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## Indigenous Knowledge Systems In Traditional Musical Instruments: The Sculptor's Contribution

Victor Kweku Bondzie Micah  
Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi  
victormicah@gmail.com

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### Abstract



Traditional musical instruments have been handed down from generation to generation although in most instances there has been a change in its development and production. Sculptors, over the years have played a very vital role in the making of such musical instruments. For someone to be able to make a music instrument, the person needs to have an idea about the material and its characteristics. This article establishes the link between traditional musical instruments and the sculptor as a depository of indigenous knowledge systems in music. Through qualitative research approach, it employed descriptive research design and aesthetic analysis as for the processes used in the making of some of the traditional musical instruments; and the symbolic meaning of material content in describing these music instruments for indigenous knowledge systems respectively. Data were collected through face-to-face interview and observation. Sculptors,

specifically carvers, in the production of traditional musical instruments and music artists from the music fraternity were purposively sampled. It was observed that beliefs and practices of Africa were seen as richest cultural systems, which were practised through the arts with traditional musical instruments. It recommended that traditional musical instruments should be seen as an important artifact. Particularly, its material compositions from an artistic point of view, serve as an indigenous knowledge system by providing artists and the users with mastery of cultural identity and edification.

**Keywords:** indigenous knowledge systems, musical instrument, sculptor, traditional

## Introduction

The production of traditional musical instruments as an art by sculptors have not been given the needed research attention, perhaps, due to the fact that some musicians produce their own preferred instrument for music making. Sculptors' contribution in the making and production of traditional musical instruments is an in-depth knowledge and, therefore, serves as part of the depository of indigenous knowledge systems. This is because indigenous societal knowledge in music has been imbedded in the traditional practices as seen or embraced by all in the society. Traditional musical instruments have been long established for the benefit of humanity but written documentation on its production processes and the artistry of the sculptor has received little or no scholarly attention. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, sculptors used simple tools and techniques in producing these instruments. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century of modern art, advanced technology has brought new and less cumbersome processes of production. The traditional musical instruments used in all over Africa have never been so distinct from each other. They are related to each other in either shape or size, and the concept of making (Brandt, Gebrian, & Slevc, 2012).

In 1992, Bégin's studies on Renaissance and Baroque musical instruments suggested that luthiers of these periods were aware of the mathematical concept of the golden mean. Its application to instrument making produced shapes, which were considered aesthetically good and which, on closer study, revealed the geometry of the instrument. This geometry provided the luthier with a simple method to achieve a harmonious shape. She accentuated that:

During the Baroque period, this sober and somewhat abstract aestheticism coexisted with a decorative style so exuberant that it sometimes overwhelmed

the true function of musical instruments, which came to symbolize social standing. Yet, the practice of decorating musical instruments is very old indeed. Some decorated instruments date back to the Stone Age and the Bronze Age in ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. In the Middle Ages, the decoration of the psaltery led to the tradition of rose decorations found on later stringed instruments. The organ, associated with religious music, was decorated with sculptures that blended with the architecture of its site. In secular music, some instruments began to be embellished; for example, the hurdy-gurdy was given a sculpted head. This decorative practice continued in the centuries that followed, reaching its peak in the baroque period. Decorative styles subsequently became more subdued, confined to details such as roses on soundboards, sculpted heads, and marquetry. With the advent of the industrial era and mass production, instrumental decorations gradually disappeared. By the turn of the century, hand-decorated instruments had all but vanished. The practice was revived only later, with the renewed interest in early music and instruments produced in the historically correct manner. Today, the instruments played in symphony orchestras are quite sober. The focus is mainly on the instrument's tone, along with its harmonious shape, pleasing colour, fine craftsmanship and, for the musician playing it, balance and personal suitability (Para. 3-4). Although looking at the traditional musical instruments in Africa from Western perspective, Northern and the Southern Africa, are a distinct African society whose musical cultures do not just have its origin only in Africa but a coalition of both foreign culture as part of its influence on musical culture. Nketia (1988) made a case that these related musical traditions constitute a family distinctively from those of the West or the Orient in their fields of emphasis. This historical linkage of the African can be well reemphasised by the artist. They may have some differences but the bond is greater. In all these musical histories, the sculptor, the maker of these instruments has been left out unmentioned.

Nketia continued to say that musical instruments may also be studied as material objects in terms of their technology, with respect to their design and craftsmanship, materials and construction and musical function.

All the attributes of these instruments, especially drums, have been made possible by the sculptor who does a comprehensive study of a material to be used in making of the instrument and design something out of it having in mind the construction and the function of the intended instrument. In designing, the sculptor, as a fine artist believes that the material has a great influence on the design. Therefore, in designing and the

construction of any musical instrument, its usage is paramount and this brings about the classification of the instruments. Nketia (1988) classified idiophones (self-sounding), membranophones (drums with parchment heads), aerophones (wind instruments), chordophones (string instruments) as the feats of the sculptor through a collective intellectual safekeeping of cultural knowledge embodied in these musical instruments. The rapport is drawn onto how the sculptor has contributed to the sustenance of these instruments over the years. Flintoff (2004) added that while most instruments have these obvious family origins, others are, however, created by a union of the families of gods. Understanding these concepts help to give some insight into the values that are placed on the instruments, the music and the materials they are created from. Flintoff alluded that musical instruments are also vehicles of entertainment and communication. However, these instruments is believed to convey a spiritual dimension that transcends the sounds they create, which is an essential part of appreciating their value.

The thoughts of Bégin (1992), Nketia (1988) and Flintoff (2004) are based on the fact that musical instruments are enigmatic and have over the years displayed mastery of family traditions, served as vehicle for entertainment – paramount to communication, material and spiritual dimensions. Musical instruments have been created by the sculptor and used by musicians, historians and storytellers who memorised and communicated to others through important events from the history of mankind. This goes to confirm Hiroa's (1944) assertion that the musical instruments, though few, played an important role in social and religious life. The bamboo flute was the least important, but young men were able to express love messages by means of its plaintive notes. This article, therefore, establishes the contribution of the sculptor serving as a depository of indigenous knowledge systems based on his feats of material manipulations in the invention of musical instruments and the philosophical, aesthetical sensory of perceptions these instruments invoked through his/her effort of creating these musical instruments.

## **Methods**

Being a qualitative approach, the study employed descriptive research design and aesthetic analysis. Face-to-face interview and observation were data collection instruments used. Miles and Gilbert (2005) cited Elliott and Timulak (1999) who stated that by distinguishing between measuring things with words and measuring them in numbers, however, might not be a particularly useful way of characterising different approaches to research. Instead, other distinctive features of qualitative research may turn out to be of far great importance. Thus, the study examined the making of musical instruments through descriptive inquiry and aesthetic analysis with symbolic meaning of material content in describing these musical instruments for indigenous knowledge systems.

Purposive sampling was used to gather data from respondents (carvers and music artistes) in Takoradi and Winneba respectively who were selected based on their expertise. A sample size of 10 was selected for the study. This sampling was very useful in situations when the study needed to reach a targeted sample quickly, and where sampling for proportionality was not the main concern (Crossman, 2017).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The processes used in the making of some of the traditional musical instruments**

Based on the data collected, respondents confirmed their views on the production processes used in making of some traditional musical instruments from technical point of view. It was expressed that the linkage between the sculptor and the musical instruments (Drums) was based on the merit of functionality. Musical instrument design has evolved over time, and that is part of the problem individuals now faces (Manchester, 2006). Modernism and man's quest for money has really redirected the focus of drumming and its construction (Chernoff, 1979). This passion is what was moving the sculptor to design and construct these music instruments as the indigenous sculptor was aspiring for a good name in the society as the adage goes "good name is better than riches". In modern times, it is not passion but money. This goes to confirm Ravasio (2016) that value theory on mass-production of musical instruments has high monetary value, which could be the contributory factor for man's quest for money, which has really, redirected the focus of drumming and its construction.

In making of these musical instruments, the sculptor goes through techniques and processes with beliefs and practices associated with the traditional musical instruments. In every facet of the life of Africans, there are beliefs and practices associated with them. Music pounds deep in the heart of every African; it was considered to be of the purest spiritual essence – a part of a person's social and spiritual being; a vehicle for healing mind, body and spirit, and inseparable from life experience (Primos, 2001). Because the process of making this instrument was considered sacred and observed as such. The beliefs were not just for nothing but had proven its worth over the years. The African believes there are spirits in every object both animate and inanimate. Due to this, special prayers are made for the sculptor (carver) before departure into the forest to cut the log to be used in making the drums. This is to prevent or neutralise the doings of any malevolent spirit on his way to the forest.

Based on his carving skills, (P. Ward, personal communication, November 24, 2010) shared that for a sculptor to effectively produce a piece whether commissioned, for

exhibition, or for sale one should make the work his or her own or put his or herself into the work as that draws passion for the work and merge one's spirit with the work. As clearly stated by Ward, the sculptor not necessarily being a musician, is able to know the kind of wood and the sound that will come out of the instrument. In the indigenous music knowledge systems, it is believed that the carver has a divine insight in making these traditional music instruments. However, if there is no linkage between the carver and the instruments then this is yet to be told of any society in Africa that had its musicians produce their own drums or instrument for play. In some few instances, it is the carver, who could really create such music instruments for play.

From the Ward's (2010) context, it is an established fact that there is a link between the sculptor and the musical instruments that are used by the musician on one hand and the sculptor and the indigenous knowledge systems in music on another hand. As it is a common knowledge that the carver needs to have some knowledge about the instruments before he can fully produce them for use by the music maker. The bond between the sculptor and the instrument, in my view, has been what has kept the indigenous music instruments knowledge systems of Africa still alive.

The process of cutting the tree also demand making of libation to pacify the spirit believed to domicile in the tree so as not to cause any harm to the sculptor (carver) in the process of cutting down the tree. In other instances, the spirits in the log is called out before cutting. These beliefs had been long established with the people of Africa even after the coming of Christianity and was still being practised by the sculptors (carver). Upon reaching home to construct the instrument, the sculptor then pours a final libation to prevent getting hurt in the process of carving out or constructing the instrument. As part of the sculptor's belief, if these rituals are not done, the spirit can cause the tool to endanger his life. If it happens that the tool hurts the sculptor (carver), he has to stop working with the tool until the sore of wound is fully healed. On the contrary, if he refuses to adhere then the sore would worsen as the tool is being used. Although these beliefs had not been fully documented in the written form it had been passed on by oral documentation and still upheld and practised by the traditional carvers of Africa.

The cutting up process of the drum came with a limited skill as the digging out of the center portion of the log was done meticulously as the slightest mistake is believed to affect the sound of the drum. Various kinds of drums were made specifically to have a standard thickness, which affected the sound that came out of it. Some had various design engraved on them with metal bowls and others with rings on them all of which affected the sound that came out of the instrument. Due to the spiritual attachment linked to the drums, women of all class could not even play some drums, and a woman

having menstrual period could not play others. With the “Asafo” drums for example one needed to be purified as rituals needed to be performed on the drummer before s/he could play the drum. This is to help the drummer to withstand all spiritual and physical attacks that might come his way in the line of duty.

The musical instruments carved by sculptors (carvers) were also based on some ideologies, which guided the procuring of materials to finishing stage of the musical instruments as the results indicated. But, these ideologies are proven through aesthetic theories guiding the production of these musical instruments. The article gives credence to the value of theory by Ravasio (2016) that making of musical instruments possesses theories that make these indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems worth producing. He posited that in the value theory, instruments are valuable objects. They might be handcrafted and, in this case, each of them is unique.

### **Symbolic meaning of material content on musical instruments in indigenous knowledge systems**

Again, data collected from respondents proved that the belief regarding symbolic meaning of material content on musical instruments in indigenous knowledge systems has become different from previously known. In this context, it can be seen that the indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems have not changed in all dimensions but as an institution, it has undergone transformation. In every bit much as the foreign cultures have tried, it has endured the test of time and events and this has remained greatly the same due to the mode of passage of these cultures from one generation to the other.

Moreover, after the carving of the “*Asafo Kyen* (Asafo drum)”, the sculptor and the drum would have to be cleansed to purify them from any contamination that might have occurred in the process of making of the drum. This confirms Aggrey (1978) statement that the “Asafo” company would have to buy a sheep, local gin, egg, kaolin, and other things that were used in purification. They mixed the blood of the sheep with local gin, egg, kaolin and smeared it on the drum to purge it of all contamination in the process of carving it. A special time was set aside for bringing the drum home, which is welcomed by a large crowd amidst drumming and gun shots. The drum and the drummer were kept in a room for at least one week, at which the drummer and the drums would be receiving various concoctions that were prepared for both of them to protect them and the “Asafo” companies from any spiritual attack or to be able to go safely through war as they lead the warriors.

Kojo Lawson (personal communication, November 30, 2010) espoused that the

maintenance of cultures largely by the African, has been demonstrated in the fact that the traditional musical instruments embodied indigenous knowledge systems concerning the production and modification of these drums. On the other hand, some have been modified in both make and outlook. A typical example is the “Fɔntofrɔm” drum set. The carver (sculptor) has seen the need for larger sound impacts at bigger and larger occasions that will attract large crowd and space. The design did not only look at the size but the aesthetics of the whole drum set. Symbolism, one of Africa’s richest indigenous knowledge systems, has not been left out in the production of the drums. The sculptor has carefully incorporated these symbols as designs to bring out the beauty of the drums and in the same vein communicate with those who matters. This actually has added up a great twist to the “Fɔntofrɔm” drum sets. In other drum sets, the make or outlook has not been modified but there have been inclusions in the number of drums that are used. A typical example is the “Kpanlogo” drum set. This set of drums now has “Gome” added to it. Lawson continued to share that this drum even did not originally come from Ghana but has been carefully fused into this group due to its strong bass like effect it brings to the instrumental play. There are hosts of other drum set that have been modified slightly by including other drum set that have linkage with it sound and beat. All these inclusions did not just happened, it is believed that the sculptor has played a very vital role in this modification. If not absolutely, then in connection with the musician, this has been so because of the fact that the indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems of Africa have been well passed onto the generations that followed. But, in spite of all these, the sculptor has contributed to the sustenance of the instrument over the years and has tried not to alter the materials but have been able to conserve and made it sacred.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study, therefore, concludes that the beauty of a musical instrument apart from its sound does not stem from a few aspects of its decoration, but from the balance of its proportions. The sculptor’s contribution to the indigenous knowledge systems in making of traditional musical instruments for music making cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the sculptor has been a worthy ware house for indigenous knowledge systems that need to be incorporated in the teaching of music in the tertiary levels.

Beliefs and practices of Africa are seen as richest cultural systems, which are observed or practised through the arts with musical instruments. Thus, these instruments should be seen as an important artifact, especially, its material compositions from artistic point of view, serve as indigenous knowledge system of providing artists and the users with mastery of cultural identity and edification. Development of indigenous knowledge systems in traditional musical instruments should not simply consider the musicians



or the music fraternity, but also the sculptor as well as, since he has been a worthy warehouse that underpins philosophical and aesthetical values which he can integrate them in the teaching of music.

Teaching of the indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems of Africa should include the designing and construction stage, because this can help musicians come out with new designs that can improve upon the existing ones and further boost the indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems of Africa, as change is very important and necessary. Ergonomics in indigenous musical instruments knowledge systems should be conducted as study to determine the applied science of equipment design intended to maximise productivity by reducing operator fatigue and discomfort.

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## **About the Author**

Victor Kweku Bondzie Micah is an Associate Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor at Takoradi Technical University. He holds PhD in Arts & Culture from University of Education, Winneba; MFA (Fine Art) and BFA (Fine Art) from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology, Kumasi. Micah is a practising sculptor with fifteen years of hands-on experience in the teaching of basic art courses at the tertiary level. He has authored books, articles and participated in several art exhibitions in Ghana.

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