

## **TRADITIONAL MUSICAL CULTURE OF OSHIMILI SOUTH COMMUNITIES: A MEDIUM FOR DOCUMENTATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Music has been one of the components of human living and growth. It has put man in a situation of relaxation and cultural disposition, shaping the ideas, imbibing the cultural norms and values that make man distinctive. Music is therefore the power house behind the success of every activity that is organized as part of the culture of the Society. Music entertains, educates as well as informs its listeners and this is done through songs, dances and instrumental performances. Educators in various subjects use music to learn basic terms and theories in their subject areas and this have aided the memorization of these basic elements of learning. Music serves its purpose as an instrument of documenting ideas, histories, and occurrences both within and outside communities. This paper intends to portray the musical culture of the Oshimili communities and the ways musical presentations contain documented ideas, cultural beliefs, norms and values. It aims to portray various important events that have occurred and affected people's lives and cultural behaviors, with these experiences often documented in their songs and other musical activities. Songs are clear means of expression hence communities tend to make use of these avenues to record their experiences, air their views and portray their cultural packages. Data were generated from participant observation and interviews conducted during participation in burial and festival celebrations. It is anticipated that the study will promote the preservation and documentation of Oshimili musical heritage for future generations.

**KEYWORDS:** Documenting, Cultural, Traditional, Communities, Musical culture.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every Community in Nigerian Society has their identifiable musical culture and structure which make them distinctive and therefore portray their cultural beliefs and practices. The indigenous music of these societies has played a very important role in upholding their cultural norms and values as well as in documenting their historical existence as communities. The Oshimili Communities have, to some extent relied on their Indigenous musical systems for entertainment, cultural expression and the preservation of cultural identity. This music also embodies cultural values that serve as a source of knowledge for members of the community and for future generations interested in learning about the histories and origins of their communities. To understand the origins of these communities, one must have knowledge of their musical culture, gained through active participation in musical and cultural performances. This engagement helps individuals to learn their songs, dances, festival performances, the meanings of their indigenous songs and instruments, as well as the roles of musical performances in cultural activities.

The Indigenous music of every society mirror their beliefs, occupational systems, religious practices and experiences within and outside their cultural boundaries. A study of the musical systems of communities will help to understand the historical account of the communities, their cultural practices and belief systems, their experiences collectively and as individuals. Musical activities have helped to portray the various experiences and through these celebrations and performances, histories are maintained and are used as reference purposes today by the present generation to keep their culture intact.

Among the Oshimili Communities, singing is a means of self expression. Songs therefore play very important roles since through it, words are clearly defined and expressed. Singers make use of words to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences, ideas, knowledge etc. Stories are told and cultural values and beliefs are portrayed. Singing is therefore

a principal means of music making hence it plays more significant roles than musical instruments in most activities that occur in the communities. Ekwueme, Laz (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”.(15). The human voices express situations and ideas more clearly than the musical instruments. Through the human voice, words are expressed in songs and sounds which are documented for record purposes. Songs therefore give clear view of a message sent through the vocalists to the audience or listener. There are situations where musical instruments play same roles but these are on rare and special occasions and this will be discussed further.

Folk songs of the Oshimili communities play very important role in their lives as individuals and as a community. They tend to depend on their folk songs for information hence music generally is very functional. The communities are gifted in the usage of proverbs and idioms in their songs; histories and past experiences are recounted in their songs during festivals and other cultural activities that are accompanied with musical performances. Nketia, k. (1982), sees songs as “an avenue for verbal communication, a medium for creating verbal expression which can reflect both personal and social experiences” (189). Singing is therefore a part of their cultural practice and this is often done at every activity that they indulge in. There are hardly gatherings that do not involve music making amongst the Oshimili communities. Oftentimes, it is the music that explains the scenario and sometimes concludes the activity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper employs an ethnographic method to investigate the musical culture of the community under study through interviews, active participation, and a review of relevant literatures. Findings reveal that the indigenous music (songs) of the Oshimili communities not only creates opportunities for the younger generation to learn their languages, but also provides a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage-including norms, values, and histories. The ethnographic approach also enabled the researchers to conduct extensive interviews on the historical background of the communities, their musical traditions, and the changes they have experienced following the influence of Western culture and Christianity.

## **COMMUNITIES OF OSHIMILI:**

Oshimili Communities comprise the Oshimili South and North. The South are; Asaba, Okwe and Oko communities while the North are; Ibusa, Okpanam and Akwukwu-Igbo Communities. These communities trace their origin from different historic accounts but seem to share similar cultural musical practices. This may be due to the fact that they share cultural boundaries or because of migrations in the past which was very common habit of clans and communities. They have also maintained trade contacts where they shared goods and services and these have also created forum for musical relationships which they share today. The Oshimili South communities trace their origin to Igala, Bini and the Igbos from across the Niger where the first settlers came from. Their festivals however, give account of their religious beliefs and practices as well as their occupational practices too. All these portray their cultural beliefs and behaviors which show that these communities comprise people who migrated from different places and settled as farmers and fisher men/ women, bringing with them their cultural practices from their previous places of abode. It will not also be wrong to say that some even came with their musical instruments as well.

The evidences from the histories and origin of these communities portray a group of settlers who migrated from different communities to farm and fish for their livelihood and today, they have formed the communities known as Oshimili South and North. Their occupation are mainly farming, fishing and trading and these have created inter tribal marriages, exchange of musical ideas etc amongst them. At their leisure time, they play music as their past time and this helps them to share their musical talents and knowledge of their historical existence, experiences and their cultural norms and values. Their songs are not only meant to entertain but some of the songs reflect on their experiences as individuals and communities.

Among the Oshimili South communities, there are cultural practices that they share in common which portray a familiarity in their origin and culture. These are found in the burial performances of the Oko and Asaba communities. The performance structures are not entirely the same except in the ritual aspect of the burial where the spirit manifest (Egwugwu) come out to mourn the dead. The similarity shows that the two communities share same history of origin and this is due to migrations, inter-marriages and trade contacts. The performance structure in the activity of the spirit manifest during burial ceremonies are however not similar- the Oko community allow women to participate (passively)

during the ceremony while the Asaba community forbid their women and un-initiated members of the community from participating. In fact they watch from a very far distant. Their songs are also different in texts and performances.

The Okwe and Asaba share a common belief in the festival of initiating the male members of their communities. The Igbankpisi is a ritual ceremony performed every twenty years to initiate every male member into the community. It is celebrated with songs which portray the origin and cultural beliefs of the communities. The celebration of this ceremony today gives the present generation a view of their cultural practices and heritage. There is this sense of belonging and oneness as they participate actively. Even pregnant women are encouraged to participate in order to admit their unborn male children into the community. This ceremony is compulsory among the Okwe community for all male children. In Asaba, it is not taken seriously hence the writer feels it is an activity the community borrowed from the neighboring, Okwe community. Today the ceremony seems to be going into extinction in Asaba but is still performed in Okwe.

### **SONGS AND SONG TEXTS:**

Song texts are conceived through various occasions either during a musical situation or other non-musical activities; it may be in an organized musical situation or in a gathering that requires music to function as a medium for entertainment. Avorgbedor, A (1990) postulates that “it does not only prescribe polite ways for saying impolite things but provides ways for expressing the inexpressible and provides license for saying the abnormal and irritant truth with fear or favor”(210). This is very paramount in slay and satirical songs which are sung to expose evil doers and correct ills in the community. In the slay songs, names of culprits are mentioned and this is done only during festival celebrations which gives room for such actions.

Ibekwe, E (2008), maintains that “song texts communicate direct information to those that understand its language and idioms”, she stressed that “African songs are full of meaning, idioms and proverbs; there are songs which help to redress people’s excesses, songs for criticisms and satire” (40). The texts in songs serve as documentation in which researchers and historians can use to get facts and figures concerning their topic for research, information on knowledge about their communities. Ibekwe E (2008) also notes that “song texts normally speak the language of the society that owns it. ‘It is usually interspersed with proverbs, myths, and valor and legendary of the people’ (36). These are avenues that will serve as proper instruments and medium in which people will depend on to gain knowledge of the cultural packages of their community and even document them for future generation to use as reference point.

The songs of these communities range from love songs to dirges. Every ceremony therefore have their songs which may identify the kind of ceremony going on while the texts of the songs may reflect the nature of the ceremony, it can also serve to entertain its audience. These songs serve as medium of entertainment, communication and cultural disposition. There are songs meant for special ceremonies, songs merely for leisure and entertainment, religious/ritual songs which are sung for special occasions and are sung only by certain members of the communities, children songs for games and moonlight plays etc. These songs play very important roles in preserving and portraying the cultural heritage of the Oshimili communities. Some of these songs give account of past histories and happenings and documents the stories directly and indirectly through the texts of the songs.

Slay songs are very common among these communities and are apparent during festival celebrations especially. There is no restriction in the usage of words of these songs which portray the story/ happening through these songs. Sometimes these slay songs are sung in other activities such as burial ceremonies, traditional marriage ceremonies and at leisure but in restricted forms to avoid punishments and disagreements. Slay songs give a detailed account of a scandal and the names of those involved are mentioned boldly, though these are allowed only during festival ceremonies which is an avenue for individuals and members to expose evil deeds committed in the communities and its environs. These practices have helped to maintain law and order amongst them and also curtail criminal activities.

Today, slay songs are not as effective as they use to be due to so many factors and influences which has affected the performances and celebrations of traditional festivals among the Oshimili Communities today. Some of the slay songs however serve as references to past happenings which have today formed part of the history of the community. Slay songs are therefore not only meant for entertainment, they are seriously regarded as communication media and part of information avenues to studying the histories and past of the communities. An example is the bi-annual festival in Asaba which originated from an experience of a wealthy man who lost his whole children and wealth through strange

attack. He travelled to a village outside Asaba to seek solution to his problems and was told to do a cleansing in his compound. The ritual was carried out and the man was restored; these actions by the man and his family today is being practiced by the entire community who call it Ulo festival which is meant to cleanse the entire community in order to usher in good and positive things. This festival celebration is seen as a New Year festival hence the ritual performance is conducted to bid all evil away from the community before the New Year is celebrated.

### **FOLK SONGS OF OSHIMILI COMMUNITIES**

Indigenous songs along with their symbolic uses and representations, are rapidly disappearing- a serious issue that requires immediate attention. The loss of these songs threatens the cultural integrity of communities and society at large. As a result, the musical practices of such communities risk becoming fragmented or overtaken by external cultural influences. However, there can be no future without a past. The past continuously informs and shapes the future and its direction. Music is an essential part of the culture of every community in Nigerian society. It has contributed to deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural values and has highlighted their uniqueness. Indigenous music not only entertains but also reflects the lived experiences and practices of the people; in doing so, it serves as a form of cultural documentation. Because indigenous folk songs preserve and transmit valuable information about communities and their heritage, they should be collected and their texts analyzed for proper documentation. A key factor in this process is understanding the Language in which the songs are composed. Language is crucial for interpreting song texts, especially since many folk songs are rich in proverbs and idioms. Therefore, one must understand and speak the language in order to grasp the full meaning of these texts. In addition, active participation in musical events and cultural activities enhances one's understanding of the contextual meanings of the idioms and proverbs embedded in the songs.

### **BURIAL SONGS**

Burial ceremonies among these communities are taken seriously. They believe in life after death hence their songs and dirges for the dead are centered on their belief in the supernatural as well as in life after death. Burial ceremonies among these communities create room for musical talents, cultural display/ beliefs. Special songs are rendered by special designated groups/ members who have special roles to play as performers, entertainers, age grades, and initiate members. The sex, age and status of the deceased is considered before the burial takes place therefore the aforementioned to an extent determines the kind of burial the community will organize. This set down rules only concerns the organization of traditional burial ceremonies among the Oshimili Communities.

Burial songs are usually performed by women and men (youths) with each playing their expected roles as sympathizers and as mourners. The first stage of a burial ceremony among the Asaba community is usually the dirges sung by the youths (Okwulagwe) who it is their duty to bring the corpse back from mortuary, and bury afterwards. The repertoires of their dirges are centered on previous and current happenings within and outside the communities. Some of the texts show the way the people feel and react to death of the young, death of a mother/ father, death of a benefactor and even death of a warrior as well as death as a result of murder. When a member of the community is murdered, there are special songs which are rendered to condemn such act and to remember those who must have been murdered too in the past. These songs form basis for documentation to keep the histories of past happenings in the communities. They are also meant to highlight the cultural practices, beliefs, norms and values of the communities. The performances of women during burial ceremonies are special, symbolic and entertaining. Their first appearance is usually symbolic since it is their duties to sit round the corpse during lying in state. Among the Oshimili South Communities, the women accompany their performances with dirges and these are done without any instrument except clapping which come in intermittently. The texts of the songs reflect the peoples feeling towards death and the dead. Some of the dirges are sung and dramatized, while some are solemn and mournful. The texts of these songs portray the belief in after death, stating that the dead is going on a long journey. They go further to present items which they believe the deceased needs while going on the journey. The items are wrapper to cover in case of cold, biscuits, sweets and other food items to eat and finally money

To pay debts incurred while alive so that those they are indebted to, will not disturb their journey to the other side. There are songs that are accompanied only by hand clapping as the culture demands or as it suits the performers. There are also solo epics or medleys that are lengthy with a lot of recitations and have more than one soloist. These may not need any instrumental accompaniment or there may be sessions that instruments are included to accompany the chorus section. Most dirges are however sung without instrumental accompaniment. This is apparent in the women dirges

which are usually accompanied with handclapping only. In the burial ceremonies among the Oshimili communities, women indulge more in the mourning session and have a lot of repertoires to accompany their dirges. Sometimes, they make use of any available instrument such as empty tin or sticks to accompany their songs too.

#### **INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC AS MEDIUM OF DOCUMENTATION:**

Some Instruments used during musical performances among the Oshimili communities play symbolic roles while some are just meant to accompany songs. Women use clapping, sticks and even empty tins etc most times to accompany their songs especially during burial ceremonies while the men have special instruments which are meant to accompany the corpse from the mortuary to the compound of the deceased. Burial songs performed by the men are accompanied by traditional musical instruments. The performing groups have their special instrument to accompany their songs.

The solemn time of a burial performance is usually when dirges are sung and these periods rarely have songs which are accompanied with musical instruments. Being a session for mourning, (especially if the dead person is young), instruments are not really needed to accompany dirges during this period. Clapping is mostly used for these activities; however there are special instruments used to accompany corpses from the mortuary to the house where they are to lie the dead in state. This is the Okanga (Drum) instruments which are specially meant for the purpose of burial hence one is used to accompany the dead home while the others are for mourning during a session of the burial performed by the Okwulagwe youths who actually dig the grave and bury the dead. In the various traditional activities, musical instruments perform important and subsidiary roles. The Okanga which is the master instrument for burial sessions signifies royalty and represents authenticity of the deceased as a legal son of the community hence must be buried like a prince. Okanga also has its music called the Okanga music (egwu-Okanga) wherein the Okanga is the master instrument. Okanga drum also symbolizes peace, hence is used for both war and to appease/appeal in situations of conflicts.

There are musical groups that derive their names from traditional instruments which may be used as a principal instrument or the instrument may have symbolic roles it plays. The Okanga musical instrument performs an important role in the music and cultural performance that is meant for burial ceremonies in both Asaba and Okwe communities. It is not only meant to accompany the corpse of a dead member of the community to where it will lie in state, it is further used for the music genre which is performed alongside the movement. The Okanga makes its presence and sounds only for serious and solemn periods in the community. It is a taboo to play it outside its designated event, as this will attract serious punishment. There is an instrumental ensemble that requires special instruments for socio-cultural performance which has to do with the burial ceremonies among the Asaba community. This aspect of the burial is a ritual as well as music performance meant for only the male and female members of the community who are married and has the alo title. It is called the EGWU-OTA music. It is an instrumental jazz music performance that is not only for entertainment but for ritual and historical purpose. The Egwu-ota is performed only in Asaba and has its origin and oral history narrated.



Egwu ndi nmo (in Egwu-ota burial Dance)

The AKAJA (a big gong) and the OZI (a big drum), are the principal instruments used. They are played by professional instrumentalists who are gifted and are trained. Not every male member of the community can therefore play these instruments. The music of the *Egwu-ota* is special and interesting. It motivates one to dance hence draw people into the arena in a magical way. No-one is restricted from joining in the dance once the music starts.

## CONCLUSION:

The intention of the writer here is to present the various ways the musical traditions imbibe the cultural beliefs and practices of Oshimili communities. It points out how the folk songs, dances and instrumental performances act as media of documentation. Some folk songs which portray textual messages related to the histories, culture and past happenings are translated and the texts are analyzed to portray its usage and message. Adedeji et al (2012:69), reports Vidal (1986) who notes that “musicians in African society are the custodians of their culture. The history of a particular people is kept from generation to generation through oral medium by professional musicians. The history of important events in the society, and the personalities involved in these events are recorded for posterity through songs”.

Music is therefore not merely meant for entertainment purposes. They are also functional in the enactment of socio-cultural and political events that occur in the society. Musicians in the society contribute to the development of the community through songs which are basically meant to provide information about the community and the activities going on, about the culture of the people and the cultural heritage, about the behavioral attitudes of the people, about the history of the community and the political state as well. An in-depth study of the traditional music of a society exposes one to various aspects of their culture, hence traditional music is said to be the product of man in his culture and environment and its artistic content includes man’s common beliefs, ways, ideas, thoughts, religion etc. All these are reflected in their musical experiences and performances, thereby projecting and presenting the music of a community or society

The music of these communities is a reflection of their cultural practices and behavior, since culture is a people’s way. Music is used to portray every aspect that make up that community, with their language as a major tool for communication. Due to non-documentation of these folk songs, the origin of some song texts cannot be traced except for those topical and special songs used during burial ceremonies where these songs may have been specially composed and sung in honor of a deceased person. Others may include those songs that have true stories behind them where names may have also been mentioned; these are common during festival celebrations. There are also historical songs which are used to reflect particular events etc. The composers of these may be known and the origin of the songs can be traced from the song texts of the songs where the names of persons are mentioned and the place of occurrence are sometimes mentioned too.

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