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The Trans-Atlantic Legacy: *The Biafran Influence on Jamaican Jonkonnu Music and Cuban Carabali Rhythms*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
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THE TRANS-ATLANTIC LEGACY

The Trans-Atlantic Legacy: The Biafran Influence on Jamaican Jonkonnu Music and Cuban Carabali Rhythms

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Abstract The music of Jamaica's Jonkonnu and Cuba's Carabali reveals a rich legacy influenced by the Biafran Africans forcibly relocated to the Caribbean during the transatlantic slave trade from 1700s to 1830s. Instruments, rhythmic patterns, and cultural practices reflect an indelible connection among Biafra (present-day Nigeria), Jamaica, and Cuba. This article delves into the historical...

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Abstract

The music of Jamaica's Jonkonnu and Cuba's Carabali reveals a rich legacy influenced by the Biafran Africans forcibly relocated to the Caribbean during the transatlantic slave trade from 1700s to 1830s. Instruments, rhythmic patterns, and cultural practices reflect an indelible connection among Biafra (present-day Nigeria), Jamaica, and Cuba. This article delves into the historical migration of musical traditions, particularly Igbo influences, highlighting the shared cultural threads and the adaptation of musical elements such as drums, flutes, and rattles in the Caribbean

jamaican jonkonnu was undoutably most impacted by biafran africans after an influx of importations from 1800-1808. Similarly in cuba, there many captives labeled "carabali" that denotes people leaving slave port calabar, nigeria. These people were apart of efik, igbo, ibibio & ekoi communities. There is a clear connection with all 3 places.

Notice the instruments & rhythmic patterns of igbo music, jamaican jonkonnu music & black cuban carabali music. As seen in jamaica in the 1800's, igbo music starts off gentle, then speeds up or quickens. Shaking/rattling instruments is heard in all 3 songs. Also present, is the use of an iron-like instrument. This is observed in all 3 songs in the next few slides.

to bed. Their music consisted of nothing but Gambys (Eboe drums), Shaky-shokies, and Kitty-katties: the latter is nothing but any flat piece of board beat upon with two sticks, and the former is a bladder with a parcel of pebbles in it. But the

The kity katy is much like the ekwe instrument, which is also played with 2 sticks & is consistant w/ current jonkonnu music



Shaky-shokies can be the yoruba Şèkèrè (shekere) or simply a duplicated patwa word for the movement of the instrument.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

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Introduction

The Jonkonnu festival in Jamaica and the Carabali music in Cuba represent cultural phenomena rooted in African traditions. The transatlantic slave trade facilitated the forced migration of Biafran Africans—primarily the Efik, Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw and Ekoi peoples from Bonny and Calabar in present-day Nigeria to the Americas. This cultural displacement left a lasting impression on music, dance, and festival traditions, reflected in the instruments and rhythmic styles of these regions.

Biafran Africans and Their Cultural Influence

The cultural contributions of the Biafran peoples, particularly the Igbo, to the Caribbean are evident in Jonkonnu festivals and Carabali music. Both traditions exhibit a unique use of instruments, rhythmic styles, and performance rituals that resonate with African origins.

The instruments central to these traditions, such as the ebo drum (likely derived from the Igbo word “igba,” meaning drum), the shaky-shakies (linked to Yoruba “sekere”), and the iron clappers like the ogene bell, mirror those used in Igbo and other Biafran music. The ebo drum is crafted from hollow wood, topped with animal hide, and played in tandem with rattles and flutes to create complex, evolving rhythms.

The ebo drum can be "igba" the onitsha dialect for drum. Also consistant with the jamaican description of the ebo drum, is the animal hide that covers the top.

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JAMAICA.

ebo drum, made of a hollow tree, with a piece of sheepskin stretched over it. Some of the women carried small calabashes with pebbles in them, stuck on short sticks, which they rattled in time to the songs, or rather howls of the musicians. They divided themselves into parties to dance, some before the gom-bays, in a ring, to perform a boléro or a sort of love-dance, as it is called, where the gentlemen occasionally wiped the perspiration off the shining faces of their black beauties, who, in turn, performed the same service to the minstrel. Others performed a sort of pyrrhic before the ebo drummer, beginning gently and gradually quickening their motions, until they

ìgbà l.	n.	drum (general name)
	ìgbà ègèdè	drum in pairs, used by <i>dibjà</i>
	ìgbà ijelè	drum or music for the <i>ijelè</i> masquerade
	ìgbà ogwè	tall standing drum used to play <i>abjà</i> music

Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

04

Rhythmic Parallels Across Cultures

Jonkonnu music in Jamaica begins with gentle rhythms that gradually quicken, a practice similarly observed in traditional Igbo music. The use of rattles (e.g., shaky-shakies) and iron-like clappers is integral to both traditions, creating a syncopated interplay of sounds. The ogene bell, prominent in Igbo culture, is also essential to the Jonkonnu musical ensemble and Cuban Carabali performances.

The inclusion of the oja flute, used in Igbo masquerades, finds a parallel in Jonkonnu flutes, suggesting a shared performative heritage. The combination of percussion, wind instruments, and dynamic rhythms underscores a transatlantic cultural synthesis.

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Cultural Continuity and Transformation

While the transatlantic slave trade disrupted communities, it also facilitated the survival and transformation of cultural practices. The rhythmic complexity, ceremonial aspects, and community engagement of Jonkonnu and Carabali music underscore their African roots. For instance, Jonkonnu performances incorporate both music and dance, reflecting the collective spirit of Biafran cultural expressions.

In Cuba, Carabali music similarly showcases a communal ethos, with performances structured around call-and-response patterns reminiscent of African traditions. The adaptation of these practices to new environments illustrates cultural resilience and the ability to maintain identity in the face of adversity.

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Conclusion

The Biafran influence on Caribbean music highlights the enduring legacy of African cultures in the Americas. From the Igbo drums and oja flutes to the use of iron bells and rattles, Jonkonnu and Carabali music are powerful testaments to the transatlantic journey of enslaved peoples. This cultural legacy continues to inspire and connect communities across the Atlantic, celebrating a shared heritage rooted in resilience and creativity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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