

EKAETTE C. UDOK, *PhD*

*Department of Music, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
ekaetteudok@yahoo.com*

Abstract

This study employed historical and ethnographic approaches to examine the significant role played by Ibibio women to propagate and sustain their musical culture. The Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State occupy the South-South coast of Nigeria. They have a rich musical heritage which are preserved and passed down through oral traditions to the younger ones. The aim of this paper is to highlight the key roles played by women in propagating the musical culture of Ibibio and the challenges posed in the modern society. The data was obtained from primary and secondary sources through fieldwork and related works from journals and textbooks. Qualitative design method was applied whereby the researcher observed, participated and documented some facts on the musical practices of the women. It is discovered that, women played key roles in various musical activities including storytelling, ceremonial activities like marriages, funeral events and some cultural practices like new yam festivals and puberty rites. They use songs that tell stories of the community's values, history and beliefs to ensure the preservation of the musical heritage. Although, those musical activities helped women to pass on knowledge and cultural practices from one generation to the next, during field study, it is found out that some musical/cultural practices performed in the olden times are gradually disappearing in Ibibio community, due to modernization, globalization and social dynamics. While some musical activities are still lingering on, some are innovated, and others are in extinct. Such inadequacies are the challenges that hinder the proper transmission of cultural heritage of Ibibio people. The Akwa Ibom State Governor during yuletide period in December, 2023, organized a festival to revive indigenous cultural/musical arts the people, this is highly commendable. Such musical display should be considered yearly, while the recording and storing of musical works in archives are recommended.

Keywords: Ibibio, Women, Music culture, Role, and Propagation.

Introduction

Across many countries in Africa and beyond, the central roles played by women throughout history to ensure the cultural stability, progress and long-term development of nations are numerous. The contributions of women to a society's transition from pre-literate to literate and transfer of musical knowledge from infancy are undeniable. Who sings to the baby when he or she cries? Who lulls the baby with sweet melodious sound to sleep? It is the woman who passes on the first musical sounds to the child. Mokwunyei (2017) postulates that women play important roles greatly in the first stage of the musical experiences of the child, she states "... it is essentially mothers who assume the responsibility of teaching and introducing successive generations to the ways of their people (culture) from infancy at the first level of cultural education". (p. 434).

Ombiyi-Obidike (2005) also affirms that, in various African states, women have been acknowledged as co-participants with men in festive musical performances. They join their male counterparts in choral singing and dancing. "Women are chanters of *Oriki*, they are the main vocalists of songs and refrains as performed on worship days and during festivals" (p.30).

The responsibilities of women in transmission of musical traits start right in the home. By virtue of women's position in the family, women are the first music teachers who sing to their children. Okafor (2005) confirms:

Women chant salutation songs to announce the birth of a child, and afterwards sing lullabies to them. They also sing as they go about their household chores, such as scrubbing the floor and walls, grinding pepper and corn. This helps to implant the musical culture in their children and to ensure the continuity of (Igbo) music (p.74).

In line with Okafor's opinion, women in Ibibio society are often the primary

caretakers of children and are responsible for instilling cultural values to young ones. This includes teaching children traditional songs, dances and stories, thus, ensuring the continuity of Ibibio musical traditions. Nevertheless, the roles played by women in every social organization to maintain the musical culture of any place cannot be overemphasized.

The pre-colonial society attributed greater musical values to certain norms, customs and socio-political power in certain contexts to women. Not only in retention of cultural values alone, but according to Ozah (2018), women in traditional Nigerian culture were also effective power brokers in areas such as farming, trading, marketing and even politics. Giving one of the most intriguing examples of women in Nigerian history is the women's war (Aba women's riot of 1929).

During the pre-colonial time, women were directly involved in the administrative roles of the nation. They played major parts in socio-political, religious, economic as well as cultural development of the society. For the Ibibio women, Udok (2021) states that most historical, political, social and religious acts were built in cultural institutions to showcase their involvement during pre-colonial time. Women were deeply involved in the task assigned to them by the tradition of the community. That is why women's traditional/cultural institutions were instituted to take care of women's administration, law and principles. Such cultural groups were *ebre* and *ibanisongesit*. In other words, the patriarchal leadership in Ibibio had freed women and their traditional institutions (*ebre / iban isong esit*) to compliment the men group (*ekpo, ekoong, ekpe*). They were to enact laws in the land and sometimes, gender roles in these institutions, overlapped each other.

Music in Ibibio is considered an important aspect of culture as applicable to other African societies, and in its broadest sense,

it engulfs all of human activity. Agu (2017) confirms that in African cultures, musical activity as an integral and functioning part of the society, is emphasized; unlike in Euro-American societies, where music making is divorced from aspects of daily life. Usually, traditional music of a particular region or culture is the indigenous music set orally by the common people of the area to form part of that culture. That means that the retention of social values in African societies are favourably maintained through indigenous music. In addition to that, the peculiarity of the musical practices and the types of instrument used, give every group a distinct cultural identity. Therefore, culture encompasses those conventional understandings and practices which give a people its uniqueness and thus render such people distinct from all others. Such is Ibibio musical culture.

However, Onyeji (2016) describes music as a universal art present in all human settlements and cultural expressions which cuts across cultural, social, educational and political bounds. He went further to explain that music has different genres to cater for different tastes and interests of the people. While that is true, he says “indigenous African music is distinguished as one of the creative arts of indigenous societies by which the people express themselves and their culture through sound” (p.8).

In view of that, Ibibio women’s cultural groups make music with the totality of both the material, spiritual, artistic, intellectual and other accomplishments of the Ibibio people. Their ways of life and modes of existence are indicated through the by-products of their music. Therefore, music as part of the culture of a people, provides an avenue for individual with

corporate expression to convey personal thought, beliefs, and feelings, as well as the community’s sentiments. Similarly, Amissah (1986) states:

...I have chosen to deal with music as one of the arts that play an

important role in the culture of the people...it does not take long to recognize the striking cultural uniformity of the people as distinct from other places (p.129).

In agreement to Amissah, it is important to note that the task of studying music in its social context, is to discover the role it plays in each man’s culture both in time past and in the present, and to find out what music means to man in every society. Hence, the interest it explores in the cultural life and behaviour of the people and the role that each individual and a group plays is important.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant role of women in the traditional setting to propagate Ibibio music culture in Nigeria, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the specific roles played by women and their contributions in today’s society. Hence, the contemporary Ibibio women seem to overlook the nuanced ways in which their forbears shaped and preserved the musical heritage for continuity. This study aims to address this gap by exploring and documenting the diverse roles of women in propagating Ibibio music culture, shedding light on their contributions and the challenges they face in this endeavour.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i) explore historical and cultural significance of women in preserving Ibibio music in Nigerian society
- ii) highlight the key roles played by women in preserving, promoting, and innovating Ibibio music traditions.
- iii) examine the challenges faced by women in Ibibio community in their efforts to uphold and transmit musical heritage

Research Questions:

- i) What are the historical and cultural significance of women in preserving Ibibio music in Nigerian society?
- ii) What are the key roles played by women in preserving, promoting, and innovating Ibibio music traditions?
- iii) What challenges do women face in their efforts to propagate Ibibio music, and how do they navigate these challenges?

Literature Review**An Overview of Music, and Women's Role in African Societies**

Music is a social activity especially in African societies, its values are so enormous and permeates every facet of life process. It is central to both cultural and social life which are expressed in all social events be it in rites of passage, political or religious activities, these are all observed, to confirm the underlying principles that African music is explicitly functional. Warren and Warren (1970) state,

For the African, music is not a luxury, but a part of the process of living itself...Music follows the African through his entire day, from early in the morning, till late at night, and through all the changes of life...For all the plateaus reached in the journey from birth to puberty, ...there are traditional songs and dances that are completely necessary to the rituals celebrating each milestone (p. 3)

Music making in Africa is essential to the development of human sociability hence, it becomes a necessity to every part of social activity. Onyeji (2016) adds, "Indigenous music is distinguished as one the creative arts of indigenous African societies by which the people express themselves and their cultures through sound" (p. 8). The social values in every society is dictated by

the beliefs and practices that are upheld by the members of the community. These beliefs are passed on from generation to generation through music. In some of these activities such as festivals, traditional games, anniversaries or any social occasions music is performed routinely or as demanded by the community. Such musical activities like dancing, singing or drumming or mixture of both during the festivals are always celebrated to unite individuals together as part of the community.

Music creates a kind of socio-cultural interaction in many occasions like marriage ceremonies, festivals and funeral ceremonies. Sometimes, such music relates to a broader social distinction of gender, age grade or social affiliation. According to Nketia (1974),

There are songs performed by women during ceremonies and rituals that are the concern of women. In Akan society, for example, the puberty rites for girls is celebrated by women, and the song and drum music for this occasion are accordingly performed by adult women (p. 36).

Similar to Nketia's view are such cultural/musical groups among women in the traditional Ibibio which were to maintain cultural identity of the group, these are: *ebre*, *nkerebe*, *Asian uboikpa*, *mbopo*, *ibanisong*. There are such various performing groups in every indigenous society which may be community-based group or individual performer. They perform at different occasions that they are called up to match with the context of the event.

In line with this fact, Okafor (2005) comments that the cause of expression of music in Igboland can easily be traced to ceremonies, rituals, and social activities, and it is music that gives character to Igbo festivals. "In ... festival of the cocoyam, *ogaletete*, women take the principal parts. They prepare the main dish with cocoyam, *ede*, make the important offerings, and dominate the public ceremonies with songs

and dances” (p.75). He further explains that in Igboland, music and dances pulse with the cosmic rhythms of moon in the sky, life on earth, and metaphysical activities with the hereafter. “Igbo music is, consequently, the music of life flowing in appointed manner with festivals, rituals, ceremonies and events, which give meaning and definition to Igbo life” (p.155).

Furthermore, Nketia (1974) cites examples that among some cultures in eastern, central and southern Africa, rites for healing the sick or for correcting certain disorders are performed by women. They sing and accompany themselves with rattles and drums around the sick person. More so, he states that, in some African societies, women play special roles at funerals, to wail, either with or without words, or in form of choral laments and individual dirges.

There are various musical groups formed in traditional African societies, with different functions. For instance, in any social occasion, members of the community may join together in singing and dancing, just to characterize the fact that African music is audience participatory. However, this is subscribed to the spontaneous type of music where there is no rigorous training and dancing styles, and any member of the community can freely adapt to the lyrics and dance styles. In most social organizations or events in African setting, members of the community are free to involve in musical events that take place in a community’s life, either as audience-participant or as a performer or a mere onlooker.

Thus, in traditional Ibibio setting, women are involved in musical activities in such communal activities like, new yam, anniversaries, marriage ceremonies, title taking, coronation, funeral ceremonies among others. Music for such social event is usually a type where everybody has access to participate, either, as a performer or as a spectator. Sometimes, such music is performed at a given point in time and at designated places. Such

musical arts performed in traditional community serves those areas. As Okafor (2005:17) puts it that “No festival can go without music”

Music in Ibibio Traditional System

Generally, in traditional Ibibio society, as common in other African societies, music acts as a social bond with the sum total of man’s interaction and relationship with one another. It is both female as well as male groups that play essential musical roles. For instance, the Ibibio people have a compendium of social activities such as marriage, political, religious and annual festivities, rites of passage, which affect all spheres of social life. So, music making in Ibibio just as in other traditional African societies, is mainly incorporated in every social event. This is because music is central to both cultural and social life. Ukpong (2014) observes that events in pre-colonial times among the Ibibio like the age set groups and gender groups for instance, were involved in the cleaning of the market square and some streets in the village, as was typically designated to women. While the building of market stalls and clearing of paths to the stream were allotted to youths. All these activities were accompanied by music rendition, either vocally or instrumentally.

Some musical performances usually took place on social events; like on occasions when members of the group, or community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, religious ceremony, anniversary, festivals, political functions or any collective activity that brings people together.

The social life of the Ibibio is incorporated also in marriage. In Ibibio tradition, in pre-colonial times, Udo (1983) affirms that marriage was considered as the institution that shapes the norms and activities of the people. Hence, the musical arts of Ibibio people were greatly incorporated on social activities like marriage rites, political and religious issues together with social/secret clubs of *ekpo onyoho*, *ekpe*, *ebre* and others. So colonialism met existing religious, moral, economic, political,

judicial and social behaviour being regulated by these social/secret clubs. Some of these societies - *ekpo*, *ekpe*, *ekong*, *akata* (male) *ebre*, *ibanisong* (women) were organized with strict codes of conduct and music was essential tool to enhance its influence on the life of the people.

The Historical and Cultural Significance of Women in Preserving Ibibio Music in Nigerian Culture

In Ibibio traditional culture, women were designated with particular roles in the society to take care of the female folk. Uko in Udoh (2018) confirms that “the pre-colonial or traditional African woman, lived in the society that was largely egalitarian, a society that clearly assigned roles to both genders without biases, a society that accepted and appreciated diversities in what the two genders could do and how they behaved” (p.345).

In an attempt to apply that to the indigenous and socio-cultural groups in Ibibio, both gender groups performed certain functions in the traditional society to complement each other. This implies that if one gender group performed the role and the other gender performed another, it is not due to incapacitation or inadequacy, but because the functions of both man and woman needs to complement each other (Udoh 2018). From the above view, it means that in Ibibio community, the women performing groups in pre-colonial times that is, *ebre*, *ibanisong*, *nkerebe* and others, were established to take care of the women socio-cultural, judiciary and economic issues just as *ekpo*, *ekpe* their counterparts within the men folk.

The various cultural groups which existed during pre-colonial times among the women of Ibibio communities, had multi-functional purposes - to take care of socio-cultural issues and administrative matters and also for musical activities. They mostly performed during festivals, rites of passage or any ceremonial event. And festival as it is commonly known in any society, be it

Western or African culture, involves a lot of celebrations. Omibiyi in Nwamara (2014); focused on the importance and usefulness of women in African musical performances, taking cognizance of women’s role and participation in festivals.

She explains festivals as occasions for cultural spectacles, ritual observances and social entertainment, which call for social re-union among members of the community. Moreover, a time when distant members of the particular town or homestead return home to participate in such important celebrations. She further comments that festival is generally recognized as celebration which involves two components: ritual and recreational/entertainment, which comprises musical performance and often times encapsulating dramatic displays.

While this is true, women in Ibibio communities are similarly engaged in music making during such communal events or festivals except it is segregated for men only. Similar to Omibiyi’s view above, music performances in Ibibio culture also fall under two major contexts: ritual and non-ritual both for men and women. For the ritual music in the female category, there were basic aspect of some musical groups in the past that had ritual activities attached to their musical ceremonies, just to provide a belief in the supernatural values of the society. Such women groups or organizations revealed during the research work include: *ebre*, *nyama*, *mbopo* and *iban isong esit*. Some of these musical organisations are gradually disappearing while some are being transformed. These groups were organized with a particular pattern and administrative purpose to strictly retain the norms and values guiding women in the society. Such musical groups were used as part of the instrument in correcting many social ills (fieldwork, 2023).

Women and music play pivotal roles in the historical and cultural fabric of the Ibibio

ethnic group of Nigeria. Traditionally, women who are also custodians of oral traditions, pass down stories, myths, and history through songs. Music is deeply integrated into daily life from ceremonial functions, rituals and social events. Women use songs to celebrate life events, educate younger generations and communicate community values. Additionally, women sometimes used songs to serve as a form of empowerment, allowing them to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a society where they often have limited voice in decision making. Thus, women create their music to form the integral part of preservation and continuity of Ibibio culture.

Key Roles Played by Women in Preserving and Promoting Ibibio Music Traditions

Ibibio women both now and then have played key roles in preserving, promoting and innovating Ibibio music in Nigeria through several ways:

i) Preservation of tradition

In Ibibio traditional system, there has been a great value placed on the morality of women. Akpabot (1975:54) states that, ‘no woman suspected to be a thief was admitted into the *ebre* society’ (*ebre* - women musical club). Such women have been the custodians of Ibibio cultural heritage through music. Example of such song to segregate or ostracize thieves from joining the women dance group is this particular song:



Mma-bo ino idukke ebre nnyin (we have agreed that no thief joins *ebre* group)
Mma-bo ino idukke ebre nnyin (we have agreed that no thief joins *ebre* group)
 Through oral tradition, they have preserved ancient songs, rhythms, and dance forms, ensuring that they are passed down to future generations.

ii) Promotion of cultural identity



Ekaette Udok - Fieldwork 2023

Ibibio women use music as a way to promote and celebrate their cultural identity. The above picture shows the performance of traditional songs and dance at cultural events during the installation of the women leader. This has reinforced the importance of Ibibio music in the face of modernization and outside influences, whereas, in some cases, the band plays the instruments while the women sing their songs and dance to the music

iii) Community Building

Music has been a tool for Ibibio women to build and strengthen their communities. Through group singing and dancing, they foster a sense of unity and solidarity among community members, helping to preserve social cohesion. During communal work like path weeding, such songs as:



I-ban Akwa Ibom, i-ban ema Asian (Akwa Ibom women, they love good things)

I-ban Akwa Ibom, i-ban ema Asian (Akwa Ibom women, they love good things)

iv) Social Commentary

Ibibio women often use music as a form of social commentary, addressing important issues such as gender roles, environmental conservation, and political activism. Their songs are powerful for raising awareness and advocating for change. Ibibio women have played significant role in propagating the Ibibio music culture in Nigeria. In the context of music and poetry, the women

are known for their rich poetry/songs and intricate rhythms for instance:

i) *Edu ekpetie nte idem* (if only the character was like the appearance.)



This means that character is what matters not just appearance or wealthy family background, and it especially derides a beautiful but insolent lady. The poetry is a condemnatory remark against basing assessment only on physical appearance.

ii) *Nanga eyinetie, yak ekaaman* (however the baby looks like, let the mother bring forth to birth). This means that it is better go with evidence or proof instead of assumption.



All these are integral to traditional Ibibio music and are additional elements to the music to enhance its cultural significance. Ibibio women in the past, used music as a form of expression and resistance. During periods of colonialism and oppression, they used songs to convey messages of resilience and unity, preserving their culture in the face of outside influences

The Evolution of Ibibio Music and Its Transmission by Women

Today, the traditions of observing most indigenous festivals in Ibibio which call for musical performances by women during festivals like new yam, *ebre* festival, *mbopo* have disintegrated at a very rapid pace. (*Ebre* which means water yam, was celebrated as festival by women during harvest in the pre-colonial times and also, it connotes the name of women musical group, performed mostly during the festival). However, this has caused some women cultural groups like *ebre*, *ndokufokebe*, *mbopo*, *nkerebe*, *ikon*, *aban* and *ubon* to suffer negligence and total abandonment while some groups are struggling to exist, hence, leaving the original status and metamorphosing to a

new group such *nkaiban*, *ibanidung*, *asianiban*, *efreuwa*. Ekong (2001) affirms thus:

Most of the female groups (*ndokufokebe*, *nkerebe*, *nyama*, *usok*) have been rendered obsolete either because they were condemned as barbaric and heathenish by the Christian missions and colonial administrators, or because of the evolution of new values and standard of morality in modern Ibibio society (p.161).

From the information gathered through fieldwork, the reason why these cultural groups with esoteric identity like *ebre*, *ndokufokebe* ceased to exist is because of the application of some rituals and other diabolical means to appease the deities or gods of their land. This is because majority of people have joined Christians faith, and they dissociate themselves from pouring libation, ritual activities and as such cannot maintain such practices. Hence, some traditional/cultural music groups attached to them are phased out. Some Ibibio musical groups employ some modern practices to suit with the contemporary society.

The Challenges Faced by Ibibio Women to Uphold and Transmit Musical Heritage

Ibibio women face several challenges in their efforts to promote and preserve their musical culture in the midst of globalised, modernised and technological society

Loss of traditional knowledge

As younger generations become more expose to modern influences, there is a loss of traditional knowledge and practices. Modern Ibibio women struggle to retain, while some have little or nothing to pass down their musical traditions to the next generations.

Changing societal roles

The traditional roles of women in Ibibio society are evolving, this impact affect their ability to devote time and energy to preserve and promote their musical culture. As women take on new roles in workforce in the society, they have less or no time to dedicate to traditional cultural activities.

Erosion and cultural identity

Globalization and modernization always lead to homogenization of culture, where traditional practices are overshadowed by more dominant, globalized forms of music and entertainment. Ibibio women find it challenging to compete with these dominant cultural forces.

Technological Disruption

While technology can be a powerful tool for preserving and promoting culture, it can also pose challenges. The remnant of traditional Ibibio women groups find it difficult to easily adapt to new technologies and to compete with more technologically advanced forms of entertainment.

Conclusion

There are considerable roles played by women on the transmission of the musical culture of Ibibio people, but some factors led to profound changes and innovations in practices. While these challenges occur, Ibibio women continue to play a crucial role in preserving and promoting their musical culture through innovations and adaptation. Ibibio women have also been innovative in their approach to music. They have incorporated modern techniques and musical styles into their performances, creating a fusion of traditional and contemporary sounds that appeal to a wider audience. They are finding ways to overcome these obstacles by adapting to the present society in order to ensure that indigenous musical practices remain integral part of Ibibio culture.

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