



Ability in Disability: Anthony Mgbara Drums Production in Yeghe Community, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Anthony Mgbara is a physically challenged man from birth, his wrist is completely off from his arm as if he is amputated but he was born into this world without a wrist. He is intelligent and naturally endowed with skills of producing drums (*kere*) and masks of different sizes and shapes. This paper examines the production of drums (*kere*) in Yeghe community Ogoni, Rivers State, South South, Nigeria, by Anthony Mgbara. He constructs drums (*kere*) musical instruments with materials found within the locality, these materials are endowed by nature in Yeghe community and he makes use of these gifts of nature to produce musical instruments. Primary and secondary sources were employed. Anthony Mgbara being a primary source, was interviewed to get first hand information's and in conjunction, journals, books, conference papers were also consulted. Various groups in Ogoni communities patronize and rely on him for the production of their drums, these drums are of various sizes and shapes, which are constructed with *Abura* or pear tree found in the community and are classified under the membranophone family. In producing a drum, materials needed are knife, chisel, wood, membrane from animal. Thus producing a drum is not an easy task; it needs strength, patience and hard work. It was discovered that the drums produced with wood from pear tree gives better sound than the woods of other trees. Conclusions and recommendations were made for the continuity of the production of drums in Yeghe, Ogoni community, Anthony Mgbara should be encouraged by the Khana Local Government Chairman and Rivers State Government to feel a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Disability, Production, Drums, Materials, Patronage.

Introduction

Drums of various sizes are major musical instruments attached to almost all the music groups in Ogoni communities, some of the music groups perform with only drums as their musical instrument without other musical instruments attached to their performances, example, the *Akuni* dance music group of Bianu community in Ogoni which is an instrumental group performed only with eleven drums. Vidal (2012) informs that "besides the diverse variety of traditions, musical culture in the south-west is dominated by two principal medium of musical expression: the drum and voice. Drumming and singing constitute the main form of musical expression"(p. 43). Drums called *kere* in Ogoni language dominates the major instruments of various music groups in Ogoni. The drums (*kere*) instruments are performed in everyday musical activities of the Ogoni people such as cultural activities, marriages, child birth, political activities, burial ceremonies, rites of passages and special occasions like the chieftaincy coronation of a traditional ruler known as *menebo*. In some communities, drums are part of the chief's stool used for communication and performance of special music and dance for the traditional rulers.

Chukwu (2004) supports that,

Musical instruments including the voice are the media for the production and propagation of desired sounds to express man's feelings. Various cultures of the world have been able to design and consider certain musical instruments for their musical purpose (p.8).

The drums of various sizes designed by Anthony in the community are considered for musical purposes like sound production which expresses their emotion, love, joy, sadness and success of Yeghe people and these drums performed in the community are produced within the community with materials found in the community. Uche (2015) affirms that,

Traditional instruments play symbolic roles both in the musical arts traditional and in other aspects that enhance the culture of the people. They are used to accompany musical activities to draw attention, and to perform other necessary activities that may not be connected to musical events such as, for public announcements, warning signals, and other symbolic usages (p.114).

Drums construction in Yeghe community is part of everyday life of the people, it forms part of the experience of the people which is typical of any African society. Cultural dance accompanied with musical instruments enhance the cultural activities of the people and also drums produced within Yeghe community are used to convey informations, pass instructions to the people, imbibe acceptable behavioural patterns, tell stories on the history of the community. It amounts to a total communion that is shared by the members of the community. The art of performing music with drum musical instruments are an avenue through which unacceptable behavior is checked in the community. There are drum instrumental ensembles that requires special drum

instruments produced for socio-cultural performance which has to do with special drums among the Yeghe people for special occasions, produced by Anthony Mgbara.

Methodology

The ethnomusicological study was used to carry out this study. Information was elicited from primary and secondary sources. The primary source was collected through oral interviews to help aid the documented facts about the construction of drums by Anthony Mgbara in Yeghe community. The oral interview method gave room for a lot of questioning, which created an environment to get enough answers, facts and information in regards to the study. Observation and active participation were also employed to understand the stages of production of drum musical instruments. Libraries were visited to consult books, journals, conference papers and internet sources.

Historical background of Ogoni community

Gberegbara (2012) narrates that the real origin of the people of Ogoni remains a mystery. Wiwa (1992), informs that there is yet much anthropological, ethno-sociological and linguistic work to be done to determine the true origin of the estimated 500,000 Ogoni people as at 1992. A recent census carried out in the area puts the population of Ogoni at over 900,000 people. There are three theories that account for the origin of Ogoni as a people. One tradition has it that a fleet of soldiers of fortune from Ghana who were in search of slaves set sail along the coast of what is today called Nigeria and were stranded at the estuary of Imo River. This was at the place now known as Opuoko in the present day Khana Local Government Area of Rivers State. It is believed that this settlement took place as a result of the activities of the British Navy against slave dealers and other anti-slave forces on the Atlantic Ocean. During the period of the Slave Trade, Luther (1986) stressed that "these soldiers of fortune from Ghana decided to settle at Opuoko to avoid the risk of being captured by the British anti-slave patrol team." (p. 23) Loolo (1981) contends that "from Opuoko they later spread to other parts of Ogoni and that the name Khana used for the people of the area is in fact a mistaken pronunciation of the word Ghana." (p. 25)

The second tradition has it that before the 15th Century, there were massive migrations from Central Africa and the Congo Basin towards the coast of West Africa. According to William (1999):

Some of the migrants that settled in Ibibio land later moved across the Imo River and settled at Opuoko, Bane, Kono, Okwale and Beeri. Those who settled at Bane extended further inland to Eweh, Duboro, Lubara and other villages, which now constitute Ken-Khana Kingdom, from Sogho, Gbenekuape and Gbenegininwa with their families went to Ueken, Horo, Kono, Kpita and Botem. Further expansion led to what is known today as the Tai kingdom of Ogoni whose names have not ever been properly identified left for Gioko. They spread further to establish Lare, Bera, Nweol, Biara, Mogho, K dere and B Dere. Later, migrants from Gioko founded Barako, Nwebiara, Deken and other communities of Gokana Kingdom. The founders of Bodo came much later on from Korokoro in Tai kingdom. (p. 5)

The establishment of Eleme Kingdom was indeed as a result of a dramatic event that took place at Lewe in early times. One of the children of Gbenekuapie that settled at Lewe committed adultery with a twin mother, a heinous crime in those days. Loolo (1981) stressed that this got the young man expelled from Lewe since it was a taboo then. When his relations on a visit asked him about his new settlement, he told them *A leemem* meaning, "I like it". Thus, the word Eleme is an adulterated form of *A leema* by the missionaries." (p. 23)

The most recent settlement of Ogoni people is that of Ben-Ogoi, Gbaken, Eemu, Tuabon, Tumbee and Oloko, which were destroyed during the Abacha's Regime by the Nigerian Army as a result of the Ogoni crisis. Settlers at Bai Ogoi came from Bodo and other villages of Ogoni especially the Gokana Kingdom. They moved into this area because of the vast forest land that was available.

The third story behind the origin of the Ogoni people could be traced to the study carried out by Wiko (1988) who classified "Ogoni as a distinct language within Delta cross sub-branch of Cross River branch in the new Benue-Congo family of Niger Delta phylum." After the fall of Ghana in 1240, the inhabitants of the then old Ghana Empire spread to several parts of West Africa. The migrants from the empire came into the area and settled at Ko (Opuoko) where they had a brief stopover before proceeding to Nama. It was from Nama that they spread to Gokana Komi (1990) pointed out that:

the present settlers in Gokana were of Khana stock, which migrated from Nama through different routes to their present homes. This was in the 8th Century AD. Later migration led to the spread of Ogoni people over the geographical area which is today called Ogoni (p. 14)

Conclusively, there are strong linguistic, socio-cultural and religious factors to prove that Ogoni people, who are fully settled in six Kingdoms of Ogoni namely Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana, Babbe, Gokana, Tai and Eleme are all one and the same people. Presently, these Kingdoms are spread within four Local Government Areas of Rivers State, which are Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme.

Geographical location

Gberegbara (2016) informs that Ogoni is one of the ethnic groups located in Rivers State, which forms a part of the Niger Delta area in Nigeria. It is one of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria, but the richest in mineral resources. Ogoni communities are made up of four Local Government Areas and they are Khana, Gokana, Eleme, and Tai. Traditionally, this region has six Kingdoms which are Babbe, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana and Tai. They have upland and coastal communities. The areas are bordered thus: on the north is the Ando-Opobo Local Government Area, on the west, the Oyibo Local

Government Area, on the south, the Obio-Akpor Local Government Area, and on the east by Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The Ogoni occupy a geographical area measuring about 400 square miles and numbering about 500,000 square kilometers.

They also have four major languages which are inter-related. Linguistic experts classified their languages as a distinct group within the Benue-Congo group of African languages. They also share boundaries with the Akwa Ibom State. The Ogoni are blessed despite their complaint of marginalization by the Nigerian Government. They are endowed with the black gold and agricultural resources. That is one of the reasons why the State Government, under the leadership of Rt. Hon. Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi, sited one of the largest Banana Plantations and Songhai Farm in the area and under the current Governor of Rivers State, Barrister Nyesom Wike, he built good road network to make the Ogoni communities accessible and also they are predominantly farmers. The communities are accessible by road and sea, and major companies in Rivers State like the Eleme Petrochemical Refinery, the Ocean Terminal at Onne, and cement companies, etc. are all sited in Ogoni land.

Significance of Drums (*Kere*) in Yeghe community

Musical instruments are humanly designed and has production mechanisms which when they are struck, plucked, bowed, blown or touched, produce certain sounds that are generally accepted by the makers and users of such instruments. Acceptability of musical instrument depends on the culture of the people. This is because every constructed instrument from a particular group of people must agree with the tonal structure of the language of the culture. The drum is as important as the culture of Yeghe community in Gokana Local Government Area. Vidal (2012) confirms that “the musical instruments of an area reflect the diverse variety of traditions and history” (p. 43). The drum (*kere*) is very important to the people because this instrument is used by all the cultural dance groups both within and outside Yeghe community. They use drums of different shapes and sizes, to display their dance. Some drums are sacred and kept in shrines for preservation. Gberegabra (2012) posits that,

In religion, before the advent of Christianity, the Ogoni people worshipped different deities. Most families have their own deity and the shrine is always built close to the river and the people belief in spirit possession. The spirits possess the victim and manifest through them as soon as the songs are accompanied with drums (p. 74).

In Yeghe community, the drum instrument is very important to them, once the drums are performed, dance follows and this is reflected in their display, and style of dance for good communication. Farming and fishing is predominantly the occupation of the Ogoni people, before and after planting season, the people use the drum which is kept at the shrine of the juju priest to appease the gods of the land for a fruitful planting and bountiful harvest, due to their belief and it works for them. Satiric songs accompanied with drums are used to expose injustice in the community, satiric songs are like watch dogs in the community as people are mindful of what they do, so that they would not be embarrassed in public. Happenings in the community both good and bad are exposed through this song performed with the drums.

Historical Background of Anthony Mgbara and his Production of Drum (*Kere*) Musical Instruments in Yeghe Community

There is a popular saying that “there is ability in disability”, at Yeghe community in Ogoni land, the man who constructs drums (*kere*) and mask of different shapes for all cultural groups is physically challenged from birth; he has no single finger on his hand. His name is Mr. Anthony Mgbara aged 49 years. From the oral interview, he granted, he disclosed that he started the production of drums (*kere*) and face masks at the age of ten, he also informs that he was endowed with the gift of producing musical instrument right from birth, that in his childhood as a Youth, he used woods found in the community to construct drums and carve masks for masquerades. The construction of these drums (*kere*) and masks for masquerades has made him popular and taken him far and near both within and outside the community and he has also participated in exhibitions when former Governor and former Minister of Transportation Hon. Rotimi Amaechi was Governor of Rivers State.

He further states that in the production of drums, two types of semi hard woods are used and they are *Abura* and *Pear* wood (pen). The woods are cut from either the bush or one’s compound (pear woods are found in the bush or one’s compound). The woods are cut down with machines and also cut in sizes for easy lift to the house. The two woods are the only woods used for construction of drums because they give better sound and the pear wood is the best because it gives the best sound, which reflects the tonal speech of Yeghe people and also since it is found within people’s compound, it assimilates sound and language spoken by the people.

Processes of Production of Drum by Anthony Mgbara



The Pear Wood (Pen) Cut in Sizes

In the production of the drums, four working materials are needed (a) wood (b) knife (c) chisel and (d) membrane from animals, before he goes into production, he libates to the gods of the land with a hot drink *kaikai* preferably, the hot drink is used to invoke the gods of the land to assist him in the production, by giving him sense of production so that the drums will look neat and produce good sound for quick patronage and he makes profit from the sales. He affirms that immediately after producing the drums, no matter the quantity, cultural groups patronizes him, which has assisted him in the purchase of his personal needs. In the process of the construction, knife is used to cut the wood into different sizes and shapes because drums are of different sizes and shapes and the size of drums are established using his initiative. In a situation where a particular drum size is booked and measurement emphasized by the owner, he uses a tape to measure the wood in order to measure out the particular size of the drum booked. The chisel is used to open the front and back of the wood to form a drum and a membrane is used to cover the front opening in order to produce good sound. An animal called "pon" membrane is used as a membrane to cover the drums, as soon as the animal is brought, the skin (*canda*) would be cut out and dried in the sun before using it to cover the drum.



Drums of Various Sizes Produced by Anthony Mgbara



Anthony Mgbara and his Apprentice Fixing the “pon” membrane on a Drum

He further posits that the construction of drums is very difficult, it needs strength, patience and hard work because the builder needs to stay at a particular place for hours, with cool mind and brain in order to achieve one’s aim. Production of one drum takes two to three days or one week even one month depending on the size and shape of the drum to be produced, and also needs an assistance by an apprentice.



Constructed and Painted Drums of Various Sizes



Carved Mask by Mr. Anthony Mgbara

Tuning/Handling/Playing of the Instruments

The tuning is done as soon as the membrane is stretched on the drum under construction. Clips are used to hold the membrane tight to the drum. For the preservation of the drum, drums are not kept on the floor because when it is kept on the floor ants devour it and makes it useless. It is hanged with rope on the wall for safety and it remains for as long as the owner decides to collect them. The playing of the drums depends on the cultural group that is handling it, some play drums in an ensemble as an instrument for communication, it communicates with other instruments. Some cultural groups also perform the drums as an instrument for improvisation; the player improvises during their performances. Some players hang the drums on the neck during performance, while some keep the drums on the ground or in between their legs for a better performance.

Classification of African Instruments

Curt Sach and Eric Honbostel (1933) classified African instruments into four main divisions which are idiophones, membranophones, aerophones and chordophones. The drums (*kere*) in Yeghe community in the classification of African instruments falls under membranophones. According to Nketia (1974),

Membranophones are drums with patchment heads. These include simple make-shift drums played by women. Strips of wood bound together by iron loops, earthenware, vessels used as drum shells, large gourd or calabash

Shapes of drums: conical, cylindrical or semi-cylindrical

Sling drums: drums are held under the armpit at play, etc. Heavy drums of various types – normally placed on the ground when played, single headed, open at one end and closed at the other end by means of a board or non-sonorous kind, double-headed drums, hourglass, and sets of tuned drums (p.74).

Anthony Mgbara produced the above sets of drums and also generated the playing techniques.

Conclusion

Drums produced in Yeghe community by Anthony Mgbara serve as an instrument for information, communication, entertainment, which ushers in love, progress, understanding and joy in the community. Those who are familiar with drum language understands and interprets the language through their body languages and gestures. Musicians who perform on these drums are respected in the community for their dexterity on the drum instruments. Through the performance of these drums, everything about the culture, norms and values of Yeghe community are preserved. It has brought the community to limelight, they perform the drums through standing or sitting positions for better communication and good performances. Drums (*kere*) are of different

shapes and sizes and are easy to access from Anthony Mgbara's store house and also when booked for production, he delivers on agreed date once payment is made, the drums requires no special services and also easy to maintain. Children in Yeghe community learn to play and construct musical instruments before school age, this has an added advantage and a credit to their creativity and it contributes to the continuity and sustainability of Yeghe culture. Learners or aids are introduced first to the drum instruments of their ethnic groups in their communities and the performance of drums of other culture, both within and outside the communities.

Recommendations

1. Drums are special instruments in an ensemble and should not be neglected by Ogoni communities.
2. Cultural dance groups should not be allowed to go into extinction so that drum (*kere*) instruments will be kept alive.
3. The knowledge acquired from the construction by children, observers and apprentice will serve as a skill which will eventually put food on their table.
4. Anthony Mgbara who constructs this instruments should be encouraged at the grass root level by Local Government Council administrators and Rivers State Government.
5. Anthony Mgbara should be encouraged and learners sent to him as apprentices for the sustainability and continuity of the construction of drums in Yeghe community.

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