

“GwoGwoGwoNgwo”: Mike Ejeagha, African Orature and the Enduring Relevance of Music as a Cultural and Literary Art Form

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Abstract: Mike Ejeagha is one of the unsung heroes of the Nigerian music of older generation. His music used traditional oral literature medium of folktales and songs to pass across critical messages that x-ray the human condition in an African-Nigerian setting. From the unique sound of his guitar to the sweet melody of his voice, Mike Ejeagha has made his mark in the Nigerian music industry.

Despite a music career that has lasted for several decades, it was not until recently that favor and fame smiled on the 92-year-old man. This paper examines the man, his music, oral literature, influence of social media, the indestructibility of music, and relevant lessons from the turnaround of events.

Keywords: Orature; Oral literature; Social media; Music, Oral Tradition; Enduring relevance; Epic tradition; Musicality; Igbo; Culture

Introduction

“We are fundamentally storytellers . . . Every society . . . has had a system of myths, a constellation of stories that provide a basic sense of meaning and context” __ (Adam Frank).

Orature is another name for oral literature. It is a form of literature and literary art sung, verbalized, spoken, and passed down from one generation to another to preserve critical cultural norms, values, and morals or disseminate information, among other reasons. Spoken words are the vehicle that drives home oral literature, and scholars have argued that just as speech precedes writing, oral literature existed before the documented written version. Orature is arguably the beginning of literary tradition as prehistoric societies expressed their worldviews and ideas using chant songs, rituals, folktales, and various art forms. From the *Anansetale* in Ghana to the Tortoise *deceptive motif* in Nigerian folklore, oral literature has shaped the African experience for generations and, by extension, sustained immortal themes that dwell on the human experience. Isidore Okpewho (1992) defined oral literature in this simple term, “literature delivered by word of mouth” (p. 3), and went a step further to state that oral literature “has turned out to be a very useful concept for those scholars interested in examining the cultural relationships between those who can read and write and those who cannot—or, in a more professional language, between orality and literacy” (p. 3). Spoken words are the critical distinction between oral literature and written literature, and I dare to argue that this distinction does not bother whether one is literate or illiterate.

Pegu (2020) added to the existing body of definitions by stating that “Oral Tradition is the cultural material transmitted orally from one generation to another by folktales, songs, proverbs or stories” (p. 3608). Societies have always existed based on the norms, values, traditions, and practices that define their existence, and literature, in whatever form it is presented—oral or written, focuses on the morals and lessons that define a people’s relationship with their society, nation, and the rest of the world. Further, Nandwa and Bukonya’s (1983) definition of oral literature demonstrates the sophisticated nature of the oral tradition thus, “oral literature may be defined as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination, and ingenious expression” (p. 1). Apparent from the above definition is the richness of the oral tradition—a quality that marks creativity, depth, and focus in addressing critical social issues and concerns with the goal of resolving tensions, sustaining peace, and extolling the ideas of brotherhood.

While the discourse on oral literature has appeared to be less prominent in recent decades, the rich values embedded in folk stories are beginning to gain attention, especially in this digital era of social media. To that end, social media could be a veritable avenue to continue nurturing, inspiring, producing, and promoting cultural arts in music, poetry, chants, dance, and performance arts. The next section will focus on the music and oral literature of Mike Ejeagha, with the hope that his music will help us to understand the influence of oral literature in Igbo land and the powerful influence he had recently gained from social media.

Music, Musicality, Orality and the Epic Tradition in Igbo Land

Oral literature, oral history, orature, or folklore has helped to shape Nigeria's culture, worldviews, and social conditioning. From pre-independent Nigeria to the colonial and postcolonial eras, Nigerians have for generations produced, transmitted, and consumed important cultural and social values that represent the people's reality. Given its pluralistic composition, multi-ethnic and diverse nature, Nigeria boasts of many traditions in material and non-material culture, including rich stories and performances that define its people.

Before the advent of Western education, Nigerians depended on traditional—communal practice to ensure their security, economy, governance, sustenance, and solidarity. Among the Igbos, from birth songs—*egwuomurunwa*, to religious ritual songs/dances, to war chants such as *Nzogbunzogbu Enyi mba Enyi*, to *Ikpirikpi Ogu* war dance, the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria have for generations asserted their voices in matters of rural, civic, regional, and national importance *via* the means of the oral tradition of literary expression. Although some of these songs may have waned over the years, they are still primarily sung and celebrated by many people today.

Of the various oral chant songs of the Igbos, Kenneth Omeje (2005) contended that *NzogbuNzogbu Enyi Mba Enyi* “is probably the most famous Igbo traditional war song. The song rallies the people’s solidarity and their collective sentiments against any adversarial forces and threats that must be urgently combated and vanquished. It is also a song that evokes the idiom of the presumed bravery and fighting prowess of the menfolk likened to the bulldozing power of elephants which rely on their extraordinary body mass to trample and crush their adversary. It is therefore an idiom of optimism and faith in the people's ability to defeat any adversary. Indeed, the *enyimbaenyi* spirit subsumes the rhetoric of assured victory in any such eventualities” (p. 630). This is little wonder why the song inspires hope, solidarity, and a “yes we can” type of spirit and attitude. Although Nigeria has so many producers of oral literature, I will be framing this piece using The Gentleman Mike Ejeagha as a case study of the power and pathos of the oral tradition in Nigeria and beyond.

Mike Ejeagha: A Brief Biography

The legendary Gentleman Mike Ejeagha as he is popularly called is a Nigerian musician of an older generation whose songs have endured the test of time and continue to resonate with both old and young people. If the materials consulted while researching this paper are accurate, Mike Ejeagha was born in August of 1932, in the present-day Enugu state, Nigeria. While contemplating the critical contributions of Mike Ejeagha to the Igbo culture and worldview, an article published in *Nigeria Notch* stated, “his lyrics are laced with proverbs; lending his music a didactic style. Iconic Mike Ejeagha taught Igbos contentment, selflessness, true spirit of brotherhood as epitomized in love, being our brothers keepers” (n.p.).

He is a master vocalist, guitarist, songwriter, soloist, folklorist, and musician, who used unique style of music garnished with enchanting tales laden with morals to pass across enduring messages that resonate with universal themes in literature. Growing up as a kid in the 1980s and 1990s, the sound of his guitar, tone of his voice, and the cadence of his accoutrements—which make up the musicality of Mike Ejeagha’s music, kept us glued to the radio set as our ears yearned to hear more of the sound and beats springing from him.

The stories that make up his music are timeless tales that reveal the internal and external conflicts people go through as they make decisions and navigate life amidst conflicting choices and options. His songs are so famous, daring, preposterous and philosophical that people developed a school of thought in Igbo land popularly known as *Akuko Mike Ejeagha*, which loosely translates as *the tales of Mike Ejeagha*. Whenever people use that expression, it was often in a perjorative manner because his stories do not make an immediate-superficial sense—you needed to follow the story, understand the plot before it could make a deeper sense. The theory of *Akuko Mike Ejeagha* is traceable to the deeply philosophical message that is often woven into his songs and music, which is difficult to decipher on first hearing, and which by the very nature of the tales, are quite long narratives that command both attention, patience, and wisdom to comprehend.

Mike Ejeagha’s “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” And Music of the Moment

The legendary Mike Ejeagha released several songs spanning over six decades without making substantial financial profit from his humble fame. He was quite popular in Eastern Nigeria, but his music labels could not fetch him wealth and an elevated financial status. At 92 years old, he is arguably in his twilight; age, ill-health, and poverty have taken their toll on him based on the several videos of him available on the internet. However, in a July 5, 2024 Instagram post, a Nigerian comedian and skit maker popularly known as Brain Jotter danced to the “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” sound of one of Mike Ejeagha’s song titled “Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche,” which he released in 1983. The “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” is the chorus of the song, and it is this singular sound of the chorus that makes that song unique—a uniqueness that was perhaps unnoticed for over four decades until Brain Jotter danced to its sound and rhythm in a now viral video. In an August 2, 2024, story

published in the *Punch* Newspaper online, Tunde Odesola observed that “Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche, became the 14th most searched song in the world because the song went viral when Brain Jotter created a funny dance step and used the song in his comic skit” (n.p.).

The song told the story of the king’s daughter (princess), in an animal kingdom, who refused all the suitors that came to her insisting that anyone that would marry her must bring an elephant which would serve as her mode of transportation and proof of wealth. In her defense, the princess stated that she did not want to be married and be walking or trekking about without the honor of been driven by an elephant; that was why she would not marry until a rich suitor comes with an elephant. As always, the tortoise is consistently a mischievous character in African folktales. The tortoise heard of the king’s daughter’s demand and tricked his friend, elephant to the king’s palace and handed the elephant to the king and by so doing, married the princess. The most important rhythm in the song is the “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” chorus—arhythmic sound or beat which means nothing on its own, rather only adds to the sound and musicality of the song. It was to this beat and sound the Brain Jotter danced and posted online and since then, it has sparked so much traffic on social media.

Adebiyi (2024) noted that “Since the video was posted on his Instagram on July 5, 2024, it has been viewed 29.1 million times with over 30,000 comments. On TikTok, it has been viewed 19.6 million times generating over 23,000 comments. The viral video has since sparked a trend on social media with thousands of users posting their videos with the song” (n.p), that number must have doubled as at the time of writing this article. After over forty years, Nigerians and people all over social media are coming back to appreciate the beautiful sounds from Mike Ejeagha. This comeback has renewed hope to the nonagerian, brought significant financial wealth to him, and made him more popular than when the song was released in 1983. The trending saga of “GwoGwoGwoNgwo,” public fascination to the song, and its social media popularity have brought hope, money, support, satisfaction, and arguably, more life to Mike Ejeagha and his family. This fact simply aligns with William Shakespeare’s assertion that nothing can outlive poetry, verse, and music, especially, when they are laden with didactic contents and critical values that sustain timeless themes and subject matters.

Enduring Relevance of Oral Tradition and Music in Literature and Society

To understand and appreciate the enduring relevance of oral literature, music, song, and poetry as a literary art form and cultural tradition, one is reminded of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55, published in 1609— “Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” In this sonnet Shakespeare affirmed the immortality of poetry (and music), arguing that poetry/verse/song/music has the capacity to last and outlive even the most beautiful and strongest of architectural edifices, including kingly structures built with marbles and stones. He argued that the memory of poetry/music shall stand and be read, remembered, and recited even when superb architectural structures suffer devastation and destruction. Drawing from the reference of the indestructibility of music, one is not much surprised that favor and fame decided to shine on the Gentleman Mike Ejeagha via his otherwise old song. He is 92 years as of the date of this publication, but the story of his famous “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” tune is just beginning and may well outlive him.

With the current wave of attraction and fascination that this music has garnered across social media, one is convinced to believe that this piece of orature will last a long time from now, sustaining the indestructibility of music/poetry as a literary art form. The trending “GwoGwoGwoNgwo” dance challenge which has been embraced by almost everyone in Nigeria, including Nigerian celebrities, TV personalities, politicians, musicians, actors, performers, and the public, is another wonder of the year 2024, as these media challenge has brought much fame, respect, influence, and financial blessings to the otherwise elderly Mike Ejeagha, a fame he never imagined when he produced the song nor has enjoyed since its release over forty years ago.

In a recent article published in Vanguard News by Benjamin Njoku, he observed that “since Brain Jotter’s adoption of the song, many lovers of old vibes have started using the track in the viral dance challenge, giving the nonagenarian highlife maestro a fresh start in his career. The dance challenge has been trending on social media, especially TikTok, garnering millions of views as netizens latched onto the viral “Onye Isi Oche”(n.p.). This is little wonder Mike Ejeagha was speechless and only cried when Brain Jotter and his team visited him in his country home. Tunde Odesola in a *Punch News* post profusely captured the recent turn of events in these words “Music is making Gentleman Ejeagha float on cottony clouds in the evening of his life, fulfilling the prayer of Everyman – to finish well in life; to not wear rags after donning coats of many colours, to not eat bone after eating choice meat” (n.p.).

Lessons from Mike Ejeagha’s Trending Music-Song and Concluding Thoughts

From the established fact that orature—poetry, music, song and verse outlive even the strongest of human architectural edifices and monuments, one is once again reminded of the theory of the indestructibility of art. Several lessons that could be derived from the saga of fame that embraced the legendary Mike Ejeagha at this

old age are almost inexhaustive. To conclude this piece, I will examine a couple of derivable lessons to further highlight the importance of music and the oral tradition in literature:

United by Sound—Mike Ejeagha’s trending song has brought laughter, joy, happiness, brotherhood, and a sense of fellow-feeling to most Nigerians this summer. All social media outlets and users from across Nigeria have embraced the song, which is now more popular than when it was sung and released in 1983. Despite Nigeria’s diversity, this song has helped to enliven, enlighten, and brighten the faces of Nigerians across social media and on the streets. Music has a harmonizing, unifying, and humanizing potential.

Embracing the Factors that Unite Us—We are united by our common and equal humanity—a sense of oneness, brotherhood, and innate appreciation of one another. While our values, upbringing, socialization, and experiences differ, music, like sports/football...has brought us together since the Brain Jotter’s skit went viral. The rhythm of the sound and its enchanting candor transcend cultural, regional, political, religious, and ideological divides. This is the true immutability of art, and we thank Mike Ejeagha for conceiving, composing, and communicating this classic song that has finally brought him to the world stage, albeit at a very old age.

Revisiting Classic Traditional Music—The song has sparked a wave of fresh love and admiration for classic Igbo traditional music. I think this song, at this time, is a good interjection to the music and art enjoyed by the Gen-Z generation. I call it an interjection because Nigeria’s social media space saw a surge of users of all generation embracing the song and its dance challenge—a critical and much-needed relief in this season of social and economic upheaval occasioned by hardship, inflation, insecurity, and the quest for survival. Even the Gen-Z and the iGeneration are enjoying this traditional classic music that celebrates the ingenious wit of the tortoise, the gullibility of the elephant, and the creative ingenuity of Mike Ejeagha.

Morals and Values—The song, “Ka Esi Lee Onye Isi Oche,” details the manipulative nature of the tortoise famously known for its tricky, deceptive, misleading, and mischievous tendencies in the animal kingdom. At the core of this classic song is Mike Ejeagha’s enduring message to his audience to avoid lies, manipulation, gullibility, and excessive demands for materialism. Many readers would pull several morals, values, and lessons from the characters, especially the tortoise, the elephant, and the princess who refused to marry except if a rich man comes with an elephant. The strength of this tale lies in the cultural values and lessons that readers of all ages can draw from and build upon as they continue to embrace a life of modesty, honor, trust, responsibility, and truth.

Dignity in Labor—After over four decades, the timeless maxim that hard work pays has proved to be true yet again. All through his music career, Mike Ejeagha worked tirelessly to build a name and a brand for himself. The “Akuko Mike Ejeagha” (tales told by Mike Ejeagha) is a brand and a philosophy that almost everyone from Igbo land could relate to. He was diligent in his career; did not give in to political pressure; sustained Igbo cultural values; transmitted the truth through his craft; and maintained a lifetime legacy of good music, good sound, and a good name. His is a proof of Paulo Coelho’s assertion, “when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” Mike Ejeagha’s hard work, devotion, and dignity in labor has paid off and it is time to celebrate him.

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