

REINVIGORATING THE INDIGENOUS FLUTE IN AFRICAN  
DANCE PERFORMANCE

\*Mariam Asabe IYEH

\*\*Godwin ONUCHE

Abstract

This article examines the place of the indigenous African flute as an instrument of communication in dance performance. In doing this, it attempts to explore the usefulness of flute in encouraging vocational and entrepreneurial skills among the youth, with a view to creating job opportunities. Over the decades, scholars and performing arts practitioners have failed to adequately develop the indigenous musical aerophone instruments such as the flute, especially for purposes of communication in contemporary milieus, given the scientific and technological trends in a globalized world. The study is of the assumption that, the flute is a key indigenous musical instrument used in enhancing dance performance in the African context, which has the capacity of not just creating jobs, but contributing to the socio-economic progress of the developing areas of Africa, including Nigeria. Employing descriptive, interview and participant observation methods, the article argues that more attention should be given to the practice and use of indigenous musical/dance instruments, especially the flute as a means of cultural exchanges among indigenous communities as well as the generation of employment, beyond the primary functions of edutainment, mobilisation and infotainment within the African context.

Keywords: African flute, Dance, Youth, Indigenous music, Traditional media of communication

Introduction

It is a truism that music in the African context serves as an edifying moving force, which propels performance action towards achieving a specific goal or objective. This, perhaps, explains why Idolo Kofi posits that "the didactic function of music is effected through logical

---

\*Mariam Asabe IYEH is of the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State

\*\*Godwin ONUCHE is of the Department of Theatre Arts, Kogi State University, Anyigba  
Emails: [mariamiyeh@gmail.com](mailto:mariamiyeh@gmail.com); [godwinonuche10@gmail.com](mailto:godwinonuche10@gmail.com)

organisation of lyrics and performance practice" (66). He further asserts that "some lyrics are presented in direct or indirect satire while other activities in the performance teach both the viewers and the participant the coded lesson(s)" (66). The manipulation of the African indigenous flute instrument is in this category. It produces melodious tunes which, in turn, trigger an exhilarating experience. There is often a conceptual confusion about traditional medium of communication. This is because, at the mention of the term 'traditional,' the general view or notion is that it is something out-dated or primitive. It is disheartening to note how people are filled with the erroneous belief and misconception that the African indigenous flute is inferior, archaic and barbaric. However, the fact remains that "though the indigenous instruments of communication or the traditional systems of communication generally, may seem to be so old and different in their ways and methods from the Western system of communication, they remain essentially what sustain the information and aesthetic needs of the rural populace" (Des Wilson in Elo Ibagere 64).

Functionally, the indigenous instrument of communication in African music and dance performance symbolized by the 'flute' teaches through logical organisation of lyrics and performance practice in a coded form. There are coded lessons and information in African music and dance practice. Unfortunately, this revered instrument of communication within the African context is relegated to the background. Therefore, this study posits that due attention should be given to the practice and use of indigenous musical/dance instruments, especially the flute as a means of cultural exchange as well as the generation of employment, beyond the primary functions of edutainment, mobilisation and infotainment within the African context. Flute music in dance performance is part of the Nigerian culture and that of Africa as a whole. Flute has always had its place in the lives of the people of various ethnic groups in Nigeria. One can actually argue that flute music has the potential to provide tonic which soothes aching hearts and troubled minds. For instance, in 1 Samuel 18:10, whenever King Saul fell into a frenzy, David the son of Jesse was always there to play some soul-lifting and spirit-rejuvenating, melodious tune from his harp instrument to ward-off the evil spirit.

On the mystery behind the exhilarating nature of the flute, Samuel O. Alidu in an interview with the researchers succinctly affirmed that, flute players normally change the pitch of the sound produced by opening and closing holes in the body of the instrument in order to captivate its listener. By implication, it means varying the air pressure through the holes of the instrument, the flutist can as well change the

pitch of a note by causing the air in the flute to resonate at a harmonic level either by closing or opening of the hole(s).

Indeed, in the larger African performative context, dance is usually done by a community or a group of people for a particular purpose. It then indicates that both music and its instrumentation have utilitarian function. The utilitarian outlook suggests that music and dance play very significant roles, especially in national ceremonies, ritual/religious ceremonies, child's naming ceremonies, war situations, national festivals, etc., and each time one mentions music and dance in Africa, this revered instrument (that is, flute) among other instruments always constitute the ensemble. This is because, in selecting any instrument for music and dance performance in Africa, consideration is usually given to its melodic, evocative, dramatic and symbolic potentials ([www.africaguide.com](http://www.africaguide.com)).

### Theoretical Framework

This paper leans on the hypodermic needle theory (the magic bullet theory). It is a theory of communication that underscores the effectiveness of the media as a powerful instrument of communication. Joseph Wogu asserts that hypodermic needle theory (magic bullet theory) is one of the earliest theories of mass communication that empirical researchers developed around 1920s; he stressed further that, early researchers (mostly psychologists and sociologists) concluded that the media had enormous power (93).

Major proponents of the theory, including Hegel, Hobbes and Machiavelli hold that messages communicated via the mass media would have strong and direct impact on the audience. This implies that the media of mass communication 'inject' messages, beliefs and information into the audience as a doctor would inject or inoculate people using hypodermic needle (Wogu 93). Hence, media messages were seen as the bullets from the barrels of a gun, which launch out with speed and accomplish the motives of the shooters soon after they are fired. The basic assumption of the theory according to Baran and Davis suggests "mass media could influence a large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response" (25). Extrapolating from the above, it is worthy of note that the two images used to express this theory are 'bullet' and 'needle.' They suggest a powerful and direct flow of information from media 'gun' into the spectators' 'head' while the hypodermic needle model suggests that media messages are injected straight to an audience which is immediately influenced by the message. In other words, it is suggested that the media could be a dangerous means of communicating ideas

because the receiver or audience is, to some extent, powerless to resist the impact of the message.

Extending the aforementioned thought to messages through the channel of communication symbolized by the flute instrument, we argue that the flute is capable of having a direct, immediate and powerful effect on dancers as well as the audience. By implication, the means of communication symbolized by the traditional flute is capable of influencing a large group of people with similar frame of reference directly by 'shooting' or injecting them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response.

### African Traditional Aerophone - Flute

In the considered view of the researchers, the classification of African musical instruments, including aerophone (wind instruments) are the media, which produce sound as a result of the manipulation of the air through the oesophagus with the aid of tongue-twisting, making the air to vibrate in the instrument. In the process, sound is produced as a result of the vibration of column of air in the mouth through the instrument. In the words of Richard Okafor, "the aerophone include the instruments of the flute family; it can be made from materials with a natural bore or hole such as bamboo or the tip of a horn or gourd" (165). Elo Ibagere submits that "aerophone comprises all the instruments that have to do with air passing through a pipe and producing sound" (64). The aerophone instruments depend on the manipulation of the column of air to produce sound. Some are skilfully or mainly carved out of wood by the carvers, especially those who are grounded in the tradition of music-making while others are made from rubber pipe, especially the type found in the northern parts of Nigeria. Other types of the flute family are horns and elephant tusks. The performer makes use of the air and his or her ability to manipulate the air and the fingers through the open stops as he or she breathes into it by blowing the air. The vibration of the column of air into the instrument helps to produce the sound and the melodious tunes. The flute instruments are of different types: the male and the female, depending on the production of its sound. The Igbo call it Oja. The Asaba people call the flute used for the Egwugwu, Ufele and the other type is called Qpi, the Hausa call it Tsarewa while the Igala call it Olili or Ufele. Figure 1 is an illustration of a typical flute (African traditional aerophone instrument).

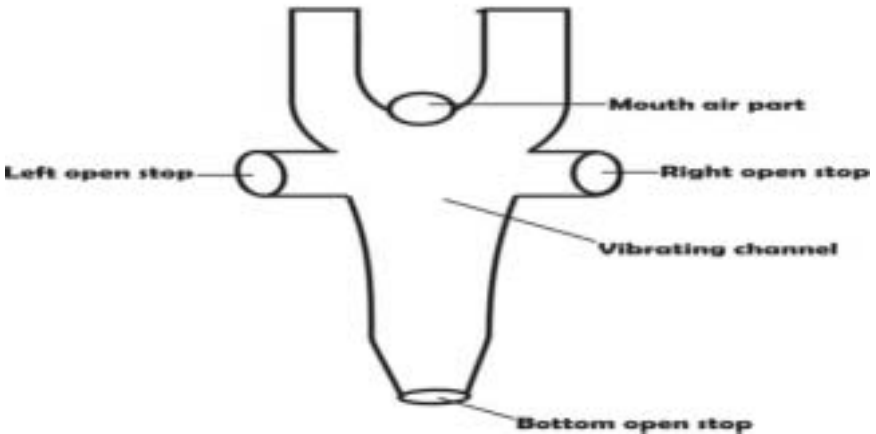


Figure1

Generally, in creating sounds from the traditionally blown instruments, the air serves as one of the major components that set up vibrations in producing musical tones. A series of open stops along the part of the tube or instrument enables a variety of notes to be produced. By opening and closing the stops, the vibrating length varies. Some of the traditional wind instruments produce a single or a few notes such that they cannot play melodies independently. Examples of these are the 'Amade' in Gboko, Benue State, 'Ju' of the Berom people in Plateau State. However, the number of the stops varies from one type to the other. In all, the arts of fluting could also act as an entrepreneurial skill capable of creating employment for the African youths.

#### Communicative Function of the Flute in Traditional African Context

Life generally is sustained by communication. The flute is one of the major instruments of communication in African dance performance. Messages produced through this medium are in codes which require people to decode. According to A.M. Jones, "African music is a language which encodes emotions, aspirations and people's goals in autonomous and self-expressive art form (75). Among the Igala of Kogi State, for instance, the yodelling and sonorous sounds of the flute can stir one's spirit to bring out the best in one's dexterity as a listener or dancer. In the same way, the flute has a very important communicative value for religious or funeral rites. The echoing of

indigenous flute at dawn indicates that, hunters are to assemble from their various locations for an important hunting expedition. More so, in some other parts of Nigeria, it has been claimed that, people who miss their pathways in the forest are helped to trace their way back home with the language of the flute.

In the same vein, some people consider flute music as something human, which originated to some extent, for spiritual communication. There is a widespread belief that each of the spirits inhabiting the world possesses its own specific sound. Adams Mohammed, a professional flutist, from Olamaboro Local Government Area of Kogi State affirmed that, each time one performs to the admiration of one's spectators; one gets rightly nicknamed 'spokesperson of the ancestors'. This attests to the fact that, one communicates the message of one's ancestors through the flute because of the spiritual undertones. Others term the flutist 'Egwu' meaning the 'masquerade'. This is because in some parts of Africa, especially in Nigeria, the voice of the spirit is believed to be heard through the objects that are used to represent the gods or through musical instruments such as flutes, drums and horns. This experience, in no small way often puts the flutists or the dancers in trance-like state. This claim is supported by Andrew Horn's assertion that:

Once possessed by the spirit, he is effectively no longer himself and cannot be addressed by his accustomed name. His body and mind have been occupied by the force and he speaks with its voice, not his own. In such a state, he as the spirit can directly approach the favours information. (184)

The spirit in this context is embedded in the flute. It is capable of taking both the flutists and the dancers into another level of performance. This often seems mysterious and impracticable except one understands the techniques and possesses the skill of displaying with the instrument. The forces that occupy the player's mind and thought is no longer ordinary. The frenzy of the dance practice is an ingredient capable of influencing both the dancers and the flutists into an unbelievable spiritual height.

#### The Art of Fluting in Traditional African Dance Performance

The art of fluting is a skill that X-rays and exposes human rhythmic sense. Within the ambience of African musical aesthetics, a flutist is a rhythmic personality. Ojo-Bakare affirms that rhythm is the underlining

beat that animates human movements in dance; but on other way round, the flute rhythm is part of the underlining notation that underscores as well as triggers the totality of movements in most African dance practices, including its musical performances. This is because the flute is capable of dictating the dance-steps and serving as a tempo-key with the support of other instruments in dance performance. This, in turn, gives room to the vigorous rhythmic movement of the dancers. It is a marker that creates the required mood of the dance. In other words, it is the 'salt' of the music among the African musical instruments that trigger the dancers into the climax of the performance. For instance, it would be unreasonable to stage Agbaka dance performance amongst the Igala people of Kogi State without the accompaniment of the flute. This is because, in Agbaka dance performance, the flutist dictates the dance steps during performance. He or she initiates the song with the flute, re-enforces the mood, and cues the dancer into action vis-à-vis the expected tempo in the dance movement. An illustration is given below to demonstrate this popular Agbaka song for the dance steps in a performance:

Flute Tune: Ode Chaboo

Chorus: Ode Chaboo

Now listen as the flutist dictates the steps for the dancers through the flute.

Flute Tune: me dago dedemi yoyoyoyo, me dago dedemiii yo.

At the hearing of the aforementioned sound from the flutist, the dancers already know the dance steps to take. There is often a 'speech rhythm' in English language; which could also be noticed in African flute rhythm. Just as the speech rhythm of a particular ethnic group could affect their drum rhythm, the speech rhythm of a particular ethnic group could also affect the flute's rhythm of the people. This is exactly what the African flute does. Every ethnic group in Nigeria knows and identifies with its own musical rhythm. For instance, among the Etsako people of northern Edo State, Piroli dance is dependent on the flute likewise the Igbabonelimhin masquerade dance of the Esan people of the central part of Edo State.

As a matter of fact, the art of fluting is a survival strategy. We observed in Samuel Alidu's professional experience that he never played the flute instrument without some economic values attached. On several occasions the spectators always appreciated him in kind and cash. Drawing on this observation, one could say that in Africa, the skill of fluting has an entrepreneurial element. One can acquire it either by observation, imitation or by the ability of learners to indicate

interest in his or her people and culture through music and dance practices. The flutist can perform either by standing, sitting or squatting, depending on the position he or she chooses. Only very skilful flutists perform, communicate as well as dance to the rhythm during a dance performance. In the African context, the flutist is a musician in his or her own right. This is because he or she makes music through his or her flute. In this regard, Okafor opines that "there are the academics - western-trained - musicians who are trained in all the rudiments and theories of the art and perhaps, the other people - gifted, excellent performers - who may not be trained academically or formally in the art, but whose natural talents release music which the society accepts (3).

### The Condition of the African Traditional Flutist

In view of the low level of patronage of traditional flute playing in contemporary Nigerian society, it is disheartening to note that the performance art hardly attracts incentive and social acceptance by many people. The indigenous flute music art or performance is appreciated, welcomed and even loved as evidenced by our field studies in north-central, south-east and south-south Nigeria; ironically, the same society treats flutists with disdain. The flutist is considered or described with such appellations as archaic, loafer, bumpkin, idler, yobbo, etc., and one who does not move with time. He or she is the least respected individual in the scheme of things. He or she suffers humiliation, ignominy and often slighted where important issues that matter to society are being discussed. Recently, for instance, the second author was with a professional colleague, relaxing at leisure 'joint', when an inspiration came, which made him to dip his hand into his pocket to bring out his 'second pen' (the flute) to play.

In this moment of relaxation, the echo of the flute rent the air, and then the people who gathered to listen were held in amazement. They identified immediately with the performers' table by asking them to demand whatever drinks from the bartender. However, a man who seemed to be somehow ill-informed from another area of the community frowned at his display with the flute. In the man's opinion, the flute is connected with evil people and could be used by rainmakers to stop rain. Although the second author's experience may not be a common thing in terms of professional experience but his claim buttresses the point on the mystery or sacred nature of the flute. In any case, a majority of the people encouraged the flutist to continue. This scenario attests to the fact that, in most cases, we do not value or recognize what we have in our cultural milieus. We rather celebrate western musical instruments and their musics which are alien to our culture



and most of them do not add much didactic value to the lives of our youths, but rather encourage deviant activities. According to Iyeh, One of the greatest problems of the third world nations, including Nigeria, is the loss of their traditions and cultural heritage. This is not unconnected with the African experience of colonialism..the problem of not knowing the reasons behind most of our traditions has led to our throwing them away and replacing them with foreign cultures, which have trapped us in a web of confusion. (133-134)

It is not an overstatement to say that our cultures and traditions are unique and capable of contributing to the economic and social development of our nation. To support this assertion, Iyeh claims further that Nigeria is a blessed country in terms of natural endowments. It is a land blessed with cultural heritages. Foreign observers as far back as the 1940s attested to this fact and expressed great optimism that Nigeria's creative arts will outshine other races if given the opportunity to do so (275).

### Recommendation and Conclusion

This article recommends that, traditional media symbolised by the flute musical instrument of communication should be encouraged to an appreciable level to mobilise the people, especially at the grassroots for community development and national consciousness. Every serious mass-oriented development programme, especially in rural communities in Africa can hardly succeed without the active involvement of indigenous bards, minstrels, flutists, and other popular culture practitioners within the traditional system. Therefore, their musics and performance tropes should be developed and used to encourage this kind of orientation. The traditional media or instruments of communication in Africa serve as sources of cultural, political, health and enlightenment programmes for the masses. Overtime, this can lead to self-actualization and national development through the acquisition of necessary skills. Through songs or theatre performances, traditional media provide edutainment in the norms and mores of society. This will in no mean way help in encouraging cultural exchanges among indigenous communities. Through traditional instruments of communication, announcement, directives and instructions could be disseminated to society. Rural populace often seek information on how they can improve their situations. One of the best ways to do this is through the use of indigenous language and instruments they understand to better their lives and the society in general. This paper also calls for an innovative negotiation of available scientific and technological knowledge for the improvement in the use of traditional communication tools, including flutes. The flute should

also be considered as part of entrepreneurial activity, which could generate employment among Nigerian youths.

#### Works Cited

- Adaji, Sunday. Personal Interview, 20th June 2015.
- Adams, Mohammed. Personal Interview, 6th May 2016
- African Music, Dance, Music and Musical Instrument. Web 28 March, 2016 <www.africaguide.com>.
- Alidu, Samuel O. Personal Interview, 6th May, 2016.
- Alkali, Domatob and Abubakar, Jika. African Media Issues. Enugu: Delta Publications, 1990.
- Baran, S.J. and Davis, D.K. History of our Understanding of Mass Communication. Ed. Baran, S.J. and Davis, D.K. Mass Communication and Every Life: A Perspective on Theory and Effects Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1981.19-52.
- The Holy Bible. (The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible, with Apocrypha, King James Version). Ed. David Norton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Horn, Andrews. From Ritual Music to Theatre: "A Case Study of the Development of Music through the Theatre." Nigeria Theatre Journal 2.1 (1998):25-30.
- Ibagero Elo, Introduction to African Traditional Communication System. Abraka: Delta State University Press, 2010.
- Iyeh, M.A. "The Traditional Dance Troupes in Nigeria and the African Realities." Faculty of Arts Conference Book of Proceedings. Ed. Agho, Jude and Anthony Okoduwa. Benin City: Jubilee Press, 2010. 275.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Centrality of Dance in Culture and Development." AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies 6.1 (2011):133-134.
- Jones, A.M. Studies in African Music. London: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Kofi, Idolo. The Breast of the Earth: A Summary of History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara. New York: NOK, 2005.
- Ojo-Rasaki, Bakare. Rudiments of Choreography. Lagos: Dat and Partners Logistics Ltd, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Underdevelopment of the Professional Dancer in Nigeria." The Parnassus: University of Uyo Journal Of Cultural Research 1.1(2002):81-91.
- Okafor, Richard. Music in Nigerian Society. Enugu: New Generation Books, 2005.

Traditional Music Instrument in Nigeria. Accessed 7 May, 2015  
<[www.vanguard.ng.com](http://www.vanguard.ng.com)>.

Ugolo, Chris . "Dance Pedagogy in Nigeria: Experience and Challenges." Perspectives in Nigerian Dance Studies. Ed. Yerina, A. Bakare, R. and Udoka. A. Lagos: Caltop Publications Ltd, 2007. 45-54.

Wogu, Joseph O. Introduction to Mass Communication Theories . Enugu: University of Nigeria Press Ltd, 2008.