

# **OBODOM**

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## OJA: A DYNAMIC MUSICAL INSTRUMENT EAST OF THE NIGER. POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE GLOBAL MUSICAL ARTS.

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### Abstract

*The place of oja in Igbo musical arts cannot be over-emphasized when one considers the multiple socio-economic roles that oja plays in Igbo culture. It is sad to observe that while other cultures of the world project Igbo flute, oja, is yet to be projected by the very people who are blessed with such a powerful musical instrument. Oja is an instrument that by nature is capable of projecting an aspect of Igbo culture, giving the Igbo the much-desired cultural identify among the world cultures. The study is aimed at providing justifiable reasons why oja should be projected to the international music scene, and how to achieve that aim using well-cited examples in some other cultures of the globe. To this end, we in Nigeria and our brethren in diaspora should play our roles.*

### Introduction

*Oja* is a legendary musical instrument of the aerophone family, very popular with the Igbo culture, East of the Niger. It is a product of indigenous technology advanced by traditional organologists as the Igbo culture continued to develop. The designing and construction of such musical instruments is an aspect of African way of life through which the cultures developed their symbols of identity, and express themselves in their own way. The instruments are constructed by experts in such a way that they are accepted by members of the community. The basic job of *oja* indigenous technologist in every Igbo community is to construct the instrument to agree with the tonal language of the people. It is in this consideration that one finds relevance here, in the views of Chukwu (2007) which states that 'acceptability of musical instruments(s) generally depends on the culture of the people; the users of such instrument(s).

\* Musical instruments in Igbo culture range from those that provide supportive roles in an ensemble to those that are used as master instruments. Nketia (1974) writes:

While some instruments are designed for use as solo instruments, others are intended for use in ensembles... within such group, certain instruments function as lead or principal instruments, while others play subordinate roles as accompanying or ostinato instruments (p.111).

*Oja* as a musical instrument in Igbo culture plays multiple roles and operates in both physical and spiritual worlds, implying that the two worlds share the same experience. According to Igbo mythology and legends, when *Oja* is sounded in the physical world, it generates action in the spiritual. That is why it is also used in prayers and invocation.

### \* The Dynamism of *Oja*

There are different tales and moral lessons surrounding the life of *oja*. These stories centre on the mythology, philosophy, cultural essence, surrogate tendency, magical power and therapeutic power, all based on Igbo belief system and values.

### (I) Mythology of *Oja* Culture

It is very essential to clear the air about the position of myth in Igbo belief system before much meaningful discussion is achieved under this subheading, otherwise, modern scientific approach to research will query some claims about the instrument. Myth is a story formulated in oral tradition and transmitted orally from generation to generation, not only in an effort to maintain and consolidate the belief system of a people or culture, but also the custom and norms, which constitute the validity of morality. The story might centre on creation or the mysteries surrounding human existence. According to Akpabot (1998, p. 12) "myth is something a society believes in totally." He adds that legends, myths and symbols are integral parts of the belief system of African societies. In Igbo culture, nobody questions a myth, but believes in it and allows it to grow as part of tradition that helps to shape the behaviour and life of the people. One cannot appreciate fully the dynamics of *oja* without getting acquainted with the myths, legends and even symbols associated with the Igbo communities. In Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart", the wrestling contest between Okonkwo and Amalinze the cat, was a very stiff and tough one. In that battle field, Okonkwo could still remember the source from which he could draw extra-powers to invigorate him. He beckoned on his father Unoka who sounded the *oja* in a special way. Okonkwo was charged, and without further waste of time, threw Amalinze to the ground and had thunderous ovation and joy for the victory of Umuofia. That is the power of *oja* in Igbo mythology.

### (ii) Philosophical Theories

The Igbo tradition believes that *oja* has unlimited powers both spiritual and physical, and should not be toyed with. That is why women are not allowed to play *oja*, hence the proverb "*onye nwanyi na afulu oja na ama aja mmuo*" one for whom a woman plays the flute jumps into the world of spirits. This is a philosophical statement which means that women are not knowledgeable or crafty enough to manipulate the unlimited powers of *oja*. A melodic phrase from *oja* can inspire a spirit manifest to climb a big tree or embark on a dangerous action, but it is another melodic phrase dished out by a professional or initiated *oja* player that will call the same masquerade to order. Otherwise the community might experience a tragedy. Women are not believed to have such qualities demanding a high degree of common sense.

Nweke Ogbanikolo of Umueze is an indigenous technologist who produces *oja* flute. In his reply to a question from the researcher said,

"*oja* is good and bad depending on the message you send through it" he went further to say that *oja* is good in the sense that it is therapeutic, it can cure psychological illness, it can keep someone in a lighter mood and so on. It is bad in the sense that it can make someone loose his sense of reasoning or make a masquerade over react. (oral interview).

### (iii) Cultural Essence of *Oja*

The role of *oja* in the cultural music of the Igbo cannot be over emphasized. *Oja* plays two basic roles in Igbo culture, one for ritual and the other for entertainment. It could be in dance music, choral music, pure instrumental or mixed ensemble. The *oja* plays its role in each of these. The most single melodious musical in Igbo culture is the *oja*. It is an instrument that is capable of communicating within a long distance range, and appeals to every listener. That is why it is employed in every cultural music in the East of the Niger. In fact, any traditional ensemble in a social situation without the melodious tone of *oja* is like food without salt.

The cultural essence of *oja* is food for thought and of serious concern to the Igbo in the interest of Igbo identity. Obi comments: "Are there no more Igbo men who would play the *oja* (flute) that rouses the

masquerade (nnukwu mmanwu) and tears the atmosphere? Can we not give the world an *oja* tune in place of a clarinet's? Nigeria is in dire need of such men and women who would redefine the music scene by injecting the rich musical heritage of the Igbo into the contemporary "Naija sounds". Until then, we will keep appreciating the creativity exuded by other tribes in Nigeria who have redefined contemporary African Music in Naija!

#### \* (Iv) *Oja* as a Surrogate

A professional *oja* player in Igbo culture is a poet whose skills manifest in his poetic aptitude in creating music using his wealth of melodic phrases popular with Igbo music. He is a man with great imagination and creativity, well grounded in Igbo philosophy and proverbs. In a social situation, the *oja* player uses melodic statements to emphasize notable feelings or emotions or grandeur thought in well-painted phrases with the aim of generating feelings by communicating with personalities. His melodic statements are very understandable as they follow the speech tone of Igbo language in strict manners. That is why the *oja* is always called the dry wood that talks (*osisi kpolu nku na ekwu okwu*). The identified surrogate or poetic features identified in *oja* are:

- (A) Expression of speech in melodic form:
- (b) Truncation of textual phrases to achieve musically balanced phraseology:
- (c) Elongation of textual phrases to achieve phraseology:
- (d) Use of similes to enhance correlation in textual explicitness:
- (e) Melodic use of idioms, metaphors, folklores and songs as well as other wise sayings.
- (f) Blowing articulation in symmetric melodic form for dance gestures
- (g) Retrogression of melodic motif.

#### \* (v) The Magical Power of *Oja*

One silent objective of a professional *oja* player is economic, that is, to earn much money in a given performance. When in a social situation the player of a musical instrument masters and displays his art so well that an admirer can dish out all the amount of money in his pocket to spray on the artist, people will say, it is magic. Some non-members of the culture might not understand the powers behind such as uncontrolled benevolence. Even the man, who spent so much money willingly, might later begin to regret why he spent so much. It is not to be associated with diabolical charm of any nature but the magical or charismatic power of the instrument. The *oja* in Igbo culture has such powers, and this is what makes many master *oja* players succeed in their various locations.

To be a successful *oja* player in Igbo culture, the greatest magic is to master the titled names of personalities, and be able to remember them in a social function. Such flautist has to study the situations and know the appropriate time to call a personality by his titled name, the right time to praise him in public and the right melodic phrases to use. Such a player can make a fortune in a day. It is that magical power of *oja* that is working to sustain a musician and his family. It is the magical power or spirit that guides the musician to live and survive through his arts.

#### \* (vi) The Therapeutic Power of *Oja*

Therapy may be defined as physical or psychological cure of an illness or problems confronting human beings. The Concise Oxford dictionary of current English defines it as the treatment of physical or mental disorder other than by surgery. *Oja* is one musical instrument in Igbo culture, which has contributed much towards healing, taking advantage of its surrogate nature. Talking to an Igbo in the language that penetrates him, gives life and satisfaction, which is capable of solving his psychological or physical problems. Consolation and advice, using effective proverbs, to someone in a state of depression is therapeutic to an African. This is one of the functions of *oja* towards healing in

Igbo culture. *Oja* players are specialized in different areas of Igbo culture, which includes music therapy. A good *oja* professional, well grounded in the melodic use of idioms, metaphors, folklore and other wise sayings is employed to give therapeutic healing to a patient.

### ***Oja* and Related Instruments in the World Cultures**

In Africa, as well as many other world cultures, one of the musical instruments that had a very humble beginning is the Fula flute of the Fulani people of Guinea in West Africa. Fulani is one of the prominent ethnic cultures in Nigeria with cattle rearing as the main occupation. Their major musical instruments are in the aerophonic and membranophonic class.

Based on the report on the Internet, titled "The Fula flute Ensemble, West African/world music" by Howard Handel, president, Jazz Journalists Association, U.S.A., the Fula flute is one instrument that has a humble beginning. Like the Kora, up until recent times, this instrument, also known as the *ambin* was primarily one of accompaniment or of solace for the lonely herdsmen. In other words, the flute was the musical instrument with which the Fulani cattle rearers used to entertain themselves as they embarked on their endless and tedious journey of cattle rearing. This is exactly the role *oja* was playing in the life of the Igbo of Nigeria, where the flute, *oja*, up to this age is an important companion for travellers on a long distance journey; hunters to identify each others location in the bush and children while going on errands or fetching firewood.

The gradual development of the Fula flute and the stages of developmental improvement is interesting enough to inspire other African cultures, Igbo in particular to emulate. This simple cultural flute produced by the Fulani tribe of Guinea is not likely to be different from *oja* and the pan flute in terms of simplicity or complexity.

Today the Fula flute (*tambin*) has gone international. In other words, the flute is now globally recognized as a standard musical instrument, which a musician can study as a vocation. It is on record now that the world has, today, a musical ensemble that is called the "fula flute ensemble" which was founded in New York city in 1999, and comprises some of the finest African and African-oriented musicians in North America.

### **Fula Flute and *Oja*: Any Difference?**

Having discussed the historical breakthrough by the Fula flute, in the world music scene, perhaps it is important to bring to focus a good comparison between the Fula flute (*tambin*) and the Igbo flute (*oja*) based on the following parameter:

The Fula flute is an ethnic flute from the Fulani tribe of Africa: while the Igbo flute (*oja*) is also an ethnic flute from the Igbo tribe of Africa. The original or cultural name of the Fula flute is *tambin*: while the original or cultural name of the Igbo flute is *oja*. The Fula flute had a very humble beginning as the musical instrument used by the Fulani cattle rearers to entertain themselves as they continue their endless wondering: while the Igbo flute had a very humble beginning too as the musical instrument used by the Igbo travellers, hunters, errand boys and community workers for telegraphic, communication purposes and entertainments.

Both flutes are locally made or fashioned out by traditional organologists from materials sources locally and both have three finger holes whose range of tones can be increasing through. The name Fula is just a short form of Fulani, which is deliberately fashioned for the purpose of cultural identify. The original name (*tambin*) is still retained but playing a subordinate role as the local name. The name *Igbo* can as well adopt the same posture if needed, in the interest of cultural identity. There is no doubt

that there are other hidden identical facts about the two flutes; Fula flute and Igbo flute, but the much that have been revealed are good enough to satisfy our objective and purpose of this paper.

India is another important world culture that uses a variety of flutes that has a lot in common with *oja*. Two of the varieties are the *Bansuri* and *Venu* all made from bamboo. Based on the above facts, there is no doubt that the Fula flute (*tambin*) of the Fulani tribe is not better in quality than the Igbo flute, *oja*. The Fulani flute has gone international to the extent that in this decade it has been globalized, from the evidences so far gathered. What is the secret, behind the success of the Fula flute in the world?

### Strategy Towards Projection of *Oja*

To meet global recognition and demand, what next is to be done? To begin with, the basic approach is to project *oja* as an instrument for inclusion in the musical curriculum of schools and higher institutions of learning in the Eastern part of Nigeria, to be encouraged by the governments. The use of *oja* for performances in the national and international festivals of arts should be given priority by artistes of Igbo origin as a way of projecting and popularizing the instrument beyond the boundaries of Nigeria.

Further research and documentation on *oja* by the music scholars of Nigeria will definitely arouse more interest, enthusiasm and understanding of the instrument in the global music scene. Within that trend, the four classes of *oja* could be developed to perform in quartets and trios, not only the duet in *Igba ijele*. A marriage between *oja* and western instruments is very possible if talented musicians in Igbo culture can take initiative. That is the secret behind the success of Bailo Bah, a Guinean born musician who popularized the Fula flute taking it to great heights to the glory of Fulani identity. The black musicians in diaspora are looking for instruments like *oja*, which has cultural tones that sounds African. Besides, association with musicians especially blacks from other continents will enhance the exposure and popularity of the instrument to the level that in no distant future, Nigeria and the world will begin to hear not only of Fula flute ensemble but Igbo or *oja* ensemble.

### Conclusion

In this paper, attention has been drawn to the dynamics of *oja* as a well-known surrogate and telegraphic magic flute in Igbo culture of Nigeria. Due to the sketchy scholarly research works so far carried on it, according to available literature, an attempt has been made in this paper to discuss the place of *oja* in Igbo tradition, as well as other related musical instruments as exemplified by the *fula flute* of Gambia in modern civilizations. The telegraphic, surrogate and magical functions of *oja* are highlighted together with its socio-economic functions and values, which qualifies *oja* as a vocation to be included under music studies in Nigerian educational institutions.

The long and short-term result of this strategy is the attainment of the much desired and cherished Igbo cultural identity, as achieved by the *fula flute* of Gambia, the *bansuir* of India, the pan flute and other flutes of different world cultures. *Oja* has come to stay as a unique musical instrument in Nigeria which, through scholarly writings, projection through performances, inclusion in educational curriculum and government encouragement, the world will come to appreciate it in the global music scene.

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