

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 6 (2), Serial No. 25, April, 2012

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v6i2.8>

The Dynamics of Music and Culture in Traditional Ibibio Society of Nigeria *(Pp. 90-101)*

Ekpa, Aniedi E. - Department of Music, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

E-mail: aniekpa2002@yahoo.com

GSM: +2347031183785

Abstract

This paper examines the degree of inter-relationship between music and culture with a view to establishing that there can be no thought of culture particularly in a typical African community without reference to music. The paper focuses on the extent to which musical recreation is an integral aspect of the life style of the traditional Ibibio. The analysis also considers the way social relations and social institutions are integral to the music. It concludes by stating that since the cultural landscape in Africa as a whole is experiencing serious erosion due to modernity, we should wake up and preserve our heritage for generations yet unborn.

Key Words: Music, Culture, Recreation, Inter-relationship, Transformation

Introduction

The field of ethnomusicology at its inception has been firmly established on an anthropological view, which stipulates that the art of music is more explained or understood relative to the culture of which it is an integral part. The integration of African music in the activities of daily life gives it an intensity and importance, which is rarely communicated in Western music. The Ibibio community is held with musical bonds. Music surrounds them

from the moment of birth, through all stages of growth, courting, marriage, work, religious and celebrations, illness, business matters, family history, and finally funerals. As Chernoff (1979), observes that “the study of African music can reveal a great deal about the nature of culture and community life” (Chernoff, 1979:36).

Traditional African music is music in oral tradition. It is that tradition in which music and aspects of music making are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, or through empirical observation and imitation. Fundamentally, it is a collective art, a communal property whose qualities are shared and experienced by all members of the society. And until recently, this music was organized as an integral part of community life within the framework of recreational, social, cultural and political institutions. But it was never an object for trade; rather it catered for that aspect of traditional beliefs, ideas and wisdom.

The Ibibio world view

However, the traditional Ibibio does not only regard music as a repository of traditional knowledge and beliefs, but also as a means he can reach out and establish a constant, uninterrupted link with the spirit world and the supernatural.

No ethnographic study carried out in Africa can be devoid of allusions to the intricate and complex attitude that constitutes the basis of meaningful life in traditional African societies. As has been generally known and accepted everywhere by scholars who research on African cultures, it is impossible to fathom the dynamics of African society without a thorough understanding of the African world view. This is borne out of the fact that Africans are notoriously religious as observed by Mbiti (1969), and each people have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices.

To the Ibibio, music and life are inseparable. There is music for many of the activities of everyday life as well as music whose texts express his attitudes to life: his hopes and fears, his thoughts and beliefs. Since music is so intimately bound with Ibibio worldview or cosmology, it then becomes symbolic, spiritually potent and situational.

For a better understanding of how music functions in Ibibio community, considerations must be given to how it is organized in relation to the activities of everyday life. The unflinching reverence for God and nature, spiritual beings, the dead, kinship, puberty, birth, circumcision, marriage, are

an amalgam of functions that operate at different levels in the Ibibio society. There are musical types performed by women or men. They do this either on individual basis or in voluntary groups or associations. There are also musical types performed by both sexes.

The role of music in traditional Ibibio society as a cohesive and spiritually potent force, coupled with its pervasive nature, its integral role in everyday life and the totality of traditional artistic experience could best be discussed under the following contextual categories:

- (a) Occasional
- (b) Recreational
- (c) Incidental and
- (d) Ritual/Ceremonial

Traditional music in Africa, like other arts, thrives in traditional institutions in which traditional beliefs are manifested.

Occasional musical activities

It is a common practice in traditional Ibibio society to incorporate music into events of the life cycle. Because of the sacred nature of each event, the types and forms of music associated with each are socially restricted. Social musical activities express the normative values of Ibibio people. Its enactment often reflects the occupational, secular and social beliefs of the people, and displays what the society values most.

Most Ibibio social musical activities concern themselves principally with the treatment of themes of chastity and other adorable virtues. The theme of pride of maidenhood is treated in *Mbopo* (fattening) songs and dances. It centres on the chastity of the maiden prior to her marriage. Virginity and chastity of an Ibibio girl prior to her marriage bestow honour and pride particularly on the girl, her parents, her fiancé and the community in general. But in this 21st century, what is the situation? Is it still a virtue adorned and admired by us?

Abang (pot) dance is performed during the ceremonial outing of the maiden from the fattening room (*ufok mbopo*), where she has been confined for months. While in this seclusion, she is fed with all the traditional delicacies that would make her plump as a pot (*abang*), from which the name of the dance is derived. There are other maiden dances, which are performed on moonlit nights to welcome the new moon as well as for communal entertainment and relaxation. Notable among them is *Abinsi* dance. In the

past, the dance was a traditional wooing dance in which young men who were intending to marry participated by picking a dance mate from among the female dancers. The girl of his choice was usually his intended future wife. The male suitors attended the dance with lanterns, which was emblematic of the clear vision that would enable them pick the right girl.

Throughout the performance, dialogue is never used. Every communication is by miming and romantic gestures, which are easily understood and interpreted into verbal language by the audience. The theme of their songs centres on social control. When the songs are well rendered they serve as the community news medium on important happenings in and around the community. Comments may be made about a beautiful girl who is promiscuous; the aging woman who marries a man many years her junior; the prominent man in the village who is a disciplinarian by day and an armed robber by night. Today, this dance is performed mainly for pleasure and relaxation.

Birth and marriage are celebrated with music in Ibibio society. Puberty musical groups perform at such ceremonies, treating texts of those songs as 'birds of passage' for the occasion.

In addition to the events of the life cycle, there are social groups such as warrior organizations and guild groups, whose memberships are based on gender and age. The music performed by these organizations is reflective of their roles in their respective societies. *Ukwa*, a war dance musical performance, is usually staged to depict a band of traditional soldiers who protect the community from the enemies. Their songs are fast and animated. Before the commencement of the performance, the *Ekong Ukwa* masquerade (war skull masquerade)- *mkpokporo*, in its black flowing attire emerges from the nearby bush, holding a sharp machete in his hand. It then runs round town heading for the palace, singing in a recitative style in falsetto tones, to herald the arrival of the performers.

One important thing with this performance is that it cannot come to an end without bloodshed. This makes the performance very dreadful, but spectacular at the same time. As the performance goes on, the drumming becomes vigorous in tempo and sends the dancers into a state of excitement and valour, or to the extent that when they engage in mock- battle, they often sustain bodily injuries.

Ubom-Isong (land canoe), is a dance-music performed by girls, reflective of a people whose occupation is fishing. It is a miniature portrayal of the supplication to the sea goddess to fill the fishing nets with seafood. Each of the dancers wears a hoop on the waist all of which are strung together to form a boat. They sing as they engage in mock paddling:

Nkà mì éwàt údèng (My mates paddle canoe)
Àmì nwàt íkpók étò (I paddle bark of wood)
Àyà---ó (Aya---o)

Funeral dirges form one of the social song repertoires. The organization is usually based on gender. When it is certified that a ruler is dead, the talking drum sends the message across to the people. Women's group sings their dirges separately under a competent leader in the family. If no such leader is found, the family hires someone and charges her with the responsibility.

IbanIsong dance is a women's dance by a women's group responsible for fighting male chauvinism (*Ndok ufok ebe*) directed against their members. They rebuke and warn male members of the community against disrespect for their women folk. As they do not tolerate any indiscriminate utterance and blackmail of women by men, any man charged for such offense is given a fair trial by the clan's council and penalized if found guilty. Subsequent involvement in the same offense is regarded as deliberate, and the society must seek redress. This they do by visiting him nude at night in his room, with singing and dancing. Writing about their activities in the society Udo submits:

This club is very strong in the riverine areas of Ibibio, for example, among the Efik, Etoi, (sic) and Uruan etc, any man who abused a woman by talking about her sexual anatomy was deemed to have committed a grave crime against Iban Isong Esit. The aggrieved woman usually took the case, privately to the Iban Isong Esit... (Udo, 1983:153).

When the day for punishing the culprit is fixed, the women begin to watch his movement until they make sure that he has gone to sleep in his house that night. Then the women would surround his house and wake him up. When he comes out of his house to see who was calling him, they would make him sit in a central and conspicuous place, while all of them strip themselves naked and stand before him, forcing the man to look at them. Their faces and bodies

painted black and holding objects made in the shape of a woman's uterus in their hands. They rain curses upon him and call upon the gods and goddesses to kill him whenever he attempts to make love with any woman. The man who falls into this kind of trouble usually dies soon after the visit by these women.

Ebre dance was performed during the period of harvesting of new yams. Taken its name from a bulbous root of yam variety, women were allocated this yam to plant in their farms and took part in the celebration. Each woman was expected to go to the farm and harvest this yam and present it to her husband in a symbolic way as a mark of respect. Members of this association were women with high level of morality. Virgins only were allowed to join as members. No thief or adulterer was allowed to join the group. They were also concerned about indignities of women by men.

Recreational music activities

Recreational music activities enjoy the largest variety of musical types and forms in Ibibio society. This is due to the fact that they are neither ritually nor ceremonially bound. They are performed not only for evening entertainment, but also on other occasions of a festive or social nature. Songs and dances like *mkpok-eto*, *nsasak*, *nsa-isong* etc, are all recreational musical performances.

Evening musical entertainments feature recreational songs performed by the king's wives in the palace or court. As noted by E. N. Amaku (1954), the king's wives perform praise songs for their husband as they accompany themselves with household utensils and thumb pianos (*mbutu*). Each wife supplies a phrase and punctuates it with her name.

Gilbert Rouget experienced something similar, at the Porto- Novo Palace. He writes:

... the court music most frequently heard is performed by the wives of the King At the palace as well as in these different houses, the King's or Chief's wives, under the leadership of an elder, forms a group in charge of ajogan music. Four wives chosen from among the youngest stand in front of the others and sing and dance (Rouget, 1971:30).

Folktales about acts of bravery are usually recounted. The men at the court accompany the performance with drums, while the women dance and the

King gives them drinks in appreciation. *The king's* daughters, sisters and female house- helps are organized by the wives to entertain the *King* with *Ikpaya* dance. Here, dancers dress in raffia costumes and sing and dance.

Most recreational songs could be heard at festivals as appendages to the main music event of the occasion. It is common to find them performed at funerals just to add colour and provide entertainment to the audience. Wherever recreational musical group is found, they are only there to entertain and have no ritual intentions.

The origin of some recreational musical groups in Ibibioland is difficult to trace while their instrumental repertoire are not standardized, due to influences of acculturation from the neighbouring ethnic groups--Efik, Ibo, Quas, Ekoi, and Ejagham. There exists some amount of interchange between these societies and different language groups, especially in these areas where social interaction has been greatest and prolonged. Some recreational groups whose memberships are drawn from the ethnic group afore-mentioned have hybrid song texts, styles of dancing and drumming. The reason for this is not too far to seek, nor is this out of order. Of all the musical activities, recreational activities are the most prone to diffusion. The creation of musical types for recreational use is a continuous process. New types spring up through the leadership of creative individuals whenever people begin to get tired of the usual ones. It is in this sphere that innovations in the use of instruments, in styles of dancing, in styles of singing are first tried out.

Since recreational musical activities are not socially restricted, except where they are considered to be harmful or detrimental to the moral fabric of the community or society, they are often transitory. They come and go with the craze of time. Musical types that are respectable and sufficiently attractive in style and content tend to be practiced over a long period of time.

Incidental or functional musical activities

Incidental music activities in Ibibio community, like in any other African society, are organized as a concurrent activity. That is, it serves as background music or catharsis for the execution of certain group activities and domestic chores such as grinding, pounding, mowing, mopping, nursing a baby with lullabies such as the following,

Éyén dáíyá ndièn, éyén dáíyá ndièn
Nkékà ikìbê mbá, ákà mbá ásáká itá
Baby sleep now, baby sleep now

I went to pluck pear, but pear is not ripe
A good baby sitter is usually praised in lullabies

During informal story telling sessions, children and parents alike sing songs to relax and pass the evening. Fishermen sing while mending their nets while farmers sing to accompany their work routine. Individuals who sit in a market place or walk on the street to hawk their wares relieve their boredom or sun--burnt passion with music. Below is a typical fishermen's song,

Sóng úbók wàt ìnyàng (Row fast, row fast)
Sóng úbók wàt ìnyàng (Row fast, row fast)
Ké édim kédí-ó-ó-ó-ó (Rain is coming-o-o-o-o)
Sóng úbók wàt ìnyàng (Row fast, rain is coming)
Ké 'dìm kédí (is coming)

Sometimes the texts of songs may not necessarily reflect the particular work being undertaken; for functional songs cover a wide range of topics such as self-pity, death, rivalry, hope, disappointment, sadness, love, theft, poverty and so on. A woman who is mowing may sing a song that satires another woman who was caught stealing.

Ritual-Ceremonial musical activities

Every religion needs a way of affirming its fundamental spiritual, philosophical and cultural principles which have been handed down in writing or by word of mouth over hundreds of years. This is necessary if the deeper sense demanded of a religion is to continue to be fulfilled and the religion itself is to continue to exist as a holistic system within a process of social development.

The consciousness of ritual/ceremonial musical activities in Ibibio nation is based on shared ideas, which concern both the interpretations of its religious thought and the concrete realization thereof in ritual situations. This then expresses itself as cultural manifestations in music, dance and language or code. The individual elements of such manifestations-the repertoire, musical instruments and terminology, make it possible for 'outsiders' to recognize its members for the purpose of identification or differentiation.

Ritual musical types are the most restrictive of all. As mentioned above, it is a means through which the individual or group may reaffirm and re-enact the events of antiquity. In a typical ritual situation, the group stands naked and unashamed, as it were before its gods, goddesses, ancestors, mother earth and the elemental forces. Most ritual activities are two-fold: private and public.

Private rituals are restricted to members of the priesthood and designated elders of the community and may use little or no music. For instance, when a King (*Obong*) wants to worship his personal god or pay homage to the clan's ancestral spirits, only the palace priests and chief drummer are allowed to be present.

This is a ritual occasion for personal and private rituals, and sacerdotal observances that do not require the full participation of a ritual assembly; for these rituals are concerned with the affirmation of *Obong's* structural relationships with the supernatural. Ritual materials-songs, symbolic use of musical instruments, dances, incantations, prayers, and other activities are considered as classified knowledge, which cannot be found or placed at public domain. For at no time in the long history of mankind has such material been made accessible to non-initiates or even available for study and analysis. At the level of ritual performance we are considering, the materials relate to this group at the most profound levels of their being.

It must not be ruled out that the selection of and use of music may depend to a large extent on the kind of rite and whether it is conceived as private or public. For there are customary rites that form part of the normal behaviour, rites incorporated into celebrations and ceremonies, including confirmatory and status-marking ceremonies, kinship ceremonies and commemorative festivals as well as rituals of worship. On the choice of ritual materials, Nketia affirms that,

Since the symbolic transformation that takes place in ritual is constituted by action which draws on sound, kinesic and visual codes, music which heightens the intensity of emotion generated by a rite or integrates the aural, the kinesic and the visual similarity enhances the ritual process. Accordingly, the music for a ritual occasion may include not only contemplative music such as chants and other music for listening, but also music that stimulates personal involvement in a ritual occasion through participation and interaction (Nketia, 1984:112).

Ritual activities such as annual harvest or commemorative festivals, deification of gods, warding off of evil influences in the community, are considered public and members of the community are required to participate. A sort of shared knowledge and experience takes place here, although the forms and types of musical activities identified with such rituals may be

socially restricted. Based on the particular ritual being performed, the choice of musical instruments and song texts must reflect the significance of the occasion. In most cases, the musical instruments are considered to be the physical representations of the gods being worshipped and are accordingly revered as such. Such god as *Fri-Obukpong*, which literary translated means 'blow the horn', is induced by the sound of horn for its affective presence. It is for this reason that ritual drums used in *Ekpe*, *Obon* and *Ekpo* cults often induce possession, as the gods are akin to the sound of these instruments.

A similar experience is reported among the Shona of Zimbabwe, where ritual events called *bira* devoted to the ancestors are held periodically. The principal instrument played on such occasions is the plucked idiophone called *mbira dza vadzimu*. Paul Berliner reports that,

In the context of the *bira*, the people believe the *mbira* to have the power to project its sound into the heavens, bridging the world of the living and the world of the spirits and thereby attracting the attention of the ancestors. In the hands of skillful musicians the *mbira* is able to draw spirits down to earth to possess mediums (Berliner, 1978:190).

Musical instruments, which are used for these performances are considered to be the physical representations and characteristics of the gods being worshipped. Such musical instruments like horn are used by *ndem* priests as a call to worship. *Mmurua* (ritual rattle) and *Ekomo Ekpe* (ekpe skin drum) are used in *Ekpe* musical performances only.

There is a very thin line of demarcation between ritual and ceremonial musical activities in *Ibibio* society. The ceremonial musical activities may be divided into two categories. The first consists of musical types used for public rites, which may be observed as a follow-up to complete secret rites. When a King (*Obong*) is to be installed, public rites involving music for enthronement are performed before all to witness and participate.

If the performance rites are without any interruption from the participants or the gods, the *Obong* is taken into the sacred chamber for the secret part of the rites. At this point, the group relates to the spirit world through high-ranking priests and traditional leaders, who are regarded as the representatives of the spiritual forces. They perform the remaining ceremonial songs and dances until the whole ceremony is completed.

Since traditional leaders play spiritual, priestly functions, political and social roles, and act as the pivot of social cohesion as well as intermediaries between the gods and their people, they protect the musical types and instruments identified with their office. These high-ranking priests also have their musical instruments, but no such musical instruments or music may be used outside their designated roles without the expressed permission of the ruler, as their musical instruments are regarded as part of the State regalia.

Conclusion

This paper therefore, has emanated from the desire to re-discover through sober and scholarly reflections some aspects of Ibibio rich cultural heritage to national development. There is need for continuous search for cultural rebirth, identity and development, through the promotion, refinement or modernization and selective integration of valuable aspects of Ibibio culture. There is also the underlying assumption that, in a relatively developing ethnic community as the Ibibio, a culture or a way of life is in an emergent state of re-discovery, modernization and selective integration, which could eventually result in the much needed cultural identity of the Ibibio.

Ibibio custodians of traditional arts and culture place a high premium on music and dance. Music is organized as part of the process of living together and also, formal structure and contexts of use often interact. Music occurs as an event in a context of situation and the varying demands of these situations often give rise to musical differentiation embodied in individual items or in a group of such items, which then constitute a single musical type. This is the reason we have music for the burial of kings, royal procession, battle, etc.

The arts of Africa are fast undergoing social and cultural transformations in recent times, and these have given rise to new forms of music, dance, drama, literature and art that have taken their place alongside historic traditions that antedate the colonial period. Contemporary arts, unlike the traditional arts that are closely integrated because of their community orientation, are evolving separately in a milieu of change in which the focus is on individual creativity that takes the arts beyond the historic forms and modes of expression established in the traditional arts. Change and innovation are valued as ends in themselves in the contemporary arts. Contemporary artists do not relate their arts to the rituals of traditional communities; but to venues like clubs, cafes, radio and television.

It is therefore imperative to systematize and document our rich cultural heritage for our posterity.

References

- Akpabot, S. E. (1975). *Ibibio Music in Nigerian Culture*. Michigan State University Press.
- Amaku, E. N. (1954). *Edikot Nwed Mbuk* Vols. I-IV. Nelson: London
- Berliner, Paul (1978). *The Soul of Mbirá*. Berkeley
- Chernoff, J. M. (1979). *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Ekpa, A. E. (2001). *Ekpe Music and Dance of the Efik*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Mbiti, John (1969). *African Religion and Philosophy*. London
- Nketia, J. H. K.. (1984). "Interaction Through Music: The Dynamics of Music Making in African Societies", *International Social Science Journal, Making of Music* 94 (UNESCO) 34/4.
- Rouget, Gilbert (1971). "Court Songs and Traditional History in the Ancient Kindoms of Porto-Novo and Abomey", *Essays on Music and History in Africa* (ed.) Wachsmann, Klaus P.; Evanston: Illinois, Northwestern University Press.
- Udo, Edet A. (1983). *Who Are the Ibibio?* FEP Publishers Limited, Onitsha