

## PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE USE OF SOUND AND ACOUSTICS IN IGBO CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

Language had been a veritable tool for communication among homo sapiens and had been described as human specific. However, there are several extra linguistic forms of communication that have been made possible also by sound and acoustic effects as in language production. Based on the foregoing, the paper investigates non verbal forms of communication among the Igbo people of the south eastern Nigeria. The production of sounds and acoustic effects from various traditional instruments are studied. Also, also various parts of the body other than the normal vocal sounds are investigated. Furthermore, the paper studied the use of these sounds in communication, especially in cultural communication among the Igbo people. We adopt the descriptive survey method and use the theoretical framework of oramedia an aspect ethno-cultural communication in exploring the dynamics of extra-linguistic sounds in Igbo cultural communication. The paper discovers that sound patterns and acoustic effects (extra linguistic) other than the sounds from the vocal tract system of man play a significant role in human communication, especially in cultural communication.

**Keywords:** sound, acoustic effects, extra-linguistic communication, non verbal communication, cultural communication.

### INTRODUCTION

Agbedo (2000:1) describes language as “the system of rules and principles of human communication”. The foregoing definition shows the importance of language in communication. Communication according to Okoro (2013), therefore, is the verbal and non-verbal symbols and exchange of ideas or transaction of information from sender to receiver. Language is the major form of communication bequeathed on man by nature. Language has been variously described by different authors. Okon, Ekpe, Ansa and Udoinyang (2007:42) note that Lyon defines language as “... the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other...” Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010:1), define language as a means “ ... which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc through complex vocal or written symbols”.

In the foregoing, one have seen some definitions of language and one thing common with all the definitions is that the authors all agree that language is exclusive to man. That means that language being human specific can only be produced and used by man. This is seeing language in terms of the production of vocal sounds which are called phonetic or phonological sound units in linguistics.

Beyond the use of phonetic sounds and phonemes in combination to make meaningful utterances in communication, man manipulates other forms of sounds, whether from the body parts or various forms of gadgets to communicate. All over the world in various cultures and in various spheres of human endeavours, man has manipulated sound for various purposes. In the military, various music and tunes from the bugle, are used to communicate certain information and also give orders to the men and officers of a military formation. These include call to assemble, time for meals, time for parade, time for sleep popularly known as ‘light’ out in military parlance, call for war among others. Again, in most schools, especially primary and secondary schools, bells are used to indicate various timing and segments of lessons and activities. Bells are used to indicate time for morning assembly, warning to end a lesson period and to show the end of a lesson period. Also, bells are

sounded to show the beginning and the end of break periods as well as the end of school period. This is a daily routine in most schools whereby the conventions associated with ringing of the bell are well known to students, teachers and vendors that bring wares to schools. Some schools because of their size have graduated from using ordinary bell to disused gas cylinders to make the sounds produced more prominent. Also, in most offices, once a boss or a superior rings the bell in his office it means that the attention of a subordinate, usually the secretary or the messenger is needed. Nowadays, specially designed bells are mounted on doors for visitors to sound alerts. These forms of communication, which can be classified as non-verbal or extra-linguistic make use of sounds and acoustic effects to pass across meaningful messages. For instance, blaring of the horn from a car could mean to communicate that a vehicle is approaching, do not cross the road yet, you are too close to the road, keep clear, you are just on the road, go off from the road. It also generally suggests that you are at danger and the intensity and frequency of the horning by the driver of the vehicle could also be an indication of the level of danger. In Nigeria, as it could be the case in order parts of the world, drivers are known to blow their horns as greetings to other road users and people they drive past by.

Again, drivers at other time can blow their horns in expression of anger. We are faced in everyday life with different forms of extra linguistic sounds that are encoded and decoded in communication. This paper investigates the use of sounds in communicating different manner of meaning in the Igbo culture. The paper is divided into different segments starting with an abstract, followed by an introduction. The other sections are literature reviews, methodology, theoretical framework, sound and acoustics effects in Igbo cultural communication under which we have several discussions on different aspects of our topic. Thereafter, some findings are stated, followed by conclusion and recommendations.

### Review of Literature

Apart from the oja ‘flute’, there are several other Igbo traditional instruments such *Ikoro (giant gong)*, *Igba Membrane drum*, *Ekwe*

(gong), *Ogene* (metal gong), e.t.c. employed in cultural communication. Chukwu (2011) researches on the African membrane drum which the Igbo people call *igba*. Chukwu (2011:i) notes that "the membrane drum is about the commonest traditional musical instrument found in various shapes and sizes in Africa". Chukwu asserts that the drum is commonest in Africa, noting that the Igbo people call it *Igba* or *Ogwe*, *Dundun*, *Iyaalu*, *Bata* varieties exist among the Yoruba while such varieties of the drum as *gangan*, *kalangu* exist among the Hausa. Chukwu (2011:xii) denotes the communicative abilities of the drum in the following:

The membrane drum plays both melodic and rhythmic roles, as far as African drum music is concerned. Hence, the membrane drum is a melo-rhythmic instrument. As such, the African membrane drum is normally used as singing or talking musical instrument.

Chukwu also notes that the drum is capable of making three distinct tones in line with most African languages, (') for high, (˘) for low and (˘) for medium, and adds that in Nigeria the sound of the drum has musical, rhythmic and linguistic components. The foregoing underscores the communicative capacity of the drum aside its melodic abilities. He likens the drum rhythm to the speech rhythm since the drum can rhythmically imitate the variation and character of the human voice in its production. He adds, "the morphemic and phonemic structures of Igbo traditional drums make drum language to be distinct and very close to the imitation of the ethnic group it represents", (Chukwu, 2011:4). Asserting the communicative function of the drum, Chukwu (2011:3) notes "the African membrane drum 'talks' as well as 'sings'. Each African society understands the sounds or tones produced from the specie of her drums".

Okoro (2013) notes that Umuopara, Nguru, Mbaise have a specially designed giant clapperless bell they call 'Ozuru-Igbo', which is their unique name for '*Ogene*'. Okoro (2013:13) discusses the use of 'Ozuru-Igbo' and observes:

With it, town criers draw the villagers' attention; while diviners utilize it as they invoke the gods. It is sounded to punctuate the minuets recorded and read after the latest age-grade meeting deliberations. At times it is struck to draw attention to a point of correction marked by raising one's hand during the communal social gathering discussion. The 'Umuada/Umumboto', married first daughters of every house hold during their group condolence visit to the bereaved family of a departed husband/father play a single "Ozuru-Igbo" to announce their arrival and departure. In the course of this event, it is occasionally struck and alternated with choral shouts of grief. During the "Umunna", kindred male assembly for "Mmánya Orié", a given market day palm wine drinking, those in attendance are called to order during discourse by sounding the instrument in a running rhythm

In most Igbo dance performances and also in most indigenous African dances, the communicative ability of the musical instruments like the *Oja* and *Igba* becomes highly evident. This aptly captured in the following:

In most African dance groups, for instance, the drumbeats spur and energize a good dancer to a state of ecstasy, and elevate the spirit of both dancers and spectators.... This is evident in the *Atilogwu* dance or the *Ese* or *Ukom* dance groups of the Igbo society; the *bata* dance group of the Yoruba; the *kalangu* or *ganga* dance music of Hausa; The *Ganda* dance of *Giriama* in Kenya; the *nammadu* tuned drum ensemble or the *entenga* drums of Uganda etc..

The talking and singing ability attributed to the African drum underscores its ability to communicate within cultures. As noted by Chukwu (2011:3);

During performances, for instance, the master drummer expresses and/or tells stories and gives information or directives to members of his group as the performance is going on, and they understand whatever the drum talks or sings. In dances, for instance, very lively dialoguing takes place between the drummer and the dancer, which enlivens the spectators. Pointed..., "In some African cultures, the drum instantly engages in a conversation with human (human

verbal – instrumental voice dialogue), or transmits instructions or messages to designated persons ...

Chukwu further notes that the drum can be used to send messages that can spur communities into actions especially in terms of summoning the villagers or passing across messages for particular purposes. This could be true as regards summoning the people for war or notifying the people of the land that their domain is under attack or is about to be attacked. He also observes that various African cultures have different drum languages implying that drum messages are encoded within the context of various cultures that use them for communicative purposes according to their specific languages. Chukwu (2011:41) further notes "the African membrane drum is a very subtle musical instrument that engages in conversation with both human and spirit voices". Achinike (2012) discusses the communicative power another Igbo musical instrument, *oja*, and observes that it follows the tonal language of the culture to communicate.

Okoro (2013:8) observes that musical instruments are employed "... as a privileged medium of communal communication... for information dissemination of disquieting kind/signal in terms of sound emitted". Fictions by notable Igbo authors give vivid account of the use of most indigenous Igbo instruments in cultural communication. Achebe (1958) and Emecheta (1979) acknowledge the use of cannons, *Ekwe*, *Ikoro*, while Amadi (1966) speaks of the *Ikoro* as singing. All these authors agree that these special acoustic instruments are used within the Igbo cultural area to announce deaths. Emecheta (1979:154) observes that cannons when fired informs "... the neighbouring towns as well that an important person had left the earth to go to his ancestors". Amadi (p.172) notes that the *Ikoro* was beaten to announce Madume's tragic death.

Okoro (2013:1) further affirms the importance of musical instruments in cultural communication as he elaborates in the following:

Music instruments are aspects of the tangible culture with considerable exertion of sound profound in culture. Clearly and definitely emitted, musical sound yields values of utilitarian significance for social development. In Igbo norm for instance, it creates awareness, which abounds in oral traditional, historic and mythological spheres with far-reaching effect for the welfare of the indigenes in their milieu. Conventions and knowledge acquired for responsibility in a given social environment typifies musical communication practice

In Yoruba, sound is culturally significant. Among the Yoruba people there are royal sounds, sounds that an ordinary man should not respond to. In certain dances there are some beats that are royal in nature and it is only the title men that are expected to respond to such tunes. Sounds could be used in announcing deaths, especially the death royals or great personalities. There are sounds that are peculiar to death announcement. And some sounds are peculiar for ceremonies and celebrations. Metal gongs are used in the Yoruba culture to announce deaths. Some traditional Yoruba musical instruments are used to produce certain sounds to announce war in olden days. Okoroafor (2007:73) refers to "the drumlores (as can be found among the Yoruba people of South West Nigeria with *Oriki* the talking drum) can be in other forms other than drumbeats. For example, among some communities talking drum is derived from gongs e.g *Igbogene* in Bayelsa State of Nigeria, *Ikoro* and *Ekwe* among the Igbo, *Ufie* and *Ibom* among the Oru of Southern Central Nigeria". According to Waya n, in the Tiv culture, *Indyer* instrument can be to announce deaths or vital events in Tiv culture. The sounds produced communicate a particular meaning tied to a particular event. For instance, announcing the death of a prominent or illustrious sons. The *Indyer* sound announces the circumstances surrounding the death and also the name of the person. Again, messages can also be sent to ask people to gather or not to gather. Also the *Indyer* sound can send messages to the women folk to go in doors. The *Indyer* sound can also be sounded to announce meetings, new yam festivals, first rain, and also the arrival of new babies. The *Indyer* in the Tiv cultural communication is akin to the modern day mass communication gadget. It is used to communicate to the people

several issues and happenings in the community. Waya in an interview, however, notes that the use of the *Indyer* cultural instrument is gradually fading away obviously because of modernity.

Okon, Edemekong, Ansa & Udoinyang (2007) note that the Ibibio people have several means of traditional communication including drums, music, folktales, town criers and others. Okon et al (2007) set out to study the rich cultural communication system of Ibibio and ways of preserving them for posterity. They observe that talking drums are major components of the Ibibio culture. It is used to communicate to wrestlers during contests keeping them alert, prepares them for moves and also tells them when to use the opponent's wrong moves to attack them. The talking drum has a language among the Ibibio people which only the initiates understand, (Okon et al, 2007:47).

In the Igala cultural and /or traditional palace, musical instruments such as *Oja* (flute), *Okakachi* ( trumpet made of elephant's tusk), *Ikolo* (a kind of wooden gong), *Odu* (a kind of trumpet made of wood) and local musical drums called *Okelegwu* are used for one form of communication or the other. *Oja* (flute), for instance, is used to praise someone (male or female) who has good and exciting dancing steps. *Okakachi* is used to draw the attention of prominent and wealthy personalities to particular events such as war, death of a fellow and important ceremonies. *Ikolo* and *Odu* are used to honour or praise warriors, hunters and wrestlers who have in the past performed bravely or wonderfully.

### Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study is situated within oramedia and cultural communication. Oramedia according to Akpabio (2003:3), oramedia is "informal channels of communication". Oramedia involves the use of traditional or indigenous means of communication within a particular cultural areas. The signal and conventions of such communication systems are well known and understood by the people who use them. Okon et al (2007:1) assert "oramedia comprises the use of traditional means, methods or instruments for communication." Cultural communication suggests indigenous means of communication within cultures and among cultures. In this regard it could be intra cultural or intercultural. However, the focus of our paper is the intra cultural aspects with particular reference to the extra linguistic sounds and acoustic effects that have communicative effects within the Igbo cultural area.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this research is the descriptive survey approach. Interviews, participant observations are adopted in data collection. Also data for this study are collected through reviews relevant publications such as books, journals, research papers. Data collected are systematically analyzed.

### Sounds and acoustic effects in Igbo cultural communication

Several instruments, gadgets whether musical or not have been known to be used to generate certain sounds and acoustic effects to encode and pass messages within the Igbo cultural context. Besides, some body parts could also be used to make certain sounds that are intended for communication. In the sub sections that follow, we shall discuss some aspects of the manipulation of these instruments to make extra-linguistic sounds and acoustic effects in communication among the Igbo of south east of Nigeria.

### Death/Burial announcements

The *Ikoro* and the cannon (known in the Igbo language as *mkponala* or *mkponani* depending on the dialect in various parts of the Igbo land) are used for communicating or announcing the death of important personalities. In most cases, these personalities are titled men or kings. The *Ikoro*, which is often used at different occasions like coronation or burial of kings is sounded in a particular way as Achebe (1958:84) records it, "Go-di-di-go-go-di-go Di-go-go-di-go". As Achebe puts it, it inform the clan of a negative event. The acoustic effects of *Ikoro* is usually used to inform the immediate community and their nearby neighbours of the death of eminent personalities while the blasting sound produced by the cannon guns follows to

inform the dead and the living farther away from the immediate community of the loss.

At burial ceremonies, sounds of cry are used to show grief by the loved ones of the deceased. Hence, it is expected that much sounds generated at the funeral go to show how important or loved is the departed soul. Besides, spontaneous cries mostly by groups especially women are used to indicate the death of a member of a family. Thus, in a community when sounds of cries are heard in such a manner, one would begin to enquire of the cause of the sound to verify who has died. In most cases, the younger ones are sent towards the direction of the sound to confirm what has actually happened. The *Oja* music in various parts of the Igbo cultural area is also used to talk to the deceased and bid him farewell. In the Ibibio culture, according to Okon et al (2007) gun shots are used during the burial of a prominent personality and also acts as means of passing information to neighbouring villages.

### Call to War/ Danger Announcements

In Igbo land, especially in the olden days when traditional wars are fought, the *Ikoro* and other like *Ogene* indigenous instruments are used to summon the warriors for action. This could be sounded at any time of day depending on the urgency of the matter and once it is sounded, the men of war would understand and respond accordingly. However, none response could be taken as an act sabotage or cowardice. In the same vein, the *Ikoro* can be sounded with joyous melodic tunes to signify victory over the opposing side. This is similar to the use of trumpet to alert the citizens to assemble for war in the Jewish culture during the Biblical days.

The *Ikoro* can be sounded depending on the area and circumstances to indicate that there is danger lurking around the town or to announce a tragic occurrence like the death of a king in the community. It could also be the announcement of an invasion or announcement that non initiates and women should stay indoors when certain traditional ceremonies or rituals are going to be performed. It could also be an announcement that certain dangerous animal has invaded the community and is on rampage, killing people. Generally, certain traditional musical instruments such as *Ikoro* could be played to indicate emergencies and make the people to be at alert. For instance, in case of fire out break, especially bushfires sound signals are transmitted to call the attention of the people. This is complemented with desperate shouts and in some communities such as Isuochi, shouts of '*okoro oku*' is added. Within a community neighbourhood the whistle can be sounded to announce that a thief is attempting to break into a house. And when one person starts the whistling others join. When such an alarm is raised the men come out in their numbers to respond to the distress call.

### Announcing Pain/Sickness

When someone is so sick to the extent that he could not talk, he can resort to making some sounds to indicate his/her condition, attract attention and get the needed help. This kind of sound is known as '*ude*'. This kind of intermittent moaning is capable of sending signals to someone within the range of the sound that there is somebody in distress and need.

### Social communication

The '*Oja*', Igbo flute has been known to play a prominent role in social functions. The Igbo flute player has the mastery of using it to address and call the names of people in an occasion especially the dignitaries. In most cases, the dignitary so saluted who recognizes his name usually responds by answering to his name verbally or by dancing to the tunes of the flute or by dolling out cash to the flute player for such a special recognition. In some cases, an individual who has been addressed by the flute player responds by doing all these depending on his status.

Peer groups or age grade groups within communities have been known to devise conventions of using mouth whistling ( *mkporofifi* ) and the *Oja* sound to call their individual names and also communicate and pass across messages to one another. They can manipulate this system to signal the time to assemble for an outing without members of their various households neither knowing when

they sneak out one after the other nor even knowing their intentions.

### Communication among hunters

In most Igbo communities, there is communal hunting. Hunters most of the times operate in groups. The hunters have also devised among themselves how to use sounds whether from the Oja or any other musical instruments to communicate. It could be communicating the time to gather for the hunting expedition or the time to leave the hunting forest. They could also send sound signals to beckon on others in the case of danger or casualties. They could also send sound signals to call on others to gather when there is a very big catch. The hunters also could employ the manipulation of sounds and noise to scare their prey out of hiding.

### Visitor's announcement

In the Igbo culture, anybody that enters into a compound or a household is expected to make his entry/arrival known to the owners of the house. Failure to do so makes the person stand the risk of being mistaken for a thief no matter how close the individual may be to the family. There are linguistic differences among various Igbo groups as regards the form the announcement may take. It could either in the form of statements or questions. For instance, in Umuchu, it could be in the form of a question as in the following:

Question: Enwekwara onye nọ n'ụlọ? Is there anyone in the house?

Mmadụ ọ nọkwa ya ooo? Is there anybody around/at home?

Response: Anyị nọ ya ooo? We are around/ we are in.

By this response, the visitor walks boldly towards the sound of the voice having known that the owner(s) of the house is/are aware of his/her presence. This is similar in other Igbo cultural areas as attested to by Michael Ugwu from Odoru Nsukka and Unaabuonwu Umeh from Umugama Umuchu. However, the visitor's announcement can be substituted with sounds of '*kpam kpam*' made with the mouth or made with the two hands clapped together in quick successions or made by tapping the fingers on the door of the house or any other nearby furniture/instrument convenient for that purpose. In this case, the visitor need not talk if he so chooses, but wait for the response of the owner of the house. The owner may choose to ask the visitor in or ask who it is- Onye na-akụ? Who is knocking? or Ọ bụ onye? Who is it?

### Communicating to animals

Certain sounds are used to communicate to animals especially to scare them away. The communal nature of the Igbo traditional communities has made it possible for domestic animals to intermingle with human beings. Hence, man has to devise certain methods of communicating with them, especially when they begin to constitute nuisances. For instance, 'shiiii' sound always rattles and scares away the chicken. Also, the 'suuu' sound rattles goats. Again, metals made from disused household utensils are put together and hung at the farms to scare away animals from destroying the farm produce. These metals when shaken the movement of the wind jam together making some sounds which send the animals away from the farm.

### FINDINGS

Most African communities each have their peculiar traditional musical instrument that they employ for communicating certain information over a limited space. In Nigeria, most of the tribes have their own instruments for making sounds to send messages across space, and the sound produced by these instruments in different cultures always corresponds to the tonal, and phonetic qualities of the languages involved. In other words, the skilled users of these instruments make them to 'talk' and produce sounds similar to the language of the locality. Again, the tempo and pitch of these sounds are manipulated to communicate different kinds of messages. For instance, the sound for announcing death will differ from the sound for call to war. Some sounds produced by the human body both from the vocal tract and other parts of the human body, which can be

referred to as extra-linguistic can be used in communication solely or in conjunction with linguistic sounds.

### CONCLUSION

Apart from the linguistic sounds produced by human vocal tract, there are also sounds produced by other parts of the body that are used in communication by humans. Moreover, man has manipulated gadgets and instruments in his environment to give certain acoustic effects which he uses for communication and other purposes including entertainment. Sounds and acoustic effects play prominent role in cultural communication. The case of the Igbo in using these traditional instruments to produce sounds and acoustic effects for communication purposes is extensive. Even though some of these rich cultural heritages in indigenous communication have been threatened by modern communication media, it could still be recorded for future generation or reenacted for tourism and entertainment purposes. The paper agrees with Okon *et al* (2007) that most of the traditional means of communication existed in the olden days with some surviving up till contemporary times. The paper also agrees with Chukwu (2011) that the experiences of the Igbo people are not so different from their Nigerian counterparts and other African races. The drum is the commonest among the tribes in Nigeria and also in Africa even though it comes in various shapes and modes across cultures in Africa.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend further studies in the use of sound in Igbo cultural communication as well as in other African languages. This kind of study will help promote indigenous values and the musical instruments involved in the sound production. This will also give more impetus in the inclusion of traditional musical instruments and traditional music in the educational curriculum. Besides, there is the need to improve on the traditional musical instruments and gadgets to make them more modern and more appealing. This can also encourage the mass production of these instruments for commercial purposes both within and outside Nigeria. The potential use of these traditional instruments for tourism purposes to attract foreign investors could also be considered.

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**Appendix**

1. Interview with Umeodinka Aloysius, lecturer at Unamdi Azikiwe University Awka, aged 51 from Umugama, Umuchu on 30th May, 2013.
2. Interview with Unaabuonwu Umeh, petty trader, aged 75 from Umugama, Umuchu on 3rd June, 2013.
3. Interview with Ugwu Michael, pensioner, Aged 58, a native Igbo speaker from Odoru Nsukka on 4th June, 2013.
4. Interview with David Waya, a native speaker Tiv, lecturer at the Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka on 5th June, 2013 in his office.
5. Interview with Moses Melefa, a native speaker of Yoruba, lecturer at the Department of English and Literary studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka on 5th June, 2013 in Room 314, Faculty of Arts, Block A.
6. Personal communication with Ayegba, Monday, a native speaker of Igala, lecturer at Kogi State Polytechnic on 8th June, 2013.