

Musical role-play: a study of instruments' functions in the indigenous *ikon* (xylophone) ensemble, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria

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Abstract

Traditional instrumental ensembles remain vital tools for preserving African cultural heritage. However, for the *ikon* (xylophone) ensemble in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, there has been a dearth of systematic analytical works. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining how musical instruments in the ensemble function as a coordinated system of 'musical role-play' that reflects the social organisation and collective identity of the Akwa Ibom people. The objective was to analyse and document the distinct melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and communicative roles of each xylophone and the accompanying percussion instruments within the ensemble. An ethnomusicological approach was adopted, which combined oral interviews with veteran performers and instrument makers, archival research, and participant observation of community performances. Findings reveal a hierarchical structure: the lead *ikon* provides melodic leadership and performance cues; the second lead, tenor, and bass *ikon* establish harmonic depth and rhythmic grounding; while the percussion section functions as a communicative network that sustains tempo, signals transitions, and synchronises dancers. These roles collectively enact a dynamic "musical conversation" that encodes social values of collaboration, hierarchy, and cultural continuity. By documenting these functions, the study contributes to the preservation of intangible heritage and enhances ethnomusicological understanding of African ensemble practices.

Keywords: cultural heritage, ethnomusicology, *ikon*, musical role-play, xylophone ensemble

Introduction

In African music traditions, ensemble performance is not simply an act of sound production; it represents a carefully coordinated social event in which every participant, both human and instrumental, plays a defined role. Music functions as a vehicle for communication, cultural continuity, and collective identity, embodying the social values of the communities that create it. Among the Akwa Ibom people of south-south Nigeria, the indigenous xylophone, known locally as *ikon*, holds a central place in communal expression. It is used in storytelling, ritual performance, social ceremonies, and entertainment, often serving as a ‘voice’ that speaks on behalf of the community.

The *ikon* ensemble is more than a gathering of instruments; it is a living representation of social organisation, in which distinct instrumental parts combine to produce a unified musical statement. Each instrument fulfills a particular musical and symbolic function, contributing to an intricate interplay of rhythm, melody, and communication. Understanding these member functions provides insights not only into Akwa Ibom’s musical traditions but also into the broader cultural systems they sustain.

Some ethnomusicological scholarship emphasises the importance of documenting instrumental role-play as a means of preserving intangible cultural heritage (Nketia, 1986; Agawu, 2016). Yet, systematic analyses of the *Ikon* ensemble’s member functions remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining the roles of individual instruments within the ensemble, with a view to elucidating their contributions to the musical texture, performance dynamics, and cultural meaning of *ikon* music.

By focusing on “musical role-play,” the study highlights the interaction between instruments as an organised system of sonic roles, where leadership, accompaniment, and rhythmic anchoring are enacted in real time. In doing so, the paper situates the *ikon* ensemble within the wider discourse of African ensemble practices, where music operates as both art and social communication.

Objectives of the study

The general objective of this study is to investigate the musical role-play within the Akwa Ibom indigenous *ikon* (xylophone) ensemble by identifying and analysing the distinct functions of each instrument. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- i. document the member functions of all individual xylophones in the *ikon* ensemble, and the accompanying percussion instruments, with greater emphasis on their structural, melodic, rhythmic, and communicative roles;
- ii. examine the interaction among the instruments as a coordinated system of musical roles that reflects the social dynamics and cultural values of the Akwa Ibom people;
- iii. highlight the cultural significance of the *ikon* ensemble as a repository of intangible heritage and a living example of collective musical organisation; and
- iv. contribute to ethnomusicological scholarship by providing a role-based analysis of African xylophone ensemble practice.

Through these objectives, the study emphasises the importance of functional analysis in understanding the deeper strata of meaning and organisation in indigenous African music.

Ensemble role-play in African music

African ensemble music is characterised by a structured distribution of musical roles, where each instrument contributes uniquely to a composite sonic texture. Nketia (1986) emphasises that African instrumental music often operates as “a social drama in sound” in which leadership, rhythmic grounding, and dialogic interaction are enacted through performance. Agawu (2016) further observes that ensemble parts are typically interdependent, with lead instruments initiating melodic or thematic material, while supporting instruments provide rhythmic and harmonic frameworks.

Xylophone in African musical systems

Xylophone (an idiophone with wooden bars played by the use of mallets), has a widespread presence across sub-Saharan Africa. Bates (2012) highlights its dual significance - as a musical instrument and a carrier of cultural meaning – that reflects craftsmanship, performance traditions, and symbolic associations. In Akwa Ibom, the *ikon* is both a melodic and communicative instrument, historically used in ceremonies, storytelling, and social functions (Ekong & Ufford-Azorbo, 2016). Its evolving design, particularly innovations such as the modulating *Nyaama*, demonstrates the adaptation of traditional instruments to contemporary musical contexts.

Musical communication and role differentiation

The concept of ‘musical role-play’ in ensembles mirrors broader social organisation. MacDonald (2021) asserts that instruments within traditional ensembles often enact “roles” that parallel human relationships - leaders, responders, timekeepers, and commentators - thus fostering a collective musical narrative. Agu (2013) notes that African ensembles typically include one or more instruments, and these act as metronomic anchors that guide performers and dancers with strict rhythmic patterns.

Preservation of intangible cultural heritage

Traditional instrumental ensembles like the *ikon* not only provide entertainment but also safeguard historical memory and communal identity. Tangem (2017) argues that indigenous music systems embody “repositories of knowledge,” transmitting cultural values across generations. Understanding the functional distribution within these ensembles contributes to their preservation amid increasing pressures of modernisation and globalisation.

Gaps in existing scholarship

Despite extensive documentation of African xylophones, focused analyses of the member functions of the Akwa Ibom *ikon* ensemble remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by providing an ethnographically grounded, function-centred account of the *ikon* ensemble’s instrumentation, elucidating how each instrument (member) contributes to the ensemble’s cohesive musical and cultural expression.

Methodology

Ethnographic data were collected through participant observation, interviews with eight veteran *ikon* performers, and instrument makers. Photographic documentation during rehearsals and community performances in central Akwa Ibom was undertaken. The findings of the study reveal that the *ikon* ensemble is organised into a tiered-structure of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic functions. Each instrument's role is both musical and communicative, and together the instruments enact a dynamic 'musical conversation'.

Features and roles of the member-instruments in the *ikon* ensemble

The *ikon* ensemble is made up of four principal member-instruments. These include lead *ikon*, second lead *ikon*, bass *ikon*, and backing and tenor *ikon*. Each of these instruments has distinctive features and plays unique roles.

Lead *ikon* (*ikon nta obong*)

It is a diatonically tuned xylophone with wooden bars, ranging from middle C to the higher octave. It is traditionally mounted on a resonating wooden frame. It is the principal melodic voice and leader of the ensemble. It introduces themes, signals transitions, and 'speaks' commands to dancers and supporting players through coded melo-rhythmic cues (e.g. *suksoro* – squat; and *dakada* – stand up). Culturally, its role is that it represents authority within the ensemble, that is akin to a lead storyteller.



Plate 1: A Twenty-slab diatonic *Ikon* without sharp or flat keys

Source: Humanitatis Theoreticus Journal (2018)

Second lead *ikon*

This instrument has a physical feature similar to the lead *ikon*. It is tuned an octave lower than the lead *ikon*. It provides harmonic reinforcement and rhythmic stability,

and serves as a bridge between melodic leadership and lower rhythmic layers. It often performs antiphonal ‘answers’ to the lead *ikon*’s melodic ‘questions’, thus enriching call-and-response textures in performance contexts.



Plate 2: Lead ikon (1) and second lead ikon (2)
Source: Arise concert (2021), Nairaland

Bass ikon

This instrument is composed of large wooden bars that produce deep and resonant tones. It provides the ensemble’s harmonic foundation and rhythmic anchor, comparable to a bass guitar in a contemporary musical band. The instrument works closely with the master drum (*Eka ibid*), thus locking in the underlying groove that

drives the music forward.



Plate 3: The Bass Ikon

Source: Field

Backing and tenor ikon

This member-instrument is usually made of slimmer and fewer bars compared to the lead or second lead *ikon*. It is considered an auxiliary xylophone, and its function is to fill out the ensemble’s harmonic and textural framework. It performs ostinato

patterns, chordal harmonies, and rhythmic accents that support the melodic line. It helps to unite the ‘body’ of the music by ensuring continuity and cohesion between the lead and bass parts.



Plate 4: *The tenor ikon*

Source: *Field*

Accompanying percussion instruments

There are certain percussion instruments that play accompaniments in *ikon* performance. These instruments are *Abang*, *Eka ibid*, *Ekomo ibid*, *Etok ibid*, *Siko*, *Akankang*, *Nsak*, *Ntakrok*, *Obodom*, and *Sekere*.

Abang (pot drum) is comprised of cast metal pot and a padded beater shaped like hand-fan, which is struck across the single opening to produce sound. It produces low bass tones in a performance. *Eka ibid* (master talking drum), acts as the timekeeper and ‘conductor’ of the percussion section by reinforcing rhythm and communicating performance cues. *Ekomo ibid* (twin drums) provides steady accompaniment by filling mid-frequency spaces in the rhythmic texture. *Etok ibid* (small drum) adds high-pitched rhythmic ornamentation, often used to ‘answer’ the *Eka ibid*. *Siko* (talking drum) is used for tonal communication, which capable of ‘speaking’ messages through pitch inflections. *Akankang* (small gong) marks large rhythmic units and signals structural divisions in performance, while *Nsak* (rattle or maracas) provides a persistent rhythmic shimmer at higher frequencies, reinforcing

ensemble drive. *Ntakrok* (woodblock) adds percussive accents with sharp, penetrating tones, *Obodom* (slit-drum or wooden gong) functions as a ‘talking’ instrument that transmits commands from drummers to dancers. The role of the *Sekere* (beaded gourd rattle) is that of enriching the rhythmic texture, with dual-layered sounds of beads striking the gourd, and the gourd’s own resonant tone.



Plate 5: *Ikon* ensemble accompanying instruments: (1) *Abang* – pot-drum, (2) *Eka ibid* - big drum, (3) & (4) *Ekomo ibid* – twin-drum, (5) *Etok ibid* - small drum, (6) *Sekere* – shakers, (7) *Obodom* – slit-drum or wooden gong, (8) *Ntakrok* - woodblock, (9) *Nsak* - rattles or maracas, and (10) *Akankang* - small gong.

Source: *The Authors*

Ensemble configuration

The *ikon* ensemble operates as a hierarchy, with roles provided by designated instruments: melodic leadership (lead and second lead *ikon*); harmonic foundation (bass, tenor, and backing *ikon*); and rhythmic anchoring and communication (drums, gongs, rattles, and slit-drums). Each part interacts dynamically, creating a layered musical narrative that guides dancers and engages audiences.



Plate 6: *Ikon Ensemble Group Photo*

Source: New Dawn Entertainers (2022). [Web.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/newdawnentertainers)

Discussion of findings

The findings highlight the *ikon* ensemble as a finely organised system of musical role-play in which each instrument fulfills a distinctive function that contributes to the overall performance. This structure mirrors the communal values of Akwa Ibom society where collaboration, hierarchy, and dialogue are essential.

Role differentiation and leadership

The lead *ikon* emerges as the ensemble's melodic and communicative leader. Its ability to 'speak' through coded rhythms and melodies reflects the ensemble's social function as a medium of storytelling and direct communication. As Nketia (1986) notes, many African ensembles assign leadership roles to instruments that are capable of signaling structural changes and guiding performers - a role clearly embodied by the lead *ikon*.

Harmonic and rhythmic foundations

The second lead, tenor, and bass *ikon* provide harmonic depth and rhythmic grounding, creating the scaffolding for the lead instrument's melodic statements. This division of labour aligns with Agawu's (2016) description of African ensemble practice, where textural density and interlocking patterns generate musical momentum. The bass *ikon*, in partnership with the master drum (*Eka ibid*), establishes the groove that unifies the ensemble.

Percussion as communicative network

In the *ikon* ensemble, percussion instruments perform more than rhythmic accompaniment - they constitute an intricate network of sonic communication that mediates interactions among musicians, dancers, and audience. The *Eka ibid* (master drum) operates as the central timekeeper, maintaining the ensemble's rhythmic integrity while issuing performance cues that signal transitions, tempo adjustments, or shifts in dance movement. Working in tandem, the *Obodom* (slit-drum) acts as a 'talking drum' that transmits coded instructions to dancers and other instrumentalists, thereby ensuring a coordinated performance.

Smaller percussion instruments such as the *Akankang* (small gong), *Nsak* (rattles), *Ntakrok* (woodblock), and *Sekere*, enrich the communicative system by marking structural divisions, accentuating phrasing, and providing auditory cues that synchronise collective movement. Each percussive element occupies a distinct sonic register, allowing multiple layers of information - tempo, dynamics, and form - to be communicated simultaneously without masking one another. This shared communicative function mirrors what Nketia (1986) describes as the "polyphonic conversation" of African percussion, where multiple rhythmic voices operate semi-independently yet remain interlocked. In the *ikon* ensemble, this network enables the seamless negotiation of musical structure and dance choreography, thereby transforming rhythmic instruments into agents of social coordination and expressive storytelling.

Musical role-play as cultural expression

The ensemble's interwoven interactions constitute a 'musical conversation' in which leadership, response, and accompaniment parallel the dynamics of communal life. This supports MacDonald's (2021) argument that musical instruments in traditional ensembles enact social roles, reinforcing values of collective identity and interdependence. The role-play enacted within the *ikon* ensemble thus extends beyond music, functioning as a sonic representation of community organisation. The *ikon* ensemble functions as an aural metaphor for a society where no single voice dominates - teamwork replaces individualism, monopoly gives way to shared participation, and every instrumental voice contributes to the communal narrative of unity in diversity.

Implications for cultural preservation

Documenting these instrumental functions discussed in this paper has practical implications for sustaining Akwa Ibom's intangible heritage. By codifying the knowledge of instrumental roles, this study aids in preserving performance practice for future generations, especially as modernisation pressures threaten traditional music systems (Tangem, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has examined musical role-play within the Akwa Ibom *ikon* (xylophone) ensemble, revealing a highly organised system in which each instrument fulfills specific melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic functions. The lead *ikon* directs performance through melodic leadership and communicative signaling, and supported by the second lead, tenor, and bass *ikon*, which provide harmonic depth and rhythmic stability. The percussion section operates as a communicative network, enabling seamless coordination among performers and dancers through interwoven rhythmic cues.

Beyond its musical architecture, the *ikon* ensemble embodies social values of collaboration, hierarchy, and collective identity that are central to Akwa Ibom cultural life. The interactions of musical instruments reflect a sonic metaphor for communal dialogue where leadership and support coexist within a unified whole. Documenting these member functions contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and provides a framework for understanding African ensemble practices in ethnomusicology. As modernisation and globalisation continue to reshape cultural landscapes, studies like this play a vital role in safeguarding the knowledge embedded within traditional music systems. The Ikon ensemble remains not only an artistic expression, but also a living archive of Akwa Ibom's history, identity, and communal values.

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