The Meaning of the “Meaningless” Refrain in Igbo Folksongs and Storytelling Events

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Here Chukwuma Azuonye ponders the possible meanings of the "meaningless" refrains in Igbo folk songs that are sung during storytelling events.

A Bird Refrain
The refrains in folk songs that are often sung in chorus by the audience in folk storytelling events often have been described as "meaningless" or "nonsense" phrases largely because they comprise strings of sounds that supposedly do not have any current lexical status. But when one listens between the lines of some of the texts in which such descriptions occur, one is often struck by the wide range of expressive value that the so-called meaningless refrains have been recognized to carry. Indeed, when one closely examines these refrains, one finds that they are not only the most archaic and meaningful elements of the folk songs but by far the most critical in defining the lyrical quality and musicality of the songs. Isidore Okpewho (1992) comes more or less to these conclusions after examining the refrain of the following Igbo folk song, which he recalls from his childhood:

Little bird, little bird
*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*
What are you doing there?
*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*

I'm up there fetching wood
*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*
After fetching what will you do?
*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*
After fetching I'll light a fire
*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*

Of the so-called nonsense phrase (*Tuluzamzam tuluzam*), Okpewho writes:

Such sounds are usually left untranslated—rightly, perhaps—because there is no obvious meaning or function to them other than to complete the rhythmic beat of the song. But it is equally possible that those sounds have been derived from a close observation of the habits of little birds and are employed as a vivid phonological way of representing the "personality" of the bird in this particular dialogue.

Okpewho concludes:

On a more serious level, it has been charged that these ideophones or nonsense sounds are frequently found in "primitive" languages in their infancy of development. Again, it could be argued that some of these sounds have long lost their currency and that we no longer know their exact meanings because the language has developed well beyond them. On the whole,
However, it is safer to see ideophones and similar sound as proof of their users' sensitive feeling for language, a deep sensitive attachment to sounds and their power of vivid suggestion or representation.

Later, in this article, we shall see that—withstanding the validity of Okpewho's argument—the repeated phrase (Tuluzamzam tuluzam) in the song is not a case of a meaningless syllable, but a typical example of an onomatopoetic refrain, one that imitates sounds made by people, animals, and objects in the natural and cultural environment. Often other patterns of meaning in the folk song text (and in the larger narrative or liturgical text in which it is embedded) draw from, and are informed by, the fundamental meaning contained in the refrain.

While these claims will be illustrated in this article chiefly with reference to the folk songs and folktales of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, it is assumed throughout that the emergent paradigms will be applicable to the choric refrain in other cultures, not only in Africa but elsewhere across the world as well. As T.V.F. Brogan and Laurence Perrine have noted in their contribution on the subject to The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, “the full comparative study of refrains remains to be written” (p. 1018).

In order to present the so-called meaningless refrain in its proper perspective as part of a general pattern of meanings, it is necessary to outline and examine all the major categories of refrains that have been observed in the Igbo folk song, including those with unmistakable meanings. Eight main categories present themselves readily from the texts of performances that are available to us. These may be described as follows: (a) apostrophic refrains; (b) echo or parrot refrains; (c) complementary refrains; (d) exclamatory words; (e) theme or topical refrains; (f) onomatopoeic refrains; (g) ideophonic refrains; and (h) lyrical refrains. As we shall see presently, it is within the domain of ideophonic and lyrical refrains that the great majority of the so-called meaningless or nonsense phrases will be located.

**Apostrophic Refrains**

Apostrophic refrains are the most elementary and, presumably, the most archaic category of refrains. They range from simple interjections or exclamations that use all vowel sounds and nasals in the language (a! e! i! i! o! o! u! u! m! n! n!) to various patterns of combination and reduplication of these same sounds. Most common is the vocal exclamation, “O!” (Oh! Ou!), which, in Igbo, as in most other languages, is used to call attention to oneself or to something, or to express emotions ranging from surprise and admiration to fear, doubt, disapproval, or excitement. This is illustrated in the following song from the popular tale of “Omalinze,” in which the hated wife bears the king’s only male offspring. Here, the discovery of the king’s unknown son, where he is being fostered by a pauper, provokes a song of praise and rejoicing with an apostrophic refrain:

Omalinze, Omalinze, Okoro oma
O, Omalinze!
Omalinze, Omalinze, Okoro oma
O, Omalinze! . . .
Nwa nze, Nwa nze, Nwa nze,
Okoro oma
O, Omalinze!

Omalinze, Omalinze, lovely man
Oh, Omalinze!
Omalinze, Omalinze, lovely man
Oh, Omalinze!
Lordly son, lordly son, lordly son,
lovely man
Oh, Omalinze!

Often, for melodic effects and as a means of maintaining quantitative symmetry between the solo and the refrain, the apostrophic phrase includes melismata, or different notes sung to one syllable, as in the following lines from the popular folk ballad “Nwakadiukporo.” This is a cumulative tale that recounts a linked chain of tragic happenings that ensue when a breadfruit falls and kills the beautiful village girl for whom the ballad is named:

Gini, gini ga-emere m ukwa nu O!
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
Gini, gini ga-emere m ukwa nu O!
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
Ukwa mere gini?
Ukwa kugburu Nwaakadiukporo,
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!

What, O! what will happen to this breadfruit?
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
What, O! what will happen to this breadfruit?
È-e-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
Breadfruit did what?
Breadfruit that killed Nwaakadiukporo,
È-e-è, Nwaakadiukporo!

One of the major theories of the origins of human language suggests that interjections and exclamations, such as the above, that express a wide range of emotions—joy, grief, anger, excitement, fear, and love—lie at the very base of poetic communication. The idea of the lyrical impulse as the root of the emergence of primitive song has grown out of the assumption that humankind has an innate capacity to produce such emotion-toned sounds, which, in the course of time, crystallized in traditional form as codes for elegiac and rhapsodic song. Beyond simple exclamations (e.g., a!, el!, il!, ol!, etc.) and their reduplications (e.g., a-a-a-a!, aa-aa!, a-aaa! aaa-aa!, etc.) or melismata (such as we have seen in the Ballad of Nwaakadiukporo) that involve lyrical variations of the tones of a reduplicated sound (e.g., ââáâ!, etc.), apostrophic refrains, like their manifestations in ordinary speech, are tonological gestalt tone-patterns with specific domains of meaning into which the singer or the speaker can fit any vowel sound or nasal. Thus, for example, we can fit any vowel or nasal sound into the gestalt form (High-Low-High-Downstep) and the resultant sounds (e.g., ââââ!, èèèè!, ìììì!, òòòò!, úúúú!) will always be connotative of a sudden flash of regret.

Exclamatory Words

In addition to vocal exclamations and melismata, Igbo folksingers make use of a rich repertoire of exclamatory words and phrases that have established themselves firmly, both in everyday speech and in formal religious and magical rituals, as codes for expressing certain kinds of emotion. Like “Alas!” in English, the exclamatory words Haweel and Ewu! are interjections that express grief or regret that we find as refrains in funeral and satirical songs, either independently or as part of apostrophes addressed to death itself or to the dead. By the same token, interjections such as Tuffa!, Ihaa!, and Ise! function as a ritual formula with specific connotations when used as refrains in a folk song. Tuffa! is an interjection that connotes spitting off something in disgust; Ihaa! expresses affirmation or a plea for affirmation (as in the English “hear, hear!”); while Ise! (literally “five”) connotes ritual power and features frequently in ritual chants as the equivalent of the Judeo-Christian “Amen.”

Interjections such as these occur frequently in Igbo ritual and satiric songs. In ballads and other types of folk songs, they serve as formulae to highlight the ritual seriousness of certain kinds of action. Thus, in a popular folktale, a group of animals going for a hunt discover a tree full of ripe berries but agree not to touch the fruits until after the hunt. But as is his wont, Mbe (Tortoise) the trickster would not leave the fruits alone. On the pretext of going to toilet, he returned to the tree and ate up most of the fruits (without plucking them from the tree) and managed to fill them all with feces. When the animals returned to the tree at the end of the hunt and discovered the outrage, they agreed that each and every one of them should swear an oath to clear himself. The oath is in the form of a song:

Umu njeee, umu njeee, jere nta,  
Hii-i-hii!
Umu njeee, umu njeee, jere nta,  
Hii-i-hii!
Ake m kpatukwa utu, okpa m  
kpatukwa utu chara acha,  
Hii-i-hii!
Mmm, Omenuko ha alachaala

Travelers, Travelers that went a-hunting,  
Hii-i-hii!
Travelers, Travelers that went a-hunting,  
Hii-i-hii!
If my hands touched the fruits, if my legs  
touched the fruits that have ripened,  
Hii-i-hii!
Mmm, Omenuko and others have all gone  
home!

At the end of the song, each animal must jump over a pit. The culprit alone would be trapped by the charm placed in the pit. The refrain here (“Hii-i-hii”) is a variation of the ritual interjection, “Ihaa” which is frequently heard in oath-taking rituals as a code of acquiescence to the terms of the oath. (The significance of the last line is rather obscure, but it may be mentioned in passing that Omenuko is the hero of an Igbo historical novel by Pita Nwana [1933]. The novel tells the story of a poor village boy who becomes a wealthy merchant. He must go into exile after he commits the outrage of selling his
apprentices into slavery to make up for the losses he incurred when his goods fell into the rapids of a river when the bridge on which they were crossing collapsed.)

Echo or Parrot Refrains

Echo or parrot refrains are meaningful units which simply reecho, by repetition or parallelism, either the actual words or the meaning of the preceding solo lines. Refrains of this type range from single words and phrases to whole lines to verses of two or more lines. In the following song, an oppressed orphan, aided by his dead mother, conjures his magic palm tree to grow shorter so that he might harvest the fruits:

_Nwa nkwu m sughu sughu . . .
Sughu sughu!
_Nwa nkwu m sughu sughu . . .
Sughu sughu!

My little palm tree, grow shorter, grow shorter
Grow shorter, grow shorter!
My little palm tree, grow shorter, grow shorter
Grow shorter, grow shorter!

When verses are involved, we have instances of the traditional “shout” that was carried over to the New World.

Onomatopoeic Refrains

Onomatopoeic refrains are of the order of sound images. They are always complementary rhythmic units that add color and vividness to the song through the verbal imitation of sounds in the natural and cultural environment. In some cases, what may appear to the outsider as mere gibberish may indeed be a whole song comprising onomatopoeic patterns that reenact the sound of music and the thumping of dancing feet as in the following:

_Tiii-ro tiro
_Egwu na-agba n’obodo agu:
_Tijam jam!

_Tiii-ro tiro
A dance is grinding in leopardstown:
_Tijam jam!

_Tiii-ro tiro
_Egwu na-agba n’obodo agu:
_Tijam jam!

Similarly, we can hear the sound made by the drum of plenty in the refrain of the following verse:

_Kwam putu kpam putu!
_Igba nri na ofe!
_Kwam putu kpam putu!
_Igba nri na ofe!

_Kwam putu kpam putu!
Drum of food and soup!
_Kwam putu kpam putu!
Drum of food and soup!

And in the following, the solo imitates the beating of wooden drums (ekwe) while the choric refrain imitates the sound of the accompanying pot drum (udu) and maracas (oyo):

_Kpom kpororom, kpom kpororom,
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!
_Kpom kpororom, kpom kpororom,
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!

_Kpom kpororom, kpom kpororom,
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!
_Kpom kpororom, kpom kpororom,
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!

_Ewu tara akara ike adighi ya
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!

A goat that has eaten beancakes has no strength,
_Dum uyom uyom dum uyom!

By the same token, the guttural sound made by spirits is evident in the refrain (“Hioro hioro”) that we hear in several songs through which one fiend or another threatens his human would-be victim.

Birds, both domestic and wild, figure frequently in Igbo songs and are often apostrophized. In such lyrics, onomatopoeic refrains that imitate the characteristic cries or other noises made by the animals that are being addressed help to underline the mood of the song. In the following lyric, the contrast is between the noisy gnawing of the squirrel and the death of its mother:

_Osa na-ata akwu o!
The Meaning of the “Meaningless” Refrain

Onomatopoeic refrains are not limited to the reproduction of sounds produced by people, animals, and objects in the natural and cultural environment. They also function as myth-creative devices that enable the singer to evoke an eerie atmosphere through the creation of imaginative patterns of sounds that suggest other realms of existence, such as the spirit world. In the following, the strangeness of the sound made by the horn of life and death that is blown by a spirit-woman who is pursuing two brothers fleeing from her ravenous claws is evoked by the refrain (ndofuro ro-ro-ro-ro-ro):

Opi ukwu, opi nta
Biko hwugbuoro umu nne abo na omiko,
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!
Ji mmam ha rikwere,
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!
Ede mmam ha rikwere,
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!

Big horn, small horn,
Pray, have mercy, blow to death two brothers
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!
Spirit yam, they ate,
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!
Spirit cocoyam, they ate.
Ndofuro ro-ro-ro ro-ro, ndofuro!

Similarly, in the refrain of another song, the horn of a fierce spirit pursuing his human victim has the menacing sound, Temu lemu gene ntumulu gene tumul! And in the hero tale of the great wrestler, Ojaadili, who throws spirits in a wrestling match in their own land, the refrain onomatopoeically reenacts the sound of the wrestling drums: Ngoro ngoro didi ngoro!

Ideophonic Refrains
Inasmuch as onomatopoeia is sometimes confused with ideophones, onomatopoeic refrains are apt to be confused with their very close relative, ideophonic refrains. But whereas onomatopoeia is a verbal pattern that imitates specific types of sounds, ideophones are gestalt sound patterns that provide subtle suggestions of the quality, duration, and intensity of phenomena. Thus, a steady flicker of light from the distance on a dark night would be described with the sound keri keri; the speedy movement of a stalwart going to war or a wrestling match is described as viam viam viam viam! or flam flam flam flam!; the smoothness of a shiny object is described as muru muru. By the same token, vuruuu describes the agility with which a fierce lion or leopard pounces upon his prey, while jijiji or kwekwekwe describes the suddenness of the body of a frightened actant shaking in the face of danger. A whole class of refrains in Igbo folk songs are of the order of this class of phonoaesthetic device. In one refrain, the wicked laughter of a heartless co-wife when her frightened rival knocks persistently at her closed door is described as mgbafiri kotoo mgba mgba; in another, the callousness with which a monstrous vulture swallowed the hero’s mother together with her market commodities is depicted as chafuru kpoto mkpo!; and in variants of the story of the oppressed orphan, the hero’s persistent and desperate weeping as he performs his tedious chores is evoked through the ideophonic refrains, milize lizenze or zeezee1ize Nwoye 0 zeeze ze elize! Similarly, when the king’s lost son in the tale of “Omalinze” makes a revealing contact with his father’s dog, his weeping is rendered as Niyaa, nyiakk! Ideophonic refrains are the so-called “meaningless” refrains par excellence; the popular assumption that they are meaningless derives from the fact that the verbal patterns involved are usually not lexical entities but are ideophones.

Lyrical Refrains
Closely related to, and, perhaps, substantially much the same as ideophonic refrains are lyrical refrains, a distinct class of refrains that make use of special lyrical formulae or codes, all of which are restricted to lyrical poetry and which we may aptly describe as lyremes. These archaic expressions generally invoke mood and atmosphere. Analysis of the contexts of their use reveal that each refrain belongs to a special mood category,
such as elegiac, rhapsodic, or apostrophic. They have become an intrinsic part of the vocabulary of the song. The following are among the most common of these lyrical refrains that we find in Igbo elegiac songs—songs in which the atmosphere is predominantly one of grief, regret, or desperation: Nda (Ndawere nda; Ndawerere werere nda); Une (Inine; Inene; Une, unembele une); Samala (or Samara; Ramala); Mbele (Mbene; Ajambele); Mbenike (Bene; Tumbeneke; Tunegenene); Awonjenje (Awandegele); Nturuzaam (Turuzzi; Turuzi; Turuzanza; Tuzanza); Kparanuma (Kpalanuma); and Zamiriza (Zamirize; Nzamiriza; Awanzamiriza). While there are no known lexical glosses to any of these sounds, it seems rather clear that each of them, like regular words in the lexicon, has dialectal and even idiolectal variants (the items in parentheses). It therefore seems right to assign them the meanings that seem clearly defined by the contexts in which they are used, for example, as lyrical codes for grief.

There is a whole class of lyremes in which the matrix of the apparently meaningless pattern of sounds is in fact a word that denotes a specific emotion (pity, fear, excitement, etc.) or describes a specific type of action or situation (movement through a forest, slow movement, etc.). Thus, in the refrain ndo rima rima ndo rima (Ugonna, 1980) and its many variants, such as ndogh- orighioma and ndo ndoo-o ndo, the matrix is the word ndo (denoting pity or sorrow). By the same token, awa njenje or its variant (awa nje) contains two meaningful matrices, namely awa from -wa- (to wade through a forest) and nje from -je- (to be on a journey). The lyreme thus literally means “wading through a forest, journeying and journeying.” Not surprisingly this lyreme almost invariably occurs in songs that evoke the idea of an adventurous journey through a thick forest. In other significant instances, the matrix awa (wading through a forest) combines with such lyremes as nzamiriza (connoting harrowing and tear-provoking confrontations) to evoke the idea of an adventurous journey that takes the hero through harrowing, tearful confrontations such as encounters with dreadful many-headed spirits. It may be possible in the future to undertake a more detailed analysis of other lyremes that at present seem to defy such analysis.

Complementary Refrains
Complementary refrains may be regarded as half-lines that serve to complete the sense or meaning of the first half-line of a solo. Such complementary half-lines may be variable or fixed. In the following game song, the complementary refrain is fixed. It focuses on the overriding theme of the dispensable and replaceable abominable child, who must be thrown away or sold into slavery:

Tufuonu nwa mere aru o! ... 
E ru echi amuta ozo!

Refuonu nwa mere aru o! ... 
E ru echi amuta ozo o!

Throw away the abominable child! ... 
Tomorrow another will be born!
Sell away the thieving child! ... 
Tomorrow another will be born!

But, in another example, a lullaby, the complementary refrain is variable. Each new variant stresses a new strategy for lulling or coaxing the child to sleep:

Nwata m ku na-aka O! ... 
Rahuru m ura!

Nwata m ku na-aka O! ... 
Rahuru m ura!

O buru ji gi o ... 
Mu enye gi ya! ... 
O buru ede gi o ... 
Mu enye gi ya o!
Rahu ura ma oke
anyui gi nsi n’anya o! ...
Rahuru m ura!

O Child I’m carrying in my arms ...
Sleep for me!
O Child I’m carrying in my arms ...
Sleep for me!
If it’s your yam ... 
I’ll give it to you!
If it’s your coco yam ... 
I’ll give it to you! 
Sleep, lest a rat shits into your eyes ... 
Sleep for me!

Theme or Topical Refrains
Theme or topical refrains are equivalent to the “Burden” in European folk songs. In this category of refrains, the main theme or subject matter of the song is reiterated throughout its performance. In the folk ballad or narrative folk song, the theme refrain is usually the name of the hero or heroine. Two examples that come readily to
mind are the ballads of Nwaakadiukporo and Omalinze (Omalungwo or Omaraugo). The former is a cumulative or incremental ballad that begins with an apostrophe to the breadfruit tree whose fruit falls and kills the heroine:

\[
\text{Gini, gini ga-emere m ukwa nu O!} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{Gini, gini ga-emere m ukwa nu O!} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{Ukwa mere gini?} \\
\text{Ukwa kugburu Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{Gini, gini ga-emere m mkpo nu O!} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{Gini, gini ga-emere m mkpo nu O!} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\text{Mkpo mere gini?} \\
\text{Mkpo mawara ukwa!} \\
\text{Ukwa mere gini?} \\
\text{Ukwa kugburu Nwaakadiukporo,} \\
\text{È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!} \\
\]

What, oh what will happen to this breadfruit?
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
What, oh what will happen to this breadfruit?
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
Breadfruit that did what?
Breadfruit that killed Nwaakadiukporo,
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
What, oh what will happen to this stake?
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
What, oh what will happen to this stake?
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!
Stake that did what?
Stake that split the breadfruit.
Breadfruit that did what?
Breadfruit that killed Nwaakadiukporo,
È-é-è, Nwaakadiukporo!

There is no space to consider further examples. The material considered so far seems to show quite clearly that no refrain in the Igbo tradition on which we have focused can rightly be described as “meaningless.” Every single sound that forms part of the idiom of the folk song seems to have some connotation, specific meaning, or symbolic value, no matter how unrelated they may seem to be to words in current language. Needless to say, further in-depth investigation of comparable manifestations of this important but hitherto neglected area of the expressive use of language in folk songs and storytelling events may yield meaningful results.

**Further Reading**


Ndior, Innocent, *The Role of the Chorus in Igbo Folksongs and Folktales with Special Reference to Osisioma Ngwa* (Bachelor's long essay, University of Nigeria), 1983

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