

MUSIC AND COMMUNICATION IN THE TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE OSHIMILI COMMUNITIES OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Communication is a vital tool to understanding the make-up of every community and its behavioral attitudes towards the building of a nation. Nigerian society in general relies on communication to disseminate duties and distribute vital information that will help to keep the nation in order. The world therefore needs vital communication to carry out important duties that will help keep things going among bodies that make up every institution that exists in nation building, starting from family to governmental bodies. The need to delve into the traditional activities of the *Oshimili* community involves a deep probe into the musical traditions of the people and its communication system. Music being the main source of communication amongst these communities has also helped in understanding the traditional practices and building of the people. This paper will not only look into the musical practices and traditions of *Oshimili* communities, it will point out the communication processes that exist in the various traditional activities of the community and the roles music play as communicative device to maintain and uphold their traditional belief systems. This paper relied on observational methods, and some literatures on the history of the community and other related literatures for data collection. It also conducted oral interviews with persons knowledgeable in both the musical and traditional activities in the community.

Keywords: Communication, Society, Oshimili, Information, Music Traditions.

Introduction

The Communities of *Oshimili* North and South share same boundaries and have always had several inter changes and inter relationships. Due to these relationships and communications, these communities have related beliefs and belief systems, similar cultures yet distinct in some of their practices especially in their religious beliefs and practices. *Oshimili* North and South have always shared the same traditional musical ideas. Their musical interests have in the past brought these communities together for one performance or the other. This happens during festivals, Marriages, Burial ceremonies; their languages are also similar hence they understand each other and these have helped to enhance their communicative system in their musical traditional performances. Traditional music of the *Oshimili* communities have therefore played very important roles in projecting their cultural packages thereby acting as a communicative instrument used to define their cultural norms and value systems. Music is a vital means of communicating to an audience, a neighbor and the community at large since this will help to also preserve the cultural heritage of a community. Musical communication exists not only in vocal music but also in dance and instrumental performances. Music is therefore more than a means of entertainment but play other roles such as medium of expression, connection and culture indicator. Highlighting and projecting the importance of music communication Xiaolin et al (2024) discusses the role of network communication in the process of music promotion by stating that “network communication has the characteristics of extensiveness and convenience which enable traditional folk music to spread rapidly around the world, expanding the scope of influence and audience groups”(P.275). They concluded that in this form, “traditional folk music can break the geographical limitations through the network so that more people can know and appreciate its special charm”.Boro (2025) states that, “folk songs are an important element of oral tradition, the practice of passing information, stories, and customs by oral transmission rather than written form” (P.105). He concludes that, “folk songs are the cultural identity of the community”. This is because the cultural heritage of every community reflects in their folk music. Okpokwasili (2023) also infers that, “any song that originates among the people of a country or area, passed by oral tradition from one singer or generation to the next, often existing in several versions and marked generally by simple, modal melody and stanza narrative verse can be termed a folksong”.

Communication is a vital tool for human understanding, human creativity, and even human growth. Human beings make up a nation hence the nation needs effective communication system to disseminate duties and monitor the effectiveness of the duties. Even in humans, communication helps to keep a home and make it habitable for proper and effective relationship. Communication is therefore, a device to building a family, a community, a nation and the world.

There have been so many definitions of communication by various persons and authors; from the perspective of the authors, communication is a process of studying or transmitting messages to a group of persons for proper and effective information dissemination. Communication therefore involves two or more persons. Where there

is no communication or effective communication there is never an understanding and no proper documentation is upheld. Trinh et al (2023) also contends that, “communication refers to the exchange of information between multiple individuals”. Citing the following as example they buttress that, “in the context of musical interactions, communication often involves conveying emotional and/or social information between a care giver and an infant”. Sarah et al (2023) see music as, “another communicative mode that has a unique power to bring people together and transmit a rich tapestry of emotions, through joint music making and listening in a variety of every day contexts”. Communication among group of persons or individuals in a musical performance helps to understand the aims and objectives of the performance and also urges them into action. This is very clear in a session of the burial ceremony among the Asaba community of *Oshimili* South, where the first stage of the burial is introduced with songs (*abu-ozu*) meant especially for that aspect of the burial ceremony. The songs and instruments that accompany the songs are very significant because of their important roles as accompanying musical instruments in the first session of the burial (*abu-ozu*) ceremony, to members who are familiar with the process of the burial rites, though to outsiders, this action is seen as mere entertainment but to the people, it is a cultural practice. Udoh, (2023) notes that, in most Igbo dance performances and also in most indigenous African dances, the communicative ability of the musical instruments like the *Oja* and *Igba* becomes highly evident. He maintained that, “musical instruments are used in various forms of communication in the Igbo land”. Although music is seen and considered as a direct expression of human emotions, it also communicates messages and instructs on the actions to be taken which will help in making the traditional activity for proper understanding. In the instrumental burial rites among the *Oshimili*, the session of ‘*Egwuota*’ instrumental music, directs the people on how to take their traditional dances, as they enter the arena in turns. Every stanza is played, with the first stanza performed for the gods/ ancestors who are believed to be present at the arena and are to perform the first dance, called *Egwundinmuo* (dance of the spirit).

Communication can also come in different ways, either through verbal and non-verbal. The verbal communication is the use of the spoken words in a face-to-face setting or through telephone calls, video calls etc, while the non-verbal involves actions like dance steps and movements, instrumental displays, gestures when the necessary steps are taken in a communication process, the expected objective is achieved. Communication in a musical performance is very effective when the sender and receiver(s) come to a final understanding, which completes the circle of communication.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study includes three theories which are: Cultural Studies Theory, Symbolic Interactionism and Performance Theory: These frameworks portrays an emphasis in understanding music and communication within the cultural contexts of the community under study; highlighting the significance of music in shaping cultural identity, preserving traditions and promoting social cohesion. In upholding the theory of symbolic interactionism, this focuses on how music communicates its meaning and also shapes social interactions within *Oshimili* communities, exploring how music is used to convey cultural values, tell stories and reinforce norms. Finally, the performance theory will highlight and examine the performative aspects of music in traditional activities of *Oshimili* communities, which includes ceremonies, festivals and rituals.

The aforementioned will provide foundation for understanding the complex relationships between music, communication and traditional activities in *Oshimili* communities.

Traditional Music and Communication

Traditional music is always associated with the cultural beliefs and practices of every society. It is a means of portraying the cultural heritage of communities in a communal performance. Udoh, (2023) notes that, “Traditional Communication media are vehicles that are rich in variety and are readily and economically viable”. He further stresses that, “they are tools or channels used for passing information or messages to the people in rural communities” (P.100). Leongomez et al (2022) infers that, “music is a universal language that has been used for centuries as a means of expression, entertainment and communication” (P.7)

Nzewi, (1984) states that “in traditional strategy for mass communication, the various musical process used can be categorized as direct when the intention of musical sounds of mass communication is exclusive and direct, when music making and presentations are intended as the entertainment based for mass communication objective” (p.32). Direct communications in traditional music performance usually occurs in traditional festivals where the audience is allowed to air their views, praise and even expose individuals freely. In *Ulo* festival of *Asaba* community, the performers are permitted to air their views; therefore songs are used to expose the evil and atrocities committed by persons or groups. These serve as a source of information to members of the community and their guests. In this festival, the performers capitalize on the freedom of speech to air their views and sing about evil actions meted on them either by their neighbors or benefactors, etc., who ordinarily, they

could not confront. The rulers and elders are not left out in this celebration. The exposure creates room for repairs, reconciliations, and for such ills to be addressed properly.

An example of such song is:

Obi obi Kachi-----obi kachi
Obi-o obi Kachi – o-----obi kachi-o
Ewookisieme – o-----is this how you are?
Igbu Si ahaba, ----if you kill everybody in the land
Nginaonyeg’ebi-o-----who will you live with?
Ogaekwei me-oooo-----can you achieve your purpose?

The above song tells the story of a wicked titled man who tortured and killed anyone that quarreled with him. It became so consistent that the community had to cry out to expose his evil deeds and to warn people from associating with him. The song is in context with the festival that is being celebrated which is called the *ekwensu* festival, specially meant for cleansing the land of all evil and ushering in the New Year.

When traditional festivals are organized and designed for public presentation as mass media, the intention is usually to inform the community about its policy, social events, local gossips, the medium utilized here is a verbal mode of communication. In other cases that involve sensitive issues, metaphor and allusions are factors that determine the effectiveness of communication among communities; this is because the traditional mass media relies principally on the speech media (verbal and instrumental) hence everybody within the community need to understand the language. Understanding the language of one’s community enhances communication. Traditional festivals are performed to showcase the cultural beliefs and practices of indigenous communities hence it is purely for the benefits of the members of that community and also to portray their beliefs and culture to their audiences. It is also an avenue for communal communication and gathering of people who share common knowledge, ideas, beliefs and love for their land.

Communication Through Songs and Song -Texts

A folk song is a song traditionally sung by the common people of a region and forms part of their culture. It is therefore a collective effort of a community which portrays their beliefs and practices as well as their creativity and artistic potentials. It is a medium of expressing the state of being of an individual or group of persons in an artistic manner through speech and language.

Oshimili communities rely on their songs to communicate their feelings to their audience, in all their cultural activities, song appear as information, entertainment and worship. Songs and Song texts as culture indicators have played important roles as means of expression and communication. Societies have used them as elements of historical activities from the past to the present and this is where languages as a cultural trait, is used in song texts from its origin. Song texts therefore were used to pass information from one generation to the other, for example, the “Abu Ozu” a song meant specifically for mourning talks about the effect of death on the bereaved especially the death of the young.

Song

Oh! oh! Ewo oh oh
OnyekoteOgu
Yagbanaso o
Omekanneone who imitates the mother
Adiaanwuanwu does not die prematurely
Ewo! Ewo-oooewoooo (lamentation)

Translation

(lamentation 3ce)
one who starts a fight
should not run

Another song which comes often to portray marital disagreements and maltreatment in polygamy goes thus:

Dim-o dim-odim-odim-o	my husband, my husband, my husband
Nsi dim go nyemgiorgi-o	I asked my husband for George (cloth)
Nsi dim go nyem lace-io	I asked my husband for lace material
Manaofuonyeyigorgi	but if he sees another woman on George
Onanaaanya	it will attract his attention
Manaofuonyeyilaci-o	but if he sees another woman on lace
Onanaaanya	it will attract his attention
Ewoo love dim	ewoo, my love my husband
Dim-o,dim-o,dim-o dim-o	My husband, my husband, my husband

Ahamefula, (2013) notes that, “at burial ceremonies, sounds of cry are used to show grief by the loved ones of the bereaved”. These sounds are communicated in between songs during dirge sessions and they are improvised to portray the mood of the moment. Izu, (2022) contends that, “to understand a song’s true meaning, one must

look beyond the rhythmic pattern and position of the song's texts within a broader socio-cultural context" (P.82). *Oshimili* communities rely on proverbs in their songs hence a good singer is identified and acknowledged for his/her expertise in the usage of proverbs when singing. A good singer is therefore expected to have in-depth knowledge of the community and persons. Song texts are better appreciated and understood when the lyrics of the songs are packed full with proverbs as well as wise sayings.

Communication through songs may appear in different ways. This paper will look at it from two points of view; Direct and indirect. Direct communication through songs and song texts occur when the sender sends messages and gives an accurate description of the subject and subject matter. In the aforementioned, names dates and places can be mentioned. This type of communication is common in festival celebrations where "slay" songs play prominent roles as medium for correction and exposure. Good deeds and crimes are portrayed through songs. Those whose good deeds are pronounced are praised and may be visited during the celebration while the evil doers are exposed, insulted and warned. On the other hand indirect communication may also come from songs of satire, instrumental performance, dances, and artificial images drawn or costumes worn for mimicry. Among the Delta *Igbos*, singing is a natural means of self-expression. It is also the principal means of music making since it plays more significant roles than instruments in most activities that occur in the communities which called for music accompaniment. It is not surprising to see individuals singing to indirectly insult a neighbor or a rival. Indirect songs are ways of expressing individual or group reactions towards each other to communicate feelings of joy or anger.

Ekwueme, (2004) points out that "the most natural method of music making is the employment of the natural instrument: that which every person owns or carries with him wherever he goes – the human voice. He contends that "singing has been known to be with man as long as can be traced" (P.15). The *Oshimili* communities in Delta state are known to use songs to express not only their feelings, thoughts and moods but also to air their views on issues concerning them personally and the community in general. Direct communication through songs appear in burial songs where principal roles that lead to the burial proper are performed by specified persons such as the *Umuada* and the *Okwulagwe* groups. These are the chief mourners who with their songs gather to mourn the dead with songs and praise, citing all the past good deeds of the deceased. In the same burial ceremony, the instrumental performance displayed by the *Egwu-ota* instrumental ensemble communicates to the audience that the deceased was a titled man and if it is a woman; the husband was a titled man as well. This therefore means that the *Egwu-ota* performance in a burial ceremony communicates the status of the deceased person that is being buried.

Although folktale songs among the *Oshimili* communities and even among societies have begun to go into extinction, it has in the past made communication effective among children in the society. It has provided avenues for socialization and encouraged active participation as well as educating children in the area of moral values, folk stories etc. **Ekwueme, (2004)**, points out that,

music folklore performs dual functions "first, it provides a break in the narrative for reflection, dialogue or monologue; this is always in verse, performing the function of an aria in European opera, secondly, It calls for participation of the audience, thus helping to keep the interest and attention of children to whom the story is primarily aimed. He concludes that "music and group singing consequently play no small role in the early education of (Igbo) children(p.5).

In bringing up children, music and group singing have played no small role. They have been used as medium of passing on knowledge in the education of children. At infancy for example, songs are used to pet children when they cry, mothers sing lullabies to the crying child, either to pet him/her to sleep or to make the baby to stop crying. Every song communicates something to the child which the child responds to. The child here may not understand the words but the tones/melodies communicate something to the child that he/she responds to.

Communication Through Musical Instruments

Udoh (2023) notes that, "musical instruments are used in various forms of communication in Igbo land in some occasions". (P.104). Musical instruments not only dictates dance movements, it has in so many musical and non-musical activities, played very important role as communication media in communities. The drums also give expressive communicative messages in its use among various communities; it communicates as speech surrogate in Yoruba indigenous music performances. Chukwu, (2011), portrays the communicative abilities of the membrane by stating that, "the membrane drum plays both melodic and rhythmic roles, as far as African drum music is concerned. Hence the membrane drum is a melo-rhythmic instrument. As such, the African membrane drum is normally used as singing or talking musical instrument". Drums play various roles in

different communities as communication media and they relay their designated information for the audience action and responses.

During burial ceremonies, a membrane drum called *Akaja* plays a leading role in accompanying the corpse of the dead from the mortuary to its lying in state. This is practiced by *Asaba* communities of Delta State. The sound of this drum from a distance tells the people that the corpse of the dead has arrived for the burial ceremony to begin. This communication is vital to the intended persons and encourages those who have special and key roles to play to get prepared and be at the venue for the ceremony. The drum is usually accompanied by the woodblock which also plays the same role as non-verbal means of communication in burial ceremonies. Udoh (2023), cites Kamien, (1994) who infers that, “tone languages permit the use of music for communication: drummers, trumpeters, and other musicians convey messages and tell stories by imitating the rhythm and pitch fluctuations of words” (Pp.2-9). The *Akpele* (trumpet) plays significant role in dance performances; it dictates the time for the singers to show their expertise in their songs and conveys to the dancers when to perform, from slow movements to the climax of their dance till the dance ends. This communication between the instrumentalist and the dancers, singers and other instrumentalists portray the role of the *akpele* player as the master instrumentalist who not only conducts the entire ensemble but also communicates its messages clearly for an effective performance to take place. In nonmusical situations among the *Asaba* community, the *Akpele* serve other purposes of communication; it is blown by titled men (*ogbueshis*), to welcome, identify and showcase their presence in a gathering, it is blown during burial ceremonies of a titled man (*eze* title) by the first son to indicate royalty.

Conclusion

Societies and communities operate effectively when their means of communication is carried out in a well-structured and defined manner. Indigenous communities have always relied on communication to send their important messages to uphold their cultural heritage and clearly define its importance to outsiders and the younger members of the community. Information is power hence communication among communities should be encouraged and carried out effectively. Different means of communication, both verbal and non-verbal will help communities to grow towards a sustainable development. It will help to structure their pattern of operation and dissemination of information within and outside their locality and this will help to advertise the community for popularity and growth. Indigenous music, being a powerful means of communication, has in the past helped to portray the cultural practices of its communities and even help to shape these cultures to suit their purposes. Using indigenous music to send information, communication will become effective and its processes will be understood clearly and distinctly, creating an opportunity to expand its potentialities.

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