

**MUSIC IN FISHING AND POND DEPLETING IN
OKPE CULTURE: EMOTION, SPIRITUALITY
AND EXPERIENCE.**

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Abstract

Okpe is one of the multi-ethnic groups in Nigeria, and fishing in the Okpe culture is in different shades at both subsistent and commercial degrees, requiring individual and group efforts. Individuals and families own the ponds often depleted by group of family members and invited community folks annually or bi-annually. Music plays very essential roles during the depletion of water and fish in the ponds at season. It spiritually mediates the course of human efforts in depleting the water, in order to catch the fishes and the backing of the forest and water deities who possess the stream forest and reserve exclusive authority over all beings and activities in the environment. Music, during the events, exerts socio-moral control on the pond depleting participants, regulating their minds, emotions, moods and behaviours at different stages of the task and expedition. This paper investigates the roles of music in mediating between the activities of man and deity in environmental and metaphysical relationships. It further examines its roles in exhilarating, invigorating, energizing, exciting, and controlling the labour force as well as warning and checking excesses in emotional change and reactions.

‘As a social tool and as a tool for effecting social promotion, music has no equal amongst the arts’ (Feenstra, 1999/2000: 76).

Introduction

Fishing, in Okpe culture is an occupation that is practiced in different forms through the use of fish net, cage, hooks, arrows and pond depleting that all follow certain traditional calendar. As Nzewi (2005: 39) puts it: ‘some... occasions for communal music making, occur at specified times in the annual calendar’. The climatic condition of Okpe land is temperate, being neither extremely cold, nor extremely hot. It experiences two major seasons, the dry season and the rainy season, which are further subdivided into four traditional seasons respectively (Idamoyibo, 2005: 3-4). The subdivisions of the traditional seasons include the following:

Dry seasons

Season	Period	Feature
<i>Okaka</i>	January-early March	Streams dry and fish ponds are depleted
<i>Oro</i>	April-May	Oil palm productivity flourishes
<i>Oriaren</i>	Late August-early Sept.	Trees denude and bear fresh leaves
<i>Ohwahwa</i>	December-January	Harmattan wind blows and it becomes cold

Rainy seasons

Season	Period	Feature
<i>Ovon</i>	June	Intermittent rain fall
<i>Ukude</i>	July-mid August	Flood and frog crowing
<i>Ewe</i>	September	High volume of rain, thunder and Lightening
<i>Oya</i>	October	Some rain and much fishing success

It should be noted, however, that little overlapping occurs in the above subdivisions of the seasons. Although some of the fishing forms are seasonal, fishpond depleting is most seasonal in the traditional system. Any wrong calculation for schedule to deplete the ponds could make it impossible once the rains begin. There is a season when the streams overflow and a season when they are completely dry without any water, though some streams particularly those that link to any river may not completely dry up before the next rainy season. In the first quarter of the dry season, *Okaka* – experienced between January and March -, the waters in the streams drain from all water lanes to irregular deep spots called *ot̄erhe* – large depression. Human beings then watch out for such depressions and construct it to fishponds.

The ponds are maintained annually or biannually, depending on when it is depleted to catch the fishes. Family members usually inherit the ponds from generation to generation. In a number of cases, the ponds are inherited and maintained by the extended family, to the point that notice is passed to all members (elders) of the extended family, fixing date for the fishpond depleting. The task of depleting the ponds, depending on the size and work force, could take a whole day, sometimes two or more days. It should be stressed that nowadays many ponds are depleted by use of water pump engine that sucks the water out of the ponds. This way, the pond depleting exercise does not exceed one day.

The spirituality of music in fishing

George King (1999/2000: 48) quotes Duckles (1980:836) that: ‘the advanced study of Music should be centred not on music but on Man, the Musicians acting within a social and cultural environment’. The basis of the above argument is that human beings use music to subdue their environment and turn it to a pleasant world. Marianne Feenstra (1999/2000:75) asserts that: ‘the social role of music has throughout the ages been acknowledged as a vital one: deities are praised most highly by means of music, rituals are accompanied by music, armies go to war marching to music and mothers sing their babies to sleep’. Nzewi (2007: 99. Vol. 2) similarly asserts that:

Music rallies the human participants, and generates the right spiritual environment and disposition. Music evokes the essential emanation of the intangible supernatural participants and obligors for palpable or effective interactions. The indigenous musical arts are a transcendent medium of communication with the deities at the same time as they create a socially cohesive atmosphere and produce states of altered

consciousness or induce the right physical elevation for human rapport with the intangible but felt supernatural presence.

Nzewi (2007: 10. Vol. 4) further argues that humans live in a world of dual material quantities and immaterial impacts that can cross or share boundaries, philosophically negotiating the complementarities, a balance and healthy psyche of individuals; a cardinal intention of the musical arts in Africa being the deploying of creative and participatory structures that allow the formation of humanning virtues and dispositions to be interactive processes. ‘As such the grammar, syntax and public/private procedures are designed to intensify other-consciousness, and moderate the excesses of the ego. Individual merits are recognised, but not aggrandized and idolized (Nzewi, 2007: 16)’.

Music is highly a spiritual element, a component of spiritual reality that is capable of bringing forces and beings to action. Human beings recognise the spiritual power of music, thus they use it to certain advantage in worship, praise and entertainment. In the Okpe culture, and around the globe, it is a commonplace belief that some spiritual forces, deities, gods and goddesses live in the waters in the ocean, sea, river and stream (Idamoyibo, 1998). It is believed therefore that the immortal beings that dwell in the stream have control over certain operations in the environment. When a fishpond in the stream is to be depleted, such deities are normally appeased.

On arrival at the foot of the fishpond, the elders offer one or two boiled or roasted plantain fruits, preferably the ripe type, matched and mixed with palm oil, then moulded into two wraps, to the deity with incantations, in order to propitiate the deity and request it to release all the fishes, particularly the big ones and take away all dangerous creatures like snake from the pond, to enable the family team catch the fishes peacefully. Other items included in the sacrifice are a young chick and a raw egg. They peel the bark of a big tree and lay the sacrifice on it. In Okpe, the people use palm oil to eat plantain just as one would use stew (soup) to eat yam. The plantain sacrifice is therefore prepared with palm oil to make it deliciously attractive to the deity. As soon as the sacrifice is offered, a team of two to four persons step into the water at a point prepared for the depletion of the water. Then they begin to deplete the pool of water by use of large bowls to pull the water away over their shoulders to the passage by which it flows away out of the pond. In this way, some fishes are depleted with the water and some members of the team watch out to catch them. In the first stage of the fishpond depletion exercise, the team performs the following song:

Example 1: *Utiaberen (Ukorugbuku) – Kinds of fish*

♩ = 100

U - tia - be - ren ro vwa me, - tio - bo n'a - me n'a - mio rio, - e. - - - -

U - ko - ru - gbu - ku ro vw'a - me

4
Tio - bo n'a - me n'a - mio rio, e.

Text:

Utiaberen (Ukorugbuku) ro vbo ame
Ti-obo n'ame n'ame orie, e.

Utiaberen, the owner of the waters
Release the water and let it go, yea.

Utiaberen is a kind of fish in the tilapia family and *Ukorugbuku* is a big kind of fish with soft scales, often referred to as *Ugwrerhe*. In the context of performance, the song refers to both fishes hence their names are used interchangeably, as well as the deity that possesses the stream and the ponds. The appeal contained in the song suggests that the named fishes, known and unknown deities who own the water should release it and make its depletion much easy. This appeal is considered necessary, because of certain fundamental implications. At times, the earth is still very wet i.e. it still contains much water, leaving only a shallow dry point below ground level and could therefore puke much water into the pond thereby frustrate the efforts to deplete it. For this reason, it is believed that the deity of the stream has the power to stop the waters from puking into the pond as it is being depleted, thus the appeal to withhold it is made through the song. It is also a common knowledge that creatures like fishes and animals have a way of reacting to the activities of human beings, particularly as it affects them.

The *Utiaberen* – tilapia kind of fish, though appears to be small, conglomerate in clusters and stop the water from flowing out of the ponds, therefore the task of depleting the water could become extremely difficult if appeal is not made to this group of fishes to release the water for depletion. The *Ukorugbuku* is one of the biggest forms of fish expected in the fishponds. It is believed that this group of fishes also react and cluster to withhold the water from flowing out of the ponds, in order to frustrate the efforts of the pond depleting participants. If appeal through sacrifice and music is ignored, water could continue to puke into the stream and make the expedition linger for two or more days when it could have taken only a day. The foregoing reveals that the spiritual nature of music enables it to mediate in the affairs between human and others beings within the physical and metaphysical environment.

Music, the vigour charger

Taryn Arnott and Louise Saunders (2008: 49) assert that social behaviours function in different musical contexts and are significant when participating as either a musical performer or a spectator. Ijeoma Forchu (2007: 94) argues that music behaviours result from musical concepts which in turn reflect the general societal value systems and behavioural patterns, while traditional music elicits tremendous power on the people. She quotes Basden, G.T (1966: 94) that: 'Passions are roused, abnormal strength is instilled, men and women acting as they never would under ordinary condition.' On the aspect of human control, Richard Okafor (2005: 12) asserts that: 'music helps to provide [people] with mental stability... it helps to keep their minds not only alert but also concentrated and not in a state of frenzy... music not only provides a punctuation to the tedium and rhythm of work but also helps to keep the mind from running wild, and not being a destructive force within the individual'.

Music charges the energy of human beings to enable them do more work than they could ordinarily do. Much as it charges and invigorates the workers, it does also soothe the mind at work to the extent that the workers enjoy the work activity and therefore do not experience stress and boredom. At the fishpond, the task of depleting the water is distributed in a way that members take turns in small groups of three or four. The small teams perform the task in a uniform order, so as to create rhythm,

which accompanies the work. As they plunge their bowls into the water at the same time, pull out the water and pour it over their shoulders to strike the passage at once the rhythm produced is strong, exciting and motivating. The rhythm also accompanies the singing and clapping done by other members who provide such moral support to the workers.



Figure 1: Depleting water from the fishpond

The songs that accompany work are normally short and straightforward in communication content, since it is not a time to listen to any long and contemplative musical dialogue. The songs address various subjects within the discipline and expected conduct of participants at the different stages of the activities. The songs connote (not only) the immediate prowess demonstrated by the participants in depleting the water, wherein the labourers are praised and encouraged, but the vigour, strength and expertise of the individual in the physical labour. The following song, for instance, excites and charges participants greatly to enable them work harder and at the same time enjoy the activity.

Example 2: *Fen, Ame Ogberiruo* (Deplete, the water is with you)

Solo

Fen, fen, fen, a - meo' gbe ri ruo, Fen, fen, fen, a - meo' gbe

Receiver Solo

4 O- gba 'meo se gbe-ru-dio, Chorus Fen, fen, fen, a - meo' gbe ri ruo, RS O- gba 'meo se gbe ru dio,

7 Chorus

Fen, fen, fen, a - meo' gbe ri ruo, a - meo gbe ri ruo, a - meo gbe

10

ri ruo.

Text:

Fen, fen, fen, ame-ogbe ri ruo, Deplete, deplete, deplete, the water is with you
Fen, fen, fen, ame-ogbe ri ruo, Deplete, deplete, deplete, the water is with you
Ogba 'meo se gbere udion, The powerful water depletor is at the duty post
Fen, fen, fen, ame-ogbe ri ruo Deplete, deplete, deplete, the water is with you
Ogba 'meo se gbere udion, The powerful water depletor is at the duty post
Fen, fen, fen, ame-ogbe ri ruo Deplete, deplete, deplete, the water is with you
 Ame-ogbe ri ruo, ame-ogbe ri ruo. The water is with you, the water is with you.

Aluede (2008: 89) notes that: ‘Esan songs are didactic, political, historical, and satirical, for ritual healing, for leading campaigns and propaganda, for entertainment, for praise, etc’. The text above suggests that the team that depletes the water is commended in such a way that individuals amongst them acknowledge the commendation by working harder. The expression *Ogba ame* signifies one who is very powerful and experienced in depleting water at fishponds. Since occasions arise when members who sing and clap for the team before their turn openly commend those who are working hard and query the lazy, each team member then struggles to impress him/herself and the others. The expression that ‘the water is with you’ also signifies that very hard working team members could be commended for fast depletion of the water and early departure from the stream, and the lazy could receive blames for causing delay. By implication, therefore, the song has a way of using both positive and negative approaches to challenge people to work hard.

Musico-emotional control, an experience in conflict management

Adeogun (2003:106) argues that ‘master-musician-educators’ in traditional African societies not only use music to inform, motivate, delight, socialize, educate and humanize fellow Africans in their aspirations but also use education in the realm of music to teach musical skills, prepare the mind and personality of a learner for functional and effective artistic roles. Olorunsogo (2008:78) observes that: ‘traditional music mirrors the culture and values of the people who perform it.’ The greatest value and attribute of the Okpe is peace loving and peace making. As music in other socio-

ritual events in Okpe emphasize and uphold the value of peace among human beings, music at the event of fishpond depleting, is performed with the purpose to control human attitude and heal wounded souls, in order to ensure peace amongst the participants.

Meki (2007:65. Vol. 3) argues that at the root of the idea to create indigenous music, there is an objective, a purpose in which the artistic, aesthetic and material aspects of creativity are judiciously rationalized to make real in human experience a utilitarian aspiration. While discussing the Odumorigo music and musicians of Okaiuga Nkwoegwu Igbo culture, Nwamara (2006:133) observed that: it serves various purposes as entertainment music, educative music, praise achievers and correct evildoers.' Eunice Ibekwe (2008: 37) simply states that: through music, the people's behaviour and mode of conduct are shaped. In other [words], music is a character molder. It condemns as well as appraises good morals'. John Hinch (2008: viii) summarizes the views of his students that: 'Music is the language of the emotions,' but argues that: 'Clearly it cannot be' and acknowledges that: 'While music is obviously not the emotion itself, it certainly seems to message... emotions in some inexplicable way'.

Music has played, and continues to play vital roles in controlling the social attitude and emotions of human beings in the society. When properly bridled, through inspiring and critical music dialogue, the temperaments of human beings experience change from moody to gay, fury to tranquil, tense to easiness, etc. Such changes turn the reaction of persons from violence and enable them to manage conflict effectively with a ready mood to embrace peace. Experience generally in Okpe reveals that to deplete the fishponds is to harvest the fishes in the ponds with expectation that family members would go home rejoicing and satisfied.

In the beginning, members are cordially invited and they go together to the stream as friends and relations. During the depletion of water from the ponds, the most tasking aspect of the work, members encourage, support and energize one another to work very hard to achieve the goals. But when the waters have been depleted and the time to catch the fishes comes, conflict is often experienced. Someone attempts to cut or catch a big fish and the relation nearby pushes him/her away so that he/she would catch it. Other times, one may not push the other away, but would suddenly make haste to cut the fish attempted by another. See illustration in figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Scramble to catch the fish

When the fishes are being caught, some participants set fire to roast and cook some for consumption while the labour goes on. Emotionally, the spirit of envy is aroused at this stage. Some participants feel they worked harder when depleting the water, but are probably not smart or lucky enough to catch very big fishes. Although all participants ought to catch and send the fishes to a common collection, some hide the big fish they catch, others roast and cook them for immediate consumption; thus the scramble and envy. At this experience, the following song is performed to deride the greedy participants and exert some social control over their behaviour.

Example 3: Otoké Ame (When it is Time to Deplete water)

Call O - t'okea 'meo, o - t'okea 'meo, o - t'okie 'rhe-rio,

Response Da-bo fen ye, da-bo fen ye, ti keo

bo - ra ti keo 'bo - ra, me - m'o -voe fiae, me -m'o voe rie.

Text:

<i>Ote oke ame, dabo fɛnye,</i>	Time to deplete water, one is urged,
<i>Ote oke ame, dabo fɛnye;</i>	Time to deplete water, one is urged;
<i>Ot' oke erherin,</i>	Time to catch fish,
<i>'Tikɛ 'oboran, tikɛ 'oboran,</i>	'Move away, move away,
<i>Mɛmɛ oʋo e fia 'e,</i>	Let me cut it,
<i>Meme oʋo e riɛ'.</i>	And consume it alone'.

The above song is performed when the water is greatly reduced and participants can access the fishes more easily. It suggests that both the lazy participants and owners of the ponds do urge and energize the hard working and skilled participants to deplete the water with all their strength. Normally, members of the team work together to deplete the water and catch the fishes, and then put them together for sharing at the end of the expedition. But the social attitude of some people changes when it is time to catch the fishes. They suddenly become greedy, wild and selfish. This could be referred to as a lower level greed, because it involves individuals who may not be the owners of the ponds. The higher-level greed, however, involves owners of the fishponds who invited close family relations, fiends and neighbours to participate, but in the end take a large portion of the big fishes and give invited participants insignificant amount of share. At critical moments of sharing, some close relations get involved in serious dissension, squabble and fighting. This results in immediate or temporary enmity between the opponents who could be very close relations. The song in example 4 below illustrates this experience.

Example 4: *Ibi Orhueren ofan Omizu* (Little cart fish broke blood relations)

Text:

<i>I bi OmQ orhueren ofan omizu,</i>	Little cart fish broke blood relations,
<i>Ekete omizu omerhe te,</i>	Pleasant as blood relationship is,
<i>I bi OmQ orhueren ofan omizu;</i>	Little cart fish broke blood relations;
<i>Ekete omizu Omerhe te,</i>	Pleasant as blood relationship is,
<i>I bi OmQ orhueren ofan omizu.</i>	Little cart fish broke blood relations.

This song is performed at the middle and last phases of the pond depleting activities. At the early stage, it is performed to warn participants ahead, that emotions should be controlled to avoid quarrelling and fighting or breaking of relationships. After sharing the fishes, if some participants begin to quarrel and fight, the song is performed again to remind and control their social behaviour. It implies that the fellows quarrelling and fighting over the sharing of fish have little wisdom. The expression ‘little cart fish’ in the song means that fish is consumable; big or many, they could be exhausted soon. It is therefore worthless, compared to good human relationship that can last long with its attendant benefits. It should be noted, however, that the scramble to catch the big

fishes could also be influenced by participants' desire to prove their individual agility and worthy contributions.

Conclusion

This paper has provided background knowledge of the traditional fishponds in Okpe culture as opposed to the present day mechanized fishponds. It has x-rayed the roles of music in the events of fishponds depleting. It established the fact that music is a spiritual element, which human beings use to access the presence and deeds of the supernatural beings that exist within the environment. It further indicated the roles of music in mediating between the activities of human beings, deities and other beings in environmental and metaphysical relationships. It examined the roles of music as an invigorator that exhilarates, energizes, excites, strengthens and controls labour force during fishpond depleting. It also established the role of music in total human experience, how it plays on the changing human emotions and mood, thereby controlling social behaviours that erupt as reactions. It established that music is such a panacea to the up-keep of societal values, in that it gives warning and sanctions in order to check excesses in human behaviour and maintain social standards.

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Oral Interview

1. Madam Agnes Imonikpiroro Erivwo
2. Mrs Helen Ovwufeti
3. Mrs Diomuayigele Ovwirhue
4. Mrs Obosogworuru Eyesagbaran
5. Mrs Memeriyede Izediken
6. Mrs Egborode-orumene Iboyitie
7. Madam Ajeneye Echogba
8. Mrs Oti Enerheru (in blessed memory)
9. Mr John Idamoyibo Odafe (in blessed memory)