

## AN ORGANOLOGICAL STUDY OF IGBO MUSIC

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### Abstract

The study of Ethnomusicology has extended the frontiers of music studies in general, beyond the imaginary boundary set earlier by formal educators and curriculum planners. The musical heritage of every culture, tribe and place is beginning to count and so, the study of world music is just starting to make sense. This paper looks at Igbo music from the point of view of organology-the study of musical instruments with focus on the classifications. Using a descriptive-analytic approach, a review of both the current state of the studies and problems is advocated.

### Introduction

The quest to establish the musical identity of Igbo-Africa is a response to the question of being. In 1971, almost four decades ago, Okere asked a very important question in far away Belgium, concerning the existence of African philosophy. It was simply put: "Can there be an African philosophy"? He answered his own question in the affirmative before J. Ladriere and Paul Ricoeur. Thirty-one years after the defence of that thesis (2002), he stated again in no equivocal or hypothetical terms that there is indeed African philosophy. The event was the *International Conference of Philosophers on the Crisis of Governance in Africa*. It was in his keynote address delivered inside the auditorium of Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu that he declared: "Today, as I look at you, I derive a certain satisfaction that the question is more than answered" (p.1).

## **Material Sources and Social Values**

The Igbo are music-loving and music-making people. In creating their own music, they have invented for themselves a wide range of musical instruments. In this endeavour, they have made a very creative use of the materials found within their environment in the south-eastern part of present day Nigeria. These materials are derived from living and non-living creatures in a very broad division. Five basic sources have been identified in the process of making instruments. They are animal, air, fire, earth, and tree. The material elements that are immediately implicated, according to Agu (2000a), include, wood, metal or iron, clay, hides and skin, gourds, bamboo, ropes, animal horns and seeds. The reason for the preponderance of wooden instruments is offered by Agu: “the Igbo have lots of wooden instruments because they have plenty of woods around which they put to effective use” (p.89). Various symbolic art designs and carvings are found on Igbo instruments as a direct display of inspiration coming either from the makers of the instruments of their owners in a manner that speaks beyond mere music. The roles which the instruments play differ from place to place. Thus, while an instrument may play a social role in one place it may assume a ritual role in another place. These instruments, which are found in many towns, are used differently or employed to serve the same musical need. They are manufactured by specialists who have the know-how concerning the materials, handling, production and maintenance. Some instruments are exclusively reserved for the men. Today, mass influxes of people into urban areas, school environments and other such factors have made it almost impossible for such restrictions to exist. Some instruments are even assigned a metaphorical sex like the *Oke Igba* and the *Nne Igba*. In Some places, women are not allowed to play some instruments.

## **A Classification of Igbo Musical Instruments**

The method of classification of Igbo instruments have generally followed the Curt Sachs and Eric von Hornbostel (1933) approach which is based on the method of sound generation. This pattern has generally been followed by Nzewi, (1991), Agu (2001), and Okafor (2004). To this end, four classifications of Igbo musical

instruments were followed until the recent categorization by Chukwu (2007). They are: idiophones, membranophones, aerophones and chordophones. The names of these instruments differ from place to place, town to town, sub-culture to sub-culture. The presentation of the instruments generally follows a descriptive-analytic approach. Some of the regions where the instruments are found have been indicated too.

**Idiophones** refer to the class of instruments which produce sound through the vibration of their bodies. They are regarded as the most common type of instruments not only in the Igbo nation but according to Okafor (2004), in Africa south of the Sahara. These instruments are beaten, struck or shaken.

- (a) *Mgbeleke or ngedegwu or ngederegwu or igenyi* (Ohafia), *Ubomma* (Mgbo-Ishieiu); *akwari* (Afikpo); *ikwilikwo* (Nenwe), *agogo* (Isele-Uku); *Ikwe-mgbo* (Idemmili); *mbarimba* (Ngwa); *ngelenge* (Owerri); *oge* (Maku); *Ikiri* (Mgbowo); *ekere mgba* (Akpo). These names refer to the one musical instrument translated as xylophone. In Igbo organology, it is a rhythmic, melodic and melo-rhythmic instrument.
- (b) *Ikolo/ikoro* is the name of the slit wooden drums that come in various' sizes and shapes. Other names include *Okwe, ufie/ushie/uvie, obonyi* (Nsukka).
- (c) *Alo* or *ubom* (Achalla) is the clapperless bell family. Other names include *ogene/ogele, igbugbo, ivom* and *imomo*,
- (d) *Ichaka, oyo/you, idi, yom-yom, ekpili, ajali, ishaka, ukwusa* (Isele-Uku), *icha* (Achalla) and *ubi* (Akpo) are names associated with all kinds of rattles chaplet bead, basket and metal types.
- (e) *Ubo-aka, ubo-agbugba* (Imezi-Owa), *ogume*, (Nsukka), *okume* (Anambra L.G.A) all are names for the thumb piano.
- (f) *Udu, kpalikodo, mgbu-udu, uduonu*, all refer to percussion pots or clay or water pot drums.
- (g) *Mpochi/mpachi, aja/oja, nkwo-nkwo, ekpele, nkwa-nkwa*

(Owerri), *akwa* (Mbu in Isi\_Uzo L.G.A), *awaraka* (Ihiala) are the various names for stamping sticks, tubes and wooden clappers.

**Membranophones** are those musical instruments that produce sound through the stretching of animal membranes over a wooden or metal frame. They make up the drum family. They include: *Igba*, *nkwa*, *abia*, *ebili* (Ihiala). *Idi* (Nkwerre-Isu), *ogwe* (Eti), *nwa-ekete* (Mbgowo), *ese* (Ngwa).

**Aerophones** are the group of instruments that produce sound through the agency of an air column such as is found in some materials with natural or acquired bore such as horns, gourds and bamboos.

- (a) The *oja* is a prominent member of this family. It is a melodic instrument which comes in various sizes. The English translate it as flute but that is wrong or in a more qualified way, the notched flute. Other names for the flute are *opu*, *ogene* and *osu* (Nsukka); *ufe* (Isele-Uku).
- (b) Another set of wind instruments is the horns and these include all animal horns that are employed in music-making and elephant tusks. They are variously called *opu/opi*, *mpi akpele*, *odu*, *ogbo* (Idemmili); *odu-okike*, *odu-enyi*.
- (c) There are a number of instruments derived from gourds which are called *opu-eke*, *oke-opi*, *opu*.

**Chordophones** are musical instruments that depend on the agitation and vibration of a string or strings to produce sound. The major instruments in this family are the *une*, which is equally called *uta-ekwele* by the Delta Igbo and *ubo akwara* which

English name is the zither.

### **Chukwu's Taxonomy**

In a recent research by Sam Chukwu (2007) titled *Igbo musical instruments: a taxonomical study on the classification of traditional musical instruments of Imo state Nigeria*, a thorough review of the different classificatory models by scholars was carried out and from what he called a "culture-owner's point of view", a new model for classification was advanced. From the Victor Mahillon (1880) system of classification to Curt Sachs and Erich von Hornbostel (1914) and the expanded version of (1933), serious doubts were raised concerning the adequacy of the basically European model for African instruments. Jaap Kunst was quick to observe the obvious dissimilarities existing among the individual instruments bundled together as the idiophones, the membranophone the chordophones or the aerophones. These specifics about method of play and shape of particular instruments denied the classifications a measure of uniformity. Hood's additional fifth classification, 'electonophone' and "symbolic taxonomy" said to have been derived from Laban notation, did not quell the agitation from other scholars. Nketia's (1974) classification was called an 'inventory' of African musical instruments. But it was Echezona who literally took an inventory of Nigerian musical instruments when he worked as the director in charge of exhibition during the Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977. His descriptive model (1981) featured (a) instruments of inherently resonant materials (b) membranophone, (c) prongaphones, (d) aerophones and (e) stringed instruments. Bamijoko's classification (1980) derived from the Igbo infinitives of verbs that describe the various ways of playing the instruments. They include: (i) *ifu* (to blow), (ii) *iku* (to knock or beat), (iii) *iti* (to beat or strike), (iv) *lyo* (to shake) and (vi) *ikpo* (to pluck). Even though *ikpo* was translated as to pluck or bow, the actual Igbo word that translates to bow is '*ikwo*'. T.C Nwachukwu's, (1981), Akpabot's, (1986), Nzewi's (1991) and Okafor's (1994) classifications follow the same descriptive trend which was adjudged by Chukwu as great but in need of further improvement.

Chukwu (2007) outlined what he called the 'basic principles that underlie the

classification of these musical instruments and the cognitive principles in the formulation of folk terminologies from the Igbo language structures'. These include;

1. Traditional musical instruments identified by their manner of play (Mannerphone).
2. Traditional musical instruments identified by the materials from which they are made (Materiaphone).
3. Traditional musical instruments identified according to their onomatopoeic derivations (Onomatophone)
4. Traditional musical instruments known by their utilitarian associations (Utiliphone), and
5. Traditional musical instruments identified by their abstract appellations (Abstractophone). (p.71)

### **A Rethinking of Methodology in Organology**

We have been able to state the major approaches adopted by various scholars in the study of Igbo musical instruments. We have equally observed with interest, the wonderful attempt by those scholars to bring together the craft and art of making and playing instruments. But to the drum maker in a remote Igbo village, or the great drummer who is not known beyond the confines of his village and town, these expositions and the classifications into idiophone, membranophone, chordophone and aerophone do not really mean anything. Yet it is people like that, and not really the western-trained professor, who have ensured the survival of Igbo music from one generation to the next. So, in the celebration of Igbo civilization and culture, who should be praised more? The practitioners, who are largely not beneficiaries of western education, or the classroom teacher who gets more degrees by learning from those practitioners in the name of fieldwork? I think that the whole business of methodology in the study of musical instruments has to be re-visited. A rethinking of the western-style method of classification has become necessary. Effort should be directed to a more meaningful way of making the schools directly responsible for the preservation as well as the promotion of Igbo musical

instruments. This can "be done by that sponsorship of departments of music in Igboland towards the establishment of traditional music technology. The current state of our instruments could, by such a venture, be improved. But more to this, there is need for a new approach to Igbo music studies, an approach that will make the appreciation of local instruments a bigger and richer project. The time for collaboration between the musicians of the schools and the owners of the knowledge of traditional music is now. This means that the rethinking of our existing methods of studies have become necessary if we have to evolve an Igbo civilization which is both authentic and relates to the essence of our being.

### **Conclusion**

The difficulty posed by the attempt to systematize the divisions among the various instruments is one unique feature of all aspects of Igbo music. The existing methods of classifying or categorizing things do not seem to have taken the nature of realities in Africa into consideration. Thus every existing thing has to be known in its own right. Igbo musical instruments have a lot in common both within their groups and outside them. But the individuality of every instrument, which speaks more strongly in the structural analysis of Igbo music, remains a big factor in organology. Is the attempt to harmonize the different classes ultimately necessary?

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