

Article

Celestine Ukwu – the Music, the Message, the Man

Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna

Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; ikenna.onwuegbuna@unn.edu.ng; orcid.org/0000-0002-1577-8224

Abstract

Celestine Ukwu was a pioneering Nigerian musician who became renowned for fusing philosophical reflection and social commentary into his music. Through the historical method and content analysis, this paper explores Ukwu's musical style and evolution, lyrical themes, biographical background, and lasting cultural legacy. It analyses representative songs such as *Uso ndu*, *Ije enu*, and *Onwunwa*. The paper discusses Ukwu's ability to distil complex existential themes into catchy, insightful songs that resonated widely. It delves into his unique musical synthesis of traditional Igbo folk rhythms with neo-folk, highlife, and afro-fusion genres. Examining songs like *Mmefie a diro mgbayalu a ma di* and *Ome ife jide ofo*, the paper illuminates Ukwu's talent for sage-like lyrical wisdom. Finally, it assesses Celestine Ukwu's enduring influence on African popular music and position as one of Nigeria's most important cultural voices in the post-independence era. The paper ultimately argues that Ukwu's genius lay in his fusion of musical innovation and philosophical rumination into a body of humanistic work that remains relevant decades later.

Keywords: Celestine Ukwu, highlife music, philosophy, social commentary, fusion, neo-folk

Introduction

African music, by its nature, is logogenic and at the same time pathogenic. Collectively, they can be appreciated as an artistic expression of the people's culture based on the language and emotions of the people. This cultural artefact communicates a feeling deeper than the sonic consideration of Western music. The indigenous idioms of the people are often detected at the base of the music. Nigerian highlife music is not an exception; even though it is a syncretic popular style, it retains all the features that have stemmed from its roots – folk music. It was this highlife music that caught the attention, arrested the interest, and sustained the loyalty of Celestine Ukwu. This is easily understandable as the Igbo would say: '*Egwu gbalu n'iru azi ka azi na-agba*' (Each generation partakes in the reigning music of their time).

In the 1930s and 1940s, Nigeria saw the emergence of indigenous popular music genres that were a deliberate reaction against the Western dance music that had become prevalent during the colonial period. These new musical styles grew out of traditional "concert parties" and varied by regions across Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups. The Igbo merchants played a key role in this musical development – their travels abroad exposed them to diverse foreign cultures, and they brought back fascinating foreign items and practices including music. By combining elements of traditional Igbo entertainment music styles like *igede*, *ifo*, *nkwa*, *egwu-amala*, and *egwu-une*, Igbo minstrels laid the foundation for Nigeria's first popular music genre with truly national appeal – the neo-folk, native blues styles of *dodokido* and *akuko n'egwu*, which were precursors to Nigerian Highlife (Akpabot, 1989; Collins & Richards, 1982, Nwosu-Lo Bamijoko [as cited in Okoro, 2005]; Okafor, 2005; Onwuegbuna, 2011, 2015a, 2015b).



In his contribution, Graham (1994) writes:

While *juju* and *fuji* have ruled among the Yoruba, high-quality *highlife* was the norm in the East for well over forty years. *Highlife* arrived in Nigeria...and it easily took root in Igboland. The Igbo have a traditional familiarity with stringed instruments; early “Igbo Blues” is redolent of later guitar-band idioms... *Highlife*, with its Western and Christian musical likes, slotted well into the Igbo cultural framework – non-muslim, individualist, outward-looking (p. 305).

In the 1930s-40s, three original neo-folk genres emerged from Nigeria's main regions – *Kokoma* from the East, *Dodokido* from the West, and *Bonsue* from the North. These genres laid the groundwork for highlife music. The travelling Igbo merchants' exposure to diverse foreign musical cultures led to a fusion of African and Western traditions involving new scales, modes, styles, harmonies, and instruments. This synthesis was first termed *Native Blues* – an early national musical style played on European box guitars, accordions, traditional drums, and shakers, and often a bottle tapped rhythmically with a knife. Key early *Native Blues* artistes were G.T. Onwuka, Okonkwo Adigwe, Benjamin Kokoro Aduronmu, and others. Soon the style was dominated by Bobby Benson, Sam Akpabot, Eddie Okonta, Stephen Amechi, Chris Ajilo, and more. Also prominent were Charles Iwegbue, Atomic Seven of Aba, Roy Chicago, Baby Face Paul, and Erasmus Januwari (Okoro, 2005; Onwuegbuna, 2022).

Well before Nigeria's 1960 independence from colonial rule, numerous highlife bands had established themselves across the country. Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson's group was based at the Dolphin Café in Onitsha. Dan Satch Joseph and the Atomic Eight held a residency at the Travellers' Lodge in Aba, while the Paradise Rhythm Dance Orchestra was stationed in Calabar. In northern Nigeria, Satche Ayo and the Sahara All Stars Band were centred in Jos. Meanwhile, Ibadan was home to Eddy Okonta and the Jofab Star Aces, Zeb Philips and the Blue Nine, and other groups (Idonije, 2000a).

Lagos was the vibrant hub of the music scene, with top musicians resident at popular hotels and clubs throughout the city. E.C. Arinze performed regularly at the Kakadu Hotel in Yaba, Eric Onugha at the Central Hotel nearby, and Victor Olaiya at the Stadium Hotel. Other big names included Roy Chicago at the Abalabi Hotel in Mushin, Adeolu Akinsanya and his Western Toppers at the Western Hotel in Mushin, and Charles Iwegbue at Lido Bar on Agege Motor Road. Stephen Amechi frequently played Empire Hotel in Idiro. Bobby Benson was the star attraction at Kaban Bamboo on Ikorodu Road, while trumpeter Zeal Onyia, formerly with Bobby Benson and E.T. Mensah's bands, moved over to the Ambassador Hotel. Major musicians and venues dotted the Lagos landscape, making it the hub of Nigerian popular music (Idonije, 2000a).

By Nigeria's Independence in 1960, highlife music had become enormously popular and widely embraced across the country. As Idonije (2000a) notes, highlife was so universally loved that it was accepted as Nigeria's national music without the need for any formal legislation or constitutional provision. Performing for dignitaries like

Princess Alexandria of Kent, Sir James Robertson (representing Queen Elizabeth II), and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa on the actual Independence Day festivities was Victor Olaiya and his All Stars Orchestra. Olaiya had the distinguished honour of entertaining these VIP guests with beloved highlife melodies, underscoring the music's role as a reflection of Nigerian national identity. Highlife had risen to prominence on the airwaves and among the people, cementing its status as the sound of an independent Nigeria (Onwuegbuna, 2022; Uhakheme, 2000).

The Music – Highlife

Highlife is more than just music—it serves to integrate people into their cultural norms and values. As such, it is an influential tool for social mobilization and cohesion. The underlying philosophy of highlife encompasses public education and awareness, promoting understanding and unity within a culture. Through its lyrics, highlife music extols virtues like heroism, patriotism, love, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance. These values are often conveyed through dirges, praises, insults, and satire. By praising desired virtues and criticizing unwanted behaviours, highlife reinforces cultural ideals. Whether inspiring or admonishing, highlife music philosophically binds communities to their heritage, making it a powerful force for cultural integration and evolution (Okafor, 2019; Onwuegbuna, 2022).

Highlife songs are typically performed in various Nigerian vernacular languages like Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Kalabari, Efik, and Idoma. Pidgin English, locally called "All-man language," is also widely used, as in Celestine Ukwu's *Money Palaver*. Some highlife songs like Celestine Ukwu's *No Condition Is Permanent*, Ifeanyi Olor's *Back to Highlife*, and E.C. Arinze's *Time for Highlife* are rendered in English. However, Igbo became the predominant highlife language in Nigeria and all of West Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. Even non-Igbo Nigerian highlife stars like Victor Olaiya (Yoruba), Rex Jim Lawson (Kalabari), Inyang Henshaw (Efik), and Victor Uwaifo (Edo) recorded major hits in Igbo. Other West African highlife musicians like Okuku Seku of Ghana and Money Man of Cameroon also recorded songs in Igbo. This widespread use of Igbo correlates to the tonal nature of African languages, which complements the melodic pitch contours in highlife music. So, while highlife encompasses many languages, Igbo emerged as its lingua franca during the genre's peak (Onwuegbuna, 2022).

Highlife music encountered its first major setback in 1967 with the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, which raged until 1970. As Idonije (2000b) reports, this marked the beginning of an era of decline for the genre. The upheaval and violence of war disrupted the vibrant music scene that had thrived in cities like Lagos and Onitsha. Musicians struggled to perform and record, and the cohesive spirit that highlife embodied was shattered. While a few stalwarts like Victor Olaiya continued to wave the flag, the genre lost momentum and entered a transitional period from which it never fully recovered the overwhelming popularity and youthful exuberance of its heyday. The civil war dealt a blow both to Nigeria's unity and highlife's dominance, initiating a slow fade after the peak golden years of the early 60s.

According to Idonije (2000b),

Lagos had the largest number of Highlife musicians, most of whom were from the East of the Niger. They all moved out; and even though some were conscripted into the army as musicians, it was to complement the war effort rather than to enhance the evolution of the nation's musical culture (p.35).

Lagos was not the only area impacted by the Eastern musicians' relocation during the civil war – the entire Western and Northern regions faced the same loss. In 1963, the Igbo highlife star Celestine Ukwu ventured north to form the African Band in Maiduguri, then the Republic Knights in Zaria. But with the war's outbreak, he retreated east to Onitsha and started the Civil Starlites Band. As highlife shifted eastward, the genre nearly vanished from western cities, save for stalwarts like Victor Olaiya now competing with the rising *juju* and *apala* styles. The North, already sparsely populated by artistes like Bala Miller in Kaduna, was deprived of entertainment and music. So while Lagos felt the sting, the wider Nigerian landscape was generally drained of vibrant highlife during the war years. The music's geographic centre of gravity lurched east, leaving other regions fallow, and marking the start of the genre's decline in dominance nationally (Onwuegbuna, 2022).

When the civil war ended in 1970, the East became saturated with highlife artistes while Nigeria was socially fragmented. This led aspiring musicians to explore new popular styles that would stand out commercially in the flux, like *Afro-rock*, *Afro-calypto*, *Afro-reggae*, and *Afro-funk*. Myriad bands pioneered these fusions, including the Black Stones of Port Harcourt, Funkees, Apostles, Wings, and Sweet Breeze of Aba. Others like One World, Hi-Grades, Aktions, Strangers, Wrinklers Experience, Doves, Founders 15, and Semi-Colon also grabbed airplay. But as highlife declined nationally, some stalwarts like Celestine Ukwu, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Eddy Okwedi, Stephen Osita Osadebe, and Mike Ejeagha insisted on upholding their genre's legacy. Forming new vibrant highlife bands, they kept the embers warm while Nigeria moved in fresh musical directions post-war. The conflict left the East bloated with talent, prompting innovation, but for some veterans, highlife still burned brightly despite its dimming dominance.

To revive interest, highlife pioneers started adapting the genre in creative ways – fusing styles and diversifying their instrumentation to achieve a sound that was both novel and traditional. This balanced innovation allured audiences while upholding continuity. Celestine Ukwu electrified the thumb piano's melodic effect by incorporating the vibraphone into his band. Joe Nez used electronic organs to complement his calypso-highlife rhythms. Osita Osadebe's guitarists deployed *wah-wah* and cry-baby pedals to *rockify* his sound. Bassist Inyang Henshaw *funked* up his highlife by slapping and pulling the strings. Through such experimentation, the core foundations remained as veterans like Ukwu, Nez, and Osadebe infused modern flavours into highlife to regenerate fans nostalgic for its glory days but also hungry for its evolution. The artistic license to modify resuscitated public appetite by refreshing a beloved style (Onwuegbuna, 2022).

As Nigeria recovered from civil war, many youthful musicians chased commerce by exploring Afro-rock and other popular styles, abandoning highlife. Yet some

stalwarts stayed firmly rooted, even attracting younger recruits who threw their vigour into upholding the genre's continuity. These faithfuls included Celestine Ukwu, Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe, Raphael Amarabem and the Peacocks, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Dr. Victor Olaiya, Paulson Kalu, Mike Ejeagha, David Bull and the Professional Seagulls, and Sunny Brown. The new blood rallying to highlife encompassed bands like Oriental Brothers, Muddy Ibe, Goddy Ezike, Oliver De Coque, Prince Nico Mbarga, Ali Chukwuma, Ikenga Super Stars, and Ifeanyi Ordor. So while many Nigerian youths flocked to styles like rock, a cross-generational coalition of veterans and newcomers carried the highlife torch, ensuring its flame was not fully extinguished through a turbulent transitional era.

The Afro-rock craze waned within a decade as bands tired of the fad, disbanded. This void sparked an influx of vibrant young highlife talent whose rhythms stirred unprecedented excitement. Oriental Brothers debuted with Cameroonian *makossa*-inspired guitar licks, while Oliver De Coque unveiled powerful, up-tempo Congolese-style leads. Ikenga Super Stars explored *soukous* and *liquour-liquour* dance beats. But it was Prince Nico Mbarga's beautiful, pidgin-English *Sweet Mother* in 1976 that resonated across Africa, its Cameroonian-Nigerian fusion recovering far-flung highlife fans. The commercial success was too appealing for aspiring artistes to ignore.

In 1982, Rex Lawson's ex-guitarist Ifeanyi Ordor released the English-language album *Back to Highlife*, urging Nigerian youth to re-embrace their heritage, supervised by Sonny Okosun's mentor Goddy Oku to maximize outreach. This call was amplified when the physically similar Oliver De Coque declared a "Highlife War" through 1990's *Musik Africa*. He sustained this offensive with consistent albums, even rapping over hip-hop in *Social Man* to entice youth. Likewise, Celestine Ukwu's guitarist, Emmantex Ikediashi and his Black Tops series, *Highlife Unadulterated*, contributed to the continuity. So, as Afro-rock faded, vibrant young highlifers and veterans sparked a comeback, ultimately enticing the youth by fusing modern styles while urging a return to their roots.

These revival efforts bore fruit. Lawrence Obusi and his band Locomotion make rousing highlife statements evoking Celestine Ukwu and Goddy Ezike. Manuel Mavis and his Akara-Ugo Super Stars craft impressive albums easily mistaken for Oliver De Coque's work. Former minstrel Emeka Morocco Maduka had also permanently joined the highlife ranks. Even most modern Nigerian gospel praise albums paste together highlife styles. So through the dedication of its stalwarts and evolvers, highlife has permeated diverse new realms—from inspiring locomotive contemporary acts to serving as the backbone of contemporary Christian music. Thanks to its versatility and resilience, highlife continues engaging new generations of artistes and audiences.

Ultimately, highlife absorbed aspects of African, European, American, Asian, and Middle Eastern musical heritage. Variants emerged like *Higherlife*, *Hip-life*, *High-pop*, *Gbedu*, and *Africalypso*—crafting globally appealing, rock- and jazz-oriented sounds while retaining indigenous flavour. Exponents of these new offshoots are manifold, including Sonny Okosuns, Tony Grey, Christy Essien-Igbokwe, Onyeka Onwenu,

Bongos Ikwue, Pat Finn, Arinze Ejiogor, Emma Ogosi, and Jonel Cross. Others are Veno Marioghe-Mbanefo, Charley Boy, Wuru Fadaka, Sunny Neji, Zubi Enebeli, Seyi Sholagbade, Kola Ogunkoya and Lagbaja. So through decades of reinterpretation and borderless absorption, highlife has spawned ever-evolving variants that resonate with wider audiences while upholding the style's core ethos. This flexibility and inclusivity have ensured highlife's longevity, as new generations of artistes continue reimagining it in their image (Idonije, 2002; Onwuegbuna, 2022).

The new millennium sparked a sporadic explosion of Nigerian artistes masterfully fusing highlife and hip-hop—Flavour, Wizboyy, J. Martins, Wiz Kid, Mister Incredible, Timaya, Terry G, Duncan Mighty, Omawunmi, P-Square, Don Jazzy, Tiwa Savage, Iyanya, Davido, Wande Coal, Eldee, Ransom, Phyno, Sound Sultan, MC Galaxy, Selebobo, and Yemi Alade. By uniquely hybridizing highlife across genres, they have vastly expanded its intergenerational and socioeconomic appeal. However, unlike the socially conscious “old school,” this neo-highlife renaissance has deviated greatly from the genre’s traditional utilitarian ethos. While modern pioneers have fuelled highlife’s popularity by infusing modern styles, they have traded its communal obligations for mass-market success. Their expansive sound may captivate wider audiences but risks severing highlife’s roots.

The Message

In accord with Onwuegbuna’s (2015a) extrapolations, Celestine Ukwu's personal opinions and beliefs significantly shaped his ideology and worldview on topics like philosophy, spirituality, nationalism, politics, and interpersonal relationships. This ideology went on to inform the common themes found in the lyrics of Ukwu's songs—themes centring around love, life, death, destiny, dualism, retribution, and survival.

Ukwu's philosophical and ideological leanings in his music likely resonated deeply with the students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. After an eclectic performance by Ukwu's Music Royals Band at the Margaret Ekpo Hall in 1972, the enthusiastic students fittingly renamed the band to Philosophers National in recognition of Ukwu's talent and substance. This renaming highlights just how profoundly Ukwu's thoughtful lyrics and ideological perspectives impacted his audiences (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999).

The pioneering highlife works of Celestine Ukwu frequently carry resonant social messages alongside their artistic innovations. His lyrics convey philosophical depth and social awareness by tackling themes aimed at bettering society and humanity itself. The works are permeated with Igbo cultural identity and traditions. Both the style and philosophical messages of his songs strongly reflect the values and worldviews of his ethnic background. Several resonant themes emerge that demonstrate this deep connection.

Egalitarianism is a prime Igbo principle showcased in Ukwu's music. In the song *Grade by Grade*, he espoused the spirit of equality, industry, and destiny being in one's own hands rather than determined by fate or birth right. This aligns with the Igbo cultural emphasis on achievement through hard work. Similarly, Ukwu levied

trenchant criticism against materialism in songs like *Ego Eju Aka*, which condemn the unbridled accumulation of wealth for its own sake. Such greed is anathema to the Igbo communal system based on sharing resources. By highlighting these tensions, Ukwu's lyrics provide social commentary on the changes affecting post-civil war Igbo society.

The transience of life is another theme the song *Ije Enu* touchingly addresses, reflecting Igbo philosophical views about the uncertainty of existence and constant flux. Other songs imprint Igbo wisdom and identity by incorporating folk musical styles and lyrics pondering metaphysical questions about human nature.

Ukwu boldly addressed specific societal issues as well. The song *Money Palaver* sheds light on the problem of prostitution and the accompanying crisis of urban poverty. Other songs like *Ije Enu*, *Ụsọ ndu*, and *Elege* contain meaningful commentary on moral questions and injustice. Critics—including Okafor, et al (1999), Egbunike (2022), Aguodogwu (2022), and Muzikifan (2022)—agree that these works are “pregnant” with philosophical insight into the deeper malaise behind surface social troubles.

In the oral tradition, Ukwu carried on the Igbo practice of transferring generational knowledge through storytelling songs that bore essential cultural meanings. The communalism emphasized in his music also aligns with Igbo cultural norms of cooperation and the needs of the collective over extreme individualism.

Both in aesthetic form and thematic content, Ukwu's pioneering Igbo highlife works bore the profound imprint of his ethnic lineage. His artistic innovation preserves and celebrates Igbo culture even while addressing contemporary issues of societal change. The universal messages within his music are rooted in the particulars of Igbo highlife identity.

Ideological analysis of some purposively selected songs of Celestine Ukwu would lay bare some of his timeless messages that could easily pass for the gospel.

ỤSỌ NDU

The Sweetness of Life (Overindulgence)

(Spoken)

Oo! Ndị be anyị, k'anyị lotakene nụ
Oh! Our people, let's remember

N'enu ụwa nkea anyi nọ a burọ be anyi
That this world is not our home

N'anyị ncha bụ ofu na Chukwu
We are one before God

K'anyị ghalukene nụ ụsọ ndu
Let's restrain from overindulgence in life

Wee lota na ọ Chukwu kelu anyi n'ụwa
And remember that God is our Creator

K'anyi welu nu ofu obi wee bili n'udo na ndokwa
Let's live wholeheartedly in peace and togetherness

(Sung)

Ewo! N'uso ndu e gbugo anyi
Oh! Sweet living has killed us

Uso ndu e mego anyi, anyi adi elota nke anyi dili adi
Overindulgence has caused us to forget our past lives

Uso ndu e mego anyi, ufodu adi elotezi na Chukwu di fu
Overindulgence has caused us to forget the existence of God

Uso ndu e mego anyi, ufodu na atuzi egwu onwu
Sweet living makes some of us dread death

Ewo, uso ndu e mego anyi ife
Oh! Overindulgence has caused us great harm

While bemoaning overindulgence, Celestine Ukwu admonishes us to anchor our attention on God, learn the lessons from our past, be at peace with ourselves and others, as well as prepare for our inevitable death, with confidence. A balanced view of life and death, such as this, goes to show the depth of Celestine Ukwu's understanding of the invisible reality. In some other songs, he considers life a journey and death a debt. He also shuns materialism and endorses a life of moderation.

IJE ENU

Life's Sojourn

Ije enu bu na ndi na-akwa na-akwa, ma ndi na-anuli na-anuli-o-o-o
Life's sojourn is such that some are grieving while others are rejoicing

Ije enu bu na ndi na-anuli na-anuli, ma ndi na-akwa na-akwa
Life's sojourn is such that some are rejoicing while others are grieving

Onye na-akwalu uwa nya malu n'uwa na-erughali
He that bemoans his lot should remember that the world vacillates

Onye na-anuli n'uwa nya lota n'enu na-erughali
He that rejoices should remember that the world undulates

O buru k'anyi si loo k'ife uwa si adi
Life does not always grant our wishes

O buru onye o dili mma tata k'o na-adili mma echi
It is not necessarily one who is favoured today that will be favoured tomorrow

Ije enu bu na ndi na-akwa na-akwa, ma ndi na-anuli na-anuli
Life's sojourn is such that some are grieving while others are rejoicing

Ije enu bu na ndi na-anuli na-anuli, ma ndi na-akwa na-akwa
Life's sojourn is such that some are rejoicing while others are grieving

In a few words, Celestine Ukwu succeeds in painting the picture of life's duality or polarity, succinctly. He considers life a journey that undulates between peaks and gorges. That life does not always grant our wishes implies that free will is conditioned by fate. This balanced point of view leaves us with the message that no condition of life is permanent. Rather, we should strive to be neither for nor against any situation in life. Such a detached disposition would then give us a vantage position to learn and grow above the extremes – negative and positive.

ỌNWUNWA **Temptation**

Ọnwunwa bịa o dika ụwa a gasịa
When temptation strikes, it appears the world has passed us by

Ọnwunwa bịa o dika ụwa e jedebe
When temptation strikes, it seems the world has ended

Ọnwunwa bịa o dika ụwa a gasịa
When temptation strikes, it appears the world has passed us by

Onye chekwube Olisa, e mesịa o ga-adị mma
But if you hope in God, later it will be all right

Ọnwunwa bịa o dika ụwa a gasịa
When temptation strikes, it appears the world has passed us by

Ọnwunwa bịa o bulụ ọlụ ekwensu
When temptation strikes we blame the devil

Ọnwunwa bịa o dika ụwa a gasịa
When temptation strikes, it appears the world has passed us by

Onye nwelu ndidi, e mesịa o ga-adị mma
Eventually, there is a reward for forbearance

Añana ntị asịlị umu-enu
Don't listen to the gossip of the world

Añana ntị okwu umu-ụwa
Don't bother about what people say

Añana ntị asịlị umu-enu
Don't listen to the gossip of mankind

Ife i mena n'umu ụwa ga asịlịlị
Whatever you do, people must talk

Añana ntị asịlị umu-enu
Don't listen to the gossip of the world

Añana ntị okwu umu-ụwa
Don't bother about what people say

Añana ntị asịlị umu-enu o
Don't listen to the gossip of the people

Ife i mena n'umu ụwa ga asịlịlị
Whatever you do, people must talk

Naturally, when the vicissitudes of life weigh one down, one becomes a veritable target for all manners of gossip. Here, Celestine Ukwu counsels that sudden undesirable changes in fortune are mere momentary temptations. One in this state should learn to forebear, not just the harrowing conditions of economic recession, but also the slander of people. The same people who praised you when you rode the crest of your life, will also despise you when you are down and out. It takes patience to understand that life is a swinging pendulum.

MMEFIE A DỊRỌ MGBAYALỤ A MA DỊ
No Offence, No Forgiveness

Mụ na yị ga ebi-o
We shall live together

Adamma, mụ na yị ga ebi
Adamma, we shall live together

Adamma, Nw'onye m bu n'obi, e kwerọ m zulu ike
Adamma, the girl after my heart, gives me restlessness

Oyị m, nw'onye m fụlụ n'anya, e kwerọ m larụ ụla
My beloved friend after my heart causes me sleeplessness

Oyị m, nw'onye m bu n'obi, e kwerọ m zulu ike
The friend after my heart gives me restlessness

Oyị m, nw'onye m fụlụ n'anya, welukene obi umeani
My beloved friend, be accommodating

Adamma, nw'onye m bu n'obi, weluken obi umeani
Adamma, the girl after my heart, be accommodating

Welukene obi umeani, adamma, onye-oma m fụlụ n'anya
Be accommodating, my beloved Adamma

Welukene obi umeani, Adamma, onye-oma m bu n'obi m
Be accommodating, Adamma, the girl after my heart

Welukene obi umeani, Adamma, mụ na yị ga ebi
Be accommodating, Adamma, we shall live together

Welukene obi umeani, adamma, onye-oma m fụlụ n'anya
Be accommodating, my beloved Adamma

Ọ bụ gịni ka m melu yị ị ji agbalụ m ọsọ?
What have I done that you run away from me?

Ọ bụ gịni ka m melu yị ị ji ewelu m iwe?
What have I done that you are angry with me?

Ife m emena yi, biko gbaghalu m
Whatever I have done to you, please forgive me

Ma mmefie adiṛo na mgbayalu a ma adi
If there was no offence, there would be no forgiveness

Ma mmefie adiṛo, Adamma, na mgbayalu a ma adi
If there was no offence, Adamma, there would be no forgiveness

Gbata b̄ia tie m obi, Adamma, onye-oma m f̄ulu n'anya
Come and embrace me, Adamma, my beloved

Gbata b̄ia tie me obi, Adamma, onye-oma m bu n'obi m
Come and embrace me, Adamma, the girl after my heart

Mu na yi ga ebi-o
You and I will live together

Adamma, mu na yi ga ebi-o
Adamma, you and I will live together

Another philosophical theme in Celestine Ukwu's music is the notion of "no offence, no forgiveness"—the idea that forbearance and letting go of past wrongs are meaningless without first acknowledging the original harm. Ukwu's lyrics explore how true reconciliation requires those who offend to take responsibility and show contrition for their actions. Empty apologies or skipping over the offence to offer cheap forgiveness alone solves nothing—it only papers over the underlying cracks. True healing involves the offenders owning up to how their words or deeds impacted others unjustly. It also requires the offended to find the grace within to forgive, once expressions of genuine remorse have been made. However, the lyrics powerfully affirm that reconciliation cannot begin until the initial wrong receives due recognition. In essence, Ukwu's message serves as a call for both hardened hearts and tender hearts—for offenders to show accountability and for the hurt to tap into divine compassion. His philosophy recognizes the complexity of forgiveness, which often entails moving from darkness into light, bitterness into understanding. By facing the offence first, space opens up for authentic forgiveness afterward—this forms the heart of forbearance.

Advocacy for peace, unity, and love is possibly the masked undertone running through this Ukwu's song. In an age of conflict and instability, arising from the just-ended civil war in 1970, he called on Nigerians to come together through this 'superficially' love song—promoting reconciliation and mutual understanding. His overarching goal was correcting wider social ills that plagued the national psyche, marked by interethnic distrust and enmity.

Celestine Ukwu leveraged his artistic medium to highlight issues of apathy and disunity while envisioning a more ethical, caring society living by his wisdom-filled lyrics. His catalog forms a song-by-song diagnosis of Nigeria's moral health during a turbulent era. By thoughtfully addressing these ills in the public discourse, Ukwu demonstrates music's power as an agent of social change. His fearless social consciousness left a legacy that resonates far beyond the aesthetic realm.

OME IFE JIDE OFO (Part 1)
Whoever Acts Should Act Righteously

(Spoken)

Ndị be anyị, anyị na-ewetalị unu ofu egwu anyị – Igede
Our people, we bring you one of our kinds of music – *Igede*

Igede bụ egwu omenanị anyị
Igede is our traditional music

Egwu ndị bụ ogalanya
The music of the wealthy

Egwu ndị chil'echichi
The music of the titled

Egwu ndị gbulu efi
Music of the *Ogbu-efi* titled men

Igede bụ eje be onye-ubiam
Igede is music that never goes to the destitute

K'anyị nekene nụ ife nina e kesili n'enu ụwa-a
Let's contemplate the entire creations of this world

Fa ncha digbado n'iche, n'iche
They all exist in opposites

O kelu igwe, kee anị
He/she/it created the above and the below

O kelu efifie, kee anyansi
He/she/it created the day and the night

Kee mma, kee njọ
Created good and evil

O biazị ike mmadu, O kee nwoke, kee nwanyị
And in creating the human, he/she/it created man and woman

Ma na-ime mmadu nina a, e nwelu nma, nwee njọ
Yet, within every human being, there exists the good and the bad

Nya bụ, onye mejọọ yị, e gbun'ye
So, if one offends you, don't condemn

Makana o nweazịlị omume nke dī mma
Because he/she equally has the good side

(Sung)

E gbune nwanne yị makana nwanne yị mejọlụ yị
Don't condemn your relation because he/she offends you

Ekwutona mmadu ibe yị makana mmadu ibe yị mefielu yị
Don't castigate others because they offend you

I na-ekwuto nwanne yi, o nwelu onye n'enwero ntupo?
As you condemn others, is anyone perfect?

I na-ekwuto mmadu ibe yi, o nwelu onye omume ya kwusi otu?
As you condemn your fellow beings, is anyone upright?

Onye obuna Chi kelu n'awa nwelunu omume nabu
Every person created on earth has two (opposing) characters

Omume nke di mma nu-o, na omume nke di njo
The positive and the negative characters

Amaka onye obuna a ra na-njo n'awa, o nwelili omume di mma
No matter the depth of one's negativity, there is also the positive side

Nya bu na tupu i kwutoo onye obuna, nyochagodu onwegi
Therefore, before you condemn anyone, examine yourself

Makana ife di be osa, diazi na be uze
Because what holds for *osa* also holds for *uze*

Osa enwe akwu, uze enwe akwu
Neither the *osa* nor the *uze* owns the palm fruits

Ife medebelu n'awa bu ome ife jide ofo n'aka-o
The principle of life should be: Whoever acts should act righteously

Ome ife jide ofo n'aka-o
Whoever acts should act righteously

Nke onye dili ya
Unto everyone his/her rights

A key philosophical theme in much of Celestine Ukwu's music is the duality of life—the co-existence of positive and negative, lightness and darkness. His lyrics often reflect on how suffering and hardship are unavoidable aspects of the human condition, occurring in tandem with joy and prosperity. Ukwu recognizes that the negative experiences in life are what make its positive moments truly precious and sweet. Just as the bitter taste of a lemon accentuates the sweetness of honey, tribulations in life help highlight the preciousness of the good times. By enduring the lows, people can fully appreciate the highs when fortunes change. Ukwu seems to suggest that life is meant to be lived in balance, embracing both the sunshine and the rain. The negatives thus shape human strength and resilience, while simultaneously enabling people to be grateful for and savour the positives whenever they arrive. Through meditating on life's dual nature, Ukwu's music offers hope to endure present troubles and have faith that better days lie ahead. The bitter and the sweet are forever intertwined.

Another moral principle that often emerges in Celestine Ukwu's songs is the idea that all human actions should be guided by righteousness. He believed that how one lives and interacts with others matters profoundly—that there exists a higher ethical standard to strive for in one's conduct. Ukwu felt that regardless of status, background, or circumstances, each person has a responsibility to act justly,

compassionately, and honestly in their dealings. Even amidst hardship and turmoil, individuals must seek to exemplify the best virtues – to move through the world with wisdom, restraint, courage, and morality. Ukwu's lyrics imply that living righteously provides meaning and purpose, no matter one's station in life. By adhering to ethical values, people participate in an eternal chain of goodness that uplifts human society. Though the path of integrity poses challenges and sacrifices, the lyrics ultimately suggest that moral awareness leads to greater fulfilment. For Ukwu, the essence of life and community lies in individuals striving to act nobly. The principle rings clear – whoever acts must endeavour to act righteously. This provides the foundation for human relations marked by justice, empathy, and profound purpose.

The Man – Celestine Ukwu

Born (the eldest of four male children) in the year 1940 to Mr. Anigbogu Ukwu and Mrs. Udenwo Ukwu of Umuavulu Abor, in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State, Celestine Stanley Onwurah Ukwu's village is about 17 kilometres from Enugu, the Coal City and administrative capital of Enugu State, Eastern Nigeria. Young Celestine started life in a very humble background whereby his father worked as a low-class but very progressive coal miner, while his mother helped out at running the home, raising her four sons, and engaging in subsistent farming (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999).

Right from the developmental stage, Celestine's interest in music was initiated by his grandmother, Nneolima Onyeze, who proved to be an expert in folklore and was also involved in traditional dances and spared no chances at stuffing Celestine with the folkloric tales and songs of the Igbo – full of parables and proverbs. His mother, Udenwo, was equally popular with many women folk dance groups that she participated in as the lead singer. His father was a popular village minstrel who excelled at performing the *Igede*, *Ikpa*, and *Ode* folk music of the Udi. His uncle, Vincent Ukwu, was the first known organist in the then-Udi Province. Celestine was later to build on these experiences as an artiste. At age eight, Celestine was further exposed to organized music as he transferred from St. Peter's Primary School, Abor to St. Mary's School, Port Harcourt, Rivers State. In Port Harcourt, Celestine lived with his uncle, Vincent Ukwu, who at the time was a school teacher, choir-master, and band-master at St. Mary's. Celestine received his first formal training in music from Uncle Vincent who taught him how to read musical notes and play the harmonium musical instrument as he performed with the school band. At the time the reigning African popular musicians – including E. C. Arinze, Bobby Benson, Sam Akpabot, I. K. Dairo, J. O. Araba, Eddie Okonta, Eric Onugha, Victor Olaiya, Stephen Amechi, Lawrence Agu, Charles Iwegbue, Bala Miller, Roy Chicago, and E. T. Mensah – were the performers of the *highlife* styles. This exposure saw Celestine growing up amid music (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999; Onwuegbuna, 2012a).

Celestine Ukwu, despite his domineering passion for music from an early age, first embarked on a career as a teacher. After completing his primary education, he moved to Zaria where he taught for a year before gaining admission into the Teacher Training College there. In 1958, Celestine obtained a Teacher's Grade Three

Certificate upon finishing the prescribed coursework. For a few years, he worked as an educator. However, his musical aspirations ultimately led him to join Gentleman Mike Ejeagha's band as a full-time musician, vocalist, maracas player, and rhythm sticks player (Aguodogwu, 2022; Egbunike, 2022).

Celestine's big breakthrough came in the 1960s when he began recording singles with the Niger Phone Recording Studio. Hits like *No Condition is Permanent*, *Artificial Beauty*, *Appolonia*, and *Ije Enu* brought him fame across Nigeria's burgeoning highlife scene. When the Nigerian Civil War broke out in 1967, many of Celestine's bandmates fled, but he stayed to entertain and boost morale as part of the re-grouped band. They released patriotic songs in support of the short-lived Republic of Biafra. After the war ended, Celestine signed a valuable recording contract with Polygram Records in 1970 (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999).

As Celestine's fame grew across West Africa, his band, The Music Royals, travelled extensively to perform in countries like Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. In 1972, during a particularly memorable show at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, enthusiastic students crowned Celestine as the Ambassador of Highlife in West Africa. They also fittingly renamed his band The Philosophers National in recognition of his talent and the philosophical richness of his lyrical contents. Besides shows across West Africa, Celestine Ukwu and his band also had the opportunity to perform in Europe. Not only did Celestine become popular across Nigeria, but his music was also featured at a music fair in West Germany, bringing some international exposure (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999).

Throughout his successful career spanning over two decades, Celestine financially supported his entire family, including paying school fees for his younger brothers. Well-liked by fans and fellow musicians alike, Celestine Stanley Onwurah Ukwu made an indelible mark bringing the lively sounds of highlife music to his country and abroad. His pioneering recordings and performances in the 1960s and 70s helped cement the popularity of the highlife genre during its peak period.

Celestine Ukwu was a disciplined and generous man who was well-regarded by those in the Nigerian music industry. He led a healthful lifestyle, avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and took care of his appearance by dressing neatly. Socially, Ukwu enjoyed the company of women. However, what defined him was his extreme generosity – Ukwu was over-generous when sharing his earnings, often to the point that he faced financial difficulties as a result of overextending himself for others. Sharing his admiration and nostalgia for Celestine Ukwu, the ace guitarist of Philosophers National, Emma Ikediashi (2019) says: “Leave everything philosophical to Celestine...who was a gentleman to the core and avoided anything that could attract attention to himself. Note that he never smoked or drank alcohol.”

Despite sometimes struggling with bills, Ukwu remained popular thanks to his musical talents. His personality also drew people to him; fans, music associates, and fellow competitors all liked Ukwu. He built positive relationships and left a strong impression within Nigeria's entertainment circles through his music and character. This admiration was evident at Ukwu's untimely funeral, which stunned friends,

fans, and family members. The 37-year-old Celestine was killed in a car crash along the Onitsha-Owerri expressway on Sunday, May 8, 1977. Well-known musicians, radio personalities, and more media figures all turned out on the day of his burial, May 14, 1977, to pay tribute to Ukwu's memory and musical legacy. The twenty-one gun salute that honoured him with the highest tribute further symbolized the deep respect Ukwu had earned. The eulogy delivered by Ukwu's brother, Damian, reinforced the significant impact this generous, disciplined, and well-liked musician made during his life. In both life and death, Celestine Ukwu was beloved for sharing both his music and his earnings with others (Okafor, Nwokike, Eziechi & Egudu, 1999; Ukwu, n.d.).

As a musician, Ukwu distinguished himself from his highlife predecessors through several musical innovations. He incorporated traditional Igbo instruments like the *ogene* into modern highlife arrangements featuring guitars, keyboards, and percussion. The addition of vibraphones, group vocal harmonies, and other new elements gave his music a soulful, philosophical sensibility that departed from conventional upbeat highlife trends. Ukwu sang in both English and Igbo, allowing him to reach broad audiences while retaining his cultural roots.

Beyond music, Ukwu was renowned as a philosopher and voice of the marginalized. His lyrics tackled pressing social issues like inequality and corruption. Songs like *Igede* and *Ilo Abu Chi* from his popular albums established his reputation as "The Wailing Philosopher" and "The Voice of the Voiceless." During the Nigerian Civil War, he played for the Biafran army, using music as a powerful tool to inspire hope.

As one of Nigeria's most popular highlife performers, Ukwu helped showcase the genre to global audiences when he represented the nation at the Festival of Arts in Congo Brazzaville. At home, he mentored younger musicians like Sweet Breeze and launched the career of famous artiste Prince Nico Mbarga. Despite his early passing in a 1977 car accident at just 37, Ukwu left a lasting impact. His prolific discography and musical style blazed the trail for highlife to evolve as a distinctly Nigerian tradition. Singer, songwriter, philosopher, and innovator, Celestine Ukwu was a legendary musician who transformed highlife into a globally celebrated Nigerian art form. His contemporaries include Stephen Osita Osadebe, Raphael Amarabem, Rex Jim Lawson, Victor Olaiya, Victor Uwaifo, Baby-face Paul, Paulson Kalu, Celestine Obiakor, and Joe Nez (Onwuegbuna, 2012b; Ukwu, n.d.).

Over his two decades-long career, Celestine Ukwu released several acclaimed albums and singles. Notable full-length albums include 1971's *True Philosophy*, 1974's *Ndu Ka Aku*, and 1975's *Igede Fantasia*. He also released well-regarded singles like *Ejina Uwa Nya Isi*, and *Ilo Oyi*. Some of Ukwu's most famous and profound works came from these albums and singles. For example, the song *Grade by Grade* from his *Igede Fantasia* album displayed his talent for dispensing wisdom through his lyrics. Another standout is *Ego Eju Aka* from the 1974 album *Ndu Ka Aku*, in which Ukwu philosophizes about the meaning of life. He also made his mark with the single *Ije Enu*, which cemented his reputation as a musical poet and philosopher. Whether through full LPs or individual singles, Ukwu used his music to provide

commentary on spiritual themes and reflect on the human condition. Songs like these stamped him as an exceptionally thoughtful and talented musician as well as a wordsmith.

Conclusion

In the end, Celestine Ukwu left an indelible mark on both African music and wider cultural discourse through his skilful synthesis of musical innovation, lyrical depth, and philosophical insight. Songs like *Onwunwa* and *Ome ife jide ofo* exemplified his ability to capture profound reflections on life's meaning amidst the rhythms and textures of Igbo highlife, neo-folk, and Afro-fusion. Yet beyond just entertainment, Ukwu consciously used his music as a vehicle for commentary on social injustice, spiritual connection, and the human struggle. By weaving this level of political and existential social critique into popular music, he expanded the very boundaries of what the genre could achieve.

As one of Nigeria's most prominent musicians of the post-independence period, Celestine Ukwu articulated the anxieties, hopes, and complexities of a nation in formation. Tracing the evolution of his style alongside the country's transformations shows the interconnection of the artistic and political spheres. Ultimately Ukwu's legacy lies in proving that music can be a tool for both spiritual solace and social change. His lyrical agility and musical innovation keep influencing generations after him.

The story of Celestine Ukwu is one of an artiste who transcended the perceived limitations of his craft to offer music with layers of meaning. More than just a talented singer and instrumentalist, Ukwu emerged as a visionary philosopher-poet, using his gifts to spotlight social issues and universal existential questions. Through the vehicle of melody and verse, Ukwu compelled his society to reflect more deeply on its values, behaviours, and direction.

As one of post-independence Nigeria's artistic luminaries, Ukwu gave voice to the distinct sensibilities birthed by cultural change and upheaval. Yet while his music responded to the unique pulse of his nation, the profound humanity of releases like *True Philosophy* resonated across countries and generations. At his core, Celestine Ukwu saw music as a tool—one that could inspire as easily as it entertained. This multi-layered orientation makes labelling him merely as a musician feels reductive. Ukwu just as easily filled the role of visionary communicator, moral guide, and healer of people's shared psychic wounds.

The scope of Ukwu's impact stretches from his indelible influence on the progression of contemporary African pop to the continuing relevance of his lyrical themes in present-day civic discourse. In subtly yet profoundly seeding socio-political debates and existential questions into popular music, Ukwu carved out an elevated space for the genre as an intellectual conduit—setting the stage for today's musical sages. As an artiste, he followed his muse to deliver a body of politically conscious and spiritually rich anthems unmatched in emotional potency. Ultimately, it seems fitting that a man who spent his career philosophizing about the meaning of life through song, would himself become the answer to his

existential question – what is the purpose of music? For Celestine Ukwu, the answer was clear: to uplift peoples' consciousness while bringing them together through a common rhythm.

References

- Aguodogwu, L. C. (2022). *Igbo history – Celestine Ukwu*. Retrieved November 23, 2023 from: https://www.facebook.com/groups/httpsyoutube.comchannelucwgn8mhaahnoxhxlpi/permalink/7146625665409306/?paipv=0&eav=Afb6aVLIHrN3B_pykqApUm0HE0bohFm-bELyNIYsWyyIVlt-TN3er0Rum-DeCTAMDnE&_rdr
- Egbunike, N. (2022). *Celestine Ukwu – the Nigerian philosopher-musician who left his-mark on Igbo highlife*. Retrieved November 23, from <https://globalvoices.org/2022/06/15/>
- Graham, R. (1994). Juju garbage: Nigeria's gifts to the world. In S. Broughton (Ed.) *World music: The roughguide* (pp. 299-309). London: Rough Guides.
- Idonije, B. (2000a). Hearing from a grand highlife voice. *The Guardian Newspaper*, March 1, 2000, p. 54.
- Idonije, B. (2000b). Highlife: Independence music in depression. *Guardian Newspapers*, September 29, 2000, p. 35.
- Idonije, B. (2002). Elders' Forum wears Great Highlife Party's coat. *Guardian Newspapers*, July 26, 2002, p. 30
- Ikediashi, E. (2019). 43 years after, Celestine Ukwu's guitarist opens up on him. *Vanguard Newspapers*, August 3, 2019. Retrieved November 23, 2023, from: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/08/43-years-after-celestine-ukwus-guitarist-opens-up-on-him/>
- Muzikifan (2022). *Discography of Celestine Ukwu and his Philosophers National*. Retrieved November 23, 2023, from: <http://www.muzikifan.com/ukwu.html>
- Okafor, R. C., Nwokike, A., Eziechi, C., & Egudu, J. (1999). *The life and works of Celestine Ukwu*. Enugu: New Generation.
- Okafor, R. C. (2005). *Music in Nigerian society*. Enugu: New Generation.
- Okafor, R. C. (2019). *Popular music in Nigeria*. Enugu: New Generation Educare.
- Okoro, J. C. (2005). *No eclipse for the star*. Benin City: Timeless.
- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2011). The musical confluence of highlife and reggae: Africa's enduring gifts to the world. In A.B.C. Chiegboka, T.C. Utoh-Ezeajugh & M.S. Ogene (Eds.), *The humanities and sustainable development* (pp. 192-200). Awka: Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2012a). Popular music and socio-cultural integrity: The contributions of E. C. Arinze. *Nsukka Journal of Musical Arts Research*, 1, 154-162.
- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2012b). Music as an embodiment of culture and philosophy: A survey of Nigerian folk songs. In C. Krydz Ikwuemesi (Ed.), *Astride memory and desire: Peoples cultures and development in Nigeria* (pp. 291-309). Enugu: ABIC Books.

- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2015a). Philosophical embodiments in Igbo music: An analysis of Mike Ejeagha's 'popular' folk songs style. *SAGE Open*, January-March, 1-7. DOI: 10.1177/215824401556966.
- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2015b). *Trends in African popular music*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris.
- Onwuegbuna, I. E. (2022). Trends in stylistic development of Nigerian highlife music. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 30 (1), 1-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62250/nsuk.2022.30.1.1-20>
- Uhakheme, O. (2000). Olaiya: Independence player missing in 40th Anniversary action. *Guardian Newspapers*, September 29, 2000, p. 34.
- Ukwu, C. (n.d.). *The legend: Celestine Ukwu*. Enugu: Proudly Catholic Publishers

Publisher's Note/Disclaimer: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of NJH. NJH disclaims responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.