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The Innovative Use of the *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) In Making Music by the Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble in Ghana

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Abstract:

Nwaba (Snail Shell) instrumental groups are contemporary traditional Ghanaian ensembles. The research is a case study of the Axim Nwaba Instrumental ensemble which performs traditional Ghanaian tunes, local Ghanaian popular and religious tunes, patriotic songs, hymns and popular Western tunes. The purpose of the study is to explore the innovative ways the ensemble uses Nwaba (Snail Shells) in making music. The innovative use of the Nwaba (Snail Shell) in making music started in 1972 when a chief fisherman introduced the sea shell as a musical instrument in Axim. Using techniques from the seashell and pawpaw stalk flutes, the Axim Nwaba group formed an instrumental band with drums similar to the structure of Brass Bands and fancy dress groups. It developed its own identity through the innovative transformation of the snail shell into a musical instrument. The band served the Axim community in a number of ways until it collapsed in 1993 but was revived as a result of this research.

1. Introduction

Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble is a contemporary traditional Ghanaian music ensemble. The purpose of the study is to explore the innovative ways this ensemble uses *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) in making music. Preliminary investigations showed that *Nwaba* (Snail shells) are used in making music in the Sefwi area in the Western Region and other parts of Ghana. There is therefore the need for an exploration of the musical importance of *Nwaba* (Snail shells) in Ghana beginning with the Axim *Nwaba* group after several unsuccessful attempts to locate a *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) ensemble in the country.

1.1. The Use of Shells for Music and Communication

In a review on the use of shells for music and communication, it was noted that long before modern day communication systems, trumpets made from shells produced sound that carried for many miles. Shell trumpets have been used as signalling devices in many parts of the world. They have been used as summons to call warriors to battle, to ring out triumphs in battles and to announce the entrance of Kings, Emperors, heroes and important persons (Clark, 1996; Bourquin, Mayhew et al, 1999; Ampomah, 2014).

They have also been used in making music and accompanying songs. In some countries, shells have been strung or tied together, or they have seeds of sand added to them and then sealed off so that they could act as rattles. These were then used to accompany songs and dances. Shell music has been used as accompaniment in songs, chants and dance throughout the Indo-Pacific region (Bourquin, Mayhew et al, 1999).

Once a hole was made into them, many types of shells could make music. Any unaltered large shell could also make gurgling musical sounds once it is filled with water. Ocean waves could be heard once an empty shell was held close the ear. It was the sounds around us, which interacted with the shells to give the whizzy sounds. In a completely quiet place, one would not hear any sound at all from holding the empty shell close to the ear (Bourquin, Mayhew et al, 1999).

A shell trumpet was normally constructed to play one note though it is possible to create harmonics. One exception was the Japanese *hora*. It could play three or four pitches in the harmonic series. The Fijian shell trumpet had a finger hole, which could play a whole tone from a given note. There have been several successful explorations of Shell trumpets with many finger holes. Modification of pitches could be effected by adjusting the opening space once a while. The remote areas of Tonga (in Polynesia) were some of the rare places where conch ensembles could be found. These have been used for recreational activities such as the playing of cricket. Trombonists Stuart Dempster and Steve Turre used shell trumpets in contemporary music and jazz (Clark, 1996).

The giant African land snail, commonly known as *Achatina achatina*, is the largest species of snail found on land. As the common name of the giant Ghana snail (also known as the giant Tiger land snail) and a species of very large, air-breathing land snail in the family of *Achatinidae*, it is believed to be native to West Africa. It could be found within 100-190 miles of the coasts of Sierra Leone,

Liberia, Ivory Coast as well as Togo, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria (Anim, 2011). Ecotypes of *Achatina achatina* for snail farming in Ghana has been catalogued to show the economic importance of the Ghanaian species of giant African snails (Parden, 2011). The innovative use of the snail shell in making music in Axim is the problem being investigated in this study. The snail shell is known in the Akan language of Ghana as *Nwaba*. There is hardly any literature on *Nwaba* music in Ghana. Most of the literature reviewed in this study was on the use of shells in making music in other parts of the world such as India and Tibet. One of the most recent studies on *Nwaba* (Snail shells) music was undertaken to look into snail shell instrumental music as a dying musical heritage in Ghana and to interrogate the problem of what scholars of African music in Ghana are doing about the threat to extinction of some of their traditional music (Ampomah, 2014).

1.2. Definitions and Theories of Innovation

There are several definitions of Innovation. One definition states that innovation is the discovery of more brilliant ways of doing things. (Wong, 2013). Another definition states that innovation involves the generation and implementation of new ideas (Ijuri & Kuhn, 1988). The difference between ‘innovation’; and ‘invention’ is that ‘innovation’ refers to a more brilliant way of doing things resulting from an original idea but ‘invention’ refers more directly to the creation of the idea itself. Innovation also differs from improvement. While ‘innovation’ refers to the perception of doing something different, ‘improvement’ refers to doing the same thing better. Innovation is therefore the exploitation of an invention and the spreading of an innovation from the innovator to other individuals and groups is known as diffusion (“Innovation”, n.d; Rogers, 1983).

A review of the literature on innovation and diffusion reveals several distinct schools of thought on innovation and why it occurs. One of the most influential North American schools of thought on innovation is led by Everett Rogers. He defines innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption”. This school views innovation and diffusion as different processes. It assumes that there is always the need for innovation. Technology is viewed as an object independent of cultural connotation. Problems of diffusion are associated with the ability of people to communicate and persuade others. From Rogers’ point of view, innovations are extraordinary inventions that are accepted through a process of promotion. It is a question of attitudes and personalities rather than the ability to persuade the prospective adopter (Rogers 1983:11).

Contrary to the Rogers school, Barnett, Agarwal and others have argued that innovation and diffusion are not different processes. According to this school of thought, innovations are ideas which are continually modified as soon as they are accepted. They correspond chronologically to socio-cultural transformation. They mark the beginning of the diffusion process and the decision of prospective adopters is based on prudence rather than influence (Agarwal, 1983). An early advocate of this school stated that whenever an innovation takes place there is a synthesis of two or more factors to make the diffusion process more complete (Barnett 1953:181). The second step in the innovation process according to this school is the development of ideas. This paper agrees with the second school of thought that innovation and diffusion are not different processes but that innovation is the beginning of the process of diffusion. The assumptions in this theory are that the history and culture of a people, the political and economic context within which they operate and the organizational framework within which they reason, discuss issues and perform tasks affect the process of innovation and diffusion (“What is an Innovation and Why Does One Happen?”, n.d)

2. Methodology

The research is an illustrative case study of *Nwaba* music in Ghana. It is a qualitative descriptive research that utilizes the instance of the Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble to familiarize African music scholars with the little known *Nwaba* music and to show what the situation on *Nwaba* music looks like in Ghana.

Textual meaning of *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) music was analyzed within the theoretical framework of the integrated approach to the problem of meaning in African music using the espoused by Nketia (Nketia, 1962, 1973, 1976, 2005). The songs collected out of the *Nwaba* performances were all instrumental but most of the songs had words and so it was possible to read meaning of the songs beyond the sounds.

The methods of primary data collection used in the study were observation, and contact methods. Observations included interpretation. It showed how people behaved and interacted in public. It was the gathering of primary data by the researcher’s direct observation of people in the actions of their situations in life. The plan involved the systematic gathering and analysis of verbal and nonverbal actions as they occurred in a variety of situations (Bottorff, 2004). The contact methods were the use of the telephone and focus group interview. The secondary data involved a review of literature on the use of shells for music and communication.

The study employed the unstructured and the non-participant observation during the performance by the *Nwaba* instrumental Ensemble. Unstructured observation was the unplanned, informal, watching and recording of behaviours as they occurred in a natural environment. It was naturalistic observation in real-world settings: an attempt to observe things as they were, without any intervention or manipulation of the situation by the researcher.

The focus group interview with the Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Group followed immediately after their performance. The interview was administered to the group to find answers to the origin of the group, how the instruments came about and music made out it. How to ensure that the legacy of group remained for posterity to enjoy was a very important point in the discussion.

3. The Case of Axim *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) Instrumental Music

My fieldwork on the search for *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) ensemble in Ghana started from Sekondi-Takoradi on April 22, 2013 where we were directed to a village nearby but that did not yield any results. We came to Cape Coast where we had some assurances of meeting

a *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) musical group. That information too was not correct. We were then directed to Saltpond but it turned out to be *MmInson* ensemble (Elephant Ivory Musical Ensemble). Further enquiries brought Sefwi Wiawso into the picture. We actually interacted with the leader of the group but a last-minute disappointment prevented us from meeting them. Aburi also came into the picture but locating the group failed. Finally, we turned back to Sekondi-Takoradi where we had an assurance of meeting *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) musical group at Axim.

We drove to Axim on December 5, 2013 to find a disintegrated snail shell instrumental ensemble. The group agreed to organize a performance on December 27, 2013. On the said date, we travelled to Axim and witnessed a performance of the Upper Axim *Nwaba* instrumental group at the Axim beach. We observed, took pictures and did an audio-video recording of the performance. It came out of the focus group interview that the group was formed in 1972 but collapsed in 1993 as a result of competition from a local Brass Band.

From the focus group interview with the Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble, it came to light that the basis for the creation of *Nwaba* as a musical Ensemble was the use of the pawpaw stalks as musical instruments by the children of Axim. The use of pawpaw stalks in making music by children is well known across the world. Agawu discussed the music language of Northern Ewe children of Ghana and the modes of meaning in rhythm involving spoken language, movement and song. He highlighted their exposure to a variety of musical activities during their formative years through learning from other children and imitation of adults. The unlimited ingenuity of Northern Ewe children in the construction musical instruments was stressed. These included the use of stretched skins over tin cans as membranophones and the transformation of pawpaw stalks into aerophones with the aid of spider webs (Agawu, 1995). My childhood recollections on the pawpaw stalk flute is that it is made by cutting both ends of a pawpaw stalk and covering one end with a spider's web. A notch is made on one side of the stalk. Sound is produced by blowing through the uncovered end of the stalk as the notch is covered and uncovered by the finger.

4. Innovative Use of *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) In Making Music

4.1. Construction of *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) Musical Instruments

The snails are picked from the Axim forest and extracted from the shells. The shells are dried in the sun for about a week after which the tip of the snail shells' spire are cut open and sealed off with polythene rubber. Originally spiders' web, were obtained from the corners of people's rooms, and used to seal off the spire of the shells. Obtaining the spider's web is becoming a problem because of the use of insecticides in spraying rooms. A notch is made on the side of each of the shells facing the hollow from which the snail was extracted. Sound is produced by blowing through the notches. Shown below, is a picture of constructed *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) musical instruments from the Axim *Nwaba* instrumental performance:



Plate 1: Constructed *Nwaba* (Snail Shell Musical Instruments)

The construction of the *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) musical instruments is modelled after the pawpaw stalk flute and the sea shell musical instrument. In both the pawpaw stalk flute and the *Nwaba* musical instruments one end of the instrument is cut open and covered with a spider's web or polythene rubber. A notch is made on only side of both instruments. While the pawpaw stalk flute is made from fresh pawpaw stalks, the *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) instruments are dried for some time before the instrument is made. Sound is produced from the pawpaw flute by blowing into the open end of the pawpaw stalk but in the case of the *Nwaba* musical instrument sound is produced by blowing into the notch. The pawpaw stalk flute lasts for a few days but the snail shell musical instruments may last for years.

4.2. Experimentation and Building of Repertoire of Songs

It was through the ingenuity of a chief fisherman, by name Nana Atta-Gyan, that the *Nwaba* Sextet instrumental group was formed in 1972. He brought a big seashell home from one of his fishing expeditions. They were all surprised when they heard a very loud hornlike sound when the chief fisherman blew into an opening at the side of the seashell. From that time on, whenever someone was missing during a sea expedition, a need had to be satisfied or danger was encountered on the sea, the seashell was blown to inform the townsfolk so they could give a helping hand.

The chief fisherman suggested that since the pawpaw stalk lasted for a few days they could use the seashell in its place to provide the music for the ensemble as the shell could last for many years. He brought some of the shells from his sea expeditions for the anxious youths to try out. After experimenting for some time, members of the group were able to produce musical sounds from the shells. Since the seashells were difficult to get from the sea, he further suggested that they used the local land snail shells, which were much more in abundance in the Axim forest. Further experimentation was done with the snail shell based on the knowledge from the sea shells. The group started building up a repertoire of songs made up of traditional Nzema tunes, local Ghanaian popular and religious tunes, patriotic songs, hymns and popular Western tunes.

Below is a picture of the Upper Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble.



Plate 2: Musical Performance by the Upper Axim *Nwaba* Sextet Ensemble

4.3. Formation of the Upper Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Band

At the time the Upper Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Group started, there used to be a very popular Brass Band in one of the suburbs in Axim called *Akyinim*. When the Brass Band collapsed, people in town had no other choice than to hire the services of the *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) instrumental band. They were invited to funerals and other social activities. Teachers hired the group for their get-together and end-of-year activities. The Fancy dress groups also hired their services. The Collapse of Brass Band in Axim gradually gave birth to the formation of the Upper Axim *Nwaba* Instrumental Band. At the height of its glory, the Band was made up of constructed *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) musical instruments, castanets, the bell, the bass drum, the side drum and the alto or tenor drum known as *Kyinkyin*. The bass drum was constructed by sending an iron barrel to the blacksmith who cut open the ends and covered them with sheepskin or cattle hide. The other drums were made in a similar way.

The absence of the Brass Band during the time of festivities was quite disturbing to the people of Axim so from time to time they went outside and hired one to perform for them. The elders decided that there was the need to have a permanent Brass Band. Therefore, finally they got a new set of Brass Band instruments for the townfolk. This went a very long way in gradually collapsing the *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) Instrumental Band in Axim. By the year 1993, after twenty-one years of scintillating instrumental band music, the once vibrant *Nwaba* (Snail shells) Band in Axim finally collapsed.

4.4. Form, Structure and Innovative Interpretation of Music

The *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental band adopted and adapted the style of the Brass Band and Fancy Dress instrumental music and dance to suit their instrumental resources. The performers could neither read nor write music but learned and played by the ear. The lead instrumentalist introduced the tunes before all the other instrumentalists joined the performance. Harmonies were in the unison breaking occasionally into 2, 3 or 4 parts in consonance with the theory of African music. Some of the introductions were brief while others were long. In a few of the songs, all the performers joined in the introduction or played a short coda after the end of a song. The group performed their own 'version' of the songs. The general structure of the songs was in the cantor (*dwomtufo*) and chorus (*ngyedo*) form as shown in the traditional Nzema song below:

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "BLEWIE KOFI (Nzema folk tune)". The score is arranged in two systems. The first system contains six staves labeled "Nwaba 1" through "Nwaba 6". The second system contains five staves labeled "Cnt. 1" through "Cnt. 5" and a final staff labeled "Tbn.". The music is written in a key with one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 6/8. The Nwaba parts are primarily melodic, while the Contrabass parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment.

Figure 1: Blewie Kofi, a song in honour of a god in Axim

This is the only song in the collection which is in the Mixolydian modal scale as shown below:

The image displays the A mixolydian mode in D Major. It consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It shows the notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, and C. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It shows the notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, and C. The title "A mixolydian in D Major" is centered above the staves.

Figure 2: The A mixolydian mode in D Major

The tunes were analyzed using concepts in African music and Western theories and methods of analysis. However, most of the songs had words which threw more light on the meaning of the songs beyond the sounds. The range of keys in the melody of the notated songs was from B below Middle C to B^b below high C as shown below:

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It displays a single note on the second line of the staff, which is B below Middle C. The staff ends with a double bar line.

Figure 3: Tone range of Nwaba Instrumental Melodies

When the performers were asked to play individually, the soprano part played a song which extended the compass to F above high C in the song below:

ASEDA YE WODZE
(Thanks belong to You)

The musical score for 'Aseda ye wodze' is presented in three staves, all in treble clef and 6/8 time. The key signature is E major (three sharps). The first staff, labeled 'Nwaba', begins at measure 1. The second staff, also labeled 'Nwaba', begins at measure 6. The third staff, labeled 'Nwaba', begins at measure 13. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and slurs.

Figure 4: *Aseda ye wodze*, a song in honour of God Almighty

5. Discussion

The Fancy dress involved the holding of carnivals by masqueraders with Brass Band music. European merchants who traded along the Ghanaian coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were believed to have introduced the fancy dress idea (Ampomah, 1997). Playing in the style of instrumental music with the integration of band and dancing was a borrowed idea by the *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble from the Brass Bands and Masquerade groups. It was, therefore, quite understandable why the Fancy Dress groups in Axim would substitute the Brass Band with the services of the *Nwaba* (Snail shells) groups since the *Nwaba* Band performed in the style of the Brass Band.

The *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental Band adopted and adapted the style of the Brass Band and Fancy Dress instrumental music and dance to suit their instrumental resources. It, however, developed a unique performance style since the compass of keys the instruments could play was very limited in comparison with Brass instruments. Apart from one song in D Major, the range of keys of the notated songs from the performance was from G to B Major. Since the group learned and played by the ear, it was sometimes difficult for it to play in tune. In the Finale notation, the five upper parts played in a transposing key of E Major in the song *Bllwie Kofi* so the concert key was A Mixolydian in D major. Since the group could not play in tune the lead instrumentalist moved from D Major to E Major and from there to F Major and finally to F[#] Major. This song exemplifies the cantor and chorus form of the *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental music. Similarly the Soprano solo song, *Aseda ye wodze* (Thanks belong to You), begins in D major moves to E^b Major and back to E Major. The tone range of the *Nwaba* instrumental melodies was from A below Middle C to A^b below High C but when the soprano soloist played alone he was able to raise the tone to F Natural key above High C. This strengthens the possibility of experimenting with the instrument to play higher keys.

The *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental Band was active from 1972 until 1993 when it collapsed as a result of competition from a newly established Brass Band by the people of Axim. Fortunately, when I arrived in Axim on December 5, 2013, the core members of the *Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble were in town. They organized themselves and performed on December 27, 2013 to the amazement of all. The group has been revived as a result of this research.

6. Conclusion

Nwaba (Snail shell) instrumental groups are contemporary traditional Ghanaian ensembles. The research is an illustrative case study of *Nwaba* music in Ghana. It is a qualitative descriptive research that utilizes the instance of the *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental Ensemble to familiarize African music scholars with the little known *Nwaba* music and to show what the situation on *Nwaba* music looks like in Ghana. The *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental ensemble performs traditional Ghanaian tunes, local Ghanaian popular and religious tunes, patriotic songs, hymns and popular Western tunes. Data for the study was collected between August, 2013 and December, 2013. The purpose of the study is to explore the innovative ways the ensemble uses *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) in making music.

The innovative use of *Nwaba* (Snail Shells) in making music could be summarized under the following: Construction of *Nwaba* musical instruments, the experimentation and building of repertoire of songs, the formation of the Upper *Axim Nwaba* Instrumental Band, and the form, structure and innovative interpretation of music.

The group was established in 1972. It served the Axim community in a number of ways such as performances at funerals, get-together activities and the celebration of carnivals by masquerade groups until it collapsed in 1993. It has been revived as a result of this research.

7. Recommendation for Further Research

Further research is needed on the construction of the *nwaba* musical instruments, the range of keys they could play and which of them are transposing instruments. The research is an illustrative case study of *Nwaba* music in Ghana. There is therefore the need to study more *nwaba* instrumental ensembles in Ghana to find out the similarities and differences in order to place the findings of this study in a broader context and secure the widest validity for its findings.

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