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**Abstract**

In light of the increasing demand for multifaceted strategies to confront contemporary global environmental challenges, this paper explores the Indigenous environmental knowledge embodied in the Musical traditions of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Employing ethnographic and musicological research methods, and focusing on the musical contents of selected Igbo traditional songs, it examines how Igbo music traditions convey ecological principles and practices. Through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates theoretical frameworks drawn from sustainable development and ecocriticism, the research argues that many Igbo traditional songs articulate and promote core values such as inclusivity respect for the environment, cooperation, mutual aid, moderation and justice. These principles constitute the foundational framework through which the Igbo community conceptualizes the environment and collective wellbeing. This research contributes novel theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches for interrogating the intersection of environmental sustainability, musical expression, and social structures within a transdisciplinary scholarly discourse. Moreover, it facilitates the preservation and critical interpretation of the Igbo’s ecological cultural heritage, thereby supporting its transmission and safeguarding it for future generations.

Key Words: Igbo music, traditional songs, Igbo environmental knowledge, musical traditions, environmental sustainability.

**Introduction**

The natural environment supplies the essential resources that underpin human development, and the Indigenous cultures around the world long developed sustainable environmental practices deeply rooted in their cosmologies, livelihoods, and traditional ecological knowledge. Historically, this knowledge has supported communities by fostering practices that secure food supplies, conserve resources and biodiversity, and manage ecosystems sustainably. For example, the Ifugao people of the Philippines engineered and maintained their rice terraces for over two millennia, integrating water-management techniques with soil-conservation methods to sustain their landscape (Acabado 2012). Indigenous groups like the Kayapó in the Brazilian Amazon use agroforestry systems that integrate crops with native forest species. These systems maintain biodiversity, restore degraded land, and enhance soil fertility through polyculture planting and fallow periods (Posey, 1985). The Sámi People of Scandinavia practiced migratory pastoralism which involved seasonal movement across massive landscapes that prevents overgrazing and offers time for ecosystems to recover (Forbes, 2013). Many Indigenous African cultures practiced several communal resource management techniques that involved strict regulation of the use of water bodies, mountains and groves. These systems served as effective means of conservation (Roe and Nelson 2009). A significant portion of Indigenous ecological knowledge is deeply entrenched and stored in the musical traditions of Africa.

The Igbo, predominantly found in southeast Nigeria, one of the country’s largest ethnic groups, is a member of this African society, and as such, its music serves as a repository of traditional knowledge that is essential for harnessing mental and ideological resources for development. Thus, a significant portion of Igbo people’s cultural and environmental knowledge is incorporated, preserved and transmitted through their musical tradition across generations. This encompasses normative frameworks governing human interactions with the elements, flora and fauna of the environment, frequently integrating principles that foster ecological stewardship and sustainable resource management.

In recent decades, numerous scholars have engaged with Igbo music and culture from various perspectives. For instance, Okafor (2005) examined the historical and functional perspectives, Agu (2024) investigated structures of traditional Igbo musical forms, Echezona (1964) engaged the organology of Igbo musical instruments, Onwuegbuna (2015) analysed the philosophical embodiments and identity, and Nwamara (2017) examined the interaction of Igbo musical forms with global musical trends. Despite the growing need and demand for varied perspectives and strategies to tackle the increasing global environmental crisis (which also affects southeastern Nigeria and the country in general), there is a dearth of Igbo music scholarship that explores music and environmental themes. As a result, there remains a significant gap in academic engagement with Igbo music that address the intersection of environmental stewardship and societal well‑being. This study seeks to fill that gap by uncovering the Indigenous environmental concepts, knowledge, values, and practices embedded in Igbo folk songs, and by examining how this musical tradition conveys ecological principles and practices.

To achieve this, the study focuses on Igbo folksongs from southeastern Nigeria—a region characterized by a diverse landscape of wetlands, forests, and farmland. Despite being rich in natural resources, the area struggles with serious environmental issues, such as deforestation, land degradation, unsustainable land-use practices and particularly gully erosion.



Plate 1. Map of Igboland in southeastern Nigeria. Adapted from https://www.researchgate.net

***The ethnology of the Igbo*.**

The Igbo are patrilineal and traditionally organized into decentralized autonomous communities with great importance placed on democracy and egalitarianism (Afigbo 1981). Kinship and lineage form the basis of their social structure with patrilineal descent groups (ummunna) being pivotal in shaping political and economic activities. While Traditional Igbo religion (*Omenala*), Christianity, and Islam are the main religions, a few others, including the Bahá’í Faith, are practiced by the minority. Allegiance to more than one religion is also common. The Igbo people have a rich tradition of trade and craftsmanship, including blacksmithing and weaving, which facilitated not only local exchange but also long-distance commerce, thereby integrating Igbo communities into larger regional economic systems (Afigbo 1981). Colonialism and post-colonial state formation have significantly altered traditional institutions. Nevertheless, the Igbo continue to navigate modernity by blending Indigenous norms with broader national and global influences through adaptive practices.

This paper explores the connection between music and the natural environment within cultural and social contexts, and presents a framework that integrates Indigenous knowledge system in addressing contemporary environmental issues, while emphasizing the role of music as a tool for ecological awareness and sustainability. Its multidisciplinary approach provides a broader perspective on the interrelationships between music, the environment and culture, contributing to the emerging field of ecomusicology. By offering distinctive perspectives on how music mirrors and impacts environmental values, it introduces innovative theoretical frameworks for analysing society among the Igbo, in the light of environmental sustainability. This approach contributes a novel viewpoint by exploring non-Western, Indigenous musical traditions through the lens of environmental ethics and sustainability.

Rapid globalization in Nigeria poses a risk to the preservation of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. By documenting and interpreting cultural ecological heritage, this research contributes to its preservation, and safeguarding for posterity. It also offers resources for scholars in environmental humanities, ethnomusicology, Indigenous studies and spiritualities, facilitating further exploration and study.

***The Environment***

The environment is a multifaceted notion that encompasses physical, biological, chemical and human dimensions. It includes both natural components (air, water, soil, and biodiversity) and human-induced factors (cities, infrastructure, and pollution sources). Through the complex interaction of these elements, the ecosystems and societies are shaped (Ruiz-Mallén and Corbera (2017). The environment is essential for life, supplying fundamental resources like food, water, and materials, and underpinning ecological processes that preserve biodiversity and ecosystem functionality. The degradation of the environment occurs through overexploitation, pollution, or alteration of natural resources, resulting in reduced ecosystem functionality, and issues such as biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, and climate disruption.

The term ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’ are often used interchangeably. In their scope and focus, however, there are subtle differences. Ecology explores the relationships between organisms and their environment, and how biotic and abiotic factors interact and influence each other (Begon, Townsend and Harper 2006; Molles 2019).

***Indigenous Environmental knowledge***

Indigenous Environmental Knowledge (IEK) denotes the traditional understanding, practices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples regarding their local ecosystems and natural surroundings. It encompasses the accumulated knowledge, practices, and traditions developed by Indigenous peoples over centuries of living in close relationship with their environment. This relationship includes the physical, social, and metaphysical aspects of how they interact with and perceive their environment. The values, practices and ideas are informed by the lived experiences and intimate connections of long-term residents with their surrounding environment (Thornton 2014). This knowledge includes detailed information on plants, animals, weather patterns, landscapes, as well as sustainable practices like harvesting, and land management.

IEK is perpetuated through cultural taboos and beliefs, and is increasingly recognized as a vital means for sustainable environmental management and conservation efforts (Adesawe, 2023). It provides valuable insights into species behavior, habitat management, and climate patterns, that might otherwise be overlooked by the conventional scientific approaches, thereby complementing it (Agrawal 1995). Transmitted across generations through oral traditions, rituals, and cultural practices, including storytelling and music, this dynamic body of knowledge evolves through adaptive processes. Its holistic nature, integrates, ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, and mirrors an acutely interrelated understanding of the relationships between humans, other living beings, and the environment.

The Igbo environmental knowledge reflects a comprehensive understanding of the natural world and its interconnection with human societies. It is anchored on traditional beliefs and practices, and integrates ecological wisdom, resource utilization, and spiritual reverence for nature (Okafor 2010, Nzeadibe and Egbule 2012). According to Igbokwe and Omire (2020: 3147), the Igbo perceive themselves as intertwined with their biophysical environment through a spiritual network of relationships. A central aspect is the notion that elements of the environment – land, water bodies, hills, mountains, plants, animals, valleys, the sky – and all their inhabitants including animals and plants are the abodes of various spirits (Ilogu 1974). It was crucial that dignity, care and respect be accorded to them in all relationships, especially as some of the spirits have the power to protect, reward or punish. This belief promotes a culture of moderation, consideration, and respect in the use of environmental resources as disregard for these principles can result in negative outcomes affecting individuals and the broader community. This notion is not peculiar to the Igbo, the Yoruba of the southeastern Nigeria also hold this understanding (Ojo 2017), as well as several other Indigenous groups.

Ossai (2024) posits that Igbo IEK offers priceless lessons in environmental care, from farming methods based on harmony with the seasonal cycles to spiritual rites and recognizes the sacredness of natural forces. In Igbo cosmology there is the interconnectedness of all elements of the universe – ancestors, humans, spirits, animals, plants and the land (Kalu 2008). This holistic worldview emphasizes the sacredness of nature and the balance of existence which is maintained through a network of taboos, norms and rituals. Central to this cosmological framework is Ala/Ana/Ani, the Earth goddess, who functions as the custodians of morality, fertility and the sanctity of the land. Ala embodies the spiritual essence of the earth and oversees the ethical conduct of individuals and communities (Okonkwo 2017). Her authority is reinforced through a system of taboos (*nso-Ala* [What the land abhors]) and ritual practices, which serve both as moral injections and environmental regulations (Ucheaga, 1999).

*Nso-ala*, culturally sanctioned prohibitions designed to maintain cosmic and social equilibrium often pertain to ecological stewardship—such as the protection of sacred groves, the sanctity of water bodies, and prohibitions against certain forms of exploitation or pollution (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Violations of these *nso-ala* are not merely social infractions but are considered spiritual offenses against Ala, which disrupt the harmony between humans and their environment (Edeh, 1985). To address such breaches, communities perform rituals of atonement and purification, which are essential for restoring balance and re-establishing the mystical relationship between the human and the spiritual realms. These rituals reaffirm the collective responsibility to uphold the moral and ecological order as ordained by Ala (Njoku, 2002).

Under the guardianship of Ala, the principles of coexistence, respect and reciprocity are deeply embedded in social, spiritual and cultural values that uphold peace, environmental stewardship and sustainability. The worldview of the Igbo indicates a spiritual ecology whereby environmental morals are acutely entrenched in cultural practice and religious belief. This comprehensive system preserves the natural world and the moral integrity of the society. This fosters harmony between humans and the environment and ensures sustainable resource use and resilience against environmental degradation.

A good number of IEK are embedded in stories, songs and literature. These narratives often include origin stories, cautionary tales about environmental stewardship, and guidance on maintaining harmonious relationships with nature.

***Traditional songs***

Traditional songs are Indigenous music firmly anchored in diverse cultures. They embody life’s philosophical questions and the community’s value systems. They function as essential means of education and communication within particular cultural settings. Typically, of anonymous origin and transmitted orally, traditional songs safeguard cultural heritage across generations (Euba 1970). Indigenous African music emerges from the fusion of metaphysical, psychic, psychological, and physical energies that shape behaviors, leading to musical expression (Nzewi and Nzewi 2007). Across African societies, music is driven more by extramusical factors—such as cultural concepts and practices—than by purely artistic aims. Consequently, music-making engages the mind’s practical creativity, expressing itself through both sound and visual imagery. This view highlights that each musical sound is influenced by non-musical motivations, ideas, and purposes. African traditional music is a dynamic and diverse cultural expression rooted firmly in oral traditions and community practices. It plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, enriching spiritual ceremonies, and safeguarding history and storytelling arts within African societies. Heavily reliant on improvisation and oral transmission, it cultivates creativity and adaptability in performance.

Nzewi (2003) highlights the importance of melody, rhythm, melody, and the complex interplay of patterns that showcase complex polyrhythms and call-and-response techniques in African music. Through the call-and-response dynamics of the structural form, collective participation reinforces social cohesion and strengthens community ties. African music is marked by its integration into everyday life (Nketia 2005). Percussion instruments, like drums are essential, as they serve as backbone for rhythmic structure to the melody (Kubik, 2010).

Igbo traditional songs exemplify the utilitarian creativity characteristic of African music. They place importance on both sound and imagery, extending beyond mere entertainment to embody deep societal purposes and impacts. Woven into every phase of life, these songs illuminate the essential dynamics of human existence.

**Materials and Method of research**

We employed a combination of field and analytical methods to examine the lyrics and musical structures of selected songs, which were chosen for their direct and indirect references to environmental themes. About 40 songs were accessed, 15 were recorded on the field among which include dance, ceremonial, ritual, story songs, and children’s songs. This is an indigenist research design, which Wilson (2007) defines as an inquiry conducted by Indigenous people and is informed by Indigenous philosophies, theories, and methods.

Based on the transcription, analysis and interpretation of the data, this paper asserts that some Igbo songs engage with the environment and argues that they often use imageries and representations of animals, and the supernatural to convey this. Theories of Sustainable Development and Ecocriticism are applied to examine and give insights to the Indigenous environmental principles and practices embedded within the songs.

***Sustainable Development***

The framework of Sustainable development is grounded on (1) Economic Growth – Long-term, equitable economic development, (2) Social Inclusion – Fairness and equality for all members of society, (3) Environmental Protection – Preservation of natural resources and biodiversity, and (4) Conservation of biodiversity. It originated from global dialogues recognizing the interconnectedness between human development and environmental stewardship (World Commission on Environment and Development, [WCED] 1987).

The concept of sustainable development emerged in response the challenges of resource overuse, environmental degradation, social inequality, and loss of biodiversity. The Industrial Revolution of the 1800s caused major environmental damage and natural resource depletion, triggering early conservation efforts with activists like Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, advocating for responsible use of natural resources in the early 1900s. These early conservation efforts focused on protecting forests, wildlife, and national parks (WCED 1987). By the 1960s and 1970s, concerns grew over industrialization’s impact on the environment, leading to the 1972 United Nation’s Conference in Stockholm, where global leaders emphasized the need to balance development with environmental protection (United Nations, 1972).

The 1987 Brundtland Report articulated the concept of Sustainable Development – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 45). It underscored the importance of balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability and social equity, advocating for the prudent use of natural resources to maintain resilient ecosystems and the essential services they provide.

African Indigenous Knowledge systems have traditionally promoted sustainable resource management using culturally rooted practices to protect ecosystems, preserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance across generations. African cultures’ sustainable development ethos embraces social equity for all beings – human, animal, plant and spiritual – ensuring vulnerable communities are not marginalized. The attitude of sustainability is investigated in Igbo traditional songs – how they mirror this holistic approach by encoding responsible environmental practices that uphold social and ecological balance. Thus, the relevance of the sustainable development framework in this study.

***Ecocriticism Theory***

Ecocriticism provides a framework for examining Igbo songs through the prism of IEK. An interdisciplinary approach, it bridges literature, culture, and ecological consciousness, interrogating how environmental themes and representations of nature are articulated in texts. As a response to growing environmental concerns the foundation of ecocriticism was laid in the 19th Century by Henry Thoreau, John Muir, and Ralph Emerson who had explored humanity's place within nature (Garrard 2012) and in 1978 William Rueckert coined the term ‘ecocriticism’. These literary scholars championed symbiotic engagement with the natural environment (Buell, 1995). Ecocriticism encourages a reevaluation of human interactions with the environment and draws from feminist, postcolonial, and deconstructionist theoretical perspectives to examine concerns such as sustainability, nature and the ecological interrelation of all elements.

At first ecocriticism focused on literary analysis, however it has grown to include a wide range of media, such as film, art popular culture and music, engaging in cross-cultural dialogues about environmental justice, climate change, and the challenges of the Anthropocene. It emphasizes the unity of all life and humanity’s bond with nature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996), while acknowledging that environmental concerns are shaped by political, economic, and cultural contexts (Bennett 2010). It explores how texts address environmental issues, calls for change and emphasizes the importance of Indigenous voices and traditional ecological knowledge in promoting sustainable practices (Nash, 2001). It engages with global environmental crises, including climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, while fostering awareness and championing the cause of ecological justice ((Morton, 2007).

Ecocritical analysis reveals intricate dynamics between culture, environment and society. Employing its framework in this enquiry, and investigating representation of nature, cultural identity, environmental critique, preservation of Indigenous knowledge, and promotion of community actions in these songs, provide insights into environmental values, concepts, and practices that underpin Igbo cultural expression.

**Organization of Igbo Music**

Indigenous Igbo music is intricately woven into the religious and social fabric of the people, and as it fulfills cultural needs, it also entertains. This gives rise to two main categories of music - social and religious music. Religious music encompasses those performed during traditional sacred rites, acts of invocation, appeasement and worship. Social music is performed during a variety of festivals, ceremonies and other secular gatherings. This category includes, praise songs, work songs, ceremonial music, songs associated with different age groups, children’s music and other forms of music tailored to specific social events. Many traditional groups across the major categories and their subtypes, contain direct or indirect references to the environment, highlighting ecological themes through music.

Musical instruments play vital roles in Igbo music. They include drums of various sizes and forms, and different types of percussion instruments. String and wind instruments are few. Musical instruments frequently accompany traditional songs and enrich environmental communication through their sonic functions, cultural symbolism and also because their materials often come straight from the environment.

Igbo music serves not merely as a source of entertainment, but more significantly as an educational and cultural medium. It transmits historical narratives and communal identity, creates appropriate atmospheres for cultural and religious observances, facilitates communication with deities and the metaphysical realm, and reinforces the structures through which societal laws, norms, and values are upheld in the society.

***Structural Forms of Igbo Traditional Music***

The procedure and presentation of the core elements of Igbo music - form, harmony, instrumentation, melody, rhythm, repetition, scale, tonal organization, improvisation and vocal techniques –enhance the conveyance of the norms and codes of the society, including environmental values and management. These features are seen in the various structural forms which appear as solos, and alternations between solo and chorus in Igbo traditional music. (Musical Example 1)

Musical Example 1. Call-and-Response Mgbanti



 

 

The creatively crafted solos, sometimes delivered through the strophic or speak-singing style, convey powerful oblique or direct environmental messages which evoke impactful impressions on the audience as well as the performers. The call-and-response structure, prevalent in many performances, invites audience participation. This interaction fosters a sense of communal unity in the experience as well as in the concept being expressed in the songs.

***Melodic Structure***

Maintenance of correct tonal inflection of the language which enhances meaning is boosted by the use of short melodic intervals of 2nds, 3rds, and 4ths and sometimes leaps, capturing intense sentiments, and communicating complex emotions. Igbo music is marked by extensive repetition of short melodic themes. Repetition accentuates the message of the music and helps to recall it.

***Rhythmic Structure***

Both simple and complex rhythmic patterns appear in the music chosen for this research, and at times they are interwoven within a single composition. This is observed in both the textual and instrumental rhythms. The textual rhythmic patterns enhance the expression of ecological values and norms by reflecting the rhythm of the text, thereby strengthening their overall effect while the instrumental rhythmic patterns boost the general depth and vitality of the music. This enables a dynamic and impactful mode of communication.

***Harmonic Structure***

Sometimes Igbo traditional music incorporates harmonies. This adds depth and richness to the melodic texture, making it more pleasurable to listen to, and strengthening its communicative power. This contributes positively to conveying cultural principles and values, including environmental stewardship in music. This is observed in the rendition of Egbe belị Ugo belị, Example 2, where a polyphonic structure is manifested.

Musical Example 2. Egbe belị Ugo belị (excerpts)





***Song texts***

Interpreting the song texts through the lens of Indigenous knowledge systems unveils the Igbo ecological philosophy, which views the environment as a spiritual entity, where reciprocity and justice are the hallmark of the interrelationship among all its components. The song text in Example 1, (an Igbo idiom), regularly set to music by Igbo musicians, succinctly captures this concept.

Example 1 Egbe belị k’Ugo bel

Example 1.

*Egbe belị, Ugo belị* Let the Kite perch, let the eagle perch

*Nke sị ibe ya eblịna* Anyone that says not to perch to the other

*Nku kwaa ya* May its wings break

The Kite (*Milvus migrans*) represents disruption, whereas Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) signifies beauty and prestige. Despite the Eagle’s superiority over the Kite in desirable traits, there is fairness in relating with them, as the high and low are treated with equal regard. Retributive punishment is seen in the breaking of the wings of the errant bird and symbolizes swift delivery of justice by Ala, the Earth goddess, irrespective of the social status of the individuals involved. This axiom used in consolidating order, social justice, unity, co-operation, and peaceful co-existence, emphasizes fair play and the freedom to go about one’s undertakings. This does not only apply to humans, but also to all elements of the environment—both animate and inanimate. When set to music, it penetrates both physical and metaphysical realms of emotion, effectively inspiring action.

Example 2, in addition to expressing the emphasis placed on retributive justice in cultural norms of the Igbo, also articulates the importance of music in invoking spiritual entities in the environment.

Example 2. Ọ bụrụ mụ riri azụ nwa azụ (excerpts)

Ọ bụrụ mụ riri azụ nwa azụ If I were the one that ate the fish

Yeyeye (Yeyeye is onomatopoeic and gives structure to the song)

Nkpume heturu data May the Stone come down

Yeyeye Yeyeye

Ọ bụrụ mụ erighị azụ nwa azụ If I did not eat the fish

Yeyeye Yeyeye

Nkpume kwụrụ ka ị kwụ Stone stay were you are

Okere kwu jere be di ya The rat went to visit her husband

Ngwere jere be ọyị ya Lizard went to visit her friend

Ụchịcha nọ na-akpụ ite Cocroach was molding pot

This song accompanies a folktale. Such songs like this serve to enhance clarity, engagement, attentiveness, and the retention of the ethical education embedded in the tales. In the story a rat, a lizard, a grasscutter and a cockroach live together in a house. One day they cook fish for dinner but the meal mysteriously disappears. Each deny any knowledge of what happened. To uncover the truth, they seek the help of Nkpume, a massive rock inhabited by a deity known for instantly detecting and punishing wrongdoers. The procedure involves each suspect going to the deity’s grove and invoking its spirit through song. If a person is innocent, the rock remains still; if guilty it rolls down and crushes the offender. The rat, the grasscutter and the lizard each sing, and the stone remains immobile. However, when the cockroach sings, the stone rolls down and crushes it, revealing its guilt.

The various animals in the story - each representing different categories of life within the ecosystem including humans - illustrate inclusivity and the principle that none is exempt from the consequences of its actions. The concept of spirits inhabiting elements of the environment is glimpsed, especially through the deity residing in the rock. Through the accompanying song the tale emphasizes that even inanimate component of the environment holds significance and, at times, possess greater powers than humans, as demonstrated by the rock’s ability to administer justice. This worldview stands in contrast to the Western anthropocentric perspective, which places humans at the apex of ecological hierarchy.

The song texts of *Gini mere Nwaniga[[1]](#footnote-1)* (Example 3), by depicting a chain of interconnected actions by inhabitants of the environment and their effects on co-residents, reveal the Igbo environmental ideology of inclusivity and interconnectedness.

Example 3. Gịnị mere Nwanịga (excerpts)

Gịnị meere Nwanịga? What happed to the Nwaniga?

Nwanịga o, Nwanịga Nwaniga oh, Nwaniga oh

N’ụkwa dagburu Nwanịga That *ukwa* fell on and crushed Nwaniga to death

Gịnị meere ụkwa ahụ? What happened to that *ukwa*

Na nkpọ mawara ụkwa That the wood struck ukwa

N’ụkwa dagburu Nwanịga And Ukwa fell and crushed Nwaniga to death

The lyrics of this speak-singing offer insights into the natural environment – its settings, the inhabitants and the web of interactions among them. It recounts how Nwaniga is killed by *ukwa*, (African breadfruit [*Treculia Africana*]) which was dislodged when a piece of wood that was weakened by termites’ activities on the wood, struck it. The termite is eaten by a chicken; the chicken is seized by a kite; the kite is felled by the gun; the gun is forged by the smith; and the smith is created by God. In tracing this chain, the chant reveals the grand design of Chukwu Okike, the Almighty Creator, as the ultimate source of the entire universe, and underscores how actions of seemingly small creatures of the ecosystem such as the termite, can result to huge and sometimes disastrous consequences like the death of Nwaniga. It also conveys the understanding that every element of the environment - both inanimate and animate - plays a role, that in one way or the other contributes to the state and harmony or disruption of the ecosystem. Respect for every entity is advocated because of possible concealed capabilities and effects on the ecology. Therefore, everyone has a duty of responsibility to the wellbeing of the environment.

The following song also emanates from a folktale and conveys a number of Indigenous environmental ideologies.

Example 4. Idee Idemiri (Excerpts)

Idee ide mmiri naasa kuma kuma The river that is very wide

Ofu iko nkunye nwa, mụ o Because of a cup of water which I gave to my baby

Idee ide mmiri naasa kuma kuma The river that is very wide

Ọ sị mụ jebe ide And she asks me to go to Ide river

In the story, on a certain day, a baby is very thirsty and is crying desperately for water. Unfortunately, Nnenwa her mother has run out of drinking water in her home. Nnenwa asks her co-wife to lend her a cup of water for the baby, promising to replace it the next time she fetches water from the river. The co-wife agrees and gives her a cup of water which she had fetched from Ide, the Great River. As soon as the baby finishes drinking, the co-wife demands that the water be returned immediately. Unfortunately, that day happens to be one on which trips to the river are strictly prohibited in the community. It is considered highly dangerous for anyone to venture near the Great River on such a day. Nnenwa offers water from a nearby stream but her co-wife insists it must come from the Great Ide River. Despite Nnenwa’s earnest pleas, her co-wife remains adamant. So Nnenwa takes a water-pot and sets off for the great Ide River. Along the way, she encounters several terrifying creatures and vengeful spirits poised to devour her - but when she sings the above song, they take pity on her and allow her to pass. She reaches the river, Nnenwa sings the song and the great Ide allows her to fetch her water. Upon returning home, she hands the cup of water back to her co-wife, who is astonished and wonders how Nnenwa managed to survive the perilous journey.

This song text is subtly permeated with many concepts including reverence to nature, environmental stewardship, duty of care, cooperation, inclusivity and interconnectedness with nature. It starts with praises to the great Ide River *Idee ide mmiri naasa kuma kuma*, (The River that is very wide), showing reverence to nature. This represents respect and veneration accorded to supernatural elements of the ecosystem. This is possible because of the understanding that components of the environment are imbued with spirits, and in this case, River Ide is a deity. Nnenwa relies on the deep communicative potency of music to reach the depths of emotions of the vengeful spirits, the dreadful creatures and the Great River Ide.

The story through its song, offers insights into how environmental resources are regulated, exemplified by the prohibition of visits to, or the use of any resources from the river on certain days. IEK understands that regulation reduces pressure on the river’s exploitable resources allowing for rejuvenation that protects ecosystems, preserves biodiversity and maintains ecological balance. All entities within the ecosystem share the environment with humans and rely on the same resources. This shared dependence explains the interest of the spirits, as well as their cooperation, inclusivity and interconnectedness in the conservation of nature.

Through the song’s lyrics, the folktale vividly conveys the rare compassion of the dreadful creatures and spirits upon learning that Nnewa’s journey was driven by her baby’s desperate need, exemplifying a profound duty of care. This situation presented an exception to the rule, as it involved a baby. Rather than punish her for breaking the community’s prohibition, they spared her life – recognizing that she risked everything for the sake of a child, not merely defiance. In Igbo society the norms dictate that the community collectively ensures the well-being, support and protection of its members, especially children, because their upbringing directly serves the community’s interests and falls under its responsibilities. Similarly, pregnant women and those carrying babies are protected from attacks and forbidden in engagement in any activity that might endanger the young ones in their care. Even the deceitful co-wife was not directly bad to the baby although she had endangered the life of the mother by forcing her to replace the water on that perilous day.

All elements of the ecology - including the creatures and spirits that Nnenwa had encountered on her way to the river - share a collective responsibility to protect their habitat, exemplified by the Great River Ide, upon which the entire community depends for survival. This song reinforces the story’s message of cooperation in maintaining the environment. Humans, for their part, refrain from visiting the River on certain days, while other inhabitants of the environment uphold this practice by punishing those who violate the environmental conservation rule. The recognition that non-human members of the environment play a crucial role in its protection and sustainability is clear and is suggestive of collective effort. Safeguarding all components of the ecosystem ensures ecological balance and harmony, both of which are vital for wellbeing. The song alludes to the importance of harmony for mutual support within the ecosystem. This support can only be achieved when the norms and values that govern peaceful coexistence among all member of the ecosystem are upheld.

Example 5. Azụ azụ (Excerpts)

*Azụ, azụ* Fish, fish

*Singịlịma* (Singilisma is onomatopoeic and gives structure to the song)

*Ị hụrụ ngbaka mụ* Have you seen my bangle?

*Ngbaka m dobere n’akụkụ nmiri* The bangle I kept on the river bank.

*Ọ bụ onye na-ekwu singịlịma* Who is singing?

*Eloo m gị* I will swallow you

Accompanying a folktale, this song functions as a didactic exhortation to uphold and respect the fundamental element of the natural environment. It issues a stern warning against acts of disobedience and the transgression of ecological principles - specifically, the reckless exploitation of natural resources - and underscores the inevitably environmental and societal repercussion that follow such violations. In this story, a certain village prohibits going to the river in the afternoon, for any reason whatsoever, because that is the time large fish and other big aquatic animals come out to swim, relax and socialize. Ada and her siblings go to the river to swim in the morning. Before entering the water Ada removes her bangle and keeps it at the riverbank. After swimming, she forgets her bangle and goes home. In the afternoon she remembers her bangle and insists on going back to the river to retrieve it despite her parents’ clear warning not to go to the river at that time of the day. On getting to the river, she meets a big fish relaxing in the water. She sings the song above and the fish tells her that it will swallow her – and then it does. Later her siblings come looking for her. One by one, they encounter the same fish, and one after another, it also swallows them.

This song reinforces the concept of environmental conservation in the story. This was also seen earlier in Example 4. Prohibition of swimming at a particular period of the day symbolises a form of regulation of the use and extraction of resources from the river by the IEK. Respect demands giving the river and its spirit time to rejuvenate and when this is not done, IEK realizes that it will lose its capacity to sustain life. Measures are therefore put in place for responsible exploitation observed in the story and song. The song communicates the dire consequences that await individuals that pay no heed to rules and regulations of the community, parents’ counsel, and lack respect for nature. It also connotes that individualism at the expense of others is not condoned, rather the collective wellbeing is of utmost importance. This song can be contrasted to that of Example 3 in which the life of Nnenwa was spared even though she broke the law, but for a good reason. The action of Ada and her siblings was inexcusable – disobedience to her parents and disdain for the norms governing their society for personal reasons.

**Ecological stewardship of Igbo music**

Igbo music is a rich source of knowledge about the people’s perception of the environment and its linkage to them. Even when the songs are folktale songs, they buttress the morals of the accompanied stories which resonate with the prohibitions governing the use of environmental resources in Igbo communities. The deft rendition of solos whether in strophic, or free style guarantees deep attention and internalization of the environmental messages of the songs. The alternating repetition in the call-and-response structures enhances both the entertainment value and communicability of the theme of music, thereby heightening its social-ecological commentaries. The various performance structures, adapted to the demands of specific occasion, also amplify the message conveyed through the songs. In some songs, especially the folktale songs, the audience could join in some of the refrains, thereby allowing the message to sink even deeper into their subconsciousness.

Of all the musical elements, lyrics most effectively convey ecological messages, in the selected songs. The intensity and amplification of the messages are achieved through emotional connection and the multisensory engagement experience brought about by the various musical components – melody, rhythm, repetition, harmony, extemporization, instrumentation, tonal organization, and vocal techniques. Thus, the message resonates more deeply as the music is learned, internalized and repeatedly sung - both in groups and privately - over an extended period.

Igbo traditional songs encapsulate the values, ideologies and environmental perceptions of past generations through symbolic representations of animals, plants, valleys, hills, bodies of water and other inanimate components of the ecosystem. These are conveyed through artistic expressions (especially music) that cultivated imaginative, emotional and spiritual engagement with environmental sustainability. The belief that spirits and deities inhabit various elements of the natural environment is emphasized. This establishes an intrinsic interconnectedness and interaction between the spiritual and human realms. In pursuit of harmonious and sustainable coexistence, communities accord reciprocal respect, and at times reverence to these spirits and deities, whose perceived capacity to safeguard or devastate society is contingent upon the nature of human interactions with the environment. Consideration for nature is manifested through strict observance of customary regulations governing resource use. Practices characterized by selfish or unsustainable exploitation such as overharvesting of fish and wildlife or indiscriminate tree felling are proscribed, for such wastefulness is deemed disrespectful and liable to provoke the ire of the spirits. Caution, moderation and stringent regulation in the extraction of water, flora, fauna, and other ecological resources are rigorously enforced, thereby promoting regeneration and renewal - an underpinning principle of sound environmental stewardship and sustainability.

The spirit of collective care in Igbo communal life resonates in the Indigenous music where empathy and inclusivity are apparent in engagement with the inhabitants of the environment. This responsibility encompasses acts of kindness, shared duties, and mutual support that benefit everyone rather that favoring individual gain. In many traditional African societies this ethos underpins harmony, social cohesion, and sustainability, ensuring that every member, especially the most vulnerable is cared for. This mindset encourages a collective approach to problem-solving, resource sharing and social justice, and links each person’s wellbeing to that of the entire community. Likewise, the health of the environment and its elements is intertwined with human welfare, affecting both positively or negatively depending on the circumstances. Music is a powerful medium for ecological communication as it penetrates both physical and metaphysical realms of emotion, effectively inspiring action. Figure one illustrates positive relationship of the fauna, flora, spirits and human beings, which results to environmental sustainability.



Figure 1. Environmental Sustainability

The holistic environmental stewardship involves working in concert with every aspect of the natural world including its spiritual forces, to cultivate balance among people, plants, animals, inanimate objects, and unseen beings, resulting in nurturing collective wellbeing and long-term sustainability. This pro-environmental behaviours among the Igbo are grounded on cultural values, beliefs and norms that are believed to have been divinely ordained. Igbo environmental understanding emphasizes the inherent worth and sacredness of nature, which is symbolized by viewing the land (*ala*) as the abode of a divine being, Ala the Earth goddess, who bears the same name as the former. The land and surrounding environment have been safeguarded by *nso-ala*, which are believed to have been passed down by Ala, since ancient times (Igbokwe and Omire 2020). Sadly, colonial regimes dismissed this Indigenous worldview and systematically pushed them to the margins. This disruption has precipitated the marginalization of Indigenous epistemologies thereby contributing to ecological degradation and the gradual erosion of social cohesion.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

This paper has revealed the rich environmental insights of the Indigenous Knowledge System inherent in Igbo songs. Key to sustainable environmental interactions are justice, respect, mutual support, cooperation and moderation. This article also demonstrates that Igbo traditional songs reflect and communicate environmental values through symbolic representations. These songs portray animals and plants as having human-like qualities and engaging with humans as equals, while underscoring the right of life for every member of the ecology. Indigenous Igbo music significantly promotes environmental sustainability by fostering connections between humans and nature, and by emphasizing humanity’s custodial role. It raises awareness and serves as a rich resource for exploring cultural heritage, thus facilitating multifaceted connections – intellectual, cultural, historical and physical.

Despite the global shift towards capitalist and individualistic values, which have contributed further in weakening Indigenous Igbo environmental beliefs and practices, and undermined ecological and societal sustainability, these Indigenous concepts persist, albeit in more subtle forms. For example, the belief by many, that the moral and social decline witnessed today is a form of retributive justice from Ala, for the failure of the society to respect and responsibly care for the natural world. They therefore see the need to renew the sacred relationship between humankind and the environment in order to restore ecological balance.

The current environmental crisis facing the glocal communities has often been treated merely as technical problems that require policy interventions. Attempts to take on this crisis have largely focused on its symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes. It is imperative to understand the root cause which is the prevailing consumerist, materialistic and pleasure-seeking attitudes that regard the natural world as mere property. Tarusarira 2017, however notes the growing recognition of the need for alternative perspectives and approaches that delve more deeply and broadly into the relationship with the natural world. Currently the ascendant discourse on decolonization is instigating a rigorous reevaluation of the Indigenous perspectives. Accordingly, it becomes imperative to incorporate perspectives that conceptualize the environment in different ways. The Indigenous communities, including the Igbo, which have historically engaged the environment through principles of respect, solidarity and complementarity - attitude that maintained the health of the environment and sustained the societies over centuries, is an example of such. These practices do not compromise the abilities of the future generation to meet their needs. Finally in agreement with Pavlou (2025), addressing the challenge of environmental degradation demands a deeper recognition of humanity’s inherent interconnectedness and the application of principles such as justice, consultation and the oneness of humanity.

This paper focused exclusively on the interaction of Igbo traditional music with the IEK. Further researchers could explore how environmental issues are represented and addressed in the music-making processes of contemporary genres of Igbo music, including art music and popular styles.

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1. The tortoise is sometimes referred to as Nwaniga. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)