

## **The role of women in the musical traditions of Oshimili communities**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the vital cultural and musical roles women play within Oshimili communities, despite the longstanding myriad of limitations imposed on them by socio-cultural norms. Historically, women in many African communities have navigated a complex landscape of restrictions that confine their participation in communal life. These restrictions extend into musical traditions where certain performances are exclusively reserved for men, hence it taboo for women to participate or even observe musical performances. Nevertheless, within these limitations, women uphold crucial responsibilities within community, transmitting effective social functions. Drawing on ethnographic observations, this paper investigated how Oshimili women serve as cultural custodians and agents of heritage preservation, highlighting their roles as performers and educators in various communal settings, thereby showcasing how they contribute meaningfully to cultural continuity and social development. The study found out that women and girls contribute significantly to the sustainable socio-cultural development of their society as musicians, teachers and performers. The study also notes areas for further studies, and highlights women as composers and performers in their musical culture. The study concludes that women are promoters of their cultural heritage through musical presentations and performances in the community. It recommends that women's contributions acknowledged and accorded much deeper scholarly attention, particularly as it relates to music and sustainable cultural development.

**Key words:** community heritage, gender issues, Oshimili culture, traditional music

## **Introduction**

Traditional music and culture are inseparable. This is because traditional music projects the cultural heritage of man, and helps to communicate accurately, the inhibited values and beliefs of man. Individuals, therefore, rely on music to communicate their desires, needs, feelings, thoughts and potentials to the outside world. Music is, therefore, seen as a mirror of man's 'thoughts to man'. Music forms part of the cultural heritage of man. Every society relies on their musical traditions in order to showcase their cultural practices and further project their cultural activities. Culture is therefore the way a group of persons act in order to show that they agree to that action which is a communion of persons that have come together willingly and out of a common belief to share and showcase their cultural package. Traditional music being a part of culture has helped communities to organize their cultural activities accordingly so as to suit their desired goals and document their cultural heritage for generations. Traditional music also plays vital roles in the cultural activities of communities. It functions at every stage of their cultural practices; entertaining, educating, communicating, disseminating messages to and from for a proper communication network.

## **Justification of the study**

In Oshimili communities of Delta State, traditional music has been a significant aspect of cultural expression that plays symbolic functions in communal life. The intimate bond between music and culture is vividly echoed in the day-to-day and ceremonial lives of the people, where music entertains, educates, communicates, and preserves social values and ancestral heritage. Traditional music, in this context, serves as a living archive of the people's worldview, by acting as a vehicle through which acutely held beliefs, customs, and communal philosophies are transmitted through generations. The justification for this study, therefore, lies in the crucial role traditional music plays in nourishing the cultural identity and social cohesion of the Oshimili people. Music is used to articulate historical narratives, and reinforce moral codes. Whether used during rites of passage, festivals, religious ceremonies, or agricultural events, traditional music strengthens the structure, mood, and meaning of each occasion. However, with the increasing influence of globalisation, urbanisation, and the proliferation of foreign cultural values, the continuity and authenticity of Oshimili traditional musical practices face substantial threats. Younger generations are gradually becoming disconnected from indigenous musical practices, which risk the erosion of the very cultural identity these musical traditions uphold. Hence, this study becomes imperative as an academic and cultural intervention aimed at documenting, analysing, and revitalising the traditional music of the Oshimili people.

By critically examining the functions and forms of traditional music within the Oshimili cultural framework, this research will provide valuable insights into how music contributes to community organisation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the expression of communal values. Furthermore, the study will contribute to broader discourses on indigenous knowledge systems and cultural

preservation in Nigeria. It will also support efforts to integrate traditional music into formal and informal education, community development, and heritage conservation policies.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study are to:

1. examine the traditional and musical roles women play in Oshimili communities regardless of prevailing socio-cultural restrictions;
2. investigate how Oshimili women function as cultural custodians and agents of heritage preservation through music;
3. analyse the contributions of women as performers and educators in communal musical practices; and
4. identify and document the ways in which women's musical roles reflect broader patterns of gendered participation in Oshimili cultural life.

### **Theoretical framework and review of related literature**

The study is hinged on Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist theory, which views cultural practices as playing specific roles that uphold the stability and cohesion of a given society. Functionalism emphasises that every component of a culture serves a specific purpose, thereby helping to meet the needs of individuals and the community.

Ibekwe (2009:139) defines gender as “a state of being male or female”. She stresses that “gender has a strong force on the type of musical performances of any ethnic group or society”. Traditional musical activities among societies are seen to have been dominated by the men while the female members are expected to play roles ascribed to them by the men. Women are therefore debarred from certain musical endeavours (Igbi, 2018). The men are the lawmakers hence the culture of the communities is decided by them and presented to the other members to follow and abide by. Musical traditions of the communities are therefore a package of the male members of the communities which are handed to other members to carry out their designated roles. Women therefore have their gender roles which they perform as expected in order to complete the ascribed roles given to them. These roles are apparent in the different cultural activities that occur in that society which is their cultural practice. Apart from these important roles, women in African communities have other duties as music educators to their children right from birth. This occurs when as mothers, they rock their babies to sleep or to stop them from crying while they sing lullabies to them. Women are seen here as the first music teachers that children have in their communities.

Besides the given roles women play as demanded by tradition, they provide music for almost every activity that occur in their communities from birth to death. When a woman gives birth, it is announced by their fellow women in the community with shouts of joy and songs of happiness which may be accompanied by dances at certain points. Some of the songs may have been in existence or are composed spontaneously and may be useful for other ceremonies. Women are

composers of songs which are used for cultural activities in their communities. As composers and singers, women have provided music to aid certain cultural activities which are part of the communities' heritage. In traditional marriages for example, the women play special roles during the bridal payment. The occasion becomes colorful when it is time to bring out the bride for the bridegroom to identify. The bride is brought out by the women and this is done by the women with songs while they make their demands at every point until the groom meets their requests and the bride is finally brought out for identification and for proper handover. At every point in the ceremony, the women have their special songs which are used. These songs though may have already been in existence or may have been composed spontaneously for that particular ceremony.

### **Musical traditions of communities in Oshimili South Local Government Area (L.G.A)**

Communities in Oshimili South Local Government Area of Delta State include Asaba, Okwe and Oko. These communities share common boundaries with each other and with other towns and villages that speak same dialects and share similar cultural ideas as well. Traditional and cultural practices are very common among societies in Nigeria and Oshimili South communities are not left out in these practices which they refer to as their *omenani*. Every traditional practice is often heralded by indigenous music and dances which act as a medium for entertainment, celebration, religious worship and communication within and outside the communities. Their songs and dance performances are often referred to as *abu* or *egwuodinani*. Music among these communities is apparent, not only for entertainment but to portray the cultural practices as well as the aesthetic features of the communities' musical traditions which include indigenous songs, dances, festivals and traditional musical instruments. Music therefore plays very important roles in different celebrations. It functions in the activities that occur among individuals and groups in the community, thereby bringing every cultural interest and organisation to limelight. Music is used as a forum for love, maintenance of law and order, political rallies, festival celebrations and worship hence their indigenous songs form part of their history, depicting every aspect of the communities' cultural heritage which is documented in their musical traditions. Music also entertains them and encourages their social and cultural obligations as members of the community. Almost every activity that this group of people engages in is heralded with their indigenous music since it is their major source of communication. Traditional activities range from birth to death and include the following: marriages, birth, initiation, burial ceremonies and festivals. In these afore-mentioned activities, women, men and both sexes play their roles dependently and interdependently and these actions or performances are determined by their culture.

Oshimili communities engage in various musical activities to showcase their culture, occupation and their love for music. After the day's activities, they usually gather to entertain themselves with their indigenous music and this is purely for entertainment and may however not require gender roles. There are

certain occasions that the boys/males come together for such activities while the girls/women perform theirs just for entertainment purpose. In some other musical performances, initiate male members are the only performers. Gender roles are shared by the men in the community since they are the lawmakers as tradition demands although every musical role performed by both the male and female are important since music plays different functions during these activities.

Musical activities are organised in such a way that they meet the cultural demands of the communities and those who are expected to play important roles are usually there to share in the musical traditions as well as cultural heritage of their community. It is therefore not surprising to see the younger generation during traditional activities, maintaining their gender roles as their culture demands before they attain the age of maturity. An example of these is when the young boys in the community are engaged in their masquerade dances, they never allow the girls to join nor will they reveal the name of the masquerade. This show of maturity at a young age goes a long way in showing how gender roles are upheld in Oshimili as well as other communities that share same or related culture practices. In Oshimili community, gender roles are not meant to demean nor display weakness and strength but to identify the important roles of individuals in the community and to make the structural dispositions to their cultural and musical performances effective and meaningful. The restrictions placed on women to certain musical activities which are tied to their cultural beliefs are not to show that they are weak or unrecognised, they are actually meant to show that the men have their functional roles while the women have theirs.

### **Gender roles in the musical traditions of Oshimili communities**

Among the communities in Oshimili, musical activities are organised to suit its portrayed cultural activity and the performers are gender selected to play their expected roles; although all musical performances are organised based on gender selection as the culture demands. With the former, the requirement to the musical activity which is needed to portray the cultural heritage of the community is met as the culture demands. Every member of the community (male and female) knows what is expected of them and these are carried out as appropriate. In the communities, gender roles to some extent, are culture-based and distributed accordingly to suit the cultural norms and beliefs systems. Everyone, therefore, understands their roles and act accordingly.

Musical activities and practices that require gender roles form part of the cultural requirements in their repertoires for performances. Gender defines the states of being a man or woman and this state has further defined the duties, character and behavior that are expected from these genders by the society in which they live, as well as its norms value systems. The cultural state of the community where one emerges, to an extent guides his/her behavioral attitude. Cultural values and its practices are upheld to organise the activities of one community, maintain its integrity and keep its existence stable and unique so that it remains in existence.

As earlier said, among the Oshimili communities, gender roles are culturally shared and distributed accordingly to suit their cultural norms, values and beliefs. Despite the influences and intrusions of other cultures as well as westernisation, some gender roles are still maintained and upheld since they are linked to ritual practices and performances hence, they cannot be removed. Gender roles among Oshimili comprise roles played by women only, men only, and both men and women. There are also roles played by initiate members who are all males, roles played by age grades, and roles played by women who are daughters only and those that are wives only. Each of the aforementioned groups performs their roles and these are important. One of the things that make the cultural and musical activities of Oshimili communities to be effective and colorful is the way members of the community identify their roles and adhere to them without resentment and bias. They accept their given roles for an effective cultural disposition. The women indulge in their household chores and carry out their work as they sing songs to aid their actions. Music, therefore, performs functional roles in activities ranging from birth to death. The female members in *Oshimili* communities play roles as entertainers, educators and performers in the various activities and help to sustain their cultural dispositions and also maintain the norms and values. Women are therefore seen as singers, musicians, dancers, instrumentalists, and historians among others.

### **The place of Oshimili women in musical traditions**

Women in Oshimili communities play important roles in musical activities. They are not only entertainers, educators and musicians but also promoters of their cultural heritage. From home, women are seen as the informal music teacher who introduces the child to the indigenous music of their culture. Hence, the first music teacher to the child is the mother, who introduces the child to the indigenous music of his/her community as she sings lullabies and other songs to entertain the child. This action not only meets the needs but introduces the child to proper understanding of his/her environment and language. The women in Oshimili community provide the education of their children at home while they indulge in domestic chores. The children, therefore, are their audience while they perform at home. This action may seem ordinary but it helps children to understand the cultural norms of their community, and further prepares them to partake in the musical traditions that occur in and around such community.

This first lesson from the mother is very important since it helps to appreciate the important roles women play in their community in regards to the musical traditions and cultural dispositions of their community. As a teacher of informal music education, women through music and songs, educate them on how to indulge in their domestic work and ease boredom. They teach them songs which are actually meant for recreation and entertainment. Being the constant companion that children have, the home provides the cultural norms and values to the children informally. Accompanying chores with songs has been a long practice among indigenous communities in Nigerian societies hence music encourages communal efforts and prepares the child to contribute to the development of



his/her community and even the larger society. The Oshimili woman is a storyteller who accompanies her stories with songs that teach them language, proverbs, idiomatic expressions and aphoristic sayings. Apart from contributory efforts to encourage indigenous musical studies, the women are also among those that preserve their cultural heritage in their communities through their songs which although may face many changes in lyrics, its melodic contour still remains.

### **Burial ceremonies**

Women in Oshimili communities have their special roles to play during a burial ceremony. They usually play roles as chief mourners, *Umu-Ada*, since they sit by the corpse of the deceased during wake-keep. Their songs are usually dirges accompanied with hand clapping. This role is part of the cultural activity which must occur during burial ceremonies and as tradition demands, it should be played by the women in the community. The dirges are often composed during the ceremony by gifted members who are very good singers and composers. Their repertoire centers on death and its effect on the relatives of the deceased and the entire community. The group of women who are involved in this aspect are called the *Ikpoho-Ogbe* and *Umu-Ada*. The *Umu-Ada* are the daughters of the quarter where the deceased is from, while the *Ikpoho-Ogbe* are the wives from the quarter. The roles played here may look normal to an outsider but it is symbolic to members of the community because it is part of their culture and must be carried out, another role played is among the Asaba community and this involves, women and girls.

After the burial ceremony, they are expected to go to the small market on *Eke* day to pay debts which they believe the deceased may have owed before his/her death. This is an important part that requires music which is more of dirges and is sung without any instrumental accompaniment, it is called, *iya-ego*. Arriving at the *Ogbe-oke* market square in a procession, they form a circle singing different songs while they clap rhythmically before throwing monies of different denominations to the crowd that have gathered round expectantly to pick the monies. A young girl carries a clay pot on her head which contains monies of different denominations as well as cowries. She finally breaks the pot for the crowd to pick the items while the performers sing songs of thanksgiving which accompanies them back home. The traditional burial ceremony comes to an end if the burial is organised for a female member or a young man.

There are roles performed by women, which are actually not culturally demanded but are expectations and are normal roles expected of them in a society. These roles are however seen as feminine roles which are meant for the women folks. Other aspects are parts of the cultural practices and are culturally demanded. Generally, women love singing and dancing. They engage in this while doing their domestic chores in order to ease boredom and make their work easy and simple. It is not surprising that they are seen and considered as the first music teachers the child have before venturing outside his home.

The home is the first school of the child and the first teacher is usually the mother who trains the child to prepare him or her for the outside world. Ekpo (2008:26) notes that the “home is the child’s first station on earth or the child’s first world; hence, its influence is very strong in the training of the child”. Tradition sees the women as the home keeper hence her role in the upbringing of the child is very important since the child learns his or her first skills from the home and from the first teacher -the mother. The musical skill among other skills the child acquires from the mother helps him or her to learn his language, to be creative musically and to understand his environment and his culture. This, the child first learns from his mother, then the care-takers (who are usually the bigger children in the home). Ekpo (2008:27) stresses that “every Nigerian child between the ages of one and six years is curious and watches his mother’s gestures and expressions. He learns his language from his mother and knows what it means when she smiles, frowns, screams, weeps or even sings”. These and other things sum up the fact that the mother (women) are basically the first teachers the child has and need to prepare him for his or her musical future. Ekpo concludes that “the child’s first lesson in music are given by his mother immediately after birth, the child is placed on the mother’s back while she goes about her daily tasks”.

The daily tasks of women in Oshimili is usually accompanied with singing which helps the child to learn and understand his language, sweeping and pounding which helps the child to get used to rhythmic sounds and later apply them to his musical experience. The mother prepares the child for the future, making the child understand the need to uphold the cultural values of his community. The child can also understand the gender roles played in the musical activities that occur in his/her community. In Meki Nzewi’s *Okeke*, (2006:48), he infers that “most traditional activities, gatherings and associations are organized according to gender and age grouping as are pressure and socio-political action groups”. This is actually to showcase the gender distributions which occur due to the demands of their culture. Women in *Oshimili* community supply music for special occasions such as during title taking. Their roles are actually to sing praises to the person taking the title and this is called *Itu-afa*. The genealogy of the man is presented in a song just like the *Oriki* of the Yorubas. This symbolic musical performance is part of the cultural practice that requires the role of women in the quarter. At the end of the performance, the titled man takes a name which he will be recognised with as his titled name. *Itu-afa* also occurs in other ceremonies such as burial, naming and other indigenous activities.

Ritual performances in *Oshimili* is virtually the affairs of the men and the male youths in the community but there are situations the women are needed to play certain roles the culture demands. In the burial of a matured male member of the community, the *Egwugwu* (spirit manifest) at a point comes to mourn the deceased and at the early stage of the ceremony before the spirit manifest goes around the community to mourn, it performs its first mourning from the previous night. This ritual performance allows the first daughter (*Ada*) to sing or chant praises to her deceased father who is believed to be the spirit manifest calling out



her name and that of the other family members. The *Ada* and those who have come to sit with her during the ceremony are allowed during this performance to sit close to where the spirit manifest is and can even see it. Outside these, it is a taboo for women to watch the ceremonies of the spirit manifest. In this context, women are actually passive members who are expected to sit quietly and not say anything unless spoken to by the initiate members who are there to give directions.

In the social musical practices, women engage in various musical groups ranging from festival celebrations to ceremonies such as traditional marriages, naming, title taking and in all these, women are the musicians and organizers of the musical practices that occur in most of the social practices hence their roles towards the development of the musical activities is numerous and important, any traditional musical performance without the presence of women is said to be uninteresting. The focus on burial ceremony here is because they perform special roles alongside the men and at different stages of the burial ceremony, which are more of ritual in nature. Other performing roles include social activities that actually expect the women to play such roles.

### **Songs performed by women**

#### **Song 1**

*Okwungwalinwunye dim* - secret I shared with my co-wife

*Kaobulugwa dim* - she told our husband

*Dim ewilien'etim-o* - my husband beat me because of it

*Aliliegbue wee-o* - misery will be their portion

Song 1 gives a clear picture of rivalry in polygamous homes despite that it was an acceptable traditional practice in the past. It also portrays how women use music and songs to communicate to a rival and also to her audience in both situations that maybe good or bad. It highlights the spontaneity Africans use in composing music out of any situation hence improvisations are common occurrences in music performances among communities in Oshimili, especially among the women. The song is sung by women during social gatherings and activities and it's sung in a call-and-response form. Its melody is simple and the song tends to show improvisations whenever it is sung on various occasions. This maybe due to the fact that it is not recorded nor documented in any way.

#### **Song 2**

Call: *Onyen'etinwataa* - who is beating this child?

Response: *Olinni* - he/she will not eat

Response: *O-lachaofo* - he/she will not lick soup

Call: *Onyen'etinwataa* - who is beating this child?

Response: *Olinni* - he/she will not eat

*O-lachaofo* - he/she will not lick soup

Song 2 is a lullaby meant to stop a baby from crying and to sleep. It shows the bond mothers share with their babies using music and songs to pet them and assure them of their love and protection. The intention here is not only to calm the child but to put the child in cheerful mood and teach the child the musical disposition of their community towards training the child. The song is presented hyperbolically but is actually capture the attention of the child and soothe its mood. It is sung in call-and-response form.

### **Discussion of findings**

#### **Finding 1: The cultural and musical roles played by women in Oshimili communities despite prevailing socio-cultural restrictions**

One of the findings from the study reveal that, even though socio-cultural rules in Oshimili communities historically restrict women from actively partaking in certain ritual and ceremonial musical contexts, women have carved out unique roles where they vigorously participate as performers and organisers. Their participation is very conspicuous during festivals, initiation ceremonies, women's gatherings, and age-grade events, where they exert cultural influence through music.

#### **Finding 2: How Oshimili women function as custodians of culture and agents of heritage preservation through music**

It was discovered that Oshimili women play a substantial role in conveying indigenous knowledge and communal values through song performances. They are helpful in preserving folk songs and ritual chants passed down through generations, and in that way, guaranteeing cultural continuity despite the threat of modernisation and cultural erosion.

#### **Finding 3: The contributions of women as performers and educators within communal musical practices**

Fieldwork also revealed that the women not only perform music but also engage in its composition and teaching. Women in Oshimili communities compose songs that address social issues, moral values, and communal issues. They serve as educators by mentoring younger girls, and teaching the girls traditional songs, rhythms, and dance patterns, often through informal and indigenous knowledge learning systems.

#### **Finding4: The relationship between women's musical involvement and socio-cultural development**

The study showed that women's musical engagement in Oshimili contributes to the reinforcement of communal identity. Their songs promote moral behaviour, peace-building, and collective responsibility, thereby supporting the social and cultural frameworks needed for sustainable development in the community.

Findings also indicate that while men dominate certain high-profile ritual performances, women's musical roles reflect a gendered division of cultural labour that nevertheless grants them authority and respect within specific domains. Women's musical participation is determined by age-grades, marital status, and social rank.

### **Conclusion**

This work investigates the three communities in Oshimili South local government area of Delta state with a view to bringing out the gender roles played by the women in the society. The roles include the expected feminine roles and the special ones demanded by tradition. Every society expects their women to take care of the domestic chores in the home, while the men go to work to provide for the entire family. Music has been an avenue to almost every action put up by man. It has helped man understand his environment, enjoy his/her environment and even make the environment conducive for proper living.

Every member of the community has contributed to the development of the musical traditions which is also part of the cultural activities of the community. Women in Oshimili South communities have in the past played important roles in the musical traditions of their communities by showcasing their culture to others. Their musical repertoires center on their cultural heritage and appear in their various activities. They play roles both in the home and within the community. They educate the younger ones through their musical performances by educating them, entertaining and passing on other information that will be helpful and beneficial to them, thereby helping to sustain their cultural dispositions and maintain the norms and values of their land. Women are acknowledged as musicians, instrumentalists, dancers, historians, who also help to maintain the structural and aesthetic features and qualities that are contained in their indigenous music.

In Oshimili community, the women do not see the roles meant for them as mundane. They are respected and appreciated in their various roles. They are given the opportunity to show their musical talents and prowess as musicians and as upholders of their cultural heritage. Where restrictions are placed, the women dutifully accept and obey, giving room to the men to play their roles. Women, however, consider their roles as very important. They prepare the younger women and girls by accepting them into their *Umu-ada* fold and further co-opt them in order to recruit them as future leaders who will later take over as singers, dancers, etc.

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