

The Efficacy of Women’s Musical Performance at Childbirth Events Among the Mhiship of Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

From time immemorial, music has been the core of all cultural activities in most Nigerian communities as well as an indivisible component of events in such cultures. The musical tradition of the Mhiship of Plateau State is functionally rich and diverse because of its connection with songs, chants, dances, worship, rites of passage, occupation, and rituals among others. This notwithstanding, the traditional music practices by Mhiship women during childbirth are particularly on a decline towards extinction. Hence, the need for urgent documentation of the birth songs of the Mhiship natives to preserve them for progeny is, therefore, necessary. The focal point of this paper is to examine women’s music-making at childbirth events among the Mhiship of Plateau State, taking into cognizance the relevance of music, chants and dance in happenings revolving around childbirth, including the musical components and performances at such events. The ethnographic method was utilized with interviews employed for data collection. The study reveals the importance of childbirth among the Mhiship people, the accompanying welcome ceremony, the invaluable nature of chants, music and dance as well as the impacts of the childbirth folksongs performance in the aforesaid culture.

Keywords: women’s music, performance, childbirth events, Mhiship, Plateau State

Introduction

A childbirth event (in the context of this study) is a formal occasion which takes place before, during and after the delivery of a baby. In Mhiship land, some of the happenings associated with childbirth are usually accompanied by songs of encouragement, and praises and those expressing the joy of motherhood by the womenfolk. The process of childbirth starts from the point of conception, that is, from the moment a woman realizes she has conceived. This is when she begins to prepare herself in anticipation of the coming of a new family member. The preparation process involves receiving counsel from experienced elderly women, mothers and traditional birth attendants also regarded as midwives, (*mat labla*) trained in assisting women during childbirth. The midwives, who are majorly female, are saddled with the responsibility of caring for expectant mothers in the course of pregnancy until child delivery. Sometimes, they combine different indigenous plants, leaves, tree roots, ointments, animal skins, etc, as treatment all through the period of gravidity. The herbs and plant mixtures serve as protective agents against childhood ailments such as jaundice, malaria, etc. Childbirth is of great relevance to every family in Mhiship because the child is regarded as a symbol of peace, and arbitration (settles disputes) and perceived as a sacred being. Thus, at the birth of a living child, there are always waiting for hands to carry the newborn baby and applaud any woman who comes victoriously through childbirth, with songs of encomium sung or chanted to bid the baby a heroic welcome to the warmth of the mother’s bosom.

A Historical Background of the Mhiship People

Mhiship is used to depict all the landmarks and natives of the settlement covering Plateau Central Senatorial District of Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. Their neighbours are Geomia and Tarok to the South, Tal and Ngas to the East, Mupun and Nwaghavul to the North and Pan, Chakfem and Jipal to the West. The ethnic group is one of the minority groups in Plateau State.

Presently, the Mhiship ethnic group consists of one chiefdom also referred to as Chip District, comprising two major clans, namely: Longmaar and Jibaam. The language spoken by the indigenes is the Mhiship language. It is linguistically similar to that spoken by the neighbouring Mupun. Banwar (1997) cited in Mauzu and Katwal (2010) discloses that the Mhiship migrated between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries from Kanem- Borno to their present abode in Pankshin –Plateau State, Nigeria.

Several socio-cultural institutions existed in the region before the emergence of the two major religions of Islam and Christianity. These include marriage ceremonies, funerals, childbirth events, circumcision, and death rites, among

others. Economically, Mhiship people are predominantly farmers; agriculture has been their major occupation. The major crops produced by them are cowpeas, yam, beans, guinea-corn and rice while further activities such as mining, hunting, blacksmithing, and weaving constitute their secondary occupations.

Women's Creative Potency and National Development

Ibekwe (2012:106) writes that “music is one of the paramount values and experiences that a community shares or transfers to her younger generation through women’s involvement in musical activities”. Women naturally have singing potential in them and are happy when they are put to bed safely, after going through the rigours of pregnancy. Their procreative potency is paramount to the development of every nation. They also contribute to creativity in society as some birth songs are composed on the spur of the moment. Women play a colossal role in population growth and extend many generations to posterity for the continuity of the human race. The expansion of the family tree is dependent on a woman, as an increase in population is a sign of strength, power and a source of economic development to the Mhiship man. Thus, women contribute significantly to nation-building physically, socially and economically because they carry the blessing of continuity.

Childbirth Significance to the Mhiship Community

In Mhiship land, the birth of a baby enriches the hope of the parents and family. It also calls for celebration by the entire community. Okafor (2005:47) notes that “in birth, there is not only joy and thanksgiving but also the appreciation that a genealogy is being expanded and that certain hopes can find fulfilment.” Thus, as soon as a baby is born, women who have given birth gather in a circle to celebrate and dance while singing songs accompanied by maracas (*shaa*) and drums made from a small tin can (*bang gongon*). Bang gongon is sometimes used as improvisation where the traditional drum is not available. In a situation where the child is male, a new big hoe (*kekshan*), fresh palm fronds for mats (*keram*) and a pair of bow and arrow (*keop khi paas*) is hung at the entrance of the room of women who just put to bed to indicate the arrival of the male child as a provider, who would use his hoe to farm extensively, his bow and arrow to hunt as well as provide security to the family not only in times of danger but also to secure the inheritance of his father’s lineage. The male child is regarded as a symbol of strength. On the other hand, to announce the birth of a female child to the community, a basket, broom and clay pot are placed at the entrance of the mother’s hut to signify the role of a woman as a home builder, who would sweep and keep her home clean; use the pot to fetch water, and the basket to collect and store food items in her home. The newborn baby girl is viewed as a symbol of honour in the Mhiship community as the birth of a new nation is seen in her. Women are filled with great joy in their hearts, the moment they bring forth another life. This is regarded as the fulfilment of their prime duty to humanity. It also marks the moment of leisure after a job well done.

The Musical Components and Performances at Childbirth Events in Mhiship Culture

The relationship between music, chants, and dance as inseparable entities in Mhiship culture cannot be overemphasized. Igbi and Ogbeide (2019:125) submit that “African traditional music is a product of creativity and syncretism, usually involving other aspects like dance, drama and poetry”. Music at different events in Mhiship is usually accompanied by peculiar dance styles, chants, (*waas*) as well as traditional musical instruments, depending on the type of event. These may include marriage, coronation, funeral, festivals, and childbirth naming ceremonies among others. The music associated with a childbirth event in Mhiship is predominantly vocal but sometimes is accompanied by handclapping and a few indigenous musical instruments such as the maracas (*shaa*) and a small tin can drums (*bang gongon*) or drums (*bang*). These instruments are used in articulating and maintaining the stimulating rhythms of the dance steps to the songs. Ofuani (2014:163) notes that “African rhythm is deliberately created”. While Peggy (1976:2) explains further that “the rhythmic patterns of Nigerian traditional dances consciously express the social identity of the performers and implicitly reflect the physical conditions in which they live”. According to him, the nature of the country, the climate, and the work that people do, eventually become heightened and intensified into the rhythmic movement of their dance. The above is evident in the childbirth music and dance performance as women demonstrate and express themselves in the context of the happenings revolving around the birth of a baby. Before delivery, songs of hope and joy are sung for the expectant mother during labour. This helps to progressively control labour pain. It also plays a major role in encouraging, strengthening and aiding her relaxation in the process of childbirth.

Relevance of Music, Chants, and Dance in Childbirth Events in Mhiship Culture

Music is a powerful tool for socialisation into different aspects of communal knowledge systems (Emama, 2022). Music, dance and chants are very functional in every Mhiship traditional community as they grace different kinds of events that go on in the society. Idamoyibo (2021: 25) posits that “the relevance of music is seen in the general functioning of the society”. Just as there are different occasions for different kinds of music and dance performances, so are there different kinds of chants (*waas*) for different kinds of events, ranging from musical festivals, childbirth events, marriage ceremonies, harvests, coronation, and initiation ceremonies to mention but a few. Music, dance and chants play very useful roles in childbirth events in Mhiship. Aside from the fact that they are very expressive, they also act as a social and artistic medium of communication used to express thoughts, make statements or put across messages of personal and social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions.

Enekwe, (1998) cited in Ubani (2013:72), rightly observes that “besides group dance offering an excellent social integration, it helps one gain new friends, strengthen family ties, develop group loyalty, social cohesion and group solidarity”. He further explains that members of such organization enjoy and cherish performing and sharing common bonds and offers opportunity in sharing creative experiences and a good avenue for the expression of group sentiments. According to him, music and dance result in group participation; a forum for generating cooperation, unity, peaceful co-existence and sentiments. Music and dance in childbirth events play a similar role as explained by Ubani above, while the chants (*waas*) serve as a proclamation of the victory of the lineage of the child, praises to the creator and also the pronunciation of the prosperity and blessings the child will grow to have in the future. Below are some songs associated with childbirth:

Nan Phi Rheip
 (God Bestow Your Blessings) Mhiship Folksong

Nan phi rheip nka la she dei ni puutkhen dhi nan phi rheip nka la she dei ni puut khen

dhi nan phi rheip nka la she dei ni puut khen dhi

nan phi rheip nka la she dei ni puut khen dhi

Fig. 1: Mhiship folksong used in praying for a blessing upon a newborn child

Mhiship

Nan phi rheip nka la she
 Dei ni puut khen dhi

English translation

God pour out your blessings upon this child
 So that he will be prosperous in the future.

The song is usually performed by all the women who have given birth to children as a sign of a motherly blessing upon the child. It welcomes him to the world and also wishes him well, and affirms that he becomes only a source of joy, happiness and blessings to his parents in particular and the community at large.

Liak Paas Fuun
 (Our Arrow of Fight) Mhiship Folksong

Nan dok den lah_ liak pass fuun o shrop mu eeh Pen deh aseh baa_ liak

paas fuun o mat neh_ eeh_ Aaa ha_ wa wu nden mun shik bis oo shuopp mu

mu oo Aaa ha wa_ wu den mun wul lah o_ mat neh eeh

Fig. 2: Mhiship folksong used in controlling labour pain

<i>Nan dok den lah liak paas juum ooo</i>	God has ordained our little arrow
<i>Shuopp mu eeh</i>	to fight, my dear women
<i>Pen deh aseh baa a liak paas fuk o matneh eh</i>	So it is our arrow fight my wife
<i>Aaa hawawu nden mun shikbis oo shuopp mu o</i>	It was Eve that sinned on our behalf
<i>Aaa hawawu den mun wullab matneh eeh</i>	It was Eve that gave us this pain

This song is sung for pregnant women before delivery. It is usually performed by her mother-in-law or any aged elderly woman during pregnancy and labour, asking her to carry her cross and to encourage her to prepare herself for the ultimate journey ahead as every woman has trod the same path she is treading. Therefore, the song concludes that she can equally come out victorious.

Lah Ngu Long
(A Rich Man's Child) Mhiship Folksong

1 Lah ngu long khi wal eeh mu mang ess lou mu gwam keh ni lah
 3 gu geal khi wale ehh mu mang kuk shep mu gwam keh ni lah
 5 ngu long khi wal eeh mu mang ess lou mu gwam keh ni lah gu
 7 — geal khi wale ehh mu mang kuk shep mu gwam keh ni lah ngu
 9 long khi wal eeh mu mang ess lou mu gwam keh ni

Fig. 3: Mhiship folksong used in calming crying babies

<i>Lah ngu long khi wal eeh</i>	When a rich man`s child cries,
<i>Mu mang ess lou mu gwam keh ni</i>	Meat is used to console him
<i>Lah gu geal khi wale ehh</i>	When a poor man`s child cries,
<i>Mu mang kuk shep mu gwam keh ni</i>	Cane is used to console him.

The song above is used to console a child when he/she cries in expectation of his/her mother. The song explains the disparity between the rich and the poor in society. It also puts in plain words, the type of luxury the rich afford to calm their crying children in times of distress. It reflects the reality of social stratification and its effects on society.

Lah Nbakhi Ret
(Children Are Precious Seeds) Mhiship Folksong

1 Lah nba khi ret o ooa lah nba khi ret o ooa
 5 neer neh shang gurum mu v wash kang neer neh shangurum mu v wash kang lah nbi khi
 9 ret ooo shuop mu lah nbi khi ret ooo shrup
 12 — mu lah nbi kih ret o

Fig. 4: Mhiship folksong buttressing the significance of children

<i>Lab nbakhi ret oooa</i>	Children are precious seeds
<i>Lab nbakhi ret oooa</i>	Children are precious seeds
<i>Neer neh shang gurum mu vwashkang</i>	My reproductive organ has produced a great nation
<i>Lab nbikhi ret ooo</i>	Children are precious seeds
<i>Shurop mu lab nbaikhi ret ooo</i>	Women, children are precious seeds.

This song is performed before and during a child’s birth to young women in labour, reminding them how much having children around their means. An elderly woman ties a guinea-corn stalk in between her thighs while she chants and explains to the expectant mother that her reproductive organ has given birth to a very important personality as a reward for the labour. Thus, she will be well-taking care of, even in her old age, because she has fulfilled her primary obligation to society.

Lah fin nok wall eeh
 (Stop Crying My Child) **Mhiship Folksong**

Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu

3
 lah fin nok wall eeh wu eeh wuu lah fin nok wall eeh wu eeh wuu

5
 lah fin nok wall eeh lah fin nok gwam lah fin nok wall eeh lah fin nok gwam

7
 gwam lah Mhi ship Muk khi gwam aa shu eess lou

8
 mang lah nih ashin mu dukut Aah lap khean niha rhim mang

9
 lah nih ashin mu dukut Aah lap khean niha rhim Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu

Fig. 5: Mhiship folksong used in calming crying babies

A chant:

Eech lah seh eeh
Ghi phi wal ameh eb?
Ghi peh shu yugur aab?
Ghi nok wal keyeh,
Nok bhi ghi, nok bhi ghistop
Ghi naa lah ret fig
La gong nan kyakhat
Khi lap aa la nbeghen khi
bikeh ret moot aseh aah.

This child!
 Why are you crying?
 Would you take breast milk?
 Stop crying, my dear
 My dear, stop crying
 See how cute you look
 Very small beautiful nose
 You resemble your mother
 Very beautiful and adorable

Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
lah fin nok wall eeh wu eeh wuu

Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
 Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
 Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu
 Stop crying my child wu eeh wuu

<i>lab fin nok wall eeh lab fin nok gwam</i>	Stop crying my child
<i>gwam lab mbhip</i>	To console a Mhip child
<i>mukki gwam aa shi eess lou</i>	You use meat bones
<i>mang lab nib ashin mu dukut</i>	I wrap my child on my back
<i>wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu</i>	Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wuu

The above song begins with a praise chant, addressed to the newly delivered (mother) and her baby. In most cases, the mother of the newborn baby, the grandmother or the caregivers are the performers of the song. It is rendered at the first cry of the baby as soon as he/she is born. “Wu eeh wu eeh wu eeh wu” at the beginning of the song is an exclamation of rhythmic expression of joy repeated severally to get the attention of the baby to stop crying.

Impacts of the Childbirth Folksongs Performance in Mhip Society

Although childbirth folksongs performance of the Mhip is sometimes viewed as merely social and recreational activities that involve women gathering to sing, clap, chant and dance before, during and after the delivery of a baby, beyond this, it has numerous impacts on society as outlined and explained below:

1. **It Promotes Social Bond among Members:** childbirth folksongs performance in Mhip society brings about the feeling of togetherness amongst women in particular and the community at large. The songs, on the other hand, give comfort and encouragement as well as enhance celebrations that can never be done in isolation. This, in turn, results in social bonds and also serves as an avenue for women to render help to their counterparts by showcasing kindness through the gift of items to them (mother and her newborn baby), thereby sustaining the spirit of partaking in sharing in the victory of another family's growth, expansion and development in the society.
2. **It Defines Social Responsibilities and Gender Roles Including Communicating the Sex of Babies after Delivery:** The performance of Mhip childbirth folksongs is majorly carried out by women. This clearly defines their roles in terms of maternal health care in society. Again, the sex of babies as well as gender roles are made explicit through Mhip women's performances at childbirth events. For example, women gathering around to bring baskets, brooms, mats and water pots signifies the birth of a female child who will grow to become a home builder while the birth of a male child is announced through Mhip women's display in songs by carrying a big hoe, a bow and an arrow to remind every man of his duty to cater for his home. These demonstrations are usually for the older and upcoming generations to learn and know the various gender roles expected of them as they grow to continue the norms and values of the Mhip natives.
3. **It Helps to Preserve the Aboriginal History:** Mhip women during their childbirth folksongs performances narrate past events as they affect childbirth among the natives. This provides an avenue for educating them (men and children inclusive) on events surrounding childbirth and why it is a cross that every woman is expected to carry.
4. **It Buttresses the Importance of Children:** songs performed at childbirth events unfold the worth of well-meaning children in society. This implies that parents blessed with such children will not suffer in old age because they will take care of them whenever the need arises. This is exemplified in the lyrics of the song (*Lab Nbakhi ret*) where children are regarded as precious gifts to their parents. Children are also considered blessings from God to the marital union. Thus, any marriage without a child is considered incomplete.
5. **It Retains Continuity of Family Pedigree:** as soon as a child is born in the Mhip culture, womenfolk renders praise chants to welcome the newborn baby to his/her milieu. The chants also contain information concerning the lineage of the child. This denotes that the descent and generation of that family had been extended further. Thus, the family has been expanded and society has increased as well.
6. **The Folksongs Function as Therapy:** childbirth folksongs of the Mhip act as anaesthetics during labour as their rendition helps to control labour pain by lowering anxiety, preventing discomfort and aiding women's relaxation in the process of child's delivery.

7. **The Folksongs Serve as Material – Catalysts for Further Inventiveness in Musical Artistry:** The performance of the Mhiship childbirth folksongs spurs further music creativity as contemporary composers and musicians (pop and art) explore the folksong materials in their music.

While Agu (2011) discusses the impact of folk music on socializing and educating the child morally, physically and musically, Onyeji (2005) acknowledges the roles of folk music in uplifting a family (a micro grassroots society) morally, educationally, etc. Ofuani (2015; 2019) reveals that idioms and materials from folksongs have been explored in contemporary Nigerian music, be it art, gospel or pop. Okoro and Ofuani (2020) discuss the sociological importance and aesthetic efficacy of folk music using abigbo as a Nigerian example

Childbirth Events and the Influence of Modernism

Modernism, according to Idolor (2014:105), is simply “modern thought, character or practice; and a revolt against the conservative values”. In furtherance, he elucidates that it encompasses the activities and output of those who felt the *traditional* forms otherwise known as *Colo* or *Old School* which are outdated in the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging industrialized society. Indisputably, the arrival of Europeans to the African continent brought about noticeable changes in the lifestyle of Africans and their traditional music practices. This is evident in women’s disinterest in musical practices associated with childbirth in Mhiship land. In this era of global socialization and cultural modernization, women no longer participate and value such customs due to the influence of western civilization. Consequently, the rendition of birth songs is on a decline and gradually fading away. Again, the advent of modern medicine has led to the replacement of traditional birth attendants with trained midwives who use modern methods of delivery for a better outcome.

Conclusion

Music, dance and chants are noteworthy activities in the social event of childbirth in Mhiship. They are very expressive and serve as potent communication tools employed by women for expressing and conveying thoughts, statements and messages of personal and social importance before, during and after childbirth events. By then, newborn babies are welcomed into the family and community among other roles. This paper, therefore, concludes that the childbirth folksongs performance of the Mhiship has numerous impacts on society beyond just being a gathering of women to celebrate the birth of a newborn baby.

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Interviewees

- Alfred Helen Nadwaghat, an indigene of Jibaam village, 16th November 2021.
- Arzak Pandang Isaiah, a native of Jibaam village, 22nd December, 2022.
- Desmond Yilmohor Yonla. An indigene of Minting Pada village, 17th November, 2021.
- Kumshin Joel, a native of Jibaam village, 16th November 2021.
- Rebecca Benschak, a native of Longmaar minting village, 17th November 2021.
- Janet James Nthuhun, a native of Longmaar Minzham village, 22nd December 2022.
- Rebecca Arzak, a native of Jibaam village, on 22nd December, 2022.