

# The Green Perspective of the Sociocultural Tapestry of Igbo Music

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## Abstract

In response to the growing need for diverse approaches to addressing global environmental challenges, this paper investigates the indigenous environmental knowledge embedded within the musical culture of the Igbo people, located in southeastern Nigeria. It aims to gain insights into the nuanced subtleties and occasional direct expressions of environmental concerns in Igbo music. Using ethnomusicological methods (ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of concepts, musical structures, performance practices, and the social and cultural contexts of selected songs), the study explores how environmental themes and concerns are articulated in Igbo songs. This paper is framed by two Igbo idioms namely, *akọ bụ ije* (symbolizing wisdom, success, and cooperation) and *ọ chaa gbute, ọ chaghị gbute* (denoting the relentless pursuit of wealth at all costs). This paper challenges dominant anthropocentric discourses by arguing that Igbo traditional music, in its engagement with environmental concerns, sustains an indigenous ecological ethic rooted in Igbo cultural values, thereby offering a counter-narrative aligned with environmental justice and decolonial scholarship. It highlights how indigenous expressive traditions articulate alternative epistemologies for sustainable human-environment relations. This ecomusicological study contributes novel theoretical frameworks and opens new pathways for examining the intersection of music, environmental sustainability, and societal dynamics through a transdisciplinary lens.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Igbo Music, Igbo Indigenous Environmental Knowledge, Justice, Reciprocity, Sustainable Environment.*

## INTRODUCTION

Serious environmental challenges persist across the globe, and manifest in various forms such as flooding, climate change, deforestation, desertification, air pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources. These crises not only threaten ecological stability but also pose significant risks to human health, food security, and socio-economic development.

Nigeria, as a developing nation with a rapidly growing population and expanding industrial activities, grapples with these pressing issues. One of the most alarming manifestations is found in the southeastern region of the country in Igboland, which suffers from some of the most severe cases of gully erosion in sub-Saharan Africa (Igwe 2013). Gully erosion in southeastern Nigeria has led to the destruction of homes, farmlands, roads, and entire communities, contributing to displacement and economic hardship (Ezezue, 2014).

Southeastern Nigeria faces significant ecological challenges, including soil erosion, deforestation and flooding (Kalu and Zakirova 2019). These are often intensified by poor land management, population pressure and climate change. These assortment of environmental

degradation threaten agricultural productivity, displace communities and degrade the region's rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystems.

In recent decades music scholarship has explored Igbo music and culture through diverse analytical lenses. For example, Echezona (1964) focused on the organology of Igbo musical instruments; Nzewi (1997; 2003; 2007) analysed philosophical, theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of African (especially Igbo) music; Okafor (2005) investigated its historical development and functional significance; Agu (2024) explored the structural features of traditional Igbo musical forms; and Forchu examined the place of Igbo music in gender equity (2023). There however, remains a notable deficiency in scholarly inquiry within Igbo music studies that addresses the intersection of musical expression and ecological concerns. This dearth of academic investigation exists in spite of the escalating global environmental crisis which significantly impacts both southeastern Nigeria and the nation at large.

To fill this gap, this paper aims to gain insights into the nuanced subtleties and occasional direct expressions of environmental concerns in Igbo music and how it reflects the interconnected webs of customs, and social norms that define the Igbo way of life. Responding to the increasing demand for diverse approaches to global environmental challenges, this paper explores the indigenous environmental knowledge embedded in Igbo music. As a mirror of the culture, Igbo music serves as a rich repository of indigenous ecological insights.

### **Ethnography of the Igbo**

The Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria constitute a society grounded in communalism, deeply rooted spirituality, and a dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity. Though unified by a common ethnic identity and language, they originate from various subregions across southeastern Nigeria, each with its own dialect and localized history. This diversity has given rise to rich cultural variations in customs, rituals, political structures and artistic expressions, yet a shared linguistic and spiritual worldview binds them into one cohesive nation. The Igbo cosmology is anchored in the belief in Chukwu (the Supreme Being), alongside a pantheon of lesser deities *alusi*, and ancestral spirits *ndi ichie*, which guide moral conduct and social harmony. They possess a system of decentralized political organization where decision-making is often democratic and consensus-driven, typically through village assemblies or councils of elders.

Kinship and lineage play a central role, and *Umunna*, (the patrilineal kin group) serves as the foundational unit of identity, inheritance, and social responsibility. Prestige and authority are based on achievement rather than birthright. The Igbo have historically been industrious traders, farmers, and craftsmen, and in the modern times, entrepreneurs and professionals in all fields of human endeavour. Rites of passage, from birth to death, are deeply symbolic and often feature music, dance, poetry and other artistic displays which serve as vehicles of cultural expression and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The Igbo language, though dialectically diverse, binds the people through proverbs, folklore, and storytelling that encode communal values and ecological wisdom. Despite colonial disruption, Christianisation, and post-colonial challenges, the Igbo have retained and reimagined their traditions, creating a vibrant syncretism that continues to shape identity, resistance, and innovation in Nigeria and the global diaspora.

This ecomusicological study contributes novel theoretical frameworks and opens new pathways for examining the intersection of music, environmental sustainability, and societal dynamics through a transdisciplinary lens. It develops a framework for engaging indigenous knowledge systems as critical resources in addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

It also contributes both to African-centred scholarship and to global discourses on sustainability and cultural knowledge systems.

This paper further underscores the role of music as a conduit for articulating ecological consciousness and fostering sustainable environmental practices. Its multidisciplinary framework not only illuminates the intricate relationships between music, environment and culture but also advances the relatively nascent field of ecomusicology. This study provides a distinctive lens through which to understand how music mirrors and informs environmental values. As a result, it advances novel theoretical frameworks for analysing the Igbo society in relation to environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, it enriches current scholarship by bringing indigenous musical traditions into critical dialogue with environmental ethics and sustainable practices. It also provides resources for scholars in environmental humanities, ethnomusicology, indigenous studies and spiritualities, for further exploration. As Nigeria experiences the accelerating forces of globalization, this study undertakes the critical task of recovering, documenting and interpreting some cultural ecological practices, essential for environmental sustainability and generational wellbeing.

### **The Environment**

The environment is a complex concept that includes physical, biological, chemical, and human elements. It encompasses both natural and human made factors. The interaction of these components not only shape ecosystems and human societies but also provide essential resources and support biodiversity and ecological functions.

The color green conventionally signifies ecological well-being, the vitality of nature, the abundance of vegetation, the generative principle of fertility, and the processes of ecological renewal (Eiseman, 2017; Bell 2011). It has come to symbolize sustainability and ecological responsibility within both cultural and political narratives, as reflected in ideas such as *green politics* and the *green economy* (Dobson, 2007). Different shades of green further evoke layered connotations, for example, lighter hues are frequently linked with freshness and renewal (Adam, 2016).

Environmental pollution, driven by wrong usage and disruption of natural systems, leads to problems such as biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification and climate change. Okereke (2008), argues that Western-centric ideologies prioritise market-based solutions, privatisation, and economic efficiency over social equity or ecological integrity. These ideologies he contends, shape and constrain environmental policy and sustainability discourse in the Global South. These principles often marginalize alternative approaches more relevant to the realities of these countries (Ruiters and Bond 2023).

### **Indigenous Environmental Knowledge (IEK)**

Indigenous environmental knowledge refers to the traditional understanding, practices, and values developed by indigenous peoples through centuries of close interaction with their local ecosystems (Thornton 2014). Rooted in physical, social, and spiritual connections to the land, this knowledge includes detailed insights into plants, animals, weather, and sustainable resource management.

A core belief in Igbo culture is that natural elements such as hills, rivers, valleys, caves, animals and plants are inhabited by spirits and therefore deserve respect and reverence (Ilogu, 1994). This worldview fosters a deep sense of environmental respect and responsibility. It

encourages moderation and care in resource use, as dishonoring these spirits is believed to bring harm to individuals and the community.

### **Igbo music**

In Igbo culture, music is more than mere entertainment. It is a comprehensive art form that encompasses drama, dance, ritual, education and philosophy. Igbo music is a medium for carrying out cultural, religious and social activities and functions as a tool for social control, a repository of historical records, and a platform for moral instructions.

Both traditional and contemporary musical expression of the Igbo are marked by rhythmic complexity, call-and-response design, and melodic and harmonic structures that are often tied to the tonal patterns of the language. In this art, a variety of musical instruments, differing in capacity, function, form, and size, are sometimes used to serve artistic as well as symbolic roles.

By developing a theoretical system rooted in African (specifically Igbo) epistemologies, Nzewi (1991; 2007) challenged the Western-derived frameworks that dominated musicology. His theorization of African music presents a framework that reconceptualizes music as a holistic, lived experience rooted in African epistemologies rather than as mere sound or entertainment. He argues that African music functions as a philosophical system, integrating performance, social values, spiritual essence, and ecological consciousness into a unified praxis (Nzewi, 1997).

At its core, Nzewi emphasizes the participatory and communal dimensions of African musical processes. He highlights how performance embodies social responsibility, moral education, and environmental equilibrium (Nzewi, 2003).

His framework also critiques Eurocentric analytical models by foregrounding indigenous theories of rhythm, tonal organization, and performative dynamics as self-sufficient and philosophically robust (Nzewi, 1991). Thus, African music, is not only an art form but also a knowledge system that sustains cultural identity, ecological balance, and societal harmony.

### **METHODS**

This paper, employs ethnomusicological methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, and an indigenist approach (an inquiry conducted by Indigenous people and which is informed by Indigenous philosophies, theories, and methods [Wilson 2007]).

Through the prism of two Igbo proverbs, it analyses concepts, musical structures, and the social and cultural contexts of selected songs. It also explores how environmental themes and concerns are articulated in Igbo songs. Approximately 100 songs were reviewed out of which 10 were selected for this study based on their direct or indirect connection to environmental themes.

Although proverbs originate from oral tradition and often do not have direct written sources, they are preserved and transmitted through oral literature, music and other forms of cultural heritage. Proverbs encapsulate wisdom derived from experience, and have significant philosophical, cultural, and moral weight.

The two proverbs used in this study are aimed to help explain, predict, and comprehend Igbo conceptualizations on the environment as well as the societal phenomena. Thus, and *o chaa gbute*, *o chaghị gbute* may initially appear to represent opposing concepts at first glance. However, when examined more deeply, they reveal a dialectical relationship in which the latter is counterbalanced by the former.

## Àkọ̀ bụ̀ ije

Àkọ̀ means wisdom, deep insight, knowledge, prudence, or strategy. Bụ̀ is to be, and ije means journey. Therefore, translates loosely to “wisdom is the way to go” (that it, live life on earth). Symbolizes wisdom, success, and cooperation. Its meaning is layered. On the one hand, it indicates that wisdom is not static or innate; it is something acquired over time through movement, experience, and engagement with the world. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, this Igbo axiom emphasizes that growth and understanding come through exploration and experience. On the other hand, posits that wisdom and deep insight are essential, as they enable one to skillfully navigate life’s paths, be it literal journeys, social interactions, or life decisions. Wisdom, prudence, knowledge and strategic actions in navigating life and fostering healthy relationships with others and the environment are essential for promoting environmental sustainability, as well as individual and societal wellbeing. The second meaning is applied in examining the nuanced subtleties and occasional direct expressions of environmental concerns in Igbo music. This exploration also reveals how the music reflects the interconnected webs of customs and social norms that define the Igbo way of life.

## Ọ́ chaa gbute, ọ́ chaghị, gbute

This proverb gives the imagery of a crop. Whether it is ready or not, it should be harvested.

It represents the relentless pursuit of success (which is often realized in wealth and power) at all costs and speaks directly to impatience, moral compromise, and the get-rich-quick mentality that disregards values, laws, consequences or ethical boundaries. The result, not the path taken to achieve it, is the most important. So, ọ́ chaa represents an honest way, and ọ́ chaghị, a dishonest path to success. It resonates with the Machiavellian maxim, of the end justifying the means, a dictum often invoked to rationalize morally questionable actions in pursuit of desired outcomes (Machiavelli, 1532/1998; Berlin, 1990). Within this context, the proverb functions as a cynical commentary on societal realities, exposing the ethical compromises and pragmatic calculations that frequently underpin social and political life

Far from endorsing this view, this axiom serves as a moral alarm, a warning that when both the clean and the corrupt are celebrated equally, society risks moral collapse. In this article, this philosophy is used to examine forms of environmental engagement and their implications for both the present and future state of ecology and society. It also brings to mind the Neoliberal norms within global environmental governance, which subvert justice and sustainability in developing countries. Neoliberal norms in global environmental governance prioritize market-based mechanisms, privatization, and commodification of nature, often undermining justice and sustainability in developing countries. For instance, Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones (2012) show how “green grabbing” enables powerful actors to appropriate land and resources under the guise of conservation and climate mitigation, marginalizing local communities. Ciplet, Roberts, and Khan (2015) trace how neoliberal restructuring of climate governance entrenches inequalities, as developing countries bear disproportionate burdens while wealthier nations consolidate power and benefits. Dunlap and Sullivan (2020) further argue that neoliberal governance masks dispossession and alienation, as environmental solutions are reframed to serve capital accumulation rather than local ecological or social needs. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that neoliberal approaches fail to address the root causes of



environmental crisis. They also reproduce structural inequities, subordinating sustainability and justice to global economic imperatives.

*Àkọ̀ bụ́ ijè* underscores the role of wisdom, foresight, and cooperation in sustaining human–environment relations, while *ọ́ chaa gbute*, *ọ́ chaghị gbute* functions as a cautionary reminder of the destructive consequences of unchecked exploitation. In this way, the interplay of the two proverbs articulates a balanced framework for environmental and societal sustainability, rooted in indigenous Igbo knowledge systems.

### Environmental Perspectives of Igbo Music

Transcription and analysis and data interpretation reveal that some Igbo songs engage with the environment, frequently employing animal and supernatural representations to do so. The potency and resonance of environmental messages are heightened through an emotional nexus that deeply connects the listener to meaning.

This effect is further reinforced by a multisensory experience, facilitated by an array of musical components, such as harmony, melody, rhythm, repetition, improvisation, instrumentation, tonal structures and vocal techniques. Thus, the message resonates more deeply as the music is learned, internalized and repeatedly sung, both in groups and privately, over an extended period.

### The Musical Structure

The arrangement and performance of the structural elements in Igbo music (form, harmony, instrumentation, melody, rhythm, repetition, scale, tonal organization, improvisation, and vocal techniques) serve as vital tools for promoting environmental stewardship. Igbo traditional songs employ diverse musical structures that feature solo performances (see musical example 1), as well as call response patterns (See musical example 2). These are sometimes accompanied by instruments of various sizes and shapes.

Musical Example 1. Excerpts from *Umunenyi na-agu aro*.

U - mu N'e\_nyi n'a gu a-ro, a-na-f'a - gu-ia a - gue.\_\_\_\_\_ A - cha-la-a-gun'a-gu a-ro, a-na-fa

4  
 — gu - li - be.\_\_\_\_\_ O - bu-r'E - nyi n'e - che a-kwu na kwu e-che-r'E - nyio.\_\_\_\_\_ O -

kwa-li - E-nyi ne-che A-kwu,n'A- kwu\_kwu na\_mae

The carefully composed solo passages, sometimes rendered through a speak-sing technique, function as potent mediums for articulating both overt and implicit environmental

messages. These vocal expressions possess a rhetorical intensity that resonates with the audience, often leaving lasting cognitive and emotional impressions.

Moreover, the predominance of antiphonal structures, particularly the call-and-response format (musical example 2), introduces a dynamic interplay that not only invites but necessitates audience participation.

#### Musical Example 2 Call and response Excerpts from *Idemmiri*

Call

I - de - de mmi-ri na'a-sa ku-ma ku-ma I - dee - de

Response

call

mmi-ri'O-fu'u-konkwun-ye nwa-muo

Res.

I - de - de mmi-ri na'a-sa ku-ma ku-ma I - dee - de

call

O-si'n-mu je-be'I-de

Res.

mmi-ri I - de - de mmi-rina'a-sa ku-ma ku-ma I-dee-de mmi-ri

The reciprocal exchange between performer and listener fosters a dialogic space wherein meaning is co-constructed. The result is a heightened sense of communal identification, as both audience and performers unite in the musical experience.

These diverse structural forms enhance the expressive capacity of the music and serve as effective channels for communicating environmental values, as both the artists and spectators engage with the music and its underlying message.

The deliberate arrangement of melodic contours which generally mirrors the rise and fall of tonal inflections of the Igbo language, significantly enhances the clarity of communication, including that on environmental stewardship.

These melodic patterns are imbued with emotional depth, capable of conveying nuanced sentiments, articulating complex ideas, and even mimicking physical actions. Short melodic motifs, frequently repeated, are a prominent feature, serving as mnemonic devices that

reinforce the message. Through such repetition and strategic comparison, the music achieves greater emphasis and ensures the retention of its thematic content.

In Igbo songs, both intricate and simple rhythmic patterns may appear independently or in combination within a single piece. These rhythmic structures play a crucial role in reinforcing the transmission of ecological values and cultural norms by echoing the natural long and short duration of the text, thereby heightening its expressive impact.

Harmony, the simultaneous blending of distinct tones, further enriches the sonic texture, enhancing aesthetic appeal and deepening listener engagement. It significantly strengthens the communicative power of Igbo music, and makes it an effective medium for conveying environmental principles and values.

### Song texts

Igbo song texts abound with conceptualisations and explications of the environment as both a spiritual and physical entity. The songs examined in this study contain nuanced subtleties and explicit articulations of environmental concerns. At the same time, they mirror the intricate networks of customs and social norms that shape and sustain Igbo cultural life.

In Example 1, the song texts interrogate the significance of the ensemble's name, 'Akwūnechenyi'. The song texts indicate that the meaning reflects contested cultural interpretations and reveals implicit environmental engagement. *Akwū* is forest, and *enyi* is elephant, *na-eche* means to protect.

The name therefore can be translated as 'the forest protects the elephant' which encapsulates the idea of environmental sustainability.

Example 1. Excerpts from *Igū arọ* (Akwūnechenyi ensemble)

<i>O bụ nū enyi na-eche akwū?</i>	Is it the elephant that protects the forest?
<i>Na akwū echerọ enyi...</i>	That the forest does not protect the elephant ...
<i>O bụrọ enyi na-eche akwū?</i>	Is it not the elephant that protects the forest?
<i>O kwali enyi na-eche akwū?</i>	Is it not the elephant?
<i>Na akwū kwū na ama oo</i>	The spirit-manifest is on stage

At the beginning of each performance the soloist stimulates a critical discourse on the interdependence between the forest and the elephant. This is a theme resonant with environmental philosophy which emphasizes relationality and mutual sustenance within ecosystems. The inquiry interrogates whether the forest's impenetrable density serves as a protective shield for the elephant, or whether it is the elephant's size and strength that deter intrusion, thereby safeguarding the forest itself. Within this ecological framework, the elephant also symbolizes other animals. This representation highlights the interconnectedness of species and the reciprocal dynamics that sustain environmental balance.

From the perspectives of the Igbo idiom of *àkọ bụ́ ijè*, deep insight and wisdom ultimately prevail - a principle reflected in the naming of the ensemble, Akwūnechenyi. This indigenous worldview aligns with African eco-philosophy, which emphasizes that environmental equilibrium depends on reciprocal obligations between humans, animal, and the spiritual world (Nzewi, 2007; Murove, 2004).



It stresses that protecting the forest ensures the conservation of habitats (encompassing flora, fauna, and even the metaphysical realm). This viewpoint affirms that ecological stewardship is integral to sustaining both the material and spiritual dimensions of life (Otubelu, 1984). The result is the continuity of a healthy and sustainable ecosystem, grounded in reciprocity, resilience and the ethics of interdependence

The song *Agbalu aka na-azọ ana* (example 2) is often performed by dance ensembles.

Example 2: Excerpts from *Agbalu aka na-azọ ana*

<i>Agbalu aka na-azọ ana</i>	When a land is in dispute and none of the parties has financial means
<i>Onye ji ji ana-akonye</i>	Whosoever has yam should quickly sow it
<i>N'olugo nu na omume no</i>	Because this is the time for action
<i>Na obodo</i>	In the land

Within Igbo environmental philosophy, the imperative of maintaining land productivity is a core principle that reflects both ecological and spiritual dimensions. Land is not merely an economic resource but is revered as the sacred abode of Ala, the earth goddess, whose moral authority regulates human conduct and environmental stewardship. Consequently, even when land is under dispute, the party that first succeeds in putting it to meaningful and sustainable use is often acknowledged as the rightful custodian. This customary practice underscores the Igbo understanding that ownership entails responsibility to preserve fertility, safeguard ecological balance, and ensure the land's continuous capacity to sustain life. Such a principle resonates with contemporary sustainability scholarship, particularly with land ethic theories that emphasize care, stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility (Okoye, 2012). In this framework, legitimate land ownership is adjudicated not solely by legal entitlement but by a demonstrated commitment to ecological productivity. This standard embodies the Igbo conviction that wisdom and deep insight manifest through the active preservation of the environment.

Natural environmental imagery woven into song texts, often serves as a medium for addressing societal issues. The song texts of Example 3 is such a narrative. It describes a young kite learning to hunt under the tutelage of his mother.

Example 3: Excerpts from *Nwa egbe na-amụ nta*

<i>Egbe bulu nwa okukụ ...</i>	<i>The fledgling captures a chick</i>
<i>Nne egbe ajụ ya...</i>	<i>Mother kite asks him</i>
<i>'Nne okukụ ekwuru gini?'</i>	<i>'What did the mother hen say?'</i>
<i>O sị na 'ọ nagbakọ na-agukọ ihe ọ ga-eme...'</i>	<i>'She tried to fight'</i>
<i>Nne sị nwa ya buru okukụ ribe...</i>	<i>The kite asks the fledgling to eat the chick</i>
<i>Nwa egbe ga buru nwa obogwu, felie...</i>	<i>Soon after, the fledgling catches a duckling</i>
<i>'Ebum obogwu lọta...'</i>	<i>'I have brought home a duckling'</i>

*Ma nne ya ekwughị okwu... ‘*

*But the mother duck did not protest’*

*Nne we sị nwa ya*

*The kite tells her son*

*‘Bulu ọbọgwụ bulagara nne mụrụ ya ...’ ‘Return the duckling to his mother’*

On his first attempt, the fledgling captures a chick. When the mother kite asks what the mother hen did in response, he explains that she tried to resist and fight back. The mother kite then encourages him to eat the chick without fear. On another occasion, the fledgling returns with a duckling. Again, the mother kite inquires about the reaction of the duck. This time, the fledgling replies that the duck did nothing. Immediately, the mother kite instructs him to release the duckling, warning that it is too dangerous to eat. She explains that the duck's lack of resistance signals a hidden strategy, a 'plan B', that may ultimately endanger the fledgling.

Symbolically, this parable foregrounds the ambivalence of resistance and silence in human and ecological relations. The hen's active struggle, though ineffective, is read as transparency. Her power and intentions are visible and predictable. By contrast, the duck's passivity embodies an opaque form of resistance, signaling an unseen reserve of power and the possibility of retaliation. In socio-political terms, the text warns against underestimating silent or marginalized groups whose apparent acquiescence may mask a more formidable counteraction.

From an environmental perspective, it underscores the deceptive calmness of nature. Ecosystems that appear subdued or resilient may in fact be accumulating disruptive forces that manifest unexpectedly when thresholds are crossed. Thus, through avian imagery, the song encodes a philosophy of caution, respect, and vigilance, teaching that both overt resistance and quiet endurance must be carefully interpreted in the dynamics of social and ecological survival. This attitude aligns with the Igbo idiom, *àkọ bụ ijè*, which emphasizes wisdom, and foresight as guiding principles of life's journey.

The fledgling's temptations to devour the duckling whose parent was silent and did not offer any resistance, an opportunity that looks effortless and highly rewarding, represents immediate gratification without probing consequences, akin to *ọ chaa gbute, ọ chaghị gbute*. Just like the duck's silence, wealth and reward that come too easily often mask unseen risks, including fraud, exploitation, unsustainable ventures, or moral compromise.

Even when the songs are folktale songs, as in Example 4, the texts buttress the morals of the accompanied stories. Example 4 resonates with the prohibitions governing the use of environmental resources in Igboland. The song through the story, engages responsible environmental resource management.

Example 4: Excerpts from *Azu azu*

*Azu, azu* Fish, fish

*Singilima* (*Singilima* is onomatopoeic, imitating the sound made by the fish as it moves in the water.)

*I hụrụ ngbaka mụ*

Have you seen my bangle?

*Singilima*

*Singilima*

*Ngbaka m dobere n'akụkụ nmiri*

The bangle I kept on the river bank.

*Singilima*

*Singilima*

*Ọ bụ onye na-ekwu*

Who is speaking?

*Singilima**Singilima**Eloo m gi*

I will swallow you

The story centers on a community that prohibits visits to the river in the afternoon, a period reserved for large fish and other aquatic creatures to swim, rest, and socialize. This taboo is not arbitrary. It encodes ecological knowledge that ensures harmony between human activity and the natural rhythms of nonhuman life. When Ego, a young maiden and her siblings go swimming in the morning, she forgets her bangle at the riverbank. Later, in defiance of parental and communal instruction, she returns in the afternoon to retrieve it. There she encounters a large fish, who responds to her song by declaring that it will swallow her, an act it promptly carries out. One by one, her siblings follow in search of her, and each suffers the same fate.

This song functions as a didactic exhortation to respect and uphold the fundamental principles of the natural environment. It operates not merely as entertainment, but as a cultural mechanism for transmitting ecological ethics across generations. By embedding environmental wisdom in narrative form, it warns against acts of disobedience and the violation of ecological laws, especially the reckless exploitation of natural resources. It also underscores the inevitable consequences, both environmental and societal, that follow such transgressions.

Symbolically, this tale dramatizes the peril of violating ecological boundaries. The river and its creatures function as custodians of moral order, enforcing taboos that sustain harmony between humans and nature. Ego's privileging of personal desire above communal wisdom reflects the arrogance of anthropocentrism, similar to the attitude of *ọ chaa gbute, ọ chaghị gbute*. In Igbo thought, this arrogance disregards the agency of the natural world, understood as a living community of rivers, forests, and unseen beings whose moral authority sustains balance and collective wellbeing. The swallowing of Ego and her siblings signifies nature's capacity to retaliate when humans intrude upon its rhythms and sanctuaries. In ecological-philosophical terms, the story reflects an indigenous ethic that recognizes the environment as both a life-sustaining and morally responsive entity. By presenting nature as an active agent capable of rewarding obedience and punishing transgression, the folktale enshrines principles of restraint, reverence, and sustainability at the heart of communal life.

Within the framework of African eco-philosophy, this narrative resonates with the Igbo proverb *Àkọ bụ ijè*, which emphasizes prudence, foresight, and respect for the boundaries that sustain existence. By disregarding parental and communal instruction, Ego abandons the path of wisdom, and the consequences underscore the cost of ignoring ecological intelligence. African ecological thought often conceives the environment as an active moral agent, capable of rewarding those who live in harmony with its rhythms and punishing those who transgress its laws (Okoye, 2012; Kanu, 2021). The song texts reinforce the folktale, to enshrine restraint, reverence, and sustainability as cardinal virtues, affirming the inseparability of ecological order and human flourishing.

Example 5 is the accompanying song of a folktale about the hunter who found a litter of lion cubs on his way home from the forest. It also offers an ecological lesson.

Example 5: Excerpts from *Okpochi ntị gbu di nta*

*Ọ bụ gịni melu di nta?*

What happened to the hunter?

*Okpochi nti gbuu di nta...*

Heedlessness caused the death of the hunter..

<i>Di nta nabanu</i>	Hunter you have gone
<i>Na ife i melu</i>	Because of your actions
<i>Q bulu na okwelu ife ibe ya gwalu ya</i>	If he had paid attention to counsels
<i>Onwu amegbu ya</i>	He would not have died
<i>Ije dinta na nwa agu</i>	What happened between the hunter and the cub
<i>Ofu mbosi na dinta bazilu ofia</i>	One day the hunter went into the forest
<i>Q we gbasizia nta na ofia</i>	After hunting in the forest
<i>Q we bulu zia nu ka o naba</i>	He set off for home
<i>Q puta zia na uzọ</i>	On his way home
<i>Q fu ebe agu mulu umu ofulu dobe</i>	He saw where the leopard had kept her newly cubs
<i>Q nwuluzia nwa agu we naba nu</i>	He took one home

Against the counsel of his family and community, who urged him either to return the cubs to their natural habitat or to kill them for food, the hunter chose to rear one as a pet. When the cub matured, however, it killed him and his family. This narrative underscores a central principle of Igbo IEK, that conservation must be rooted in wisdom and discernment. The Igbo maxim *akó bu ije* serves as a moral compass here, emphasizing that ecological decisions must balance compassion with foresight. Protecting wildlife is commendable, but doing so without respect for natural order and ecological boundaries invites destruction. Igbo IEK therefore, insists on an ethic of sustainability where humans and nature coexist in harmony, guided by prudence, communal knowledge, and respect for the interdependence of all life forms (Nzegwu, 2006; Okoye, 2012).

### Ecological and societal values in Igbo Music

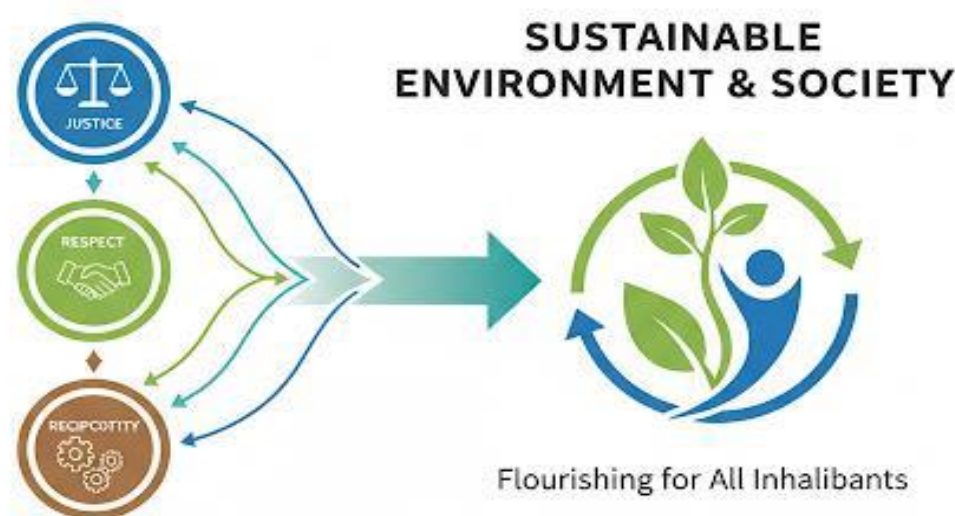
The skillful delivery of solos, whether in strophic or free style, ensures focused attention and a deep absorption of the communication of the songs. The effectiveness and reinforcement of the messages emerge through affective bonds and the immersive, multisensory involvement generated by diverse musical elements, including, melody, rhythm, harmony, instrumentation, tonal arrangement, and vocal expression. **The repetitive alternation of call-and-response structures not only amplifies the entertainment value but also strengthens the clarity of the musical theme, thereby deepening its social and ecological commentary.** The diverse performance structures, tailored to the demands of specific occasions, further reinforce the messages carried in the songs. In folktale songs in particular, audiences often join in the refrains, enabling the messages to penetrate more deeply into their collective consciousness. In this way, the songs' messages gain greater depth of resonance as they are absorbed, remembered, and continually performed, both communally and individually, across time.

In the songs above, several key themes emerge, each resonating with the Igbo indigenous philosophy of *ako bu ije*, the idea that wisdom, prudence, and foresight are essential for navigating both ecological and social life.

They include:

- 1) The principle of reciprocal dynamics that sustains environmental balance, which reflects the understanding that every action carries consequences that shape the journey of communal survival.
- 2) The understanding that land ownership is not determined solely by legal entitlement but also by a demonstrated commitment to ecological productivity. This principle aligns with the ethic of foresight, which ensures that the land remains fertile for current and future generations.
- 3) A philosophy of caution, respect, and vigilance, which teaches that both overt resistance and quiet endurance must be wisely interpreted within the broader dynamics of social and ecological survival.
- 3) Conception of the **environment as an active moral agent—rewarding those who live in harmony with its rhythms and punishing those who transgress its laws.**
- 4) And, the articulation of an ethic of sustainability in which humans and nature coexist harmoniously, guided by prudence, communal knowledge, and an appreciation for the interdependence of all life. They foreground values (respect, reciprocity, wisdom, and justice) that illuminate and shape environmental relationships. Central to this ethic is *àkọ bú òjè*, a cultural notion of deep insight and collective wisdom that grounds these values and sustains their transmission.

Holistic environmental stewardship entails working in harmony with every dimension of the natural world, including its spiritual forces, to sustain balance among humans, plants, animals, inanimate elements, and unseen beings. Such an orientation nurtures collective well-being and ensures long-term sustainability. The IEK practices among the Igbo are rooted in cultural values, beliefs, and norms, and are regarded as divinely ordained. They provide a grounded framework through which environmental ethics are internalized, practiced, and transmitted across generations. By emphasizing interdependence, justice, and collective responsibility, these practices both resonate with and contribute to global sustainability discussions.



**Figure 1: Environmental and societal sustainability**



## CONCLUSION

The environmental crisis facing glocal communities is too often conceptualized as a collection of technical challenges that can be remedied primarily through policy interventions (Okereke, 2008). Such framing has resulted in responses that largely address the symptoms of the problem through regulatory adjustments, technological innovations, and short-term mitigation strategies, while neglecting the deeper structural determinants.

At a more fundamental level, the crisis is driven by a pervasive consumerist and materialist orientation, characterized by the pursuit of immediate gratification and the commodification of nature, which reduces the environment to private property and normalizes its exploitation (Isham, 2024). Addressing this requires the integration of perspectives that reconceptualize the human–environment relationship.

Reconfiguring humanity’s relationship with the natural world necessitates new patterns of action in confronting environmental degradation. This transformation must extend beyond policy reforms to encompass changes in consciousness, values, and modes of living at both the individual and collective levels.

Central to this approach is the conviction that the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits must be considered in ethical, spiritual, and communal terms, rather than exclusively through technical or economic frameworks (Bahá’í International Committee [BIC], 2015). What emerges, therefore, is the need for a morally robust alternative to current approaches. One that transcends market-centered responsibility and instead advances principles of justice, global equity, and sustainability.

This shift calls for a reimagining of global environmental governance that is rooted in equity and resonates with environmental justice scholarship that critiques entrenched power asymmetries. Such scholarship underscores the imperative of including marginalized voices. It advocates for frameworks that incorporate the historical experiences, knowledge systems, and ethical orientations of the Global South.

Doing so ensures that governance structures reflect diverse epistemologies and yield more equitable outcomes. Confronting environmental degradation thus requires a deeper recognition of humanity’s inherent interconnectedness and the practical application of principles such as justice, consultation, and the oneness of humanity. Indigenous communities, including the Igbo, exemplify this orientation.

For centuries, their relationship with the natural environment has been guided by values of respect, solidarity, and complementarity, principles that not only sustained ecological balance but also ensured the long-term viability of their societies.

This study has examined the interplay between indigenous music and Igbo Indigenous Environmental Knowledge (IEK) through the lenses of *ako bu ije* and *o chaa gbute*. In doing so, it contributes to broader scholarly conversations on the ways cultural expressions embody and transmit ecological wisdom. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining additional Igbo idioms in relation to IEK, both within the Igbo context and comparatively across other ethnic groups. Furthermore, subsequent studies might critically investigate how Igbo axioms engage with, reinterpret, or challenge contemporary popular musical forms and environmental sustainability.



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