ENGAGING THE EBIRA IKEDE DRUMS AND INSTRUMENTATION AS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION MEDIUM IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

In most African societies, the drum transcends its role as a musical instrument. It functions as language, archive, regulator of movement, and custodian of values. This article examines the Ebira Ikede drums and instrumentation of Kogi State, Nigeria, as a sophisticated system of non-verbal communication. Using qualitative methods that combine literature review, textual analysis, and performance observation, the study argues that Ikede instrumentation operates simultaneously as entertainment, moral pedagogy, social mobilization, and economic catalyst. Framed within theories of African communication systems and non-verbal semiotics, the paper makes three central claims. First, non-verbal codes embedded in drum timbre, tempo, and pitch structure the communicative exchange between drummer, dancer, and audience. Second, Ikede encodes and transmits Ebira values of diligence, communalism, and cultural pride. Third, Ikede festivals generate measurable economic activity that sustains local livelihoods. The study situates Ikede within the broader African taxonomy of idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, and chordophones, and demonstrates how the ensemble of big bass drum, omele, beaded gourd, slit drum, and gong produces a layered sonic discourse. By reading the drum as text, this article contributes to scholarship in Applied Theatre, African communication systems, ethnomusicology, and peacebuilding. It concludes that for Ikede and similar indigenous performance systems to remain viable, they must be systematically documented, institutionalized in curricula, and integrated into contemporary cultural policy.

Keywords: *Non-verbal codes, Percussion Aesthetics, Ethnomusicology, Pitch Structure, African Instrumentation.*

Introduction.

The drum occupies a central position in African cosmology and performance. For drummers, dancers, and musicians across the continent, the drum is not a passive instrument but an active interlocutor. Constructed from wood, animal skin, and iron rings, African drums vary widely in morphology, and each variation determines a unique sonic signature. The size of the

shell, the tension of the skin, and the method of striking all combine to produce distinct timbres that communities have learned to decode over generations.

In ritual dance, music, masquerade, and festival, the drum functions as director and regulator. There exists a symbiotic relationship between drum sound and human movement. When the master drummer accelerates tempo, dancers respond with increased vigor. When the drummer introduces a roll or break, dancers transition to new choreographic phrases. This relationship is not accidental. It is cultivated through years of apprenticeship and communal participation.

Beyond aesthetics, the drum bears political, spiritual, and historical significance. It proclaims births, initiations, marriages, and deaths. It accompanies religious rites and the invocation of ancestors. It serves as alarm, as summons to war, and as medium for long-distance messaging. The talking drum in particular has for centuries functioned as what modern discourse would call "wireless communication." Villages separated by forest could relay news through relay drummers, compressing days of travel into hours of sound.

Instrumentation, understood as the artful combination of diverse instruments to produce harmonic texture, is the organizing principle of African ensemble music. Among the Ebira people of Kogi State, the Ikede ensemble combines the big bass drum, omele, beaded gourd, slit drum, and gong. Each instrument contributes a distinct pitch and timbral color. When played together, they do not create noise but a structured conversation

Despite the centrality of drums in African communication, scholarly attention to specific indigenous ensembles like Ikede remains limited. Most studies generalize about "African drums" without analyzing how specific communities encode meaning, teach performance, and sustain the tradition economically.

Theoritical Framework

Scholars have long established that African societies developed complex communication systems prior to colonial contact. Michael Kombol and Alhassan Gabriel document how indigenous media include symbols, signals, drum language, and performance. These systems were not inferior substitutes for writing but parallel technologies adapted to oral societies.

Frank Ugboajah argues that drums function as "verbal" media because they encode speech tones and proverbs. In this sense, the drummer is both musician and broadcaster. Odozi Ogwezzy further notes that African communication is holistic: it engages sight, sound, and body simultaneously.

Non-Verbal Communication and Semiotics

Non-verbal communication encompasses all messages conveyed without spoken words. In performance, sound itself becomes a sign. David Nsor Ella and Mercy Onyeka Onwochei note that instruments produce meaning through volume, tempo, and rhythm. A loud stroke is not just louder; it means "pay attention." A slow tempo is not just slow; it means "mourn." Semiotics helps us read the drum as text. Each stroke is a signifier. The cultural context provides the signified. Without shared cultural competence, the message is lost.

Theoretical Framework: African Performance Theory and Cultural Peace

This study adopts the framework of African Performance Theory as articulated by Oyin Ogunba and Isidore Okpewho. The theory posits that performance in Africa is communal, participatory, and didactic. It is not for passive consumption but for active engagement. The study also draws from Johan Galtung's theory of cultural peace to argue that Ikede functions as a tool for social cohesion. By bringing people together in rhythm, Ikede reduces tension and affirms shared identity.

Man, Sound, and the Science of Drumming

Human beings are neurologically wired to respond to sound. Sound is mechanical energy transmitted through air molecule vibration. The ear converts vibration to neural signal, and the brain interprets pitch, loudness, and timbre.

Samuel Kelechi Ikechukwu Chukwu explains that African membrane drums produce no single fixed pitch but a spectrum of high, medium, and low tones determined by drum size and stroke technique. This mirrors the tonal structure of many African languages. Just as tone changes meaning in Igala or Yoruba, tone changes meaning on the drum.

> Meki Nzewi and Odyke Nzewi observe that The tones produced on the drum generate raw or cluster harmonics, the healing energy of which massages the mind. Hence, experiencing the right type of drum sound and music, means undergoing metaphysical engagement of mental tension or other states of being (3).

Scientific studies, including that of Oluwasegun Kayode Olao using spectrum analyzers, confirm that talking drums operate at three distinct pitch levels. Pitch variation is therefore not decorative but semantic. The drum literally "speaks." Felix Egwuda categorizes African instruments into idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, and chordophones. Ikede primarily uses membranophones and idiophones to create polyrhythmic density. The bass drum grounds the ensemble, while smaller drums and gourds provide commentary. The physics of sound also explains why Ikede is effective in large outdoor spaces. Low frequencies travel farther and penetrate crowds. This is why the big bass drum leads processions and calls people to the arena.

Sound and Non-Verbal Communication in Ikede

The Drum as Talking Text

The drum is a very significant and vital tool that does not only exist as sound but also exist as communication and message projected through the sound made with uttermost dexterity by the drum especially with the talking drum.

> Samuel Kelechi Ikechukwu Chukwu states: The African membrane drum talks as well as sings. Each African society understands the sounds of tones produced from the classification of her drums. During performance, the master drummer expresses or tells stories and gives information or directives to members of his groups as the performance is going on, and they understand whatever the drum talks or sings (3).

Meki Nzewi further notes that "the drum instantly engages in a conversation with human or transmits instructions or messages to designated persons within the context of a performance" (2).



Plate 1: A talking drummer dressed and fully ready to perform especially with communicating directly to the celebrant in special events

In Ikede, this is literal. The master drummer can announce the entrance of an elder, praise a dancer, or warn of rain all without speaking.

Codes in Ikede Performance

In Ikede, a drum roll signals transition. A high-pitched slap signals acceleration. A sustained bass tone signals conclusion. A syncopated pattern signals that dancers should improvise. Dancers decode these cues instantly because they grew up hearing them. The communication only works because both parties share a cultural code. This is what David Nsor Ella and Mercy Onyeka Onwochei mean when they argue that non-verbal communication depends on shared context. Frank Ugboajah, as cited in Ukonu and Wogu, affirms that "drums communicate from a verbal basis through signals, speech and dance at ceremony, puberty rites, at funerals and by drumming organizations such as popular brands, hunters and warriors companies" (95).

The Agidigbo and Sacred Communication

The Agidigbo is one of the earliest form of communication and in the Ebira speaking tribe, it is most time played when an important person dies or when there is a very impotant scenario that has to do with a ritual.

> Gabriel Ottah provides a concrete example with the Ikoro, a sacred idiophone: The Ikoro is a sacred instrument and it is only beaten when there is an important announcement to make such as the appearance of a new moon, the date of a new yam or pumpkin leaf festival or an emergence of war or epidemic or any of such serious matters. Ikoro is a good example of idiophone, the Ibaji community in Kogi State call it Agidigbo and it performs the same function as in Igbo land (86).

While Ikede is not as restricted as Ikoro, it borrows the principle: certain rhythms are reserved for certain occasions. This gives the performance moral weight.



Plate 2: Adayi Fache, a blind man but full of dexterity who is always playing the Agidigbo on special occasions and coronations.

The African Drum Taxonomy and the Ebira Ikede Ensemble

African instruments fall into four classes: idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, chordophones. Kwasi Ansukyeremeh and Francis Chukwuemeka Agu Wilson provide taxonomies showing how each class serves distinct communicative functions.

Idiophones like gongs and bells are self-sounding. Membranophones like drums use stretched skin. Aerophones use air columns. Chordophones use strings.



Plate 3: A lead drummer playing during an ikede instrumentation performance.

Ikede is dominated by membranophones and idiophones. The big bass drum provides timeline. The omele provides melodic variation and responds to the bass. Beaded gourds and gongs provide accent and texture. The slit drum can mimic speech patterns. This combination creates what Hugo Cole calls "layered notation" not written on paper, but embodied in performance. Each player knows their part and how it fits the whole.

Ikede as Culture, Communication, and Economy

Inculcation of Values

The word Ebira denotes "character." Ikede is therefore a school of character. Through dance and drum, the performance teaches diligence, respect, and community.

Drum patterns mimic the rhythm of cloth weaving and farming, the two traditional occupations celebrated in Ikede. When men dance, their hand positions mimic hoeing and cutting. When women dance, their legwork mimics the motion of the loom. Because participation is open, Ikede builds social cohesion. Strangers are invited to dance. Age grades perform together. This aligns with Galtung's idea of cultural peace: shared rhythm creates shared identity.

Communication Role

Ikede narrates Ebira history. The speed of drumming communicates urgency and time consciousness. A fast section may represent war or harvest. A slow section may represent mourning or reflection. The ensemble tells the story of a hardworking people who take pride in tradition. Learning to "talk" in drum language is difficult, but the system remains an effective indigenous medium because it is lived, not just studied.

Economic Impact

Beyond culture, Ikede has economic consequences. During festivals, thousands travel to Ebira land. Transport unions record peak earnings. Drivers call the period "festive season" because daily income triples. Markets for food, drinks, and cultural materials boom. Vendors sell Itenehi_ and Ubane-ito cloth. Itenehi serves as everyday wear, while Ubane-ito is reserved for funerals and major festivals. Artisans sell carved drums and dance accessories. The influx of visitors increases demand for goods and services, boosting local GDP. Thus Ikede functions as both cultural expression and economic engine. It is cultural tourism before the term existed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has established that Ebira Ikede drums and instrumentation constitute a complete system of non-verbal communication. Through pitch, tempo, and ensemble arrangement, the drums direct dancers, transmit moral values, and mobilize community. The tradition confirms the broader African principle that the drum is language. And also to the documentation of endangered indigenous knowledge and provides a framework for using traditional performance in communication, education, and development. It also positions Ikede as a case study for cultural policy and Applied Theatre practice in Nigeria.

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