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**The Functions and Spiritual Connotations of  
Traditional Music Performance with Particular  
Reference to *Ufie* Music in Igboland**

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**Abstract**

*The role of ufie music in the traditional society cannot be over emphasized. It is one of the oldest and most revered musical instruments performed in the traditional Igbo society. It symbolizes dignity, prestige, nobility and class distinction and is associated with the aristocrats and men of honour in the society. Its impact in the occasions like festivals, rituals, and significant communal events is quite overwhelming. The secrets in the performance lie on the techniques of the performer and language of communication. Ufie music, which is the cultural heritage of the Igbo people, faces the risk of extinction as a result of lack of interest by the younger generation who find*

*other types of music more interesting. The lack of interest stems from contact with other cultures of the world and consequent acculturation, and enculturation that has resulted. This work examines the spiritual connotations of ufié music, socio-cultural implications, performance norms and prescriptions. This descriptive survey employed musicological tools. It provides information on ways and means of preservation and maintenance of the instrument for the well-being of the society and posterity. This will be of great benefit to the Igbo world, music educators, scholars, historians and the media practitioners.*

### **Introduction**

*Ufié* music, the music played by *ufié* instrument (slit wooden drum), accompanied by *oyo* (rattles), is one of the oldest and most important music types played and performed in many parts of Igboland. *Ufié* as instrument is one of the indigenous musical instruments that are prominently in use among the entire people of Igboland. *Ufié* music symbolizes dignity, prestige, nobility, class and is associated with the aristocrats in the society. *Ufié* music is performed during important ceremonial occasions, festivals, rituals and other significant communal events. The importance of this musical genre lies in the fact, as adjudged, that it satisfies many socio-cultural expectations and exigencies. *Ufié* music is the identity of the *ozo* institution in Igboland. *Ozo* title according to Okafor (2005) is:

The most prized status every Igbo man is ambitious to acquire in life because it symbolizes fullness of manhood and authority in the traditional and cultural life of the people. It is neither politically affected nor craftily contrived; people have to work for it. (p. 103)

*Ufie* music ensemble comprises a pair of 2-slit wooden drums and a pair of rattle and both belong to the idiophone family. The two medium slits- wooden drums of about two feet long and ten inches in diameter are usually placed on pads, which are round - woven materials made from dried raffia. These pads not only help to keep the instrument in balance but provide good resonators for them. Each *ufie* has two resonating lips; about a tonal interval of a third apart. This represents a transposition of three primary speech tone levels in Igbo language, which gives about a third above and below a middle pivot tone.



***Ufie* Instruments**

The slit wooden drum is made from the bore of *ufie* (*osisi obala*) cam wood tree. The bark of the cam -wood log is removed and the inside is scrapped out to have a uniform wall of about half a

centimeter, all round each side of the wooden drum. Two drums that constitute the *Ufie* are classified under male and female. The male is known as *di-ufie* which looks slightly smaller in size than the female and is always at the right hand side of the player, while the female which is known as *nwunye ufie*, is always at the left hand side of the player. Each of the *Ufie* has two tongues-one male and one female. The male usually calls the music while the female responds. Interestingly, the female has a deeper tone than the male. The pair of shakers (*oyo*) constitutes the accompanying instrument in the ensemble. It serves to provide a steady rhythmic support for the master instrument.

The *Oyo* (basket rattles) is calabash based, with basketry upper part, covered with raffia fringes. It is cone-shaped and the handle is made of cane bound with raffia. The basket is filled with apple seeds or pebbles.

Each pair is played by a man who generates complicated rhythmic patterns that make the overall music sound complex. The instruments of *ufie* are made locally from the available materials within the environment just as Agu (2000) stated that, “the production of the variety of instruments by Nigerians was made possible by their ability to harness their environment as much as possible, making effective use of local materials around them with good result.” (p. 89)

### **The Functions of *Ufie***

The *Ufie* music portrays the culture of the Igbo tribe in general. It is popularly associated with the kings or the *Igwe*, the *Nze* and the *ozos* in most parts of Igboland. It is specifically attached to tradition. It is a type of music reserved for a stratified group in the society. It is purely an instrumental music. The functions of *ufie* music in the traditional settings are limited to *ozo* title-

taking, coronation of a king, the *ofala* festival, funeral of a title person, *Iguaro* or *Iwaji* festival. Nzewi (1991) classified this type of music as “Event-Music,” with the subheading *Egwu Ogalanya* (Title music). According to him:

*Ogalanya* is an Igbo generic term of reference for worthy, usually a wealthy/aristocratic person. Participation in *Egwu Ogalanya* types of music is exclusive to members of specific title associations in a community. Such selective participation is therefore, on the basis of achieved or ascribed social stratification. Title usually achieved, have strong political recommendations in the traditional Igbo society, the higher the title the more crucial its reckoning in political matters. Hence the music that belongs to powerful political associations or institutions tops the traditional rating of music types (p. 27)

*Ufie* music gives the elders or the title holders’ joy and it reduces stress because they take joy in dancing to the music. Collins (2001) explained that since most illnesses are caused by one form of stress or the other, it follows, therefore, that the removal of or lack of stress contributes to the achievement of the general well-being of the individuals in the society, which in turn effects directly to a more stable society, higher levels of productivity and longevity.

The utilitarian purposes of *ufie* music includes communication, educational/social control, history and tradition, economic implication, aesthetics, rejuvenation, identity and solidarity, entertainment, dissemination of information, moral support and encouragement, bestowing honor, prestige and dignity on worthy individuals amongst other cultural implications mentioned in the text.

### **Economic Implications**

*Ufie* music through its performance empowers *ufie* musicians financially, enabling them to meet up with personal as well as social, cultural and other requirements in the society, thereby raising their standard of living and that of their families.

### **Education/Social Control**

*Ufie* music also enhances education in the cultural norms and practices. Through it, codes of conduct are acquired. It also praises good conduct. Bad conduct is discouraged through *ufie* music, since it not only warns but also admonishes people.

### **History and Tradition**

*Ufie* musical performance helps to maintain and safeguard the continuity of the tradition and historical facts and legends through the re-enactment of historical facts. The implication of this leads to having more confidence in the people, solidarity of common ancestry and strong social bonds.

### **Communication**

*Ufie* is a medium of communication. It is a talking instrument in Igbo culture and is regarded as a spokesman to the Igwe and the *Ozo* initiates who can interpret the language of the music. Its music reduces stress and enhances stable life. *Ufie* music depicts the strong relationship between the people and the supernatural and communion between them as seen in a lot of rituals involving the super natural beings. At the funeral ceremonies of *ozo* titled men, *ufie* music acts as a means of communication between the living and the dead. In Awka South Local Government Area, the *Igwe*, *Ndi Ichie* and *Ozo* men are eulogized through *ufie* music. This calibre of people understand and interpret the language of the *ufie*.

## **Aesthetics**

The beauty of the *ufie* music when performed has its influence on individuals, society and the ceremony in which it is performed. It uplifts the spirit and sets the correct mood for the ceremonies etc.

## **Rejuvenation**



### **Livinus Mgbike (Ozo-nwelibe of Nise) dancing to *Ufie* Music**

*Ufie* music sounds make the initiated elders more lively or youthful. It elicits tremendous power on the people. Looking at Ozo Livinus Mgbike's picture (Ozo Nwelibe of Nise) above, one could ordinarily doubt the man's ability to still walk without a walking stick not to talk of dancing so lively more than a youth can do. *Ufie* music breathes new life into people. Basden (1921) said this of Igbo music, *ufie* music inclusives:

The more one-listens to native (Ibo) music, the more one is conscious of its vital power. It touches the chords of man's inmost being, and stirs his primal instincts. It demands the performer's whole attention and so sways the individual as almost to divide asunder, for the time being, mind and body. It is intensively passionate, and no great effort of the imagination is required to realize that such music could only have originated with the son of Cain. (p. 92)

### **Identity and Solidarity**

Agu (2006) pointed out that "music is one of the strongest tools for cultural uniqueness and self identity in the life of any society." (p.18) This affirmation consequently situates music as a cohesive force for the unification of the different members of the various cultures co-existing in different urban centres. Onwuka (2010) asserted that:

*Ufie* music is a collective kind of performance style in which people of different inclinations congregate in order to uphold common aspirations, beliefs and socio-cultural value systems during music events. Bound as one indivisible unit, the performing artistes and the committed spectators participate actively in the animated art of a traditional musical outing which calls for an integrated effort featuring accomplished instrumental playing, skilled dancing and a corresponding level of music appreciation. (p. 183)

### **Peculiarity**

*Ufie* music is a peculiar music that solemnly reminds members of the society of its rich culture and it is one of the oldest music in Igboland, which is still in current use. The sound of the music is uniquely Igbo, and can be identified as such.

Apart from musical functions, *ufie* instruments also perform extra musical functions. *Ufie* could be used for emblematic representations. It can be used for decorations in an *ozo* titled man's palace. It is also used to give signals and for directing the *ozo* men during performances or for summoning a people to the village square.

*Ufie* musical instruments have cultural attachment. It is strictly reserved for the *ozo* institution. It is a medium of communication because it is a talking instrument in Igbo culture and beyond. It is regarded as a spokesman to the *ozo* initiates, the *Igwe* and titled men generally who can interpret the language of the music. It is also a royal instrument.



**Romanus Iloh- Igwe Ugochimalenze (Ise of Nise) dancing of Ufie music**

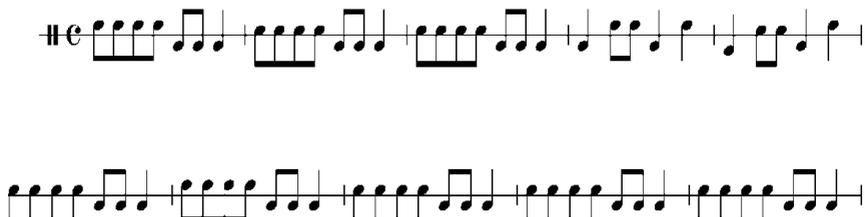


Those who understand the language of the *ufie* drum gave this interpretation to the above transcription.

Igbo Text	English Translation
<i>Ogaranya</i>	May the rich men come together.
<i>gbakotabanu</i>	May the rich men come together
<i>Ogaranya gbakotabanu</i>	The hour has come for the initiation
<i>N' oge ezugo</i>	May the rich men come together
<i>Ogaranya gbakotabu</i>	

There is an Igbo proverb that says *Ugboro abuo ka ekwe na-akpo dike, okpoo ya na-ndu, okpoo ya na onwu* which means that “the drum calls on a great man two times; in life and in death.” *Ufie* is performed in life and in death. During the *ozo* initiation, *ufie* plays and during the burial of an *ozo* titled man, *ufie* also plays. During the burial of an *ozo* titled man, all the tunes played during his initiation shall also be played with the addition of this special tune.

### ***Odogwu Anaa***



An *ozo* titled man is committed to mother earth with this tune. An *ufie* player calls on the name of the *ozo* deceased man, bewailing

that the worst has happened because a great man has gone. This tune has simple rhythm and has not much complicated rhythm.

### **Spiritual Connotations and Socio-Cultural Implications of *Ufie* Music**

Onwuka (2010) on the socio-cultural implications of *ufie* instruments stated that:

Socio-culturally, *ufie* instruments are said to be surrogates of a titled man and his wife who are usually engaged in romantic dialogue, during musical interplay. They are, therefore, held in high esteem, handled with utmost care and treated with such great honour as is given to any titled man or woman. Against this background, it is a taboo for any female or the uninitiated to touch, carry, beat or even push down the *ufie* drums. Where one infringes on this exceptional tradition, he or she is said to have violated the *ufie* and shall be required to perform the purification ritual (*isepu ya aka n'ufie*,) which entails presenting them with a live white cock. (p. 181)

The *ufie* ensemble is considered so sacrosanct that women are not allowed to play the instrument. In modern times, this may not resonate well with the advocates of equal rights for men and women. It gives the overt impression that Igboland is a man's world. But does this show a denigration of the women folk? Nothing suggests that there is any form of conspiracy, culturally conceived against women in this regard but even the idea of *di-ufie* and *nwunye ufie* as well as the division of the *ufie* proper into male and female tongues shows that there is a certain and unmistakable duality in the conception of Igbo world view. This division pertains more to role and not to superiority and dignity.

Another implication of this study relates to the dearth of performance of *ufie* ensemble. More and more, Igboland is being overrun by Christian doctrines and practices. Some of these frowned at Igbo traditional customs like *Ichi ozo*. Even the Christianization of the *ozo* (*ozo uka*) has not allowed the institution to retain its pristine dignity and popularity among the people. The consequence is that more people are beginning to see the *ozo* title taking as unimportant. The opinions of the *ozo* title holders, their enviable social status and privileges have all been subverted by a new way of life that does not depend on any of those past values. Therefore, very few people are interested in the ceremonies that showcase *ufie* music. Christians bury their members without the *ufie*. Other social, philanthropic and national awards are more respected today more than the *ozo* title and so a reversal of value order is witnessed in a way that affects *ufie* music, the makers and performers. This is because *ufie* music is indeed event music.

In considering the axiological implication, axiology being the philosophical study of values, there is a link between the *ufie ozo* music and the values which the *ozo* status enforces. The decline of interest in *ozo* title taking invariably affects the *ufie* music and indirectly the traditional values that the *ozo* stands for. Such values like hardwork, honesty, truth, justice, dignity, respect, responsibility, common good are all implicated as positive aspects of the *ozo* status.

If more towns, communities, even institutions revive the interest of Igbo people in this music which speaks volumes about identity, even the socio-economic well-being of the makers of the instruments and performers will be positively affected.

It is a mark of great honour to host this musical genre as it is not considered an ordinary music that the ordinary people can

partake in. It is categorized by Nzewi (1991) as *Egwu ogaranya* (i.e. music for the affluent).

*Ufie* music gives the elders or the title holders' joy and it reduces stress because they take joy in dancing to the music. Collins (2001) explained that since most illnesses are caused by one form of stress or the other, it follows, therefore, that the removal of or lack of stress contributes to the achievement of the general well-being of the individuals in the society, which in turn effects directly to a more stable society, higher levels of productivity and longevity.

The utilitarian purposes of *ufie* music includes communication, educational/social control, history and tradition, economic implication, aesthetics, rejuvenation, identity and solidarity, entertainment, dissemination of information, moral support and encouragement, bestowing honor, prestige and dignity on worthy individuals amongst other cultural implications mentioned in the text.

### **The Sacredness of the *Ufie* Instruments in Igbo Culture**

*Ufie* instruments are generally regarded as sacred in the sense that before the construction, certain rites must be performed. Nwogbo (2009) calls it *Idoana Abazuka*. Before the construction, a white hen, a keg of palm wine, four kolanuts, and eight yam tubers are presented for *Abazuka* (ritual) to appease the deities and the ancestors and to request for a successful construction.

According to Agu (2009), before the *Ufie* starts sounding, after construction, certain rites must also be performed. The owner must bring four tubers of yam, one cock and one bottle of hot drink before taking the *ufie*. This must be completed prior to the sounding of *ufie*.

He explained further that after the invitation message for a performance, 8 tubers of yam, 2 cocks, and 1 bottle of Saint Remy are presented to the *Ufie* musicians. The mentioned items are used for (*Salaka*) that is, to appease the deities and ancestors and to request for a successful performance. After the performance, a chick (*uriom*) is used for the purification against any evil act during the performance.

During the interment observances of an *Ozo*, *ufie* music performs continuously from the beginning to the end of the ceremony. It is the only cultural music that does so. Two wooden sticks are used to beat the *ufie* instrument at the burial of an *ozo* instead of the usual sticks from the midrib of palm frond to signify mourning, and finally the usual sticks from the mid-rib of palm frond are used to beat the *ufie* instrument in order to purify the household of the deceased, of any evil act incurred during the funeral ceremony

### **Summary/Conclusion**

*Ufie* music is the cultural heritage of Igbo people and it symbolizes dignity, prestige, nobility, class and is associated with the esoteric in the society. Performed during important ceremonial occasions, it satisfies many socio-cultural expectations and exigencies. *Ufie* music is the type where dancers freely express themselves with various signs of aesthetic communication in a free medley dance pattern.

As music organized in the context of the cultural norms of the Igbo society, it has three movements- free rhythmic movement known as *ufie* Nwa-muo, rhythm of dance movement called *ufie* zuzugbe and *ufie* ozo. The instrument as surrogates of titled man and his wife who are engaged in romantic dialogue, during musical interplay are held in high esteem, handled with utmost

care and treated with such great honour as is given to any titled man or woman. Considering *ufie* so sacrosanct, the players believe that the spirits of their forefathers are indwelling in it. To them, it is not a piece of wood but the representation of their ancestors therefore women are not allowed to play, carry or push down the *ufie* drums and when done, she has to perform the purification ritual.

*Ufie* instruments are generally regarded as sacred musical instruments and that is why, before the construction, certain rites must be performed. Certain items are presented for the ritual to appease the deities and the ancestors and to request for a successful construction and performance.

*Ufie* music is one of the artistic forms through which culture is expressed. The general wellbeing of individuals and society is not only related to economic and social factors, but also to history, values, self understanding, attitudes and the process of interaction which is evident in *Ufie* music. Consequently, the foundation of human development must be based on the culture for it is these socio-cultural concepts and ideas that propel development or underdevelopment, hence the importance of traditional music, *Ufie* music inclusive.

*Ufie* music is very important to ethnomusicology, it will in no small measure portray the indigenous music potentials (education, communication, history and tradition, economy, aesthetics, rejuvenation, identity and solidarity etc), in Nigeria in particular.

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