

IBIBIO TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND GENDER SENSITIVITY

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Introduction

Gender discourses have taken the centre stage in contemporary scholarship to capture the yearnings for equality in all human endeavours. In Africa, culture has been established as a catalyst and dictator of performance when considering gender stereotypes in musical instrumentations. Some instruments are ritualistic and assigned to males while the females are forbidden from 'touch', 'usage', or 'display.' Few instruments can be used by females in select festivals while others are universal. Through a survey of available literature on the field, participant observation, field study, interview, and content analysis, the researchers have arrived at findings which reveal that beyond human biological differences, gender sensitivity goes way down to influence objects which in this case are musical instruments. It was discovered that in the Ibibio setting, as it is applicable to other African societies, some musical instruments are categorised as female and others, male, as a result of make and tonal structures. In this case, those 'female' or 'male' instruments can be played by anyone without gender restrictions. In some ensembles, instruments with larger construction demands and heavy tonal impact are seen as males while the small sizes with lighter tonal impact are seen as female. It is also discovered that different communities have unique and very peculiar names attached to musical instruments as a result of the prevalent situations regarding the manufacture, sound, and use of the instrument in question. Others consider naming the instrument according to the position of children in the family. These go on to prove that traditional musical instruments are culture-specific.

Over the years, musical instruments and instrumental renditions in the traditional Ibibio society have been inclined towards patriarchal hegemony making it a highly gendered practice favouring the males. To be a woman in that society translated to depict child bearing, raising a family and caring for the needs of the

man. She was not to be noticed outside her home. As such, women were restricted from taking part in many performances. They were allowed some privileges as members of the audience and at other times, totally excluded from viewing especially in ritualised ceremonies. So, the opportunities to have women in performances were limited. Such societal stereotypes and expectations which made women and men view their abilities differently, influenced the traditional music industry. Women were preferred as singers and in some cases dancers but not instrumentalists.

Recently, gender discourses have been prevalent globally, creating an avenue to seek for a balance in all spheres of life. These discourses centre on cultural, social, economic, and historical definitions of roles assigned to women and men in the society, taking into consideration proportions of power and relevance assigned to each through social institutions like family, age groups, religion, politics, and the arts. Women, acting against the patriarchal tilt of gender concerns, seek to take well deserved adventure into known male domains to exercise their rights to fair contribution to the advancement of life and the society.

Conceptual Framework

i. Gender

Different authors and scholars have provided some understanding of gender and its varied definitions. According to Obiunu:

Gender refers to roles, attributes, and values assigned by culture and society to women and men ... (which) define the behaviours of women and men and the relationship between them. They are created and maintained by social institutions such as families, governments, communities, schools, churches, and media. Because of gender, certain roles, traits and characteristics are ascribed distinctly and strictly to men and women... Gender sensitivity is the level of awareness and appreciation of the need to maintain a reasonable level of gender differentiation between the male and female (2013: 888).

Similarly, the Business dictionary defines gender as “culturally and socially constructed difference between men and women that varies from place to place and time to time” (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/gender.html>). Another definition of gender is stated in the Oxford Dictionary of Current English (Soanes, Hawker, & Elliot (Eds.) (2006) as “the state of being male or female (with reference to social or cultural differences rather than biological ones” (p. 377).

The afore-stated definitions reveal that gender is socially constructed and determined and “begins immediately after a child is born” (Walker, 2004, n. p.). It is obvious that the society determines and defines the role for men and women. This results in gender discrimination. The differences between the two genders which are culturally and socially constructed possibly informs Ezeigbo’s (2014:23) assertion that “cultural traditions devalue women seeing them as the ‘other’ and ‘second’ sex. This has adversely affected the women folk as some of them have, apparently, accepted and internalised the negative delineations by the dominant patriarchal system.”

ii. Gender Discrimination and Sensitivity

There is obviously conjectural conscious gender discrimination in the musical entertainment industry as there is with other life concerns. Article I of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) cited in Usoroh (2014:2) defines gender discrimination as:

any discrimination, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, employment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of man and woman, of human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil and any other field.

This quotation, succinctly, captures what constitutes gender discrimination which has been overtly presented as a recurrent decimal in gender studies.

Knox (1997) expresses that:

Traditionally, gender and sexuality had a history and cultural motivation of their own, having nothing to do with nature and nurture. People rose to a given occasion engaged temporarily or

permanently in actions or roles as a matter of expediency. They were not necessarily defined by such actions or roles. The roles were dropped, changed, or modified for other roles or acts on demand (p. 18).

The Ibibio society constructed an imbalanced gender representation in arts by creating institutions that were suppressive of the female gender because "... the more conspicuous the institution, the less likely will be the presence of women in the artistic hierarchy: women contribute very little to the production of cultural matters..." (Kruger, 1996:49). These gender postulations on gender disparities in the Ibibio society and Africa by extension "focus on illiteracy, poverty, culture and religious beliefs as factors that act as viable instruments or justifiably repressing and suppressing women from any form of identification" (Sarki, 2015, p. 214). Culture is the major instrument which dictates what humans do and what they do not do. It is mainly "learned and acquired through instruction, interaction, and other means of knowledge transmission" (Evwierhoma, 2003, p. 36). Being passed down from generation to generation as dictated by culture, women are exposed to victimization and oppression, and are portrayed as "objects of quest rather than as subjects in their own right. Men regard women as commodities that must be used, drained and discarded" (Okuyade, 2006: 9). Kafewo reiterates this point as he asserts that:

The 'masculine tradition' has dominated the conscious and subconscious of man. This has, to a large extent, been the sole determinant of individual's response to reality which captures the external manifestations of gender roles internalised over a long period. Human life, therefore, has come to be structured along the lines of the aspirations and expectations and even the constraints which society designs for the sexes (pp. 15).

Though gender relations are so structured by culture and society through historical indices, the researchers' believe that a thorough analysis of contemporary issues on gender sensitivity will reveal that they are continually transforming towards achieving equality. Gender in equality has received critical challenges globally thereby serving as a launch pad for the enablement of diverse strategies to correct this anomaly through an effective balance. Culture, on the other hand, "can help shape gender by propelling society towards additional complementarities and a unity of purpose between men and women" (Evwierhoma, 2014, p. 15).

The Ibibio People: Musical Tradition and Gender Sensitivity

The Ibibio society south-south of Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State in particular, is generally captured as a man-centred setting. Their culture and tradition which are factors of their ideology provide set rules to enable men continually overshadow the women. The woman's role is mainly to bear children for her husband or face strict opposition and mockery from her husband's people and society. As rightly captured by Ewwierhoma (2002), "The woman in a patriarchal society lives under burdens known and unknown to her (p. ix). There are lots of restrictions faced by women in traditional rural settings regarding domesticity, labour, marriage, patriarchy, inheritance rights, widowhood practices, sexuality, and even musical performances. They are placed in an inferior place and seen as male assistants. There is an unsaid but generally conceptualised demand that a virtuous woman in Ibibio society and by implication Africa, should be silent with no authority over the man and must be submissive. If women are to be silenced in this way, what happens to music which must be heard? It simply means the music of the woman must be subdued or heard at men's demand or, better still, minimised. This may have prompted Adebayo's (2002) outburst as he quotes Sarah Grimke's postulation thus:

All history attests that the man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her (pp. 129).

Ibibio people have a rich musical repertory. Their traditional music heritage is associated with institutions the Ibibio people created themselves. Their music, both vocal and instrumental is highly diversified in style and content. Vocal music, in this ethnic group, which is made manifest in songs and chants reflect the speech mannerisms of the Ibibio in rhythm and intonation. Instrumental music/instruments are also varied in types and tuning techniques. Instruments repertory is made up of melodic and rhythmic instruments. According to Nketia (1977). Individuals can make music privately for their own amusement, for relief of boredom, or as an occupational activity. Music organisations towards performance form part of a larger ceremony like festivals and carnivals. Nketia posits:

In many parts of Africa, the general pattern of musical organisation is one that emphasises the integration of music with other activities, with social and political action or with those activities in which African societies express or consolidate their interpersonal relationships, beliefs, and attitudes to life (Nketia, 1977:29).

The above assertion points to the fact that public performances of music, whether vocal or instrumental or both, may be for recreation and entertainment, ritual orderings, ceremonial and social occasions. The Ibibio people have songs for work, puberty, war, marriage, coming of age, etc. On the whole, it is worthy to note that music-making and performance in Ibibio society is socially controlled. This is so because, most times, the contexts in which some musical types can be used is limited. For instance, music used to inspire young men for war may not be used every time. It comes as the occasion demands. Furthermore, music which is used for a particular rite such as initiation ceremony (*Mbopo*) and festival (New Yam) may not be performed outside these contexts. So for societal control of music in Ibibio society, it is evident in the selection of events where music is needed, and the choice of musical resources such as voice or instruments or both. At other times, special drums may be set aside for the worship of divinities and musical instruments played for kings may not be played for ordinary individuals. Where the same instruments are used, the repertoire may be differentiated (Nketia). The period and place of musical performance presentations are also subject to social dictates.

The Ibibio musical instruments fall under the Hornsbostel and Sach's (1961) four major classifications of idiophones (woodblock, xylophone, rattle, etc.), membranophones (membrane drums), aerophones (native horns and flutes), and chordophones (musical bow [*ndido uduk*] and lute [*anana*]). There is, most times, a synergy between the vocal and instrumental music. This is succinctly captured by Ufford (2000) that "the instrument makers always use the voice compass, as a rule, to construct the musical instruments used in Ibibio land" (p. 127). In this case, major instruments of the people such as the xylophone, slit wooden drum, and membrane drums do render verbal equivalents in performance.

In the context of this paper, it is expedient for a discourse on gender as a determinant factor in the traditional musical expectations of the Ibibio people. Age and sex are two basic stratification modules for participation in Ibibio traditional music. Children and the youth have specific songs mostly incorporated into stories, games, and rites for children. On the other hand, gender or sex is considered when adult music participation is structured. Therefore, there are music types for males, for females, and for both sexes. The males engage in music for war, special initiation rites, labour (farming, hunting), heroic music, and relaxation. The women, as mothers and care-givers, are socially positioned to partake, according to Nketia:

In recreational songs, dirges, grinding, pounding, and other domestic songs as well as special songs for ceremonies performed by women... rites for healing the sick or for correcting certain disorders are also performed by women... who accompany themselves with rattles and drums. (1977:32)

The above-mentioned gender considerations of music further have special traditional demands regarding the mode of performance, content of the repertoire, the choice and use of musical instruments, and the context in which the instruments are to be played.

Ibibio Traditional Musical Instruments and Gender Issues

The Ibibio society has an array of musical instruments. These instruments are made from materials found within the society such as wood from the forest used in the construction of instruments such as the xylophone (*Ikon*), slit drum (*Obodom*), woodblock (*Ntakrøk*), membrane drum (*Ibid*), stick clappers (*Eto Nkukwak*); metals used for the gongs (*Nkwon*; *Akanjan*); tusk from animals used for the horn (*Adak*) – the main instrument in the *Uta* ensemble; flutes from bamboo stems; rattles (*Nsak*) made from raffia palm extracts and the gourd type made from gourd or calabash with beads embellishments or adornments; and pots (*Aban*) made from clay. The xylophone is the most detailed instrument of the Ibibio people. In an ensemble, this instrument performs a dual function: providing the melodic as well as the rhythmic foundations. This instrument is regarded as a sacred and also a secular instrument functioning in rituals and other ceremonial and social

occasions. An interview with Patrick John Ekwere, who had been the Head of Performing Unit, Akwa Ibom State Council for Arts and Culture, reveals that:

The Ikon is a mystical instrument that was used in rituals within the Inam institution which is the highest institution of authority in Ibibio land. It also functioned in the Mbopo institution meaning that it was an instrument that served both male and female concerns, only that it is a male instrument which was played solely by men in the traditional society (personal communication, April 5, 2015).

In contemporary times, the story is different as this instrument, which was revered in the traditional setting and reserved for only male performers has become an instrument for general use and universal displays. The construction of the instrument which was the preserve of male instrument makers has found its way into the hands of female counterparts. The *Ikon* Afrikaana Theatre, for instance, a family troupe named after this dynamic musical instrument has both males and females in the family. The initiator, a cultural expert, had trained all his children (both males and females) in the construction of and performance on this unique instrument which is dominant in the ensemble. In Ibibio land, there is, hardly, any cultural troupe without the xylophone in display. Again, more women display their artistry on the instrument. In Ekemini Cultural Group, the three xylophones utilised by this group has three very young girls aged between 7 to 10 years playing them. Similarly, the Akwa Obio Theatre Group features both males and females on the xylophones. During the National Festival for Arts and Culture held in 2010, EkomObong Robson, presently a student of the Department of Music, University of Uyo, took the first position having represented Akwa Ibom State in the solo instrumental music competition featuring on the xylophone. So, this particular instrument has moved from the gender restrictions of the traditional society to becoming gender sensitive in present day use. It is worthy to note that these females, who feature on those instruments regarded traditionally as male stereotypes, do so in towns, cities, schools, and other arena, outside the typical traditional sphere, where ceremonies, occasions, and celebrations take place.

The xylophone is the lead instrument in Ibibio society whenever it forms part of the musical ensemble and Nwadigwé (2002) postulates that:

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In most parts of traditional Africa, the artiste-leader quite often, the lead drummer/instrumentalist or lead vocalist, is entrusted with the responsibility of giving direction in the process of production. Also, this is a position in which one would hardly find a woman (pp. 212).

This assertion has been surpassed as changes have evolved which now favour the woman. His assertion captures the past which created the need for women agitation that has yielded positive results in present day performance structure. Presently, the actual concern of each professional in the entertainment industry is to be expressive as long as the expressiveness is enhanced by unity, balance, and harmony, irrespective of gender.

Another very important musical instrument of Ibibio people is the slit wooden drum (*Obodom*), regarded as a male instrument which features prominently in sacred and secular occasions and culturally known to be played by men. It is also an instrument of royalty which commands attention of the subjects to report the message of the king. This instrument is also used to communicate non-verbal messages among initiates of secret societies so that non-initiates and women may not decode the content of the message. His Royal Majesty Ime Udo Usoro Inyang, the present Paramount Ruler of Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom state, spoke on the principal use of *Obodom* in the olden days. According to him;

The slit wooden drum (Obodom) in the olden days was used principally for the declaration of war. Anytime there was impending war, the Obodom was kept on top of a tree, usually, the cotton tree (Ukim) and the drummer beating constant rhythm for seven times. At the last beating, the instrument was brought down and all able-bodied men picked their weapons of war and assembled at the designated place ready for war (personal communication, September 25, 2013).

This information confirms the stereotyped instrument and its sanctity. An interview conducted with Nkoyo Udi, an indigene of Ikot Obio Oko reveals that the slit drum was used to announce the beginnings of festivals in the past and was sounded to determine the end of the festival which was usually on the seventh day. She avers that only men could carve and perform on/with it in the olden days. On her view on

the use of the instrument today, Nkoyo opines that “Christianity has changed people’s faith and removed barriers, as such instruments are no longer restricted to the traditional setting but played by anyone, man, woman, or child” (personal communication, July 7, 2014).

The turn of events as they concern gender equality does not seem to go down well with some elders in Ibibio society. Obong George Ukpuho, the village head of Ikot Obio Oko in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area opines that:

The ancient boundaries have been shifted making it difficult for people to respect tradition. I frown at women agitating for equality with men and I see it sacrilegious for them to perform on those instruments that were men’s reserve, especially the slit drum, the native horn, and the xylophone. In those days, it was a taboo for any woman to touch any of these instruments. Such attempt attracted sanctions on the culprit. These instruments have spirits of our ancestors resting on them, so any woman who touches them reduces and destroys the potency of the gods and spirits which guide the community. I attribute this irreverence to poverty and misfortunes in the land (personal communication, July 7, 2014).

This very revered instrument has been a contemporary feature in female performances. Presently, school children, women groups in towns, churches, and other associations play the instrument in traditional dance performances.

The membrane drums function in rituals and secular events. Some of these drums are still restricted to certain cults where women are forbidden to touch or play them. It is unheard of, in contemporary times, that a woman would touch or play the ‘*Nkrong Ekpo*’ (a set of drums arranged in a tone row). These are membrane drums strictly used in the *Ekpo* (Spirits-manifest) performances and no other. In this society, the drums are seen as representative of the ancestors and it is sacrilegious for a non-initiate to touch and unthinkable for a woman to play. It is also a taboo for a woman to dance to its rhythm, speak or cry like the *Ekpo*. Hers is to watch when allowed and stop at the allowed limits. The *Ekpo* spirits-manifest group utilises *Ekpuud* (Ritual rattle) in their performances. This instrument is usually held in the hand by the *Akwa Ekpo* (the leader) of the group who is not

masked and uses it to coordinate the activities of the spirits manifest. This is also limited to the use of only initiates. It is also sacrilegious for women to touch or play the *Ekpe* drums. In the *Ekpe* fraternity, there are special rattles and drums used only in musical performances which are forbidden for use in any other setting. Other membrane drums are available for use by women.

Horns (*Aduk*) are aerophone instruments; which were seen with the twin gong (*Akankan*) as sacred and were used by *Ndem* priests as a call to worship. These were also male stereotype but presently, with the change in belief system, they are used for secular performances by both males and females. However, there are other musical instruments in Ibibio land that are delineated for females which are dominant in female ensembles but not restricted for men. These include metal gongs, rattles, pot drums, whistles, woodblocks, some types of drums, etc.

Going through the discourse presented so far, the tilt in favour of the male gender is very obvious creating a case for agitation on the part of the female gender. None of these instruments, even those stereotyped for females, excludes men from playing them. These and more salient issues have limited the females from actualising professionalism in the Ibibio musical setting.

Conclusion

Unarguably, it is discovered that traditional musical instruments and their performance structures are dominated by men in the Ibibio society. This is, however, factored to the social and cultural preferences for males over females in the setting under study. For a proper balance, there is an urgent need to conscientiously raise more women in the traditional musical industry, train them in such instrumentation as could be created in order to increase their visibility in this creative area of performance industry. As it is rightly opined by Enwonwu (1977), "Art is not static. Like culture, art changes its form with the times..." (p. 52).

It is observed that more women have, despite the odds, expressed their potentials in different professions and in the arts. Some professionals play different instruments including those traditionally seen exclusively as male stereotypes. This shows that women have talents peculiar to them which require a platform to

flourish. The society should create an enabling platform where men and women are treated equally in respect to their rights, privileges, opportunities, and obligations in every facet of life. This paper recommends a public action for the protection, acknowledgement, artistic, and educational empowerment of women, for women have a particularly high stake in creating processes and systems that promote equitable and sustainable livelihoods. Times have changed globally. Therefore, conscious attempts should be made by all and sundry to guard against gender biases as they relate to the use of traditional musical instruments in performances in the communities. This is not to say that women should violate rules governing secret societies. These authors have had the privilege of training female students on Nigerian dances and had taken bold steps to bring into classroom situations those instruments that the society regards as being exclusive reserve for men. The outcome of these attempts had been highly appreciated by both the female and male students. Arguably, one might be tempted to think that these students appreciated these instruments because, may be, most of them are not conversant with the gender implications of these traditional musical instruments in their different cultures and traditions. Must we still go back to the dark ages to progress? If music educators rely solely on the cultural and gender impositions, we are, inadvertently, denying our students the opportunities to be deeply engaged in their cultural music performances. Music education emphasises creativity, exploration, and improvisation. Opportunities should, therefore, be provided for the youth to explore the rich cultural heritage of their fatherland. Who knows, this could create a forum for our youth's vocational aspirations.

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