# Thematic Extemporization - A Compositional Exploration of Mike Ejeagha's *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo*

Benedict AGBO<sup>1</sup> & Felicia Ezeugwu<sup>2</sup>\*

1.Department of Music, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
2.Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
Email: ¹benedict.agbo@unn.edu.ng, ²felicia.ezeugwu@unn.edu.ng (\*Corresponding Author).

### Abstract

The popularization of Mike Ejeagha's long-released song titled "Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo" in recent times has opened up new vistas of compositional research interests among Nigerian musicians and musicologists from variant perspectives. The song's catchy rhythm and engaging lyrics, spiced with comic folklore, radiate a unique centripetal force of attraction among many performers and consumers. Nigerian TV journalist Rufai Oseni's influential platform on Arise Television helped to throw this work into the mainstream media consciousness, prompting many dance clubs as well as politico-social gatherings to romanticize with it as a brilliant artifact of cultural enthusiasm and intellectual engagement. Using a research-compositional method, this paper capitalizes and draws on the theme of political deceit in the song, mining the extant melodic and harmonic resources in it to generate a political satire and discourse that is both consistent with and contemporaneous to the present-day Nigerian situation.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Thematic Extemporization, Political Deceit, Orature, Percussive Vocalisation.

### INTRODUCTION

There is, arguably, a rise in folkloric musical appreciation in Nigeria. Danlami<sup>1</sup> Baba supports this view citing Mike Ejeagha's song and the repopularization of Theresa Onuoha's song by Phyno and Flavor<sup>2</sup> into the Nigerian music industry in recent times as solid empirical examples of this renaissance. More specifically, Adebowale Adeogun<sup>3</sup> provides an insight stating that the major patronizers of modern folkloric music in the social media are Yahoo Boys who have the money to sponsor popular music performances and recordings. From these developments have emerged today, Nigerian audiences with a palpable sense of candor and ardor for folk music without perhaps an equivalent degree of ethnomusicological interest. For better or worse, we have come to witness a media upsurge of interest creating a knowledge gap for both composers, music entrepreneurs and musicologists in general who may wish to navigate the waters.

That said, we cannot but underscore Youssue N' Dour's recent experience of being booed off the stage during a performance because his fans were not looking for the kind of high technology African Music he thought they wanted. "They were rather looking for low technology music because they were trying to resolve a problem in their music psychology, that is, seeking folkloric authenticity". (Ngobili, 2024: 133). Today, Nigeria's social media space is awash with folkloric genres such as *Egwuogene*, *Udubunch*, to mention but a few. But the recent explosion of Mike Ejeagha's music is foregrounded on the sudden popularization of the *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* dance style.

Michael Nwachukwu Okobo Ejeagha (a.k.a Gentleman Mike Ejeagha) was born in August 1932 and hails from Imezi Owa in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. He learnt how to play the acoustic guitar under the tutelage of Moses Aduba (popularly known as Moscow) and Cyprain Uzochiawa. He performed with Paradise Hotel's Rhythm Orchestra in Enugu and the Merry Maker's Band in the 1960s and through their mentorship grew into a very professional musician. He has more than 33 record albums where he rearranged some extant Igbo folk songs to suit his Akuko n'egwu (which literally means story in song). The major instruments that accompanied Ejeagha's Akuko n'egwu include the Western guitar, ichaka (beaded gourd rattles), okpokolo (wooden calves) and igba (membrane drums). In a very unique way he was able to repackage the extant folk songs of his people (Igbo) to suit his Akuko n'egwu medium of presentation as well as accompany his singing artistry with the above mentioned instruments (Onwuegbuna, 2016). Akuko n'egwu 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 - music - historians of North and West African regions. These explain why Ejeagha's works come under the genre of "folkloric pop music" (Ugorji, 2024: 3).

Rufai Oseni, co - anchor of Morning Show on Arise News Television, once presented a very compelling analysis of Nigeria's socio - political dynamics drawing some parallelism between the *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* dance craze and the pervasive political deception that has long plagued the nation. This dance style, involving the twisting of the waist, raising of one leg and the comical pursuit of oneself has become trendy. Hitherto, Mike Ejeagha had released several songs spanning over 6 decades and was quite popular in Eastern Nigeria without making substantial financial profit until July 5 2024 when a Nigerian comedian and skit maker, popularly known as Brain Jotter, in an Instagram post, danced to a *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* sound of one of Mike Ejeagha's song titled *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche*<sup>4</sup> which he released in 1983. This is the chorus of the song that Brain Jotter danced to its sound and rhythm in a video that finally went very viral. 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. The song has sparked "a fresh love and admiration among the Gen - Z generation who are enjoying this traditional classical music that celebrates the ingenious wit of the tortoise, the gullibility of the elephant and the creative ingenuity of Mike Ejeagha" (Akanwa, 2024: 27).

Synopsis of the story: *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* literarily means how the Chairman was deceived. The tortoise told his friend the elephant that the King has asked him (the elephant) to be the Chairman in his *Ofala* ceremony. This lie was occasioned by Adaeze's (Adaeze is the daughter of the king) request that whoever will marry her must bring a life elephant. The tortoise therefore went ahead to deceive and convince the elephant not only to escort him to the King's palace but to carry him on his back with a rope tied to his shoulders. As they got close to the king's Palace, the Tortoise raised his voice and sang:

Nnam eze akpatam enyi, Nnam eze akpatam enyi.

(My King I have brought the Elephant)

Nwa mbe isi na ikpata onye, Nwa mbe isi na ikpata onye?.

(Small Tortoise who did you say you have brought? The Elephant queried)

Asim ana ya chebe enyi dube enyi, odikam si na akpatam enyi.

(I said let the earth protect and guide the Elephant. Did I say I have brought the Elephant?)

Okwa enyi ga abu isi oche, okwa enyi ga abu isi oche.

(Is it not the Elephant that will be the chairman?)

Enyi na aga anyi so gi na azu

gwo gwo gwo ngwo

(Elephant continue to go we are behind you, gwo gwo gwo ngwo).

From the foregoing, this paper sets out to explore the musical and extra musical possibilities arising from this composition and hazards a kind of thematic extemporization beyond the composer's own imagination.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of folkloric renaissance in the Nigerian music industry has become quite interestingly topical. This concept revolves around orality and epic tradition. Orature is arguably the beginning of literary tradition as prehistoric societies expressed their ideologies and worldview through chant songs, rituals, folklore and various art forms. Scholars are getting interested in examining the cultural relationships between orality and literacy; that is, between those who cannot read and write and those who can. Akanwa (2024) argues that while oral literature is growing less prominent in Nigeria, folk songs and stories are beginning to gain attention especially in this digital age of social media. Virtually all the ethnic groups in Nigeria have a rich repository of material and non-material culture; rich stories and performances that define these ethnic groups. Among the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria for example, we have birth songs, lullaby (egwu omuru nwa) and religious ritual songs/dances such as the *Omabe* music of Nsukka people of Enugu State. We have songs and music of social entertainment such as Atilogwu dance of Enugu, Ikorodo dance of Nsukka, Akunechenyi dance of Anambra and Ahawfiawar dance of Abia State. Philosophical insights into the Igbo worldview, about their religion, art, language, culture, moral, social organization and belief patterns have continued to grow (Nwala, 1985 in Onwuegbuna, 2015). Unsurprisingly, Mike Ejeagha's Akuko n'egwu has become one of the strongest apparatchiks of this propagation.

Although folk music has a general ethnic mood, Nzewi (1980: 8) contends that "there is a traditional recognition of accomplished exponents; the raconteur, soloist singer, master instrumentalist, dancer...the witty extemporiser". As such, Mike Ejeagha has emerged amidst many other agents of this cultural renaissance to affirm what Austin Emielu calls a "theory of reverse identity" - something that is obtainable when individuals intentionally adopt identities that are inconsistent with the regular norms or expectations of a particular society or group (Emielu, 2018 cited in Ngobili, 2024: 125). Ejeagha's *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* is one example of his use of folkloric metaphor and such characterizations as the tortoise and elephant to depict social deviance, insincerity and greed.

From this development, Ofuani (2024) argues that,

Composers have achieved "creative nationalism" through the modernistic repositioning of indigenous folk songs and the sociocultural norms/values and philosophies thereby imbuing aboriginal songs with contemporaneous idioms and globally accessible means towards asserting Nigerian Art Music identity. This is actualized in several ways such as adaptation of folk songs to modern art music

fashion such as arranging them for solo voice or SATB Chorus in fusion with Western musical elements. These repositioned or arranged folk songs often inspire indigenous stimulus even though they are interculturally recreated (Ofuani, 2024: 104).

Through the compositional processes of transcription, arrangement, orchestration, and so on, these folk songs are made to take a new form. Emielu reveals that what is happening in Nigeria, Ghana and other African nations with this new trajectory of musical change is first of all the shock of colonialism which compelled people to imitate a foreign culture particularly because it was fascinating to them or perhaps because they were compelled by circumstances to do so. Social media and the digital age provides the fecund ground for this cultural imitation. Both the cultural and cultivation theory in agreement with other neo - Marxist ideologies argue that the more people are exposed to the mass media, the more they will come to believe that the real world is like the one they observe (Obasi & Aondover 2023). Emielu calls this evolutionary process a period of "progressive indigenization" and "progressive traditionalism". He identified 2 significant processes of development: indigenisation and syncretisation. The former is a process of return to folk music while the latter is a reconstruction of style metamorphosing into new forms (Emielu, 2011: 375). This theory of social reconstructionism represents exactly the concerns of this paper on thematic extemporization.

# **Thematic Extemporization**

Thematic analysis is a process of identification of themes and interpretation of patterns in a data set which often leads to new perspectives, insights and understanding. As a rule of thumb, providing researchers with a comprehensive and nuanced approach to thematic analysis in qualitative research entails processes such as transcription, selection of key words, coding of data, development of themes, interpretation of keywords and development of a conceptual model (Naem and others, 2023). Accordingly, Rufai Oseni, co - anchor of Morning Show on Arise News Television was the first to offer a compelling thematic analysis of Mike Ejeagha's *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* in connection to the socio - political dynamics of Nigeria after which, Dr Ugorji Okechukwu unpacked a deeper argument which I have chosen to describe in this paper as a thematic extemporization. Says Okechukwu: "I don't know what he had in mind when he told such a story, but as iridescent as that story is, it shone in my mind with a lesson that made me shed tears. The lie the politicians tell us during campaigns is comparable to the lie the tortoise told the elephant" (Okechukwu, Jolibalive news, 2024).

In what follows however, Okechukwu argues differently from Rufai and contends that the judiciary is the ultimate authority that confers electoral victory. But in the scenario of the story, the king embodies a combination of the Executive and the Judiciary. Going by the chorus: *Enyi na - aga na anyi so gi n'azu* (Proceed elephant we are following you), he argues quite reasonably, that the elephant can't be the same people who are following him. On the contrary, he proposes that the politician is the elephant in this power game of Nigerian politics since every politician gets told the same lie by some people, including the clergy (that he/she is the best candidate on whose mandate they stand). He therefore presents the tortoise as the main protagonist in the story who strategizes and conceptualizes how to "deliver" the elephant (the politician) to victory or to a loss. In this scenario, he argues quite ingeniously that the tortoise is the journalists/gentlemen of the press, political consultants, the clergy, etc who are the purveyors of truth and falsehood (deception) in this macabre contest for power - the contest for the King's daughter - the contest for power in the so - called Nigerian democracy.

To be clear, Okechukwu states that the people is represented in the story by the crowd which includes the story teller and the story creator. He argues that the cheering of the elephant by the people is conditioned on whether the dance steps of the elephant (politician) is in sync with the interests of the people. Where the dance steps are totally selfish, as was the case in the folk tale, the elephant suffers the kind of fate we see in the story. Okechukwu claims that the tortoise - here represented by journalists (the gentlemen of the press), like lawyers in every case, tend to smile to the bank regardless of who wins. This is a unique extemporization of the theme and structure of this story which is clearly beyond the composer's original intent and conceptualization.

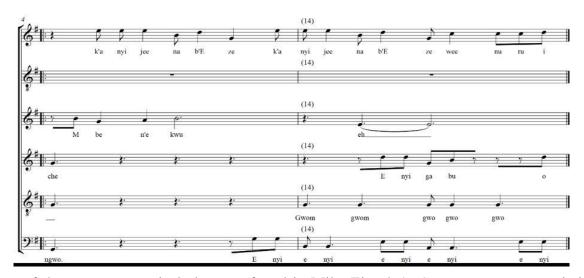
Akanwa (2024) corroborates this position of Okechukwu stating that "Mike Ejeagha's songs are so famous, daring, preposterous and philosophical that people developed a school of thought in Igboland popularly known as *Akuko Mike Ejeagha* - the tales of Mike Ejeagha - often in a perjorative manner because 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". This deeper understanding is what this paper perceives as Thematic Extemporization. Akanwa argues that the strength of this tale lies in the cultural values and lessons which readers of all ages can draw from and build upon as they continue to embrace a life of modesty, honour, trust, respect and truth (Akanwa, 2024). As such, political satirism is not intended by the author but has been extemporized. Other dimensions of musical extemporization such as movement from the call and response minstrelsy style to the SATB Choral style are also ingeniously deployed in this paper.

# **Musical Analysis**

The focus of this paper is on the music and so does not allow one the leisure of space for serious textual and stylistic analysis. Yet, no serious musical analysis can ensue without a deep understanding of the use of language. Nwokoye (2018) refers to the term 'text' as any instance of language in any medium that makes sense to someone who knows the language since language functions in context. Song's 3 major functions of language are ideational, interpersonal and textual (Song, 2009: 117). All the 3 meta functions interact in a huge system network in every literary work. This is why stylistic analysis is important since the smallest detail of language can unlock the "soul" of a literary work (Nwokoye, 2018). Onwuegbuna (2015) speaking about Mike Ejeagha's songs states that the modal melodies, the country - side lyrical contents and close - knitted intervallic ambience of his songs are evident features of African folk tunes in general. Permit me however to tarry on a few analytical details as follows:

(i) Percussive Vocalisation and ostinato techniques; My arrangement of Mike Ejeagha's *Gwo gwo gwo* begins with a florid use of percussive vocalisation and ostinato techniques. Nwankwo (2015) explains the use of percussive vocalisation and ostinato techniques as major characteristics of the Nsukka Youth Choral School (NCS) championed by Christian Onyeji. And more specifically, Onyeji (2015, 2016) is of the opinion that NCS is characterized by its "adaptation of performance techniques from indigenous vocal and instrumental ensembles and the synthesis of idioms and performance behavior and dynamics of such ensemble in a composition of a choral piece of Music or a section of it" (Onyeji & Onyeji, 2015). The work begins with an ostinato bass line at bars 10 to 14. This is followed by a percussive vocalisation of one of the beautiful rhythmic movements from Mike Ejeagha's original guitar accompaniment framework expressed in both the soprano and alto voice. Fig.1 presents this style as shown below:

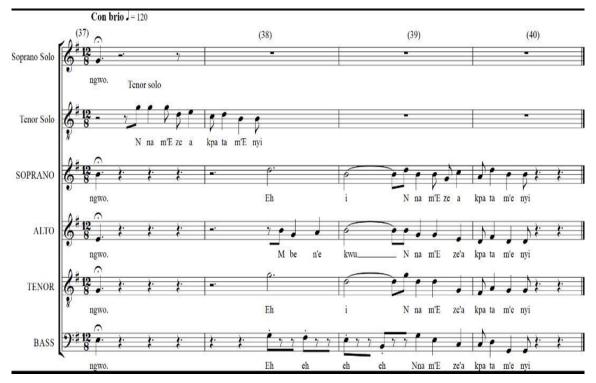




One of the strongest musical elements found in Mike Ejeagha's *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* is its rhythmic bite. Uzochukwu (1981) affirms rhythm as one of the strongest elements of oral poetry. The rhythmic motif below is arresting. See fig. 2 below:



- (ii) Repetition: Repetition is the periodic recurrence of some sort of movement (Nwokoye & Oraegbunam, 2018). See the original music from Mike Ejeagha already cited.
- (ii) Call and Response Style: This is one of the most common compositional forms and styles used in African Music. It is well employed throughout the piece. In bars 37 to 40 the call comes from the Tenor soloist while the rest of the parts join in the response. See Fig. 3 below:



- (iv) Creative imagery: Mike Ejeagha's art is crafted with an abundance of imagery ranging from the use of metaphors, irony and onomatopoeia. An example is the use of the phrase *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* to capture the feeling of deceit both in sound and meaning.
- (v) Thematic Extemporization: In this paper I have tried to go beyond the composer's original intent by applying deceit to the realm of politics and the fluid claims of democracy by the Nigerian politicians. In fig. 4 below democracy is likened to the elephant where the tyranny of number and claims of power being given to the people remain in Nigeria only a mirage:



(vi) Modulations and use of sequence: Beyond the composer's original work, I embarked on a number of uses of sequence and modulations in order to create a strong climatic episode and emphasis at *Okwa Enyi ga abu Isi Oche*?

The composition is intentionally brought to its climax with the question: *Okwa Enyi ga abu Isi Oche* (Will the Elephant be the Chairman)? just to emphasize the thematic extemporization through use of compositional devices such as repetition techniques and the onomatopeic rendition of *hei!* with a glissando music style. See fig. 5 below:



(vii) Use of chromaticism: I have again applied the use of chromaticism in highlighting the leitmotif of deceit at *awuwo ndi ochichi akaria*. Here the use of diminished chords, neapolitan 6th chords and major - minor borrowing are employed at bars 61 to 64 for the sake of emphasis and creating of tension. See fig. 6 below:



The entire composition could be divided into 4 parts: ABCD with the A section beginning from bars 1 to bar 37 consisting of the polyphonic introductory section led by the bass ostinato. The B section begins with the Tenor soloist's call at bar 37 and ends at bar 49 before the modulation. Section C begins at bar 50 with a homophonic modulation of all the parts to the A minor and C minor and ends at bar 61 with the glissando shout of *hei!* Section D begins at bar 62 and ends at bar 68 with the *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* danced chorus.

## **Critical Evaluation**

The folk musician is an ubiquitous social organizer. Nzewi (1980) ascribes to folk music the power to supervise the operations of established governments and effect useful changes in the machinery of government, maintaining law and order, safeguarding tradition and morals, promoting justice and social equity. For Nzewi, "folk music crowns rulers, welcomes birth, buries the dead, enforces public health programmes, generally organizes and enlivens all purposes of community get together " (p. 15). Accordingly, composers and arrangers of folk music are encouraged in the business of social reconstruction and moral renaissance. This is in agreement with Ofuani's earlier mentioned position that composers can bring creative nationalism through the "modernistic repositioning of indigenous folk songs to modern art music fashion" (Ofuani, 2024: 104). However, this noble vision has been blurred by the recent explosion in popular music of a number of music albums that lack sound moral and socio political message. Obasi and Aondover argues that today's value is being influenced by "market demand" and they suggest that organizers of African Music awards should not place emphasis

on economic gains but "the music's unique value to the society" (Obasi & Aondover, 2023: 57). They have observed that a cultural war is going on in the music industry today and affirms Nzewi's earlier position on the importance of socio - musical symbolisms, that is, "social actions emanating from this social chain which will add new meanings to the music, most times beyond the original intention of its creators" (Nzewi, 1980: 381).

To this end, one must carefully note a number of changes in the development of the music industry. Okorie observes that "the media has critically evolved, adapting new trends, digital platforms and storytelling formats" (Okorie, 2024: 10). Modern composers should therefore readjust to the challenges of social reconstructionism revisiting the folk songs that bear deeper meanings and applying modern compositional tools to reconvey their autochthonous meanings in a contemporaneous context. This study contributes to understanding cultural dynamics emphasizing the need for music producers and composers to adapt to "evolving audience preferences and embrace digital innovations to sustain viewer interest" (Nelson, 2024: 2). This saves many modern composers from the danger of non-recognition which has been the fate of many composers of old. Ejeagha at 92 has escaped from this old trajectory through the digital innovations of just a few destiny helpers. For a full view of the performance of this composition<sup>5</sup>, see link below. To see the full score<sup>6</sup>, also see link below.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper, employing the research compositional method, has explored the satirical theme of political deceit in the reinvisioning of Mike Ejeagha's *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* even beyond the composer's original intent. Through the use of SATB Choral compositional style, this author has brought the work from the primitive folkloric texture to a modern choral form admirable to a wider audience. This claim, though epistemologically subjective and historically relative, can be affirmed as musicologically authentic. Passing through the significant processes of indigenization and syncretisation as Emielu (cited in Ngobili 2024) has earlier argued, Mike Ejeagha's *Gwo gwo gwo Ngwo* has taken a new look, wearing a new garb of choral finesse while retaining the vestiges of traditional folkloric integrity.

## **Footnotes**

- 1) Danlami Baba, Interview with author, 10 March 2025, Nsukka.
- 2) https://youtu.be/lzhnih2QYS4?si=1sGiPwPwUUJkUS7a
- 3) Adebowale Adeogun, Interview with author, 10 March 2025, Nsukka.
- 4) https://soundwela.net/music/high-life/mike-ejeagha-gwo-gwo-gwo-ngwo/#google\_vignette
- 5) https://youtu.be/kHjB6lchXX0?si=APSMLb-xCivEfKb7
- 6) https://musescore.com/user/97801903/scores/23946403/s/kNC6FS?share=copy\_link

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