cannot conceive of identity in essentialist terms. We can only talk of ‘Igbo person’ (*Onye Igbo*), ‘Igbo culture’ (*Omenala Igbo*), etc.

Nevertheless, attempts have been made to categorize the concepts of identity in the social sciences. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, in an article dedicated to streamlining the use of the concept of identity by social scientists, point to five uses which oscillate between a ‘weak’ and a ‘strong’ understanding. Brubaker and Cooper presented identity as an amalgam of meanings including, identity as the individual or collective self, identity as the basis or product of social and political action, identity as an unstable result of multiple and often rival discourses, and identity as a *collective* phenomenon.⁹ The multivalent, and so ambiguous, nature of the concept of identity is perhaps captured in the interplay of ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ within these categorizations. However, this ambiguity does not annul the indispensability of identity. One thing

6 Ibid.

7 Being a theological project, our approach will follow some results in the social sciences (in this case sociology and social psychology) since they deal with the human society within which communal identities exist and function.

8 See, Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (1983): 910–931.

9 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1–47; pp. 6–8.

is rather clear in these categories: They embrace both the common, everyday understanding as well as the meaning that emerges out of a constructed process—whether individual or collective.

Malešević has dismissed these categorizations on the grounds that they emanate from the “mathematico-logical and philosophical origins.”¹⁰ He argues that the attempt to link identity to social and political action implies an understanding of the social group from the outside. It thus lacks an insider perspective, in which case the group is defined from the inside. Malešević builds his position on three main grounds: a) the concept assumes a reified form of identity, as if identity is material in nature; b) on the basis of the preceding reason, this form of identity fails to explain the behavior of individuals or groups. At most it engages in recycling the narrative of boundaries of different groups; c) the understanding of the different modes of the self (individual's or group's) does not necessarily require the concept of identity. According to him, researchers and theorists only appropriate the term ‘identity’ as an aid in describing other grand narratives such as modernity, post-modernity, etc. all of which are abstract in nature.¹¹ This further increases the ambiguity of the term and renders it almost empirically valueless.

Part of the reasons for the ambiguity of the concept of (communal/cultural) identity is the tendency to read it from the outside. In such a case, the individualist mindset subsists despite the collective nature of the project. A possible way of overcoming this lopsided approach is to examine the communal identity from the inside. This would involve an examination of how a community is formed and sustained; how the in-group and out-group emerge. The indices that generate the in-group and out-group categories, create scholarly interests as regards the internal mechanism of a group. This internal mechanism accounts for the dynamism without which a group would remain a static, lifeless, monolithic entity with exclusive boundaries, impervious to any form of enriching external relationships. Whether such a homogenous group exists or not is not of particular interest to us. Rather our interest is to understand how a group is formed, and also how group behaviour functions. The aim is to supply the missing link which was pointed out by Malešević in his analysis of the Brubaker and Cooper's categorizations. To do this, I shall appeal to the results of sociologists to determine the basic categorizations of how communal identity is formed from an external perspective.

¹⁰ Malešević, *Identity as Ideology*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

3 Sociological Models of Communal Identity

Sociological interests in unravelling how communal¹² identities are shaped and transformed over time have produced two prominent trends, namely the *integration* and *aggregation* model. These two models correspond with Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* respectively. According to the German sociologist, the former indicates 'association' where individual belonging is based on impersonal and contractual terms, while the latter refers to 'community' wherein the relationship among members is more interpersonal and relational.¹³ Other terms have equally been used to describe both concepts, for example role-based identities and group-based identities;¹⁴ ascription and inscription,¹⁵ etc. The integration model explains the emergence of communal identity based on the functions that individuals play within the society which is aimed at achieving a common goal. Émile Durkheim develops this model in his famous *De la division du travail social* (1893).¹⁶ Durkheim in seeking to understand how society is formed developed the concept of social solidarity or integration.

Social solidarity, according to Durkheim, has two forms, mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Solidarity is mechanical when one's belonging is determined by similarity with the roles or attributes of other members and

12 Here we attempt to use the three concepts 'social', 'group', and 'communal' synonymously despite the subtle differences. While 'social' covers both 'communal' and 'group', as both could be categorized under it; 'group' refers mainly to a relatively small-size collection of individuals whose association with one another is often contractual, while 'communal' refers to much larger collections, mostly characterized by interpersonal relations. While the peculiarities and complexities of any given community might not allow a perfect application of the arguments in social identity discourses, nevertheless these discourses offer us reasonable insights into understanding the issue of communal identity which we set out to investigate in this project.

13 Tönnies' main ideas could be found in his 1887 work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, translated in 1957 as "Community and Society" and after several editions was reprinted in 2005 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft). His ideas are also projected by other sociologists who research on community studies: Rolf Fechner, "Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936)," in: *Handbuch der politischen Philosophie und Sozialphilosophie* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008); Werner J. Cahnman ed., *Ferdinand Tönnies: A New Evaluation* (Leiden: Brill, 1973); Werner J. Cahnman ed., *Weber and Toennies: Comparative Sociology in Historical Perspective* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995).

14 Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 123.

15 Roland Pierik, "Conceptualizing Cultural Groups and Cultural Difference: The Social Mechanism Approach," *Ethnicities* 4, no. 4 (2004): 523–544.

16 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

this, for him, is characteristic of the primitive societies.¹⁷ Thus, mechanical solidarity does not allow any 'difference' since everyone homogenously strive for the same goal. On the other hand, organic solidarity is defined basically by strong interdependency of the members, and so is based on differences. Each person has a particular role to play in the complex web of functions with the collective aim of achieving a defined goal.¹⁸ Durkheim identifies organic integration with the functioning of the modern society. One could conclude that Durkheim's model despite making space for the individual, is based on 'what one does' and not 'who one is', in so far as it is primarily aimed at the functioning of the society. It is essentially role-based. Durkheim agrees that mechanical solidarity is never totally eliminated in modern society as both appear in the legal system.¹⁹ However, by indicating a certain discontinuity between the mechanical (primitive societies) and the organic (modern societies), Durkheim's analysis fails to recognize the complexity of the human society and how some elements in the primitive society may have re-emerged in contemporary society, although in transformed ways. By contrast, in the aggregation model a communal identity is said to emerge when all the complexities of individual identities are pulled together and given a common expression, sometimes through the mechanism of language. While one cannot do away completely with the integration model and its normative attribute, the aggregation model provides more space for dynamism which best captures the reality of any given communal identity. Having familiarized ourselves with the dynamics of communal identity and integration, I shall, in what follows, show how this plays out in the Igbo context as it relates to Igbo language and cultural identity.

4 Language, Identity and the Igbo

According to the Canadian linguistic anthropologist, Monica Heller, identity and language are certainly "terrains of struggle, of contradictions and ambi-

17 Ibid., p. 84.

18 Ibid., p. 102.

19 Durkheim argues that mechanical solidarity which is based on sameness is evident in penal laws which treats every individual as same, while organic solidarity which is based on differences and interdependence is made manifest in contractual laws. For him, the law could be applied as 'a measuring instrument.' Herbert L.A. Hart, "Social Solidarity and the Enforcement of Morality," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 35, no. 1 (1967): 1-13; p. 6.

guity.”²⁰ The fundamental importance of language in the construction of cultural identity is something that is already demonstrated, especially within post-colonial contexts. A research carried out among Zulu students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal indicates that despite the use of English as the language of instruction, students perceive their local language as intrinsically vital to their self-understanding.²¹ This claim is sustained even in the complex contradictions of praxis and choices. Such contradictions are witnessed in the preference of minimal interference of native language in formal education. In other words, the official, formal role of English in education is safeguarded. One also discovers such complications of choices in the options of hybridism and fluid identities among the students with respect to both the native and official languages.²²

Among the Igbo people one could also expect a similar result as that of the Zulu students, perhaps with a greater percentage tilting towards hybrid and fluid identities. It is most likely that more people would rather opt for an Igbo identity that does not necessarily involve the language. Such an understanding of identity contrasts with the so-called Romantic tradition in which language is tied to identity in a ‘quasi-biological fashion’. Hence, identity is construed as “rooted not in genetics but in heritable cultural forms, especially language, which symbolize and, in more extreme essentialist modes, iconically embody an ethnic group’s distinctive cultural identity.”²³ But then, identity is not essentially biological but is a product of action: “As a product of situated social action, identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances. This dynamic perspective contrasts with the traditional view of identities as unitary and enduring psychological states or social categories.”²⁴ These polarized perspectives offer a possible way for rethinking the problem of Igbo language and identity, problem that appears to corroborate the verdict of UNESCO despite the denials and dismissals from Igbo elite and scholars. According to Emma Asonye, opinions provoked by the UNESCO assessment could be divided into

20 Monica Heller, “Globalization, the New Economy, and the Commodification of Language and Identity,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 4 (2003): 473–492.

21 Andrea Parmegiani, “The (Dis)ownership of English Language and Identity Construction among Zulu Students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal,” *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 17, no. 6 (2014): 683–694.

22 Ibid., p. 683.

23 Bucholtz and Hall, “Language and Identity,” p. 374. See also, Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, “Language Philosophy as Language Ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder,” 139–204 in Paul V. Kroskrity, ed., *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2000).

24 Ibid., p. 376.

two broad responses: on the one hand are those who outrightly dismiss the UNESCO assessment, and then insist that the Igbo language is never under any threat of extinction, and on the other hand are studies that really admit that there is serious cause for concern, and so the urgent need to intensify effort towards reversing the trend.²⁵ While both groups advocate for the safeguarding of the language given its critical import on the Igbo identity, I consider the second group as more critical in analyzing the causes of the endangerment. And from a non-essentialist perspective, what is required is to design a course of action towards a unifying cultural identity that is symbolized in the common language of Igbo people.

In what he referred to as the ‘symptoms of Igbo language endangerment’, Igbo poet and professor of African and African Diaspora Literatures at the University of Massachusetts, Chukwuma Azuonye, outlines six critical factors that impede the flourishing of Igbo language. These symptoms include a) reduction in speaker competence, b) radical decrease in child competence due to absence of intergenerational teaching and learning, c) colonial repression of vernacular in the boarding school system, d) uncontrolled language shift, with intense code-switching and code-mixing, e) assimilation of Igbo language into other language forms like pidgin, and f) the fading population of monolingual elderly.²⁶ Against the position that the Igbo language is invincible given the sheer size of the Igbo population (set at about 30 million), Azuonye, a seasoned anthropologist and linguist insists that,

Igbo exemplifies the unacknowledged wisdom that neither official nor majority status can shield a language from endangerment or death if that language exists in an environment in which native speaker competence and generational transmission of the codes of the language have been decisively undermined by such socio-psychological, political and historical factors as colonial mentality and consequent language shift, often glorified as ‘receptivity to change’.²⁷

However, without dismissing the colonial perspective that Azuonye brings to the fore, it is also important to indicate that the danger faced by Igbo language

25 Emma Asonye, “UNESCO Prediction of the Igbo Language Death: Facts and Fables,” *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 16, nos. 1–2 (2013): 91–98.

26 Chukwuma Azuonye, “Igbo as an Endangered Language,” *Uwa Ndi Igbo: Journal of Igbo Life and Culture*, no. 3 (2003): 41–68; p. 44.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

is perhaps part of the consequences of their peripatetic nature.²⁸ In travelling out to other lands and back to their territory repeatedly, Igbo people struggle between adapting to their host diaspora communities and re-adaptation to their motherland. This back and forth movement greatly affects the sustainability of Igbo cultural identity in all its forms. Penchant for migration among Igbo people implies that effort towards safeguarding Igbo language and culture must be continuously intensified.

There have been many strategies towards the safeguarding and revitalization of Igbo language. Azuonye, in articulating most of the positive suggestions, offers two basic recommendations. These bother on a) documentation of the language and b) revitalizing and maintenance programs. Documentation must consider all extinct forms, the surviving rare forms as well as modern forms of the Igbo language. Revitalizing and maintenance programs include a wide range of actions and resolutions, from resolving the problem of Standard Igbo, translation projects, public awareness, to making Igbo a compulsory subject at all levels of our Education system.²⁹ Other strategies for the safeguarding of Igbo language that focus on the strategy of public awareness, as well as on educational methods have also been undertaken by some other interest groups. We find examples in the use of Radio in propagating Igbo language,³⁰ public Igbo lecture series such as *Odenigbo*,³¹ individual projects such as Amarachi Atama's *Oja Cultural Development Initiative*, as well as online and diaspora Igbo language classes that spring up in places like Frankfurt, Brussels, Houston, etc. Azuonye's suggestions, though laudable and fundamental, appear to ignore the difficulties that are faced by Igbo people in diaspora and, as a matter of fact, do not help in propagating the language in the streets. Bridging this gap through music constitutes therefore an essential part of this investigation.

28 Remi Chukwudi Okeke, "Relative Deprivation, Identity Politics and the Neo-Biafran Movement in Nigeria: Critical Issues of Nation-Building in a Postcolonial African State," *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 66, no. 2 (2016): 73–80; p. 74.

29 Azuonye, "Igbo as an Endangered Language," pp. 56–63.

30 Uchenna Onuzulike, "Discussing the Igbo Language on the Igbo Internet Radio: Explicating Ethnolinguistic Vitality," *Journal of African Media Studies* 6, no. 3 (2014): 285–298.

31 *Odenigbo* annual lecture series was founded by the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri, Most Rev. Dr. Anthony J.V. Obinna. *Odenigbo*, more than a public lecture, is a celebration of Igbo culture. It is rendered in Igbo language unlike other similar series such as the defunct *Ahajoku* Lecture Series and the most recent *Nkata Umu Ibe* by the Center for Memories, Enugu, both of which are delivered in English. All of these lectures, including *Odenigbo*, are elitist and essentially does little in terms of helping the younger generation to learn the language.

5 Music and the Crafting of Cultural Identity

Christopher Waterman's 1982 essay "I'm a Leader, Not a Boss': Social Identity and popular Music in Ibadan, Nigeria,"³² represents one of the earliest attempts at scholarly understudying the relationship between music and cultural identity in Nigeria. Waterman's work however is limited by its narrow focus on the specific genre of *Juju* music, which is very popular in Yorubaland, as well as in the analysis of social identity that is tied to the person of the musician. Also, no attention was given to the relationship between the Yoruba language and Juju music. My argument here, in the case of the Igbo, follows a slightly different trajectory by virtue of its broadness, its focus on the group identity as well as the analysis of the relationship between language and music. Perhaps part of Waterman's perspective is informed by the anthropological rather than philosophical approach it took, as well as the absence of the crisis of language and identity among the Yoruba when compared with the Igbo race.

Since the conditions of limitation in Waterman's essay do not apply in the case under review in this essay, the question that should preoccupy us at this stage is the relationship between music and cultural identity. How does music performed in local language influence the identity of a particular social or cultural group? In the case of Igbo, how does Igbo music help, not only in reviving interest in the Igbo language but also in advancing the cultural identity of Igbo people? Having argued for the nexus between language and cultural identity, I shall, in what follows, examine how music influences, preserves and promotes cultural identity.

Music despite reflecting an individual expression, genius and creativity in most instances, also involves a communal identity marker. We are able to distinguish Rock music from Afrobeat due to the identity element that impresses itself on any version of the music. In yet another way, music created by an individual could over time become the cultural identity of a group. We find this in popular movie or TV news soundtracks. Hence music has a way of holding together both the individual and the community, the self and the other through identity network and representation. American ethnomusicologist, Mark Slobin, maintains that,

Music seems to have an odd quality that even passionate activities like gardening or dog raising lack: the simultaneous projecting and dissolving

32 Christopher A. Waterman, "I'm a Leader, Not a Boss': Social Identity and popular Music in Ibadan, Nigeria," *Ethnomusicology* 26, no. 1 (1982): 59–71.

of the self in performance. Individual, family, gender, age, supercultural givens, and other factors hover around the musical space but can penetrate only very partially the moment of enactment of musical fellowship. Visible to the observer, these constraints remain unseen by the musicians, who are instead working out a shared vision that involves both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of the ego.³³

Nowhere is the relationship between music and cultural identity more evident than in the genre of folk music. Originally, folk music is considered as having no authorship, as emerging from the tradition of a people, and as having orality as its mode of intergenerational transmission and preservation. Today, however folk music has become codified in musical staffs, especially with the threat posed by the disappearance of oral tradition in many societies. Some newly composed folk songs have identifiable authors. However, there is an ongoing effort to maintain the historical, cultural and traditional character of folk music. As such, in so far as it recaptures the traditional sentiments of a group, it remains the property of the society. It is thus important to note that folk music is not merely aimed at entertainment but rather has cultural and epistemological functions. As argued by Slobin, folksingers aim at using their music “to raise children and keep family ties, to give voice to their beliefs, hopes, and identities, or to signal that they understand their place in society.”³⁴ In other words, music becomes a process of shaping the society, a means of behavioral formation. For instance, among the Igbo a particular form of music, rhythm and tune signals a particular kind of behavior. A woman who mourns the loss of a husband or a child has a peculiar way of grieving that sends the message across to other members of the society. Childbirths are also greeted by peculiar music and rhythms.

But beyond this is the intent to preserve the collective memory of a society. Social psychology maintains that one of the key elements in the formation of group identity is the collective memory, also referred to as social memory. Part of what holds a group together is the knowledge of a common history, one that is constantly enhanced and which every member of the group could claim as his or her own history. Social memory emerges out of progressive sameness and holds the past and present together. For the *London School of Economics* social

33 Mark Slobin, *Subculture Sounds. Micromusic of the West* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 41.

34 Mark Slobin, *Folk Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

psychologist, Sandra Jovchelovitch, “the workings of social memory allow communities both to retain a sense of continuity and permanence and a sense of historical development and change. The capacity to remember opens the future of communities by establishing links between the past and the present through the understanding and elaboration of what has been.”³⁵ Such a collective or reservoir of knowledge represents the “identity, culture and history of a group of people.”³⁶ Music, especially folk music, constitutes one of the expressions of the collective memory of a people, and as such has remained a means of ensuring continuity in the history of the people.³⁷ African scholar, John Miller Chernoff, further argues that,

African music is a cultural activity which reveals a group of people organizing and involving themselves with their own communal relationships—a participant-observer’s comment, so to speak, on the processes of living together. The aesthetic point of the exercise is not to reflect a reality which stands behind it but to ritualize a reality that is within it.³⁸

Music in this instance recaptures, therefore, an identity that is not locked away in the past, but a present self-understanding that builds from the past. In the case of the Igbo, for instance, the war experience and the post-civil war events, meant that the boom of oral tradition of historical narrativity as a way of preserving collective memory is threatened. Codifying the people’s history in folk music, sometimes in modernized versions (like Jude Nnam’s *Uwa Mmehi*) thus became a way of keeping the history alive. This does not mean that the pre-civil war Igbo society had no folk music, rather the content of the post-civil war folk music adapted the experience of the war and its effects in the collect memory. Perhaps it is important to note that the post-civil war folk music paid less attention to Igbo legends and myths. Narratives of Igbo history, and Igbo cultural values are the preoccupation of modern Igbo folk music. In the next section, I shall deepen the conversation around how music could help in reviving Igbo language and cultural identity.

35 Sandra Jovchelovitch, *Knowledge in Context: Representations, Community and Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 69.

36 Ibid., p. 89.

37 Slobin, *Folk Music*, p. 6.

38 John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), p. 36.

6 Language, Music and Identity: Deepening the Contextual Reflections

The task of safeguarding identity through local language expressed through music presupposes not only the relationship between language and identity, as already demonstrated above, but also requires an enquiry into the relationship between music and language. Music and language in this case are not only recognized as elements of cultural identity, but also as means through which we come to the knowledge of cultural identity. In investigation their relationship to one another, we are wont to ask: Are music and language completely unrelated, especially when the former is considered without lyrics? It is easy to conclude that, even without the lyrics, the melodious sound of Pericom's *Ekwe mgbadike* can never be confused with the terrific oratory of Major General Odumegwu Ojukwu during the civil war period. Yet music is a form of language with its set of rules and attribute of intelligibility.

Addressing the question of the relationship of music and language from a fundamental perspective, Erin McMullen and Jenny R. Saffran undertake a comparative investigation of the developmental phases of both forms of knowledge in infants. Their task was "to consider the learning processes facing infants as they are confronted with their native musical and linguistic systems," as well as to investigate "the extent to which the developmental trajectories of linguistic and musical skills may rest upon the same learning capacities, at least early in life."³⁹ The comparison is motivated by double concerns: a) on the environmentally-induced structure of music and language, according to which a great deal of epistemological claim could be made concerning their relationship, and b) the challenge created by the idea of 'modularity', which raises the question of whether there exists "a neural system underlying music that is either somewhat or entirely distinct from the neural system underlying language."⁴⁰ Claims to neural specialization has already been defended in cognitive sciences.⁴¹ However, McMullen and Saffran opine that the suggestion that modularity exists in adults does not answer the question of whether such neural specialization is purely ontogenetic or a product of experience. Hence, the need to re-examine such claims by attention from both an ontoge-

39 Erin McMullen and Jenny R. Saffran, "Music and Language: A Developmental Comparison," *Music Perception* 21, no. 3 (2004): 289–311; p. 289.

40 Ibid., p. 290.

41 Cf. Jerry Fodor, *Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); Isabelle Peretz and Max Coltheart, "Modularity of Music Processing," *Nature Neuroscience* 6, no. 7 (2003): 688–691.

netic and epistemological perspectives. Beyond the very segmental structure of music and language (in terms of phonemes and tones), both scholars examine the suprasegmental level of music and language in infants even in utero. They argue for the validity of fetal learning, that is, the claim that prenatal environment influences the learning of language and music in infants. This form of learning extends into the post-natal phase, and gradually modified by caregivers in a way that is attractive to infants.⁴² What this relationship suggests is that fetal learning also involves cultural learning to the extent that music and language are tied to cultural identity in utero. For the language and music which determine the structure of the fetal learning constitute the elements of the communal culture and identity in which the infant is born.

By inference, therefore, a similar relationship is established between Igbo language, music and identity, not just in the context of fetal learning but also in what it means to have an Igbo identity. Even in the acceptance of neural specialization, the identification of a particular genre of music as specifically Igbo, in terms of its tune and lyrics, confirms the identity factor in both forms of knowledge. Thus, any enrichment, renewal, improvement of Igbo music or language directly impacts positively on Igbo identity. Conversely, it is also important to consider the promotion of Igbo identity not only from the linguistic channel but also from music. While language serves as a means of expression and identification of Igbo music, music could also function as a channel for expressing the Igbo language, identity and culture. We find this not only in the example of folk music given above but also in non-traditional music genres such as Afrobeat, Gyration, Reggae and Rap. The massive explosion of Igbo Rap music in Nigeria today, championed not only by forebears like Mr. Raw (Okechukwu Ukeje), Slow Dog (Nnenna Okechukwu) and Illbliss (Tobechukwu Ejiofor), but also fresh acts like Zoro (Chimaobi Owoh), Phyno (Chibuzor Azubuike), Hype MC (Udensi Ukeje), and so on, has generated a growing interest in Igbo language among most Igbo and non-Igbo people. Such interest even when it is marginal (that is, limited to vocabularies deployed in such music) should never be overlooked. Contemporary Igbo Rap and Afrobeat have proved to be very powerful identity reference to the Igbo diaspora, especially the second and third generations, who are in some ways disconnected from the traditional Igbo cultural setting.

To illustrate further, Igbo contemporary singer, songwriter and performer, Chinedu Okoli, provides us with an example of the intersection between music, language, culture and identity. Chinedu, popularly known by his stage-name,

42 McMullen and Saffran, "Music and Language," p. 294.

Flavour, could be considered as a contemporary Igbo highlife musician, following in the line of first generation of Igbo highlife musicians such as Osita Osadebe, Oliver De Coque, Oriental Brothers (Dr. Sir Warrior Obinna), Prince Nico Mbarga, and so on. It must be noted that Highlife genre is not specifically Igbo but represents a fusion of both Western and African musical genres, popular in the West African countries of Nigeria and Ghana. Like most musical genres it remains fluid and continues to undergo transformation in resonance with generational shifts and yearnings.⁴³ Its popularity functions within globalized and intergenerational contexts to promote culture, identity and language. Despite sometimes portraying a deficient lyrical content, some of Flavour's tracks (including the videos) sufficiently capture the meeting point of cultural identity, music and language. One of Flavour's most famous and award-winning tracks, *Ada Ada*, which featured in the album *Blessed*, captures the beauty of Igbo traditional marriage in such an irresistible fashion.⁴⁴ While the graphic representation might be considered to be a little bit elitist, it however resonates with the average atmosphere of Igbo cultural setting, especially in a contemporary world. Today *Ada Ada*, both in lyrics, music, and visuals remains the best reference point to both the culturally and linguistically disconnected Igbo people and others who are interested in both the language and culture. Another significant track is *Golibe*,⁴⁵ which is crafted beautifully to recapture the traditional setting of Igbo oral tradition. Despite the asymmetry between the visual concept of 'moonlight tales' which would have fit into Mike Ejeagha's folklore, *Golibe*'s content tells the story of love and adulation of the beauty of a maiden, an Igbo Cinderella story, in a way. More so, the setting recaptures

43 For a detailed analysis of Highlife music and its socio-historical emergence and development, see: Austin Emielu, "The Concept of Change and Genre Development: A Case Study of Highlife Music," A paper presented at the *First International Conference on Analytical Approaches to World Music*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, U.S.A, 19–21 February, 2010, 1–26.

44 The album, *Blessed*, which was produced in 2013 was twice nominated for *Best Album of the Year* by Channel O Music Video Awards and The Headies, while the track, *Ada Ada* received multiple nominations and eventually won the 2014 *Best Video of the Year* (African Muzik Magazine Awards), 2014 *Video of the Year* (City People Entertainment Awards), 2013 *Best Use of Costumes*, *Best Indigenous Concept*, *Best Highlife Video*, *Video of the Year* (Nigeria Music Video Awards—NMVA). *Ada Ada* video currently has close to 43 million hits on YouTube. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lUFM8yTtUc> (accessed 9 December 2020).

45 *Golibe* was produced in 2014 and has over 40 million hits on YouTube today. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lUFM8yTtUc> (accessed 8 December 2020). The use of piano as well as the English phrases/words add to the blend of contemporary or specifically Western elements in the Igbo Highlife.

the sentiments of traditional royalty, of community, and humor. Apart from *Ada Ada* and *Golibe* are other very powerful examples, such as *Ijele* (Flavour ft. Zoro), *Igbo Amaka* (Ocha T.K and Handsome T), *Gbo Gan Gbom* (Flavour ft. Zoro), *Ogene* (Flavour ft. Zoro), etc. which are deliberately intent on reviving Igbo language, cultural practices and appraising Igbo identity. We find in these examples complex elements of *Ogene* (gong), *Oja* (local lyrical flute), *Mbem* (specialized hybrid art of song and speech) and *Ilu* (Igbo proverbs). One understudied effect of these efforts is the increasing interest and modernization of specifically traditional Igbo music like *Ogene* and *Oja*, popularized by the social media. Such indications of Igbo music renaissance cannot be overlooked but ought to be further promoted and encouraged as ways of sustaining the Igbo language and identity.

7 Conclusion

Language is an important element of identity and should be constantly revived and promoted, especially in its expression through the medium of music. Reasons for doing so may not only be tied to identity debates but could also be argued from the positive value of diversity in our society. The impending linguistic homogeneity that is evident in the increasing spread and influence of English language, as well as the gradual extinction of some local languages remain a threat to human flourishing. As argued so far, music remains one important way of preserving the local languages and cultures. More than preservation, music invariably becomes a tool for the learning of language, even when this may involve only a couple of vocabularies. As regards the Igbo language, it is thus important to appreciate this value of music and to promote purely Igbo or Igbo-infused music in all the genres. To capture the interest of the young generation, it is important that a) there is a wide acceptance of Igbo contemporary Afrobeat, b) that older forms of Igbo music be promoted and given some contemporary features, such as quality video remake, c) that old Igbo musical icons be celebrated and studied, artists like Promoter, Pericom, Mike Ejeagha, Osita Osadebe, and so, and d) that media, especially the social media be deployed effectively in promoting these initiatives. This applies not only to the Igbo but to every other language and culture, especially those that are facing the threat of extinction. Indeed, through music, the relationship between language and cultural identity could be further highlighted and explored.