Cultural Perspective in the Music Performance of Oshimili South Communities: An Overview

By

Uche, M. A. PhD
Department of Music,
College of Education, Agbor
Jingiada23@yahoo.com
&
Onyenye, Peace. Temabor PhD
Department of Music,
College of Education, Agbor
Abugopeace@gmail.com

Abstract

Communities in Oshimili South Local Government Area are known for their cultural ingenuities in the celebration of their musical arts which has been a part of their day to day activities. They indulge in the celebration of both life and death, and music is used to accompany almost all aspects of the celebration. Musical performances are organized to celebrate these cultural events of the people. This paper focuses on the social and ritual music performances in Oshimili South, pointing out their importance and the need to preserve these traditional performance activities through active participation to prevent its oblivion. It also discusses the cultural and aesthetic values in the performance of social and ritual celebrations, outlining the structures and structural qualities in the musical performance practice of the Oshimili South communities. Data for this paper were collected through library research, interview observation and participant observation.

Keywords: Culture, Musical Performance, Communities, Social and Ritual Music

Introduction

Traditional African music has formed the basis for social interactions and cultural display among societies in Africa. It is therefore not a surprise to see any African setting or activity that occurs without musical performances. This is because music is a medium which African societies use to express their feelings, either directly or indirectly. Nketia (1974: 21) notes that "the basis of association for music making, however, is usually the community, those members of the ethnic group who share a common habitat (such as a group of home-stead, a village, a town or a section of a town), and who live some kind of corporate life

based on common institutions, common local traditions and common beliefs and values". Music making among communities in Oshimili South is a common practice which they use to entertain themselves and to mark certain important event which are associated with their cultural belief and heritage. Okafor (2019) confirm this view when he says that, music can be performed for its sheer fun, it communicates, the outlet it provides for social interaction for the sharing of the community's sentiments. Nketia (1974:21) stresses "the degree of social cohesion in such communities is usually strong". Among the communities in Oshimili South, musical performances are either organized or spontaneous. Spontaneous musical performances may be done by individuals or by groups of persons who come together just for leisure to enjoy music. This type of performance is common among children, women and men who share common interest in their jobs such as farmers, hunters etc. These groups of persons play music to ease boredom and to ease fatigue as they work. Children on the other hand come together to amuse themselves with musical performances as they sing and dance. One can also find individual members singing as they indulge in their domestic work. This is to accompany their work and to ease boredom as well as entertain themselves. E.g. an instrumentalist may play for his own enjoyment, or a vocalist may sing for his or her own enjoyment as well.

According to Drewal (1992:32), "performances are a primary site for the production of knowledge". Onyenye (2017) also adds that "indigenous people have for a long time maintained a system for the acquisition of environmental knowledge thus, musical performances are not only meant for entertainment but are used to create avenues for individuals to learn their culture, acquire information as regards their past and present participate in and be a part of their musical creativity. Nketia (1974:22) stresses that, "the performance of music in such context therefore assumes a multiple role in relation to the community. It provides at once an opportunity for sharing creative experiences, for participating in music as a form of community experience and for using music as an avenue for the expression of group sentiments." He concludes that "community life lays much emphasis on group musical activities than on solo performances." This is because in community performances, different aspects are presented and learned by participating individuals, information are gotten from the songs texts, creativity in instrumental performances are shared, dances and dance movements are also learned and at the end of such musical performance, every participating member of the community gets the feeling of satisfaction for their shared knowledge in their musical performances.

Music performances in Oshimili South are tradition practices among these communities which has become part of their cultural practices. Every musical performance whether spontaneous or organized portrays their cultural practices and habits, their cultural experiences are shared and passed on for the younger generation to absorb, Adeogun

(2005:3) infers that "as the transmission of musico-cultural manifestations from one generation to another. It equips the African to function in the total musical life of his/her environment". Participation in music performances will create opportunities for members of the community to keep abreast of their cultural practices, attune themselves to the musical sounds and moods of special instruments used for the performances of important musical/cultural activities, Adeogun (2005: 42) concludes that "it is aimed at preparing the human person as music maker who can use music performances in promoting, conducting or transacting the crucial issues of community living as well as probing the meaning of life." Participating in musical performances is therefore vital because every participating member has various roles to play - either as a performer or as an audience. They all share in the cultural heritage and tap into every knowledge that is presented for absorption. Although there are aspects certain individuals or group play as if special roles are ascribed to them, every member of the community contributes to the creativity and their cultural development.

Music Performed for Social Celebrations

Music for social performances among the Oshimili south communities come in two ways. The first are those that involve certain group of persons in the community such as children, adults which may be men only who gather together in a drinking place, as they entertain each other with recreational music. Women also engage themselves in such recreational musical activities. In some aspects, there are mixed sex combinations of women and children musical performances. The aforementioned may be seen as a spontaneous musical activity organized purely for entertainment.

On the other hand, there are social music performances that are presented for specific occasions. They may be part of a ritual activity or interwoven with a ritual performance, such as funeral ceremonies, festival celebrations, initiations and others. These are organized into social music performances that are not only meant for entertainment but are part of the cultural practices and tradition of the community. Most times these types of social music performances occur after a ritual rite or performance which may involve only certain members of the community.

In burial ceremonies in Asaba for example, the ritual aspect is performed by members of the deceased family while the social aspect involves every member of the community present and their guests who may have come from outside the community. Everyone present is culturally bound to participate in the social performance of a burial, especially the 'Egwu-ota' dance which marks the climax of the burial ceremony. This social performance in a burial is organized in such a way that every member of the community is involved one way or the other to showcase the cultural heritage of the community. The

first phase of the burial presents certain members (youth - men only) and the women (Umuada) as they sing their dirges while they mourn the dead. The atmosphere then is solemn. The second phase is when every member of the community is involved and that is called 'Egwu-ota' dance. The performance is organized in such a way that there is a meeting of the living and the spirit of the dead. The first dance in Egwu-ota performance is reserved for the spirits, hence no one enters the arena to dance, the second is only for the Ada (first daughter of the deceased) while the subsequent dances are for all present until the last dance which is meant for the Diokpa (first born son of the deceased). The Egwu-ota dance is specially organized to entertain the living and to bid farewell to the deceased (dead). The end of the Egwu-ota dance precedes the Igba-ilo, where different dance groups accompany a member of the family who has invited them to dance round the town until they return back to the burial arena. This Igba-ilo is also a compulsory performance which is carried out as part of a burial ceremony for a deceased adult member of the Asaba community. The dance group during 'Igba-ilo' follows a marked out pathway which they are culturally bound to take while they dance round the town and as they get close to any church compound, they immediately stop playing their music as a mark of respect to God and other religious practitioners; although this was not so in the past. Everyone involved here are the female members of the community. The first to move is the Ada, followed by the rest of the family members (only females) who have their dance group to lead them. No one must pass the Ada, whose duty is to lead the dance, no matter how slow she moves. The Igba-ilo is performed as a mark of respect to the dead and to announce to the entire community that the burial have so far been a success. As soon as the Ada and other groups arrive back at the burial arena gun shots are shot to mark the end of the burial. No one is supposed to play any musical instrument, sing or dance at the arena. If defaulters are found, they will be fined.

The Igba-ilo is a musical performance that creates opportunity for different dance groups to showcase their music, sing their newly composed songs, and show their new costumes and their prowess in music. The accompanying instrumentalists display their talents because they are sort afterwards by people who may want to employ them to play for them, either individuals or dance groups. This social aspect of a burial ceremony is therefore, not only meant for social cohesion, continuation of a cultural activity that must be preserved and passed on to succeeding generation and entertainment but also for the advertisement, of creativity in music, either as a singer, dancer or an instrumentalists. The repertoires in their songs center on historical songs to enact the events that have occurred in the community and its environs as well as songs which they have learnt from neighboring communities hence the repertoire of folk songs at this section of the burial are not restricted to only the ceremony. They may be sung in other contexts like marriages, naming ceremonies, title taking etc.

After the Igba-ilo, the music performance that is organized as part of a burial ceremony is the Iya-ego. This is a ritual performance that is celebrated by family members of the deceased, all putting on their native Akwa-ocha (white woven cloth). The performers move in procession from the family compound which is the burial ground to the Ogbeke Square where the Iya-ego will take place. The umu-Ada leads the procession and handles the ceremony. At the square, the performers form a circle as they sing and dance round, clapping their hands to accompany their songs. Only one person plays the bell (Agogo) which is the only accompanying musical instrument besides the hand-clapping. After the songs, recitations are raised and the texts 'are in praise of the family of the deceased, the lineage and their past achievements, as well as that of the quarter where the deceased came from.

The final performance is the Iya-ego proper which is the throwing of monies to the crowd gathered round to watch the performance (in the past, it was cowries only). The performers (who are mainly family members) throw monies to the crowd, singing a symbolic song which communicates to the crowd of onlookers' that it is time to pick the monies thrown to them, The final performance is when the clay pot carried by a member of the family is smashed and the crowd rushes forward to pick the monies and the cowries put inside the pot. The performers then leave singing as they return back through same part to the burial avenue for more music and entertainment.

Performances in social activities among the Oshimili south communities are celebrated as a communal effort to meet up certain needs that are part of the tradition of the community. They are also meant to learn the history, beliefs and cultural practices of the community; hence there is a learning process which is passed on orally from the old to the young, from the known to the unknown. People come together to learn and understand the culture and traditions of the people. The euphoria of oneness is felt and the need to be a part of the community and contribute to its development is shown by every participant, whether active or passive.

Music Performances in Ritual Celebrations

Music performances during ritual activities in Oshimili south local government, area are seen as performances that occur in well-defined contexts. These types of music are easily identifiable because most times, not all members of the community are directly involved in the performance. The music performances for rituals are most times designed for specific periods and to mark specific seasons and in most cases, there are music specifically meant for such contexts and may hardly be used outside its context.

In burial ceremonies for example, the dirges sung to mourn the dead are specifically meant for the dead and are not used outside that context. The Okanga drum music meant to accompany the corpse of a male member of the community is only used for that context, if the Okanga drum is heard and the songs are also heard outside the context it is meant for, the defaulters will be fined or ostracized from the community (i.e. if they do not pay their fines). The Okanga music is never played for a dead female member. The Okanga can also be used during war and in times of crises for protest and this must be by permission or communal agreement.

In festival celebrations, the ritual performances are organized and performed by certain members of the community who have not totally embraced the Christian religion or those who seem to hold firmly to their belief in their ancestral spirits. Performance in ritual celebrations during festivals are rites meant to appease, appeal and thank the gods. The music meant for these performances are usually not common since some of the songs are purely meant for that context. In 'Ulo' festival celebrations, which is a bi-annual festival meant to precede the New Year, the songs used for procession to the river are meant for that aspect of the ceremony and are never heard or sung afterwards. Although there is no penalty for anyone that sings it afterwards but if heard outside its context, people will think the singer is not normal but in the music meant for the Egwugwu (spirit manifest), it is not sung outside its context. This type of music is meant for certain male age grades (initiate members) and is only performed when a cult member dies. No woman is allowed to see the Egwugwu nor sing their songs.

Music performed for the ritual ceremonies are hardly found outside its place of origin and when found, they may be used in other contexts and the music may not be exactly the same, A ritual music performed may be borrowed but the performance mode may be different and the origin of such music may be easily traced, either due to the language, performance structure or other symbolic materials used for the performance. For example, the origin of the Ulo festival celebrated in Asaba is traced to Yoruba land or to a Yoruba native doctor; this is as a result of the Yoruba text used in the song and the origin of the festival. Secondly, the origin of the Egwugwu (spirit manifest) is traced to Igalla community of Kogi State, since the Asaba community of Oshimili South traces their origin to Igalla.

Ritual music performances are therefore not meant only to celebrate with the gods but serve as a media for historical information that concerns the community and even its environs. Ritual music performances are also celebrated to portray the belief in their ancestors and gods and their supernatural powers and to present these powers (which they possess) to the other neighboring communities.

Conclusion

Music making does not occur in every activity that exists in Oshimili South communities; (there arc ceremonies that occur without music performance but these ceremonies or activities may not be a social event), although these communities use every opportunity to indulge in musical performances because of their love for music and celebrations. When the need arises for music making, the involvement in musical performance is satisfactory since it is a community effort and the sharing of a community's experiences. Through these musical performances, music is learnt socially as each member of the community participates actively and creatively in the learning process. Everyone plays his or her own part as they generate musical knowledge and also become knowledgeable through music making. Traditional musical performances are therefore a collective effort that is used to celebrate important activities that are a part of the tradition and culture of the communities. It is created to encourage individual as well as the entire community in the learning of the historical events that make up the existence of that community. It is also meant to encourage group cohesion and social interaction as well as to encourage creativity in music making thereby, creating avenues for learning and passing on the oral traditions of the community.

Traditional music performances will also help in preventing the extinction of cultural music practices aid folk songs of the community since it is an avenue for music making, music learning and music celebration. Despite the dynamism in our cultural practices, music performances in Oshimili south still exists and every important cultural practice is still celebrated with traditional music, The present generation still has the time to celebrate their culture and retain some of the cultural histories of the community. Burial ceremonies are still performed, although there are changes to meet the present demands of the society and the changes that occur in our present contemporary and global world.By active participation in music performances, members of community get to learn a lot about their culture, their histories, and different ways of celebrating important ceremonies which have been an important aspect of their tradition My information which they have gotten regarding their folk music and tradition is passed on to the next generation. Active participation will therefore create an avenue for the young members of the community to learn every musical art that is of interest to them as they discover their creative talent. The cultural heritage of the people will also not suffer extinction but instead will meet up with the changes that exist in the present contemporary (global) Nigeria (and a global world).

Participation during music for social event is encouraged to enhance the learning of the traditional musical art of the community so that the important events that have to do with the culture will not further, go into extinction and die. Erneka (2006: 1) infers that "social consciousness enables any society to be aware at all times of its values, norms and

principles, its skills and world view and to be able to defend them at all times and in all circumstances." The need therefore, for the younger generation to be actively involved in the traditional musical performances of their community is very vital; this is because every member of the community has a role to play in the preservation of the culture and tradition of his/her community. Erneka (2006:2), stresses that, "consciousness of the individual of the meaning, implications and -values of belonging to his/her society and the consciousness of the society for ensuring the continuity and development of its own being through the development and promotion of social consciousness in the individual are the double barrel of social consciousness," Since the traditional musical arts of the Oshimili South communities are rooted in the culture, rites and ritual ceremonies as well as social contacts that govern every essential aspect among them, every member is expected to play an active role in the celebration of their musical art performances and ensure its continuity and development.

Adegbite (2006: 50) states that "performance is a creative activity and the performer must therefore, have a good knowledge of the resources and procedures of his musical culture and skill to apply them, especially in situations which lie is expected to extemporize." He adds! that it is not always that the performer has to cream something new; for every African society has a heritage of individual musical items that are passed on from generation to generation and to which new ones are added by each succeeding generation of musicians." Musical performances among the Oshimili South communities which has become an important part of the community's cultural practice and celebration of their musical art has survived till today due to the social involvement and interest of every member of the community.

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