

## **Digitising Indigenous Music in Nigeria for Contemporary Relevance**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated how producers of indigenous music have keyed into today's prevalent digital culture using the case of a renowned masquerade in Igboland known as *Ajofia*. By its nature, traditional institutions like masquerade are known for its sacredness and resistance to foreign corruptions. However in these modern times, traditional community leaders and indigenous culture scholars have come to realize that to stay relevant and prevent misrepresentations, traditional cultures must also be reflected in the current technological revolution. Using the qualitative approach of interview the researcher attempted to gain insight into how *Ajofia* masquerade songs has transformed from being folk songs sang at festivals and ceremonies to being hosted in different internet and social media platforms. Purposively the researchers formally interviewed two key associates of *Ajofia* masquerade to ascertain their motive for embracing the digital culture and the extent to which that decision has helped their objectives. Findings from the study revealed that digitizing indigenous music portends more benefit than loss to the indigenous society. Some of the reasons adduced for digitizing indigenous music include; maintaining contemporary relevance, cultural preservation and transmission, and income generation.

### **Introduction**

Music is classified in traditional African society as a demonstrative form of communication which can be used to pass meanings and core values from generations to generations. By its nature indigenous music serves as a powerful tool of mass education, conscientization, and intercultural interactions. Traditionally music play important role in African culture. It is essential in representing the strong African heritage and its importance can be seen in many aspects of the culture. Unlike many cultures today, ancient African cultures encompassed music into their everyday lives. Dance, story-telling and religious practices are all grounded on the music of the culture (Gaines, 2012). Conceptualizing music is a difficult task. Davies (2012) declared that compared to art, philosophers have not shown much interest in defining music. In fact, definitions of music are rarely attempted. The Merriam Webster's dictionary defines music as the science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity.

According to Nketia's (1986), African indigenous music expresses and transmits cultural knowledge through sound. Music thus is regarded as a crucial means of communication in African culture. It is used to inform, entertain, educate, instruct, rebuke, and celebrate. Agawu (2003: 97), buttresses in different perspective that music is a text-woven, an act produced by performer-composers who conceived them. Mirriam (1964) and Blacking (1976), however in their view considered indigenous music as an expression that initiate from a cultural society. This implies that regardless of the approach adopted, the creation of music depends largely on the decision of the people who conceive and practice it.

Until the advent of the technological revolution, there were no other means of preserving indigenous music away from oral impartation. Folk music and other varied forms of indigenous music were handed over from generations to generations orally. There were also some other traditional laws limiting the transmission of these indigenous music like masquerade music. Sometimes of these laws were made in accordance with age, place of origin, marital status, socio-economic status and so on. However producers of indigenous music have realized that in order to survive in this ever evolving society there is need to key into the digital culture.

Kumar & Parikh (2010) observed that within the last 5-10 years, new media technologies such as DVDs, CDs, and mobile phones have gained considerable popularity in rural areas, offering many people

in villages a personal device that they can use to listen to their choice of content. Even many low-end phones have FM radio, audio players, and recorders. Among other changes, this has allowed folk musicians to reach out to wider and more geographically-distributed audiences. This study uses the music of Ajofia masquerade, a renowned masquerade from Nnewi in Anambra State Nigeria to describe how indigenous music has gone digital. The Ajofia masquerade's songs were considered a good fit for this study owing to the fact that its music videos and audio files are readily available on varied online platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Mp3Juices and so. Thus beyond stating the obvious, this study also sought to ascertain the varied motives why producers of indigenous music embrace digital culture. It sought to discover the implications of this shift to digitization to the traditional culture. And also examined the perception of the local indigenes regarding this cultural transformation.

### **The Nature of Indigenous Music in African Culture**

Fundamentally, music is a basic form of communication in African culture. In his definition, Hornby (1984:772) fully captured the true essence and meaning of music in the traditional culture by holding that music is the art of making pleasing combinations of sounds in rhythm harmony and counterpoint. The implication of this definition is that music does not only consist of songs but other features like sounds, lyrics, etc. that accompany the human voice producing the sound. The essence of this definition may be viewed in the fact that various African instruments of indigenous music communicate different messages through its unique sounds. Even in event of combination of the instruments, the messages conveyed are usually different.

Depending on the occasion, there are varied types of indigenous music in African culture. There are songs used in encouraging people to work for instance the *Onye gbuwe achala* rendition! The song is used to motivate and encourage young men to work. The song can be rendered in such a way that the names of the workers can be inserted in the lyrics thus raising their morale to work harder.

There are also lullabies used in lulling children to sleep. For instance *Onye tiri nwa na ebe akwa*. Usually an acapella, the song is usually sung by anyone attending to infants to make them sleep or disturb less.

There is also the song for war. *Nzogbu Nzogbu.....Enyi mba Enyi*. Usually accompanied by instruments like ekwe (wooden gong) or ogene (metal gong). The song rouses able bodied young men to war and charges them to defeat their enemies completely without sparing anyone. It is a type of music that charges the adrenalin. There are also dirges, sung for the dead extolling their virtues or even as it is believed in Africa, aids the passage of the dead. *Ugegbe etiwaala* is a veritable example of such dirges expressing the shock of a person's demise and extolling the virtues of the deceased at the same time.

In general, indigenous music can be used for all manner of endeavours. It may be used to forge a link between past and present; wish couples marital bliss, foster communal/national unity; sensitise the society and mobilise people for development. Agawu (2003 p.24) opines that indigenous music is best conceived not as a finite repertoire but as a potentiality. In terms of what now exists and has existed in the past, indigenous music designates those numerous repertoires of song and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, and performed regularly as part of play, ritual, and worship, and circulate mostly orally/aurally, within and across languages, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

According to Wilson (1998:41) indigenous music could take the form of grapevine stories to alert the people on development planned for them. Aesthetically, music may be likened to dance usually considered simply an art for its own sake. But music is much more. It is a highly significant form of cultural expression of a people. Thus to fully appreciate a given indigenous music, it is imperative that one must understand the cultural background from which the music emanated from

### **Masquerade Songs: An Overview**

An important classification of indigenous music is masquerade songs which makes the focus of this study. Masquerade songs are songs sung by masquerades in African culture. They are usually proverbial in nature and often have guides governing its usage in the pre-digital era. Masquerade songs are by their nature considered sacred and thus have myths surrounding its usage and transmission. Writing on the

communicative relevance of masquerade music in Igbo culture, Ezech, Ifeanyichukwu, and Kenechukwu (2019) described *egwu mmonwu*-masquerade song an interesting type of African traditional songs found especially in Nigeria. Although most western scholars of African culture (Hodgson 1988, Karl and Ganz 1960) conceptualize the culture of masquerade merely from an entertainment standpoint, the indigenous concept of masquerade views it as extra mundane interaction between the living and the dead.

Nzekwe (1981:134), conceives masquerade from extramundane perspective when he held that masquerade is a physical representation of ancestral spirits. Similarly, Enekwe (1981) defined masquerade as a 'communicant' medium through which the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead is invigorated and maintained. Elaborating further on his definition, Nzekwe (1981) further asserted that "the dead person's spirit whose soul has been housed in the wood sculpture or woven form, is temporary alive with the mask being a representation of the anonymous spirit deity".

On the other hand, Amankulor (1981:83) expresses the entertainment aspect of the masquerade culture when he defined masquerade as a celebration and merrymaking during festivals in Igbo land. Beyond entertainment though, there are didactic and constructive sides to the masquerade songs which makes them unique. Consequently, this informs Enekwe (1987)'s submissions that beyond manifesting the supernatural, masquerades dramatize the manners and habits of the living. These views, Ozochi (2011) noted, has in no small measure, helped the traditional Igbo society to evolve a device for social control in its different communities.

By its nature, most masquerade songs in Africa are usually framed as folklores and delivered through the aid of proverbs or parables. The use of proverbs and parables makes the song often difficult for non-initiates of masquerade cult to grasp. Thus they are often considered as truth hidden in plain sight to be decoded only by the ears of worthy men.

The following are few excerpts taken from songs by the Ajofia masquerade promoting different cultural values of the Igbo tribe:

#### **a. OmetaraYa Buru**

*Ogwugwu Akpu nokwoolu onwe ya.....*

OgwugwuAkpu keeps to itself

*Onye ya ekwuru umu ogwugwu onu ha....*

Who would speak for the children of Ogwugwu

*Nke emena ebo mbe.....*

The tortoise gets blamed for whatever happens

*Umu Igbo kowaalunu uwa eziokwu..... Ka akwusiikpo Afor, Nkwo.....*

The Igbos should explain the truth to the world, so that they will cease to mistake Afor market day with that of Nkwo

*Okwa arusi di n'ugwu, Yoruba, nke Igbo ona ya adi ichi.....*

There is idols in the north, in Yoruba, will that of the Igbos be different?

*Ara aturu Ogwugwu ntu.....*

You do not lie to Ogwugwu idol

*Onye gbuo onwe ya obu ndi be ha ya ebulu ozu ya ga ba na ana obi ndi ntu.....*

He who kills himself would be brought to the land of liars

*Mana ndi ona egbu Kirikiri bu Ogwugwu Akpu bu ndi achoghi ikpe nkwumoto.....*

But those whom Ogwugwu kills mercilessly are enemies of justice

*Ndi na egbu mmadu were awuufu zoro onu ha.....*

Those who kill their fellow human and covers themselves with bribe

*Jee n'uno uka chiribe eze.....*

Goes to church and get crowned as they like

*Ebe ana afia okwu mmanu na ogaranya apuru ogbenye ife ya.....*

Where truth is handled with kid glove while the rich forcefully take things from the poor

*O welu ego ogolu ndi uka.....*

Buys the church over with money  
*Kedu maka Tafa Balogun na ndi ozi ya, isi na anya odi ha aghaa?*  
What of Tafa Balogun and his minions; how is the condition?  
*Agwalu Balogun eyina akpukpo ukwu ba ana nso*  
Balogun was told not to enter the holy threshold with his sandals  
*Na Ogwugwu Akpu na aso ya nso*  
That Ogwugwu Akpu forbids it  
*Ma okpa nganga kpalu nganga kpanye agu n'onu nganga ya anaa*  
But the proud loses his pride in the mouth of the lion  
*Na miri oku n'egbukwo mbe*  
Because hot water kills the tortoise

The song *Onye meta ya buru*, is a tribute in defence of the Ogwugwu Akpu idol in Okija Ihiala local government area of Anambra state. Owing to a tip-off about some inhuman practices going on at the Ogwugwu Akpu shrine, a team of policemen in August 3, 2004 led by then Anambra State Police Commissioner Felix Ogbaudu invaded the shrine. Forty native doctors, custodians and attendants were subsequently arrested in the shrine. Over seventy dead bodies and skulls were allegedly recovered. However, in the light of the laws of freedom of worship, Ajofia in his song considers it a slight to cultural heritage of the Igbos to invade the Ogwugwu Akpu shrine. While extolling the virtues of the idol, he defended the idol as just and unfairly maligned. He also called out the Igbo indigenes who rather than identify with their cultural identities prefers to join strangers in the misrepresentation. In its views, there is a repercussions for offending Ogwugwu Akpu idol and the then Inspector General of Nigerian Police Force Tafa Balogun who signed off on the raid felt it. Not long after the raid, the police boss found guilty of graft and financial impropriety and hence was disgracefully sacked from his office.

#### **a. Odinana Abia**

*Onye Igbo siri na Chukwu bu obia na ana oji*  
The Igbo man said God is stranger to the black land  
*O kwero na onwere obodo ana akpobu Arochukwu*  
He doesn't agree that there is a town named Arochukwu in pre-colonial days  
*O sina Chukwusi ocha feta oji*  
He said that God crossed over from the whites to the blacks  
*Onye igbo si na orazi ago muo*  
The Igbo man says he worship spirits  
*Ma na ezikwa ozioma si ka efebe Chukwu*  
Still he preaches God worship  
*Ajuo ya onye bu Chukwu osi n'obu muo*  
And when asked who God is, he says he is spirit.

In this song titled "Odinana abia", Ajofia bemoans the willingness of the Igbo race to mental slavery especially as it regards religion. Ajofia contends in this song that no one introduced the Igbo man to God and certainly not the white man. The masquerade implies that Christianity only introduced the Igbos to the white man's distinct cultural way of doing the same thing their forefathers were already doing and today the Igbos willingly disparage and denigrate the ways of their forefathers.

So far, the Ajofia masquerade have about seven albums consisting of about fifty songs in different new media platforms. Some of the online music platforms hosting Ajofia masquerade music include; amazon.com, mp3tuns.net, ezewest.blogspot.com, hungama.com, Mp3juices.com, movies.9jarocks.com, highlifeng.com, among others. The music can also be found on YouTube,

Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp. Other cultural groups like Ogene groups who equally retain strong online presence have adapted the Ajofia masquerade songs in their performances.

### **Indigenous Music in the Era of Digitization**

The burning question remains, why digitize indigenous music? What are the implications of digitization to the uniqueness, morality, sacredness and integrity of indigenous music culture? Wilson and Stewart (2008 p.376) recalled that:

In the early days of Indigenous participation in digital media, many elders and traditional people worried that sacred and protected knowledge would be degraded and stolen in media productions. Those concerns have not gone away, and for good reason: Indigenous people have a terrible history of being crushed under the machinery and tangled in the circuitry of modernity's technological progress. The question of who controls the design, production, and distribution of Indigenous media remains. While many elders, community leaders, and Indigenous scholars may still critique digital technology's hegemonic properties, there is now an awareness among them that Indigenous communities must either represent themselves and create media that reflect their identities and desires or they will be misrepresented by a media industry that has processed and sold Indigenous knowledge as a commodity. Moreover, isolation can be dangerous for Indigenous groups in regions where military or paramilitary violence threatens their survival.

Bartholomew (2000), witnessed that long before the advent of sophisticated media technologies scholars have grappled with the moral and political implications of mechanically reproducing creativity. He further observed that music remain the most reproduced art, with songs currently enjoyed more in recordings than live performances as it were in the early days. Other scholars are of the view that the prevalence of recorded music has led to the devaluation of cultural practices predicated on localized knowledge systems by the pervasive and homogenizing corporate culture business. (Maybury-Lewis, 1997; Novick, 1997).

One of the pronounced effects of digitizing indigenous music is commodification. While commodification in this case helps to spread the digitalized songs, its sole aim is to make profits with less concern on the unique cultural values and peculiarities of those intellectual properties. Digital indigenous music marketers are usually more motivated by the desire to make money than to promote the cultural values of the music. Consequently as Leuthold (1998) observed the indigenous music's "local immediacy" is forfeited in the interest of commerce.

Similarly, the commodification of indigenous ceremonial objects and cultural products and the appropriation of customary practices through the language of possessive individualism pose the danger of cultural dissolution. (Coombe, 1998). Bartholomew (2000) noted further that digital revolution has added to the dangers of cultural appropriation as local, collectively held knowledge now has the potential to be electronically recorded, decontextualized, marketed or accessed in ways that undermine the creative integrity or cultural dignity of the producers.

The digitization of indigenous music though trendy is equally a proven vehicle of cultural imperialism. Digitization so far has constituted a threat to both linguistic diversity and to local cultural traditions and industries, which have become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of cultural imperialism -- the growing hegemony of the English language and the U.S. entertainment business, which, along with weapons and food, represents one of our most profitable "national" exports (Jameson, 2000). With the growing emergence of the global cultural economy, local musical styles have been increasingly marginalized in preference for foreign music styles with their more sophisticated and mechanized instrumentation.

There is also the problem of protecting the property rights of indigenous music



producers accruing from digitization. Bartholomew (2000) observed that there are innumerable instances where the property rights of indigenous music and imagery producers are grossly undermined through the usage of these songs and imageries in movies and on web sites, CDs, and the airwaves without due permission.

However on the brighter side, the advent of new technologies have to a large extent helped global interconnectedness, promoted social and cultural transformations which has enhanced collective memory, promoted cultural awareness, and facilitated cultural preservation efforts. Zimmerman, Zimmerman, & Bruguier (2000) remarked that older technologies like print media are usually not suitable for the curation of oral-based performative genres. In contrast, newer technologies, such as online databases and CDs, provide promising curatorial alternatives, particularly for cultural activists interested in celebrating oral expressive forms such as music, stories, and ritual chants. CDs can combine high fidelity audio recordings with multi-media to provide audiences with accurate, contextualized presentations of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

## **Methodology**

The researchers adopted the qualitative approach of in-depth interview in carrying out this study. By its nature, the in-depth interview method consists of unstructured questions used in circumstances when the interviewer discusses limited number of topics. Considering the technicalities associated with masquerade culture, this type of investigation hardly follows the conventional methods of research. In circumstances like this, it is rarely possible to talk to the masquerade itself. Rather after careful assessments, the inquirer may be allowed to talk some key associates of the masquerade. Those associates equally would be careful and often proverbial in their responses in order to avoid *ita mmanwu*- betraying the secrets of the masquerade to non-initiates. Yet it must be noted that masquerade cults are either community or masquerade specific. This means that being member of one's own village masquerade cult does not automatically qualifies one to become privy to another village masquerade cult. Also, there are levels of masquerades even in the same community, one may be a member of the general masquerade cult, but still not admitted to know about certain class of masquerade.

The researchers succeeded in getting audience with two high ranking associates of the Ajofia masquerade owing to the fact that the lead researcher is a member of a masquerade cult. The location of the interviews was Umudim Nnewi the village where Ajofia masquerade hail from. One of the interviewees was met at the village square while the other was met at his homestead. They were both interviewed with Igbo language which they are very conversant it. The researchers met the two associates in two separate market day the first on *Nkwo* market day and the other on *Orie* market day. In each of the meetings, the researchers were given kolanut to eat and asked to pour libations. This act though a sign of welcome and fair mindedness, also is viewed as an act of covenant. The implication is that the researchers are bound by the act to use the reports of the interview strictly for research purposes and nothing harmful. Anything contrary should attract curse upon them. The interviewees were treated on the basis of anonymity.

A sound recording device (mobile phone) was used by the researchers to record the proceeds of the interview. While the interview questions were limited to the main purpose of the study which is to ascertain the motive behind the current digitization of indigenous music with Ajofia masquerade songs as case in point. The researchers moved further to ask questions on the perceived impact of digitization on the cultural integrity of the traditional society. The participants gave some insightful responses which the researchers considered very useful. The data generated were subsequently transcribed and thematically analyzed. Below are some the excerpted responses from the interview sessions:

- a. Masquerade songs like that of Ajofia Nnewi is a sacred type of music, why go digital then; does it not devalue the uniqueness of the culture?

**Participant A:** *Not at all it doesn't. Things change as the world evolve. Using and electronic device to preserve and transmit sacred indigenous music does not undermine*

*the sacredness of the song. It rather gives it more popularity, more respect for the tradition and more honour to the heritage.*

**Participant B:** *Rather than undermine our culture, digitization have helped to promote it further. The trend is to showcase what you have and be proud of it. The era of ignorant spiritualization is in the past. Making indigenous music readily available online holds better advantage than hiding in the cloak of religious observances.*

- b. So what would you classify as the motive behind digitization of indigenous music?

**Participant A:** *The urge to reach as many people as possible in the world and pride ourselves in our own unique culture. Colonial experiences have rendered Africa nearly without identity, digitization of indigenous music helps brethren in foreign lands to stay in touch with their culture.*

**Participant B:** *There are many things that can motivate digitization of indigenous music. Chief among them is money. Digitization implies more money through plenty fans who patronize the online stores. The Ajofia masquerade songs are true testimonies of this opportunity. Digitization will also put our culture in the map and in doing so promote the varied heritages of the indigenous people.*

- c. What implication has digitization of indigenous music on the culture of Africans?

**Participant A:** *It implies all positive for African culture. We must move with trend and take our seat among global cultures. Digitization to the best of my knowledge is the fastest route to culture export. It will definitely mean well to digitize indigenous music for contemporary relevance.*

**Participant B:** *The effect of digitization of indigenous music in the local society may be a bit negative but more beneficial. It wouldn't have benefitted Ajofia Masquerade to sing merely for occasions. His albums are making great sales and the film economy in general.*

## Findings

From the data generated during the interview session, the researchers was were able to make these findings which are thus thematically presented. First, digitization helps to promote indigenous culture. It is evident that in this modern era of technology, traditional culture must also evolve alongside trending innovations or risk going extinct. Digitization thus becomes veritable means of easy promotion of indigenous culture. There may be some areas of the culture which may still be reserved for reasons of principles and integrity, however making indigenous songs readily available on the internet constitutes a veritable means of sustaining the cultural heritage.

In addition, digitization is a proven source of income. Indigenous music on YouTube channels and other online music platforms provides profit for the owners. Aside from giving the music producer high visibility and prominence, certain amount of money accrues to the owner of the intellectual property through downloads.

Furthermore, digitization helps in availing prompt clarification of certain misconceptions held against some indigenous cultures. Masquerade songs for instance have been demonized and considered an evil art. However a glance at the lyrics of Ajofia masquerade songs for instance reveals the rich meaningful content as opposed to the erroneous championed mostly by adherents of Christian religion. In this era of technological revolution, digitizing indigenous music is the surest way of having this art remain relevant.

The younger generation are keen users of these modern technologies. To transmit these cultures successfully to them, it is imperative that indigenous music gets digitized. In all it is safe to say from all indications that digitizing indigenous music is the way to go towards preservation of indigenous culture.

### **Conclusion**

The Ajofia masquerade sets a very good example for other to emulate. Taking advantage of the digital space is a plus to the indigenous culture rather than a loss. Through its foray in the digital space, the Ajofia masquerade and its songs has come to be known and celebrated around the world as a prominent representative of the Igbo culture. Of course there are evident risk to this move. Piracy and other acts undermining the producer's right to intellectual property are real issues which beset the digital world in general. However it is a risk worth taking as the chances of survival is very high. Digitization does not undermine uniqueness and peculiar cultural principles, it rather promotes it to an enviable height.

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