

Xylophones in Traditional Igbo Culture: A Study of Musical Instrumentation and Cultural Significance

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of xylophones in traditional Igbo culture, focusing on their musical instrumentation and cultural significance. Drawing on ethnographic research and musical analysis, the paper examines the construction and tuning of Igbo xylophones, as well as their use in various musical contexts, such as social gatherings, religious ceremonies, and artistic performances. Additionally, the paper discusses the cultural significance of xylophones in Igbo society, including their role in promoting communal identity, expressing religious beliefs, and transmitting oral history. Overall, the paper argues that xylophones are a vital component of traditional Igbo culture, both as a musical instrument and as a cultural artifact.

Keywords: *Xylophones, Traditional, Igbo, Culture, Umude – Avuvu*

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Background to the Study

The xylophone, also known as "Ngelenge" or "Ngedegwu" in Igbo, is a traditional musical instrument that holds great cultural significance in Igbo society, which is primarily located in southeastern Nigeria. In the opinion of Zak (1986), traditional arts and music culture represent the very essence of the people's total existence. It holds great cultural significance in traditional Igbo society, which serves as a link to the ancestral world, a source of entertainment, and a symbol of cultural identity. It is a percussion instrument that consists of a set of wooden bars of varying lengths, which are arranged in order of pitch and struck with mallets or sticks to produce musical tones. The xylophone has been an integral part of Igbo traditional music and cultural practices for centuries. It is considered to be one of the oldest musical instruments in Igbo culture and has been passed down through generations. The instrument is typically played during important ritual ceremonies, cultural festivals, and social gatherings.

In Igbo culture, the xylophone carries both spiritual and social meanings. It is believed to have the power to communicate with the spirit world and ancestral beings. It is often used in rituals and ceremonies to invoke ancestral spirits, seek blessings, or communicate with deities. The xylophone's unique sound is believed to attract these entities, making it an essential instrument in traditional religious practices. Beyond its spiritual significance, the xylophone also plays a vital role in Igbo social life. It is commonly used to entertain guests during social gatherings, weddings, and other celebratory events. The instrument creates an energetic and joyous atmosphere and encourages communal participation, as it is often accompanied by singing, dancing, and other forms of rhythmic expression.

The art of playing the xylophone is usually passed down orally from one generation to another. Skilled xylophone players, known as "Ngelenge" or "Ngedegwu" players, possess extensive knowledge of the traditional melodies, rhythms, and techniques associated with the instrument. They are highly respected members of the community and play a crucial role in preserving Igbo cultural heritage.

In recent years, the xylophone has gained recognition beyond Igbo culture and has been incorporated into contemporary Nigerian music. According to Hornby (2000), the word "music" means sounds that are arranged in a way that they are pleasant or existing to listen to or simply, study of such sounds organized in time. It has become a symbol of Igbo identity and a way for younger generations to connect with their cultural roots. However, despite its cultural significance, the xylophone is also facing challenges in the modern era. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and the influence of Western music have led to a decline in the popularity and practice of traditional Igbo musical instruments, including the xylophone. While it faces challenges in a rapidly changing world, efforts are being made by cultural activists, musicians, and organizations to preserve and revitalize the traditional music and cultural practices associated with the xylophone.

The Umude – Avuvu people

The Umude village, in Avuvu is a community located in the Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. They are predominantly Civil servants, farmers and traders, with

agriculture being their primary means of livelihood. The community is made up of several kindreds, including Umu Okenwaka, Mbaforom n'Okorie and Orji Ohiagbaji. The people of Umude-Avuvu are predominantly Igbo, and they share many cultural and linguistic similarities with other Igbo communities in Nigeria, Hence the agricultural profession linked to them. Their religion is centered on the worship of Chiukwu, "Almighty God" via different Christian denominations. They are predominantly Roman Catholics, a denomination which has gained a foothold in the community in recent years. The Anglican community, the Pentecostals and other Christian denominations are represented too.

The community has produced many notable individuals in various fields, including politics, academia, and business. Some of the notable figures from Umude-Avuvu include Eze Barrister Sabinus Ahamefulaohia Oparaocha, the Mfunala III of Avuvu, Professor Victor Chukwuma, a renowned Physicist at the Ogun State University, Abeokuta, Elder Jerome Opara, Hon. John Achilike Ohiri, Sir. Dr. Valentine Iheukwumere Oparaocha, (Ochudo ndi Igbo), Sir John Anamelechi, High Chief Sunday Onyewuenyi, (a.k.a Agaracha), Pa Agbugba Okoronma, (a.k.a Papa Mercy), Pa Onwumere Akuchie, Prince Chucks Daniel Oparaocha, Nollywood celebrity, High Chief Emmanuel Azorom, Dr. Chile Augustine Oparaocha, and others too numerous to mention.

In terms of infrastructure, Umude-Avuvu has a few primary and secondary schools, a health center, and a few churches. The community is also known for its annual traditional musical outing, which is a celebration of the season of love among the people of the community, an opportunity for the people to come together and showcase their cultural heritage, as known and called "Umude Day". There are a few sculptural pieces executed and mounted within the community which had defined the melody of "Ngelenge", the xylophone.

History of Xylophone

The history of the xylophone in traditional Igbo culture dates back centuries. It is believed to be one of the oldest musical instruments in Igbo society, with a rich and storied past. A glance through some of the work by Nketia (1974), Akpabot (1975), Ufford (2000) and few others on the xylophone reveal that the instrument exist in other geographical areas. (Ekong & Udoh, 2018). The origins of the xylophone in Igbo culture can be traced to the Nri Kingdom, which was a prominent political and religious center in southeastern Nigeria from the 9th to the 19th century. The Nri Kingdom played a significant role in the development and diffusion of cultural practices in the region, including the use of the xylophone. Another school of thought believed that xylophones was introduced to the Igbo people by the neighboring Ekpe society, which had connections with the Akan people of present-day Ghana. Over time, the Igbo people adopted and integrated the xylophone into their own musical traditions.

The xylophone in Igbo culture was primarily associated with religious and spiritual practices. It was used in rituals, ceremonies, and other cultural events to communicate with the spirit world and invoke ancestral beings. It was believed that the unique sound of the instrument had the power to attract and connect with these entities, thereby facilitating communication between the human and spiritual realms. Over time, the xylophone became an integral part of

Igbo social life. It was incorporated into various cultural expressions, including traditional music, dance, and storytelling. It served as a means of entertainment, fostering communal participation and creating a vibrant and joyous atmosphere during social gatherings, weddings, and other celebratory events. The playing technique of the xylophone was passed down orally from one generation to another. Skilled xylophone players, known as "Ngelenge" or "Ngedegwu" players, were highly respected members of the community, possessing extensive knowledge of the instrument's traditional melodies, rhythms, and techniques. They played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Igbo cultural heritage through music.

In contemporary Igbo culture, the xylophone continues to hold cultural significance, albeit with some challenges. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and the influence of Western music have led to a decline in the popularity and practice of traditional Igbo musical instruments, including the xylophone. However, efforts are being made to revitalize and preserve these cultural practices, and the xylophone remains an important symbol of Igbo identity and a link to their ancestral past. In conclusion, the history of the xylophone in traditional Igbo culture spans many centuries. It has played a vital role in religious and spiritual practices, as well as social and cultural events. Despite the challenges it faces in the modern era, the xylophone continues to be treasured for its cultural significance and serves as a reminder of Igbo cultural heritage.

Construction and Tuning

Construction and tuning play integral roles in the creation and sound production of the xylophone in traditional Igbo culture. Traditional Igbo xylophones, known as Ekwe or Ngedegwu, are typically made from wood and have various sizes and shapes. The resonating bars, known as "ule," are typically made from hardwood such as rosewood, mahogany, iroko, or obeche. These bars are carefully carved and shaped to produce specific pitches and tones. Each bar is of varying length and thickness, contributing to its unique sound.

The bars are then arranged in a horizontal fashion with the longest and thickest bars positioned on one end and the shortest and thinnest bars on the opposite end. A resonator box, usually made from gourd, calabash, or wood, is attached beneath the bars. This box enhances the sound by amplifying the vibrations created when the bars are struck. The bars are securely fastened onto a frame, often made from wood or bamboo, using cords or ropes. The frame is designed to hold the bars in place while allowing them to vibrate freely, enabling clear and resonant tones.

Tuning the xylophone involves determining the pitch and harmonic relationships of the bars. Skilled xylophone builders and tuners use their ears and knowledge of the traditional tuning system to ensure that the bars produce accurate and harmonious sounds. Other scholars outside Igbo culture like Strand (2009) explains that the xylophone equidistantly and non-equidistantly tuned from low to high pitches. Traditionally, Igbo xylophones follow a pentatonic tuning system, meaning the bars are tuned using a five-note scale. This scale consists of five pitches, often referred to as "do," "re," "mi," "so," and "la." Each bar is carefully tuned to produce a specific pitch within this scale, creating a melodic range across the

xylophone. Tuning is achieved by carefully adjusting the length, thickness, and resonance of the bars. The builder or tuner may use tools such as chisels, rasps, or files to make precise adjustments to the bars' dimensions until the desired pitch and tonal quality are achieved. The tuning process is a skill that is passed down through generations, ensuring consistency and accuracy in replicating traditional Igbo xylophone sounds. The tuning is often subjective and relies heavily on the tuner's experience and understanding of the desired tonal characteristics.

The construction and tuning of the xylophone are crucial in its ability to produce rich and resonant tones. Skilled craftsmen and tuners meticulously pay attention to detail to create an instrument that not only looks aesthetically pleasing but also produces a clear, balanced, and harmonious sound. Through the careful construction and tuning process, the xylophone becomes a vessel for expressing the musical traditions and cultural heritage of the Igbo people.

Musical Contexts

In the words of Anita (2005), all aspects of human life needed music for pleasure, direction, stimulation, instruction, approval, and rejection. The xylophone holds significant cultural and symbolic value in traditional Igbo culture in various musical contexts in which the xylophone is used in traditional Igbo culture, such as:

Rituals and Ceremonies: The xylophone holds a significant role in Igbo religious and spiritual practices. It is often played during rituals and ceremonies, such as ancestral worship and initiation rites. According to Akpabot (1975), the initial role of the xylophone ensemble in Akwa-Ibom was to feature at the initiation of an Mbopo, a virgin sent to tattering room” (p.45) The instrument's resonating tones and rhythmic patterns create a reverent atmosphere, invoking the presence of ancestral spirits and facilitating communication between the physical and spiritual realms.

Social Gatherings and Community Events: The xylophone is a key component of social gatherings and community events, serving as a source of vibrant accompaniment to traditional dances and songs. Its lively melodies and rhythmic patterns encourage active participation and create an energetic and festive ambiance. The xylophone's dynamic sound adds to the overall enjoyment and sense of togetherness in these communal celebrations.

Cultural Festivals: During important cultural festivals like the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji), the xylophone takes on a central role. It accompanies and enhances performances of traditional dances, songs, and storytelling. These festivals provide an opportunity for the community to come together and showcase their cultural heritage, with the xylophone playing a critical part in creating an immersive and memorable experience. **Entertainment:** The xylophone is also used for entertainment purposes in everyday life. It is played during social visits, weddings, and other celebratory occasions. The instrument's captivating melodies and rhythmic patterns elicit joy and celebration, entertaining both participants and onlookers. The xylophone's presence adds a layer of excitement and enjoyment to these festive gatherings. For example, xylophones are played during masquerade performances, traditional dances, and cultural festivals. They provide rhythmic and melodic accompaniment to songs and chants, enhancing the overall auditory experience.

Musical Performances: In addition to traditional settings, the xylophone is sometimes integrated into contemporary Nigerian music. It can be found in various genres such as highlife, afrobeat, and gospel music. When incorporated into these modern compositions, the xylophone brings a distinct flavor and distinctiveness, infusing traditional Igbo musical elements into the contemporary music scene. In each of these musical contexts, the xylophone serves as a cornerstone of Igbo cultural expression, providing rhythmic and melodic foundations and captivating audiences with its unique timbre. Its presence in rituals, community events, cultural festivals, and contemporary music performances showcases its versatility and indispensability in the musical landscape of traditional Igbo culture.

Generally, xylophones are used in a variety of musical contexts in traditional Igbo culture. They are often played at social gatherings such as weddings, funerals, and festivals, where they serve as a musical accompaniment for dancing and singing. Xylophones are also used in religious ceremonies, such as ancestor veneration rituals and the worship of the earth goddess Ala. In these contexts, the xylophone is often used to create a sense of spiritual connection between the participants and the divine.

Cultural Significance

The xylophone holds immense cultural significance in traditional Igbo culture. It represents a deep connection to the roots and heritage of the Igbo people. The instrument is not just a musical tool; it encapsulates the essence of their identity and serves as a symbol of their cultural traditions. In Igbo culture, the xylophone is an integral part of spiritual and religious practices. It is used to invoke ancestral spirits, communicate with the spirit world, and participate in rituals and ceremonies. The instrument serves as a conduit for spiritual connections and plays a vital role in maintaining cultural and spiritual beliefs. Beyond its spiritual significance, the xylophone brings communities together. Its vibrant sounds and rhythmic melodies create a sense of unity during social gatherings, festivals, and celebrations. The instrument encourages active participation through singing, dancing, and storytelling, facilitating a strong bond and a sense of belonging among community members. The xylophone also holds importance in preserving oral traditions and cultural heritage. Learning to play the instrument and passing down the knowledge from one generation to another ensures the continuity of Igbo traditions. Skilled xylophone players carry a respected position in the community, as they are responsible for transmitting cultural knowledge through music and helping to maintain the connection to ancestral practices. Moreover, the xylophone showcases the artistic expressions and craftsmanship of the Igbo people. With its decorative elements, intricate carvings, and vibrant paintings, the instrument is a visual representation of the talent and creativity within the community. It adds aesthetic beauty to cultural performances and reflects the cultural motifs and symbols of the Igbo people.

In addition to their aesthetic role, xylophones are often viewed as ancestral instruments, connecting the present generation to their ancestors. Xylophones are sometimes used in divination rituals, where they are believed to communicate with the spirit world. It is also believed that the sounds produced by the xylophone have the power to heal and cleanse the soul. Furthermore, xylophones serve as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and

preserving Igbo traditions. The songs played on xylophones often carry historical narratives, moral lessons, and societal values. Younger generations are taught to play the instrument, ensuring its continuation as an integral part of Igbo culture. Xylophones hold immense cultural significance in traditional Igbo culture. They are not only musical instruments but also symbols of ancestral connection, sources of spiritual powers, and tools for cultural preservation. Xylophones in Igbo society allows for a deeper appreciation of the rich musical heritage of this Nigerian ethnic group. It is often used as a symbol of communal identity, serving as a means of expressing the shared values and beliefs of the Igbo people. Xylophones are also associated with oral history and storytelling, as they are often used to accompany traditional narratives and legends. However, the xylophone holds a profound cultural significance in traditional Igbo culture. It represents spirituality, community unity, cultural preservation, and artistic expression. Through its melodies, it connects the Igbo people to their ancestral roots, celebrates their traditions, and serves as a testament to their rich cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The xylophone holds a deeply rooted and significant cultural significance in traditional Igbo culture. It serves as a symbol of identity, spirituality, community cohesion, and artistic expression. Playing the xylophone carries on the rich musical traditions of the Igbo people, connecting them to their ancestral heritage and preserving their cultural identity. The instrument is utilized in rituals, ceremonies, social gatherings, and cultural festivals, playing a crucial role in various musical contexts. Through its melodies, rhythms, and harmonies, the xylophone enhances spiritual communication, fosters social unity, and offers entertainment and joy to the community. Its construction, tuning, and preservation require skill, knowledge, and a deep understanding of the instrument's tonal qualities. By honoring and preserving the xylophone, the Igbo community ensures the continuity of their traditions, celebrates their cultural heritage, and passes down their unique musical legacy to future generations.

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