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THE SLIT WOODEN DRUM IN SOUTHERN REGION OF NIGERIA: MUSICAL AND EXTRA-MUSICAL VALUES

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Abstract

his research work is set to give a full descriptive and analytical study of the 'slit wooden drum' as an idiophone instrument. It is important to note that the slit wooden drum as an indigenous instrument has social symbolism and its cultural values in the society and not only as a mere instrument for musical performance alone. Therefore, using historical and descriptive approaches through primary and secondary sources, the study clearly examines the key areas in the study of the indigenous instrument vis-à-vis classificatory, analytical and applied. This implies the material object, its context, mode of construction, tuning, care and repair, playing techniques and is musical and extra-musical values. A theoretical and applied knowledge on the construction and performance on slit drum as the indigenous instrument is indispensable for the study of organology, which actually is a branch in ethnomusicology. Hence, this work is to serve as a written manual for other researchers, and as a part of study in organology. Significantly, it provides detailed information on how to construct slit wooden drum following the construction procedures meticulously. Another historical significance is the retention of cultural value through its socio-cultural functions (a giant slit drum symbolising a community's collective ethos and spiritual and political emblem). From the findings, it is realized that construction of the instrument needs much carefulness. And procedures must be diligently and tactfully followed before one can succeed in making a required kind of



instrument with proper pitches and designs. In conclusion, slit wooden drum has musical values as rhythmic instrument, solo instrument, speech arrogate and in instrumental ensemble, while the extra musical purposes are for communication and cultural symbolism.

Keywords: slit wooden drum, idiophone, musical value, extra-musical, construction and care.

Introduction

There are certain factors which influence the availability of musical instruments in any society. One of those factors that affect the kinds of instruments produced in various parts of Africa is the environment. Akpabot (1998), distinctly states that the environment and occupation are some of the factors that account for the diversity in African societies and this by extension, also influence the distribution of musical instruments. Other factors can be attributed to migration, cultural interaction, trade and globalization.

The slit wooden drum is one of the instruments variably found in Southern zone of Nigeria in particular. Its availability is mostly influenced by the environment, especially the forest region where there is abundance of woods for the construction of the instruments. So the construction of slit wooden drum in some African states depends much on the climatic conditions of the area which in turn influence the availability of the resource materials in the society. Okafor (2005) in his discussion on the African musical instruments states that 'the African traditional societies were those in which people depended on and harnessed their environments as much as possible. Africa encompasses many vegetation zones - the mangrove swamps, the rain forests, the deciduous forests and the savannah... Africans have learnt, through more than seven thousand years, to master their environments and the resources of those environments' Hence, according to Okafor the choice of musical (p.159). instruments from wood of local trees, iron, stone, clay, gourds and



animal skin is influenced by the environment. He states, 'environmental factors influence the choice and use of musical instrument' (p.159). Slit wooden drum therefore, within Nigeria is limited in distribution in the Northern and Western part, while the South East (Igbo), and the South South (Ibibio) have more of the slit wooden drum appearing in various sizes ranging from the smallest size made from the bamboo tree to the very giant and unmovable ones. They serve various functions (musical and extra-musical) as solo, melodic and rhythmic instruments and for communication and other symbolic values.

Hence, the discussion on the subject matter is based on the following sub headings:

- The history
- The classification system
- The structure of the slit wooden drum
- Method of construction (process of construction)
- Care and repair
- Techniques of performance (playing techniques)
- Performance capacity
- Acoustics
- Musical function
- Socio-cultural function
- Symbolism and
- Extra musical functions
- Different Ethnic Names

History of Slit Wooden Drum

Slit drums according to the free encyclopedia, were developed simultaneously by several cultures as a means of sending messages that could be heard over great distances. These cultures lived in places where large trees grew (including parts of Africa, Asia, the



Pacific Rim and the America) and they sent messages using drums made out of huge logs of woods. The log from a large tree produces the bigger log, which brings out giant type, and the louder the sound would be heard. A slit drum is a type of "unpitched" percussion instrument that creates its resonance with two tongues that are carved into a hollow trunk, which is usually made out of cherry or maple wood. The two tongues are carved in a manner such that one is higher pitched than the other. When the tongue is struck, it vibrates, resonating through the box-like chamber and creating a dark mellow tone. The instrument is to be played with soft rubber or yarn mallet.

Classification System

Slit wooden drum as a self-sounding instrument belongs to the classification group of idiophone. There are some rationales guiding the naming and classification of musical instruments, and the concept of classification of musical instruments into groups is according to common technological feature and peculiar sonic attributes. However, by classification some music instruments can also be grouped according to the materials of construction and others according to what they are used for in the culture, which implies non-musical criteria (Nzewi 2007a).

Furthermore, Nzewi states that studies, documentation, classification and exhibitions of music instruments of world peoples have advanced over years developing new approaches and insight without detracting from the validity of African systems. Wherefore, there have been a number of attempts to find out the most adequate universal system of classifications of African instruments, but each attempt argues out some theories and criteria based on cultural areas and other issues.



The classification system of Curt Sachs and Eric von Hornbostel on African musical instruments is grouped into various classes according to their mode of sound production. They are:

- i) idiophone
- ii) membranophone
- iii) chordophone and
- iv) aerophone

Among the four classes of African instruments identified above by Sach Hornbostel system, slit wooden drum belongs to the class of idiophone - a body vibrating sound instrument when struck or shaken. From the musical point of view, the slit wooden drum functions both as a rhythmic instrument and as independent melodic instrument.

On the whole, the classification system developed by Sach Hornbostel in 1914 came to be the most universally acceptable one in use. This system was discussed, published and then applied by many researchers of the indigenous music of the world cultures. The Sach Hornbostel system is described according to the mode of sound production as noted above.

Where Found

The instrument is found in West Africa – Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Cameroun as well as East Africa – Congo. They are used both as musical instruments and as speech surrogates in central Africa for example; they functioned as the principal talking drums of the Lokele and other societies (Nketia 1974).

Materials Used

The wood used in making the slit wooden drum is known as the 'red wood'. The red wood is a kind of hard wood with a chemical substance that does not allow termite or any other insect to destroy it. The instrument can be constructed using the following types of trees:

1. bamboo tree



- 2. mahogany tree
- 3. ebony tree
- 4. cherry or maple tree
- 5. paduc wood in Eastern Nigeria.

The Structure of the Slit Wooden Drum

The slit wooden drum is formed from a hollowed trunk of a wood in which a narrow groove serves as a sound opening. Slit drums vary in sizes from huge tree trunks of 6 metres or more in length and 2.1 metres in width, to the miniature size. The sizes and shapes among communities depend on the usage and symbolic values in the society. For instance, the giant slit wooden drum described by Okafor (2005), (*Ikolo* Ozobu of Umagba, Imezi Owa, Ezeagu LGA) is a typical example of a very large slit wooden drum, specifically for cultural symbol and communication value. See the picture below:



Okafor (2005), (Ikolo Ozobu of Umagba, Imezi Owa, Ezeagu LGA) p. 175

The structure of slit wooden drum is made up of block wood, which is usually part of a tree trunk. It is cut into the desired shape and



hollow out through the slit in the upper side. The edges of the slit are usually of different thickness, so as to produce different pitches.

Interview with Dominic Okon Ekpo - a slit wooden drum technologist - on January 30, 2018 provided detailed information on constructions and care of the slit wooden drum as noted below:

Tools for Construction

Tools commonly used for constructing this musical instrument are: knife - machete, carpenter saw, chisel, mallet, measurement tape, marker - chalk, charcoal or pencil and sand paper.

Method of Construction

The making of the slit wooden drum is not an easy task to be completed so rapidly. It involves so many processes, and the builder of the instrument must be a skillful artisan who is meticulous in carving the wood and the slit in order to bring out the required pitches and designs. The particular trees good for the construction of slit drum are iroko and other type of mahogany. The mahogany tree (*ukpa*-Ibibio) has white colour in the early years, during this time it is not ready for use, until at the mature age of 15 years and above, where the colour turns red, it then becomes good and ready for the construction. Then the following steps are required for the construction of the instrument:

Step i

The first move is to search for the particular tree. After finding the right and the mature tree the next thing is to cut down the tree. The felling of the tree depends on the size needed by the maker, a big tree with large trunk will produce a giant type, likewise a medium size tree produces large or medium size instrument. When the tree trunk is cut according to the desired length into logs, it is dried under the sun and kept for about a week or two before moving to the next step.



Step ii

The second step is to measure with the tape and mark the required length with the chalk or charcoal before cutting the wood according to size. Using a saw or sharp knife, the wood is cut to the required shape and then seasoned.

Step iii

This is where the greater work is involved, the scooping and carving of the hollow with chisel to create the two slit on the surface of the wood needs carefulness. It is at this stage, that the actual carving with the aid of machete to the desired shape be it cylindrical shape, trapezium or any shape of one's choice is done. Chisel and mallet are used in scooping and digging. Water is poured inside the carved area to keep the instrument wet during scooping and digging. (water is applied during dry season, and not during rainy period). The hollow and the two slit are to be properly carved for the desired pitch to be achieved. So the slit has to be long enough to help in good sound production. At this stage, the shape - whether cylindrical, trapezium or whatever shape and design one need is to be considered here.

Step iv

The sawing of the tongue of the wood - the bridge between the two holes, helps to create a tiny line touching both edge of the hole. By doing this, it allows the drum to produce different sounds at each edge or point.

Step v

The body of the instrument after construction is brushed using sand paper, thus making the rough body to be smoothen.

Step vi

At this stage, after the construction of the body, the making of the handle is carved out, though handle is optional in some cases. But the



handle is sometimes needed or found in small or medium size idiophones.

Step vii

Creating the stick as the beater whose size complement with the size of the slit drum is done with the soft wood, where the head is bond with rubber. Hard wood is not recommended because it can crack the lips.

The Tuning of the Slit Wooden Drum

The tuning of some African indigenous instruments often takes place during the construction of the instrument. Nzewi (2007) adds, 'all slit drums are permanently tuned during construction, but could be finetuned by chipping on the outside or the inside of the lip the instrument' (p.88). Okoye (2008), also confirms that the construction and tuning of local instruments go hand in hand. That is to say tuning is done while the instrument is constructed.

Care and Repair

The slit wooden drum is not to be exposed to direct heat of the sun, nor kept in wet environment. A raised platform is always provided, especially the giant type to avoid direct contact to the ground. The seasoning of the instrument to achieve the desired aims is maximized after carving. The seasoning agents are: kerosene, shear butter and palm oil. All these products are mixed together proportionally and then rub on the body of the slit wooden drum.

Reasons for seasoning:

- i) For durability
- ii) As a drying agent
- iii) For good tone production



Playing Techniques

Slit wooden drum is a log of wood with a slit in the middle producing two tones, high and low tone a major third, (depending on the made) a minor third or a perfect fifth apart (Akpabot 1998). The instrument is played with two mallets held by two hands. Each section of the upper side is played with left and right hand to provide it with a pair of lips that can be struck with the beater to produce different sounds. Example:



Slit wooden drum: http: tomlohre.com/drum.htm

The pair of the lips is constructed so as to yield two or sometimes four contrasting tones according to Akpabot (1998). As such, the instrument is rhythmic and melo-rhythmic in nature with high and low pitch, the drum sticks or rubber mallets are handled by hands as above to strike the lips of the instrument to produce the required sound.

To play the rhythm or message, the beating is done on the drum's lips with sticks, beating out the rhythms of high note by the right hand and low note by the left hand. Each side of the slit beats out the rhythm alternately to produce the high or low sounds which can further be developed to form message. But however, the playing technique of the instrument depends much on the context of the



performance, because traditionally, as a talking instrument, the giant type is capable of transmitting sound over long distances. According to Nzewi (2007a) the following varieties of slit drums are identified:

-the giant-sized, "talking/signaling" slit drum

- the portable melo rhythmic slit drum
- the bamboo slit drum
- -the small wooden slit knocker (p.88)

The Igbo indigenous names for the four major sizes of slit wooden drum are noted by (Okoye2008) while names in Ibibio cultures are synonymously written alongside, these are:

Size Description	Indigenous Name	
	Igbo	<u>Ibibio</u>
Extra-large (giant)	ikolo, ikoro	Ikrok
Large	abia	Obodom
Medium size	ekwe	Mkporo
Small size	okpokolo	Ntakrok

The playing techniques all differ because of their sizes. The giant size cannot just be played anyhow unless there is an important announcement. The medium size is the one used in traditional musical ensemble as solo, rhythmic and melorhythmic instrument. While the small size *ntakrok* which is used as time line in ensemble and the giant type is played with one beater. This is ascertained by Nzewi (2007a) 'the knocker and bamboo species (small sizes) are played as percussive instruments. The giant, (*ikolo, ikrok*) message-sending could as well serve as a cultural symbol, and are therefore, deployed solely as verbal language communication and would not be used in musical ensembles' (pp.87-88).

Performance Capacity

The performance capacity of the slit drum is that the range of the sound depends on several factors;



- ✓ The volume of the instrument.
- ✓ Atmospheric and topographical factors
- \checkmark The force in which the instrument is struck.

What really determines the variation in pitch is the size and shape of the slit drum.

Musical Functions

The musical role of slit drums is found as both rhythmic and melorhythmic functions. It is used in traditional music ensemble. Slit wooden according to the nature of its sound production of two tones can as well be used as solo instrument to direct the steps of the dancers. The term is referred by Nzewi (2005) as (dance statement), a 'talk' to the performers and the audience by the instrument (p.139).

Solo Instrument

As a solo instrument in a musical ensemble, the slit drum plays a leading role as Nzewi (2005b) states that it plays the role as the captain of a soccer team. It is the most outstanding player of other instrument. However, with the most outstanding sound and roles of directing, it cannot really perform alone in a group, so the foundation of other instruments needs to support the group.

A slit drum can direct dancers and play a pattern or statement that corresponds to the rhythmic pattern produced by the movements (feet, hands, torso, head) of the dancers. Since slit drum is a two or more tones instrument (depending on the make), this helps to give the rhythmic motion of the dancers a different colour of interest perceived as sound. As such what the dancers interpret in movement and gestures is what the instrument plays. Such can be achieved in an organized dance where there have been previously rehearsed with the instrumentalists.



Rhythmic Instrument

A small size slit drum *ntakrok* which has a sharp sound with possible one level tone is used to keep time and play the basic length of pattern for music. It guides other instrumentalists to organize their respective lengths of musical patterns. Sometimes, it produces rhythmic sounds which help the overall music sound to be richer and more exciting or energetic in nature, thereby moves for intensive actions or listening. Some slit wooden drums are used as instruments capable of producing melo-rhythmic sounds. This is as a result of its peculiar ability to act as mother instrument in ensemble through the dramatic and the communicative roles it gives to dancers during performance.

Drum Language of Slit Wooden Drum: The messages are passed through the use of instruments as speech surrogate to disseminate information to the dancers. This is an important feature of dance performance as the verbal and a non-verbal element of communication, which is the actual physical product with meaning, is demonstrated. The following messages are passed on by the skilled drummer to the dancers:





Dakka-da	Rise up
Fehe di i-tok i-tok	Run up quickly
Itok i-de i-de	Run swiftly
Ben u-bok u-dom	Lift up your right hand
Yak nnim k.ison	Keep it down
Ben u-bok u-fien	Lift up left hand
Yak nnim kísong	Keep it down
Tuak edem timme	Go backward
Ten so-ro	Squat down
Be-ne e-nyin se'nyong Abasi	Lift up eyes toward the sky
Suk enyin ki'song	Bring your eyes down
Dak-ka-da	Get up
Tim ofon kiine	Tie wrapper well

Now the phrases formed from the above context has the tonal arrangement as 'L' - 'Low' and 'H' - 'High' sound pattern, since African language is tonal in nature. The drum language uses the following phrases in Ibibio language to illustrate the tonal pattern

Phrases	High/Low	Solfa
dakka-da	LHH	d:m:m
fehe di i-tok, i-tok	LHHLHLH	d:m:m: d:m: d:m
i-tok i-de,i-de	LHLLL	d:m:d:d:d
ben u-bok u-dom	HHHL	m:m:m:d
yak nnim k'isong	LLHL	d:d:m:d
ben u-bok u-fien	HHHL	m:m:m:d
yak nnim k'isong	LLHL	d:d:m:d
tuak e-dem timme	LLLHH	d:d:d:m:m
ten soro	LLH	d:d:m
bene e-nyin s'enyong Abasi	HHLHLHHLL	m:m:d:m:d:m:m:d:d
suk e-nyin k'isong	LHLHL	d:m:d:m:d
dakka-da	LHH	d:m:m
tim o-fong kinne	LLLHH	d:d:d:m:m



The two tone slit drum communicate phrases in Ibibio language because the language is tonal. It is accomplished because each syllable in a word has a high or low tone. The tonal patterns that result in the speech are the same tonal patterns at the drum. By communicating in this way, they create drum language in which their vocabulary is always understood in the context of phrases.

Socio-Cultural Functions

A giant slit drum symbolizes a community's collective ethos with spiritual and political emblem. As such, it is usually housed in a ritual place or at location that rallies the collective political voice of a community. It is usually sounded sparingly, only when the occasion demands it. For instance, in Akwa Ibom State, there are some communities this giant instrument called *ikrok* in Akwa Ibom dialect serves as a symbol of peace for the settlement of dispute. An asylum seeker gets rescued if he is able to beat the drum. Traditionally, as informed by the elders, an instance of an offender who escapes from his village, if he is able to locate the *ikrok* in the nearby village, can beat the drum and get rescued. When the instrument is sounded, the authoritative communal voice of the symbolic instrument is implicitly respected and obeyed more than the voice of any individual or any status or authority in the community. This significant sound will attract the attention of the villagers, to come and intervene and rescue the offender.

The giant slit wooden drums are kept in some communities as a great cultural image with the potential of attracting tourism, thereby, becoming an income earning avenue for the people.

Cultural Symbolism

The making and construction of some musical instruments are not mainly for the purpose of music making. Likewise, the sounds production of some indigenous musical instruments are not always



regarded or appreciated in terms of mere sonic value, but as a means of communication. The peculiar sound qualities of some musical instruments could be apportioned exclusive political or social significance (Nzewi 2007a).

The giant slit wooden drum is a symbolic object, which according to Okafor (2005) 'the human heads and community totems are carved on to *ikoro* (a giant slit wooden drum) both for aesthetic and as ritual symbolism' (p.174). The physical structure and design of the giant slit drum alone can explicitly indicate that the instrument has an extraordinary significance and potential in the culture, it is an embodiment of power in the community. The peculiar sound quality alone is so distinct that it covers considerable distance.

Extra - Musical Functions

The usages of slit wooden drums for extra-musical purposes are many. It acts as cultural symbol and mostly as a means of communication. This instrument is used as a symbol of authority in some societies, to demonstrate the traditional conduct of the communal meeting. Moreover, the sound of a slit drum in some places is to enforce procedural order or as a sign of consensual seal to a decision that has been reached through appropriate deliberation.

Different Ethnic Names

The following are the names of slit wooden drum from different countries, culture or tribe:

Country/Tribe Nigeria (Ibibio/Efik) Nigeria (Igbo) Guinea Congo Basin Vanuatu (Sydney) Mexico

Generic Name obodom ekwe krin/kolokolos lokole tamtam huiringua



Java, Indonesia ketongan Bali, Indonesia kulkul Mesoamerican (central Mexico – Aztecs) teponaztli Yaka people (Congo) mokoku (Slit wooden drum: http:tomlohre.com/drum.htm. Assessed February 8, 2018)

Conclusion

Slit wooden drum from very early times was developed and used by various world cultures for different purposes apart from music. From the study so far explored, it is realized that slit drums are not just African instrument alone, but are found in most countries and cultures of the world (Mexico, Indonesia, Zaire, Congo, Cameroun and Eastern Nigeria), hence, different countries and ethnic groups so mentioned have different names for the instruments. It is more profound in forest areas. Its musical and symbolical functions create significant impact in the societies that own them. From the study conducted, it is observed that slit wooden drum is not commonly found in savannah zone in Nigeria because of unavailability of raw materials for construction. Traditionally, the usage of these drums in mainly for extra-musical functions olden times was like communication, or community symbol than the musical values. Today, technological advancement in the global world has reduced this traditional value system of communicating more in drum signals. The focal point for now is geared more for musical accompaniment, though some indigenous societies are still making use of it for communication. However, the ingenuity of the makers of various carved and designed slit drums in different societies commendable. While. are technological innovations are recommended for the instrument makers to match up with the society.

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