

# **Sustaining the Mbula Music Heritage for Development in Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Music has traditionally played an important role in African tradition and culture. The many centuries of western cultural imperialism has left many negative impacts on African music. With the increasing wave of urbanization and western influence, traditional music although still practiced have decreased. New ways of singing are emerging with little or no significant African elements. This in its sense is gradually eroding and encapsulating the indigenous African music, which is stylistically distinct from the music or other cultures from the west. The aim of this paper is to identify values and significance of African music through its heritage while using Mbula ethnic group as an example. The paper also wishes to examine how values in music through African heritage can be used in developing the Mbula people, Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The study employed historical survey design. Both primary and secondary sources were gleaned to strengthen the study. The findings reveal that there are significant values in African music that can be sustained and used in our desire for all-round development for an individual and the African continent at large.*

Key Words: Mbula, Music, Festival, Heritage

## **Introduction**

African continent has vast human and natural resources yet to be fully utilized for the development of the continent and the world at large. The paper intends to survey the values of African music using the *Mbula* musical heritage as an example for development in Africa. It will also examine how these values can be utilized for development among *Mbula* people, Nigeria and the continent at large. The idea of development is a multi-faceted phenomenon. However, in which ever way development is defined, it is unarguably aimed at the human person. This is corroborated by Shonekan (2005: ii), where he asserts:

Development is people-centered. It wears a human face and it is about improved standards of living for the vast majority of the masses, improved access to communication network, electricity, health, education, nutrition, healthy water and eradication of poverty among others (ii).

At an individual level Rodney (9) also asserts that development implies the

acquisition of increased skill and capacity for instance, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being.

### **African music**

The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (1960) defines music as "an art of making pleasing combinations of sounds in rhythm, harmony and counterpoint; the sounds and composition so made written or printed signs representing these sounds". However Dorcell in Blacking (4) using super-stimulus theory assert:

Music is a super-stimulus for the perception of musicality, where musicality is a perceived property of speech. Musicality refers to the property by music that determines how 'good' it is, how strong an emotional effect it has and how much we enjoy listening to it.

Blackening further extols the musicality of all members of African society who are able to perform and listen intelligently to their own indigenous music.

African music is the way indigenous Africans maintain their culture through songs and use of other instruments. The composition of songs and manner of expression in singing are determined largely by their hermeneutical methodology, culture and experiences (Felix 2008: vii). Felix (2008: 54) further corroborates that music has an identity much the same way, as people, because the meaning of music is in people not in the sounds. The music and songs performed and listen to reflect our cultural identity, interests, values and beliefs.

In the pre-colonial Africa music was used to express both good and evil i.e. different forms of indigenous music were use to summon ancestral spirits for benevolent purposes as well as to prevent indecent behavior among listeners. Music is still in use in almost every aspect of African life especially in religious ceremonies, festivals and social rituals. It is also use as an educational tool for memory retention, light entertainment, comforting the grieving, tales and for communication. Music also serves as a powerful symbol of social integration and identity (Felix 2008: 79-80)

Garnes (2014: 2) asserts music has traditionally played an important role in African culture. It is essential in representing the strong African heritage and its importance can be seen in many aspects of their culture. African cultures encompassed music into their everyday lives. Dance, story-telling and religious practices are all grounded on music of the culture. He further asserts, music is especially vital in African dance, so much so that in many African cultures including the *Mbula* ethnic group, there are no two words in the language used to distinguish between the two. Essentially, when one uses the term in reference to African culture, it should include the idea of dance. Unlike many western

civilizations, in the African culture, music and dance means so much more than something done just to have a good time. It has a much greater purpose. In the African culture dance is usually done by a community or group and for a specific purpose. The idea of utilitarianism suggests that the value of a thing depends on its use and not its beauty. In many ways, African music is a utilitarian function used in vital aspects of life such as child's naming ceremony, initiation rites, agricultural activities, national ceremonies, war times, religious ceremonies and ceremonies for dead among others.

Thus, music in Africa is a way of life and not just a form of entertainment. African music is also used in vital aspects of life. African culture is deeply rooted in its music and as well as struggles that were overcome. It is used to communicate, pass literature, welcome heroes among other ritual functions. There are equally diverse genres of music in Africa like hymns, and dirge that create mood and feeling for the occasion (Garnes 2014: 3).

### **The *Mbula***

The *Mbula* occupy the region to the east of the Benue River from Numan in Adamawa State. The *Mbula* land is traversed by River Benue and River Gongola and their tributaries as well as numerous small lakes that are found all over the kingdom. Thus, one part of the kingdom is in the north bank and the other part is on the south bank of the River Benue. The land occupies the low flood plains which gradually slope down to the Benue valley. The vegetation is relatively rich as there is always grass cover (Abubakar 1970: 5). Borrong the administrative headquarters of *Mbula* people is located approximately along latitude 12°E and longitude 9.5°W. It is about 24 kilometers east of Numan and about 55 kilometers west of Yola, the Adamawa State Capital (Doli 1988: 1).

Mijah (2008: 13) further states that the population that make-up the *Mbula* ethnic group are found in three local government areas of Adamawa State. These include Demsa, Numan and Girei local government areas. Although there could be many other people and groups who speak *Mbula* related language within and outside Adamawa State our study shall be limited to the population of *Mbula* people that are found in these Local Government Areas. The reasons for these are first, it is within this geographical expanse that the ethnic group known as *Mbula* is found. Secondly, most of the written records on the *Mbula* tradition, religion and culture use the geographical area of Demsa and some parts of Girei and Numan local governments to refer to this ethnic group. (See appendix I, II & III for geographical location of *Mbula* people in the North-eastern Nigeria).

### **The Classification**

*Mbula* language belongs to the Bantu. The *Mbula* language is therefore, Bantoid both in sound and meaning (Meek 1931: 57).

### The *Mbula* Music

The definition of music given earlier by Garnes is a true reflection of music among the *Mbula* people. The cultivation of music is integrated with dance that stimulates affective and psychomotor response. Music is part of the *Mbula* people right from pre-colonial period to modern times. Whatever is the social status, every *Mbula* man is involved in the music of the community. In *Mbula* land there are many song composers and dancers who are gifted. Any person can also compose a song because he or she has a message to pass onto the public (Zebulun, interview).

*Mbula* music mostly exhibited in songs and dance is traditionally upheld. There are songs (*ngyal*) with their corresponding dance (*ngwam*). There are also different categories of *Mbula* songs which range from religious, philosophical, economic and social songs. For example, there are songs that are sung to express and appreciate the beauty by nature. The songs are referred to as *ngyalgbotok-gbotok*. Similarly, there are abusive songs which are sarcastic and could at times be directed at a stubborn individual, notorious witch group or sometimes the whole village or community. The songs sometimes come in the form of challenges or competition in the use of abusive language known as *kpoli*. Abuse songs are either an attack on non-identifiable and unnamed persons through indirect and anonymous criticism or personal and direct abuse of individuals (Kastfelt 1994: 151). Since such songs are sometimes directed at innocent persons, they were viewed as negative and destructive to the psyche of any individual targeted. They however, have their uses in stimulating linguistic creativity, prosaic language, poetry and preserving history (Mijah, interview).

There are also songs for joking relations among various clans in *Mbula* land known as *gyajam-ndoro* which also serves as catharsis. People from different clans are engaged in making jokes and provocative statements which may sometimes lead to the composition and singing of songs. Sometimes it is a device to put aggression under control. (Kedewe, interview).

Many social activities of the *Mbula* people are characterized with songs. Below, are tables capturing the zeal and the enthusiasm of the *Mbula* people in the use of songs:

S	o	n	g	s	D	a	n	c	e
<i>NgyalNgala</i> (secret cult songs)					<i>NgwamNgala</i>				
<i>NgyalZozang</i> (feminine songs sung during moonlight plays)					<i>NgwamZozang</i>				
<i>NgyalTsari</i> (songs during rainy season)					<i>NgwamTsari</i>				

<i>NgyalTawa</i> (songs during fishing)	<i>NgwamTawa</i>
<i>NgyalBombo</i> (hunting songs)	<i>NgwamBombo</i>
<i>NgyalGbotok-gbotok</i> (song appreciating beauty)	<i>NgwamGbotok-gbotok</i>
<i>NgyalMurum</i> (song in praise of a chief)	<i>NgwamMurum</i>
<i>NgyalNoki</i> (song of praise to any person)	<i>NgyalNoki</i>
<i>N g y a l D i g b o l</i>	<i>NgwamDigbol</i>
<i>NgyalKewera</i> (wrestling songs)	<i>NgwamKewara</i>
<i>NgyalKpakyaru</i> (songs for appreciating beauty and handsomeness sung by girls during moonlight)	<i>NgwamKpakyaru</i>
<i>N g w a r n T w a l k i r u</i>	<i>NgwamNgala</i>

Sources: Leneke, (103) and Dubi, (interview).

**Table 1: Songs and Corresponding Dance**

**Table II Songs for activities**

<b>S</b>	<b>o</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>g</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>v</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>y</b>
<i>N g y a l E u l o</i>				Song for baby-sitting							
<i>N g y a l g o</i>				Song for grinding							
<i>N g y a l L w a - m u n o</i>				Song after war							
<i>N g y a l L w a - n d u r i y a</i>				Song during hippopotamus hunting							
<i>N g y a l K w a r - w a r u</i>				Song during carving canoe in the forest							
<i>N g y a l K u r r - n g u n</i>				Song for lifting firewood in the forest							
<i>N g y a l p w a n o</i>				Song for gathering harvest in the forest							
<i>N g y a l k a n a</i>				A d i r g e							
<i>N g y a l R y a</i>				F a r m i n g s o n g							
<i>N g y a l G i b i</i>				J o g g i n g s o n g							
<i>NgyalNjanzo (female cult)</i>				The Njanzo cult song							
<i>N g y a l t w a l o</i>				Song for harvest lifting							
<i>N g y a l k e b a n</i>				Song for meditation and lamentations.							

Source: Leneke, (103).

Apart from the classifications of the songs above in a tabular form, There are also *ngala* songs which are sacred. Igoil (202) describe sacred songs as those genres whose conceptual contents would be directed to the agents associated with turbulent atmosphere conditions and ritual ceremonies.

### **Contextualising Mbula Values in Music for Development**

*Ngala* is a name of a secret cult in *Mbula* traditional society. The word *ngala* literally means "crab". Figuratively, it means "wisdom". The membership of the group is derived from both the youth and the aged. They practice certain rituals with some aura of mystery and are believed to see into the spirit world. They sometimes perform duties of a native doctor by curing spirit-related sicknesses. They are believed to drive evil spirits out of homes and villages. In doing this songs normally characterize the process of exorcism. The members give total allegiance and are made to swear to an oath of secrecy. They don't reveal their activities and they detest any form of other religions especially Christianity. The *ngala* music and dance is normally exhibited after the initiation of new members or funeral of any late colleague (Mijah 2008: 79).

The *ngala* members dance with gourds containing pebbles which are shaken to make some marching sounds to rhyme with the movement of their bodies and songs. They dance with their black, well-built, torso shining (Leneke, 93). This is the most interesting part of the *ngala* for the non-members. Dance styles and songs of praise for the cult and the efficacy of its secrecy is upheld to high esteem so as to encourage new-initiates. Most of the content of their songs are defenses of the activities of the cult shrewded in secrecy and total hate for Christianity. They dare anybody who challenges their traditional status and role in the community. In fact because of the high discipline in their membership a traitor is killed through torture and the relations have no right to question the death of a cult member. This is also applicable to any on-looker or community member who reveals their secret. Tapping of their songs and snapping of pictures during their festivities is a taboo. If found guilty, the victims would face the consequences

similar to that of the cult member.

### **Contextualising Development Mbula Values in Music for Development**

It is unarguable that *Mbula* music and dance is unequalled among the surrounding communities in Adamawa State. At different places and stages especially during festivities and social activities among various communities, army and police barracks, *Mbula* songs and dance have characterized proper development of the affective and psychomotor domain as a result of their dance style. It is important at this point to stress that one of the musicians who encouraged and gave proper value to Christian music in Nigeria, Panam Percy Paul is an indigene of *Mbula* land. The splendid display of his talents in gospel music has earned him honours at local, national and international fora. (Paul, interview). This goes to display his quality and development of his affective and psychomotor domain. The climax of the effect of *Mbula* culture in this music is seen in the release of his album "Master of the Universe" which turns many worshippers on worship days into frenzy and dancing mood.

Songs and music in *Mbula* land also serve as catharsis- process of releasing strong feelings, a way of providing relief from anger and suffering or pain. This value is utilized in the period of plagues, burial ceremonies, festivals and other social activities. As relayed by Echezona (1978: 224) *Mbula* music is appropriately used on different occasions and festivities. In its performance and communicative roles, it fuses both performer and participant into an indivisible unit and promote cooperate feeling and leads itself admirably for development (Igoil 1977: 208). Songs also regulate the moral conduct of the member of *Mbula* society. Songs expose the evil and bad deeds of members of the community where they cannot be reached directly.

Songs have equally boosted economic and social activities within the *Mbula* traditional Society. In every economic activity such as fishing, hunting, farming, hewing firewood, making of canoes etc, singing songs are fully accompanied to give morale and strengthen the participants in their activities. The two tables presented in the earlier part of this paper can attest to this.

The *Ngala* cult had/has a discipline and mechanism of social control over its members and the entire community through their music which encourage stability and communal cooperation. The genres of songs among the *ngala* are directed towards mystical powers and cosmic forces which describe their religious views. Sometimes songs are sung to appease the gods in the course of any danger and pestilence for the benefit of the cult members and the entire community.

The traditional healing process of the *ngala* cult in the traditional *Mbula* society can be fully utilized for African medicare. There are diseases and health related ailments that have defied modern medicine like witchcraft and demonic attack which the *ngala* cult members have control over through their healing songs. Apart from other traditional medications, songs play vital role in exorcism and healing process.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has clearly demonstrated that African continent has a vast human and natural resources yet to be fully utilized for the development of the continent and the world at large. The paper therefore encourages the use of native music styles. Thus, the *Mbula* culture and heritage in music can undoubtedly be useful as an example for development in Nigeria and

Africa as whole.

However, following colonialism, there were disruptions of social and natural activities which came as a result of modernization (Igoil 1977: 207). Reality and experience have proved that music moves through a process of change because it is dynamic. There are a number of situations that pull culture through changes and there is in-escapably cause for the musicians to modify their music to fit a particular context. But this situations do not entirely put the values attained by our traditional music to the background. There is need for a wholistic approach to maintain and sustain our cultural and traditional music styles, instruments and values for the development of modern Africa.

This paper started with an introduction by giving the meaning development at the individual and societal level, meaning and value of African music as well as giving a brief identity of the *Mbula* people with their music. The value of music in *Mbula* is clearly shown through their world views in *ngala* cult and various social and economic activities.



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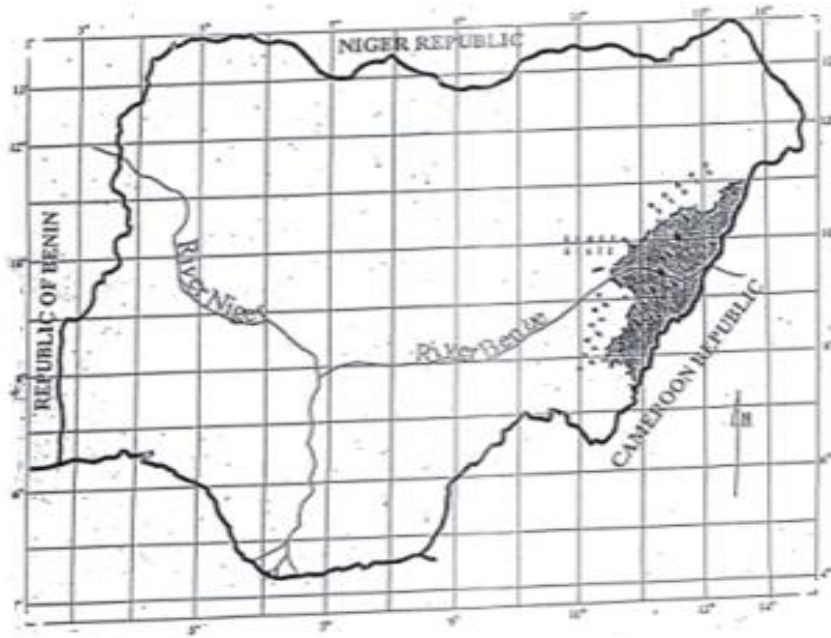
### Oral Interview

- Dubi, Ensley Age: 56 years interviewed on 4th July, 2014
- Kedewe Andrew, Age: 61 years interviewed on 1 ih May, 2014.
- Mijah Elias age: 93 years interviewed 15th May, 2014.
- Paul, Panam Percy age: 57 years interviewed on s" June, 2014
- Zebulun, Boniface, age: 60 years interviewed on is" June, 2014

**APPENDIX I**

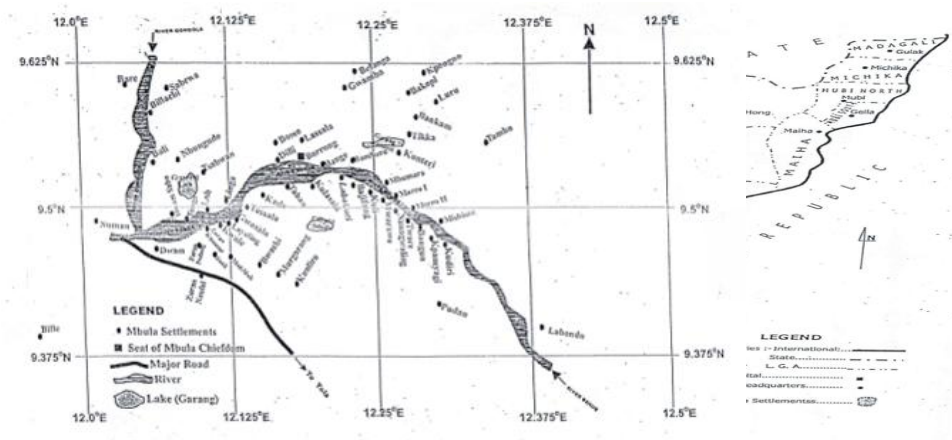
Map of Nigeria Showing the Location of Adamawa State

Source: Mijah, (20)



**APPENDIX II**

Map of Adamawa State Showing the 21 Local Government Areas  
Source: Mijah, (21).

**APPENDIX III**

Sketch  
Showing Mbula  
Settlements  
Source: Mijah,

