

## Traditional Rhythmic Patterns: The Source of Creativity and Identity of Original Nigerian Art Music Compositions

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### Abstract

*The truism that African music lays emphasis to rhythm than harmony, tone and its color reveals that the creative input of African music making is essentially embedded on rhythmic considerations – the hallmark of its musical identity. This paper considers the compositional efforts of Nigerian late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century's art music composers in drawing rhythmic patterns or structures from its traditional music. Hence, the finding that the rhythmic creativity of such practice is the major factor that has placed diverse original African art music styles and genres (e.g. African pianism, drummistic-piano, native-air and African-vocalism etc.) as distinct and identifiable art music type across the globe. This research essentially depends on published art music compositions of some Nigerian-Igbo academic musicians. Thus, in order to identify and elucidate the rhythmic patterns and structures that are prompted by traditional rhythmic motifs, it studies, analyzes and discusses some compositions in the tendency. The outcomes of the research are significant and beneficial for theoretical analysis of African rhythms and further utilization of the identified rhythmic techniques by diverse African and non-African art music composers. This paper is not interested in establishing pedantic theories of African rhythms, so it goes direct in applied sense to demystify rhythm as the central tool for initiating creativity, Africanism and identity of contemporary Nigerian art music composition.*

**Keywords:** art music; composition; contemporary; creativity; identity; Nigeria/Africa; rhythm; traditional music

### Introduction

From ancient times, Africans have expressed its sonic-visual culture in unprecedented multi facets that integrate to holistic music or performance. These sonic-visual traits are seen and perceived from its tonality, harmony, vocalism, timbre, instrumentation, dance, mode of performance among others. And, *rhythm* serves as the creative *nucleus* or *cement* that binds them together. Consequently, of the entire musical elements with which traditional Africans have expressed its musical culture/heritage, their rhythmic ingenuity is the foremost element that transverses, appeals and attracts music audience and researchers/writers across the globe. This is simply because the art of rhythm in Africa is fascinating and it eludes the Europeans (and other worlds') rhythmic skills and considerations. Hence, the quintessence of rhythm in African music was long ago noted by Senghor in Chernoff (1979: 56) who confirms that, "Rhythm is the basis of all African art", and Jones (1959: 40) who points out that "Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans." Roger (2002: 391) corroborates the assertions, as he certifies that "Rhythm and percussion are highly emphasized in African music, reflecting the close link between music and dance. African music tends to feature complex polyrhythm; in which, several different rhythmic patterns are play simultaneously and repeated over and over, and each instrument goes its own rhythmic way."

Against this veracity, most pioneer African art music composers essentially indulged in composing works that characterized occidental rhythmic patterns/structures and other compositional idioms. By nationalism consideration, the practice earned them little or no identity in their immediate society and across the globe. In contemporary times (from late 20<sup>th</sup> century) however, some composers of the same took a 'U-turn' by imbibing nationalistic-composition approach, which introduced variety of original indigenous art music genres/styles. (See: Ogisi, 2008 and Onyeji, 2011).

And so, in referring to original Nigerian art music genres or styles, we hear and say *African pianism, drummistic-piano, native-air* and *African-vocalism* etc.





But he goes further to state that “the dance mode of drumming is by far the most frequently used. Drums used in this mode are accompanied by gongs or gongs and rattles...In this mode of drumming, single drums and idiophones may be used for playing the required dance rhythms.”

The above assertion is well entrenched in Onyeji’s art music compositions, where drum(s) rhythmic-tone patterns are captured in the left hand of the piano. Rhythms under this category enable him to initiate and stimulate gravity, balance and dance sentiments etc during the performance of his compositions.

According to him “the lower part of the piano simulates drum patterns similar to those found in a typical women’s dance group...” (Onyeji, 2005: 43)

The predominant rhythmic pulses he employs in reflecting melorhythm, gravity/balance and dance sentiments are motivated by any African drumming modes that are replicated. This is rhythmically achieved by the means of divisive, additive and dotted note pulses which fiercely doubles and/or alternates in octaves apart (above or below). The *drummistic* technique attempts to capture the melorhythmic attributes of a number of drummers in an ensemble under the control of a performer – the pianist. It also provides for delicate African melorhythmic contrast and emphasis on gravity of propelling rhythmic motion by cultivating the traditional African music drumming style, in which:

Attempts are made to provide for tone contrasts either by applying a suitable drumming technique which enables the drummer to achieve such tone contrasts on a single drum, or by assembling together drums of different pitches whose individual rhythms are so arranged as to enable these tone contrasts to be displayed. The fascination of what is commonly described as “cross rhythm” in African drumming lies in the fact that contrasts in the individual rhythms played by each drum are heightened by tone contrasts. (Nketia, 1958: 23)

The above assertions of African melorhythmic technique of drumming portray and encompass the melorhythmic creative instinct in the left hand side of the Onyeji’s piano accompaniments to most of his songs in this tendency. Generally, the effect of the *drummistic* rhythm patterns results to multilinear rhythm and rhythmic-counterpoint textures when played together with the *orientational* rhythmic pattern. These rhythmic techniques help to initiate dance sentiments and communal music-making scenario – where everyone shares in music-making. This is relatively simulated in art form as the resultant aural perception of the multilinear rhythms by a single player prompts the audience/listener to think/feel that each rhythmic line is played by a pianist among a group of pianists. This is a fascinating and inexplicable rhythmic technique that most contemporary composers who intend to simulate African rhythmic techniques in art form aspire to effect, blend and indoctrinate in their works.

Apart from the *orientational* and *drummistic rhythmic* techniques that Onyeji employed in establishing African rhythmic identity and passion, there are other instances where some varying characteristic rhythmic models of indigenous musical arts are utilized as the rhythmic basis of his compositions. For example his *Oga* (maidens’ musical-game) is essentially based on the varying characteristic rhythmic motifs of the maidens’ musical game – where rhythmic patterns generate from hand-clapping, foot stamping and body stamping. Hence from the foregoing, it is obvious that rhythm is the fundamental creative standard or backbone of Onyeji’s *African-vocalism* and *drummistic-piano* styles/genres and through the same, his works are identified.

### ***Rhythmic Technique in Choral (Native-Air) Compositions***

Generally *rhythm* in Igbo choral art music is employed in diverse pulses, which may prevail as divisive, additive, hemiola and hocket rhythmic patterns. At times, a couple of these rhythmic pulses and patterns are mixed simultaneously in horizontal and/or vertical sense. As a result, some of the common African rhythmic textures like polyrhythm, rhythmic-counterpoint, multilinear-rhythm and homo-rhythm etc usually emerge. The extension of these rhythmic patterns also yield the diverse structural forms we have in African choral music, which includes call-and response, hocket, variation, cyclic structures etc. Hence, contemporary composers of Igbo *native-air* (choral-anthem) essentially strives to replicate all the features in relation/emphasis to the rhythmic attributes of Igbo traditional music to the extent that the characteristic rhythms of some African musical instruments are vocally simulated in contemporary Igbo *native-air*. Even so, the most outstanding factor through which rhythm generates in Igbo *native-air* is the speech-rhythm attribute of words. And, that is why I think that the tonal-rhythmic attributes of African words remain the basic reason why African vocal art music composers find it difficult or impossible to adjust by composing typical African vocal works using English language that cannot to certain extent enable/suggest effective resultant African tonal-rhythmic patterns. Naturally, African languages/words endow and influence any typical African vocal music with basic rhythmic patterns.

Nketia (1975:180) notes that “phonological characteristics of speech – namely, rhythm and speech intonation correspond to analogous features of song as well. The relative durational values of the syllables of words are reflected in the rhythm of songs.” Ekwueme (2004: 186) states that “just as Igbo speech has tones, so does it have rhythm.” Likewise, Agu (1999: 50) agrees that “the relative durational values of syllables of the texts of African songs influence the rhythm of the music.”

These statements inform us that rhythm, tone and word correlate in African vocal music composition. Hence, indigenous vocal art music composers have applied the speech-rhythm endowment of its language in their compositions.

The approach is one of the primary factors that enabled agility and diverse intricate/dexterous rhythmic-patterns, meters and irregular phrases in *native-air* genres. In fact one can say that the rhythmic-patterns obtainable in Igbo vocal music for instance, are as multiple as the diverse rhythmic patterns of its words.

Dan Agu is among the prominent creative Igbo composers who intelligently harnessed speech-rhythm techniques in his vocal art music. Hence, we examine his choral (*native-air*) art music compositions. Ekwueme (2004: 241) stipulates some general rules arising from the speech-rhythm of Igbo tunes, thus:

- (a) When two successive syllables are sung to the same pitch, the second syllable generally has the longer duration.
- (b) When words or sections of words which would normally have two or more syllables are shortened into one, either by means of a diphthongal or triphthongal joining of different vowels, or by simple elision, the note sung to such resulting syllables has a relatively long duration.
- (c) When two syllables are on the same pitch, the elision generally occurs on the second, thereby combining the effects of ‘a’ and ‘b’ above.
- (d) Disyllabic spondee words share equal duration per syllable, especially when several of them come together.

Whether Dan Agu and other Igbo composers consciously or unconsciously apply the above speech-rhythm pulse theories/techniques/guidelines in their vocal music compositions is another matter altogether, but the veracities of it are seen applied accordingly and frequently in high percentage in their compositions. For example, in Agu, (1998), the piece No. 1, entitled *N’ihi na taa n’obodo Devid*, the *rule-a* can be seen executed in bar 8 (tenor solo), where *-hi na* is sung to the same note ‘B’ of which the second syllable *na* took the longer note duration – that is, crotchet as against the quaver note of its preceding syllable *-hi* etc. Example of the *rule-b* is located at bar 30 (soprano and alto), where elision occurred between *nile* and *elu* which resulted to *nil’e lu*. The syllabic-spot where the elision took place has the longest note duration – dotted-crotchet, while others are crotchets and quaver. The *rule-c* is seen all over the piece as the combination of the *rules a-b*; this is executed to all the prevailing *Onye’n zoputa* in the piece. The pitch of the syllables is essentially on the same note and the second syllable is elision. These allow the second syllable *-nye’n* to utilize the longest note duration, thereby fulfilling the *rule-c*. Generally in the work, disyllable words without elision are rhythmically treated freely with each syllable having the same note duration and that justifies the *rule-d*.

However, according to Agu (1999: 50), “In some cases, they [the above rules] are altered to allow for the use of particular sequences of rhythmic patterns.” Hence he skillfully deviates out of the rules where/when necessary. This paper recoils from asserting completely that speech-rhythm considerations should constrain relevant creative rhythmic adventures, which may arise out of contrast and musical reasoning. But as far as we seek to ascertain the element that elicits originality, identity and creativity in African vocal art music, I think it is fundamentally rhythmic-tonal considerations and influences of the words/texts of the music. As a composer and choir-director, I realized that Igbo vocal music compositions that project high percentage of indigenous speech-rhythm techniques with limited amount of superfluous and subjective rhythms win the admiration of the singers/performers and listeners.

### ***African Creative Rhythm in Uzoigwe’s Ukom***

*Ukom* is one of Joshua Uzoigwe’s compositions that were essentially written for the piano using the *African-pianism* technique that was initiated by Akin Euba and according to Omojola, (1995: 63) “*African-pianism* is a compositional approach through which the piano can be used to evoke the rhythmic, textual and formal characteristics of traditional African instrumental music.”

*Ukom* was originally entitled *Talking-drum* (see Uzoigwe, 1994: 180). It was derived from a traditional music ensemble of Mbaise people of Nigeria. The melo-rhythmic creative attribute of the *ukom* drum-row is what the composer replicated in art form. The meter of the piece is *twelve-eight* (that is, twelve quavers in a bar). It is accompanied with wood-block or slit-drum, which plays the aforementioned (fig.1) *orientational-rhythmic* pattern throughout the piece. Its essence is to guide, regulate and balance the creative rhythmic extremes of the piano. The composition is primarily based on rhythmic-tonal variations of four distinct melorhythmic themes.

The rhythmic-themes with its diverse prevailing variations are characterized by rhythmic-counterpoints and multilinear-rhythms. In other words, the *polyrhythmic* attribute of African music ensemble is what the composer simulated for an instrument – piano.

### Rhythmic theme 1



Fig. 3. *Ukom* melorhythmic theme 1

This rhythmic theme is in four-bars. It is subjected to diverse rhythmic variations in the right-hand side. Thus, the variations were developed through the application of some indigenous rhythmic techniques, which include cyclic, divisive, additive and hemiola techniques. In the left hand of the piano, the rhythmic technique is strictly the cyclic style, which allows the left hand in the piano to supply a steady background rhythm repeatedly while the creative rhythms in the right hand complement it. In the right hand, divisive rhythmic technique (which divides dotted-crotchet into three equal parts – *three quavers*) flourishes. Some of the outstanding bars where it featured are bar 12, 22, 26, 27 and 28 etc. Addictive technique (which is an unequal division of dotted-crotchet to *one-quaver+one-crotchet* or vice-versa) is employed at bar 9, 11, 16 etc. Hemiola technique (which sub-divides two-dotted-crotchets into three equal pulses – *three crotchets*) is employed, for example in bar 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 39, 40, etc. Generally, there are several cases where the mixture of two or three among the addictive, divisive and hemiola rhythmic pulses are simultaneously employed in horizontal and/or vertical sense in the same bar. For instance, bar 9, 16 & 18 etc. exhibit the mixture of the three pulses while bar 20 combines the divisive and hemiola techniques. All these rhythmic pulses are concurrently achieved in multilinear and counterpointal rhythmic techniques.

### Rhythmic theme 2



Fig. 4. *Ukom* melorhythmic theme 2

This rhythmic theme is essentially based on *hocket* rhythmic style – an instance where each hand (left and right) in the piano use divisive rhythm to queue-in alternating note of the other hand. Hocket rhythmic style prevails throughout the melorhythmic variations of the theme 2. Summarily, the rhythmic variations of themes 3 and 4 essentially employ the rhythmic pulses, patterns, structures and textures already discussed in the variations 1 and 2 above.

### *African Creative Rhythm in Ndubuisi's Folksong Arrangements*

The rhythmic styles of Okechukwu Ndubuisi (O'Ndu) are the foremost feature in his arrangement that can enable one to guess rightly some of his works without seeing his name as the composer/arranger. He so admired a couple of his rhythmic patterns to the extent that he nearly featured them in all his arrangements/compositions. The rhythms are of two types. He essentially applied a type in the right hand and the other in the left hand side of the piano accompaniment to his folksong arrangements. Base on harmonic sense, Njoku (1998: 244) refers to the left-hand rhythmic type as *Ndubuisi-bass*. But this paper in rhythmic sense refers to it as *Ndubuisi-rhythms*.

1. **The right-hand rhythm:** this rhythmic pattern combines the dotted-crotchet with its divisive pulses (three quavers). For instance, in most of O’Ndu’s works in compound-time, dotted-crotchet is sub-divided into three equal pulses (three-quavers). In the rhythmic structure, he allowed the dotted crotchet its full length while it is simultaneously counterpointed rhythmically with another line of three quavers.

This is concurrently taken care of in the right hand of the piano accompaniment and it induces aural effect of bilinear rhythmic texture. Thus:



Fig. 5. Ndubuisi right hand rhythmic pattern

2. **The left-hand rhythm:** here, the rhythmic pattern occupies the duration of two-dotted-crotchets. In the rhythmic structure, a dotted-minim is drone while divisive and additive rhythmic pulses counterpoint it. This is done simultaneously in the left hand of the piano and it also induces aural effect of bilinear rhythmic texture. Thus:



Fig. 6. Ndubuisi left hand rhythmic pattern

### Conclusion and Suggestion

Rhythm is a fundamental creative endowment in African music. The people of Africa ordinarily derive exclusive musical and artistic pleasure in it. Today the contemporary world strives to benefit from the art, skills and passions of African rhythm. This is due to the inexplicable and fascinating aesthetic, balance, metric, dance sentiment, dexterity and propelling gravity etc that African rhythm induces in music making. Obviously rhythm is the principal key to African art music identity but harnessing, propagating, standardizing, canonizing and indoctrinating its techniques and *spirit* in arts music composition practice and education is quite obscure and vague. Promising world glory awaits African (even non-African) art music composers who explore African rhythm in unprecedented traditional approach. This is because such composer/educationist must always stand out in the global art music composition/education scene. There are quite a lot remaining unknown about simulation of indigenous rhythmic patterns/elements in art music form. Hence, I join Onyeji (2005: 44) in suggesting that “there is need to emphasize that modern Nigerian art music should draw essential creative elements [rhythm] from various traditional musical arts found in various sub-areas of the country if not depend on them entirely. This is necessary if we must have a place in the global music scene.” He calls this approach *researched-composition*. Thus, the least that any contemporary African art music composer can do is to imbibe African rhythmic skills and techniques in art music form.

### Note

1. Acoustically, each octaves of the pianoforte is described with numbers – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 etc. For example, the notes within the ‘C’ below the ‘middle C’ up to the ‘B’ below the later are called C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3 and B3. Likewise, ‘4’ is for notes within the ‘middle C’ up to the ‘B’ above it. ‘5’ is for notes within the ‘C’ above the middle C’ up to the ‘B’ above it, and so on.

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