

ỌDỤ IN IGBO MUSICOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR CHARLES NNEKE

Prof. Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara

(ao.nwamara@unizik.edu.ng)

&

Dieudonné Kodichukwu Ezeanyim

(dezeanyim@gmail.com.)

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

In Igbo culture, Ọdụ (elephant tusk) is a highly revered object, symbolizing prestige, wealth, and tradition. It serves both ornamental, musical and extra musical purposes, playing a significant role in Igbo social and cultural life. This article through qualitative research, uses observation to explore the significance of Ọdụ in Igbo musicology, its construction, varieties, and its role in contemporary Igbo society. The study is further enriched by an interview with Dr. Charles Nneke, an expert on Igbo traditional music, a renowned Odu player, resulting to a better insight as to the construction, playing and the future of this traditional instrument. It was discovered that this traditional instrument needs an alternative source of supply other than the ones got from animals. The need to train more odu players and get Igbo youths to appreciate this distinguishing instrument cannot be over emphasized.

Keywords: *Ọdụ, Igbo, Igbo Musicology.*

Introduction

The Igbo people utilize traditional horn instruments such as Okike, Ọdu-mkpalo, and Enenke, which are crafted from horns of wild animals.

The Odu is not just a musical instrument in Igboland but also an ornamental object. However it is used, it depicts honour and prestige and sometimes royalty.

The instrument is integral to major events like title-taking ceremonies, kingship festivals, and funerals. Despite modern challenges such as the limited availability of elephant tusks, the Ọdụ continues to be a cherished symbol of Igbo heritage.

The Cultural and Social Significance of Odu

In many communities within Anambra State, such as Obosi and Onitsha, Ọdụ is an essential part of the Iyom title, a prestigious honor conferred on women of high social and economic standing. Women who receive this title become members of the Otu Ọdụ society, serving as custodians of Igbo customs and enjoying great respect in the community. As part of the initiation, their hands and legs are adorned with various sizes of Ọdụ, signifying their elevated status. Beyond adornment, Ọdụ is also used to craft durable artifacts and jewelry, which are highly valued for their durability and aesthetic appeal.



Iyom Mozeli Onuekwusi of Obosi :an otu ọdụ member

Odu as a Musical Instrument

According to Umezinwa and Ezeanyim (2022), *Ọdụ* is a generic term for Igbo musical instruments made from animal horns. These instruments, also referred to as African horn trumpets, are typically side-blown and produce powerful, resonant sounds. Their primary functions include communication, announcements, and musical performances at significant events.

Ebighbo (2009) categorizes *Ọdụ* alongside other horn instruments such as *Okike*, *Ọdụ Mkpalo*, and *Eneke*, all of which are derived from the horns or bones of wild animals. He noted that:

Okike, *Ọdụ-mkpalo*, and *Eneke* are all horns or trumpets produced from bones or horns of wild animals. Each horn is accorded its respect and utility according to the values and norms attached to the animals from which it is produced. These norms and values of the animals are further transferred to the societal social commitments. Hence, the Igbo people use these musical instruments to actualize their set objectives in social commitments such as title-taking (*Ichi Ozo*), marriages, burial ceremonies, and emergencies. Despite modernity and Christianity, the impact and importance of these musical instruments are still felt in Igbo society today. (<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4761530.0006.101>)

This observation underscores the cultural depth of *Ọdụ* as not just a musical instrument but also a medium for preserving societal values.

Construction of Ọdụ

Ọdụ is crafted from the horns or tusks of various animals, including elephants, cows, buffalos, antelopes, and goats. The formation of these horns is a gradual biological process, beginning with the development of a bony core in the skull of the animal. Over time, layers of keratin; a tough protein accumulate, resulting in the hardening and elongation of the horn.

Elephant tusks, in particular, are composed of ivory, a dense, cream-colored tissue that continuously grows throughout the animal's life. Unfortunately, the high value of ivory has led to widespread poaching, threatening elephant populations across Africa.

Some the animals that have horns that can be transformed into *odu* are seen below.



A deer

A goat

A cow



A buffalo

An antelope

A buck



An elephant

Igbo Musical Instruments and the Role of Ọdụ

Igbo music is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, spirituality, and communal life. Traditional Igbo musical instruments, including drums, gongs, flutes, and horn instruments like Ọdụ play a crucial role in ceremonies such as title-taking (Ichi Ọzọ), marriages, funerals, and festivals.

As classified by Curt & Hornbostel (1933) and affirmed by Onwuekwe , Igbo musical instruments fall into four categories:

Aerophones: Instruments that produce sound through vibrating air columns, such as Oja (flute) and Ọdụ Okike (elephant tusk trumpet).

Idiophones: Instruments that produce sound through their own vibration, such as Ekwe (slit drum) and Ogene (metal gong).

Membranophones: Drums covered with animal skin, such as Igba and Udu.

Chordophones: Stringed instruments like the Ubo-aka (thumb piano).

Despite modern influences, traditional Igbo music remains resilient, with elements of these indigenous instruments being incorporated into contemporary genres like highlife, Afrobeat, and hip-hop.

Varieties of Ọdụ and Their Applications

The term Ọdụ encompasses a range of horn instruments, differing in size, material, and function. The two most significant types are:

a. Ọdụ Okike

This is the most prestigious and sophisticated horn instrument in Igbo culture, carved from elephant tusks. It is primarily used by titled men (Ọzọ and Nze), symbolizing wealth and authority. Ọdụ Okike is played during major events such as: Ọzọ and Nze title-taking ceremonies, Ofala festivals (celebrations of kingship and leadership), state funerals for high-ranking individuals, traditional Igbo weddings etc.

When played, Ọdụ Okike produces a deep, reverberating sound that signifies celebration and social prominence.

b. Ọdụ Mkpalo

A smaller version of Ọdụ Okike, this instrument is commonly held by Ọzọ-titled men as a symbol of their status. Unlike Ọdụ Okike, which is large and requires skill to play, Ọdụ Mkpalo is mainly carried for recognition and prestige rather than for musical performance.

Contemporary Relevance of Ọdụ in Igbo Society

Although modernization and Western influences have altered some aspects of Igbo music, Ọdụ remains an enduring symbol of cultural heritage. It is still used in traditional ceremonies and has found a place in modern entertainment, where artists incorporate it into fusion genres.

However, the rarity of Ọdụ Okike due to restrictions on ivory trade and elephant poaching has made it a collector's item, primarily owned by affluent members of society. Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to preserve its legacy through research, documentation, and cultural festivals.

Interview with Dr. Charles Nneke: A Performer's Perspective on Odu in Igbo Music



A valuable moment with Dr. Charles Nneke after an insightful interview.

To gain firsthand insight into the playing and significance of Ọdụ, we interviewed Dr. Charles Nneke, a seasoned Ọdụ player who has performed at various traditional ceremonies and festivals in Igboland. Dr. Nneke, though an Ọdụ player, is also a man of letters.

Charles Azubuike Nneke PhD is the first surviving child of Ogbuefi and Odoziaku Nzediegwu and Adaoba Nneke, of Umualogu, Mmiata, Aguleri, in Anambra West Local Government Area of Anambra State Nigeria. He lectures at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in the Department of Igbo, African and Communication Studies Faculty of Arts. He holds a Masters Degree in Igbo Oral Literature and majors in Igbo Literature and Stylistics in his PhD, in Igbo,

African and Communication Studies Faculty of Arts African and Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. His academic research areas include hunting, drama and aesthetics of Ijele Masquerade as Igbo Work of Art. He is fondly called Eze Odenigbo II, as an Honourary Royal Award. H.R.H Eze. C. A. Nneke (Odenigbo II), Igwe Akwudolueze Unizik 2007/2008. Charles Azubuike Nneke is a member of Otu Sùbakwa Igbo Nigeria and Association for the Promotion of African Studies. He loves reading, writing, meeting people, singing, and swimming.(<https://profile.unizik.edu.ng/nau4796>)

Dr. Nneke loves not just the Igbo language but also everything about the Igbo people including their music, hence his perseverance in the preservation and preservation of the Ọdụ, a traditional Igbo instrument. The following questions were asked to Dr. Nneke to which he responded as recorded below:

(i) Question 1:How did you first experience the Power of Ọdụ?

Answer: I grew up in a family of Ọdụ players. I grew up seeing the Ọdụ in my family. I observed my father player it and my siblings also.

Comment: To him playing the Ọdụ was not a skill to be acquired but a usual thing to do just as children fiddle with objects they see around them while growing up.

Question 2: How do you feel playing the Ọdụ?

Answer: Playing the Ọdụ is not just about making sound; it carries deep meaning. In our culture, it calls attention, a way to announce the presence of something or somebody important. When you hear the sound of Ọdụ, you know that something significant is happening whether it is the coronation of a king, the gathering of titled men, or a major festival. It is a good feeling to be a local communicator, communicating in the language that only your people can decipher. It is a thing of joy. It is also a thing of pride that a skill you possess is not common. It distinguishes you from the rest of the people. It also endears you to many.

*Comment:*This means that a feeling of satisfaction comes with the playing of this instrument.

Question 3: How did you learn the craft?

Answer: Though I come from a family that already had the instrument and could use it to produce sound at a very early age, I still discovered the Ọdụ is not something you just pick up and play. I started learning from older musicians who had mastered it. The way you blow into the horn, the way you control your breath, all these small techniques determine the kind of sound you produce. Some sounds are for calling people together, some are for sending messages, and some are purely for celebration.

Comment: Ọdụ playing is therefore a skill that a player acquires with practice , devotion and doggedness.

Question 4:What do you consider the role of Ọdụ in Igbo Ceremonies?

Answer: At title-taking ceremonies like Ichi Ozo, the Ọdụ is played to announce the presence of the newly inducted titled man. At Ofala festivals, when the king comes out to greet his people, the Ọdụ is blown to honor him. Even at funerals of respected elders, it is played as a farewell sound. It is not just an instrument; it is part of our identity.

Comment: This instrument is therefore cultural and played only for the crème de la crème of the Igbo society both when alive or dead. It is also a mark of royalty.

Question 5: Do you foresee any challenges for the Ọdụ musical instrument in the future?

Answer: One of the biggest challenges is the scarcity of real Ọdụ. In the past, they were made from elephant tusks, but today, because of restrictions on ivory, we mostly use cow or buffalo horns. Also, fewer young people are learning how to play. Many prefer modern instruments, but I always tell them that if we lose Ọdụ, we lose a part of our tradition.

Comment: Dr. Ndeche discusses Ọdụ with passion as a cultural heritage that Igbos must strive to preserve , protect and propagate.

Question 6: Can anything be done to prevent the extinction of this of the play of the Ọdụ?

There is still interest in Ọdụ, especially in cultural festivals and traditional events. If more young people take an interest, and if we continue to teach and pass it down, the sound of Ọdụ will never disappear from Igboland.

Comment: Dr Nneke further highlights the deep cultural value of the Ọdụ and the need to preserve its legacy for future generations.

Inasmuch as the production of Ọdụ has witnessed a setback due to the raw material of production, the cultural significance is far from lost but keeps being appreciated and needs to be taught the younger generation.

Conclusion

The *Ọdụ* remains an integral part of Igbo music and cultural identity. Beyond its function as a musical instrument, it holds deep social and symbolic significance, marking important ceremonies, reinforcing traditional values, and serving as a medium of communication in Igbo society. As highlighted in this study and through the insights of Dr. Charles Nneke, the *Ọdụ* is not merely an instrument but a cultural artifact that embodies status, authority, and communal heritage.

However, the continuity of *Ọdụ* tradition faces challenges, particularly with the declining availability of elephant tusks and the reduced interest among younger generations. Despite these obstacles, the adaptability of Igbo music has ensured that *Ọdụ* remains relevant, with alternative materials being used for construction and cultural festivals keeping the tradition alive.

It is crucial for scholars, performers, and cultural custodians to document, promote, and preserve the knowledge and techniques associated with *Ọdụ*. Efforts should be made to integrate it into contemporary Igbo music while maintaining its historical significance. As modernity continues to reshape African musical traditions, the survival of *Ọdụ* will depend on a conscious effort to pass it down to future generations. By doing so, the *Ọdụ* will continue to serve as both a musical instrument and a cultural beacon of Igbo heritage.

References

- Agu, D. C. (2000). Classification of Nigerian musical instruments and their roles in Nigerian cultures. In N. Ojiakor, G. C. Unachukwu, & A. Obiajulu (Eds.), *Challenges of national growth and development in Nigeria* (pp. 89–102). Enugu: John Jacob's Publishers Ltd.
- Britannica. (n.d.). Ivory: Material and significance. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved June 4, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com>
- Curt, S. & Hornbostel E. V. (1933) *The Ethnology of African Sound Instruments in Africa* Vol 6,2.
- Ebighbo, C. (2009). The Trumpets: Okike, *Ọdụ* Mkpalo, And Emenke as Ethnography in Igbo Social Commitments. *GEFAME Journal of African Studies*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4761530.0006.101>
- Onwuekwe, A. I. The Teaching and Learning of African Musical Instruments in Africa using Ezegebe's Figured Organographic Composite Notational System (EFOCONS). *Journal of Nigerian Music Education and Development (JONMED)*. Retrieved from <https://www.nigerianjournalonline.com/index.php/jonmed/article/viewFile/3581/3>
- Ultimate Kilimanjaro. (n.d.). *List of African animals with horns* Retrieved from <https://www.ultimatekilimanjaro.com/animals-with-horns-list-africa/>
- Umezina, E, & Ezeanyim, D. K. (2022). The role of traditional Igbo musical instruments in socialization. *Interdisciplinary Journal of African & Asian Studies (IJAAS)*. Vol 9, No 3 (2023) Retrieved from <https://www.nigerianjournalonline.com>
- Umezina, E. C. & Orajaka Ego E. (2019). "The making of an Igbo musical instrument: Interview with Anakwenze Nwude" *Nnadiabube, Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(2), 1– Legit.ng. (n.d.). Igbo musical instruments: Names and significance. Retrieved from <https://www.legit.ng/1126026-igbo-musical-instruments-names.html>
- Nneke, C. (2024). Interview with Dr. Charles Nneke. (Personal interview, May 2024).