Philosophical Embodiments in Igbo Music: 
An Analysis of Mike Ejeagha’s “Popular” 
Folk Songs Style

Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna

Abstract
The omnipresence of music in the human society and its utilitarian stance in the human life make the study of its philosophical 
tilt a necessity. Although the functionality of music can be ascertained from a myriad of perspectives, it is in the textual 
content and performance practices of folk songs that the general world view of a people is exposed. Through contemplation, 
appreciation, and analytical approaches, this research report reveals some of the set ideas, views, opinions, beliefs, and norms 
of the Igbo about the cosmos, nature, and providence, embodied in the folk songs of Mike Ejeagha—a folkloric popular 
musician of that regional extraction.

Keywords
folk songs, interethnic pop music, textual content, igbo philosophy, symbolism, Mike Ejeagha

Introduction
Definitions of and about music abound, each favoring the angle(s) that would suit and support the objectives of the 
scholar. Angles such as aesthetic, emotive, symbolic, psychic, cathartic, cryptic, normative, perfunctory, and metaphysical have all been covered in manifold definitions of and about music; yet, a consideration of music as a mere sonic material presents music as the conscious and, at times, fortuitous combination of individual notes that appear successively (melody) or simultaneously (harmony), or even both. The foregoing is true whether the medium of music-making is vocal, instrumental, or vocal–instrumental.

Music-making, therefore, is a global practice, but what is arguable is that music is, solely, a human practice. The argument arises from expressions such as “music of the spheres,” “celestial music,” “music of the gods,” “music of the spirits,” “mating songs and dances of certain animals,” “songs of birds,” “musical cry of hounds,” and “musical murmur of brooks.” It is in support of renegotiating the musical soundscape that Schafer (1974) writes,

Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music:

Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe!

And the new musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!

There is a shattering corollary to this for all music educators.

For music educators are the custodians of the theory and practice of music.

And the whole nature of this theory and practice is now going to have to be completely reconsidered. (p. 2)

It is in this proposal for a renegotiation and complete reconsideration of the theory and practice of music that the present study of the philosophical angle of the folk songs of the Igbo finds fascination. This fascination stems from the fact that the folk music of the Igbo is a communion shared by the supernatural, the supra-terrestrial, the human, and the sub-human (Gracyk, 2008; Nzewi, 1980; Onwuegbuna, 2012). Umezinwa (2009) corroborates the foregoing as he informs,

Igbo music is more than mere music. To the owners and practitioners, it is a living force that yields to various forms of meanings and interpretations. It is just not one thing but many things viewed from a prism, which unifies all . . . At once, Igbo music becomes a philosophy, metaphysics. (p. 128)

Education of the Igbo child is, therefore, a sacred duty conducted through music—along with other media of transmission.

1University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author:
Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna, Department of Music, University of Nigeria, P.O. Box 3081, Nsukka, Enugu State, 410001, Nigeria.
Email: ikenna.onwuegbuna@unn.edu.ng
Folklore, mnemonics, jingles, slogans, memory enhancers, and other agencies of education are first encountered in music.

**Philosophy**

Conceptually, philosophy can be considered to be man’s critical approach to the acquisition and coordination of knowledge of his universe, using tools such as thought, logic, and transcendental means to demystify the so-called mysteries behind beingness, existence, reality, and nature. It also covers a set or system of ideas, opinions, beliefs, or principles of man’s behavior based on an overall understanding of his existence and the universe (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2013; Nwala, 2007; Nze, in Okolo, 1993; Oxford Talking Dictionary, 1998). Much as professional philosophers are in disagreement over a globally acceptable definition of philosophy, some definitions still carry their weight in the field of philosophical studies. One such definition is that of a foremost professor of philosophy, Nwala (2007), who argues, No definition of philosophy can be complete without taking into account the nature of the more traditional world views, the product of ancient sages and the critical mass reflections and nature of reality including the nature of world views. (p. 21)

Much as there are diverse views about the definition of philosophy, its regional application has never been as contestable as its interpretative and pedagogic approaches. This accounts for why we have medieval philosophy, Greek philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Western philosophy, African philosophy, and Igbo philosophy. It is the latter that is, indeed, the thrust of the current discourse.

Philosophy as it concerns the Igbo would, naturally, give insights into the Igbo general world view about the people, their religion, art, language, culture, morals, social organizations, belief patterns, divinity, time, matter, energy, space, and life generally; mostly in consonance with African philosophy—part and parcel of which the Igbo is (Nwala, 1985; Okafor & Emeka, 2004; Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi, & Egunu, 1999; Opata, 1998).

**Igbo Music**

The enterprising Igbo merchants of Southeastern Nigeria were known worldwide for their commerce and industry. Their ingenious transactions with Portuguese and British trade partners led to the establishment of international mercantile firms such as the United African Company, John Holt, P.Z., Miller Brothers, and Compagnie Française de l’Afrique de l’Ouest in Nigeria today. It is also to their credit that international markets in Onitsha, Aba, Nnewi, and Port Harcourt and many road networks, rail lines, airports, and seaports were constructed to favor access to commercial and industrial areas of Nigeria (Ozigbo, 1999).

Exotic in taste, lovers of innovation, and explorers of opportunity, Igbo merchants brought home fascinating items and practices of the various foreign cultures they had had contact with. Such items and practices included dress, language, music, religion, and manipulated ethnicity (Collins & Richards, 1982). The foundation for the development of the Nigerian first popular genre with national appeal was laid by the ubiquitous Igbo minstrels who combined elements of their entertainment music of igede, ifọ, nkwa, egwu-ume, egwu-amala, and so on, to form the initial neo-folk, native blues styles of dodokido and akuko n’egwu—the precursors of Nigerian Highlife (Okoro, 1993; Okafor, 2005; Onwuegbuna, 2011).

The musical proceeds of these culture contacts between the Igbo and her immediate and distant neighbors form a corner stone in the musical style of Mike Ejeagha, the subject of the current discourse. Akuko n’egwu, the folkloric popular musical style is one of the major proceeds of this culture contact, and it was Mike Ejeagha who popularized it. The major musical instruments that accompany the Ejeagha’s akuko n’egwu include the Western guitar, ichaka (beaded-gourd rattles), okpokolo (wooden claves), and igba (membrane drums).

The justification for locating Ejeagha’s Akuko N’Egwu within the matrix of Igbo cultural contact with her neighbors and foreigners is contained in the fact that urbanization and industrialization, the offshoots of 19th century global modernization, and territorial expansion for commercialization of the excess products of some rich and powerful European nations, led to the disruption of traditional attitudes and lifestyles of the African nations. Different ethnic groups migrated to the urban centers to form a stratified society based on socioeconomic status. This new social order differed widely from the traditional homogeneous ethnic settings. In expressing their musical artistry, these urban dwellers, drawn from different ethnic backgrounds, created a syncretic urban neo-folk music classified as Interethnic pop styles. In its unfolding as causes and effects in the time-space structure, the definitive peculiarities of this form include the use of foreign musical instruments, expressions, and recording technology. This moves the cultural practice beyond oral tradition to audio recording—what Goodman (2008) aptly captures as “From Village to Vinyl.” The foregoing is true about Ejeagha’s Akuko N’Egwu.

**Mike Ejeagha: The Musician**

Michael Nwachukwu Okolo Ejeagha (a.k.a.Gentleman Mike Ejeagha) was born in the month of August, 1932. He hails from Imezi-Owa, in the Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Upon completion of his primary school education in 1948, Ejeagha started learning how to play the acoustic guitar under the tutelage of Moses “Moscow” Aduba and Cyprian Uzochiawa—taking advantage of his proximity to these professional guitarists with whom he shared a common neighborhood at Coal Camp, in Enugu.
After his apprenticeship under the Paradise Hotel’s Rhythm Orchestra, in Enugu, Ejiegha’s professional career as a musician took off in the 1950s with his Mike Ejiegha and Merry-Makers Band. The band later transformed into the Premier Dance Band in the 1960s and has grown from strength to strength since then. So far, Ejiegha has more than 33 record albums and four singles—in the forms of vinyl, CDs, VCDs, and cassette tapes—to his credit (Nwagbo, 2009).

Ejiegha’s compositional rationalization bestrides the creative and methodological thoughts involved in composing most folk songs. These creative thoughts are determined and shaped by the society’s musical system, and influenced by the society’s folk musical thought and rules regarding inspiration and fantasy. What Ejiegha does, in line with the foregoing, therefore, is to rearrange some extant Igbo folk songs to suit his akụkọ n’egwu medium of presentation as well as accommodate the limitations of his choice of musical instruments for performance.

Mike Ejiegha: The Music, the Songs

With the definitions of music, folk (also traditional) music, and popular music already given in the foregoing exposé, it is equally necessary to look closely at the word song. A song is a musical experience, expression, or composition that involves the setting of text to melody for vocal performance. Such texts are often metrically composed verses, which account for why they readily lend themselves to melodic interpretations. They may or may not be accompanied by musical instruments. However, some of such songs are, at times, delivered through the medium of musical instruments. They are still identified as songs because they retain their text-driven melodic expressions (Apel, 1964; Oxford Talking Dictionary, 1998). The implication of the aforesaid is that there could be music without song, but all songs still remain music. However, the Igbo use the term egwu in a generic sense for various musical activities. They include music, song, dance, games, drama, festival, and banter. Hence, there are activities as follows:

1. Egwu Imo Awka — Imo Awka festival,
2. Egwu onwa — moonlight plays,
3. Egwu ekpili — ekpili music,
4. Egwu umuazi — children’s games,
5. Egwu okolojia — youthful banter, and
6. Egwu iyanga — graceful dance.

In the case of Mike Ejiegha, while his style of music—the akụkọ n’egwu—falls within the popular class, his songs are still redolent of the folk. The modal melodies, the countryside lyrical contents, and the close-knit intervallic ambience of his songs are evident features of the African folk tunes. Akụkọ n’egwu, the literal translation of which is “story in song,” is delivered in a vocal technique that employs an interchange of speaking and singing, couched in folkloric musical activities—a practice that is often linked with the griots, the folk poet–musician–historians of North and West African regions. These explain why Ejiegha is here referred to as the folkloric popular musician.

The Song Texts

**Song I: Omekagụ**

Opi m fugbuelum Omekagụ; Opi m fugbuelum Omekagụ
My horn, please, blow Omekagụ to death
Omekagụ lil’ ji Mmụọ; Omekagụ lil’ ede Mmụọ
Omekagụ ate the yam of the Spirit; Omekagụ ate the cocoyam of the Spirit
Ọbụ’ n’i fugbuelum Omekagụ, fugbuelum Omekagụ
If you could just blow Omekagụ to death, blow Omekagụ to death
Ka m wel’ ebini gwa yi aka
So I could sacrifice a ram in appreciation
Ọbụ’ n’i fugbuelum Omekagụ, fugbuelum Omekagụ
If you could just blow Omekagụ to death, blow Omekagụ to death
Ka m wel’ ebini gwa yi aka
So I could sacrifice a ram in appreciation
Ma gi jide ogu, jide ofo; Ma gi jide ogu, jideka ofo
But ensure you are just and fair; but ensure you are truly just and fair.
Oh ghuu, oh gho-oghoo; Oh ghuu, oh gho-oghoo!

A summary of the story behind this song goes as follows: The King, upon envisaging his imminent death from old age, assembled the elders and council of chiefs of his kingdom to introduce to them the heir apparent to the throne. But instead of presenting his first son, as the custom of the land stipulates, the King presented his younger son, named Omekagụ. His reason was that he loved Omekagụ better—whom he had often praised beyond the skies; thereby spoiling him. This unjust deprivation of the right of primogeniture of the first son was unacceptable to the elders and chiefs, who walked out on their King in disapproval. The King, adamently, paraded Omekagụ to his community on the appointed market day. It was as this parade progressed that his aggrieved first son picked up the magical horn he received from the Spirit land and sounded the quoted song. The result: The horn did as was implored, striking Omekagụ to death; the King and the entire community apologized to the first son; he reversed the song of his magical horn; Omekagụ resurrected; the rightful heir was reinstated; and peace and harmony were restored to the community.

Some of the symbols in the song include the following:

1. *Omekagụ*—the leopard brand (a name and an item of characterization),
2. *Opù*—musical horn (voice and power of the Spirits),
3. *Ofo na Ogu*—justice and fair-play,
4. *Ebini*—Ram (forbearance and resilience),
5. Eze—King (spiritual and temporal ruler, custodian of Omenani).
6. Ji na ede—Yam and cocoyam (totality of the agrarian economy of the Igbo).

**The philosophy therein.** The song, *Omekagu*, is Number 1 in the Omenani series by Mike Ejega. Omenani (also Omenana, Omenali, or Omenala) stipulates, assigns, interprets, and orders in totality, the norms and values of the Igbo (Ekwunife, 1997; Nwala, 1985; Opata, 1998; Ozigbo, 1999; Umeh, 1999). Looking at Omenani as what accords to the customs and traditions of the Igbo, Nwala (1985) writes,

*Omenala* includes major beliefs about the origin of the universe and its nature, the place of the spirits, deities, man and other beings in the universe, the nature or character of taboos, regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions as to what is proper in such a universe—rules of marriage, sexual intercourse, attitudes to strangers—and forms of social relationship, as well as the realm of simple decency and etiquette. Indeed, *Omenala* is a body of law and morals along with their metaphysical foundations. (p. 27)

Injustice is a negation of Omenani, and when it is done by the custodian of the Omenani himself, the Spirits of the land would wade in on the living to defend the offended. As long as the oppressed is on the side of justice and fair-play, he is always assured of the intercession of the Spirits. The facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about thelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the facelessness of both the king and his first son (none of whose names were given in the story) speaks volumes about the head of the land himself, the Spirits of the land (Ekwunife, 1997; Nwala, 1985; Opata, 1998; Ozigbo, 1999; Umeh, 1999). Looking at Omenani as what accords to the customs and traditions of the Igbo, Nwala (1985) writes,

Igbo realization (not belief) of the existence of that which is beyond the material, that which supports and modifies the material, that which is the ultimate basis for the phenomenon of life (Ndun) manifesting in matter, is expressed in the term Mmuo. When man puts off his material cocoon at what is called death (omwu), he continues to exist on the other side of existence in a life that is not cut off from relationships and mutual influences with the world of the bodily senses of those who are on this side. (p. 22)

To further justify his claim to fair-play, and therefore, his qualification to receive divine assistance, the oppressed had to inform that Omekagu lil’ ji Mmuo; Omekagu lil’ ede Mmuo (Omekagu ate the yam of the Spirit; Omekagu ate the cocoyam of the Spirit). It is mere foolhardiness for a mortal to pounce on the entire economic wealth of the Spirits—as equated to Omekagu’s crime against the land. This is a highly philosophical allusion, for, according to Nwala (1985), “In Igbo traditional society we find evidence of economic factors reciprocably interacting with religious and philosophical ideas” (p.176). And touching on gender-sensitive issues, while yam represents the entire economic wealth of the male, and cocoyam represents the entire economic wealth of the female Spirits, a distress call from an oppressed mortal, with this form of allusion, would surely put the Spirits on the double to help. And it did!

Most religious doctrines uphold the idea that divine utterance is heard as sound. In the Igbo cosmology, this sound is musical. Spirits speak to mortals via coded musical sounds, the meaning of which can only be deciphered by the Afia priests and the initiated. The nonlexical syllables (often, erroneously, termed nonsense vocables) are actually the coded language of the Spirits, and the onomatopoeic Oh gho, oh gho-oghoo is, in effect, the voice of the Spirits speaking through the medium of the magical horn that was “received” by the oppressed heir.

Ka m wel’ ebini gwa yi aka (So I could sacrifice a ram in appreciation) is a figurative expression that conveys the meaning, “So I could forbear and defeat my assailant without violence.” This underscores the Igbo’s belief in nonviolent resistance to evil and injustice. Rather than take the laws into his hands, the Igbo would seek divine intervention in matters of misunderstandings and disagreements. This philosophy is borne in the name Chinua (i.e., Chi n’alụ m ọgụ)—Let my personal God fight the fight for me.

The issue of postmortem among the Igbo is more spiritual than physiological. The cause of physical death of humans is often traced back to the Spirits, and not just the disease that may have ravaged only the body. This philosophy is expressed in the Igbo adage: A chọba isi ọchụ e jee n’ụzụ (literally, “If you want to trace the cause of the murder/man-slaughter, you go to the blacksmith”). The idea is that it was the blacksmith that manufactured the weapon with which the crime was committed. In the case of Omekagu, it was the consultation with the Afia priest that revealed that his sudden death was due to his connivance with his father, the King, to dispossess his elder brother, the rightful heir, of his right of primogeniture.

**Omekagu,** as the title of the song as well as the name of the protagonist, also stands as an item of imagery and characterization. Literally meaning “the leopard-brand,” Omekagu images a spoiled-brat who gloats about in a devil-may-care attitude. His destination is quite predictable: disaster, not minding that he may have the backing of the “High and Mighty.” The moral of this imagery is central to Igbo philosophy of childbearing and rearing. Humility is a virtue, and pride is a vice. For this reason, Ejega warns against otuto ntoghu na-egbu nwankita (the highly bloated praises that lead the dog to its untimely death).

In all, the Omekagu story-in-song (akuko n’egwu) has touched on the entire aspects of what Ekwunife (1997) calls the quinquagram of Igbo traditional religious cultural
values. They include life (ndu), offspring (omumu), wealth (aku na uba), peace (udo), and love (fiunanya). The death and resurrection of Omekagu provide insights into life as a supreme value in the Igbo nation. The presence and activities of the two sons (offspring) of the King can be easily seen as the hub upon which the whole story is built. The value of wealth (as typified in the throne) can also be appreciated by the conflicts that arose from dispossessing the rightful heir apparent to the throne. For the love of peace, the subjects boldly disagreed with their King, notwithstanding his power and might. Eventually, it was fraternal love that assuaged the pains of the offended prince, which led to his act of reversing his request of the Spirits.

Song 2: Nwa Bu Onyinye Chukwu

Obianuju eeh—eh ee! Obianuju eeh!
Talu nukwu afulu na be diya maka ifi nwa.
Suffered a great deal in her husband’s house due to childlessness.
Mana O mesili mba di ozo, wehe mma uma ọsaa.
But she latter remarried and begot seven children.
Ifele bu nke onye? Ifele bu nke di mbu.
Whose then is the shame? The shame is on the first husband.
Biko, a’achukwu ume gi na nwa bu onyinye Chukwu.
Please, do not sack your wife because, childbearing is the gift of God.

The story. Obianuju got married to a husband (di) who, soon afterward, started mounting pressures on her to give him offsprings. Under the pressurized situation, Obianuju could not conceive, and this caused the husband to lose his patience and resorted to maltreating her. This situation endured for a long time until Obianuju packed out of her husband’s house and remarried. It was in this latter marriage that she begot seven children, thereby leaving the former husband in shame and disrepute.

Some of the symbols in the song include,

1. Obianuju—one that arrives in time of abundance (a name and an item of characterization).
2. Di—husband (patience).
3. Nwa—offspring (succession, perpetuation of lineage, true-wealth).
4. Ọsaa—seven (fullness of a major cycle in Igbo numerology).

The philosophy therein. The entire story of Obianuju is fore-shadowed by irony. The irony of the name Obianuju (one that arrives in/with abundance of wealth) could not be deciphered by the husband, whose titular status is “patience” (di bu ndidi). In his impetuous temperament, he impeded and eventually chased away the potent true-wealth in his wife, Obianuju. The manifestation and realization of the full potentials of Obianuju had to wait until she found courage to quit her impatient husband and married a truly patient one (di bu ndidi). Part of Igbo philosophy is that one’s given name would fit and shield the one like a cloak, only when the one understands the full import of the name. Ejeagha, in line with this philosophy, sings Onye lie afa o si na nke ya kasị nna (When one benefits from the full imports of his name, he acclaims that his is the best).

The issue of the offsprings comes up again in this song. Nwa, as a great value symbolizing succession, perpetuation of family lineage, and true-wealth, is the central theme of this song. Uzo e ji nwa adighi echichi (the path that is cleared with offsprings is never terminated) is an Igbo adage that supports the philosophy of nwa among the Igbo. The absence of offsprings in Obianuju’s first marriage was responsible for her woes; the presence of offsprings in her second marriage restored her dignity. Mere (as cited in Ekwunife, 1997) agrees,

Traditionally children are highly valued. They have to continue the ancestral line in order to retain the family’s ownership of whatever property belongs to it. The reality of family extinction cannot be ducked where children are not forthcoming. Such a situation is socially abominable. On the part of any Igbo parents, having children wards off the anxiety of growing old and fear of loss of property to undeserving fellows. (p. 77)

Ịsaa (also asaa), which is the number “7,” is very important in Igbo numerology. It represents the fulness of a major cycle in the philosophy of the Igbo. Izu n’asaa (seven weeks), ọnwa n’asaa (seven months), mmili n’asaa (seven seas), and agu n’asaa (seven forests) are all Igbo expressions regarding space and time, and the asaa (or ọsaa) here underscores the centrality of the Number 7 in Igbo philosophy of numbers as symbols of reality. For instance, 1 month (28 days), which is made up of 7 weeks (1 week being 4 days) is calculated as 4 × 7 = 28; to travel to the Spirit land, the traveler has to cover seven seas and seven forests in his travel. This philosophy of fulness of cycle is inherent in Ejeagha’s story of Nwa Bu Onyinye Chukwu, woven around the character of Obianuju and her birth of seven children.

Song 3: Udegbunam

Ude . . . Udegbunam; ude ndịọma, Ude!
Ude . . . Udegbunam; fame of the good people, Ude!
Nnagị sị gị ejene ọzala g’agbue akwụ, Ude!
Your father asked you not to go to the wilderness to harvest palm fruit.
Nnagị sị gị ejene ọzala g’agbue akwụ, Ude!
Your mother asked you not to go to the wilderness to harvest palm fruit.
I kachie nti jebe.
In disobedience you went.
Malụkwa na mgba afulu ogu, mgba ndịmmụ.
Be aware that a wrestling match that turns into a fight is a fight against the Spirits.
Udegbunam, Ude!
The child that dares his parents (and, as a matter of fact, his elders) is regarded as one who is so callous as to challenge the Spirits to a bout. The counsel of elders is considered the wisdom of the ancestors, and a brash negation of their admonition often leads to adverse repercussions. A supporting adage says that what an elder sees from his humble stead under a tree, a child would climb the top of the tree without seeing anything.

Conclusion

The utilitarian and contingent functions of music—especially in Africa—put music in the center stage of therapy, worship, patriotism, social mobilization and control, enlightenment, commerce, transcendental supplication, national development, and philosophy. Music, when composed and performed with full complements of its cultural flavors, has a carry way of engaging the lives of its consumers in an intense emotional and mental absorption. Beyond the text, dance, drama, art, and poetry, Igbo folk songs also embody philosophies that are as personal to the musicians as they are universal to the contemplators. In aggregation, the Igbo folk songs embody various dimensions of philosophy with global relevance and appeal. Personal opinions held by individual artistes or groups form the bulk of the ideological stance of such musicians. These opinions could be philosophical, religious, spiritual, political, interpersonal relationships, and the total world view of the artistes, which are revealed in the lyrics (including determinate associations of instrumental melodies), personality image of the artistes, and their style of usage of polyglottism.

To benefit the most from these songs, the contemplator of the art would need to have a thorough knowledge of the language and culture of the Igbo. The job of accessing this artistic treasure would become easier when ethnomusicologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, and specialist scholars gather, articulate, and systematize the instructional value of the philosophy embodied in these songs, and introduce the philosophy therein. The child that dares his parents (and, as a matter of fact, his elders) is regarded as one who is so callous as to challenge the Spirits to a bout. The counsel of elders is considered the wisdom of the ancestors, and a brash negation of their admonition often leads to adverse repercussions. A supporting adage says that what an elder sees from his humble stead under a tree, a child would climb the top of the tree without seeing anything.

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Author Biography
*Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna* is a lecturer at the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He holds a Ph.D. in Music Pedagogy, Master of Arts in Ethnomusicology, Bachelor of Arts in Music, Diploma in Music Education, and National Diploma in Mass Communication. He is a many-sided creative artiste and a very gifted professional and academic musician with a special bias for studies in popular music and performance, music and multimedia, music and philosophy, and ethnomusicology.