### PHYNO'S MUSICAL FUSION: REVIVING OGENE MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY POP

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### Abstract

This study delved into Phyno's creative journey of infusing *Ogene* music into modern pop to breathe new life into this traditional Igbo music style. The central concern is the diminishing popularity of *Ogene* music in the contemporary music landscape, prompting worries about its cultural significance becoming overlooked or forgotten. To confront this challenge, we will examine Phyno's musical contributions alongside the deep cultural roots of *Ogene* music. By exploring how Phyno seamlessly weaves traditional *Ogene* flavours into contemporary pop tunes, we aimed to understand the impact of this blend on both preserving the genre and captivating a global audience. This study is not just about music; it is part of the bigger conversation on safeguarding culture through musical expressions, highlighting Phyno's pivotal role in uniting traditional and modern music realms. Ultimately, we hope this research sparks a passion in upcoming artists to embrace and rejuvenate traditional music forms, ensuring that our cultural heritage continues to thrive and resonate in the dynamic world of music.

### Introduction

*Ogene* music is not just melodies and rhythms; it is a vital part of Igbo culture, woven into the fabric of their identity. It is more than just music; it is a way of communicating, preserving history, and passing down traditions. Originally used to send messages in Igbo communities, the *Ogene* gong symbolizes the deeper societal functions of this musical style (Nketia, 1974). In addition to communication, *Ogene* music carries the Igbo people's stories, values, and shared experiences (Onuora-Oguno & Ibekwe, 2023). It touches on important themes like bringing people together and teaching moral lessons, showing its role in uniting communities and upholding customs, especially during special occasions like weddings and festivals. Despite the changes in modern times, *Ogene* music manages to evolve while keeping its essence intact, staying relevant in today's Igbo cultural landscape.

#### Historical Background of Ogene Music

Imagine being in the heart of Igbo land in South-Eastern Nigeria, where the captivating sounds of *Ogene* music fill the air. This traditional music form is a gift from the Igbo people, who crafted a special bell-shaped metal gong called *ogene* as their musical centrepiece (Nzewi, 1991). What originated as a way to communicate transformed into the heart of cultural events, ceremonies, and festive celebrations. *Ogene* music wasn't just about entertainment; it was a living tapestry of Igbo society, weaving through rituals, spiritual moments, and everyday communal life (Ekwueme, 1973; Omojola, 2001). Every note carried stories, wisdom, and echoes of the past, ensuring that the legacy of the Igbo people would endure for generations to come. When *Ogene* music played, it was a call for everyone to join in – singing, dancing, and playing instruments – creating a harmonious symphony of shared experiences and a deep sense of belonging. The call-and-response melodies of *Ogene* music were more than just music; they were a reflection of the unity and shared heritage that bound the Igbo community together.

## Traditional Characteristics and Cultural Significance of Ogene

*Ogene* music is categorised by its distinctive rhythmic patterns and melodic structures, which are often driven by the *(ogene)* gong's percussive sound. The music typically features a variety of traditional instruments, including the *udu* (clay pot drum), *ekwe* (wooden slit drum), *igba* (membrane drum), and other percussive instruments. These instruments are combined to create complex, interlocking rhythms that are central to the music's dynamic and vibrant sound. The interplay between different instruments allows for a rich tapestry of sounds that are both captivating and deeply rooted in Igbo cultural heritage (Nketia, 1974).

Vocals in *Ogene* music often utilize a call-and-response structure, where a lead singer (song leader) initiates a phrase that is then echoed or answered by a chorus or the community. This style not only adds to the music's complexity but also emphasises the communal aspect of the performance. The lyrics of *Ogene* songs are typically drawn from proverbs, folktales, historical events, and social commentary, serving as a means of storytelling and

moral instruction (Opara, 2012). This lyrical content helps to reinforce social norms and cultural values, making *Ogene* music a powerful tool for cultural transmission and education.

Culturally, *Ogene* music holds significant value in Igbo society. It is often associated with traditional rites of passage, such as weddings, funerals, and initiation ceremonies, where it is used to honour the participants and the ancestors. The music's ability to evoke emotions and foster a sense of belonging makes it an essential element in communal rituals and celebrations. Furthermore, *Ogene* music serves as a vehicle for social cohesion, providing a space where members of the community can come together, express themselves, and maintain a connection to their cultural heritage (Okpewho, 1998).

In recent times, there has been a resurgence of interest in *Ogene* music, particularly among young Nigerians and diaspora communities who are keen to reconnect with their cultural roots (Zeleza, 2010). This revival is somewhat driven by artists like Phyno, who have creatively incorporated elements of *Ogene* into contemporary pop music, thereby introducing the traditional sounds to new and diverse audiences. By blending the old with the new, these artists are helping to preserve and celebrate *Ogene* music while ensuring its continued relevance in the modern world.

### Phyno's Musical Innovations: An Academic Overview

Phyno, born Azubuike Chibuzo Nelson, is a prominent Nigerian rapper, singer, songwriter, and record producer known for his unique blend of Igbo traditional music and modern pop and hip-hop sounds. Hailing from Enugu State in South-Eastern Nigeria, Phyno initially started his career as a producer in 2003, working with various artists and honing his skills in the music industry. He gained widespread recognition as a rapper and singer with his debut studio album, *No Guts No Glory* (2014), which featured a mix of rap, hip-hop, and Igbo highlife music. His subsequent albums, *The Playmaker* (2016) and *Deal with It* (2019), solidified his position as one of the leading figures in Nigerian music, particularly in the Eastern region of Nigeria.

Phyno's musical style is characterized by his use of the Igbo language in his lyrics, a distinctive feature that sets him apart in the Nigerian music scene dominated by English and Pidgin English. His ability to seamlessly blend traditional Igbo music elements with contemporary hip-hop, rap, and Afrobeat rhythms has earned him the nickname "Man of the Year." Phyno is known for his flexibility, lyrical prowess, and the way he infuses cultural elements into his music, making it accessible and appealing to both local and international audiences. His use of traditional instruments, folklore, and proverbs within a modern context demonstrates his commitment to preserving and promoting Igbo culture through his music (Eze, 2020).

### Analysis of How Phyno Incorporates Ogene Elements into His Pop Music

Phyno has been instrumental in incorporating *Ogene* music elements into his contemporary pop and hip-hop productions, effectively bridging the gap between traditional Igbo music and modern Nigerian pop culture. *Ogene*, with its rhythmic gong patterns and call-and-response vocals, provides a rich tapestry for Phyno to weave into his music. He often employs traditional *Ogene* instruments, such as the *ogene* (metal gong), *ekwe* (wooden drum), and *udu* (clay pot drum), blending them with modern beats and electronic production techniques.



OGENE - ZORO ft. FLAVOUR



### Fig. 1: An excerpt of Ogene incorporated into Pop Music

This fusion not only preserves the cultural essence of *Ogene* but also introduces its vibrant sound to a broader, more contemporary audience.

Phyno's use of *Ogene* elements is not just limited to instrumentation but extends to the thematic and lyrical content of his music. He often draws on traditional Igbo folklore, proverbs, and storytelling techniques, which are central to *Ogene* music. His lyrics frequently address social issues, moral values, and personal experiences, reflecting the communal and didactic nature of traditional Igbo music. By integrating these elements, Phyno revitalizes *Ogene* music, ensuring that it remains relevant in the ever-evolving landscape of Nigerian pop music (Forchu, 2020). Phyno's approach to music production also reflects his innovative integration of *Ogene* elements. For instance, he often collaborates with traditional *Ogene* musicians and percussionists, bringing an authentic feel to his tracks.

Additionally, his music videos frequently feature traditional Igbo dancers and cultural symbols, further reinforcing the connection between his music and Igbo heritage. Through these strategies, Phyno has successfully created a unique sound that resonates with both young and old audiences, bridging generational gaps and fostering a renewed interest in traditional Igbo music forms (Emielu, 2018).

### **Challenges in Reviving Traditional Music**

### Factors Contributing to the Decline in Ogene Music's Popularity

*Ogene* music, a traditional genre deeply rooted in Igbo culture, has faced a significant decline in popularity over recent decades. Several factors have contributed to this decline, including urbanization, globalization, and the dominance of Western and contemporary music genres. As urbanization spreads across Nigeria, many Igbo youths migrate to urban centres where Western music and popular Nigerian genres like Afrobeat, hip-hop, and dancehall dominate the musical landscape (Forchu, 2015). This shift often leads to a detachment from traditional practices and a decline in interest in indigenous music forms like *Ogene*.

Another contributing factor is the influence of globalization, which has led to the widespread consumption of Western culture and music. The global reach of music streaming platforms and media has made Western pop and hip-hop more accessible and attractive to younger generations, overshadowing traditional music forms. Additionally, the modernization of entertainment and a preference for electronic instruments and digital production techniques have further marginalized *Ogene*, which relies heavily on traditional instruments such as the *ogene* (gong), *ekwe* (wooden drum), and vocal chants. The lack of institutional support for traditional music education and the limited inclusion of *Ogene* music in school curricula also play a role in its declining popularity. As a result, many young Nigerians lack awareness and appreciation of *Ogene* music, leading to its gradual disappearance from mainstream culture (Forchu, 2015).

### The Risk of Cultural Erosion and the Impact on Igbo Heritage

The decline of *Ogene* music is not just a loss of a musical genre; it poses a broader risk of cultural erosion, threatening the preservation of Igbo heritage. *Ogene* music is more than just entertainment; it is a vital cultural expression that embodies the history, values, and social norms of the Igbo people. It is often performed during significant cultural events such as festivals, weddings, and funerals, playing a crucial role in communal identity and social cohesion. The fading of *Ogene* music leads to a weakening of these cultural practices and the values they uphold.

The erosion of traditional music forms like *Ogene* also affects the transmission of oral histories and indigenous knowledge. Many aspects of Igbo history, philosophy, and communal values are embedded in the lyrics and performance styles of *Ogene* music. As this music declines, so too does the transmission of these cultural narratives to younger generations. This loss of cultural transmission not only affects the preservation of Igbo heritage but also reduces the diversity of Nigeria's cultural landscape, which is enriched by its various ethnic traditions and music forms (Ola & Adegbore, 2015).

Moreover, the decline of *Ogene* music represents a broader trend of diminishing indigenous cultures in the face of global homogenization. As younger generations grow increasingly disconnected from their cultural roots, there is a risk that unique cultural identities will be diluted or lost altogether. This cultural erosion undermines efforts to promote cultural diversity and inclusivity in a globalized world, where understanding and appreciating different cultural expressions are essential for fostering mutual respect and coexistence. Reviving *Ogene* music is, therefore, not just about preserving a musical form but also about safeguarding the cultural integrity and heritage of the Igbo people (Eze, 2023).

# Analysis of Phyno's Selected Songs Featuring Ogene Music Elements

# 1. Obiagu by Phyno

## **Overview and Musical Elements:**

"*Obiagu*" is a track by Phyno from his 2014 debut album *No Gut, No Glory*. The song is an example of Phyno's fusion of traditional Igbo music with contemporary sounds. The analysis focuses on several key aspects: **Instrumentation:** "*Obiagu*" prominently features traditional Igbo instruments such as the *ogene* gong and *ekwe* drum, alongside modern hip-hop beats. The *ogene* provides a rhythmic foundation, while the *ekwe* adds a distinct percussive texture. This combination highlights Phyno's approach to blending traditional and modern elements. **Rhythmic Structure:** The song's rhythm incorporates *Ogene's* characteristic patterns, with syncopated beats and call-and-response elements. This traditional rhythm is layered with contemporary drum machines and synthesizers, creating a hybrid sound. **Melodic and Harmonic Content:** The melody in "*Obiagu*" reflects the traditional pentatonic scale and aeolian modes, which are woven into a modern harmonic framework. Phyno's use of minor and pentatonic scales aligns with traditional Igbo music, while the harmonic progressions introduce contemporary pop influences.

**Lyrical Content:** Phyno's song "Obiagu" is an upbeat rap track that pays homage to his hometown of Obiagu, Enugu State, Nigeria. The lyrics emphasize the pride, resilience, and cultural heritage of the people, using traditional Igbo language and repetitive chants to create a vibrant, catchy feel. The song blends traditional Igbo elements with modern hip-hop, featuring strong drumbeats and electronic sounds, reflecting Phyno's unique style (Okolie & Onwuegbuna, 2024). "Obiagu" also addresses economic challenges in Nigeria, highlighting the strength of Obiagu's residents. It celebrates Phyno's roots and has become a popular anthem for its powerful message and engaging music.

## 2. Achikolo by Zoro featuring Phyno

### **Overview and Musical Elements:**

"*Achikolo*" is a collaboration between Zoro and Phyno, released in 2016. The song is notable for its incorporation of *Ogene* music elements within a modern pop context.

**Instrumentation:** The track features traditional *Ogene* instruments like the *ogene* and *ekwe*, which are used alongside Afrobeat and hip-hop elements. The *ogene* provides a rhythmic anchor, while the *ekwe* contributes a melodic percussive layer.

**Rhythmic Structure:** "*Achikolo*" utilizes traditional *Ogene* rhythm patterns, characterized by complex, interlocking beats. This is complemented by contemporary beat patterns and bass lines, creating a dynamic interplay between traditional and modern rhythms.

**Melodic and Harmonic Content:** The song's melody reflects the pentatonic scale, while the harmonic structure incorporates modern pop chord progressions. The use of diatonic scales alongside contemporary harmonies creates a rich, multi-layered musical texture.

**Lyrical Content:** Zoro's song "*Achikolo*" is an energetic track celebrating the joy of dancing and Igbo culture, specifically the traditional *Achikolo* dance. The lyrics highlight pride in Igbo heritage and acknowledge the influence of the Red Cap in Igbo music. The song vividly describes a lively dance floor, encouraging dancers with lines like "*Baby go down achikolo*." Towards the end, it conveys messages about hard work and celebrating success with lines such as "*Christmas bu for nyoghari ego, kitaa nwoke ebugo getting pounds ka aku odo*. Overall, the song is a vibrant celebration of life and cultural pride.

## 3. Ochie Dike by Phyno featuring Onyeka Owenu

## **Overview and Musical Elements:**

"*Ochie Dike*" is a track from Phyno's 2021 album *Something to Live For*, featuring the legendary Onyeka Owenu. The song is a prominent example of Phyno's integration of *Ogene* music with contemporary influences.

**Instrumentation:** "Ochie Dike" prominently features the *ogene* gong and *ekwe* drum, combined with modern pop and hip-hop instrumentation. The traditional instruments provide a rhythmic and melodic foundation, while contemporary elements add depth and complexity to the track.

**Rhythmic Structure:** The song incorporates traditional *Ogene* rhythms, which are characterized by their complex, polyrhythmic patterns. These are integrated with modern electronic beats, creating a fusion that highlights the rhythmic diversity of both traditional and contemporary styles.

**Melodic and Harmonic Content:** The melody of "*Ochie Dike*" incorporates traditional Igbo scales and modes, which are layered over modern harmonic progressions. This blend of traditional and contemporary elements creates a unique sound that honours Igbo musical heritage while appealing to modern listeners.

**Lyrical Content:** Phyno's song "*Ochie Dike*" is a tribute to the masculine hero in Igbo culture, celebrating strength, courage, and family. It begins by highlighting Osisioma, the hero's mother, as a powerful figure capable of invoking spirits. The lyrics express gratitude to those who helped the hero rise to prominence and ask for blessings for his supporters. Phyno uses the Igbo language to describe the hero's wealth and bravery, emphasizing family pride and the desire to create a prosperous future. "*Ochie Dike*" reflects Phyno's appreciation for the values of courage and community in Igbo culture.

### **Cultural and Musical Impact**

Phyno's innovative fusion of *Ogene* music with contemporary pop has significantly contributed to the preservation and revitalization of this traditional Igbo genre. By incorporating elements of *Ogene*—such as the *ogene* gong, *ekwe* drum, call-and-response vocals, and traditional Igbo lyrics—into his music, Phyno has brought *Ogene* into the mainstream, introducing it to new audiences both within Nigeria and globally. This fusion not only preserves the sound and structure of *Ogene* music but also ensures its relevance in a rapidly evolving music landscape. Phyno's work demonstrates how traditional music can adapt and thrive within modern contexts, allowing *Ogene* to remain a living, dynamic part of Igbo culture rather than a relic of the past (Forchu, 2020).

As a cultural ambassador, Phyno plays a crucial role in bridging traditional and modern music. His ability to blend authentic *Ogene* elements with contemporary genres such as Afrobeat, hip-hop, and pop positions him as a key figure in cultural preservation through music. By doing so, he has helped challenge the misconception that

traditional music cannot appeal to modern tastes. Phyno's approach shows that traditional music forms, when innovatively combined with modern elements, can reach wider and younger audiences, fostering a greater appreciation for cultural heritage (Onwuegbuna, 2022). This role is particularly vital in a globalized world where cultural homogenization poses a threat to indigenous art forms.

The audience reception and global appeal of Phyno's *Ogene*-infused pop music underscore the success of his approach. His songs have garnered millions of streams on digital platforms, reflecting a broad acceptance and appreciation of his unique style. Internationally, Phyno has been recognized for blending traditional and contemporary sounds, appealing to diasporic communities and global listeners increasingly interested in diverse musical expressions. His music's ability to resonate with both local and global audiences speaks to its universal appeal, showcasing how traditional music can be both preserved and popularized through innovative fusion (Eze, 2023). The global appeal of Phyno's music highlights the potential for traditional genres like *Ogene* to thrive in the modern music industry, contributing to a richer, more inclusive global musical landscape.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Phyno's approach to blending traditional and contemporary music, particularly his integration of *Ogene* elements with modern pop, can be compared with other Nigerian artists like Flavour, Yemi Alade, and Burna Boy, who also fuse traditional sounds with contemporary genres. Phyno's music uniquely incorporates specific elements of *Ogene* music, and call-and-response vocals, with hip-hop and Afrobeat. This creates a distinctive sound that both preserves Igbo cultural heritage and appeals to a global audience. In contrast, Flavour is known for incorporating highlife music into his compositions, which often feature rich brass sections and syncopated rhythms characteristic of this genre, while Yemi Alade integrates Afro-pop with elements of traditional Yoruba and Igbo music in her vocal delivery and instrumentation. Burna Boy, often referred to as the "African Giant," seamlessly blends Afrobeat with reggae, dancehall, and other African rhythms, drawing from the legacy of Fela Kuti while also infusing contemporary global sounds (Emielu, 2018).

While these artists share a common goal of blending traditional and modern sounds, their methods and the challenges they face differ. Phyno, for example, has succeeded in making Igbo culture and language central to his music, which resonates deeply with his primary audience. However, he faces challenges in ensuring that the specific cultural nuances of *Ogene* music are appreciated by a broader, more diverse audience. Flavour's highlife approach has successfully revived interest in this older Nigerian genre, but his challenge lies in maintaining relevance among younger listeners who are more inclined toward fast-paced, modern beats. Yemi Alade's blend of Afro-pop and traditional music has gained her a wide following across Africa and the diaspora, but she faces the challenge of balancing commercial pop appeal with authentic cultural representation. Similarly, Burna Boy's success in merging Afrobeat with contemporary genres has garnered international acclaim, yet he navigates the challenge of staying true to his African roots while appealing to a global audience (Nwamara, 2017).

Success stories of artists blending traditional and contemporary music highlight the potential for significant cultural impact and global reach. Burna Boy, for instance, has won Grammy awards and achieved international fame by modernizing Afrobeat while maintaining its cultural integrity. Yemi Alade's "Johnny" became an international hit, showcasing the global appeal of Afro-pop fused with traditional elements. These artists have demonstrated that there is a substantial market for music that authentically represents African cultures while being adaptable to contemporary tastes. However, the challenges they face—such as cultural misinterpretation, the risk of diluting traditional sounds for commercial success, and balancing global appeal with cultural authenticity—highlight the delicate balance required to innovate within this space (Asenye & Mandor, 2023).

### **Implications for Future Music Trends**

The fusion of traditional music with modern genres, as demonstrated by Phyno's innovative blend of *Ogene* music and contemporary pop, presents a significant opportunity for the revival of other traditional music forms. This approach can serve as a blueprint for artists seeking to preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage while remaining relevant in the modern music industry. By integrating traditional elements with contemporary styles, musicians can create unique sounds that resonate with both local and global audiences, potentially sparking a renewed interest in various indigenous music forms.

One potential trend is the revival of other traditional African music genres, such as Juju, Fuji, Highlife, or *Apala*, through a similar fusion approach. Artists could explore these genres by incorporating their distinct rhythms, instruments, and vocal styles into modern music, creating a hybrid sound that appeals to both young listeners and traditional music enthusiasts. For instance, integrating the complex polyrhythms of African drumming with electronic beats or blending the call-and-response vocal style typical of many African traditions with contemporary R&B or hip-hop could result in fresh, innovative musical expressions. This fusion could also

encourage collaborations between artists from different cultural backgrounds, fostering cross-cultural exchanges and enhancing the global appeal of traditional music (Frishkopf, 2021).

For artists interested in incorporating traditional music into contemporary styles, several recommendations can be made. Firstly, they should engage in in-depth research to understand the cultural and historical context of the traditional music they wish to incorporate. This understanding will ensure that the fusion is done respectfully and authentically, preserving the essence of traditional music while innovating within a modern framework. Artists should also consider collaborating with cultural practitioners, such as traditional musicians and scholars, to gain deeper insights and add authenticity to their work (Martin, 1991).

Secondly, artists can experiment with different fusion techniques to find the most effective way to blend traditional elements with contemporary sounds. This could include experimenting with traditional instruments in new contexts, using modern production techniques to enhance traditional melodies, or incorporating traditional rhythmic patterns into new genres. Artists should also consider the importance of lyrics and language in their fusion projects, as retaining elements of the original language and lyrical style can help preserve the cultural significance of traditional music (Adedeji, 2010).

Lastly, artists should actively seek opportunities to perform their fusion music in both local and international settings. By showcasing their work to diverse audiences, artists can help build a broader appreciation for traditional music forms and encourage a wider acceptance of their integration into modern genres. Digital platforms and social media can also play a crucial role in promoting this music, allowing artists to reach global audiences and foster a deeper understanding of cultural heritage through music (Nettl, 2005).

By exploring these strategies, artists can contribute to the resurgence of traditional music forms and help ensure their continued relevance and evolution in the ever-changing landscape of the global music industry.

### Conclusion

The analysis of Phyno's approach to integrating *Ogene* music into contemporary pop reveals its effectiveness in preserving and revitalizing this traditional Igbo music genre. Through songs like "Obiagu," "Achikolo," and "Ochie Dike," Phyno successfully merges the rhythmic and instrumental elements of *Ogene* with modern hip-hop and Afrobeat, creating a unique sound that resonates with both local and international audiences. His use of traditional Igbo language, call-and-response structures, and iconic instruments like the *ogene* gong and *ekwe* drum underscores a commitment to cultural preservation while appealing to the sensibilities of modern listeners. This fusion not only rejuvenates *Ogene* music but also ensures its continued relevance in today's rapidly evolving music scene (Nwamara, 2017).

The broader significance of Phyno's work lies in its contribution to cultural preservation through musical innovation. By incorporating traditional elements into contemporary music, Phyno demonstrates how artists can serve as cultural ambassadors, bridging the gap between the past and the present. This approach allows for the continuation of cultural traditions in new and dynamic ways, making them accessible to younger generations and global audiences who might otherwise have little exposure to such rich cultural heritage. As such, Phyno's work exemplifies the potential for traditional music genres to thrive within the modern music landscape, fostering a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and history in a globalized world (Asenye & Mandor, 2023).

Looking ahead, the future of traditional music genres in modern pop culture appears promising, especially as more artists explore the fusion of old and new musical styles. With the growing interest in world music and the increasing cross-cultural collaborations facilitated by digital platforms, traditional music forms have the opportunity to reach wider audiences than ever before. To sustain this momentum, artists, producers, and cultural practitioners must continue experimenting with innovative ways of integrating traditional sounds into contemporary music, ensuring these genres remain vibrant and influential (Nettl, 2005). Ultimately, this fusion of traditional and modern music can enrich the global music industry, offering new sounds and perspectives that celebrate cultural heritage while driving musical innovation.

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