



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Egwu Ogene: *The Heartbeat of Igbo Culture and Music*

By Idenze Ezeme

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 6 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

NO FEATURED IMAGE IN THE RECORD

The article carries no featured image, so this panel is left as an honest empty space rather than filled with one.

Ozi Ikòrò
EGWU OGENE

Egwu Ogene: The Heartbeat of Igbo Culture and Music

By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Egwu Ogene, which means “bell music,” is a traditional type of music from the Enugu people in Southeastern Nigeria. This music gets its name from the ogene, a metal bell that plays a vital role in the performance. In the past, Egwu Ogene was used mainly for rituals, especially those related to spirits. Over time, it became a form of entertainment.

01

Origins and History of Egwu Ogene Dance

Egwu Ogene is believed to have started in Aguleri, a town in Anambra State, Southeastern Nigeria. Oral stories say that Odili Chukwuemeka from Eziagulu-Otu Aguleri created the music. Later, Peter Ofordile and Ayanti Aruonu, also from Aguleri, helped make it more popular.

The ogene instrument was not always used for music. Long ago, hunters used it to call their dogs in the forest. Later, people started using it to send messages in the community. Today, it is a key part of Igbo traditional music.

The ogene is a traditional metal gong widely used by the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. It serves as both a musical instrument and a tool for communication. Traditionally, it is made from iron or bronze and is struck with a wooden or metal stick to produce a sharp, resonant sound.

The ogene is believed to have originated as a form of ekwe (wooden slit drum) replacement or complement, evolving over time as Igbo blacksmithing techniques advanced. Some oral traditions suggest that the instrument was initially crafted by the skilled Igbo blacksmiths (umunna ndi nko), who played a central role in metalwork and tool-making.

Another perspective links the ogene to the influence of the Igbo-Ukwu civilisation (9th–10th century CE), known for its advanced bronze and copper metallurgy. The craftsmanship seen in Igbo-Ukwu artifacts suggests that the techniques used to make the ogene could date back to that period.

The exact town of origin of the ogene is difficult to pinpoint, as it is deeply rooted in Igbo metalworking traditions, which were widespread across different communities. However, certain Igbo groups, particularly those historically known for blacksmithing, are often associated with its development.

One strong candidate is Awka, the capital of present-day Anambra State. Awka has long been known for its skilled blacksmiths (umunna ndi nko), who crafted tools, weapons, and musical instruments, including the ogene. The Awka blacksmiths travelled across Igboland and beyond, trading and spreading their metalworks, which could explain the widespread use of the ogene.

Other communities with strong blacksmithing traditions, such as Nri, Nsukka, and Abiriba, might have also played a role in refining or popularising the ogene. The influence of the Igbo-Ukwu civilization, famous for its bronze and copper work, further suggests that the knowledge of metal gongs like the ogene dates back centuries.

While its exact origin remains uncertain, the ogene is undeniably an indigenous Igbo invention, developed through the region's longstanding metallurgical traditions.

The Nature of the Ogene Musical Instrument

The Ogene instrument belongs to the struck idiophone class. It has become a symbol of Igbo culture and is one of the most popular instruments in traditional Igbo society. It is used for entertainment, information sharing, and even spiritual communication.

The Ogene is created using local technology by skilled blacksmiths in places like Awka, Abiriba, Nkwerre, and Igboukwu. These blacksmiths are experts in working with iron.

Several communities in Igboland claim to be the first to use the ogene in musical entertainment. However, oral traditions suggest that the people of Aguleri, in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, were the earliest to use the instrument for entertainment. This assertion is strengthened by the early emergence of distinct ogene styles such as Ogene Anuka and Ogene Okeokpa, both of which trace their roots to Aguleri and are believed to predate many other known ogene traditions.

Nzewi (2000, p.25) highlights the significance of Ogene Anuka, particularly its use of the bell, classifying it as an instrument of the struck idiophone family. According to him:

The bell is widely distributed in Africa, but is most prominent in the music of the West African region. It is made of iron by specialist blacksmiths. The music style in which it figures originated in Aguleri (a farming/fishing Igbo community on the Omambala River basin of southeastern Nigeria), but the construction of these unique bells is a specialty of craftsmen in Awka, an iron-smithing Igbo community some 70 km away from Aguleri. Migration within Igboland has made it possible for blacksmiths to settle in the performance community of the Omambala river basin. But the Ogene Anuka performers still travel to Awka to order their instruments from noted experts.

This connection between Aguleri and Awka highlights a longstanding collaboration in which musical innovation and craftsmanship cross paths, with Aguleri as the cultural origin of the ogene performance style, and Awka as the source of the specialised instruments that make

the music possible.

The Ogene is made from iron by blacksmiths, and the style of music that uses it started in Aguleri, a community known for farming and fishing along the Omambala River in southeastern Nigeria. The blacksmiths who create these unique bells live in Awka, a community about 70 km from Aguleri, where ironworking is a speciality.

The Ogene can be made as a single instrument or in pairs. It is usually struck with a stick to make a sound. Depending on how it is hit, the Ogene can produce different sounds, depending on the player's intention.

In Igbo land, the Ogene and Alo are shaped similarly, but they differ in size. The Ogene is smaller and held in the hand, while the Alo is larger and must be placed on the ground when played. The Alo, being the bigger version, is often used in dances or performances, either solo or in groups. Dance troupes like Mkpokiti and Atilogwu often use the Alo in their performances.

Cultural Importance of Egwu Ogene

Egwu Ogene is very important in Igbo culture. Ogene is played at weddings, baby-naming ceremonies, funerals, and new yam festivals. Besides entertainment, this music is used in religion, healing, and even during wars. It also tells stories and teaches values through its lyrics and beats.

For the Enugu people, Egwu Ogene is more than just music. It is part of their identity. Many young people in Enugu, also known as 042 indigenes, love and connect with this music. The dance keeps Igbo culture alive.

Musical Instruments and Performance

Egwu Ogene uses different percussion instruments, including:

- Ogene (metal bell): The main instrument that sets the beat.

- Ekwe (wooden drum): Adds deeper sounds to the music.
- Udu (clay pot drum): Gives a bass-like effect.
- Ichaka (rattle/shaker): Provides a steady background rhythm.
- Drums: Various drums make the music richer and more exciting.

Traditionally, men play the instruments, while both men and women take part in the dance. The performances are full of energy and rhythm.

With modern technology, Egwu Ogene has reached more people beyond Nigeria. New musicians and dancers have changed the style to fit today's audience while keeping its traditional roots. Ejyk Nwamba is one of the artists who has helped bring Egwu Ogene to the digital world. Through social media and online streaming, many young people are rediscovering this music.

Egwu Ogene has also influenced other music styles, like Afrobeats and Highlife, mixing traditional Igbo sounds with modern beats. This has helped spread Igbo culture to different parts of the world. Egwu Ogene is not just a dance or music; it is a symbol of Igbo culture. From its early days in rituals to its use in fitness and modern music, Egwu Ogene continues to play an essential role in keeping traditions alive, bringing people together, and promoting good health. As times change, this music remains a strong and meaningful part of Igbo life. Whether played in villages, cities, or online, the sound of the ogene bell will always be a powerful connection to Igbo heritage.

References:

- Ogbuehi, I. (2019). The communication significance of Ogene instrument in traditional Igbo society. ResearchGate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
