The Place of Semiotics in Otu – Ugo Music Group of Omoku Community in Ogbaland, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This work examines semiotics in Otu Ugo music group of Omoku community in Ogba land, Rivers State, Nigeria. The aim of the study is to find out about semiotics and relate it to otu wisdom music group of Omoku community. The study used historical research which calls for evaluation and documentation as its main tools for data collection. The primary source of data was gotten from the researchers teenage experiences of some musical practices carried out in Ogba land and also from undergraduate university dance. While the secondary sources were gotten from articles, journals, text books or dissertation. The study finds out that musical instruments are powerful signifiers. That they are objects or symbols through which meaning can be drawn from or represent where they are coming from and how they are being classified. It also finds out that semiotics simply means sign or the study of how meaning can been created. One of the signs gotten from otu wisdom music group could be seen as their age grade name mentioned above, costume and their four traditional musical instruments "ekwe" (drum), "opi" (whistle), "nkwa" three set drum and "nketeh" bell. That these instruments compliment each other rhythmically or serve as accompaniment purposes. This work serves

as a guide to teachers in ethnomusicology study, students and also the public at large as it will bring to their knowledge realities of semiotics in otu wisdom. The paper concludes by pointing out that semiotics are signs which are symbols used to portray meaning in any music group. We recommend that in other for these existing age groups not to go into extinction, members should encourage them selves and continue with the numbers available in each age group while others are yet to join their age grade. The cultural rite, age grade should be made compulsory for children with in the age brackets to register as members or form their own age group for continuity like wise the youths. And finally, the age grade practice should not be left out for some person's alone in the community, but as a collective effort to make it function for posterity.

Introduction

Music is as old as man. It existed with man starting from the early days when the environment looked primitive to man. It has long time served as a means of communication and entertainment between man and his gods. Music involves singing, dancing and playing of musical instruments with the purpose of attracting and impressing the audience. Okafor (2009) informs that:

> "music is a constituent of and plays a part in virtually every culture of the word. It is essentially a human activity denoting or expressing human emotions and the relationship of the emotions to the environment or to life. Not only is it a human activity, in its truest sense, it cannot exist without man. And so man recognizes or seems to hear music in nature only because the sound of nature appears to have close similarity with the sounds that human consciously organizes to express feelings or idea" (p. 383).

Omoku community has their folk music which they use to commorate God Almighty during their annual celebration. One of this could be seen in Otu wisdom music group as they celebrate as one during their yearly activity..

This is in line with Blakings in Rice (2009) defines that "music is a humanly organized sound" (p. 5).

Humans make music; they compose, perform and listen to music. Bode (2006) affirms that: "Music is a cultural and social structuring of sound, materialized in the process of composing, performing, and listening" (p.581). Music has been an integral force in the culture and tradition of a group of people living in a given society. It plays a vital role in every ethnicity round the world as people are seen celebrating different festivals with music. This has brought about a long time search in the field of ethno musicology study. Ethnomusicologists tend to study music in all its diversity, to find out the meaning, methods, principal insight, and the context at which it is practiced. They travel to the field to sing, play musical instrument, and dance from the traditions they study.

Particularly to Africans, they see music as their way of life, a medium through which their feelings can be expressed through art. Through this means, people come together as one in the community during various musical performances. Singing, playing, dancing and dramatization are all what Africans see and think of as one. Their performances are strongly tied to art. Talking about the relevance of music, Juslin and Soliboda (2003) affirms that "Music is perhaps the most widely practiced and appreciated of all art form. Part of the appeal of music may lie in its ability to induce and represent emotions" (p.23). People derive meaning and different kinds of emotions from the songs they listen to. It could be hate, anger, joy or love. In line with this, Ekwueme (2008) noted that music is "a phenomenon using the medium of sound which is organized and manipulated into socially accepted patterns that communicate intelligibly and meaningfully, verbally or non-verbally ideas, feelings, emotions and events to people" (p.1). Through music musicians have communicated to people round the world their own ideas, feelings, events, and emotions. Some of these musicians could be seen in Otu Ugo music group who have used their folk music to communicate to the public different emotions during their end of year performances in Omoku community. Meaning is also derived from the text of their piece of music which takes us to the study of semiotics which deals with sign.

Previous researches showed that semiotics is the study of thinking about signs, symbols and signification. The study is relating the above to one of the age grade music groups called "otu" Ugo of Omoku community in Ogba land, Rivers State of Nigeria. In Ogba land, there is music for men and women folk or both sex

combined, one of these could be seen as the age grade music group on which this research is centered on as the study progresses.

History of Ogba Land

Ogba people migrated from Benin found in the present day Edo state. They reside now in the Southern part of Rivers State. They speak Ogba language which is slightly related to *Ikwere* and *Ekpohia* languages. The Ogba kingdom is made up of *Egi* and *Igburu,* called *Usomini* Clans and the largest town is *Omoku* urban. According to Jerimiah in Akuda (2016), the Ogba, migrated from the ancient Benin kingdom at about 15th to 16th century during the reign of *Oba* Ewuarre the great whose leadership was characterized by autocracy and cruelty to his subjects. As the story went, there was a plot to assassinate this *Oba* that filtered into his ears and thus made him to become hostile. This hostility brought about a great exodus of the people from their home land (Benin*)* from fear of being killed. Among those who took to their heels was Akalaka the father of Ogba land who used to be one of the warriors of this great king (Ewuarre*).*

Akalaka fled to Ogbo where he took a wife and had children among which are Ekpeye and Ogba. As time went by, Akalaka had a conflict with the king of Ogbo and he stealthily left Ogbo with his family to the present location where they are now, alongside with the age grade practices he had with his friends in Benin. This self imposed exile was the genesis of what is now known as Ogba whose headquarter is at Omoku which his Eminence *Eze* Chukwumela Nnami Obi the second oversees, as the ruler of the kingdom, as the *Oba* of Ogba land. According to (Orji, 2012).

> Geographically, Ogba is located in the south-south region of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is one of the twenty three local government areas that make up Rivers State. It is merged with two other distinct ethnic groups which are Egbema and Ndoni which makes up the area known as Ogba Egbema Ndoni local government area having its headquarters in Omoku. The land mass of Ogba spreads from about $450^{0,}$ extends 625^{0} to E, 650^{0} W and 380^{0} S. It stretches over 920 square kilometers in the northern part of Niger Delta with a given population of about 345, 145.00 people. The region is divided into four main ecological zones known as the

sombrero river (east ward), Orashi river (west ward), the central well drained low land and farm mosaic (between Orashi and Sombrero) and the non-tidal fresh water swamps basin. In terms of size, Ogba kingdom occupies an area roughly thirty kilometers by twenty kilometers in the Niger flood plain having *Ekpeye* and Ikwerre as neighbors in the South and South West, Egbema, Oguta and Awura to the North and North east (pp. 15-154).

Historical Background of Otu (Age Grade) Ugo



The word “otu" means age grade in Ogba land. "Ugo" which signifies the name of the age group means eagle, which stands for peace. It was called otu by the fore father of Ogbaland called Akalaka. According to history, he was practicing this age grade in Benin kingdom who serves as a guide to the king called Awure of Beni City. Akalaka fled from Benin kingdom due to conflict to the present place where they are now (Ogba land) along side the age grade setting. Otu Ugo was formed as a result of this association in the year 1979. The age group is for both male and female in Omoku community that fall in the same age brackets.

The Place of Semiotics in Otu (Age Grade) Ugo

According to Otite and Ogionwo in Ugiabemi (2015), “age grade is a group of people who are roughly of the same age” (p.36). Otu Ugo is from the age bracket

of 1974 – 1976. Otu Ugo is one of the age groups who practice and enjoy this musical art despite the reduction in activities of Omoku age grade music groups caused by Christianity and urbanization. According to Johnson (2011) "age grade is an all embracing social culture in every traditional society." (p.3)

Otu Ugo has their own meeting days which they use to discuss about their welfare and plan ahead of time for their up coming annual celebration which takes place every December 29th to 31st of the year. These meeting days are: Last Friday of the month and last Sunday of the month. This collaborates with what Michael (2010) said about age grade, that it is "a vital system in the social structure of the society and the way of life of the people." (p.44).

This age group make use of their general four (4) traditional musical instruments during their annual celebration "ekwe", "nkwa", "opi" and "uketeh" in Ogba parlance, which relates to this study in the area of semiotics. The place of semiotics in otu Ugo can never be overemphasized as it has shown for itself how useful semiotics is to otu Ugo for easy identification. Semiotics simply means signs. These signs can be seen as icons, objects or symbols. According to Rey Brouck (2017), "sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (p.135). Otu Ugo traditional musical instruments aforementioned are objects or symbols which stand in respect to show where they are coming from or what they are representing. These instruments fall into the categories of some African musical instruments classified as aerophones, idiophones, membrane phones, or chordophone. They are objects or something which meaning can be drawn from just as in the case of test. Euba (2001) supports this when he said that;

> text is a signifier, and signification is an important aspect of musical understanding, meaning and there are many types of it. For example, musical instruments are powerful signifiers. They assist in the recognition of musical types (jazz as distinct from symphonic music, and of the geocultural origin of music (the gender, a xylophone, suggests Indonesia, while the gyilgu also a xylophone suggest Africa, specifically West Africa and more specifically Ghana). (p.1)

The statement above coincides with the view of Adebowale (2021) in an oral discussion in a class held with him, said: All musical instruments are signs; they represent certain things, If one sees an organ, his mind goes to church music, a saxophone, he thinks of contemporary gospel music, violin reminds one of symphonic orchestral, likewise slit wooden drum or metal gong, your attention goes to traditional music once it is about sign; it is semiotics.

Agawu is one of the music semiotians whose semiotics interpretation draws on traditional categories of theory, analysis and criticism. He said that when music is written verbally or with object language it becomes theoretical and when it is written musically, it becomes graphics where one is analyzing it.

Semiotics has a place in otu Ugo as their four musical instruments that are bought by them serves through their monthly contribution is been named with otu Ugo. This is a sign that shows that these instruments are mainly for otu Ugo and that no other age group in Omoku community can claim them, rather they all have their own with their age grade name (otu) labelled at the back of it.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4

The study finds out that, these age grade musical instruments are objects which delineate different kinds of signs, used to explain the way in information can be re-laid to the listener. The "opi" age grade instruments helps to cure them in their dance at major strategic points while the rest of the instruments serve as accompaniment to the group. There is no particular dance step for otu Ugo, which is also applicable to all the age grade. They dance according to how they are led and express themselves through movements, facial expression or gestures. This agrees with chigas in his semiotic study when he said that music is internal, that through it everything sayable can be said that music is capable of expressing what ordinary language cannot convey with words. He gave gestures as an example of such musical expression.

Another music semiotician, Trasti in his semiotic study saw music as a system whose units (words) are divided into two sides signifier (sound) and signified (sense). Talking about signification, the otu Ugo musical instruments are used to play different rhythms that could communicate different feelings to the dance group; either joy, or empathy during their annual celebration. The instruments are not only seen as signifiers, but compliment each other rhythmically as stated earlier in this study. The instruments are also used to emulate the human voice during their musical practices from observation, the instruments play hocket technique where a set of drum alternates pattern or role and the other drum plays.

This gives varieties and tone color to the music. The instrumentalist also play hemiola technique where two conflicting rhythm with different pulses are heard together, one plays in triple time, and the other in quadruple time, three against four. These supports what Desaussure in Agawu (1991) said about semiotics, that it is the study of life of signs within society" (p.40).

a) **Four musical instruments of Omoku age grades**

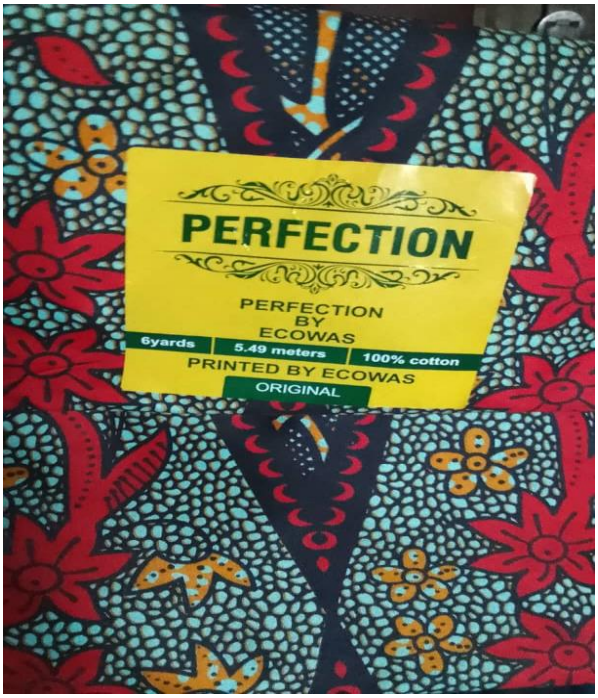


Figure 5

Translation

	Folk Language	English Language
1.	Ekwe	Slit wooden drum
2.	Nkwa	Three set drum
3.	Opi	Whistle
4.	Uketeh	Bell

b) **Costume**



This is could be seen as a selected uniform which could be set aside for music groups, actors or church members in a particular crew for easy recognition. The above costume is used by Otu Ugo during their meeting days for easy recognition of their mememberss. The ladies tie it on their clothes, while the men hang it on their hecks. Various researches have also said that costumes are cloths worn by people from a particular place or during a particular historic period. That they are cloths worn by actors in a play or cloths worn by some people to make them look like somebody else. This can be likened to "Otu Ugo mentioned earlier. It helps to beautify them as they process round Omoku community during their annual performances. Onwuka (2012) posits that:

> costume is symbolic regalia worn by dancers in a performance situation, they vary group to group and from one culture to the other. They could therefore be traditionally derived or newly designed by the dance organizers or choreographers in such a way that allows the performers freedom of movement. (p.19).

This is true because, the age grade costumes vary from one group to the other. Each group has their costume which is used to identify them during their annual celebration. The costumes are made up of different varieties. In this study, it shows the place of semiotics as it is used to identify otu Ugo. Every year they purchase new costumes except if there is a loss of life among them. The previous year they made use of white top and red George. The women tie head-tie, wear beads, make a very befitting hair style and wear shoes that matches the uniform, while the men wear caps, beads, and hold their working stick (Npra) as they process round the community. Some men may decide to wear pan slippers while others wear shoes that will go along with the chosen attire. They send delegates who go to the market to bring or select like four different costumes and show it to the age group. Once any one is selected, everybody contributes money to buy it and sews any befitting style of his or her choice for the deal day of music performance in Omoku community of Ogba land, Rivers State, Nigeria.



Ozoka (2020) compliments this when he said that

> "costume has to do with the physical outfits of performers from their heads to their feet. It includes cloths of different sizes made from fabrics of different colors which are worn by dancers and instrumentalists." (p.36)

Conclusion

Age grade is the setting of people of the same age bracket. The study finds out that Omoku age grade was brought by her finding father called Akalaka all the way from Benin kingdom. He called it otu. From here other age grades like otu Ugo originated. They have been in existence since 1979 with their age bracket as 1974 – 1976, the age names stands as a sign to identify them. They are made up of both male and female as the custom demands. The place of semiotics in otu Ugo was captured in the study in the area of their traditional musical instruments, age name written on banner and costumes. It was gotten that these instruments are four in number having their names as a sign of ownership for only otu Ugo. They are "Ekwe" (slit wooden drums), "opi" (whistle), "Nkwa" (three set drum) and finally "uketeh" bell used to play different rhythms to the dance group afore mentioned.

Recommendations

1. In other for these existing age groups not to go into extinction, members should encourage them selves and continue with the numbers available in each age groups while others are yet to join their age groups voluntarily.
2. The cultural rite, age grade should be made compulsory for children with in the age brackets to register as members or form their own age group for continuity like wise the youths.
3. The age grade practice should not be left out for some person's alone in the community, but as a collective effort to make it function for posterity.

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