Music and the African Girl Child: Gender-Based Violence, Resistance, and Sustainability in Pot Drum Dance

Ruth Opara[1]
Syracuse University, USA

Abstract: Music and dance are integral parts of girlhood in the southeastern part of Nigeria, where I grew up. Most of our training and activities focused on molding girls to become better women, desirable maidens for marriage, and ultimately good wives; the girls' dances also serve this purpose. However, gender violence affects this process in musical performance spaces. By examining the *Avu Udu*—a pot drum dance practiced by Igbo girls in southeastern Nigeria—I argue that girls utilize music to resist traditional gender norms, and to protect themselves from a society that ignores their psychological well-being and fails to protect them from gender-based violence. Because of the complexity of the girls' performances and lived experiences, this article further addresses a range of issues; the analyses of selected songs, dances, bodily gestures, and lived experiences of the girl dancers (between ages six to fifteen) show that the viability and sustainability of the *Avu Udu* depend on the Igbo's conventional archetypes of patriarchy. Narratives, history, and existing scholarship account for changes in *Avu Udu* dance that stem from transformations in Nigeria's social, political, and economic conditions. The roles that music plays in shaping the girl child and her response inform the intersections of music, gender-based-violence, resistance, and sustainability in Igbo, Nigerian culture. This research places the African girl child at the center of timely issues pertaining to social justice.

Keywords: *African music, African women, African girl, global women in music, music and gender, music and resistance, gender-based violence*

The social, cultural, political, and economic conditions in Nigeria affect the sustainability and viability of women's music. Gender-based violence and societal gender ideologies that limit women's participation in music affect their musical practices, especially in contemporary times. Furthermore, the security situation in Nigeria has created a difficult situation for women to live freely and has consequently limited their ability to participate in music; this is also the case with the musical practices of the Nigerian girl child. As a result, many girls have become vigilant in protecting themselves from gender-based violence, even in musical performance spaces. The members of the *Avu Udu* (pot drum) dance group—a group of girl dancers (aged six to fifteen) from the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria—use their music to respond to gender-based violence.

[1] Ruth Opara is a Nigerian ethnomusicologist based in the USA. Her research and teaching areas include music in Africa and the production of knowledge, music and global women, music and gender, Black Atlantic music, African music and transnational encounters. She is currently working on her book tentatively named *Music, Motherhood, and Transnationalism: A West African Perspective*. She has taught in Nigeria and the USA.

Recently, society has responded by allowing "trusted" boys into the group for protection and to ensure "better" music-making. This change has had myriad effects on a group originally entirely comprised of girls. In this article, I demonstrate the ways in which Igbo girls utilize music to resist traditional gender norms in order to protect themselves from a society that ignores their psychological well-being, and to combat gender-based violence. Further, I argue that the viability and sustainability of the *Avu Udu* depend on conventional Igbo archetypes of patriarchy. In order to contextualize this study, I juxtapose my experience with the experiences of contemporary Igbo girl children by addressing the following questions: Why do many Nigerian girls ignore all of the societal efforts to restrain them from "violent" behaviors? What roles does music play in transforming the girl child? How do Nigeria's social, political, and economic conditions contribute to the transformation of the girl child in musical performance spaces? How do musical performances express the attitudinal changes of these girl children? This paper addresses the questions by drawing from song texts, and performance practices of girl dancers in Imo State, Nigeria. Interviews, archival materials, and existing scholarships provide insight into neglected areas in music analyses with its focus on girls' musical practices in Nigeria. This paper also broadens the perspectives on music analyses, focusing on the formative stages of music and resistance among African women while emphasizing lived experiences of the girl child. It builds on performance analyses and narratives such as the ones expressed by Tegere Tulon in the documentary *Handclapping Songs of Mali* (Durán and Diallo, 2019). While that documentary shows the formative stages of African girls' musical training, this article further divulges the meanings embedded in gendered gestures and symbols that accompany music and dance.

The Igbo and the *Avu Udu* (The Pot Drum Dance): Grooming the Future Woman

The term Igbo refers to a geographic region (*Ala Igbo*), a culture (*Omenaala Igbo*), and a language (*Asusu Igbo*). Igboland is the indigenous home of the Igbo people and is situated in Southeastern Nigeria. It is one of the largest ethnic groups among the hundreds who live in Nigeria. The British colonizers amalgamated Igbos and their neighboring ethnic groups under an "umbrella" called "The Republic of Nigeria" in 1914. The effects of colonization necessitate a complex analysis of Igbo culture and a consideration of a set of dualities in tension: the relationship between pre-colonial and colonial Igbo, the post-colonial in relation to the neocolonial, the traditional in relation to modernity, and the rural in relation to the urban. Igbo society is patriarchally gendered, as evidenced in their daily lives and cultural practices, including music, attire, title, occupation, religion, and other customs. Music is primarily gendered, with different roles expected of men and women even in the same musical groups, and some musical genres are considered to be "women's" or "men's" music. Although gender roles are evolving, gender expectations and limitations still exist. Men and women are expected to perform specific functions better: men are considered better drummers, for example, while women are the best dancers in some musical genres. Lucy Durán ascertains this gendered division in her study of children's music in Mali, where girls are tasked to sing and dance while boys are encouraged to play the instruments (Durán, 2015, p. 53). Like many aspects of Igbo Nigerian culture, girls' musical genres work to mold girls into better women, with the ultimate goal of producing mothers who will continue to act as maternal figures for the younger generations and the nation. In most music performance spaces, a young female human is considered a girl or a girl child from birth till when they are maidens, usually at the start of their menstrual circle or shortly after. Girlhood is characterized by their experiences when they are girls.

Growing up, my hometown of Amakohia Uratta Owerri in Imo State, Nigeria, was not as large a city as it is now. There were no security concerns, such as fears of kidnapping and rape or

Boko Haram bombing, and indigenes went about their business freely, even at night. *Avu Udu* was part of my childhood, and I looked forward to the moonlight when we gathered to play it. The singing, accompanying dance, instrumentation, and costumes make up the music. During the holiday celebrations, several *Avu Udu* dance groups go from family to family and village to village; they dance and receive money from elders and admirers. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the *Avu Udu* was strictly for girls who hailed from particular extended families, including mine. We utilized two musical instruments—the *udu* (pot drum) and the *opi* (whistle)—to create complex upbeat rhythms that accompanied our intricate songs, which represented the girl culture at the time. We sparkled in our beautifully folded, bright, colorful wrappers and makeup as spectators complimented us. We looked forward to the holidays when we would perform the *Avu Udu*. For several weeks before the festivals, we practiced the *Avu Udu* dance, mainly by moonlight. Our family members watched and supported us while we practiced for special days. Igbo women are known for their strength, female solidarity, and active roles in society. These traits are cultivated at a very young age and proliferate in musical performance spaces (Nadaswaran, 2012, p. 117). On performance days, we worked with our mothers and older sisters to create spectacular costumes. We used large wrappers and ropes to create gathered flare skirts that fit perfectly around the waist and helped us to dance freely, using a second fabric to tie around the chest. Although solely our mothers chose clothing patterns, they chose wrappers that carefully depict Igbo locations and histories. The designs can be recognizable, or alternatively create allusions of various communities through unrecognizable stylistic references (Rovine, 2014, p. 158). We painted our stomachs, shoulders, necks, and legs, applied lipsticks, and used eye pencils to draw patterns on our faces. The costumes added a beautiful touch that complemented the girls' physique while allowing us to dance freely.

Two musical instruments—the pot drum and whistle—were essential parts of *Avu Udu*'s instrumentation. In addition to using the pot drum to accompany the dances and songs, we collected money inside the pot drum through the open hole. The pot drum is played with the hands, and it produces sound when the palm hits and covers the circular opening by the side. The sound provides a steady metronome that contributes to the complex rhythms that accompany the songs and dances. The *nne egwu* (mother dancer) plays the whistle, and she is also the lead singer and dancer. *Nne egwu* is the group's star as the other girls depend on her to remember the songs, routines, dances, and whistle patterns that comprise the songs. Songs usually end with members of the group dancing to upbeat rhythmic pot-drum patterns and the whistle, with members accompanying those instruments by stomping their feet, clapping, and "shouting," creating rhythmic complexities. Our songs were traditional Igbo songs in the Igbo language, rooted in Igbo beliefs and values, and transmitted orally (New, 1979, p. 80). *Avu Udu* songs are filled with socio-moral and cultural lyrics that both educate and entertain. They feature simple melodies, usually employ call-and-response patterns, and consequently are easy to memorize. Because many songs were passed from generation to generation through oral tradition, their creators cannot be traced. Nevertheless, some songs are created or recreated to fit the girls' needs and names. In every generation, the older girls compose songs either spontaneously or planned, a usual way to reclaim the dance group and make it theirs. Like many African girls, Igbo girls typically experience music as soon as they are born, through several rituals that involve singing for and about them. These include being rocked steadily as an infant while the family sings, to various life circle ceremonies that are marked with music. Consequently, after a period of time, girls begin to participate in music, including performing songs and inventing their own songs.

The songs that we learned from family and community members addressed many themes and served multiple purposes. They alerted people to our arrival, greeted the crowd, communicated our feelings, reminded us of our roles as girls, and prepared us for motherhood and other functions. The songs synchronized with the pot drum and dances, creating complex musical rhythms and forms that the audiences cherished. The stomping of feet during performances, the pot drum itself, and shouting and clapping by spectators created different polyrhythms at different performances, depending on audience participation.

Neglecting the Girl Child: Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

The *Avu Udu* is a musical genre at the center of girls' childhood in some parts of Igboland, providing early-in-life social groups for girls. Igbo girls in the Owerri area were expected to participate actively, as dance groups are part of the social fabric for Igbo girl children. These dance groups provide spaces for girls to begin the process of becoming a woman, which involves realizing, defining, questioning, choosing, and redefining their roles as 'future' women (Nadaswaran, 2012, p. 114). The *Avu udu* is a site for resistance, introspection, and conformity that define the formative stages for girl children. As with many associations that involve Igbo daughters and married women, girls and women's dance groups provide a space for them to control their own affairs and wield their collective strength (Ezeigbo, 1990, p. 150). On one occasion, a crowd gathered by a family in a neighboring village and watched when our lead dancer stepped out of the dance circle to scold a boy in the audience. The dance stopped, and the members of the audience could hear her say to the boy: "Do not try that rubbish again. If you do, I will teach you a lesson that you will never forget." At that point, men ran to hold back our lead dancer, who continued to repeat the sentence as she was dragged back to the dance floor. The boy became filled with shame as the angry audience admonished the girl. Men and women of all ages who were dismayed by the girl's behavior expressed their opinions: "Why would you point at a boy like that?" "Why would a girl dance leader choose to fight?" No man would marry a girl fighter!" "You lack home training!" The crowd became furious when the girl ignored them and continued to yell at the boy: "I will wait for you near the bush and teach you a lesson you will never forget if you try that nonsense again!" Most people concluded that the girl was the oppressor; no one asked her about the reasons for her actions.

Women and girls have been victims of violence in Nigeria for many years, from the national level to the family level. In 2014, women cringed in terror as over two hundred girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Bornu State, Nigeria, were kidnapped by the terrorist organization Boko Haram. This event attracted global critique in social and other media around the world through the hashtag *#BringBackOurGirls*. Many analysts and reporters attributed this unfortunate incident to bad governance and the failure of the Nigerian government to protect its citizens (Muobike, 2017, p. 11). This conclusion stems from the government's response to the situation. Scholars such as Osasumwen and colleagues note that the 2012 Human Rights Watch categorized the Nigerian government's response in two ways: stick approaches and the carrot approach. Stick approaches refer to military engagement (military power and various strategies the military utilized to fight Boko Haram) and Joint Task Force Initiatives (multinational organizations formed to tackle the Boko Haram insurgency). The carrot approach involved peace talks and negotiations between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram. These two approaches completely neglected the fate of girl children, as members of the government were preoccupied with safeguarding their future political careers. The incident, the response of the Nigerian

government, and the falsification of reports about the release of some girls revealed to the international community the vulnerability of Nigerian girl children (Osasumwen et al., 2017, pp. 45–50).

After two weeks of silence, the Nigerian president, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, addressed the world. Yunana Ahmed and Monday Bello Eje's analysis of Jonathan's speech reveals its five premises, which they describe as the claim, the goal, the circumstances, the value concerns, and the means-goal. The *claim* was that "Boko Haram seeks to overwhelm the country and impose its ideology on all Nigerians. My government is determined to make that impossible. We will not succumb to the will of terrorists." The *circumstances* refer to the readiness of Boko Haram to "overwhelm the country and impose its ideology on all Nigerians … There are political, religious and ethnic cleavages" and "economic disparities that remain a problem in our country." The *goals* were clearly stated in Jonathan's lines, "my government and our security and intelligence services…will not stop until the girls are returned home, and the thugs who took them are brought to justice." The *value/concerns* of the speech become evident when the president defended his silence: "My silence has been necessary to avoid compromising the details of our investigation ... I am a parent myself, and I know how awful this must hurt." The *means-goal* is reflected in his sentences, "this month, Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Britain, and the United States established an External Intelligence Response Unit to share security information on such threats in West Africa." He went on to say that "in September, I will urge the UN General Assembly to establish a U.N. coordinated system for sharing intelligence." Ahmed and Eje conclude that President Jonathan's speech works to exonerate the Nigerian government from failing to protect its citizens (Ahmed and Eje, 2016, pp. 46–50).

Dame Patience Jonathan, Nigeria's first lady at the time, was also concerned about her husband's reputation. In her speech, which received criticism from many Nigerians who claimed that she could not express herself clearly in "correct" English, she lamented the bloodshed and the ways that the incident was stage-managed in order to stop her husband from winning a second term (Odeh et al., 2021, pp. 238–240). The speeches and responses ignore the gender implications of the incident; no one addressed matter of the girl children. Recently, under the leadership of President Mohammed Buhari, girls are still being abducted by Boko Haram. Boko Haram continued to hold Leah Sharibu, a fifteen-year-old girl, after releasing other Dapchi schoolgirls who were kidnapped in 2018, because Sharibu refused to convert to Islam. Christians across the world, including representatives from the Vatican, have called for prayers and for the Nigerian government to secure the release of Sharibu. The president was quick to interview the released girls in Aso Rock in order to show the world that he was trying; however, he completely ignored Sharibu and the other girls who were still in the custody of Boko Haram (Maclean and Abrak, 2018). Many kidnappings do not make the news and girls are still being kidnapped in the 2020s.

Nigerian girls and women are regularly sexually harassed in their homes, churches, social groups (including music groups), extended families, schools, workplaces, and in many other spaces (Human Rights Watch 2019; Okafor et al., 2022, p. 101). Even in the wake of the #metoo movement, when the world watched women speak out against sexual abuse and harassment, Nigerian women have remained silent for two reasons. First, the culture lacks understanding of inappropriate sexual behavior, which is evident in the failure of people in positions of power to acknowledge sexual harassment and abuse towards women and girls. Secondly, victims rarely get justice. The shame, stigmatization, and victimization make girl children reluctant to speak out against sexual abuse. Girls are accused of dressing inappropriately, thereby indirectly seducing the

men (Aborisade, 2020, p. 39). In their study of the perceptions of sexual harassment in Nigerian schools, Justina Imonikhe, Oyaziwo Aluede, and Philipa Idogh conclude:

> This study also revealed that mode of dressing is a major cause of sexual harassment. This finding is not surprising for the fact that most students in Nigerian tertiary institutions these days are being bedeviled with obscene dressing particularly the female students. Most girls go almost naked displaying their boobs, all in the name of fashion. Teachers and students are aware of the evil that is eroding our academic environment and the seductive dressings of the female students have profound negative effects on both the students and their teachers as they can hardly concentrate on their academic work under such an environment. (2012, p. 271)

The notion that women and girls seduce men has been used to justify inappropriate sexual behavior towards girls and women from family members, religious leaders, teachers, bosses, and peers.

In my experience and understanding, inappropriate sexual behavior among some Nigerian men has roots in their beliefs about polygamy. In the pre-colonial era, colonial Nigeria, and in contemporary times, some men have been able to marry many wives, depending on their wealth or affluence in society. In 2019, fifty-nine-year-old billionaire Ned Nwoko married nineteen-year-old Nigerian actress Regina Daniels as one of his wives. Because there are no age limits and men can marry many wives, older married men commonly woo young girls; they may make unwanted advances towards any girl of their choice in all spaces. Because some of them end up marrying the girls, unwanted advances become normalized. Girls who excel in musical performance, especially great dancers, receive unwanted sexual advances, including men touching their breasts and buttocks while they dance. These situations blur the line between sexual harassment and demonstrating interest in a girl. As a result, many parents take preemptive measures to protect their girls, even in musical performance spaces. They limit and monitor the movements and activities of their girl children. Some have withdrawn their girl children from night cultural practices because of security issues, so that the girls can avoid walking miles in the dark because of the threat of gender-based violence and abuse. The girls who manage to perform strive to protect themselves. Hence, the reaction of our lead dancer in the anecdote provided earlier this section.

Music and Resistance

Xavier Livermon helps us understand how girls considered "bad girls" might be treated. Livermon explains:

> If we understand the bad girl as a counteridentified performance, it often exists as the flip side (rather than an escape) from heteropatriarchy, reinforcing its logics even in its rebellion. The 'bad girl,' for all of her resistant energy, exists as a normative outside available within the logics of heteropatriarchy to instill fear in women who behave outside societal norms of femininity. In the end, we know what happens to bad girls. They typically are punished. (2020, p. 128)

As young girls, we had witnessed the boy bully our lead dancer many times (including hitting her at her buttocks) before she publicly reprimanded him; we were heartbroken by the audience's response. We had walked many miles to a neighboring village to perform and this boy had followed us, called our lead singer ugly, and had thrown stones, sand, and grass at us. We did not

understand why he attacked us, but our lead dancer protected us from him by occasionally asking us to run and by throwing sand back at him. His abuses affected us; in our eyes, our leader was the most beautiful among us. She donned the best wrapper, from her mother, to complement her leadership role, and her wrappers were carefully folded into beautiful gathers. She applied makeup and body paint carefully, and everyone we encountered admired her—except for this boy. Calling our leader ugly made us feel ugly collectively, because we had put in considerable work to make her beautiful. Despite her beauty, dance, and leadership skills, that act of resistance nullified her agency since it did not conform to societal expectations about the effects of music on the girlchild. Referring to artist-musicians in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lukas Pairon best describes these expectations, which are relevant to the Nigerian context too:

> There are a variety of external (extrinsic) reasons for music-making: some of them [the artists] may work towards a better position in society; it may get others out of violence; it may bring the respect of neighbours or lead to television appearances; they may be respected as artists-musicians; they may no longer be seen as gangsters, witch or street children; it may offer them the opportunity to earn money or the hope of making a living in the future and even of succeeding in developing a career; or that they may become famous. (2020, p. 142)

Before we arrived at the compound where the incident occurred, our leader had asked the boy to stay away from us and not to interrupt our dances. He refused and continued to call us ugly during our performances. After the long walk, we were terrified and tired; our spirits were dampened as we danced while watching him identify ugly girls to us. When our leader noticed this, she left the dancing circle to warn him for the last time. We were unable to continue dancing in that compound as we packed up our pots and rested under the Iroko tree that shielded us. We cried, consoled ourselves, assured ourselves that we were beautiful, and continued to dance in other compounds. This boy, who was supposedly shamed in front of the crowd, did not relent. We unleashed our full gear of resistance through our musical performance, which was our usual response to bullies.

In this article, I push back against the notion of resistance in musical performance as a shared strategy; rather, resistive strategies are unique and depend upon the practitioners' experiences, performance practices, gender, and status in society (Jaji, 2014, p. 14). Music relates to a conscious expression of resistance that can be overt or covert. For Lara Allen, music

> may function as 'hidden transcript,' a mechanism of critiquing dominant public discourse and voicing dissent behind the backs of the powerful. The possibilities of the public/private or communal/individual intersection that music offers constitute a particular source of strength. While many types of hidden transcripts are expressed through clandestine, private modes (jokes or gestures, for instance), music is able to slip the subversive message into a more public forum. (2004, p. 5)

Allen further states that music can function in these varying ways because it exists in a privileged space of leisure, protected from excessive interference. Leisure spaces may seem politically unimportant, but they have radical potential and create the conditions of possibility for exuding joy, delight, release, happiness, humor, escape, and pleasure. Hence, the political power of music lies in the space it creates for small personal pleasure and enjoyment (Allen, 2004, pp. 5–6). Igbo girls' *Avu Udu* performances both reflect and contradict Allen's assertions as they are viable sites

of resistance. Resistance in *Avu Udu* music is reflected in the attitude and the various arts that comprise the dance. Girls walk or sometimes sashay into family compounds during festive periods to perform music. Christmas and Easter are big celebrations in Igboland because most Igbo people practice Christianity. Even those who practice traditional African religions are roped into the festivities because those festivities involve a great deal of eating, drinking, music, and dancing. Most importantly, relatives return home from across the diaspora to be with their families. People return in droves because children and youth are usually out of school for the holidays—many workers get some time off. Christmas in Nigeria also falls during the dry season, so the weather is generally good for people to gather, eat, drink, and dance to indigenous music. While adults perform many musical genres during this time, people especially value the *Avu Udu*.

Part of the *Avu Udu* dance preparation is the advice and admonitions the girls receive from their parents, especially their mothers. Mothers communicate to the girls that they should behave well and dance gracefully because they are being watched. Girls are expected to look good and "behave well" in order to attract the best suitors for marriage. The idea of behaving well is rooted in patriarchy and is based on the assumption of a male gaze. While the girls seem to agree with their mothers about their appearances, they resist the advice about ignoring bullies and remaining calm in the face of provocation. As a form of resistance, girls pay attention to details while folding their costumes and preparing their makeup and jewelry. They convince their mothers to give them their best wrappers, and they cut their nails because they expose their bare feet and hands while dancing. The girls and the mothers have different reasons for expecting the girls to "look good." While the mothers want the girls to look good to attract men, the girls believe they should look good in order to avoid being called ugly. While walking confidently, they are hyperactive in the streets, ready to fight boys and to throw stones at men who bully them. They yell "ugly" back at boys who call them ugly, and the boys are often shamed. Consequently, overpowering groups of young girls has become difficult in recent times.

The girls sashay into the compounds when they see a bully and begin their dance with a song that stresses their pride: "*Anyi abia mana ewo, anyi abiamana, Umuaka Uratta nde n'akpa inyanga anyi abimana. Were nkachiifu nye anyi pam ise*." This song loosely translates to: "We are coming, graceful Daughters of Uratta are here. Give us five pounds with a handkerchief." Depending on its context, the word *inyanga* loosely translates to having a sense of pride or being graceful. When translated to mean "being graceful," the song cues the girls as to how to comport themselves during the performance. As future wives and mothers, comportment is central to performative acts. Songs featuring the importance of comportment are sung many times when the girls arrive to perform for any family. However, the songs become a form of resistance when *inyanga* is performed in the context of "having a sense of pride." The difference in meaning lies in the girls' gestures and dance moves. Dancing gracefully entails balancing bodily movements. The girls should not engage in dancing that is considered to be erotic or immoral, such as twerking; at the same time, they should dance well. Although negotiating these contradictions may seem burdensome, Igbo girls understand the expectations. The girls move vigorously, scattering the circle, dancing in front of boys who bully them, eyeing them, and sometimes stomping their feet very hard in the dusty sand in front of them, covering the boys' clothes with dust. The girls perform the attitudinal dance when they stop singing and add more instruments, including the pot drum, whistle, and stomping of feet. As they dance to the complex interlocking upbeat rhythms they create, they swing their bodies around, moving freely to the left, right, back, and front to demonstrate resistance to any boy who bullies them. Some brave girls will dance vigorously towards the bully with their eyes fixed on him while brushing him off.

Oral cultures in many parts of Africa, especially musical ones, enable performers to engage in spontaneous or planned acts of resistance. Because of its accessibility, music reaches many kinds of audiences of various statuses (Schumann, 2008, p. 18). Through songs, music practitioners communicate the unspoken, and songs of resistance are a major part of the girls' repertoire. As in the song whose text is analyzed in the previous paragraph, overt acts of resistance can be expressed through cultural symbols that are recognizable by the practitioners and culture bearers. These symbols manifest in the dances through moves and gestures that may or may not be part of the choreographic sequence accompanying each song. Idioms, proverbs, adages, vocables, and the use of onomatopoeia for rhetorical effect may all be present in the music's lyrics as well as embedded symbols that are sometimes unique to individuals. Beyond their symbolism, the *Avu Udu* songs are multifunctional; many song lyrics reflect resistance either in part or in whole. Some songs address issues of resistance in their entirety, while others have lines reflecting resistance while addressing many themes.

The *Avu Udu* dancers in the Izombe area in Imo State, Southeastern Nigeria, express their resistance while instilling a sense of pride through songs. The song *Ada Di Mma* is an affirmation of their beauty, class, and value in society:

Ada di mma, eee (A good/beautiful daughter)
Ada Ugwueze (The king's pride)
Oyoyo nwa (Lovely child)
Nwa ka ibe ya mma (The most beautiful child)
Abum Ada eze (I am a daughter of a king)
*Ada na eme ngala (*A graceful daughter)
Nwa amuru na mkpa (A child conceived when needed)
Ejim olaedo anu mmiri (I drink water with a gold cup).

Despite the challenges and gender-based violence that girls face, music provides a space for affirmation and resistance. The girl dancers in the Izombe community are from different homes, some rich and some poor. The dancers come from high-class families, lower-class families, and most importantly, from outcast families who are denigrated as secondhand citizens in many Igbo communities.

Because the girls are still grappling with the meaning of being outcast in the Igbo, Nigerian context, they consider everyone equal in musical spaces. Unlike the maidens and married women who sometimes experience tensions in their musical groups because of class issues, girls believe that all are equal and are unified in fighting gender-based violence. They unite with one heart as they claim to be daughters of kings and queens who drink water with a golden cup. As adults, members of Igbo society are expected to know their class and the family they come from; however, this is not the case with the girls as they affirm their acclaimed royal background despite their differing status within existing social hierarchies. As a result, girls resist being categorized according to the class constructed by society. Proclaiming their beauty even when they are called ugly by their male counterparts is an act of resistance to gender-based violence. The intensity and attitude of the girls' dancing are always a response to whomever is in the audience. They tend to dance gracefully when they are primarily surrounded by parents, but intensify their moves, body language, facial expressions, and demeanor when they see an "enemy."

Although calling girls ugly is a common way to tease them, the song *Adamma* affirms their beauty. In this song, girls assert that their beauty and joy emanate from the inside, beyond the realm of physical beauty:

Agajem n' uzu hu Adamma, sambele mbele (I saw Adamma while walking on the street)

Adamma ee imara mma ee (Adamma, you are beautiful)
Ihe juru gi obi, Obuso obioma sambele mbele (What is in your mind is pure joy).

Singing this song is a way to resist the taunts of boys and the notion that any girl is ugly. The girl singers speak to girl children directly when they sing: *Adamma ee imara mma* ("Adamma, you are beautiful)," which instills self-confidence in their fellow girls. Repeating the word *mma* ("beauty)" twice in one line of a song stresses the importance of beauty. Because girls are frequently defined by their physical looks, using *Adamma,* a name that literally means "beautiful daughter", and further declaring, *imara mma* ("you are beautiful"), provide a solid response to the bullies and resists societal norms. This sentiment is amplified as the Igbo girl child hears: "Beautiful daughter, you are beautiful." These expressions in this song interrogate societal standards of beauty while affirming the girl child's inner beauty, which is her joy.

Because music is a space that prepares girls for marriage, girls utilize it to voice their opinions about how they should be treated. The lyrics of the song *Sylve* are a direct message to suitors who try to flaunt their wealth around girls in order to woo them into marriage.

Sylve Sylve, onye agbala moto na ama anyi oo (Sylve, do not ride your car around our compound)
Oburu na iga alum alu, zutaram akwa isi nde ocha (If you would marry me, buy me a foreign head wrap)
Umu egwu well done, Victoria well done, etc. (Children dancers well done).

Sylve is the short form of the name Sylvester. Igbo children do not call their elders by their first names; they are expected to add a prefix that represents respect for their elder, and the prefix differs across regions. Because the girls are singing about a man who is old enough to be a husband, the song presumes that the man will be older than the girls. While many songs include the prefix, the name "Sylve" is tricky because the extra syllable in *ster* and the prefix would make the rhyming of the song difficult. As such, girls use the nickname Sylve, for calling a future husband by a nickname is better than calling his name without respect. The girls start with the nickname, caution men not to flaunt their wealth, and further tell them what to bring as a gift to clarify their intentions. Traditionally girls are required to accept whatever gift a suitor brings; whether a man is an actual suitor is unclear if he just drives his car around. Through song, the girls are encouraging men to make their intentions clear. In the last part of the song, when the dance intensifies, the girls commend themselves for speaking out. The lead singer calls their names while congratulating them by saying: "Well done!" Their resistance is evident in their songs, dance, and demeanor.

Sustaining Girls' Dance in Nigeria

While exploring how music is used in Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina's memoirs *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Savanna Lucas investigates the ways in which music can be used to articulate a renewed sense of pan-Africanism. Lucas succinctly states that music in Africa is constantly evolving through moments, boundaries, adaptation, and circulation, and that listening to music can be a personal or collective experience. As a result, music resists finiteness by acting as an agent or tool to evoke memories of observation and to communicate renewable and changing identities. Negotiating identities through music reveals individual elements that vary contextually, temporally, and spatially, while resisting essentialist representations (Lucas, 2019, p. 303). I acknowledge Lucas' assertion but further explore the nuances of musical expressions and experiences that inform the constantly changing musical functions brought on by cultural

influences around the globe. Specifically, in this section I address factors that lead to changes in musical performance spaces, the practitioners' lived experiences in connection with the hegemonic powers necessitating the changes, and the effects of the changes in *Avu Udu* dance. Because some changes in musical performance emerge from the imposition of cultures and ideologies, musical change does not necessarily occur organically. Hence, this analysis problematizes the notion of pan-Africanism as a unification of the musical cultures of the African peoples because it erases the diversity and complexity of musical performance practices.

Sustaining *Avu Udu* Dance in recent times has been challenging. The evolution of the *Avu Udu* dance stems from Nigeria's socio-economic and political instability. The effects are three-fold. First, the security situation in Nigeria (kidnapping and endless clamor for secession from various ethnic groups) has made it difficult for girls to rehearse by moonlight or even to perform at all. Secondly, because of the gender-based violence that the girls face when they travel to perform their music—from compound to compound, home to home, and village to village—parents have allowed boy children to become members of the dance groups in order to "protect" the girls. Thirdly, the quest to "make the music sound better" has roots in patriarchy and colonization and has contributed to drastic changes in performance practices.

When I was growing up, my hometown Amakohia was considered a suburb of the main city, Owerri, the capital of Imo State. The town had few houses, and not many people lived there. The terrain consisted of mostly trees and bushes, and the moon shone most nights. However, the town has since become a full-blown city with the busy life, modernization, and insecurities that characterize an urban environment. Along with the electric lights and tall buildings that hide the moon, cases of harassment and abuse have proliferated in this and other unregulated busy Nigerian cities. Besides the local issues, crimes associated with heated national politics and ethnic tensions proliferate in the eastern part of Nigeria. Kidnapping for ransom, youth massacres, and abduction are now common. As such, most parents no longer allow their children to dance by moonlight. Girls who do manage to perform usually rehearse during the day and only perform during the festivals. Subsequently, the *Avu Udu* dance has disappeared in my city as well as in many cities in Igboland; it now exists predominantly in rural areas. With a goal of preserving indigenous cultures, the members of the National Council for Arts and Culture perform staged *Avu Udu* dance and other lost musical genres. However, when performed by employed professional dancers on stages, the *Avu Udu* dance loses its social function. Although many Igbo people believe that the arts council is doing an excellent job of sustaining culture, older adults singing girls' songs on a stage for entertainment undermines the performance practice and does not represent the culture in its original context.

These days, when parents decide to allow their girl children to perform the *Avu Udu,* they typically send an older boy child or relative to accompany the girls. Several accounts of boys defending their sisters against bullies as they walk around performing their music have sustained this new addition. Because bullying and harassment towards girls are frequently reported, many parents have decided to send their boy children to accompany the girls. Finding older boys or men to escort the girls is usually easy because most dances are performed on a festival day (Christmas, Easter, New Year, or traditional festivals). Consequently, many older boys and men are available and willing to walk around and examine the goings-on in various compounds, villages, and communities; escorting the girls provides an opportunity to do so. Parents are more comfortable when older boys accompany their girl children to dance performances and insist that their daughters should only dance if boys accompany them. However, in recent times, they have abused the privilege; they police the girls by controlling their musical performance, monitoring their

behavior, and demanding to be included in sharing the money. While the inclusion of men and boys might be necessary by some measures, "protection" in this context is often an excuse to reinforce patriarchy. While protecting their sisters or relatives, some have been accused of abusing other girls in the group. Moreover, some of them demand to be included when the girls share the money they receive from the performances. In so doing, they are paid for volunteering or being asked to escort and protect the girls. The inclusion of men and boys has resulted in drastic changes that affect the performance practices.

Perhaps, the most visible evolution in performance practices is evident in the changes in the various arts that comprise the *Avu Udu* dance. These changes evolved to become increasingly noticeable between the late 1980s and 1990s, when I participated in the group, and contemporary times. The quest to "make the music sound better" and the desire to further protect the girls inform the instrumentation, costumes, and lyrics, and are rooted in patriarchy and colonization. "Making music sound better" manifests in the change from a supposedly "simplistic" rhythm to increasingly complex interlocking rhythms. The whistle, pot drum, foot stomps, finger snaps, and clapping result in complex layers of interlocking rhythms that create hocketing and polyrhythmic effects. One exemplary rhythmic pattern that accompanies the vocals is represented in Figure 1.

Ada Di Mma (Beautiful Girl)

Transcribed by Ruth Opara

Igbo Folk

Soprano
Concert Bass Drum
Claves
Stamp
Finger Snap
Hand Clap

3
S.
Con. BD
Clv.
Sta.
Fi. Sna.
Hd. Clp.

5
S.
Con. BD
Clv.
Sta.
Fi. Sna.
Hd. Clp.

7

S.
Con. BD
Clv.
Sta.
Fi. Sna.
Hd. Clp.

8

S.
Con. BD
Clv.
Sta.
Fi. Sna.
Hd. Clp.

10

S.
Con. BD
Clv.
Sta.
Fi. Sna.
Hd. Clp.

Figure 1. The song “Ada di Mma” with rhythmic accompaniment, transcribed by the author from one of the performances by the Izombe girls in Imo State, Nigeria (July 2021).

Depending on the song and the audience’s participation, these rhythms might change, while some songs include no accompaniment. Obviously, these patterns are not simplistic; regardless of their complexity or simplicity, they provide suitable accompaniments to the girls’ songs. However, boys who primarily participate in musical genres with more layering and more interlocking and polyrhythmic effects feel that they need to improve the music. They add more instruments—

drums, slit drums, gong, and the rattle—which subsequently changes the rhythm of the music to include more upbeat complex rhythms. This forces the girls to dance more quickly and consequently to lose some of the graceful slow moves that characterize the dance. Even when the girls start slowly, the boys quickly move to a faster rhythm. While the additional instruments provide more layers and rhythmic complexity, they do not necessarily improve the music, and girls often express their frustration with their inability to control the rhythms. The instrumentation does not necessarily suit the songs and works to distort the dance movements. Because men are believed to be better drummers in Igbo society, the inclusion of drums and other instruments that were not originally part of the genre reinforces male dominance in women's and girls' musical performance spaces. The changes in the lyrics and costumes are products of colonization. The quest to cover women and girls' bodies, with its roots in Christianity, led to the evolution of costumes in many areas. Instead of carefully folded wrappers—which reveal the girls' navels and other body parts—girls wear t-shirts and other blouses in order to cover themselves. Lyrical changes have become even more entrenched. English names and words are included in the song lyrics, as they are now part of the Igbo world. The song *Sylve* reveals the quest to fit into the hybrid Nigerian colonial culture: the girls incorporate the word *moto* (the short form of motor vehicle) instead of the Igbo name *ugbo ala*. When asked, they affirm that they want to be inclusive, which in the Nigerian context is a marker of colonial language. British colonial officials amalgamated over 250 ethnic groups with different languages and made English the lingua franca while providing limited resources to study that language. The struggle to communicate freely and effectively yielded a pidgin English—an English-based creole language spoken across Nigeria—which incorporates English and multiple indigenous languages.

The girls incorporate some English words in their song lyrics because folks from other ethnic groups become excited when they understand a few words of traditional Igbo lyrics. Because of the joy that Nigerians from different ethnic groups express when they know some of the lyrics, girls feel the need to incorporate more English words, as they want their music to be recognized nationally. Politicians and elites, who benefited from the colonial Nigeria project, use the media, especially radio and TV, to perpetuate the colonial agenda by supporting musical genres that "promote unity," including popular national music that undermines indigenous musical ideas and practices (Allen, 2004, p. 1). Although scholars have long argued that songs have served as active agents for decolonization (Webb-Gannon and Webb, 2019, p. 325), I maintain that the sustainability of *Avu Udu* depends on the ways that songs evolve to fit into the colonial narrative.

Changes in the Avu Udu performance are geared towards gaining acceptability into the colonial enterprise called Nigeria. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, Nigerians have grappled with what it means to be a Nigerian or a patriotic Nigerian. They tend to be allegiant to themselves first, followed by their various families, ethnic groups, and states, before the nation of Nigeria (Uzowulu and Umeogu, 2021, p. 79). As is the case in many African countries, belonging to a "nation" means abandoning a considerable part of their ethnic identity. On the one hand, the inclusion of musical lyrics that are accessible to a broader Nigerian audience helps to sustain the girls' musical genre. It provides an easy and effective way to integrate into the Nigerian colonial project and to renew a sense of pan-Africanism that reaches beyond Nigeria's borders. On the other hand, it disrupts the musical rhyme and meanings. Consequently, the African girl child must constantly negotiate these contradictions by resisting and adapting to changes in order to sustain her music locally, nationally, and globally.

Conclusion

The government and other institutions (family, religious organizations, and so on) in Nigeria have failed the girl child, especially those who are poor and vulnerable. As a result, many girls are constantly seeking means of survival and negotiating societal expectations. Musical genres involving girls, including the *Avu Udu,* provide a space for these negotiations and resistance. While some of the girls' experiences, like colonial impact, might be inevitable due to Africa's contact with the West and other reasons, these institutions could ameliorate living standards for the girl child and society at large by addressing the security issues in Nigeria, educating the male child, and not participating in harassing the girl child. It is also important that musical genres like *Avu Udu* survive so that Igbo and Nigerian girls who would participate can continue to express themselves through music.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Ulakwo and Izombe girl dancers in Imo State, Nigeria. I am indebted to all Igbo and Nigerian girls whose experiences informed this paper.

References

Aborisade, Richard. (2020) Sexual violence in Nigerian MusiCultural festivals: Narratives of the unheard victims. In: L. Platt and R. Finkel (eds.) *Gendered Violence at International Festivals*. Oxon, UK: Routledge. pp. 39–53.

Ahmed, Yunana, and Eje, Monday Bello. (2016) A discourse analysis of Goodluck Jonathan's response to the kidnapping of the Chibok girls. *Covenant Journal of Language Studies*, *3*/2, 39–53.

Allen, Lara. (2004) Music and politics in Africa. *Social Dynamics 30*/2, 1–19.

Durán, Lucy. (2015) Growing into music in Mali: Perspectives on informal learning in West Africa. In N. Economidou and M. Stakelum (eds.) *European Perspectives on Music Education Vol. 4: Every Learner Counts: Democracy and Inclusion in Music Education.* Innsbruck: Helbling Verlag. pp. 49–64.

Durán, Lucy and Diallo, Moustapha. (2019) *Tegere Tulon: Handclapping Songs of Mali.* Macina Film, commissioned and published by Kronos Quartet Performing Arts, San Francisco, California.

Ezeigbo, Theodora Akachi. (1990) Traditional women's institutions in Igbo society: Implications for the Igbo female writer. *African Languages and Cultures 3*/2, 149–65.

Human Rights Watch (2019, March 4). *Violence against Women Pervasive in Nigeria.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/14/violence-against-women-pervasive-nigeria [accessed 26 August 2022].

Imonikhe, Justina, Aluede, Oyaziwo and Idogho, Philipa. (2012) A survey of teachers' and students' perception of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions of Edo State, Nigeria. *Asian Social Science 8*/1, 268–274.

Jaji, Tsitsi Ella. (2014) *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Livermon, Xavier. (2020) *Kwaito Bodies: Remastering Space and Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lucas, Savannah. (2019) Music memoirs from Africa: Tracking music in Binyavanga

Wainaina's memoir: One day I will write about this place. *Social Dynamics 45*/2, 303–323.

Maclean, Ruth and Abrak, Isaac. (2018) Boko Haram kept one Dapchi girl who refused to deny her Christianity. *The Guardian*, 24/3/2018.

Muobike, Omanwa Ifeoma. (2017) The Guardian and the Nation newspapers' framing of the abduction of Chibok girls. *International Journal of Communication 22*/1, 1–14.

Nadaswaran, Shalini. (2012) Dispelling the myth of the 'silent woman': The Nigerian Igbo woman in Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966): Reflections & retrospectives. *African Literature Today 30*, 108–121.

New, Leon J. (1979) The musical background of modern Igbo children. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education 59*, 79–83.

Odeh, Bestman E.; Eze, Augustina N.; Dioka, Bridget O.; and Ugochukwu, Chinaza Loveline. (2021) Speech act analysis of Dame Patience Jonathan's speeches. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 11*/3, 235–243.

Okafor, Samuel; Okoye, Elizabeth; Onu, Jancefrances; Kekeocha-Christopher, Irene; Obiozor, Elizabeth; Okechukwu, Blessing and Ogbonna, Ann. (2022) Sex-for-marks scandals in South-East Nigeria institutions of higher learning: Female student victims and the war against sexual harassment. *Italian Sociological Review*, 12/*1*, 1–118.

Osasumwen, Olanrewaju Faith; Adekunle, Olanrewaju; Roland, Loromeke Ejiroghene and Segun, Joshua. (2017) Implications of the release of Chibok girls on Nigeria's war on terrorism. *Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs 5*/1, 149–169.

Pairon, Lukas. (2020) *Music Saved Them, They Say: Social Impacts of Music Making and Learning in Kinshasa (DR Congo).* New York, NY: Routledge.

Rovine, Victoria L. (2014) *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Schumann, Anne. (2008) The beat that beat Apartheid: The role of music in the resistance against Apartheid in South Africa. *Critical African Studies 14*/8, 17–39.

Uzowulu, Onyeka Emmanuel, and Umeogu, BonaChristus. (2021) Indigeneship, citizenship and the Nigerian state: A philosophical appraisal. *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy 12*/2, 78–94.

Webb-Gannon, Camellia and Webb, Michael. (2019) "More than a music, It's a movement": West Papua decolonization songs, social media, and the remixing of resistance. *The Contemporary Pacific 31*/2, 309–343.