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## **Theory: A Basic Intellectual Tool for Study and Continuum of Traditional Musical Arts in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:**

*Quite often the reliability of theory as a tool for study and continuum of traditional musical arts in Nigeria is questioned among the academic musicians and professional – popular, traditional etc. musicians. It is true that theory is distinct from actual practice, because it is usually based on assumption. But beyond that, theory also presents acceptable principles, techniques and rules of procedure that apply to a phenomenon or subject. It is useful as a device to analyse, predict or explain the nature of a specified set of phenomena. It is a basic intellectual tool that aids the teaching, study and understanding of traditional musical arts in Nigeria. It serves as basic intermediary between the field (practical) and abstract (research/classroom) study of traditional musical arts. For the traditional musical arts in the field context to receive scholarly and/or classroom attention, fundamental theories are required, because theories tell us where we were, where we are and where we are heading to. It is also through theory that basic ideology and norms behind a specific music is exposed and without it, there can be no systematic study of music in the intellectual arena. On this backdrop, the prime objective of this paper is to examine the relevance and the extent theory has presented the study of traditional musical arts to the academics. Hence, some major perspectives in which theory drawn from traditional musical arts contributed to academic music is x-rayed in order to ascertain the worth, benefits and place of theoretical method/approach in the contemporary study and continuum practices of traditional musical arts in Nigeria. The result of this is relevant to the academic musicians and researchers of traditional musical arts.*

**Keywords:** *theory; intellectual; musical arts; research; continuum; Nigeria*

### **1. Introduction**

In the academics, many methods and study-tools are necessary in studying, explaining and applying/adapting any issue or phenomenon and one of such is *theory*. Even though that at times the application/effectiveness of *theory* in real practice when compared to pragmatic approach is questioned, the truth remains that the same enables logical study/understanding and analysis of any pragmatic issue. In musical inquiries for instance, *theory* is an approach used by researchers/writers to examine and present the pragmatic context and content of a particular musical art (or personal ideas/abstract thought on a particular type of music,) which may involve its characteristic elements and procedures. These are usually exposed in logical sequence for clear understanding and further utilisation and developments of any music under consideration. Besides, *theory* is one of the most important factors that place musical studies in the academics and thereby making it a study-able course in the tertiary institutions. Perhaps, without it musical studies may have been in vocational arenas.

- **Theory** is expressed in so many senses in human endeavour. As such, its definitions are diverse. Some of them are, *theory* as: a body of rules, ideas, principles and techniques that applies to a subject; abstract thought or contemplation; idea formed by speculation or an idea/belief about something arrived at through speculation or conjecture; hypothesis or a set of circumstances or principles that need investigation or a tentative explanation for a phenomenon, used as a basis for further investigation; scientific or intellectual principles to explain phenomena; a set of facts, prepositions, or principles analysed in their relation to one another and to explain phenomena.
- **Intellectual** refers to thought process that relates to or involves the mental processes of abstract thinking and reasoning as opposed to the emotions. Otherwise, it is the ability to have a highly developed ability to think, reason, and understand, especially in combination with wide knowledge. In the formal sense, it connotes the academics and its allies.
- **Traditional Musical Arts** is a term that attempts to anchor all the traditional performance arts facets (like music, poetry, drama, dance and costume etc.) as one. This is because in the creative thinking and performance practices of African people, the traditional musical arts allies are hardly separated, even though each has distinctive feature with unique theoretical or descriptive terms in every culture. Thus, “The musical arts is a composite thought system that was created and experienced in holistic terms as integration of music, dance, metaphysical/mythical/social drama and the symbolic/significant costumes.” (Nzewi, 2005:1)

In integrating the above explanations – of *theory* and *intellectual* to the study of traditional musical arts, their relationship stir up the suggestion that *theory* is the offshoot of intellectual ideas and findings that serves as medium in teaching, discussing, analysing, explaining, and thereby intellectualising any traditional musical arts. Consequently, this research identifies two relevant approaches of *theory* in the study, teaching, utilisation and continuum of traditional musical arts in Nigeria; these are (1) *derived* or *realistic* theory and (2) *continuum/variety* or *suggested* theory. The former are those theories that researchers of Nigerian musical arts enact or apply by depending entirely on the practitioners' practical procedures and result of a given traditional musical arts. Otherwise it arises or drawn from pragmatic inquiries. The later does not depend entirely on the practical procedures but in order to advance, create variety, contemporise, refashion, and adapt etc. a traditional musical art, the researcher adds some personal ideas/assumptions for others to consider or accept.

## 2. The Nature of Theory in Nigerian Traditional Musical Arts

It is only those who do not understand the norms, philosophy, organisations/formations and practices of African traditional musical arts that assume that there is absence of theoretical rationale in its practices. Even though theoretical approach seems silent in it because its *theory* is essentially derived from the totality of its cultural philosophies, and invoked in the practitioners' sonic and psychological performance thoughts, which is usually acquired through apprenticeship, socialisation or participation – couple with the fact that *theory* is usually embedded and applied directly in its musical practices in oral tradition; there abound theoretical considerations that guide any traditional music making in Africa. Therefore whatever reason, value, rule, philosophy, psychology, belief, that guides the crafting and the performance allies of any Nigerian musical art is its theory. Written or not. You can call it *oral-musical-art-theory*. The peculiar nature of *theory* in traditional musical arts of Nigeria is what prompts Nzewi, (2005: 4) to assert that

Human as well as contextual intentions inform the theoretical premise that frames creative logic in any African musical arts style and type. The creative theory of indigenous music is thus humanly oriented... The musicological features as well as the instrumentation are sonic translations/transformations of other humanly and community ideas, structures and relationships that are in themselves not musical. Generally the musical arts idioms, ensemble rationalisations and performance norms aim to humanise the individual and bond humanity

By implication what the silent existence of *theory* in traditional musical arts entails to the academics is that, in attempt to study, understand, adapt, teach, harness or draw knowledge from any traditional musical arts, its theories (perhaps as applied by its practitioners) must be of paramount consideration to the researcher. In that,

Any truly African literary musician of any modern musical specialisation who does not approach his or her thoughts on and practice of, such a disciplinary specialisation from essentially original local research perspectives is irrelevant to the advancement of African music studies and practices. This position recommends that the modern African literary musicians needs to derive the philosophical directions and creative rationalisations which give him or her credibility primary from material riches of the traditional sources. (Nzewi, 1999: 204)

Good enough, contemporary Nigerian academic musicians are already committed in pursuing the above approach and objective. They indulged in making inquiries/researches from the practitioners of traditional musical arts and go back to the academic context to utilize the theories and results got in their diverse personal ways. Consequently, continuums of such traditional musical arts emerge. Hence, as this discourse progresses, the major ways in which musical arts theories have been harnessed and exemplified in Nigerian contexts of academic music will be exposed.

## 3. The Utilitarian Relevance of Musical Arts Theory in Nigerian Academics

In diverse perspectives, traditional musical arts have been the inspirational source for contemporary African music theory, cultural variety, emancipator and quintessence of the peoples' musical nationalism/identity. This is made possible through the utilitarian mechanisms of its traditional musical arts theory. In the academics, such theories are felt as facilitator of academic discussions and teachings and inspirer of original Nigerian art music compositions and analysis of the same etc.

## 4. Nigerian Musical-Art Theory and Academic Discussion/Teaching

Music researchers (especially those in the area of ethnomusicology) in Nigeria have overtime, indulged in researching and analysing data got from the traditional musical arts arena. They usually arrive at the *derived* or *realistic* theoretical approach. Because, while in the field, the researchers inclined themselves to the practitioners/custodians of any musical art under study and depended on them for the processes and theories that guided them in all aspects of the musical art. Most times these theories anchor on tonality and tonal structures, vocalisation technique, sonic and performance interpretations, rhythms and metrics, ornaments, harmony, dancers' rhythm/techniques, instrumental resources and its application techniques, dramatic features, costume, signs and signalling medium/technique (otherwise known as *conductor* in an ensemble), audience participation, aesthetical values and norms etc. of a musical art. The ethnomusicological information and theories on researched/studied musical arts have been a veritable source of knowledge/inspiration in discussing, teaching and understanding of any researched musical arts. In this respect, let us consider the Uzoigwe (1998) research of *ukom* music of Mbaise people of the Eastern Igbo (Nigeria). In the published thesis, theories that anchor on performance context, creative principles, instrumental scale structure, drum-text and drum-sound of *ukom* music were well detailed, such that even (academic musicians) who are not from the *ukom* region and have never viewed the musical performance can now understand and discuss *ukom* music by depending on the published theories obtained directly from the practitioners. Hence the book – *ukom* enables the music and its theories into contemporary intellectual arenas. Also, indigenous/nationalistic musical genres and terminologies are beneficial elements inherent from the theories. For instance, *ukom* (traditional music genre), *ilulu nkwa*, (song proverbs) *ogbe nkwa*, (song preludes), *ihu nkwa* (the main songs),

*abigbo* (Igbo pun/song), *aria nkwa* (drumrow), *Onye Agugu nkwa* (Singer of music), *Onye Ikwukwe nkwa* (Responder of music), *Onye ebelu* (*ebelu* player), *Onye ekere* (*ekere* player), *oke nkwa/olu* (male drum/voice), *nne nkwa/olu* (female drum/voice), *ikwukwe/nnata nkwa/olu* (answering/receiving drums/voices), *agugu nkwa/olu* (singing drums/voices) etc. are important terminologies/words in discussing *ukom* music (Uzoigwe, 1998: 4-11; 47-48). These terminologies are very fundamental in analysing not just *ukom* music but any indigenous (Igbo) music that possesses any such feature(s).

Chukwu (2011a; 2011b) demonstrates some contemporary theories and pragmatic approaches for learning and playing the *igba* (Igbo/African membrane drum). The data for establishing the theories are essentially derived from his personal experiences as a drummer in diverse Igbo musical arts. During the '2012 Pan African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE)' West African conference at the University of Benin (Nigeria), Chukwu gave a lecture on African membrane drum notation and playing techniques. The theories in the book served as the lecture study/discussion guide. The significance of the book is essentially the verity that most of the theories and techniques elucidated the practical reality of drum playing as applied in diverse African traditional musical arts. And so, the theories are not foreign. We live with it in the natural sense, it is not obscured to us and it is our musical heritage/identity. This supports the fact that theories for discussing, teaching and learning of African traditional musical instrument in the intellectual arena must first of all require researchers or theorists to fall back to the practitioners of the traditional musical arts and draw from them the pragmatic theories of playing Nigerian musical instruments. This does not only allow enhancement of musical identity but also cultural and artistic continuum. Of which, the idea of continuum in African art music according to Onyeji, (2011: 13) is

To establish a creative link between the written art music and the traditional music that inspired it. It means distinctive exploration of the creative idioms of African traditional music for the composition of art music that, although rooted in African traditional music, employs the tools of art music and communicates in the universal language for the expression of music as a literary art.

This assertion suggests that the *continuum* or *suggested* theoretical approach is an invaluable method of achieving original African music that adapts the universal means of expression (e.g. staff, sol-fa notations etc.) in the bid to situate African-Nigerian musical features in the literary sense – in this case, for global audience.

### 5. Simulating Local Musical-Art Theories for Nigerian Original Art Music Composition

From diverse research work, (such as Onyeji, 2011: 8; Ogisi, 2008 etc.) it is evident that Nigerian pioneer art music composers deliberately indulged in composing music that depicts the Occidental musical traditions in its totality; as such they essentially favoured the Western music theory in their musical studies, compositions and performances. Thus,

A large part of the creative output of the first generation of African art music composers was in the European-Viennese classical tradition, even when some attempted grafting folk melodies to their works. The immediate motivation then was to satisfy the Western audience and to show their ability to compete, favourably in the Western musical art. (Onyeji 2011: 8)

However, the dawn of cultural realisation brought about the fusion of Nigerian musical elements to those of the Western world and subsequently, the total utilisation of the former with intangible application of the later emerged. Hence the new generation composers realise that composing art music that truly represent Nigeria musical identity demands making inquiry (by way of research) into Nigerian musical arts by examining, exposing and utilising its musical features and theories. Consequently, diverse compositional method and practice emerged from this exercise. And so, that referred to as *research-composition* is one of the Nigerian compositional schools of thought that utilises *theory* derived from indigenous musical arts. According to Onyeji in Ukpong (2005: 105),

*Research-composition* is an approach to composition in which in-depth ethno musicological research on indigenous music of a given culture informs the creative and compositional theory of modern art music composition. It is a composition process that enables a composer to produce modern African music of any length or magnitude by the study and application of creative elements and idioms from any identified African musical type or tradition.

From this perspective, let us consider the utilitarian relevance of *theory* drawn from indigenous musical arts to contemporary art music compositions. Hence, among the diverse significant contemporary ideas on utilisation of indigenous musical elements and theories, we will focus on some selected theories by examining and reviewing them in order to ascertain their relevance in the academics.

First, let us explore the compositional theories of Onyeji (2004 and 2005a), which is based on theoretical issues relating to simulation of *tonal-rhythmic and vocalism* elements of Igbo (Nigerian) musical arts into art (academic) music.

Onyeji (2005a: 29) informs us that he “developed a tradition of original solo art songs that draw from the totality of Nigeria/African traditional musical arts and vocal idioms for its creative expression.” He referred to this as *African Vocalism*. He asserts that in such songs, some simulations of the ‘four-part’ polyphony resulting from the interplay of the four layers are evidence. The *layer theory*, which he referred to as: (a) the phrasing referent (creative stimulation pattern) layer; (b) instrumental layer; (c) vocal layer; and (d) dance layer, were derived base on the creative and interpretative features of traditional Igbo music performance. In his compositions of such, the *layer theory* projects continuum of creative and interpretative features drawn from indigenous musical arts.

In compositional application, the *theory of phrasing referent layer* is essentially projected for the piano, such that it captures the metronome properties and rhythmic modes, (say that of the *ogene* or *okpokolo*) in any Igbo traditional music in consideration. But then, with the constant playing of the single melo-rhythmic note pattern, diverse creative sequences for the other layers (instrumental, vocal and dance layers) emerged and unfold. The overall texture/effect is whatever you consider typical African rhythms in terms of its characteristic multi-rhythmic textures. Onyeji (2005a: 31) describes the theory of *phrasing referent layer* as

A layer that consists of a single melo-rhythmic pattern that is repeated, as in Igbo traditional music. This pattern [he said, gives him] creative stimulation for the sequencing of surging musical motions of the instrumental, vocal and dance layers. Quite often this is simulated for the piano in a way it captures the monotone sound in the traditional music transformed... Continuous playing of this pattern in the right hand of the piano for the unfolding instrumental and vocal layers results to rhythmic counterpoint, multilinear rhythmic organisation and polyphonic textures that characterise the songs. Although played continuously, it gradually fades to the background as the instrumental and vocal layers begin to feature in the musical time and space (context). This is similar to the practice in Igbo traditional music.

The compositional application of the *theory of instrumental layer* is essentially captured with the piano (basically in the left hand). Here the diverse characteristic drumming patterns of any Igbo music in consideration is replicated. The theory of drumming style is what Onyeji (2004) referred to as 'drummistic piano.' In essence, the *instrumental layer* "evoke[s] inherent instrumental features of Igbo music such as polyrhythm, ostinato patterns, principle of continuous internal variation, element of communal performance, drum text simulations, multilinear rhythmic ordering, etc." Onyeji (2005a: 31)

The *theory of vocal layer* strives at articulating and utilising (in the voice part) any notable vocal quality, effects, ornamentation, idioms and norms that are evident in African traditional vocal techniques, especially those of the Igbo (Nigeria). These include ululation, shouts, glissando/gliding, foot-stamping, hand-clapping, yodelling, heaving, body-stamping rhythm, nasal and deep-throat voice etc. According to him, "the ultimate goal is to capture the totality of the idioms and creative features without necessarily transcribing and arranging the folk music." Onyeji (2005a: 31)

The *theory of dance layer* is inherent from the totality of such works as it simulates element of dance – a cultural theatrical element of African traditional musical arts where the social meaning of performance is the integration of music and its societal philosophical and psychological allies. In that a soloist sings, *plays the instrument* (in the sense that the totality of a performer's vocal and body-rhythmic expressions simulate instrumental elements), and dance to it at the same time, which results to multi-rhythms that suggest communal performance.

Secondly, let us examine the theory of *form and structure* pattern derived from indigenous (*ukom*) musical arts by inquiring into Uzoigwe's (1994 and 1998) theoretical perspectives.

Uzoigwe established relevant theories on *forms* and *structure* drawn from some indigenous music, of which the most notable of them is that of *ukom* music. He (1994: 157) rightly stated that "traditional forms and techniques in African music can serve as guiding factors in composing contemporary art music that captures, in essence, the African spirit."

It is a well-known fact that African music are epitomised in form of call-response and solo-chorus refrain pattern. However, in order to execute: musical contrast, syllabic/textual irregularity, words tonal verity, prolongation of the length of the music etc. the *variation forms* occur within the formal structures. In essence the practice allows for more rhythmic/tonal elongation of *shorter-forms*/theme and eliminates the monotonous tendency of the *short-forms*. Thus, Uzoigwe (1994: 157) asserted that these two principles (call-response and solo-chorus refrain) are important tools for constructing three types of formal structures he called *perpetual variation*, *short-song variation* and *extended variation*. The *theory of perpetual variation* according to him refers to the: Mutation and elaboration of a group of musical themes; as such the call-response technique serves as the most adequate means of permutation of an uninterrupted chain of varied musical ideas. In tradition, this type of variation is usually associated with a performance-composition [this connotes music created during performance by the master singer or the master drummer in an ensemble.] The call section is in the form of either a single-line melody, and the response section is in the form of either a chordal pattern (if an instrumental piece) or a shorter single-line phrase (if a vocal piece). And the performance by a soloist follows the character of a speech-song, which Igbo musicians refer to as *ilu* or *ilulu nkwa* (musical proverbs) (Uzoigwe, 1994: 157).

The totality of the technique of *perpetual variation* form, in essence boils down to the principles of extemporisation with a great deal of tonal-rhythmic differences and alterations.

*Theory of short-song variation* represents very short structural length that normally lacks much development in the use of varied tonal-rhythmic elements.

*Theory of extended variation* is of two kinds, it states that: one is based on the formal structures of the *perpetual variation*, and the other is essentially a chain of the *short-song* variation type.

Now, the question is, can these theoretical ideas (of phrasing referent, instrumental, vocal and dance layers and all its sub-theories as evident in Onyeji, [2004 and 2005a] and of *forms* and *structure* drawn from some indigenous music [*ukom*] as evident in Uzoigwe, [1994 and 1998] perspectives and lots of other Nigerian compositional theories) actually educate, inform, guide and enhance other academic composers towards effective discussion, analysis and composition of work of such resemblance? Yes! But then, there must be evidence of individual creative attributes in the content of the work, especially when the individual adapts these theories with a traditional music of another ethnic group serving as source from which the musical elements are drawn. This is because "art as a creative practice is bound to have different approaches and the artistes are also bound to see things differently." Adedeji (2006: 254)

By and large, the verity that the creative procedures and knowledge of such nationalistic art music is shared/transferred from the originator or custodians to others via the theoretical tool supports my assertion that *theory* is an intellectual tool through which academic musical ideas, creativity, techniques, analysis etc. and rules of procedure that applies to a particular music is exposed in the academics for pragmatic utility – an approach to achieving similar results and advancement.

## 6. Theory and Music Analysis

It is noted earlier that *theory* is a basic tool for music analysis. So this section seeks to examine if the Onyeji's *layer theories* will be effective in analysing one of his works in the *layer* tendency. The analysis will help us to determine the importance/relevance of *theory* as academic tool that enhances logical (analytical) exposure of any art music composition.

The work is entitled *Hi-yom*, (see Onyeji's *Nka Emume* 2008). It is for solo voice and piano, written in F major tonality and in time 12/8. For the sake of space, this paper considers the piece from bar 60 to the end. Thus:

The *phrasing referent layer* is projected in the right hand of the piano score. Hence, I strongly deduce that the (*phrasing referent layer*) in the piece replicates the piercing timbre and monotone rhythm/sound of the *ogene* (metal bell) or *okpokolo* (woodblock). The unmistakable (basic) metronome rhythm of *ogene* or *okpokolo* in most music ensemble of Igbo people is well entrenched in the piece by combining two principal notes (C5 with A5) at the interval of major 6<sup>th</sup>. Even when the pattern mutates to 'F4 with D5' at bar 65, the primary sequence and rhythm of the original *phrasing referent layer* was not forfeited. It is important to infer that the two notes ('C5 with A5' or 'F4 with D5') which formed the pattern of the layer at different levels are so applied to strengthen the rhythm, in the sense that the note combination enables the layer to carry the weight of the desired intensity of the instrumental timbre replicated.

The *instrumental layer* appeared in the left hand of the piano score in similar rhythm. The elements of *ekwe* (slitdrum) or *igba* (membrane drum) timbre and rhythm were replicated in *octave-alternation* techniques at the lower octaves of the piano. The essence of applying the lower octaves is to enhance the resemblance of the robust sound of the *ekwe* or *igba*.

The *vocal layer* is the totality of the vocal part of the piece. It adapts any vocal and body-rhythms techniques prevalent in traditional musical art performance. Some of which appeared in the piece in form of effects and ornamentation etc., for example *mbrrrrrr*, which is produced by 'fast rolling of tongue and lips to pitch' as presented at bar 61 and 65. At bar 67, the *small line* above the C5 notes stands for 'hand clap'. The same bar (67) also featured *ululation* technique, which is notated with a horizontal-zigzag line. There is a glissando at bar 66 represented with a zigzag line extending downward from F4 to A3 – as indefinite pitch. Stamping of foot is featured in bar 67 on the notes marked 'V'. All of these features are traditional musical-arts traits and theories simulated in art music form.

The *dance layer* is a performance outcome that manifests from the entire layers; however the *vocal layer* is more involved in projecting the *dance layer*. Therefore, it is ideal to infer that all the activity of the soloist or the *vocal layer* projects and stimulates inherent dance motives that enable a performer to be more active in the performance. In essence, this layer is an attempt to cultivate communal spirit in the piece, even though it is a solo piece – a performer is expected to carry out all the (*communal*) activities simultaneously.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendation

The relevance of *theory* in intellectual arena have been discussed and demonstrated with reference to its application in academic discussion and teaching, composition of original Nigerian art music and analysis of the same. However, there are many other areas/aspects in academic music where theories drawn from indigenous musical arts practices are primary in musical intellectualism and nationalism. Some of these areas are music performance allies and its techniques, music technology, popular music, therapeutic music, rhythm, harmony, melody and so on.

But then, the aspects used here in discussing the relevance of *theory* in the academics is worthy enough to convince us that *theory* is what gives rise to research and development. This is because it creates avenue for further questions (like 'how?' etc.) and spurs researchers to field or laboratory investigation of any assumption. Results from such investigation do not only serve as scholarly tool for further investigations, teaching/transfer of knowledge etc. but it also benefit humanity in terms of development. Therefore the major ladder of development/invention in the world mostly spans from assumption into research into knowledge into development/invention and utility. So *theory* is the bedrock of scholarly knowledge and development.

Hence, *researched-theories* from Nigerian musical arts (typified as *derived theory* and *continuum theory* in this paper) are important educational and developmental factor that is developing, promoting and providing Nigerian art music a distinct identity across the globe. This is because continuum musical ideas/theory generates from indigenous musical arts in the areas of

nationalistic creative composition, performance, music education, music technology and intellectual discussions etc. In all, *theory* helps to point-out problems, evolutions and prospects of a researched Nigerian musical art.

So, following the Ibekwe (2011: 123) assertion that “African music by its nature and content is, and will for a long time remain a primary intellectual resource vineyard for ideas and humanistic directions in world musical creativity as well as the currently under-explored humanistic applications of music”, this paper recommends the upholding of indigenous musical art *theory* and its utility in the context of scholarly study/work.

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