

## ADAPTATION OF THE EGWU OGENE IN A DIGITAL WORLD: A STUDY OF EJYK NWAMBA

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the transformation of the *Ogene*, a traditional Igbo melo-rhythmic instrument within the digital landscape. Ejoyk Nwamba, renowned as an *Ogene* master, provides a unique perspective on this evolution. The *Ogene*, classified as an idiophone, holds deep cultural roots and serves both musical and non-musical functions within Igbo society. However, in the digital era, cultural music faces challenges of commercialization, visibility, and authenticity. Globalization has changed the dynamics of traditional music, altering performance, social context, and audience. Digitalization has digitized traditional music, offering a global reach but also a commercial focus, potentially compromising authenticity. This study examines how the *Ogene* music has adapted to the digital world, exploring its cultural, social, and economic evolution. It raises questions about cultural identity and authenticity in a digital society and seeks to provide recommendations to preserve the cultural integrity of traditional music. Ejoyk Nwamba's journey as an *Ogene* musician offers insights into these transformations. Recommendations for preserving cultural music in the digital age include education, marketing and promotion, and the establishment of digital archives. These efforts aim to ensure that cultural music remains authentic and thrives in a digital economy.

### **Introduction**

The *ogene* instrument is a melo-rhythmic instrument of the Igbo people in Nigeria. From the classification of instruments postulated by Sachs and Hornbustel, (1940), the *ogene* instrument can be classified as an idiophone. Ibagere (1994 p.91) defined idiophones as a group of self-sounding instruments which produce sound when they are struck, scratched or shaken.

To give it a historical background, it is widely believed that the *Ogene* is forged by indigenous blacksmiths of the present-day Awka, Anambra state, as the *Ogene* is purely made from iron. The instrument is relatively shaped like a cone and is hollow inside (Nnam, 2021). The *ogene* is played by striking it with a stick and while it is a rhythmic instrument, it produces melody. Nzewi (2000) in Nnam (2021), explained it in this manner;

The *ogene*, perhaps, is the most important metal instrument of the Igbo people and it has a lot of cultural attachments. The roles it plays in the societal delegations of the

Igbo people are grouped into two; (1) the musical functions and (2) the non-musical functions.

In the non-musical functions of the *Ogene*, it is explored in these ways;

1. Spreading of Information: From literary accounts of the traditional Igbo society, the *Ogene* is the tool of the town crier. Coupled with the town crier's voice and his feet, information is disseminated across the village and the community where he resides.
2. Divination: Nnam (2021), states that;

The native doctors or chief priests use the *Ogene* as a communicating tool to call the spirit of the gods and these instruments are attached to the staff of the chief priest when they hit it on the ground for it to stand if the gods are present in the area. (p.201)

The esoteric nature of these sounds have been left to only be understood by the diviners and *Dibias* who use them.

### **Egwu *Ogene***

The role of the *Ogene* musically, is widely known across the Igbo community. As an original genre of the Igbo culture, it is known for its captivating rhythms, percussive beats and a unique instrumental ensemble.

Warner (2020), described *Egwu *Ogene** in this manner:

*Ogene*, what a sound! *Ogene* music is a dynamic performative ensemble form distinctive to the Igbo people, language and cultural practices of today's south-east Nigeria. Named for the *Ogene* bell, one of the central instruments to the form, *ogene* music encompasses rich call and response songs of marriage, praise, police and military encounters, moral and political situations, birthday celebrations, dedications and funerals, proclamation poetry and more.

There are different sizes and pitches of the *Ogene* as earlier stated and this provides for a variety of sounds in the music. The music is characterized by complex and polyrhythmic patterns. In an instrumental ensemble, multiple *Ogene* bells can be played together, creating intricate interlocking rhythms and this rhythmic complexity is a distinct feature of the *Egwu *Ogene**.

*Egwu *Ogene** is mostly played in ceremonial festivities and social gatherings. The *Egwu *Ogene** performance is characterized as high-energy, lively and engaging. The is represented in the *Ilu Igbo* that says '*Ejiro *Ogene* edu onye ujo*' which literally translates to '*the *Ogene* is not used to accompany a coward*'

*Ogene* music, with its vibrant character, evokes feelings of bravery and jubilation. (Nzewi, 2000). He went further to describe the performance in this way:

Although the music is of primarily contemplative conception, its effect compels action, which can be expressed in bold dances gestures by the performers as well as the stimulated listeners. (p.26)

The ideal ensemble setup of Egwu Ogene comprises the ogene bells, the ichaka (rattle), okpokoro (woodblock) and the Oja. This ensemble is not rigid and is subject to addition of more instruments or subtraction.

While this genre of Igbo music has deep historical roots, Egwu Ogene has evolved over time. The impact of globalization, specifically westernization, is evident in the Performance of the music as contemporary Ogene musicians have incorporated modern instruments and recording techniques into Egwu Ogene blending tradition with the innovations of the modern world.

Non-musical functions encompass its role in information dissemination and divination. The Ogene's esoteric sounds are central to rituals performed by diviners and Dibias. Musically, Egwu Ogene, characterized by captivating rhythms and complex polyrhythmic patterns, is played in ceremonial festivities and social gatherings, evoking feelings of bravery and jubilation.



conjoined Ogene Bells.

### **Background of The Study**

The nature of the Egwu Ogene serves its cultural purpose diligently. The instrument however has remained the way it is all through its history and some will agree that the way it is and the roles it plays are not subject to change. The effects of globalization have changed this narrative through the way the systems of living for most cultures have evolved in different ways. So there is technically an update on the cultural values of these instruments. For one, the fact that the society we are currently living in now is considered a digital society and these traditional instruments have now encountered other forms of use, whether it is in the choices of songs during performances or in the way they are broadcasted through the world. Changes in musical cultures are complicated because they involve changes in the performance, social context, audience and the overall nature of the music.

### **Statement of Problem**

The existing problem subjective to this study is that the *Ogene* music and cultural music generally have not identified the exact means in which to fully integrate itself into a rapidly changing world which is mostly digital. It also identifies with the challenge of the *Egwu Ogene* remaining authentic in this new world.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand how the *Ogene* as a cultural instrument has fitted into this digital world and how it has evolved culturally, socially and economically. By understanding the roles it plays, the study now seeks to postulate recommendations and in turn provide the ground for thought on the subject. For example, in this digital world, has the *Ogene* lost its identity and cultural authenticity?

### **Research Questions**

1. How has the *Ogene* evolved culturally, socially and economically?
2. What are the key elements and characteristics of *Ogene* and its music?
3. How has *Ejyk Nwamba's* music contributed to its globalization?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To know the cultural significance of the *Ogene* within the Igbo community.
2. To know the factors that have contributed to the digitalization of the *Ogene* with a focus on *Ejyk Nwamba's* career.
3. To propose recommendations on the integration and promotion of *Ogene* as a cultural asset, into the Digital economy.

### **DIGITALIZATION**

Digitalization is the use of digital technologies to change business models and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities. (Gartner, 2023). In the 21st century, digitalization has become a transformative force, changing the nature of industries, economies and society. This involves the process of digitization and has been driven by the advancement of technology.

The potential for a digital world is vast. As shown by Parviainen, Tihhinen, Kaariainen and Teppola (2017), by digitizing information-intensive processes, costs can be cut by up to 90 percent and turnaround times improved by several orders of magnitude. Going further, Parviainen et al (2017) added that replacing paper and manual processes with software allows businesses to automatically collect data that can be mined to better understand process performance, cost drivers, and causes of risk.

Streamlining it to music entails the conversion of traditional analog music formats into digital ones and therefore changing the way music is being created, distributed and experienced. Digital recording technology has made it easier for artists to capture and manipulate sound with precision without necessarily learning how to play and perform music formally. Digital audio workstations (DAW) and virtual musical instruments have created a world where musicians can exploit these sounds to create music in a digital realm.

On first glance, a digital economy seems ideal but like man-made inventions, poses some concerns. In a digital economy, music can be shared to digital platforms and made available for streaming and public consumption but while this offers a global reach for music, cultural music may struggle to gain visibility amongst mainstream commercial content. Ferguson (1992:73), opined that globalization conflates the normative and descriptive, and consequently carries ideological as well as temporal, spatial, historical and geopolitical implications.

This means that there is a commercial focus on music and cultural music may be forced to shed some values so as to conform to commercial and socio-economic standards of the day. This invariably means that the music is bound to lose some authenticity.



Ejyk Nwamba and his 'Ogene Ndigbo' crew.

### **EJYK NWAMBA**

Ejike Benedict Obiano known globally as Ejyk Nwamba or *Ogene* master, is a Nigerian musician resident in Anambra state. One of the front men in *Ogene* music, which is of course popular in Eastern Nigeria, Ejyk Nwamba is considered as one of the best *Ogene* musicians in the Igbo land.

Ejike hails from Nkanu East in Enugu state, South-East, Nigeria. He started his career in the church as a performer in the early 2000s and he of course, learnt how to play the *Ogene* by rote. He said this in an interview by Vanguard. (2023);

"Music began for me at a young age. I have always had passion for music and cultural beats. I learnt to play many cultural instruments myself. I learnt from watching other people play."

He has his own *Ogene* troupe which he refers to as 'Ogene Ndigbo'. Warner (2020) said this about the musician;

One of the hardest working *ogene* crews I've come across in my online wanderings is "Ogene Ndigbo by Ejyk Nwamba" who, as they proclaim, aim to bring *Ogene* to the World. Always filmed outdoors, with no electronic amplification and in a single uncut shot, each video blasts along for 15 minutes or more with the group occupying and enlivening urban street, farm track, parking lot, hilltop, bamboo grove, mine spoil mountain and big-house

courtyard. They offer birthday wishes, praise to important people, and dedications to car makers or a local Malaysian mini-mart with equal ebullient energy and flair.

He went further to add;

They're not only masterful exponents of the tightly knit music, song and dance skills of their Igbo cultural form but have mastered the art of performing to the unseen worldwide audience behind and beyond the video cameras to which they passionately gift their remarkable music and proud culture. We should all be thankful. (Retrieved 1:00am, 2023-09-23)

This was exactly how Ejoy Nwamba came into mainstream media. In addition to that, he recorded covers of songs that were popular already in the global world and on digital platforms.

Ejike in an interview with Guardian news (2023) said this;

"The challenges I faced at the beginning of my music career was getting people to accept my genre of music. When I started out, my genre wasn't widely recognized and accepted. Artists before me were always seen as local and not given their due respect. I thank God that has changed"

While this is a concern for most traditional musicians, the existence of social media was key to Ejoy Nwamba's success. The Ogene musician put up videos of his performances on his social media pages and then in 2020, he released his debut EP *Aja Welewele*, which became an anthem in the eastern part of Nigeria and catapulted him to limelight. (Tribune, 2023).

Since then (2020), He has collaborated on songs with mainstream musicians like Kolaboy and Zoro. He has also featured on a comedy skit for the popular comedian, Chukwuemeka Emmanuel, popularly known as Brainjotter. The video skit has up nine hundred thousand and six views on Youtube (retrieved 3:00am, 2023-09-26)

Here is an analysis of his most popular songs across three mainstream digital platforms. retrieved from YouTube, YouTube music and Spotify, 2023-09-26. (3:50 am)

Name of Song.	Youtube.	Youtube Music.	Spotify
Ubor featuring Zoro	128,000	225,000	150,428
Gbawalum Oji	179,000	269,000	22,500
Kawaii	147,000	346,000	119,685
Ogene Cultural Praise	202,000	765,000	90,980

Across these three digital platforms, Ejoy Nwamba's music is averaging over 500, 000 plays.

Ejyk Nwamba currently has 98,007 subscribers on Youtube (retrieved 6:39 am, 2023-09-25), 110,000 followers on Instagram (retrieved 6:40 am, 2023-09-25) and 371,000 followers on Facebook (retrieved 7:01 am, 2023-09-25).

### Conclusion/Recommendations

This study underscores the importance of observing and assessing the ways in which cultural music can continue to resonate authentically in a rapidly changing digital world. Ogene music, thriving in a digital world, requires a number of approaches that combine technology and cultural awareness. Here are some important ways to solve these issues:

1. Education: Promotion of Egwu Ogene within communities to ensure that younger generations learn about the authentic nature of the music is important. This can include detailed music education programs on Igbo-African music and community workshops that integrate culture into the Igbo-African child. Educating the younger generations on how to integrate their culture into the digital world is also important.
2. Marketing and Promotion: Strategies should be developed to promote Egwu Ogene musicians on digital platforms. This includes making use of social media, streaming services and online forums to reach a more global audience.
3. Digital Archives: Establishment of digital archives dedicated to preserving Ogene music, and Igbo cultural music is important. These archives can be used as valuable resources for research, education and cultural preservation.

More can still be done and it is the responsibility of researchers, scholars and the government agencies put in place for cultural affairs to critically observe and assess the ways cultural music can remain authentic and thrive in a digital economy. The focus of this seminar is Ejyk Nwamba who is an Ogene musician but of course, there are more profound cultural art and music imbued with its own philosophies and are being taken out of context in this digital world. The recommendations of this study also apply to them.

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