

## UBO-AKA MUSIC IN IGBO CULTURE: A VALUABLE MUSICAL HERITAGE

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### ABSTRACT

Traditional music is a vital and beneficial aspect of Igbo culture. All activities ranging from birth to death are integrated with music making. The presence of the western culture in Igboland and beyond influenced the traditional music in such a way that some aspects are gradually becoming extinct. For instance, some of the makers and players of indigenous musical instruments like *ubo-aka* have died without the youths (who are interested in white color job) taking over. As a result of this fact, gradual extinction of *ubo-aka* in Igbo culture is discussed. The discussion is based on the following headings: Introduction, generic names of *ubo-aka*, *ubo-aka* music, roles of *ubo-aka* music, problems facing *ubo-aka* and its music, recommendations and conclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

The word *ubo* refers to musical instruments that are either plucked (like *ubo-aka*) or bowed (like *ubo-akwara*). The English name for *ubo-aka* is thumb piano. This name may be derived as a result of the playing technique. Okoye (2002) described the playing technique of *ubo-aka* as follows:

The *ubo-aka* is held horizontally in both hands in such a way that the thumbs can play the keys or prongs conveniently. As the thumb plays, other fingers are generally hooked behind the wooden lid through the two holes in order to hold the instrument firmly (p. 39).

From the above statement, one can say that the thumbs play major roles in the playing of *ubo-aka*, while other fingers give support by holding the instrument firmly. Nzewi (1991:70) called *ubo-aka*, “a two-thumb keyboard instrument.”

Culturally, *ubo-aka* is grouped under male instruments. It is played by males from the age of puberty. The Igbo classify their musical instruments according to their playing techniques.

Thus:

Iku - to strike

Ifu - to blow

Ikpọ - to pluck

Iti - to beat or strike

Iyọ - to shake.

From the above classification, *ubo-aka* is plucked, so it is placed under *ikpọ*. Chukwu (1999:97) grouped *ubo-aka* under mannerphone as a result of its manner of playing. Based on the sound production, Sachs and Hornbostal (1940) classified *ubo-aka* under idiophones. Nketia (1975: 69-76) sub divided the idiophones according to their playing techniques. These include:

Shaken idiophones  
 Struck and concussion idiophones  
 Scraped or friction idiophones  
 Stamped idiophones  
 Tuned idiophones

*Ubo-aka* belongs to the tuned idiophones. It is tuned by the maker by pushing the prongs forward and backward until the desired pitch is achieved. Ezegbe (1977:79) states, “bearing this principle in mind, the maker tunes the instrument to imitate the tonal inflexion of human voice with the result that the instrument can talk.”

*Ubo-aka* is made of calabash or wooden box (as resonator) on which is mounted from about four (4) to eighteen (18) metal prongs. It plays rhythm, melody as well as harmony. Agu (2000:93) classified it as a melo-rhythmic instrument. It appears in various sizes and shapes. It is played either sitting or standing.

**Generic names of *Ubo-aka*.** *Ubo-aka* bears various generic names which differ from one ethnic group to another depending on the organological structure. In some of the areas where *ubọ-aka* exists, it is named after the resonant material. For instance, in Nise (Igbo tribe), *ubọ-aka* with gourd resonator is called *ubọ-aka*, while that with wooden box resonator is called *opanda*.

The table below shows, generic names of *ubọ-aka* in various countries and tribes, number of keys or prongs in the instrument, and type of resonant material used.

NAME	COUNTRY	TRIBE	NO OF KEYS	RESONANT MATERIAL
<i>Ubo-aka</i>	Nigeria	Igbo	8	Gourd
Ogume	Nigeria	Igbo	8	Gourd
Ikpa	Nigeria	Igbo	8	Gourd
Opanda	Nigeria	Igbo	4-10	Wooden box
Agidigbo	Nigeria	Yoruba	5	Wooden box
Molo	Nigeria	Yoruba	11	Gourd
Ekpe mbutu	Nigeria	Ibibio/Efik	4	Wooden box
Akembe	Uganda	Lango	12	Wooden box
Sanza	Uganda	Alur	8	Wooden box
Likembe	Uganda	Alur	8-12	Wooden box
Kadogo	Congo	Logo	10-12	Wooden box
Malimba	Tanzania	Wagogo	22,23,32	Large wooden box
kowangan	Indonesia	Javanese	5-8	Hat-like bowl etc

The table above shows that the existence of *ubọ-aka* cuts across various countries and tribes. In Igboland, *ubọ-aka* is also called *Ikpa*, *Ogume* and *Opanda*. *Okafor* (2000:164) mentioned other names of *ubọ-aka* and their peculiar areas. For example, “*ubọ-agbugba (Imezi ọwa)*, *ogume (Nsukka)* and *okume (Anambra LGA)*).

***Ubọ-aka music***

In most cases, the *ubọ-aka* music is performed solo. *Ubọ-aka* player can sing while playing the instrument. He does this as he tells stories or casts news. *Agu* (2000:93) is of the same view when he notes, “the thumb piano is a portable solo instrument used for accompanying solo singing.” Apart from solo performance, it combines with other instruments like *ogene* (clapperless bell or metal gong), *ọkpọkọlọ* (wood block), *udu* (pot drum/percussion pot) and *ekwe* (slit drum) in small group performance, such as duet, trio, quartet and quintet. Small groups of raconteur-singers could be accompanied by one or two *ubọ-aka* players (*Nzewi*, 1991:70).

**The role of *ubọ-aka* music.**

*Ubọ-aka* music performs various roles in Igbo culture which include: entertainment, relaxation, communication to mention but a few. Before the advent of the Europeans in Igboland, *ubọ-aka* music was very popular. Once the music is played in the evening (after the day’s work) in the arena or partrilocal guest house (*obu*), people move towards the place to relax and listen to the latest news. From investigation, I was told by one of my informants that *ubọ-aka* music was used as signature tune to the news broadcast of radio Nigeria in about late fifties and early sixties.

The lyrics of *ubọ-aka* music cut across various activities in Igbo, culture. They are used for greetings, praying, consoling the bereaved, correcting social ills, to mention but a few. At Nise, some of the lyrics rendered by *Ezealor (ubọ-aka* player) include:

*Payọsue, ubọ m kenelu gi*  
meaning

Pious, my thumb piano greets you.

Greeting is an aspect of Igbo culture which is incorporated in *ubọ-aka* music. The performer on the *ubọ-aka* plays various combinations of notes which reproduce either the real names or title names of certain people and greets them. See below, the language of *ubọ-aka*.

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef with a 6/8 time signature. The melody consists of two phrases. The first phrase, 'Pa-yo-su-e', is written as Pa- (quarter note), yo- (quarter note), su- (quarter note), e, (quarter rest). The second phrase, 'u-bo-mu ke-ne-re gi', is written as u- (quarter note), bo- (quarter note), mu (quarter note), ke- (quarter note), ne- (quarter note), re (quarter note), gi (quarter note). A triplet of three eighth notes is indicated above the 'ke-ne-re' part of the second phrase.

In praying, the following lyrics are used

*Igwe, ọ diraa Chukwu mma, ndi ichie kwu gi n’azu etc.*

Meaning

*Igwe*, if it pleases God, the ancestors are solidly behind you.

Here, the *ubọ-aka* player and singer, prays for God’s approval on the installation of the *Igwe* as shown in the music below.

I - gw'o - di - ra Chu - kwum - ma

N - di - chie---- kwu - gi n'a - zu

Satirical songs are used for correction of social ills. The text of such song include:

*Nwakuta, ebee ka: na-eje, Nwakuta?*

Meaning:

*Nwakuta, where are you going, Nwakuta?*

The above text condemns waywardness. The accusing finger is not directed to *Nwakuta* alone but to anyone that is wayward, see music below.

Nwa - ku - t'e - be ---- ki----- n'e - je Nwa - ku - te

When somebody dies, *ubọ-aka* music is performed to console the bereaved. The lyrics of such song include:

*Amode Enu, gi dibenu*

Meaning

*Amode Enu, you should take heart.*

The above text is used to console the bereaved with words of advice to relieve them of their sorrow. As shown in the music below.

A - mo - de - nu gi di - be - nu

*Ubo-aka* music is used by the night watchmen to ward off sleep and also to scare away thieves. This is peculiar to those that can play the instrument. There are other instruments which they also use to ward off sleep like *Ngedegwu* (xylophone).

### **Problems Facing *Ubo-aka* Music.**

The *ubọ-aka* music is not written but passed from generation to generation through oral tradition. That is why researchers found it difficult to lay hands on the works of late *ubọ-aka* makers and players. Those that are still alive cannot play their music in its exact form when asked to repeat a performance; the singer renders words as they occur to him, not initially performed. Even in the playing of the instrument, there are still slight differences.

Presently, *ubọ-aka* music is gradually disappearing in Igbo culture as a result of the influence of the western culture. From the statistics I conducted on *ubọ-aka* makers and players at Nise in the year, 2001, out of twenty-five *ubọ-aka* makers and players, twenty-one have died leaving four without some younger people replacing them. When I extended my study to other towns around Nise, the story was the same and even in some towns, none is alive. The problem of this important instrument is not even a gradual disappearance but almost becoming extinct. Chukwu (1999:97) had the same view at *Ihitte Ụbọma* when he remarked that “*ubọ-aka* is not common in my locality. I discovered that it was just one elderly man who used to play solo with it as people gathered for one ceremony or the other. He was called “*Dee Theo*” who is now late.”

From the above statement, Dee Theo was the only *ubọ-aka* player they had at that time in their town. Now, that he is late, it means that *ubọ-aka* has ceased to exist there. Sequel to this fact, the present generation finds it difficult to understand what *ubọ-aka* is all about. More so, the instrument is rarely seen in any indigenous ensemble. The very few players could only be seen in the towns where they exist.

### **Recommendations:**

There is need to reactivate the existence of this very important musical instrument and its music. This could be done by the inclusion of the playing skills and construction of *ubọ-aka* and other indigenous musical instruments in the scheme of work from pre-primary to tertiary level. Since professionals in *ubọ-aka* are lacking, master musicians could be employed to help in the teaching. Although in some of the tertiary institutions where music is taught, *ubọ-aka* is one of the indigenous musical instruments a student (irrespective of sex) could play in African music practical. This is not enough; *ubọ-aka* music should be included in small group performances during music concerts within or outside the school.

In addition to small group performances, *ubọ-aka* should be included in the indigenous orchestra that accompanies voice in choral music. If the instrument is amplified, the sound will be clearly heard among other instruments. Such inclusion was made in the former St Mark's T.T.C. Nibo-Nise choral music group, directed by Nwafor H.C. *Ubọ-aka* with gourd and box resonators of various sizes were used and they performed various musical roles in the orchestra.

*Ubọ-aka* could be used as teaching aid, when teaching some aspects of rudiments in music as well as African music. In as much as playing of recorder is included in junior secondary school scheme of work, *ubọ-aka* should not be left out because it is also portable and could be owned and played by individual student. *Ubọ-aka* and its music (score and tape) should be preserved for posterity in the museum or documentation centre. This will be of great benefit to researchers, educationists, technologists, the mass media among others.

### **Conclusion**

*Ubọ-aka* is an idiophone which is capable of playing both rhythm and melody. That is why it is called a melo-rhythmic instrument. It is played either sitting or standing with two thumbs, while other fingers hold the instrument firmly. *Ubọ-aka* is found not only in Igboland but in

various parts of Nigeria and other countries with generic names. Even within the tribes, the names differ as a result of dialectical differences, more so, on the resonant materials too. The music is not written but passed from generation to generation orally. That is why *ubọ-aka* players and singers find it difficult to perform exactly what they have performed initially. The preservation of the music score and tape is very important, to enable future performers (professionals) to perform as scored or taped. Most of the makers and players of *ubọ-aka* are late without the youths taking over. It is very important that the youths who are the future hope and culture bearers should be encouraged to participate actively in the construction and playing of *ubọ-aka* (as well as other indigenous musical instruments) for continuity.

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