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The Communicative Power of Igbo Lyrics: Cultural Identity and Poverty Awareness in Nsukka

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Abstract

Music has long served as a medium of communication and information dissemination; however, its role in shaping cultural identity and raising poverty awareness remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the communicative power of music in articulating cultural identity and poverty consciousness. Employing a historical and descriptive design, the research utilizes content analysis to collect and interpret data from two Igbo songs from the Nsukka community, *Onye-amuma la doo* and *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*. Lyrics were transcribed, translated, and coded to reveal linguistic meanings and structural organization within the community's cultural framework. The findings identify recurrent themes and linguistic devices that articulate cultural-linguistic identity and critiques of poverty, thereby illustrating how musical texts encode social norms, collective memory, and aspirational discourse. The study's significance lies in its methodological contribution to the field of ethnomusicology and its potential to inform literacy, language preservation, and cultural policy. By demonstrating how song can function as a vehicle for cultural communication and poverty eradication, the research offers a model for leveraging customary music in community development, education, and advocacy. This work advances knowledge on the intersection of music, identity, and socio-economic discourse in a Nigerian Igbo context.

Keywords: *Communicative power, Music, Culture, Language, Identity, Poverty eradication*

Introduction

Music and communication are interdependent: sound and silence, vibration and rhythm, conveyed through instruments, voices, and environmental sounds, form the fabric of human interaction. Across cultures, music functions as a linguistic medium that encodes ideas, values, and social realities, thereby shaping collective identity and informing public discourse. In Nigerian contexts, scholars have long noted that music (often inseparably linked to words) articulates ethnic and community identities and contributes to social aims beyond entertainment, including poverty awareness and advocacy (e.g., Echezona, 1963; Agu, 2017; Stock, 2009a). The language of music—its lyrical content, cadence, and structure—serves as a driving tool for communication and cultural memoria, enabling communities to publicize their past, present, and aspirations. This study investigates the communicative power of musical language in signaling cultural identity and poverty discourse among Nsukka's indigenous Igbo songs in Enugu State, Nigeria. By examining how local songs encode linguistic and cultural meanings, the research aims to illuminate music's potential as a vehicle for cultural preservation and poverty eradication.

This study advances an ethnolinguistic framework to examine how musical language in Nsukka's indigenous Igbo songs encodes cultural identity and articulates poverty discourse. By treating lyrics, prosody, and performance practices as linguistic phenomena embedded in social meaning, the study argues that music operates as a dual-coded system: it preserves and transmits language-inculture while mobilizing public discourse around socioeconomic realities. Drawing on theoretical insights from Usua & Ire (2008), Agu (2017), Stock (2009b), and related scholarship, the analysis highlights how audience reception, community norms, and local vernaculars shape the interpretive work of musical language. The work also considers contemporary challenges to ethnolinguistic vitality—globalization, language shift, and media commodification—and discusses pathways for cultural preservation and poverty advocacy through culturally grounded musical practices.

Ethnolinguistic theory posits that language and culture are mutually constitutive, with linguistic repertoires indexing social identities and communal histories. In Nsukka, Igbo songs function not merely as aesthetic artifacts but as living texts that encode ethnic belonging, political sensibilities, and collective memory. The ethnolinguistic lens foregrounds (a) how lyrics, dialectal choices, and prosodic patterns signal membership within specific Igbo communities; (b) how musical form—cadence, call-and-response structures, and instrumental timbres—operates as a performative mode of linguistic signaling; and (c) how songs translate social realities, including poverty, into publicly legible discourse. Prior work in Nigerian music scholarship has established that music articulates ethnic and community identities and can transcend entertainment to address social objectives (e.g., Echezona, 1963; Agu, 2017; Stock, 2009c). This study situates Nsukka's indigenous Igbo repertoire within that tradition, employing an ethnolinguistic approach to analyze how local songs encode linguistic and cultural meanings and to illuminate music's potential for cultural preservation and poverty discourse.

Building on Usua and Ire's conception of language as a cultural code that indexes identity, this study treats lyrics, cadence, and musical structure as embedded linguistic signals. Ethnolinguistic theory argues that language, music, and social practice interlock to produce meaning in context; listeners decode identity through voice quality, intonation patterns, lexical choices, and genre-specific conventions. In Nsukka Igbo songs, regional dialects, idioms, and storytelling traditions function as sociolinguistic markers that align performers and audiences within shared ethnolinguistic niches. The musical language—comprising rhyme schemes, tempo, melodic contour, and instrumental accompaniment—serves as a parallel channel of meaning, reinforcing linguistic cues and enabling public discourse about poverty, social aspiration, and communal resilience. This framework anticipates that meanings emerge through the dynamic interplay of text, sound, performance setting, and audience interpretation, rather than from lyrics alone.

Nsukka's indigenous Igbo repertoire embodies localized dialects and culturally specific storytelling. Within this setting, songs encode identity through (a) language choices—dialectal forms, code-switching patterns, idiomatic expressions; (b) linguistic prosody—tone, rhythm, and cadential shapes that foreground communal values; and (c) musical form—refrains, call-and-response, and instrumental textures

that reinforce social messages. Ethnolinguistic analysis proceeds from a close reading of lyric content, integrated with field observations of performance contexts and audience reception. By examining how linguistic features are interwoven with musical parameters, the study reveals how songs facilitate communal identification and frame poverty discourse as a shared societal project (Small, 1998; Nettle, 2005).

Across communities, songs address poverty not only as economic condition but as a culturally meaningful category embedded in social obligation, solidarity, and collective action. In Nsukka, poverty rhetoric may be encoded through metaphor, evaluative register, and narrative sequencing that align with vernacular concepts of worth, reciprocity, and social justice. The ethnolinguistic approach treats such discourse as a situated practice: listeners interpret poverty references against the backdrop of local norms, kinship networks, and communal histories. Music amplifies and legitimizes these interpretations by providing a sonic framework—cadential emphases, tempo shifts, and performed gestures—that reinforce shared understandings of poverty and pathways for communal response (Gewirth, 1998; Agyeman, 2017).

In Nsukka, musical language operates as a robust ethnolinguistic code that encodes cultural identity and articulates poverty discourse. The interdependence of language and music fosters communal memory, belonging, and collective agency, while modernization poses challenges to maintaining indigenous repertoires. An ethnolinguistic perspective illuminates how songs function as culturally situated texts—texts that communities read, interpret, and enact in the pursuit of cultural preservation and socioeconomic justice. Future research could incorporate systematic corpus analysis of Nsukka song lyrics, longitudinal ethnographic work to track linguistic change, and community-driven interventions that leverage musical language for poverty reduction and cultural revitalization (Nwachukwu, 2012; Adindu, 2020)).

Background of the Study

Nsukka, a community in Enugu State, Nigeria, possesses a distinctive cultural heritage manifested in its daily practices, beliefs, social interactions, and linguistic styles. Like other cultural groups, Nsukka's practices—how people behave, celebrate, mourn, and express shared values—are deeply embedded in language and musical expression. Music, in particular, functions as a potent medium for communication that educates, shapes behavior, and disseminates cultural knowledge. It can capture attention more effectively than spoken words alone and serves to broadcast cultural practices, especially when the repertoire comprises indigenous or folk music (Ugolo, 2006; Yerima, 2006).

The idea that culture is uniquely patterned across communities underpins much ethnolinguistic research. Even within a single region featuring multiple villages with ostensibly similar cultural repertoires, languages diverge in meaningful ways. Dialects—distinctive linguistic varieties within a shared cultural area—embody structural differences in phonology, syntax, and tonal inflection that nonetheless convey equivalent meanings. Such variation underscores the principle that no culture is superior to another; rather, each is a unique system of signs and practices.

In this context, indigenous language and music constitute an integrated artistic complex that articulates and sustains social identities, rituals, and worldviews (Ugolo, 2006).

Indigenous music and language together function as a compact repository of a community's traditional values, practices, and social norms. Music provides a durable vehicle for encoding and transmitting cultural information, often in ways that memory readily preserves—especially when lyrics are rendered in the community's language. As Yerima (2006) notes, the musical language of a culture can be understood as a compendium of traditional values; when music is performed in the mother tongue, listeners are more likely to recognize origins, engage deeply with the message, and retain the information conveyed. This interdependence of language and music supports rapid dissemination of messages and fosters collective memory, identity, and continuity across generations.

Within Nsukka, as in many Nigerian communities, music carries explicit and implicit messages about social identity, cohesion, and communal welfare. Songs not only entertain but also teach norms, articulate moral expectations, and address collective concerns, including poverty and social inequities. The melodic, rhythmic, and vocal characteristics of Nsukka's indigenous music—tone, tempo, call-and-response patterns, and performative conventions—function as indices of belonging and status within the community. When embedded in a shared language, these musical elements reinforce cultural identity while providing persuasive channels for raising awareness about poverty and mobilizing collective action (Nettl, 2005; Nwoye, 2014).

Despite extensive attention to music's social roles elsewhere, there remains a need to systematically examine how Nsukka Igbo songs encode cultural identity and poverty discourse through their musical language. An ethnomusicological approach—emphasizing sound as social action, language as a symbolic system, and performance as sociocultural practice—offers a principled way to analyze how lyrics, melody, and delivery jointly communicate meaning. By focusing on indigenous Nsukka repertoires, the study highlights how local musical practices negotiate identity and address socio-economic concerns within their specific cultural and linguistic context (Eze, 2013; Mullins, 2016).

Operationally, cultural identity refers to the ways in which individuals and communities articulate belonging, heritage, language use, and social roles through musical performance (Onwuegbuna, 2012). Poverty awareness encompasses discourses that draw attention to material deprivation, resource distribution, and collective responsibilities, often framed as moral or social obligations. Musical language includes all elements of song text (lyrics, proverbs, code-switching), as well as vocal manner, intonation, tempo, dynamics, and timbre that together convey meaning (Turino, 2008).

The background presented here justifies the subsequent ethnomusicological analysis, which combines transcription and translation of Nsukka songs with emic and etic interpretive strategies, contextual observation of performance settings, and

reflexive consideration of the researchers' role. This mixed-method orientation ensures that both the social meanings embedded in the music and the community's interpretations are foregrounded.

Culture

Culture is the collectively practiced repertoire of behaviors, beliefs, values, and material and symbolic expressions that distinguish one group from another. It encompasses biological, material, attitudinal, and linguistic dimensions, and it is transmitted across generations through various communicative channels. As a foundational definition, culture provides the organized framework through which people interpret and respond to their world; it shapes social interaction, norms, and ways of solving everyday problems (Kalu, as cited in Nwokolo, 2012).

Culture can be conceived as the designed prescriptions and responses that guide all aspects of life as communities engage with their environments. It is not hierarchically "superior" to other cultures; rather, it embodies a neutral, context-specific repertoire that endures over time and is recognizable by distinctive traits (Okafor, as cited in Nwokolo, 2012, p. 136). These traits—customs, language, rituals, arts, and social institutions—serve as markers of group identity and continuity.

Culture constructs and demonstrates the uniqueness and distinctiveness of a people across time and space (Igbene, as cited in Agbo, Usua, & Edego, n.d.). Each culture possesses a characteristic blend of practices that differentiates it from others, including language use, ritual practices, foodways, dress, and forms of artistic expression. These differences are not static; cultures are dynamic systems that adapt while retaining core identities (Bhabha, 1994; Onwuegbuna, 2012).

Language is the primary medium through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. In many communities, language operates alongside other expressive forms—oral traditions, idioms, proverbs, parables, music, dance, and song—as a conduit for disseminating information, norms, and values. In Nsukka, as in many places, linguistic and musical practices together encode and communicate cultural meanings to members and to future generations (Agyeman, 2017).

Culture is inherently dynamic; it evolves as communities interact, adopt new practices, and renegotiate meanings in response to internal developments and external pressures. Umukoro (2014) emphasizes that culture varies across societies and is sustained by networks of values, attitudes, customs, and behavioral patterns that define how people live, decide, and solve problems. This fluidity includes changes in dress, cuisine, religious practices, music, greetings, and language, all of which contribute to ongoing processes of cultural negotiation.

Codes—linguistic, symbolic, and behavioral—are central to cultural identification. They facilitate in-group cohesion and help distinguish one culture from another. In Nsukka, the local language code and associated musical idioms function as salient markers of cultural identity, signaling membership, belonging, and shared history. Culture, then, is both a repository of tradition and a living, adaptive system that communicates collective meaning through multiple modalities.

Nsukka culture is one part of Enugu State's rich tapestry of communities, each with its own linguistic varieties, ritual practices, and artistic traditions. Its cultural identity is expressed through distinctive speech patterns, social rituals, culinary practices, music, and forms of communal expression. Recognizing these unique features supports a culturally grounded analysis of how music and language interact to convey messages – such as those related to identity and socio-economic concerns – within Nsukka and beyond.

In examining the communicative power of musical language within Nsukka's indigenous songs, it is essential to acknowledge culture as the overarching frame that shapes both form and meaning. Cultural norms influence not only what is said in songs (content) but also how it is said (tone, performance style, audience interaction) and why it matters to a community (public pedagogy, memory work, moral instruction). By situating the analysis within an ethnomusicological understanding of culture as dynamic and multi-modal, the study can illuminate how musical practices enact cultural identity and address poverty discourse in a locally meaningful way (Ede, 2019).

Language Code and Identity

Language functions as a cultural code that signals identity, while indigenous music reinforces and transmits that identity across generations. Language and music form interconnected systems through which communities encode belonging, traceable in everyday social interactions and in historical musical practices. Contemporary technological and sociocultural shifts threaten these codes, yet music and language have historically served as instruments of continuity and resistance (Salmons, 2013). Language, dialect, and indigenous musical language function as markers of communal affiliation, and how modernization challenges necessitate strategies for preservation and revitalization.

Language is more than a communication tool; it constitutes a cultural attribute that encodes collective memory and social identity (Usua & Ire, 2008). When a language code associated with a particular community is heard, listeners can rapidly infer the speaker's community membership. For instance, in multilingual settings, an Igbo speaker conversing on a domestic call may be readily identifiable by fellow Igbo speakers through voice timbre and dialectal intonation, thereby signaling shared cultural affiliation (Usua & Ire, 2008). This recognition extends beyond mere lexical content to encompass the social and cultural meanings embedded in prosody and pronunciation. In this sense, language operates as a quasi-identity code, enabling rapid social categorization and belonging.

The depth and nature of linguistic expression, including music, are shaped by the culture in which it is performed. Agbedo (2017) contends that the communicative potency of language in music rests on its link to the culture of the singing society. Indigenous songs carry cultural attributes that reflect the group's history, beliefs, and practices, making language an essential vehicle for cultural identity across musical genres. Agbo et al. (n.d.) further emphasize that language, dress codes, and oral and written literatures collectively contribute to a society's distinctiveness, with storytelling, music, dance, and sculpture serving as modes of cultural articulation.

These perspectives illuminate how language codes and cultural practices mutually reinforce identity, particularly within musical contexts.

Historically, writers and composers from the Romantic period onward embedded cultural identity in their works by incorporating indigenous sonic materials and, at times, indigenous language elements into Western compositional frameworks. Such practices created an identifiable linkage between a composer's cultural roots and their musical output, distinguishing their work from that of predecessors who relied on different stylistic norms (Agu, 2017). Agu notes that a people's music can reveal where they come from and what they value, with composers' works bearing traces of socio-cultural identity that reflect their origins. This historical trajectory demonstrates how music has served as an externalized code of identity, accessible to listeners across time and space.

With the advent of new technologies, indigenous languages face pressures from globalization and the predominance of Western languages in daily life. Cerulo (1997) argues that ethnic identity is increasingly anchored in symbolic representations of ethnic cultures rather than in the cultures themselves, a shift that can undermine fluent use of indigenous languages in daily communication. This trend is evident in many African contexts, where individuals may struggle to respond fluently in their indigenous languages, opting for dominant global languages instead. The erosion of linguistic fluency threatens the transmission of cultural knowledge embedded in language and, by extension, in musical expression that relies on linguistic codes for meaning and cohesion.

Music has historically organized work and social life among African communities. Waterman (2008) describes music as a tool that coordinates daily activities and labor, such as the Kpelle people in Liberia coordinating machete blows through vocal patterns. Such examples illustrate how indigenous musical language functions as an operational code—one that coordinates communal action while conveying collective experience and resilience. The revival and reawakening of Africanist spirit—manifested through indigenous musical language—served as a social mechanism for solidarity and liberation during periods of oppression, highlighting music's role in expressing pains, aspirations, and collective identity.

Nketia (1982) emphasizes that social communal activities typically involve members of the same ethnic or linguistic group who share a habitat and engage in cooperative life governed by common institutions, traditions, beliefs, and values (p. 21). This perspective reinforces the idea that belonging is rooted in tangible social networks and shared local frameworks, wherein language and music function as mutually reinforcing markers of identity. Understanding a culture thus requires some experiential connection to the community, whether through residence, kinship, or long-standing social ties.

The convergence of language and music as codes of identity highlights the inseparability of linguistic and musical practices in signaling and sustaining cultural belonging. Indigenous language proficiency and musical expression provide pathways for social identification, cohesion, and continuity. Contemporary

challenges—most notably globalization and linguistic homogenization—risk attenuating these codes. Yet historical and contemporary evidence suggests that communities continue to leverage language and music as instruments of identity, memory, and resistance. To safeguard these intertwined codes, efforts in language revitalization, inclusive music education, and culturally grounded pedagogy are essential. Future research might integrate empirical data—ethnographic interviews, recordings, and community-based language and music programs—to deepen understanding of how language and musical language co-create and preserve cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Communication Theory

Claude Shannon, an engineer at Bell Telephone Laboratories, established the foundational framework of information theory to analyze the quantitative transmission of information over communication channels. This theoretical construct was later extended and elaborated by Warren Weaver, who described it as a non-mathematical formulation of communication, emphasizing the shared understanding between sender and receiver beyond the raw transmission of signals. According to this information-theoretic view, signals—whether spoken language, musical sounds, or symbolic signs—serve as vehicles for conveying ideas, events, or happenings. The core insight is that communication involves a flow of information from sender to receiver, whose mutual comprehension depends on the effective encoding, transmission, and decoding of the transmitted signal.

Communicative Power of Music in Poverty Awareness Creation and Eradication

Music functions as a potent vehicle for transmitting values, customs, and cultural heritage, enabling communities to disseminate information about shared norms and social realities to insiders and outsiders alike. As Wilson (1990) contends, music extends beyond entertainment to serve as a conduit for ideas and doctrines (p. 107). In the African context, Nnanyelugo (2016b) notes that African music showcases the continent's musical components and skills to neighboring cultures, thereby illustrating the global reach of local musical traditions (p. 15). Across communities, traditional or folk music is used to propagate cultural values and strengthen social cohesion, with songs fostering a sense of communion and liberation (Okoro, 2010; Idolor, as cited in Agbo et al., n.d.). The educational potential of musical texts is widely recognized; Okafor (2017) argues that song lyrics provide rich material for the study of folklore, oral literature, poetry, and linguistics, while the thematic content of songs often enshrines societal values and guides interpersonal relationships. Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto (as cited in Agbo et al., n.d.) underscore that folk song and music convey meanings related to culture, norms, and values, serving to warn, entertain, inform, or teach. Building on this, Adeogun (as cited in Nnanyelugo & Ukwueze, 2017) describes music as a universal language—a product of social groups whose enduring socio-musical traits codify and validate distinctive cultural practices. The broader claim that music supports cultural reform and preservation is reinforced by Nnanyelugo (2016a), who emphasizes music's capacity to reform and safeguard cultural heritage. Onyeji (2012) contends that music, as a social art, is deliberately structured to influence social life and reinforce cultural integrity. Consequently, Nnanyelugo and Anya-Njoku (2015) argue that music uniquely reveals beauty and meaning, offering insights that contribute to a

sustained sense of purpose and belonging beyond the moment.

Ethnolinguistic Reading of *Onyeamuma la doo* and *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*

The lyrics of the folk song *Onyeamuma la doo*

Igbo

Call: Agnes *onyeamuma la doo*

Chorus response: *Onyeamuma la doo*

Call: *Onyeamuma la doo*

Chorus response: *onyeamuma la doo*

English

Call: Agnes the preacher, go well

Chorus response: The preacher, go well

Call: The preacher, go well

Chorus response: The preacher, go well

The music goes on or repeats continuously for some minutes.

This song talks about the life of the diseased as a preacher and a woman of virtue. One who suffered and endured poverty and stood the shame of ill treatment from the husband who could not feed his family nor take proper care of his wife, even at the point of death. This folk song is the type that is done by the daughters of the land or village, *Umuada* or the co-wives of the village, *Inyomu di*.

Ethnolinguistic Reading of *Onyeamuma la doo*

This ethnolinguistic reading analyzes the folk song *Onyeamuma la doo* to illuminate how Igbo lyrics, prosody, and performance contexts encode social identity, gendered labor, and moneyed hardship. Through call-and-response structure, proper-name indexing, and culturally salient vernaculars, the song mediates communal meanings about virtue, endurance, and poverty. The analysis foregrounds *Umuada* (daughters of the land) and *Inyomu di* (village co-wives) as performative communities that steward moral pedagogy and poverty discourse, while also considering audience reception, ritual function, and language contact dynamics between Igbo dialects and English glosses. The study also shows how repeated musical phrases function as social rituals that reinforce shared values and collective memory amidst material adversity.

The Nsukka song *Onyeamuma la doo* is performed in Igbo communities (with provided English glosses that translate core lines for broader comprehension). The piece operates within a social ecology where *Umuada* and *Inyomu di* lead processes of moral instruction and communal cohesion. The call-response format—“Agnes *onyeamuma la doo*” followed by the chorus refrain “*onyeamuma la doo*”—provides an indexical cue to social role, lineage, and gendered authority. The repeated invocation of a virtuous figure in the context of poverty and hardship positions the song as a vehicle for communal reflection on virtue, labour, and social obligations.

The extended duration of performance—where the music repeats for several minutes—facilitates collective processing of the narrative and invites sustained audience engagement.

The linguistic frame centers on proper-name anchoring and ritual vocables that encode social belonging. The proper name “Agnes” and the kinship-oriented term “*onyeamuma*” function as identity markers that designate membership within the *Umuada* or related village groups. This nominal labeling constructs a social persona—the virtuous female preacher—whose role surpasses religious leadership to encompass moral leadership within the domestic and communal sphere. The call-response texture functions as a ritual utterance practice, wherein short, repetitive segments minimize semantic ambiguity and produce a shared sonic texture that signals communal discourse to listeners.

The lyrical text presents a figure of moral authority with material deprivation, illustrating a culturally resonant narrative type in which virtue coexists with economic hardship. Ethnolinguistically, this pairing encodes social critique: virtue operates as social capital whose accumulation is constrained by poverty, thereby reframing hardship as a test of character rather than a mere deficit. The female subject’s framing as a preacher aligns with local gendered norms in Igbo villages where women’s labour, resilience, and moral influence sustain kinship networks and uphold social norms even amid scarcity. The chorus’s repeated praise functions as social currency, validating endurance and solidarity as legitimate responses to poverty.

The call-response structure creates a dialogic frame that mirrors everyday Igbo conversational signaling, reinforcing communal interpretation through rhythmic reinforcement. Cadential shaping—tight, repetitive patterns—produces an affective buildup that deepens collective reflection on virtue, hardship, and social duty. The forward motion of the performance, sustained by minutes-long repetition, serves as a ritual of endurance, inviting participants to contemplate and internalize the moral message embedded in the lyrics and delivery.

Local Igbo dialect features—lexical choices, idioms, and phonotactics—likely anchor the song within Nsukka speech varieties, enabling precise identity marking. The English glossic elements presented in this analysis reflect broader language-contact dynamics, including audience composition and intergenerational comprehension while, at the same time, preserving the integrity of Igbo social meanings through typified terms like *Umuada* and *Inyomu di*.

The song’s association with *Umuada* and *Inyomu di* situates it within women-led moral pedagogy and communal governance. The performance setting—whether at rites, ceremonies, markets, or everyday gatherings—modulates audience reception, cueing social responses such as clapping, interjections, or collective singing. Through these performative ecologies, the lyrics contribute to collective memory and the negotiation of social norms around kinship duties, virtue, and economic hardship, reinforcing the community’s shared values and resilience.

This ethnolinguistic reading of *Onyeamuma la doo* demonstrates how a single folk song encodes layered social knowledge: identity signaling via indicia of *Umuada/inyomu di*, moral critique of poverty framed through a virtuous female protagonist, and a performative ecology that cultivates communal memory and resilience. The song's sustained repetition, dialectal features, and ritualized call-response structure work in concert to transform poverty discourse into socially shareable knowledge, reinforcing norms of virtue, mutual aid, and gendered moral leadership within the Nsukka Igbo community.

The lyrics of the folk song *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*

Igbo

Call: *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*

Chorus response: *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*

Call: *Ndi-ibe m eee, cheru m ooo ka mu bomanegh' ukao*

Chorus response: *Oyi m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*

Call: *Aga m esoru ne mu luko di wa janwune onyenene*

Chorus response: *Janwune onyenene mu luko di – janwune onyenene*

Call: *Akpoko bu n'ugwo*

Chorus response: *...janwune onyene*

Call: *Ikereke bu n'ugwo*

Chorus response: *...janwune onyene*

Call: *Isha bu n'ugwo*

Chorus response: *...janwune onyene*

Call: *Ihenile bu n'ugwo*

Chorus response: *...janwune onyene*

Call: *...janwune onyene` (7x)*

Chorus response: *...janwune onyene (7x)*

English

Call: Father, wait let me tell you some stories

Chorus response: Father, wait let me tell you some stories

Call: Brethren, wait let me tell you some stories

Chorus response: My friend, wait, let me tell you some stories

Call: I will not die because I want to stay married

Chorus response: I wouldn't die to maintain my marriage

Call: When pepper is on credit

Chorus response: ...die on account of someone's carelessness

Call: When salt is on credit

Chorus response: ...die on account of someone's carelessness

Call: Crayfish is on credit

Chorus response: ...die on account of someone's carelessness

Call: Everything is on credit

Chorus response: ...die on account of someone's carelessness

Call: ...died on account of someone's carelessness

Chorus response: ...die on account of someone's carelessness

This folk song explains the first song of *Onye-Amuma la doo*, which is sung interchanging when some careless husbands ill-treat their wives and cause them to die. Through such songs, the women of Nsukka—specifically Orba—express how their deceased colleague died and describe the state she was in before her death. In the first song, they praise the deceased's endurance and illustrate how she lived by her principles. Conversely, in this second song, *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*, they also convey that such sacrifice is not worth dying for.

One of the customs of the Nsukka people is that every man with a family or every husband should upkeep his household, especially his wife and children. This makes a family life meaningful for both husband and wife, each with duties to fulfill at home. For an Nsukka man, the primary duty is to provide for the family, while the wife's duty is to care for the children and attend to her husband's needs. In this case, that was not the experience of the woman in question. After her death, her co-wives gathered at her residence to inform the community that the man who married her failed in his duties as a husband, a failure that contributed to their sister's death. This reflects one of their cultural practices, and, spoken in their indigenous language, anyone familiar with the community's linguistic structure would recognize it as a story from Nsukka.

This Nsukka-Igbo folk song, *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka*, provides a revealing lens on language, gendered sociality, and moral economy within the Orba subcommunity. This analysis situates the song within its linguistic variety, examines its performative function, and interprets its core symbolic imagery—particularly the recurring motif of “on credit.” The study argues that the lyrics juxtapose traditional ideals of marital duty with a critique of lethal domestic expectations, thereby illuminating how language encodes communal memory, gendered experience, and social admonition.

The lyrics are presented in Igbo (with an English gloss), reflecting an Nsukka (Orba) Igbo variety—part of the Igboid subgroup. This repertoire likely preserves tonal distinctions that encode both lexical and grammatical meaning, and it showcases the use of proverbs, idioms, and ritualized storytelling patterns characteristic of local performance. The song resides within a corpus in which women articulate experiences of marriage, household duty, and suffering under patriarchal expectations. It functions as social critique, communal memory, and an ethic of resilience, while also offering a counter-narrative. The first song in the related *Onye-amuma la doo* repertoire praises endurance and frames a wife's principled conduct; by contrast, *Nna m eee, cheru m oo ka mu bomanegh' uka* foregrounds a critique of sacrificing life for duty. The Call-and-Response structure—Call and Chorus—engages the audience, reinforces communal solidarity, and encodes collective judgment about appropriate behavior within the family and marriage. The performance ecology described—women gathering as co-wives and kin—aligns with ritual spaces where such language is normative, enabling moral evaluation and social admonition to be voiced and internalized.

A central semantic frame is the Igbo-speaking community's enduring emphasis on family duty: the husband as provider and the wife as caretaker of children and

home. The song uses this frame to critique failures in fulfilling these duties, thereby reframing violence or neglect as a social moral failure rather than a private misfortune. The imagery of “on credit”—pepper, salt, crayfish, and ultimately “everything”—serves as a potent metaphor for material precarity and social vulnerability. This moral economy suggests that debt and scarcity are moral risk factors precipitating tragedy, and that irresponsible or careless behaviour has communal consequences. The deceased colleague’s memory functions as a public memorial, narrating the circumstances of her death within a framework of duty, betrayal, and communal responsibility. The song thus operates as a didactic instrument, warning others about the cost of tolerating abuse or neglect within domestic life.

The Nsukka–Orba localization of the lyric signals specific kinship, marriage, and co-wife terminology that are salient for understanding gendered relations in this region. Local ethnolinguistic cues—such as terms for husbands, wives, co-wives, and in-laws—reveal how social roles are linguistically encoded and performed. The cadence and ceremonial register typical of Igbo ritual song contribute to the transmission of moral norms and collective memory across generations. Ethically, the analysis highlights a tension between venerating female endurance and acknowledging the harm that can arise from rigid expectations of marital obedience. The song thereby participates in contemporary discussions about gendered violence and social reform within rural Igbo communities, while also illustrating how language preserves cultural memory and identity in the face of globalization and language shift.

Discussion

Musical language functions as a powerful conduit for cultural identification within the Igbo sociolinguistic landscape, and the Nsukka dialect provides a compelling case study of how a community’s indigenous language code and way of life are encoded and transmitted through performance. The central claim is that cultural identification hinges on a language code rooted in lived practice, and music amplifies this code by acting as an embodied medium that communicates to insiders and outsiders who share that linguistic framework. In this sense, musical language does more than convey aesthetic meaning; it encodes, propagates, and legitimizes cultural identity, fostering belonging and solidarity while simultaneously signaling difference in intercultural contexts (Nwachukwu, 2012).

The Nsukka speech community, located in Enugu State, exhibits distinctive phonological and compositional patterns that set it apart within the Igbo varieties. A core observation is that Nsukka speakers frequently deploy L, N, and, more rarely, R sounds in sentence construction. This particular phonemic palette functions as an audible index of Nsukka speech in both musical and everyday discourse. The implications are not merely phonetic; they suggest that listeners who are attuned to these cues can identify Nsukka linguistic presence in performance, ritual speech, and song, thereby reinforcing communal identity through auditory familiarity.

Concrete patterns emerge when comparing dialectal realizations of shared communicative concepts. For the idea of “get married,” Nsukka renders the phrase as *luoo di*, whereas Central Igbo uses *nuoo di*, Imo also uses *luoo di*, and Anambra uses *nuoo di*. This variation illustrates how a single communicative goal can be differently realized across dialects, with Nsukka’s form contributing to a distinctive musical-linguistic signature. In the case of “die for someone,” Nsukka employs *janwune onyene*, while Central Igbo offers *nga-anwuru mmadu*, Imo presents *mma-anwuru mmadu*, and Anambra provides *mma-anwulu gi*. The divergence of high-stakes expressions across communities underscores how linguistic encoding in performance consolidates group boundaries and shared meaning, reinforcing belonging in both everyday interaction and ritualized musical contexts.

These patterns feed into a broader claim about cultural identification through music: the ability to recognize Nsukka speech cues by ear implies that indigenous songs carry an embedded code. Listeners decode identity through familiar phonetic and lexical markers embedded in performance, enabling songs to function as a cultural passport (Hymes, 1974). Musical language thus signals place, lineage, and community affiliation, while also enabling solidarity among Nsukka speakers and distinguishing them from other Igbo communities. The study’s identification of symbolic codes—particularly the conspicuous use of N, L, and J combinations—points to a decodable framework that performers and audiences can rely on to navigate questions of cultural belonging during musical performance and communal activities.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings sit at the intersection of ethnomusicology and sociolinguistics, illustrating how music encodes social identity and how phonemic variation maps onto regional belonging. Methodologically, the observations may draw on field recordings, linguistic analysis of song lyrics and performance speech, and comparative dialect reviews to bolster credibility and reproducibility (Krzyzanowski, 2014; Bernard, 2017). Looking ahead, refinement opportunities include clarifying the scope of Nsukka as a discrete dialect cluster within Igbo, expanding the corpus with more song types to strengthen the pattern of Nsukka-specific cues, and incorporating visual supplements such as a dialect map and a concise table contrasting Nsukka with Central Igbo, Imo, and Anambra. A compact codebook outlining how the symbolic alphabets N, L, and J map to identity signals in musical performance could also be developed to support researchers and students.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of how Igbo lyrics from Nsukka function as powerful vessels of cultural identity and as catalysts for poverty discourse. Through an ethnolinguistic lens, we have shown that musical language does more than entertain: it encodes belonging, memory, and social aspiration, while also framing economic realities as shared communal concerns. The Nsukka repertoire emerges as a living archive in which dialect, prosody, and performance conventions converge to produce meaningful signals of identity that are recognizable by insiders and revealing to outsiders. Dialectal choices, prosodic patterns, and genre-specific

performance practices collectively index membership within the Nsukka speech community, forming a tightly woven code that listeners can decode to ascertain belonging. Simultaneously, these sonic and lyrical textures carry a critique of poverty embedded in metaphor, evaluative stance, and narrative sequencing. Such discourse aligns with local concepts of reciprocity, social justice, and communal responsibility, rendering poverty not merely as an individual condition but as a shared social burden that the community negotiates and addresses through collective memory and aspiration.

Music here functions as more than a repository of memories or an object of aesthetic appreciation; it operates as a conduit for communal memory and collective agency. By publicizing past struggles, current realities, and future aspirations, Nsukka songs mobilize audiences toward cultural preservation and socio-economic advocacy. The performative aspect of the repertoire—cadence, call-and-response patterns, and instrumental timbres—serves to amplify social messages, enabling listeners to recognize signals of identity while simultaneously conveying solidarity across generations. This dual capacity of music to preserve linguistic heritage and to propel social action underscores its centrality in community life and development. The study's ethnolinguistic approach proved effective in uncovering how linguistic signals in lyrics and performance shape social meaning, especially when complemented by field observations that illuminate audience reception and performance contexts. Integrating textual analysis with situated observation allowed for a richer interpretation of how meaning is co-constructed by performers and communities, rather than produced by lyrics in isolation. Looking ahead, there is value in broadening the corpus to strengthen patterns of Nsukka-specific cues, conducting longitudinal ethnography to track linguistic change, and incorporating community validation to enhance credibility and relevance.

From a practical perspective, the findings carry significant implications for literacy, language preservation, and cultural policy. Recognizing the intimate link between song, language, and identity suggests instructional approaches that leverage musical language to reinforce Igbo literacy and the vitality of Nsukka dialects. Policymakers and cultural institutions can draw on these insights to support indigenous repertoires as assets for cultural heritage and development, including funding for community-based music programs, archives, and language documentation initiatives (UNESCO, 2003; Ndimele, 2018). In community development and advocacy contexts, the musical language identified in this study offers a toolkit for poverty awareness campaigns and social mobilization that resonates with local sensibilities and moral economies. Such initiatives stand to benefit from co-creative processes that pair ethnolinguistic insights with practical interventions, ensuring that poetic expressions translate into tangible opportunities for empowerment.

To operationalize these ideas, we propose several concrete next steps. A compact codebook mapping symbolic alphabets such as N, L, and J to identity signals within musical performance would provide a practical reference for researchers, educators, and community musicians. Visual companions, including dialect maps and comparative tables, could accompany performances and curricula, helping a

broader audience grasp the nuances of Nsukka's ethnolinguistic landscape. Moreover, expanding collaboration with Nsukka communities to co-create repertoires that fuse cultural preservation with poverty alleviation initiatives would amplify the impact of this work and ensure that outcomes are responsive to local needs and aspirations. In sum, the Nsukka Igbo repertoire demonstrates that music is not merely a reflection of culture but an active agent in constituting cultural identity and directing collective action toward socio-economic justice.

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