MUSIC AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE IBIBIO EXPERIENCE

BY

EKAETTE C. UDOK (PhD)

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY OF UYO

AKWA IBOM STATE

ekaetteudok@gmail.com

Abstract

The Ibibio ethnic group of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, is remarkably religious, a trait common among many other African peoples. They integrate religion into every aspect of lives, given that religion is inextricably linked to culture. However, the role played by music in all religions, whether traditional, Christian or Islamic, is vital, because it serves as a powerful medium for spiritual communication, and cultural cohesion. The study examines the traditional African religious beliefs in Nigerian society, with a focus on the Ibibio people. It investigates the intricate relationship between music and religious practices among the Ibibio people. And also to assess the profound influence of music on cultural values, cultural identity, and its impact on spiritual expression. The musical expression serves not only as a means of worship but also as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural values and historical facts. The research investigates how traditional music is used in various religious contexts and beliefs, including rituals, initiation ceremonies and worship. Additionally, it analyses the challenges faced by Ibibio traditional music and religion in the face of Christianity and modernization. The aim of this work is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between music, culture and spirituality in Ibibio society, and its relevance to broader Nigerian and African contexts. By employing a qualitative research approach, this study provides insights into the dynamic and evolving nature of traditional Ibibio music and religion, highlighting their continued relevance and significance in contemporary Nigerian society. The findings highlight the significance of music in conveying spiritual messages, invoking divine presence, and reinforcing cultural values. The study recommends that efforts be made to document, preserve and promote indigenous values Akwa Ibom through music for future references.

Keywords: Traditional religion, Music, Religious beliefs, Contemporary society, Ibibio

Introduction

Traditional African religion as described by Olupona (2007), refers to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the people of Africa that includes worship, consultation of priests, rituals, symbols, cosmology and arts practices in the society. However, religion and music are inseparable, as different types of religions often involve musical activities in their belief system of worship. The religious musical rituals, chants and activities that originated from traditional religions in the area have been in practice before the advent of Christianity. Thus, the relationship between music and traditional religion in Ibibio is deeply rooted in the indigenous practices and beliefs of the people. Music and religion are compatible partners, interwoven in such a way that religion needs music, while music draws inspiration from the religious terrain. Hence, in traditional Ibibio society, musical performances have long been used as one of the fundamental aspects of traditional religious practices. Religion and music become so intimately related together that the two become difficult to separate.

Theoretical Framework

The cultural theory propounded by Mary Douglas in 1960s, examines how cultures create and maintain symbolic systems that shape social life. In the context of Ibibio group of Akwa Ibom State, this theory helps one to understand how music as a cultural expression is intertwined with traditional religious beliefs and practices. The theory is related to this research as it expresses how music serves the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom to communicate and reinforce their religious beliefs, values and social norms to shape lives. By analyzing the musical traditions of the community, an insight is gained into the underlying cultural meanings and social structures that govern the traditional and religious practices of Ibibio people.

Music and Traditional Religious Practices

Traditional religion is part and parcel of culture in Africa. As Mbiti (1970) states that it starts before birth and does not end after death. Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) also argue that one major feature of traditional African religion is that religion is a way of life for Africans. Equally, Udo (1983) describes the Ibibio concept of God as being regulated in the daily life by the tenets of religion. He cites examples that, "in farming, marriage, fighting, fishing, play, initiation into various secret societies and clubs, the naming of children, journeys, while eating, in the morning, afternoon or night, his life was tied up with his religion" (p.248). He further states that, there was nothing that the Ibibio man did, from which he expected good results without first referring to his Supreme God, *Abasi Ibom*, and to the lesser gods (deities) of his clan and of his neighbouring clans, and to his ancestors. Therefore, religion permeated into every facet of Ibibio's life cycle, while the traditional belief of the Ibibio about God was centred on other spiritual power or forces of deities which were believed to exert considerable influence upon man directly or indirectly.

Ibibio Various Traditional Beliefs System

There are various traditional religious beliefs that are integral part of Ibibio culture and identity, shaping their values and practices. These are:

Divinities and gods

In Ibibio, traditional belief in demi-gods and deities is enumerated by Ukpong (2007) from different clan divinities to include: *Awaitam* (the god of Itam); *Atakpo* (the god of Uruan); *Ayaan* (the god of Nsit); *Anantia* or *Ntia* (the god of Ibiono). Others are *idiong*; *inam* gods, Iso *idio* - a demi-god that controlled the farm and its yield. The literal meaning of *idio* is whirl wind. So for them to show appreciation to the god that came as a

whirlwind, they built shrines in the barn in order to offer sacrifices to it, and to bring the god nearer to protect the harvest. While this was so, music was involved to create a spiritual atmosphere, convey emotions and facilitate spiritual connections. Besides the deities from different clans (clan gods), Ukpong further states that the Ibibio people had numerous divinities and countless spirits where numerous shrines were hallowed or set aside for worship or reverence of the household gods, ancestors, and gods of the village, clan divinities and minor gods. 'In every Ibibio traditional setting, the religious rituals performed by traditional priest contain music as a basic element. Thus, the use of music necessitated the rituals and are religiously codified. (p.28)

Following the above comments, ritualistic songs, chants, and drumming are believed to be actively utilized, while invoking ancestral spirits and deities, seeking their guidance, protection and blessings. Thus, as religion becomes part of culture, music then serves as a vital tool for communication with the spirit world. These musical expressions are deeply connected with the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Ibibio people, reflecting their worldview, cosmology, and understanding of the supernatural. The consciousness of ritual activities in Ibibio is based on shared ideas of both the interpretation of its religious thought and the realization of the ritualistic processes. Ekpa (2012), states that the expression of religious ritual activities are of two folds - private and public, but they are all manifested in music, dance, language or code, musical instruments and terminology which make it possible to recognize its members. Additionally, Vidal (2012) also posits that music performed in ritual context is the pre-occupation of members of the various cult societies, and that it corpus of songs and instrumentation are guided by the priests and initiates which may not be used on any occasion. Sometimes, ceremonies in traditional religion cannot be duly separated from social events. The worship of deities can be done as social events through music in form of incantations and sacrifices to divinities, spirits and ancestors at different levels of shrines. Ukpong (2007) supports the fact that the Ibibio, like other African peoples in the traditional background, are remarkably religious. Religion permeates all the departments of life so fully that it is not possible always to isolate it. 'It is the strongest element in the society and exerts probably the strongest influence upon the thinking and life of the people. In traditional society, there are no irreligious people; a person does not learn his religion by rote. Rather, it is instilled in his system right from birth.' (p. 62)

The Ibibio people believe in the existence of a supreme being whom they variously referred to as *'obot*' (the creator or creation), '*Abasi Ibom'* (Almighty God), or '*Abasi asana enyong'* (the God that exists in the sky). This supreme deity is considered the creator of the universe and the source of all life and energy. Thus, the Ibibio traditional religious worshippers and Christians believe on the existent of Supreme God as the creator of the universe. The writer of Ibibio history, Umo-Faithman (1999), states that, "The Ibibio inherited the belief in one Supreme God of the universe whom they called *Abasi Ibom,* literally the greatest or boundless God … and their belief in minor deities like 'ekpo' (spirit of the dead) and '*ndem'* (satan and his co-fallen angels incarnate …)' (p74).

However, the Ibibio, like many other indigenous societies in the world, have their own system of philosophy, ethics and values and religious thought forms which are very akin to Christians in the Bible as both believe in one Supreme Being. Udo (1983) comments that although the Ibibio seem to worship many gods, but they give an exalted position to

Abasi Ibom (the Supreme God). Just as the Bible describes God as the creator of the world and the ruler of all things, the Ibibio people believe that *Abasi* is the ultimate source of power, wisdom and authority. However, a review at the religious practices of Ibibio reveals that their beliefs in the Supreme God (*Abasi ibom*) and the lesser gods are coexisting.

Ibibio Beliefs on Morality

Another belief in Ibibio is moral values, such as respect for elders, ancestors and the divine. Such virtues were instilled through traditional religious practices and music. Traditional music served as a moral guide, teaching values and this was so crucial in the cultural preservation and transmission of traditional religious practice. Both traditional religion and musical practices were integrated for the social function of structuring and maintaining a good moral life in society. Ndemanu (2018) affirms that morality is highly associated with God. In this context, it is believed that God serves as a moral guide, providing a framework for ethical decision-making. The African traditional religious system believed that God is the ultimate source of moral guidance, and that their actions are accountable to the divine.

Ritual and Sacrifices

Another notable aspect of African traditional religion and belief was/is the practice of offering sacrifices and prayers to God through their ancestors or deities otherwise called gods. This was done to appease the gods and spirits, seeking their favour and protection. Udo in Udok (2016, p.29) states that children deity called *ntum* had its shrine at the bottom of the wall at the gabble end of a building where the children sang a song while making a hole in the ground and throwing crayfish to the ground for the dead children of the family. Udo explains the meaning that, *ntum* being the children's deity, controls the welfare and spirit of both the living and dead children. Therefore, songs, dances, oral traditions and knowledge about religious rituals, myths, and cultural norms were passed down from generation to generation. Such relationship between music and African traditional religion, shows the profound significance of music as a spiritual, cultural, and social force in the lives of the people.

Beliefs in Life After Death and Ancestral Worship

The unwavering belief in life after death was/is common belief in traditional African religious system. The relationship between the dead and the living becomes peculiar to most Africans, for instance, in Ibibio ethnic group of Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, Udo (1983) states that when *Ekong* member (*ekong* - the heroes of the land) dies, he is given a special treatment by building a large and well decorated house called *nwomo*, to immortalize the person, while rituals are observed to the departed soul in every big year. Ndemanu (2018) writes on similar experience, that in Bangwa community of Cameroon, there is a strong belief on life after dead, and that those who died, are not considered dead, but as ancestors watching over the living. Hence, in African traditional religion beliefs, life after death is often viewed as a continuation of life, with the deceased ancestors continuing to play an active role in the lives of their descendants. The relationship is complex and multifaceted, the living are expected to honour and venerate their ancestors through ritual and offerings. Below is the *Nwomo* (warrior shrine) in respect to dead member of *ekong*.

Nwomo (warrior shrine). Source: Udo, 1983

The dead known as ancestors are often seen as intermediaries between the living and the divine, communicating the needs and concerns of their people to gods. This relationship highlights the importance of ancestors in African traditional religion, emphasizing the connection of life and death.

Cosmological Beliefs in Ibibio

The Ibibio have a cosmological belief that involve their traditional understanding of the universe, creation stories and the connection of God to all things. Ekong, (2001) attests that the Ibibio recognizes the sky God who is the creator of all things as well as the earth gods and the spirits of the ancestors who are all regarded as mere administrators and defenders of creation. Thus, they believe to carry out their duties effectively for the welfare of man by invoking the earth gods through sacrifices and musicals. Such view indicates that traditional religion involves some religious rituals which act as fundamental vehicle to link man and the spirit.

A juju shrine (*ekuk ibok*) *ibok* has no regular shape as such but may be represented by a small wooden carving….(source: Ekong, 2001)

The Ibibio belief in juju shrines was/is an integral part of their cosmology and traditional spiritual practices. Juju shrines are sacred places where the people believed that supernatural powers reside, and so offering of sacrifices and prayers are made to these powers. In Ibibio cosmology, juju shrines are believed to be imbued with spiritual power which can be harnessed for various purposes, like the healing, protection and fertility. The belief in juju shrines reflects the Ibibio connection to the spirit world and their desire to tap into the supernatural.

Thus, music as the key factor in the traditional religious system is established to keep man in relationship with God and the forces of nature as Agu (2017) states:

> Religious worships then and now, have been essentially ritualistic. At almost all stages of the ceremony, music played and still plays a vital role. Singing, instrument playing and dancing remained and still remain the key. Each ethnic society had its own philosophy of life, its mode of worship and specific music types applied in worship of their many gods (p.33)

The compelling force from religious stand point which the spirituality is affected deeply, is through the sound of music. Akpabot (1986), adds that "Among the Ibibios of Nigeria, all ritual ceremonies in honour of their supreme being …is principally music orientated" (p.43).

The Ibibio chief priest (Source; Umo-Faithman, 1999)

Also, in traditional religion, priests were carriers of some beliefs, religious concepts and practices and by extension musical arts in form of incantation, because they mediate between man and the supernatural. In Ibibio traditional religion, the traditional priest served as a spiritual leader, guiding people in matters of spirituality, morality and ethics. The priest also performed various rituals and sacrifices through incantations to appease gods, ancestors and other supernatural beings. The incantations by the priest through sacred language, symbols and music was to communicate with the gods and the ancestral beings. Akpabot (1986) adds that the choice of a cantor who does the incantation must be a long standing member who is acquainted with the standard texts of the songs used in the worship of a particular god. In such case, music becomes the key tool to link with the spiritual beings.

Traditional Religion and Musical Practices in Present Ibibio Society

The state of traditional religion and musical practices in present Ibibio society is complex and dynamic. Traditional practices are still valued but the influence of Christianity and modernization has significantly impacted their growth and expression. Traditional religion and musical practices in Ibibio ethnic group of Akwa Ibom State is becoming more urbanized and exposed to external influences, with marginalization of traditional religious practitioners and beliefs in contemporary society. With the rise of mainstream religions and Western musical genres, traditional musicians and religious practitioners are likely to struggle to maintain their relevance and preserve their cultural heritage.

Despite the adoption of Christian values and beliefs that led to the decline in some traditional practices, traditional music and religion still remain an essential part of Ibibio culture. Music as an integral part of Ibibio culture is used in various social context and ceremonies.

Music has always been an important part of religious worship, be it traditional or Christianity. From the Biblical perspective till now, music has played important role in liturgical services. Hence, the early missionaries with their arrival on the land of Ibibio, introduced music alongside the scriptures and were careful for the kind of the spiritual and sacred songs they gave to their new converts. They preached against African cultural practices, while promoting Western cultural values and usages. They adopted a hostile attitude toward indigenous musical practices, especially local instruments and drumming, they assumed there were associated to pagan practices. However, this brought a complex and evolving religious approaches between traditional religion and Christianity in Ibibio group during postcolonial era.

Traditional religion is still rooted in the indigenous beliefs and practices of the Ibibio, even though the Christianity religion is vast spread in the area, the coexistence has led to a unique blend of beliefs and practices, with individuals often incorporating elements of both traditions into their spiritual lives.

Today, in present Ibibio society, the Christian religion is overwhelming with the proliferation of churches in every nook and cranny. Hence, many indigenous music compositions from different

denominations are in usage. In traditional African religion, the belief in the existence of sorcery has had immense influence on people's thought processes. As Ryan in Udok (2021) states that, it is not uncommon to see church goers consulting diviners either directly or indirectly and offering sacrifices to gods and ancestors in the same old way especially when there is an unfortunate occurrence. Meaning that some of the teachings of the traditionalists are still upheld in Ibibio practices, such as the demand for rams and she-goat as sacrifice for first daughters during traditional marriage ceremonies. While some Ibibio Christians still cling to the Ibibio system of polygamy sorcery and superstitious beliefs. Similarly, Ndemanu (2018) posits that a good number of Bangwa people believe that there is no such thing as natural death. Whether somebody dies of road accident, AIDS, cancer, diabetes, suicide, food poisoning or the like, the more conservative members of the traditional religion would insist on divination to investigate the cause of death.

It can be deduced that, even with the prevalence of Christian religion, some Ibibio people are still upholding to some traditional religious beliefs. Udo (1983) affirms that, even among the elite, many falls back to traditional religion when faced with problems and when under much strain, such as not having children, being disturbed by (water) spirits, loss of property, or non-promotion in the place of work. They fall back on traditional teachings of traditional religious practices, and seek the help of the *mbia ibok and mbia idiong* (the traditional physician and diviners). He further emphasizes that "even those who are traders, businessmen, contractors or teachers, for instance, directly or indirectly, seek the aid of diviners and traditional physicians when they are in difficult situations." (p. 281)
From Udo's remark, it is obvious that, despite the prevailing Christian religion in Ibibio society, the African traditional religious beliefs and practices are not totally eradicated. Therefore, as indigenous music compositions are variedly occupying in Christian churches, ritual music and incantations are also prevalent in traditional religious practices, since the two religions are still co-existing. Some churches even merge traditional religious practices with Christian practices as Ryan in Udok (2021) observes

> …the mushrooming of the so-called Christian churches after Nigeria's Independence, indirectly adopt the African traditional systems, … (some with) Sole Spiritual Head, Apostles, Evangelists, Prophets, Deacons, and Visioners (like the *mbia ibok* of Ibibio traditional religion). In some of these 'spiritual' churches in Ibibio land, the leaders actually use charms to draw people to their church for healing. (p.282).

Apparently, the dominant religion in this region is Christianity, and gospel music, hymns and choruses are important to church services and programmes. It is well known that Christianity was introduced in Ibibio through the work of the early Missionaries such as: Bishop Samuel Bill of Qua Iboe, the Presbyterian Church led by Mary Slessor at Itu, and other denominations like the Methodist, Catholic and others were founded by foreign Missionaries. In the middle and later part of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries, other self-governing Christian Churches emerged in the society. This affirmed the fact that the proliferation of church affiliations and the ethical practices cuts across board.

Many churches and denominations have been established, with Christianity

becoming a dominant religion in the State. The interaction between traditional religion and Christianity in Akwa Ibom State has not always been harmonious. There have been instances of tension and conflict, particularly in the early years of missionary activities when traditional practices were often seen as incompatible with Christian teachings. For instance, in the early years of Qua Iboe church, hand clapping and instrumentation were not allowed to be practiced in the church. It was only hymn singing, because of the fear of pagan influences inherent in involving rhythmic movements and instrumentation. Mbon (1991), states that Qua Iboe leaders sought to distinguish their worship from traditional practices, so they focused on prayer, hymns and preaching. Furthermore, he noted that the church's early rejection of hand clapping and instrumentation was rooted in its desire to maintain spiritual purity and avoid syncretism with traditional Ibibio practices. Hence, the church leaders believed that those practices were not in line with Biblical teachings and could potentially lead to a watered-down form of Christianity. However, over time, a more syncretic approach emerged, with many church denominations blending elements of what the early missionaries assumed as bad traditions in their spiritual practices.

Presently, there are more than one or two churches in every street. But despite that, some Christians are still involved in some traditional and ritual practices. A clergy – Reverend Akpan (2023) made a remarkable point that, even though some aspects of Christianity are unchangeable and universally accepted, there are wide spectrum of activities which could be adapted from the people's cultural point of view. However, for the fact that some Christians mix traditional rituals with their Christian religion does not prove that the faith of all Christians in the area is superficial. Also, the fact that nominal Christians are evidently involved in defying moral principles does not prove that the coming of Christian religion was to cause moral decadence in the society.
Comparatively, the PEW Research Centre (2010), after conducting a research on the practices of traditional African religions in Africa, affirms that African traditional religions are still prevalent in most of the African countries in spite of centuries of Christian and Islamic dominance. They noted that, 'large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam, yet, they also believe in witchcraft, evil spirits and sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions.

Today, many people in Akwa Ibom State practice a form of Christianity that incorporates elements of traditional instruments and religion in churches. This is evident in the use of traditional instruments and cultural practices within Christian churches circle, while some continue in the observance of traditional rituals alongside Christian worship. This blending of traditions, reflects the innovations and adaptability of the region's religious beliefs and highlights the ongoing evolution of religious identity in Akwa Ibom State.

Conclusion

The study of music and traditional religion in contemporary Nigerian society, with a focus on Ibibio experience, reveals the dynamic relationship between culture and, traditional and modernity. The research highlights the significance of traditional music and spirituality in shaping Ibibio religious beliefs. As Akwa Ibom State and by extension Nigeria, faces the complexities of modernization and globalization, the findings stress the importance of preserving and promoting traditional cultural practices, while also acknowledging the evolving nature of cultural expression. By examining the relationship between music and traditional

religion, a deeper understanding of the rich culture of Akwa Ibom state is brought to limelight, thereby expressing ways in which music continues to shape and define the religions of the society.

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