

## The Anthropomorphic Attributes of African Musical Instruments: History and Use in Esan, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reviewed the anthropomorphic attributes of musical instruments in Africa. It proceeded to discuss the concepts and historical origin. In the course of this research, the instrumental resources, and ritual consecration of the instruments were seen to be strong factors for their attributes. The paper concludes by revealing the use of the anthropomorphism in the traditional Esan society.

### INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to know all the facts about the music of the past in West Africa because of the lack of indigenous written records. We can learn a great deal, however, from two major sources of historical information; the oral traditions of the land and the books written by European travelers and traders (Southern, 1983: 4).

The study of African music is deeply contingent on reports by non-Africans who are traders and travelers without ethnomusicological background. Such works have allowed copious generalizations that lacked in-depth study. If the musical past of Africans are not too known, does it appear credible to rely on the accounts of people who are primarily concerned about economic exploits? And if we have recognized oral traditions of the land as repository of the peoples past then how long should a non-African stay in a place before discussing their arts? This myriad of questions have become necessary because the answers that may be given to the questions asked by inquisitive non-Africans on flying visits may not be authentic.

In a world of human rights protection and wild life preservation, and even the presence of white men who were then seen as semi-gods, it could not have been said that certain drums are made of human, leopard, hyena, lion, Indian python, Alligator and boa hides with human skulls, human bones and elephant bones as frames. The answer due such strangers was that the drums are made of Snakes, Goats, Antelope and deer hides. Where the frames are of wood, emphasis was obviously not on how the wood are cut in the bush or the kind of consecration required before such drums

are used for ritual purposes. Researches in African musical arts should not be by question and answer. Besides, Africans who served as informants to these Western travelers and traders were oblivious of their intentions. It will therefore not be an over statement should it be said that certain pictures, obscure but still held as the gospel truth need re-imagining. Just a note to end this segment, Roger Kamien (1988: 591) says: "Non Western music (including African Music) is most often transmitted orally from parent to child or from teacher to student". If an investigator is not within this category, information gathering may be difficult and spurious.

### SOME FALLACIOUS VIEWS OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

From available records, there appears to be overwhelming misconceptions about what African Music stands for. Little wonder! That Tracey (1963: 36) remarks that "of all the arts in Africa, music is perhaps the most highly misinterpreted". Greatly disturbed about certain treatises that African musical studies have been vitiated by theories of evolution and diffusion and the concept of the primitive, Nketia (1967: 29) warns that "It is important that we do not follow these disciplines blindly". On theories of the evolution of music in the world, what we find is: exactly how music began is a mystery but an idea of its origin can be reconstructed from the music of the primitive tribes of Africa. In this direction Mitchell (1960: 3) says that "the study of primitive tribes of today likewise provides some information about music's past." African music

is very dynamic and functional and so is not and should not be seen as primitive and static as to provide strong basis of world music's reconstruction. A look at world history of music portrays individual stories of their music's origin. In this light, Polin (1954) posits:

It is doubtful that we shall ever know when or under what circumstances the first musical utterance was made, yet every culture developed some form of musical tradition and many of them possessed legends that pertain to the origin of music.

If it is doubtful to ever know how music originated, why deceive and delude the world into thinking that Africa could provide any form of clue? After Mesopotamia (Asia) the next continent that witnessed early civilization is Africa and given that every culture is dynamic, it may be erroneous to suppose that the instruments in use now, songs and dances, are true replica of those of several centuries ago in the continent.

### **Definition of Anthropomorphism**

The Cambridge international dictionary of English (1995) defines Anthropomorphism as "the showing or treating of animals, gods and objects as if they are human in appearance, character and behaviours" While this opinion is good enough for the purpose of this treatise, the chambers dictionary throws a better light into this subject by defining it as "the ascription of human characteristics to what is not human" (2001: 63).

African societies are autochthonous in nature. This situation is discernable in their diversity in language spoken, music and dance performances, cultural and religious beliefs. In spite of these obvious diversities, there is a point of agreement – some African musical instruments are anthropomorphic. Such instruments are mainly wooden and membrane drums.

### **Anthropomorphic Attributes of African Instruments: A History**

After a long study of global percussion market, the drum maker Remo Belli in Hart (1990: 29) opines that "One percent of the world's population are drummers". Hart (1990) concludes that there are probably a lot more drummers in the world than pianists, trombonists and flautists. In Africa drums form the major bed rock of the ensembles. This is so because they are given eminent positions in social, religious and political

settings. Although Africa has records of the use of other instruments from aerophone chordophone and idiophone families, drums are very common. In spite of its profuse usage and involvement in musical performances, certain drums in Africa are highly respected. The source of this respect is contingent on the attributes drums share in Africa. Bebey (1975: 14) observes that:

Because the drum in certain circumstances, is equated with a man (and a rather exceptional man, at that, whose powerful voice is capable of sending messages far and wide), women must consequently treat it with the same respect that they show towards their men folk... in some African societies, women are not even permitted to touch a drum under any circumstance.

There is a central reason why drums are respected in Africa and all over the world. Kamien (1988) asserts that in Tibet, trumpets and drums are made from human bones and skulls. This view is further supported by Hart (1990: 15) when he says specifically of Tibetan musical instruments that "The most distinctive damarus are made from human skulls".

In Africa, there are records of drums construction and consecration procedures. It is these exercises that give African drums their status of human equivalence. In Ghana, the sacrificial drums of the Ashanti are covered with the membrane of human skin and decorated with human skulls. Similarly, in East Africa, it is said that coronation drums were only played by sticks made from human tibias. To think of how old this practice is and where exactly it first started remains an unattainable goal. However, this practice may have been in existence ever since the origin of African nation.

Esan nationality broke out of the Benin Kingdom in the 14th Century. Till date, they are generally believed to be of Edoid extraction. In this area, Royal drums were said to have been made of palace Slaves' hides and skin. Later as a result of abrogation of certain repugnant practices, tiger skin was then introduced. In most Esan palaces, there are till today, drums made of tiger skin. Another important factor which aided anthropomorphism is the choice of wood for drum construction and its associated consecration by cult chief priests. Certain ritual/cult drums are made of drum frames from trees like *Ohankin* and *Akwobisi* and *Asoli*. These are mystical plants revered for their unique powers. Such frames are covered with the skin of Indian python or Boa as in the case of Native doctor's drums, tiger skin as

in palace drums and leopard or hyena as in some other cults. When duly consecrated, the drums remain very powerful in the societies they serve. This shall be extensively discussed under use of anthropomorphic drums. The products of such drum construction are *Okede'bo* Native doctor's drums, *Okede Owegbe* drums used in *Owegbe* cult, *Okede Azenu* drums used in *Azenu* cult etc.

Another major source from which anthropomorphism evolved is the practice of spiritism, there is ardent belief in ancestor and ancestral spirits in Africa. This view is supported wholly when Hindley (1982: 24) observes that "where as some instruments have become completely profane in their use, certain others have powerful religious or magical powers and women or non initiates who see them may be punished by death" In Esan, one of such religio-mystical instruments is *Alimin-Otor* – land spirits. This instrument is actually the bull roarer which is a carved bob of wood attached to a cord which, when whirled through the air produces a terrifying roar. This instrument is usually played around midnight with strong warning that women and children should lock themselves inside only initiates usually old men take part in the procession of land spirits, consequently, the sounding of the instrument (bull roarer) in Esan conveys the presence of spirits in the midst of men.

In Esan nationality is a dance called *Igbabonelimhin*; this means clapping for the ancestors. The ensemble's masquerade is obviously not expected to talk but on rare occasions, he utters some telegraphic messages in the spirit language which very few elders can interpret. The tone of the message is usually shrill and high pitched. The instrument with which such tones are produced is made of wood with a hole in the middle while one end is open the other is loosely sealed with polythene substance of 2mm thickness when sang or spoken into from the open end, the sound rattles. Till date the associated sound that comes from this instrument is believed to be the voice of the ancestors therefore the instrument is the mouth piece of their ancestors.

### **The Use of Anthropomorphic Attributes of Esan Musical Instruments**

Music in Africa is purely eclectic because its roots can be found in traditional religion, oral literature, history, traditional medicine, dance and communication. This theoretical background

gives Bebey (1975) the impetus to qualify it as an impure art form. African music cannot share the above mentioned qualities without talking of the instruments. Speaking generally of drums, Akpabot (1986) opines that an African drum in a museum could be a subject of curiosity to fine artist, musicologist and archeologist. Akpabot's position takes a lead in the thought that African musical instruments are not primarily for entertainment purpose alone or can their ascription of human characteristics be for sheer fun. Below is a dossier of the functional use of anthropomorphic features of some selected Esan musical instruments

**1. Healing Purposes:** Whether music can heal is not controvertible. Recognizing the healing forces of music, McClellan (1988: 109), opines that "the basic premise upon which healing through music operates is that a primary cause of disease is emotional stress and negative mental attitudes that create energy imbalances and blockages". Music generally in Africa cannot be talked of without mentioning its associated instruments. Just as in the ancient Greek where Theophrastus (370 – 288BC) notes that the sound of flute will cure epilepsy and a sciatic gut". Certain Esan musical instruments have healing influences on certain organs in the human body. The bell – *Agogo* is thought of in Esan as an obedient man with a sonorous voice that can never get crack under any circumstance. Drinking the water used in rinsing a bell is believed to cure sore throat in Esan.

**2. Cursing Any Evil Hands in the Society:** Having mentioned before in this paper that some drums are made of special wood and membrane and above all consecrated by blood libation, it has become necessary to spell out its functions. These drums are as highly respected as the deities of the land. This is so because some of these drums are ancestral and of unknown past. When there is epidemic in the clan, it is believed that the evil is brought by witches and wizards in the community similarly, constant theft of domestic animals and personal effects are attributed to few insiders who are heartless. To curb such developments, these ancestral drums are assembled on a traditional or native Sunday to curse the perpetrators of such evils. The curse is said to manifest in madness, constant stooling or open confessions.

Akin to the situation above, in times of initiation into some of the cults in Esan and Chieftaincy title taking, these kinds of instruments

are gathered and oath of secrecy is taken by the initiates under the instruction of the reigning monarchs or chief priests. The instruments are seen as primary witnesses who will apportion punishment should related rules be flouted.

**3. For Communication:** Whether African Musical instruments are communication devices is no longer arguable because many music scholars have supported this assertion and are evident in the works of Ames (1965), Hindley (1982), Southern (1983) and Kamien (1988). Hindley (1982: 22) specifically opines that “the talking drums have been used during the Civil wars to signal the arrival of relief supplies”.

Surprisingly enough, some non African Scholars believe that such practices are extinct, prominent in this view are Hart (1990) and Funes (1992). Hart posits bluntly that:

By creating drums capable of handling pitch at the same time as rhythm, the African figured out a way to turn rhythm and noise into speech. Today the old societies that preserved the languages of the drum are almost completely wiped out, overrun by telephones, cars and TV, all of which convey information more quickly and perhaps with greater accuracy (Hart, 1990: 200).

The above view is completely wrong of the Esan situation in Edo State, Nigeria. Of the thirty-two towns in Esan, five are hooked to GSM communication service and only four out of the five local government headquarters have telephone lines which are even unreliable. Over half of the nationality’s population live in object poverty with out access to portable water tarred roads, health care, good shelter, good community schools not to talk of Television sets, telephones and cars. In some Esan towns, movement to neighbouring markets is impaired during rainy season –a period between March to September each year as a result of the slippery nature of the roads. The above opinion is further enhanced in an interview conducted by the Nigerian Television Authority on the 28th January 2003. In this interview, the president of Nigerian society of Engineers-Engr. Somolu said that “the Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA) has reached only 30% of the Nigerian population”. This culture area under review remains part of the overwhelming 70% without electricity and its associated communication net work.

In this culture area, Musical Instruments, remain the major source of information

dissemination. There are drums and other musical instruments of different timbres to announce the death of a King, Chief or a Kins man; to convene an emergency meeting; to announce that a neighbour is missing; to announce the victorious arrival of a Warrior and to make declarations. Such Messages are usually sent at nights and very early in the mornings to enable the information-sound of the instrument cover a wide distance.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper reviewed some fallacious views of African music and its instruments as posited by some non African scholars, gave definition of anthropomorphism and the history of anthropomorphic attributes of traditional African instruments. It went on to establish the use of anthropomorphism in Esan. In the course of this study, it was revealed that the Esan people use such attributes in healing, cursing evil hands in the society and for communication purposes.

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