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Igbo Musical Instruments : *A lost Art :Ichaka*

By Maduagwu Nzubechi

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Ichaka. Photo credit: Esty

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IGBO MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Igbo Musical Instruments : A lost Art :Ichaka

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Sound classification The Ichaka is made of gourd or calabash loosely covered with beads. When tapped or shaken it produces a rattling sound to compliment other instruments. When you shake an Ichaka, the beads force the walls of the gourd to vibrate, which is what makes it an idiophone. How it's Made: The Ichaka The...



Ichaka with cowries around it. Photo credit; Music Africa Awake

01

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02

How it's Made: The Ichaka

- **The Vessel (The Body):** The base is a dried calabash or gourd. The fruit is harvested, the pulp is removed through a small hole at the neck, and the shell is dried until it becomes hard and resonant.
- **The Net (The Jacket):** A lattice or mesh of interwoven twine or nylon thread is knitted to fit the size of the gourd. It must be loose enough to allow the beads to move freely but tight enough to stay on the vessel.
- **The Striking Elements:** Historically, cowrie shells or dried seeds were used. In modern versions, colorful plastic or glass beads are common. These are woven into the intersections of the net.
- **The Finish:** The neck of the gourd serves as the handle. It is often left plain or wrapped in cloth to provide a better grip for the performer during high-energy sets.

03

Significance: The Rhythmic Spirit

- **Rhythmn:** The Ichaka provides the “shimmer” in Igbo music. While the Igba provides the heavy beat, the Ichaka fills the gaps with a constant, high-frequency rattling that drives the tempo.
- **Social & Gender Role:** Traditionally, the Ichaka is often played by women’s groups (umuada or umunwanyi alutara aluta) during social gatherings, weddings, and “August Meetings,” though men also play it in professional ensembles.
- **Physical Expression:** Playing the Ichaka is a visual performance. The player often tosses the gourd in the air or strikes it against their palm or thigh to create syncopated accents that correspond with the dancers’ hip movements.
- **Symbolism:** Because it uses cowrie shells (historical currency), the Ichaka can symbolize wealth and status during traditional ceremonies. Today, beads are used to replace cowries.

04

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Nzubechi is a history, political enthusiast who dabbles into social commentary once in a while



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