

The Role of Music in African Traditional Religious Practices in Nigeria: The Case of Ohafia Community, Abia State.

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Abstract

Music plays a crucial role in African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Nigeria particularly in Ohafia Community serving as a medium for worship, communication with the divine, preservation of cultural heritage, and social cohesion. The study explores the pivotal role of music in African Traditional Religious practices as a vital channel for spiritual expression and communication. Music here is a sacred tool that facilitates worship, invokes spiritual entities, and reinforces cultural values and beliefs. The objective of this paper is examining the role of music in African traditional religious practices in Nigeria: The case of Ohafia Community. The paper employed a historical survey and multi-dimensional approach to achieve this task. The primary source comprises of information obtained from key person's interview who are votaries of both ritualistic and non-ritualistic music. The secondary sources of data collection include information obtained from books, journals, Internet materials and conference papers. The study adopted a functional theory as its theoretical framework. The paper in its findings noted that various forms such as drumming, chanting, singing and the use of indigenous instruments abound, music serve to accompany rituals, celebrate festivals, and mark significant rites of passage. The study concludes that music enhances the efficacy of religious rituals by creating an atmosphere conducive to spiritual communication, expressions and experiences, fostering a sense of identity among practitioners, and preserving oral traditions of Ohafia Community. The paper recommends that music should remain a dynamic and integral element of Africa traditional religious practices.

Key words: Music, African, Traditional, Religion, Practices

Introduction

Music plays very important role in every human society. Music is regarded as having magic effect on both the performer and his audience in such a way that it makes them feel the cultural bounds which bind them together, thereby leading them to share the same common feeling of belonging to the same community (Onyiuke, 1999:69). Music has been styled as the greatest of the Arts. All sound is music. In other words, music is made up of sound, and a combination of musical instruments. Music, songs and dance, combined, could produce desired communicative effect.

Music holds a central place in African traditional religious practices, serving not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a vital medium for spiritual communication, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. In Ohafia Community of Abia State, Nigeria, music plays a significant role in the practice and transmission of Traditional Religion. It is intricately woven into rituals, festivals, initiation ceremonies, and ancestral worship, reflecting the community's cosmology, beliefs and moral values. Through drums, chants, songs, and other indigenous instruments, the Ohafia people communicate with the spiritual realm, invoke deities, and honor ancestors. Music in this context is not merely entertainment but a sacred tool that enhances spiritual experience, maintains oral traditions and reinforces the communal identity of the Ohafia people. This study seeks to explore the multifaceted role of music in the traditional religious life of Ohafia Community, highlighting its spiritual, social, and cultural significance.

What is Music?

Glenon (1980) defines music as “expression in sound or expression of thought and feeling in aesthetic form. It is also the fine art of combining vocal and instrumental sound into rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structure. Music is part of living; it has power to awaken in us

sensations and emotions of a spiritual kind. Music can do many things, and have many desirable results. It can stimulate or soothe the mind, help towards a wider education, of at least, a wider mental perspective. It can gently plough the mind so that it will be more receptive to the seeds of learning; music can comfort the lonely and sick, awake pleasant memories in the old, delight the young and make the child to sleep.

Okafor (1995) defined music as a cultural expression determined, molded, interpreted and dressed or coloured by culture and the cultural environment of a people. Nwadukwe (1994) defined music as a cultural phenomenon present in every society and experienced by every individual. Music is a form of artistic expression that involves the organization of sounds through elements such as rhythm, melody, harmony and timbre. It is a universal human activity that conveys emotions, tell stories and serves various functions in society, ranging from entertainment to spiritual communication.

According to Merriam (1964), music is a humanly organized sound, emphasizing the cultural and social contexts within which music is created and performed. Titon (2009) defined music as sound that is humanly patterned and organized, highlighting both the human origin and structured nature of musical expression. In Ohafia Community, music is more than an artform. It is deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life and religious practice. Nketia (1974) noted that in African societies, music is not an isolated aesthetic activity but a part of the total cultural expression, often accompanying rituals, ceremonies, and communal events.

The Role of Music in Ohafia Traditional Religious Practices

Music plays a vital role in the religious and cultural life of Ohafia people of Abia State. In Ohafia, music is deeply intertwined with rituals, war dances, ancestral veneration, and communal ceremonies. It serves as a means of spiritual

communication, historical preservation, and social cohesion. Below are the various roles of music in Ohafia traditional religious practices:

1. Music in Ancestral Veneration and Rituals

The Ohafia people, like many Igbo sub-groups, practice ancestral veneration, where music is an essential component of traditional religious practice. According to Anyanwu (1999), during the process of the commencement of ancestral rituals and veneration, music is the key medium of communication between the humans and the ancestors. The ancestors receive libations and offerings at regular intervals through the instrumentality of music. The elders of Igbo land when praying in the mornings invoke the names of their ancestors together with those of the divinities through ritualistic music. During ceremonies in Ohafia, set aside to honour ancestors, traditional instruments such as the wooden slit drum (*Ekwe*) and metal gong (*Ogele*) are played to summon spirits and set the rhythm for ritual chants and prayers. At this point, sacred songs are sung to invoke blessings and guidance from the ancestors.

2. Music and Ohafia War Dance

One of the most famous cultural and religious expressions of the Ohafia people is the war dance (*Ikperikpe Ogu*). This dance is performed by Ohafia warriors and is accompanied by drumming, flutes, and chanting of war songs. The music in the war dance serves both a spiritual and historical purpose because it is believed to invoke the spirits of the past warriors, seeking their strength and protection. The rhythm of the drums and the warriors' chants connect the physical world with the spiritual realm, reinforcing bravery and communal pride.

Ohafia war dance is one of the most popular and symbolic cultural displays celebrated among the warriors for its connection to warrior heritage, bravery,

and valour. The dance commemorates the martial history of the Ohafia people, who were reputed warriors in the pre-colonial period. In the past, an Ohafia man was recognized as a man of honour only after he had taken a human head in the battle field (a symbol of bravery and strength) and submit the head to the elders at *onuagba* of Achichi Ohafia Udumaezema square at Elu-Ohafia. However, the dance dramatizes the return of a victorious warrior from the battle field showcasing pride and a sense of accomplishment. The lead dancer often carries a human skull or a symbolic replica which signify a trophy of war. The performers usually carry machetes, spears and wear distinctive warrior costumes which may include raffia skirts, red or black caps, beads and eagle feathers. Below is the ritual song for Ohafia War dance

Ohafia War Dance Song of the Brave Warriors

English Translation (chorus)

The fathers of Ohafia, the warriors of Ohafia

The eagle has danced again

Ohafia the lion roars again

(Verse)

Who fought the war and came back strong

Okoro, the son of Ohafia, he danced with blood

He fought and brought heads, and glory home

Let the drums beat for him again

(Chorus)

The fathers of Ohafia, the warriors of Ohafia

Our land is proud of her sons

Night water, the war is done, Ohafia the Warriors.

(Verse)

I went to war, I saw the fight
Steel in hand, I took the night
They fled at the sound of my name-
Ikenga Ohafia guided my aim

Chorus

Brave men do not sleep in shame
Ohafia men rise with pride

The shadow frightens the wild.

(Verse)

The battle is done, the head is won
Our drums shake the earth with joy
Women sing, the children cheer, the
Brave return with pride.

Chorus

The war dance shakes the ground
Ohafia Warriors let the horns blow loud,
Ikpirikpe Ogu Ohafia is here

Pictures of Ohafia War Dancers Performing During Traditional Festival



Ohafia War Dancers



Ohafia War Lead Dancer on top of Car roof performing



Ohafia War Dancers



Ohafia War Dancers



Traditional Flute for Ohafia War dance song



Traditional Drum for Ohafia War dance song

3. Music and Masquerade (*Mmong*) Performance during Festivals

Masquerade performance in Ohafia Traditional Religion is believed to represent the spirits of the ancestors and deities. Music plays a crucial role in the masquerades and creating a sacred atmosphere. The clay drum (*Udu*), metal gong (*Ogele*), and large wooden drum (*Ikoru*) are commonly used to communicate with the masquerades. Songs and chants during masquerade festivals often contain spiritual messages, reinforcing cultural values and religious

belief. The music used during Ohafia war dance performance is different from the music used for masquerade performance during festivals in Ohafia. There are many masquerades in Ohafia used in the celebration of different festivals. There are different masquerades used for New Yam Festival, Burial ceremony, initiation ceremony, traditional marriage, Traditional Otomu festival, harvest festival, planting season festival and coronation ceremony. The colour and costume of the masquerades are based on the festival being celebrated by the people.

Pictures of Musical Instruments for Masquerade Performance



Traditional Gong (Ogene)



Udu



Ikoro (Traditional Wooden Slit)



Ekpe Masquerade Performing During New Yam Festival

4. Worship, Healing Rituals and Divination through Music

Traditional healers and diviners in Ohafia use music as part of their spiritual practices. However, specific songs and drum patterns are played to invoke spiritual forces during healing rituals. Music is believed to facilitate trance state, allowing the healer to communicate with spirits and diagnose ailments. Music is central to religious ceremonies, including sacrifices, festivals, initiations and funeral rites. In ATR, songs, drumming and chants are used to invoke spirits, praise deities and their achievements as well as creating a sacred atmosphere. For example, in Ohafia religious practices, the *Ikoró*, *Akwatankwa* and *Nkwa* accompany worship of the traditional deities (Agwu, 2010). Music is also used for healing in ATR. Ritual drumming and chanting are believed to have the therapeutic effects, helping to cure physical and spiritual ailments. In healing rituals, praise, poetry and sacred music/songs are used to invoke spiritual powers and also to exorcise evil spirits.

5. Music and Preservation of Oral Traditions of Ohafia People and Culture

Through music, religious knowledge, myths, and moral teachings are transmitted across generations. Songs tell stories of creation, moral values, and historical events. Among traditional societies particularly Ohafia, music is used to pass down traditional beliefs and healing practices (Kalu, 2022). The role of music in culture cannot be over emphasized. Culture is a complex whole comprising music. Music is used to correct the social ills in the society. In other words, music can be used as an agent of social control. In line with the above view, Emeka and Okafor (1994:74) explained that songs of

criticism are very simple methods of social control prevalent in many traditional societies. These songs of derision are commonly heard in the village streams, village market, village square and in social parades/procession which conveniently but embarrassingly pass where the transgressors can hear it.

In traditional society, music is used for various functions. These ceremonies include childbirth, naming ceremonies, initiation ceremonies of various kinds, marriage, outing ceremonies and burial/funeral ceremonies (Onyiuke 1999).

From the above observation, in Ohafia Community, Music serves not only as a medium for entertainment and social relationship, but as an intricate of the development of mind, body and soul. It is believed that laws of the land are learned through songs. The history of the tribe is learned through songs and the accepted behavioural patterns in the Community are all assimilated in music.

6. Music as an Instrument of Social Cohesion and Religious Festival Celebrations

Religious music fosters unity during festivals, bringing people together in collective worship. During festivals (ancestor veneration) ceremonies in Igbo land and Ohafia in particular, music and dance reinforce communal identity and social cohesion (Adegbite, 1988). Music is a unifying force during Ohafia religious festivals such as the (*Iri ji*) New Yam Festival Celebrations, and other Community rituals. These festivals often feature religious song that praises the gods of the land, heal the sick, and strengthens social bonds. Its role remains vital in contemporary African societies, even amid modern influences.

7. Music and Religious Communication with the Divine

Music plays a very important role in religion. Any religious worship without music is like fish without water. Music is a universal language of humans and the best medium of Communication with the Supernatural Being. Discussing the above, Onunwa (1990:42) stated that:

It is evident from many African societies that music plays significant roles in the religious culture of the people. Often, as a part of African art ,observers usually emphasize its influence on the drummers' and singers or dancers who work up themselves to a lever of excitement and frenzy. Their spiritual standard and tempo is usually not taken notice of. It is when some of them are in such mood of excitement that they communicate with the divine guests' very close and intimate relationship.

Picture of a man performing with a Traditional flute as a divine Communication with the divinities in Ohafia



Music is the dominant feature of Igbo traditional worship. Each deity or spirit has its special music with which it is addressed during invocation. Such music depicts the character and probably the status of the god. In traditional Ohafia Community,

music and religion are inseparable. Upholding the above assertion, Mbiti (1990) noted that “through music, singing and dancing, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship. The music and dancing penetrate the very being of the worshipping adherents. There is a link between music and religious cult as expressed affirmation of a supernatural order.

8. Music and Reconciliation

Music is very important for achieving reconciliation in Ohafia Community. In any socio- political and religious gathering dances from different parts of Ohafia are invited for entertainment. These dances with their different cultural backgrounds come together with their respective traditional musics for common purpose. During this period, everyone present irrespective of State or place of origin is being entertained. There is no discrimination whatsoever in terms of who dances or performs first but the music is what moves the soul of the participants. Music is a vital instrument for traditional reconciliation in Ohafia Community. When it is sung, every Ohafia person has a sense of commitment, belonging and patriotism to the philosophy and ideology of Ohafia ancient kingdom.

Challenges of Music in African Traditional Religious Practices in Ohafia Community.

There is no doubt that music plays a deep role in African Traditional Religion (ATR) especially in rituals, festivals, and spiritual communication. However, several challenges affect the use of music in their religious practices today.

1. Modernization and Western Influence

Western education, Christianity, and modern entertainment have shifted attention away from traditional religious

music. Many young people prefer western or Pentecostal gospel music over indigenous religious songs or music. This is a current trend in the world, Nigeria and Ohafia community in particular though it has not been able to totally destroy indigenous music. Western music has influenced indigenous music because of globalization of western music, use of modern musical instruments, wide acceptability by the youths, death of votaries of indigenous musicians without transmission of the indigenous knowledge to the younger generation, cultural shift to modern music, urbanization and erosion of cultural values, religious beliefs and practices. Also, social change has changed the structure of the society there by affecting the traditional music industry. Many Christians and few Muslims in Ohafia see traditional religious music as pagan or idolatrous, leading to social pressure against practicing or performing it openly. This is a clear case in the indigenous music used during “*Obuon*” (a male exclusive secret dance) performed during Ohafia New Yam Festival

2. Loss of Indigenous Knowledge

As an elder who knows the traditional songs, drum patterns, and chants die without passing them on to younger generations, many traditions are being forgotten. Oral transmission has been weakened by western culture. The votaries of Ohafia culture, tradition, customs and moral values as well as traditional music are going into extinction without preserving the indigenous knowledge about Ohafia music. Consequently, the replacement of traditional music with modern music, Ohafia culture with western culture has remained the cause of the loss of knowledge of Ohafia music

3. Cultural Dilution and Syncretism

In trying to stay relevant, some traditional musicians mix ATR music with Christians or Muslim music, leading to a loss of authenticity and original religious meaning. Cultural and social changes rapidly gaining momentum in Ohafia has really affected the growth of traditional music due to the clash of interest between tradition and modernity. Many people in the community especially Christians see everything that has to do with culture, tradition customs of the people as primitive, savage, superstitious, pagan, and demonic. Most of the traditional institutions in Ohafia have been affected by cultural dilution and syncretism thereby making our culture to be valueless and profane.

4. Economic Challenges

Traditional musicians and drummers are often poorly paid without financial incentive, and as a result younger generations are reluctant to learn or maintain the traditions. Traditional music is not lucrative like modern or western music which has global acceptance and coverage. Most of the traditional musicians are poor and do not have the money to buy modern musical instruments, no sponsorship and no government support thereby affecting their desire to upgrade their musical skills. So, lack of money has been a challenge affecting traditional musicians in Ohafia.

5. Government Neglect of Traditional Institutions and Music.

There is very little official support (like grants, festivals, or preservation programmes) from the government to protect or promote traditional religious music in Ohafia Community. In recent times, there is low patronage to traditional music and cultural matters as a result of modernism, urbanization, Christianity and westernization. Government focuses much

attention on things concerning science and technology thereby neglecting traditional institutions used in the formulation and preservation of traditional music. It is obvious that our traditional institutions associated with music are gradually going into extinction because of neglect by government.

6. Technological Disruption.

The rise of digital music production, DJs, and recorded music reduces the need for live traditional performances, making them seem old fashioned and outdated to many especially the younger generations. Traditional music is mainly oral in nature and are not normally documented and preserved like modern music. Therefore, the oral nature and undocumented condition of the indigenous music made it difficult for the migration to digital music. Also, lack of technological facilities, tools and manpower resources needed for digital music production and preservation are lacking in Ohafia community.

7. Erosion of Language

Traditional songs are often performed in Ohafia dialect (a variety of Igbo language). As English and Pidgin English dominate communication in recent times, fewer young people are fluent enough to fully understand or perform the traditional music and songs. Traditional music requires the services a man or woman vast in the history, tradition, culture, mythical stories of events that took place in the primordial times in Ohafia as well as the activities of the gods. For example, it is believed that the kola nut does not understand English and therefore during traditional ceremonies in Ohafia, traditional orators are needed to anchor or moderate the ceremony. The few remaining traditional folklore singers and

musicians are too old to perform as a result of old age and health challenges affecting their speech and voice pattern was considered to be a major challenge to indigenous music.

Conclusion

Music in Ohafia traditional religious practices is more than just entertainment. It is a spiritual tool that connects the people with their ancestors, deities, and community. Whether in ancestral veneration, war dances, masquerade performances or healing rituals, music plays role in maintaining cultural and religious traditions of Ohafia Community. Music in ATR is not just an artistic expression but an integral part of spiritual and communal life. It facilitates worship, preserve traditions used in healing therapy, a link to spiritual communication with the ancestors, deities and the Supreme Being and a network that strengthens social bonds.

The paper has examined religious music as a valuable instrument for cultural transmission and as the greatest of the arts. The paper discussed the role of music in African Traditional Religion. It sees music as the language of spiritual communication and religion is being interwoven with culture and the social fabric of Ohafia people. Also the paper noted the challenges facing music but believes preservation of the culture and tradition of Ohafia people will also help in preserving music in traditional religious practices of Ohafia people. Having seen the role of music in traditional religious practices on Ohafia Community, it is important to point out that music is an important agent that cannot be neglected because of its effect on the social, religious, emotional, moral, physical, and economic life of the people.

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