

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE OF THE TALKING DRUM (*OBODOM*) IN IBIBIO SOCIETY

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Abstract

The talking drum is a special instrument used in making music in many parts of Africa. Beyond making music, the talking drum serves several other purposes and is of numerous importance in several African societies. This paper is therefore intended to examine the socio-cultural and religious importance of Talking Drum in Ibibio Society. It investigates into the socio-cultural and religious worldview of the Ibibio people in order to extract their understanding of the Talking Drum. In traditional Ibibio society, the talking drum is regarded as a compelling conduit through which traditional communications are richly enhanced. However, despite the resourcefulness of this instrument, it is observed that little have been written about it particularly in Ibibio society. In the worst case scenario, the use of the talking drum is fast disappearing in Ibibio society and in other cases; they are being replaced with other modern instruments like the bells. The conclusion of this paper suggests ways in which the talking drum can be reintroduced into the socio-cultural and religious lives of the Ibibio people so as to enhance grass root communication.

Keywords: Socio-cultural, Religious, Talking drum

Introduction

Just like any other traditional African society, the talking drum in Ibibio society has been an important voice or instrument by which various kinds of information were traditionally communicated. The traditional term used in referring to the talking drum in Ibibio society is *Obodom*. In traditional Ibibio society, *Obodom* is a compelling conduit through which traditional communication is enhanced. It is so compelling that in villages and rural areas, it aids in enhancing “grassroots mobilization for society’s development” (Ushe, 2013:94).

It is essential to reiterate the view of Ushe, (2013) who believes that the talking drum is a cultural instrument which has endured and survived the test of time up to the present generation and its history is as old as creation itself. That is to say, as long as human beings in the African context have existed in their state of communal consciousness, the talking drums have not only been part and parcel of their cultural existence but also part and parcel of their religious existence too. Thus, the talking drums in all African societies in which they are used play significant roles in the socio-cultural and religious life of such communities.

In traditional Ibibio society, there are various types of talking drums. However, the crux of this paper is to ascertain the socio-cultural and religious importance of *Obodom* in Ibibio society with the view that in the rural areas and villages in Ibibio society, *Obodom* has become a compelling voice that resonates with the people in key aspects of their social, cultural, and religious lives and dealings. To reach the bottom line of this paper, a probe into the Ibibio socio-cultural and religious society will be done, as well as the understanding of *Obodom* in Ibibio worldview.

Synopsis of the Ibibio Socio-Cultural and Religious Society

Following the different views surrounding the origin and nature of the name *Ibibio*, it is necessary to say that tracing the extended root meaning of the name will be a very difficult task to undertake and the nature of this paper plus time and space will not allow for such. In fact, one of the concrete statements made by Udo, (1983:2) holds that “the origin of the name Ibibio is not known”. However, to understand the Ibibio socio-cultural and religious society, we will draw upon the works of some scholars who have in recent times researched on the Ibibio people.

Udo, (2017:87) and Udo (1983:2) both situate the Ibibio as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, after the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. While the origin of the term ‘Ibibio’ is not known according to Udo (1983:2), for Udo, (2017:87), “the term ‘Ibibio’ refers to the various historical group of people who occupy the present Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of the south-eastern zone of Nigeria.

The Ibibio of south-eastern Nigeria live in the present day Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Controversies abound as to the actual origin of the Ibibio people. However, authors like Ukpong (2007) and Udo (1983) trace the origin of the Ibibio back to the Usuak Edet in Camerouns. Ukpong (2007:2) asserts that “the Ibibio migration into Nigeria was part of the

Bantu expansion. Their original homeland prior to coming into Nigeria was Usak Edet where they lived along with the Oron and perhaps also the Efut at the Nigeria/Cameroon border.”

With the geographical positioning of the present day Ibibio, it is possible to assume that in leaving their supposed original homeland (Usak Edet), the Ibibio migrated through different routes in order to settle in what is presently called “Ibibio.” Forde and Jones (1980:67) opine that “a section of them settled first at Ibom in present Arochukwu before further migrating to their present homeland. They are generally regarded as the Eastern Ibibio. They include some people in the former Uyo, Itu, Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Anang, Opobo and Abak Divisions.” Obio-Offiong, (1958:9-10) maintains that “another section, on leaving the Cameroons, travelled by water and eventually settled in the region of *Akwa Akpa* at the estuary of the Cross River. That settlement was named *Afaha Ukpokpo Ukim* or simply *Afaha*. They migrated later from there inland. They are the Uran, the Ibisikpo and the Nsit.” Ukpong, (2007:2) holds that “another group travelled by water and settled in what later became Eket and Oron. They are generally referred to as the water-borne Ibibio. Udo, (1983:314) summarizes this point by stating that the differentiation of Ibibio language into various dialects of today took place after their migration from Ibom in Arochukwu and more so after their migration from Ikono, near Uyo Township. The point to be made here is that when the name “Ibibio” is mentioned, attention is being drawn to people in Uyo, Itu, Ikot Ekpene, Abak, Opobo, Uruan, Ibisikpo, Nsit, Eket and Oron. These people group together, are regarded by Udo, (1983:1) as “the Ibibio-speaking people.”

Ibibio as part of African society is not only socio-cultural in nature, but is also religious in its structure and formation. Esen, (1982:6) holds that the contemporary Ibibio are found in Akwa Ibom State Nigeria. They are mainly Christians with traditional African religion in its pure form practiced by a negligible minority. Islam has a small presence practiced by the Hausa settlers who migrated from the north, but is hardly practiced by the indigenous people of the state. Essien, (2017:56) in quoting Ekong (1983) affirms that traditionally, Ibibio society consists of communities that are made up of large families blood affinity each ruled by their constitutional and religious head known as the *Obong Ikpa Isong*. The *Obong Ikpa Isong* ruled with *Mbong Ekpuk* (Heads of the families) which together with the Heads of the cults and societies constitutes the ‘Afe’ or ‘Asan’ or ‘Esop Ikpaisong’ (traditional council or traditional shrine or

traditional court). Forde, and Jones, (1980) acknowledge that Ibibio society consists of villages each of which belongs to a larger unit known as the “clan”. The clan was often named after the founder of the first village in the area. The duties of a clan head include the settlement of disputes among members of the families, the villages or the clan. This makes him a true mediator between the people.

The people of Ibibio are not exempted when the claim is made of Africans being very religious people. In their religious nature, they believe firmly in the existence of a Supreme God who created everything. Udo (1983:249) has this to say:

The Ibibio call the Supreme God, *Abasi Ibom* which means “Great God”. *Ibom* is derived from *Ubom*, signifying wideness, largeness, something limitless. *Abasi Ibom* therefore means a Being that is limitless, very “large” and very “wide”. He is *Abasi emi odude ke kpukpru ebiet* (God Omnipresent), *Abasi emi ofiokde kpukpru nkpo*, (God Omniscient) and *Abasi odudu*, (God Ominipotent). He is so large that the Ibibio people built him no house (shrine) his abode is in the sky and so he is God in the sky, *Abasi Ibom ke Enyong*. He lives in the sky in order to supervise the entire world. He is not the Ibibio God alone, but God of all races (*Abasi ofit owo ke ererimbot*).

This amazing depiction of God demonstrates the Ibibio understanding of the Supreme Being. This understanding guides them in their relationship with one another because they know that *Abasi Ibom* is watching them in all that they do.

Understanding the Concept of *Obodom* (Talking Drum) in Ibibio Worldview

Obodom in Ibibio society has been called different names by different people. Udofia, (2002) calls it a “wooden drum”, Nana, (2022:375) refers to it as a “wooden gong”, Udo (1983:156) calls it a “talking drum”. Whatsoever description given to *Obodom*, it does not fall out of being a wooden or talking drum used in disseminating information across to members of rural areas or villages. According to Wikipedia.com, it is also referred to as the “slit drum” or “slit gung”. In Africa such drums are

strategically situated for optimal acoustic transmission (e.g., along a river or valley), and they have been used for long-distance communication (Wikipedia.com). According to Okpara, (2016:39) this type of drum is also an idiophone. This means that it produces its sound by its own vibration without any strings or membranes. As the name suggest, the talking drums are thought to mimic languages by closely imitating the rhythms and intonations of the spoken words. As a result of this, Udok, (2020:273) attach deeper importance to it by saying that it is an indigenous instrument with social symbolism and cultural values in the society and not only a mere instrument for musical performance. The pitches of the Talking Drum can be regulated depending upon how the players strikes the heads of the drums and change their tension. These pitches can mirror people voices, and thus, the drum is called “Talking Drum” (Ushe, 2010). Speaking from the Yoruba context, Oluga and Babalola (2012:39) believe that talking drums are used in communication. This notion gives birth to the term “drumcommunication” – a term newly coined or derived from two existing words namely “drum” and “communication”. Additionally, the talking drum is constructed in a special way as to give different tones at different intervals and the intelligibility of the message to the hearer is also sometimes increased by the rhythmic pattern, differently representing that of a spoken utterance (Ushe, 2013:96).

The purposes which the talking drum serves are enormous. Nketia (1963) as quoted in Ushe (2013:95) holds that such many purposes include: to communicate messages across distances and villages, bring people together, help settle disputes among members of a village and to serve as memory device to help people remember important events that took place in the society. Equally, Ushe (2013:95) further stressed that the talking drum today is use to praise or curse other people and to welcome guests, praise the gods and people in the society, invoke the spirits of ancestors and deities, correct the errors of the societies, generates conversational proverbs in order to allow people to communicate with their elders and is still part of royal ceremonies or recitals of ancestry.

Okon, (2014) Outlines the different types of *Obodom* to include the following: *Obodom Ubong* (royal drum), *Obodom Eyong* (the drum played on the tree top), *Obodom Mbre* (drum used by masquerade group), *Obodom Usuan Etop* or *Obodom Ikod* (drum for message dissemination). Nana, (2022:375) adds to this list the *Obodom Ekong* (A big wooden gong used to communicate message to members of Ekong cult) which is otherwise called

“*Ibit mba ekong*” (Udo 1983:156). In addition to this, Udo (1983:154) further maintains that Ibibio men, especially the young men, were duty bound to respond to the war drums by carrying their guns and machetes to the village square...war signals were given through the beating of war drums informing soldiers when to advance and when to retreat. Every soldier understood all the instructions given through the drum because it was a “talking” drum. This particularly shows that the different types of *Obodom* signify their different and special uses.

It is very sad as Okon, (2014) goes on to discover that most of the different types of *Obodom* that have been in existence are no longer in use and are not even known to the younger generation because some of them have been replaced with other instruments as a result of globalization and westernization (a pictorial representation is attached at the end of this paper which shows some types of *Obodom* found in Ibibio society). For instance, the *Obodom Usuan Etop* is now being replaced with the use of a bell which cannot travel the distance that the vibration of the *Obodom* can travel. This however endangers the rich socio-cultural and religious importance of this versatile instrument of disseminating information across in rural areas and villages in Ibibio society.

The Socio-Cultural and Religious Importance of *Obodom* in Ibibio Society

Speaking from a socio-cultural standpoint, Ushe, (2013:94) opines that the talking drum is fashioned to enhance grassroots mobilization for developmental needs of the society. What this means is that the talking drum carries with it the ability to communicate information that will enhance grassroots mobilization thereby resulting in meeting the developmental needs of a given society.

Melvin, (1975) speaks of the multifaceted importance of the talking drum when he posits that the talking drum is used as means of notification, alertness and entertainment of people in palaces or during ceremonies. Melvin, (1975) has highlighted three areas of importance of the talking drum which are also applicable in the traditional Ibibio society. First is that within the traditional Ibibio society, *Obodom* serves as an instrument or voice of announcement, notice, or warning. Second, it is an instrument which calls people to vigilance and preparedness. This is usually applicable in the case of war and the appropriate *Obodom* used in such scenario is the *Obodom Ekong*. Third, the talking drum in traditional Ibibio society plays

the importance of entertainment wherein it is used in entertainment of the people. In this regards, Udok (2020:274) assert that it is used in traditional music ensemble and according to the nature of its sound production of two tones, it can as well be used as solo instrument to direct the steps of the dancers by giving rhythmic motion of the dancers a different colour of interest perceived as sound. As such, what the dances interpret in movement and gestures is what the instrument plays. Such can be achieved in an organized dance where there have been previously rehearsed with the instrumentalists. However, it is to be noted that *Obodom* is different from other instruments of entertainment that is why it is restricted for use in palaces or during special ceremonies and to be played by specific persons.

Obodom also serves extra-musical functions Udok (2020:288). It acts as cultural symbol and as a symbol of authority to demonstrate the traditional conduct of the communal meeting thus helping to enforce procedural order or as a sign of consensual seal to a decision that has been reached through appropriate deliberation Udok (2020:288). This view is also slightly held by Udeckukwu (2019:115).

Obodom is a spiritual instrument that is believed to possess magical attributes and is often associated with birth, death, and the hereafter. For instance, Nana (2022:375) portrays *Obodom* as a pivotal instrument of communication during the death and period of burial rites of a member of the *Ekong* cult. According to him, the sounding of *Obodom* is usually done twice; first, to notify the members that one of them had died which will bring all those concerned to the deceased's house, while the second sounding comes as soon as the "*Ebot Obom*" has touched the ground thus sending the message out that the first part of the burial has been concluded successfully.

Speaking also of the socio-cultural function of the giant *Obodom*, Udok (2020:287) maintain that it symbolizes the community's collective ethos with spiritual and political emblem. As such, it is usually housed in a ritual place or at location that rallies the collective political voice of the community. It is usually sounded sparingly, only when the occasion demands it. For instance, it sometimes serves as a symbol of peace for the settlement of dispute. When the instrument is sounded, the authoritative communal voice of the symbolic instrument is implicitly respected and obeyed more than the voice of any individual or any status or authority in the community.

Obodom equally plays a religious importance to the Ibibio society in a number of ways. For instance, in the traditional Ibibio society, during certain religious festivals; for instance, the *Ekpo Nyoho* festival, the *Obodom mbre* (in this case referred to as *Ibit Ekpo*) is usually played in the *Ekpo* shrine in order to invite the presence of the ancestors to be present during the period of the festival season. The presence of these ancestors usually guides, aid, and embolden *Ekpo Onyoho* to perform acrobatic feats with agility.

Obodom as Motivator of Dance and Entertainment

Drums, dance and entertainment generally go together in all cultures. Drumming evokes dance and entertains. In many traditional cultures, ethnic cohesiveness is maintained through a calendar of ritual wants in which the village frequently dances from dusk till dawn. Many people join in, so there is usually a lot of calls and response with people singing in answer to the *Obodom* talking Drum. These events are about celebrating together, as an ethnic group, a clan, a village. The *idion*, *Ekpo* and *Ekong* cults etc. These cult groups used the talking drum to entertain the people during their festivals. These cult groups used the Talking Drum to entertain the people during their festivals. These drums play together the coordination of the master drummer; the coordination is in the form of short signatures tunes, sign languages and body gestures (Daramola, 2010).

This Talking Drum is beaten by the master drummer to give direction in so many ways sometimes through his body gesture, familiar terminologies and at times with the coded message on the drums. Collectively, the talking drum fosters social relations, as it leads to affiliation, affection and affinity among people of the same cultural group. Individually, it fosters self-concept, reduction of uncertainty as asserted by Burgoon & Ruffner (1974). On certain public occasions, personal names, genealogies and unique characteristics of people are expressed in the talking drum language. Many Talking Drum beats will move some Africans to do unusual things: calms them if they are over-wrought with grief, and stirs them to dance if they are apathetic.

The *Obodom* Talking Drums were historically used as entertainment tools to leisurely pass nights after successful harvests. Community drum circles are still formed around bonfire to create a festive atmosphere and drummers play the whole night as people dance. Moreover, Talking Drums are also used as accompaniment to other traditional fun

activities such as wrestling matches, warrior rituals and dancing competitions. This shown that the Talking Drums hold a special place in the life of Africa, they are almost always an accompaniment for any manner of ceremony births, death, marriages-together with a ritual dances.

Obodom Talking Drum as the Heart-Beat of the Society

Traditionally, the Talking Drums was the heartbeat, the soul of most African communities. The Talking Drum have been an intrinsic part of African life for centuries and for countless generations, an ancient instrument used to celebrate all the aspect of life. Across the span of Nigeria's South-West, where the Yoruba people are largely found and in distant places where they hold sway, one of the most privilege aspect of the varied layers of their tradition is the unique platform upon which the Talking Drum sits. While drums in other human settlements are employed for their rhythmic pleasures, the drum music of the Yoruba people is both tonz-based and extends its functionalities to accommodate other uses. The drums have grown through the years of Yoruba civilization to including their entertaining and social functions with the power to hold conversations (Kehinde, 2007). Rhythm has been identified as an innate, unifying element among people all over the world (Skeef 1999). In his Articles "African drumming: A perfect tool for a more open and inclusive approach to intercultural education and development," (Skeef 1999:332) discusses the potential of rhythm and particularly African drumming, to empower the individual and enhance community. He described the capacity of drumming workshops to promote positive interaction, reduce conflicts and deconstruct obstacles created through prejudice. This author holds that "the transformative and restorative power of drumming are fast becoming a major subject of discussion in western medical and educational circles". Frizdman (2000:3) is in agreement, stating the drum is fast becoming an instrument used by people of every age for personal transformation, psychological and physiological healing and creating community.

The Obodom Talking Drum and Ritual Performance

Drumming, music and dance are part and parcel of ritual performance among the people of Ikot Ekpene. And the Obodom Talking Drum has a leading role to play in this regard. Ritual is the centre of all religion. And as Alexander (1997) contends, it is generally defined as a performance, planned and improvised, that effects transition from everyday life to an

alternative context within which the everyday life is transformed. Human life in general is often broken up or endangered by crises, conflict and other disruptions, in line with authoritative beliefs, values and courses of action, especially those provided by religion, which has presented these as harmonious or convergent with the cosmic order (Alexander, 1997). This is the reason why, among the Annang of South Southern Nigeria, an adolescent girl whose status is yet to be changed to womanhood has to go through ritual performance (Ekanem, 2015) so that she can fulfill her role in society as a wife, mother and life-giver. The Obodom Talking Drum comes in to play an essential role in this ritual performance of Ibibio maidens during their transition from adolescence to womanhood. It is the Obodom Talking Drum that ushers the Mbopo initiate into the village arena after her confinement in the fattening room. This is how Ekanem (2002:75) describe this ritual performance:

As the mbopo arrives the entrance of the initiation ground (*anwa mbopo*), she is in her nudity, with only a white handkerchief covering her pubes, The Talking Drum calls her name, and she responds with an amorous shaking of her waist and breasts. Then the talking Drum instructs her to step forward, and she does so gracefully. Then the talking drum instructs her to move around the arena, greeting the spectators. The Talking Drum then instructs her to unveil her pubic hairs, hitherto cover with a white handkerchief, she does so and the spectators acclaims '*uyai ayen*', (beautiful child). After that, the Obodom Talking Drum instructs her to the center of the arena and she does so. Then the Talking Drum ushers in the groom, invites the chief priest for the initiation proper.

Whether it is funeral rites, naming ceremony, etc. The obodom Talking Drum plays this indispensable role in ritual performance. From the above, it is safe to conclude that ritual performance by Ibibio people takes the form of ceremonies in the society. It is seriously tied to liturgical functions and is anchored within their belief system. It is keyed into formal structures of transition and demonstrates sufficient features of ritual entertainment.

Mbiti (1991) is therefore right when he contends that ritual is a form of carrying out religious actions or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something which is of religious significance, through word, symbol and action. Mbiti's explanation indicate that Africans celebrate life and by doing this, they celebrate their religion by dancing, singing and acting.

The people used everything at their disposal to communicate their action and words for the purpose of ritual. They used the obodom Talking drum in terms of invocation and prayers to connect to both the vertical and horizontal network of mystical powers necessary for ritual purposes in different form and occasion. The obodom Talking drum is not for ritual performance only; it is also a means of religious communication.

Conclusion

This work has shown the socio-cultural and religious importance of talking drum (*Obodom*) in Ibibio society. It concludes with the view that obodom is a versatile instrument which place social, cultural, as well as religious roles in traditional Ibibio society. The work reveals that *Obodom* in traditional Ibibio society serves as an instrument or voice of announcement, notice, or warning. It is also an instrument which calls people to vigilance and preparedness, and also plays the importance of entertainment. However, with the emergence of globalization and westernization, many of these talking drums are exposed to extinction and some of them are being replaced with other instruments. This however endangers the rich socio-cultural and religious importance of this multipurpose instrument (*Obodom*) in rural areas and villages in Ibibio society. On this note, it is suggested that the younger generation of Ibibio society should be introduced to the use of traditional instruments such as the talking drum (*Obodom*) in order to enhance grassroots mobilization that will result in meeting the developmental needs of Ibibio society.

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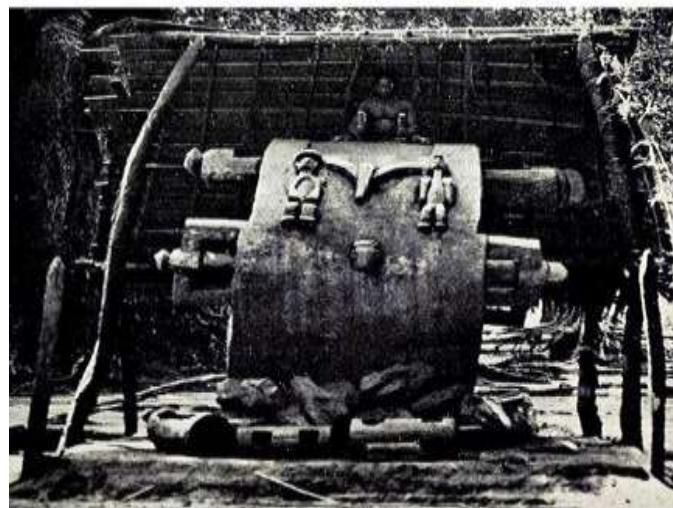
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Appendix Pictorial Representation of Some Types of *Obodom* in Ibibio Society



A Typical example of *Obodom Usuan Etop* or *Obodom Ikod*
Image Source: <https://facebook.com/groups/78179397857940>



A Typical example of *Obodom Ubong*
Image Source: Udok, E. C. and Ibekwe, E. U. (2020:278)



A typical example of *Obodom Mbre*
Image source: Wikipedia.com



A typical example of *Obodom Mbre*
Image source: Udok, E. C. and Ibekwe, E. U. (2020:282)