

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

REVITALIZATION OF *UBO-AKA* IGBO TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF EMMANUEL NWANKWO (*ONYE UBO*)

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Abstract

Traditional music is a vital and beneficial aspect of Igbo culture. Modern civilization and urbanization, has influenced greatly the Igbo traditional music in such a way that some aspects are gradually becoming extinct. For instance, the case of the Igbo indigenous musical instrument Ubo-aka, some of the makers and players have died without youthful successors. As a result of this, this research has explored further into revitalization of the Ubo-aka musical instrument, with a view to reviving the relevance of this very musical instrument (A typical goal of creative ethnomusicology). To attain this, the researcher has through personal experiences; studies and interview of (Mr Emmanuel Nwankwo) gathered and translated some Igbo traditional Ubo-aka songs for possible revitalization and sustainability of the Ubo-aka in the Igbo musical practice today. It is also important that, youths who are the future culture bearers be encouraged to participate actively in the making and playing of Ubo-aka musical instrument as well as its rich music for the purpose of continuity.

Keywords: Revitalization, Traditional musical instruments, Ubo-aka and Relevance

Introduction

Less interest has been given to traditional musical practice in Nigeria. Traditional music as used in this context refers to the local music of Nigerians that has been in use, long before the contact with Europeans. Traditional music is a vital and beneficial aspect of Igbo culture. It is worthy to note that the poor interest shown by today's youth in the area of promoting our cultural heritage with regards to valuable Igbo traditional music and instruments have led to a drastic reduction in its relevance. In the case of Ubo-aka, most of the makers and players from findings are late with no significant take over or transfer of these priceless talents and skills to the young ones.

Agu (2000) also stated that 'the thumb piano is a portable solo instrument used for accompanying solo singing (93). Ubo-aka was a popular melodic musical instrument in Igbo land. Sadly, this veritable melodic instrument has lost its place of value in today's Igbo traditional music and life because of the drastic aging of experts in the field, with the lack of competent youthful successors. The Youth today are more interested in the art and use of western instruments like the piano, guitar, violin, and so on when accompanying solo performances rather than our indigenous Igbo melodic Ubo-aka that can equally serve same purpose. Research has proven that a skillful Ubo-aka player can overlap and inter-mingle the different tones of the tines to produce a warm and intricate rhythm. Also the Ubo-aka if amplified will, be clearly heard among other instruments in the indigenous orchestra.

Presently, the researcher has noted the serious shortfall of professional Ubo-aka Players and Makers existing today and that the present generation, hardly know what the Ubo-aka looks like or is all about. Research effort is to re-project the Ubo-aka instrument to its rightful place of cultural music relevance; explore efforts that will reactivate its fabrication and use as an important instrument through a meticulous teaching of its noble skills such that the young can learn properly from the old for the purpose of continuity.

The Igbo traditional music instruments are grouped according to their making and playing patterns e.g. membranophones, idiophones, aerophones and chordophones. They can be struck, plucked, bowed or shook. Curt Sachs and Eric Von Hornbontal (1940) classified Ubo-aka under idiophones. Okoye (2013) states that Ubo-aka belong to tuned idiophones. Agu (2000:93) classified it as a melo-rhythmic instrument. Okoye further stated that the word 'Ubo' refers to musical instruments that are either plucked (Ubo-aka) or bowed (Ubo-akwara). The English name for ubo-aka is 'thumb piano'. This name is believed to be derived from its playing technique.

Ubo-aka traditionally performs various musical roles in Igbo culture like in religious ceremonies, rituals, entertainments, communication, relaxation, and so on. Okoye (2013) explained that Ubo-aka music in most cases is performed solo. Ubo-aka players can equally sing while playing the instrument. Okoye (2002) described the playing technique of Ubo-aka as follows:

The Ubo-aka is held horizontally in both hands in a way that the thumbs can play the key for long conveniently. As the thumb plays, other Fingers are generally hooked behind the wooden lid through the two holes in order to hold the instrument firmly (p. 39).

For the purpose of this research, the researcher gathered ideas about the construction and playing of the Ubo-aka from Mr Emmanuel Nwankwo from Umuagu Agbada-ani, Nri, Anaocha Local Government Area Anambra State. The researcher also investigated further into the Ubo-aka music and was able to gather just but a few because Ubo-aka music is not written but passed from generation to generation through oral tradition. That is why it was difficult to lay hands on the works of late Ubo-aka makers and players.

A Biography of Emmanuel Nwankwo (Onye Ubo)

Emmanuel Nwankwo was born on 22nd of October 1960, to the family of Mr & Mrs Hyacinth Nwankwo of Umuagu Agbada-Ani village, Nri. His father was a Secondary School Principal. Though his parents were not wealthy he started school at a very tender age and later proceeded to Mountain Gabriel Boys' High School Makurdi where he had his secondary school education. Emmanuel being extremely intelligent and gifted with innate abilities developed a taste for music appreciation. His love for music making saw him performing in front of his peers and class and also performing for and representing his school in singing competitions.

Emmanuel Nwankwo couldn't further his education after the death of his father in 1987. He stopped formal education after acquiring his G.C.E with good grades. He tried his hands on

so many things for a living like farming and other menial jobs until he decided to go into music technology full time. This was when his music talents began to make major manifest and get him recognition around the community.

He developed a unique interest in Ubo-aka music instrument by watching and listening to the music of Akunwafor Obiligbo who was a famous traditional musician at that time. He decided to venture into the making of this instrument thereafter. Worthy of note was this coincided with the period when the seating Head of State of Nigeria encouraged youth to learn to start and create industries by using raw materials sourced locally around them. This prompted him to first of all go in search of the Ubo-aka at Oye Uga, but was referred to Oye-udo Akokwa where he bought the last Ubo-aka from the seller who told him that the maker of that last Ubo-aka died three months earlier.

He thereafter started playing and mastering the Ubo-aka without help. He began performing in open places like the market square and was sometimes invited to play in different occasions like naming and installation ceremonies, anniversaries and Ofala festivals. Those performances exposed him further in the music world and he was able to meet many authorities in African music, learning more from them. Emmanuel made himself popular in the art of making and playing the Ubo-aka so much that it earned him the name Onye Ubo

After a while of playing the Ubo-aka he bought, he decided to break the Ubo-aka, under study it and then carefully make his own. He went to Uruala Street at Onitsha to buy some calabash and the materials to start up his music instrument fabrication industry. He produced the first set of 50 pieces which he sold to a seller at Oye-udo, Akokwa.

Emmanuel propagated this trade for the most of his youthful life and was keen about reinventing the already going extinct Ubo-aka music instrument, but was discouraged by lack of patronage, financial challenges and lack of encouragement. At this point he discontinued the making of the Ubo-aka and went into the making of the local guitar which had more demand and sales yield. He now constructs the Ubo-aka on demand and is one of the few surviving Ubo-aka makers around the South East.

Sample and Textural Analysis of Ubo-aka Songs:

Ubo-aka songs always have short melodic motifs. Ubo-aka instrument has only eight (8) tones and the player is limited to the key of a particular Ubo-aka. Its music is usually of a very short melodic range and rendered on demand for relaxation purpose. Most times, they are accompanied by other instruments like; *Alo, Udu, Ekwe, Ichaka*, whereas, most times, they are rendered acapella. Beyond its function as a tool for social entertainment, Ubo-aka songs also serve as a medium of dispensing advice and further moral administrative tool.

Ubo-aka Songs and their Translations

Igba ndi eze: This is an Ubo-aka song played at Ofala festivals in Igbo society. It is a praise and worship song for the King at his coronation or installation ceremony. The song is in an

Igbo traditional dancing grace style.

IGBO LANGUAGE	ENGLISH LANGUAGE
<i>Igba ndi eze, eze udo</i>	Drum of the kings, king of peace
<i>Ndi eze n'eme ego k'ova melu ya</i>	Kings handle money as though they are the makers
<i>Igba ndi eze, eze udo</i>	Drum of kings, king of peace

Nwagbogho mkpuke: This song is a combination of sex education and caution for wayward teenage girls who flirt. Teaching and educating them of the implication of such a life style.

IGBO LANGUAGE	ENGLISH LANGUAGE
<i>Nwagbogho mkpuke aturu ime</i>	A wayward girl has gotten pregnant
<i>Mgbe o ga mu obewe akwa</i>	When it's time for her to deliver she will start crying
<i>Obewe akwa, obewe akwa</i>	She will start crying, she will start crying
<i>Mgbe o ga mu obewe akwa</i>	When it's time for her to deliver she will start crying

Ego elisi elisi: This is a song to recognize and praise the rich in a community. Especially the ones who's wealth in one way or the other have affected the lives of the people.

IGBO LANGUAGE	ENGLISH LANGUAGE
<i>Oyi muo, oyi m eze</i>	My friend, my friend is a king
<i>Oyi muo, oyi m eze, oyi m</i>	My friend, my friend is a king, my friend
<i>Egwu ndi kpara ego elisi elisi</i>	Music of people that have endless money
<i>Ka'm je kwubelu, ka'm je kwubelu ndi nwere ego</i>	Let me go and praise those that have money
<i>Egwu ndi kpara ego elisi elisi</i>	Music of people that have endless money

Conclusion and Recommendation

Some musicians like Akunwafor Obiligbo whose children (Umu Obiligbo) took over his music pattern/style but show no interest in utilizing their father's identity which is the Ubo-aka, in their music do not help the very vitalization and sustenance of this historical melodious instrument. Their music (Umu Obiligbo) is in high demand both locally and beyond and this can serve a veritable platform to show case and make famous this very instrument like their father did, but they seem to have preference for western instruments like is common with the youth of today.

To therefore popularize the Ubo-aka as an Igbo Musical instrument, it is pertinent that traditional musicians be encouraged to frequently feature the instrument in their music. Ubo-aka should also be projected in the curriculum of music education in Nigeria to spread and speed up learning around the instrument in institutions of learning. Departments of music should encourage students to use traditional instruments in their IPS examinations to encourage students to rapidly pick up the art and practice of making and playing the Ubo-aka musical instrument. Media houses should increasingly showcase the works of traditional music artist containing Ubo-aka to attract more interests especially that of the younger

generation. Local Igbo traditional authorities and community custodians should encourage the few surviving Ubo-aka experts to teach the art and craft to young people of the community to better preserve this rich musical heritage and promote continuity. Other music researchers are thus enjoined to carry out further works on this instrument to improve on what researchers have already done so as to be able to achieve this all important objective of revitalization in record time. All these when properly implemented will go a long way in reawakening and preserving the aesthetics of the Ubo-aka Igbo musical instrument.

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