

IGBO MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS: SOCIO-CULTURAL TOOLS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Africa as a whole has a large collection of musical instruments; however different cultures use a small assortment of these. Some of the instruments are of local origin while others have been introduced from neighbouring communities. There may be local peculiarities in sizes, shapes, pitches, qualities, playing techniques, construction and tuning methods, but generally the various species show striking similarities. Depending on the geography and environment, historical facts, social and cultural considerations, the importance and usage of these instruments vary and may differ from place to place. Through their shapes, sizes, sounds, the materials from which they are made, and the concepts associated with these musical instruments, several socio-cultural roles and functions which have been ascribed to them by the societies, have been met in varying degrees.

Even though African musical instruments have the capability of stimulating the process of sustainable human development, they are however often neglected in the contemporary society. The result is that their resources are not sufficiently approached, recognized and exploited. Thus, adequate attention is not paid to the preservation of these instruments.

Consequently, a great number has become extinct and many more are on the verge of extinction. This gradual neglect leads to progressive loss of use, repertory, performers and eventually the extinction of the musical instruments. Consequently, all that they contain as a reservoir of resources; vital for the psychological and philosophical mobilization for development is accordingly, also progressively eroded. Oral nature of transmitting such knowledge limits continuity of the practices as the rapid change in lifestyles in recent times from rural

traditional to urban Western has been inimical to the use of traditional musical instruments in fulfilling socio-cultural needs of the African society.

The limited scope of the actual musical sound of traditional instruments has not been able to compete favorably with modern music due to its inability to quickly incorporate new sounds and technology. Unfortunately, there is yet to be a fruitful interaction between music technologists, musicians, musicologists and protagonists of traditional music in order to give rise to an effective and holistic modernization and standardization of traditional musical instruments. This would aid in restoring these musical instruments from extinction and to their former position and role in the society.

This study aims at understanding how the extra musical functions of Igbo musical instruments contribute to sustainable development in Igbo society. It does this by investigating the resources enshrined in the concept and use of some traditional African musical instruments. The large indigenous knowledge resources in African musical instrument are wide and varied. Consequently, it will be impossible to discuss adequately, within the confines of this paper each and every one of them. This paper therefore adopts a selective approach which is limited to the Igbo indigenous practices of health, communication, historical records and social integration, achieved through the aid of indigenous musical instruments. The choice of these four practices is based on the importance of their contribution to sustainable development.

Indigenous to five states in South Eastern Nigeria, the Igbo is one of the three major ethnic groups in that country. They are made up of a collection of independent groups of people who speak the Igbo language and who have minor cultural, dialectical, and social organizational variations. Most Igbo subgroups are organized along the lineage, clan and village affiliation. The traditional Igbo practised a quasi-democratic and republican system of government which was founded on patrilineal system of descent known as *umunna*. The *umunna* which is made up of groups of related and extended families, who trace their relationships to a commonly known ancestor, is headed by the eldest male member and is the most powerful pillar of maintenance of law and order (Ndukaihe, 2006). Villages (*ogbe*) are formed by a collection of *umunna*. As a result of the trans-Atlantic slave

trade and later migration, the Igbo and their descendants are found in other African countries, Europe and America, and in fact, all over the world. Majority of the Igbo are Christians while a few are confessed adherents of traditional religion. Traditional religious beliefs and practices still thrive, albeit clandestinely, among many Christians. These practices include reverence to one supreme being, Ana/Ala (the earth goddess), ancestral spirits, numerous male and female deities and spirits, and observance of rituals and practices related to them in pursuit of the welfare of individuals and the society as a whole (Elechi, 2006).

The ethnographic research method was used. African musical instruments comprise an aspect as well as an avenue for cultural expression. As a result of the fact that some of them not only serve musical needs but are also used to enhance social, political and economic activities, they are very important tools in the pursuit of sustainable development. This study will help in documentation for posterity, and propagation of some indigenous knowledge connected to African indigenous musical instruments. World Bank (1997) draws attention to the fact that the enlistment of knowledge capital in human development is as important as the availability of physical and financial capital.

Appreciation of the importance of the preservation of indigenous music and its treasures will result in special measures that will contribute in checking its extinction. Documentation of extra musical functions of African musical instruments not only benefits Africans but will also open opportunities for better universal understanding of certain occurrences. Experience shows that development efforts that ignore local technologies, local systems of knowledge and the local environment generally fail to achieve their desired objectives (Grenier, 1998). This study will contribute to better awareness and appreciation of the function and thence importance of African musical instruments in the African society. It is believed that this will lead to improved design, delivery and evaluation of African musical instruments in the local as well as the global system in general, by preserving some of the indigenous knowledge resources associated with African musical instruments.

An Assortment of Igbo Musical Instruments

Igbo musical instruments are an integral part of most communities. Even though they have common features, yet they also vary from community to community in the sizes, shapes and sound production. However, unlike Western classification of musical instruments which enjoys a long tradition of written documentation and practice, organization of African music lacks a uniform indigenous systematized forum. For this reason, in this study Igbo musical instruments are classified into four groups namely, Idiophones, membranophones, aerophones and chordophones, whose formal structures and subgroups are distinguished based on Dewey decimal classification system.

Idiophones depend on the vibration of their bodies to produce sound. More idiophones are used in Igboland than any other type of musical instruments. This group is further subdivided into struck, plucked, friction and blown idiophones. Membranophones are musical instruments that depend on the vibration of taut membranes attached to them to produce sound. This encompasses drums of all sizes and shapes. Some are open ended while others are not. Included in this group are struck and friction drums. Chordophones are musical instruments which produce sound by the vibration of string or strings attached to their bodies. They consist of simple and composite chordophones such as musical bow, lutes and harp lutes. A few of chordophones still exist in Igboland, most are now extinct. Aerophones are wind instruments that depend on the vibration of air for sound production. They include free aerophones (the vibrating air is not enclosed, for example, the bull-roarer, *agunmo* and the wind instruments proper. Here the vibrating air is enclosed within the instruments. They may be open ended or stopped, end blown or transverse blown. These include flutes of various types such as African flute (*oja*). Horns (*opi*) may be made of animal horns or elephant tusks. Reed pipes (*pipilo*) is used by children in their music.

Construction of Musical Instruments

The construction of musical instruments involves a wide assortment of techniques which employ different materials that are found in the environment (Okafor, 2005). The materials for making musical instruments include parts of plants (trunk, bark, roots, sap) and animals (horn, bones, tusks, teeth, skins) and metals. In recent times, synthetic materials are also used. Igbo musical

instruments sometimes are made to take on simple, sophisticated, sacred or serious sculptural forms, depicting their musical and nonmusical functions in the society. Hence, various forms of embellishment including beading, carvings and paintings may be used to adorn them.

Rault (2000) observed that by interacting with the musical instruments in some way or the other sounds are produced. The tonal nature of the languages is reflected in the tonal capabilities of the musical instruments as well as their tuning practices. In African music, there are definite rules for tuning the instruments. They may be tuned to tonal inflection of certain phrases, or there may be other extra musical considerations. This results in wooden drum, twin clapperless bell usually being tuned to the equivalent of the Western music's major 2nd, Perfect 5th or minor 3rd.



Plate 1. *Ogene nkpi na-abo* (Twin clapperless bell)

Source: <http://obindigbo.com.ng>

Musical Uses of Igbo Musical Instruments

Musical instruments are selected for their capabilities and effectiveness in performing certain established musical roles, for fulfilling specific musical purposes. The bell, wood block or rattles may be played as solo instruments in ritual ceremonies. They also provide time lag. The same instruments may perform rhythmic and colouristic functions, as well as provide rhythmic and colouristic density (Akpabot, 1986).

Sometimes an instrument may perform both melodic and rhythmic functions, for example, the ostinato of the xylophone can fulfill such purposes. Sometimes

definite pitched instruments with a limited number of pitches perform the same functions. Vocal solos may be accompanied by one or more instruments to add to rhythmic and melodic colour. Whistles may sometimes effect rhythmic changes in an ensemble (Nketia, 1984). The lowest pitched drums usually articulate the pulse structure. Some instruments fill in the gap between vocal music as well as accompany the songs simultaneously. There may also be alternation between voices and instruments. Some instruments stress the number of beats in a time signature, usually the smallest instruments such as the woodblock. The clapperless bell when present in an ensemble usually provides the standard rhythmic pattern. Instruments with many pitches often imitate phrases and proverb, thus communicating between performers and audience, for instance the drums. Some musical instruments like flute, drums and xylophone give signals within the ensemble – change of songs, rhythm, intensity and others. Not only are these musical instruments used for music making, they permeate the life of the society and often play socio-cultural roles, enhancing sustainable human development.



Plate 2. *Ekwe* (wooden drum), *okpokolo* (small slit drum) and *nyo* (castanet)

Human Development

Human development is a complex process that involves an indefinite enhancement of the social structures, the general attitude of the populace, national institutions, increase in economic growth, and diminution of inequality and poverty. Todaro and Smith (2009) assert that development is a physical reality as well as a state of mind which has three core values namely, sustenance, self-esteem and human freedom. They explain that sustenance involves the provision

of the basic needs essential for the survival of human beings, such as food, shelter, security and good health. Self-esteem is the capability of individuals and societies to be able to appreciate, value, respect and have good opinions about who they are and their origin. Human freedom has to do with the ability to make social and economic choices and be free from deprivation, ignorance, attitudes and values imposed on people by the society. Life sustenance enables advancement to self-esteem, which in turn enhances the attainment of freedom of choice. The extra musical functions of some Igbo traditional musical instruments impact to varying degrees on these fundamental aspects of development.

Igbo Musical Instruments and Development

Besides musical functions, the contribution of Igbo musical instruments in promoting the social, spiritual and material life of the Igbo society is glimpsed and observed during individual and collective participation in interacting with musical instruments either as performers or audience. The role of Igbo traditional musical instruments in promoting health, communication, preservation of historical records and social integration will be examined.

Health: Some musical instruments are believed to possess some analgesic properties, for instance, in some parts of Igboland, the newly circumcised adolescent boys are given *une*, (musical bow), to play. This instrument is believed to ease their pains (Okafor, 2005). Some musical instruments are believed to have therapeutic properties. Drinking water from *ogene* is thought to cure speech related ailments such as stuttering and stammering. The sound of some musical instruments seems to rejuvenate the body. Basden (1966) noted that *oja* (wooden flute), when played to tired manual workers, instilled more energy into them and made them work harder. Musical instruments are sometimes played by individuals for personal entertainment. Examples of such instruments are *Une* (musical bow), *ubo-aka* (thumb piano) and others. This tends to set the mind free from problems thus, reducing stress and stress related ailments. It aids relaxation and consequently, reduces anxiety. Since most illnesses are caused by one form of stress or the other, it follows therefore that the removal of or lack of stress contributes enormously to the achievement of the general well-being of the individuals in the society. This in turn effects directly to a more stable society, higher levels of productivity and longevity (Collins: 2001). These functions of Igbo

musical instruments enhance good health for individuals and encourage the acquisition of the basic needs of life, self-esteem and freedom of choice.

Communication: Igbo musical instruments are used in various forms of communication not only between human beings but also between humans and deities, and even between humans and animals. Some musical instruments are played in the farms in order to scare away birds and other animals that eat or destroy the crops. Rattles and bells are also tied to crops so that when the wind blows, it propels the crops to sway. This movement in turn results in the shaking of the rattle. This makes the rattles to produce sounds that scare the animals away, communicating to them imminent danger and the need to stay away from the crops in the farm. This promotes good farm yields and translates to economic benefits for the farmers in the society.

Such musical instruments as *ogene* (clapperless bell), *ekpili* (rattles), *okpokolo* (wood block) and tortoise shell are used for divination. Magical powers and divine properties are ascribed to them. They are therefore, believed to be very efficient in communication with supernatural beings. During some rituals, a musical instrument like *ogene* is played, to indicate the movement of special personalities such as priests and persons undergoing sacred initiations, in order to warn people to keep off. Thus, Igbo musical instruments aid the spiritual and invariably emotional and material well-being of the members of the society, enhancing their self-esteem.

Some musical instruments are used in representing ideas, events, qualities and things. For example, *ikolo*, (the giant wooden drum), is a symbol of the community. Its sound indicates matters that affect the whole community, in most parts of Igboland. On hearing the sound members of the society react according to the message delivered by the drum. This uniform reaction enhances identity, social bond and solidarity among them.

The status of aristocracy is represented both in the musical instruments and the musical sound of the ivory horn. The elephant is an impressive animal. Akpabot explains that the elephant tusk, "signifies the pre-eminent role in the society in the same way an elephant is seen as a formidable beast in the jungle"

(1986: 99). The possession of its tusk therefore indicates success and achievement. This can be likened to the friction drum of the Akan in Ghana, which is supposed to imitate the snarl of the leopard. Consequently, it is played to extol the might and majesty of the king (Nketia, 1982). In some cultures, certain associations, such as age grades, clubs and others; adopt musical instruments as representative symbols, representing the spirit of the group. One such group which adopts the tortoise shell aspires to be as wise as the proverbial tortoise in Igbo folklore (Okafor, 2005).

The duiker horn symbolizes manliness in some parts of Igboland. It is blown to exhort and excite the wrestler, inspire and challenge the nature of brave men in times of crises, thus, eliciting bravery, hard work and success. Some musical instruments like *ekwe* (woodblock) and *ogene* (clapperless bell), may be used as signals for attracting people and creating the appropriate atmosphere for making announcements and giving verbal messages. Some instruments that have up to three tones or more can imitate the tonal inflection of words. Messages can be sent far and wide by these 'talking' instruments. Some musical instruments are used in articulating certain metaphoric expressions thereby conveying desired emotions and ideas. For instance, in expressing the idea of beauty and excellence, the words '*igba*', '*ekwe*' and '*udu*', which are names of musical instruments, are often verbalized. These various communication functions of Igbo musical instruments enhance sustainable development in the society.

Historical records: Igbo musical instruments help in the documentation of some historical events and the preservation of some cultural practices. This they do through the accompaniment of historical stories which re-enact the annals of the communities. Furthermore, traditional ceremonies and activities are carried out through the aids of these musical instruments. They accompany songs and dances making them more effective in the functions they fulfill in the society, and ensuring their continuity and stability. This boosts the self-esteem of individual members of the society as well as the society in general. Thus, African musical instruments enhance the cultural heritage which in turn gives emotional and psychological satisfaction, and contributes to the general well-being of the people. Igbo musical instruments also serve aesthetic purposes. Some Igbo musical instruments are placed at strategic points for the beautification of public and

private places. This enhances pride in the cultural heritage, boosting self-esteem of the society; as well as marking the movements of dancers and providing rhythmic functions. Ankle and wrist rattles which are worn by traditional dancers contribute to the beauty of their costumes.

Social integration: Rattles are used to stimulate babies to walk and to encourage them to use their right hands. The sound of rattles is delightful to babies. When they are tied to their ankles, in order to hear the mesmerizing sound, they move their legs often, thereby strengthening them and inducing them to walk earlier. Furthermore, when the rattles are tied to their right wrists, it encourages babies to use their right hands in order to hear the delightful sound of that musical instrument. Left handedness is frowned upon in Igbo society. The rattles therefore, aid in conforming to the social norms.

Musical instruments enhance musical performances. These performances stimulate emotions such as longing, passion, grief, joy, religious exultation and other feelings in the performers which they express and pass on and share with their audience. This creates feelings of intense unity and harmony, fostering the well-being of the individual and the society as a whole.

Recommendations

It is pertinent that Igbo music technologists strive to channel more innovative and productive ideas into traditional musical instrument-making. Technological innovations and inventions should be harnessed to the improvement and use of African musical instruments. Towards this end the various tiers of government should encourage conservation of the environment because in addition to numerous other benefits to mankind, it preserves the reserves of the material resources needed for the production of traditional musical instruments. Nevertheless, the use of readily available materials as substitutes should also be explored.

Many African musical instruments are becoming extinct, not because they are obsolete, but because they have fallen into oblivion. They should not be allowed to vanish as many are in the process of dying. Rather they should be collected, documented, projected and harnessed for the betterment of African societies in

particular and humanity in general. The cultural practice of integration of traditional music in the social life should be encouraged and not allowed to die off. There is a possibility of this occurring as people acquire new behavioural patterns that go hand in hand with modernity, thereby abandoning some useful cultural practices which necessitate the use of traditional musical instruments. The performance of folk music in schools, public and private should be given every support and encouragement. Additionally, the collection and proper storage of this music as well as traditional musical instruments should be embarked on in order to ensure the continuity of this cultural heritage. Such encouragement will in turn stimulate increase in the production and development of traditional musical instruments. This will inspire new indigenous technology supporting the new instruments. In this difficult time, no avenue for economic growth can be treated with levity. Rather than rely on the archaic system of oral transmission, it is imperative that the stakeholders pay adequate attention and embark on a systematic approach of transmission of African musical instruments, which is effective and suitable for this modern age. This will help stem the tide of the loss of the existing musical instruments.

A fruitful interaction between protagonists of traditional music – trained music technologists, musicians and musicologists on the continent is imperative for an effective, holistic modernization and standardization of African traditional musical instruments. This may aid not only in restoring them to their former eminent position and role in society but will also propel their use globally.

Conclusion

Function concerns the analytical purpose for the employment of an element. It goes further than the perceived reason for usage. Some of the musical instruments may appear to serve only musical purposes, but on a broader inspection, it would be revealed that their employment goes much further than that. African musical instruments enhance religious practices, serve symbolic purposes, communicate, help in the identification of cultural types, keep track of domestic animals and serve aesthetic purposes. Additionally, they are used in metaphoric expressions. They rejuvenate the body and help the young in conforming to the societal norms. African musical instruments are analgesic and therapeutic, they entertain, encourage group identity, solidarity and peaceful co-

existence. They thus contribute to the three core developmental values – sustenance, self-esteem and human freedom – and consequently, the general well-being of the individual and society.

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