

**PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES AND STYLES FOR THE UDUMALA  
MOTHER DRUM OF ABIGBO ENSEMBLE**

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**Abstract**

*The African drum is not just any percussive instrument. Its roles and functions are seen and understood in the context of the society or culture within which it features and to which it belongs. Beyond the obvious musical import, it exudes symbolism and performs a host of extra-musical functions; within the ambiance of musicality, its role is not merely melo-rhythmic as it communicates with other instruments and performers within an ensemble. In fact, the African drum talks as it entertains. The above is entirely true of the Udumala which is the mother drum of the famed Abigbo ensemble of the Mbaise people. It performs all the above listed functions and even more, in the hands of a master drummer. This study therefore reveals the intricacies involved in learning and playing the Udumala drum. Primary and secondary sources were consulted in generating the data required for this study and the researcher's participant observation proved handy too. It was discovered that the Udumala controls the rhythm and entire flow of the Abigbo drums, since it gives cues and direction to both the Edimala and Ekelebe. Moreover, the researcher found that playing the Udumala drum involves both the hands and feet of the player as its tone-range is expanded by the use of the feet. The researcher therefore, recommends that further studies be made into the organology of the Udumala mother drum as this will reveal deeper information on the nature and performance techniques of African drums in general.*

**Keywords: Udumala, Abigbo, Mother Drum, Performance Technique.**

**Introduction**

*Abigbo Mbaise is unarguably the most widespread and most famed traditional musical ensemble of Mbaise, a people homogeneous in culture, faith and occupation. It is seen as one, across the entire length and breadth of Mbaise, since*

it is seen in virtually all villages in this densely populated, land-locked territory. It is therefore not a surprise to hear the aphorism “*Abigbo Mbaise wu otu*” chanted by all *abigbo* groups in the land. A notable member of the ensemble from one village is free to identify with and perform with the ensemble from another village.

The name *Abigbo* stands for this special genre of native art and also represents the individual groups which perform it. *Abigbo* is conceivably indigenous to the Mbaise nation and is seen in the musicality of every village within; hence it enjoys the status of what Nzewi (1991) called a ‘music event.’ This is so because *abigbo* is not tied to any ritual, occasion or precise social gathering. It can be performed on its own as a recreational activity, as is the case for a host of other native musical genres like *Ogbengelenge*, *ekereavou*, *agborogwu* etc. Its performances are also seen in various occasions and social functions ranging from cultural carnivals, marriage ceremonies, political rallies to child/house dedications as well as funerals.

There are uncertainties to the question on the origin of *abigbo*. But the majority of responses uphold the statement that *abigbo* as we now know it evolved from *Nkwa Otile* and *Nkwa Ogbo* and that it’s roots are found among the Ezinihitte folks; one of the clans making up Mbaise (Five Clans). Onyeji (2004) agrees to this narrative when he states thus: “Elder *abigbo* musicians claim that *abigbo* evolved from *nkwa otile* and *nkwa ogbo* and originated in Ezinihitte from where it has spread to other parts of Mbaise.”

### **Social Significance:**

The *abigbo* ensemble performs key socio-cultural and socio-political roles within all the villages of Mbaise that perform it. It is an avenue to openly condemn evil, praise integrity and goodness. It calls a ‘spade a spade’ in a rather light-hearted fashion. In consenting to this, Onyeji (2004) asserts: “*Abigbo* songs may present satire, derision, praise or general commentaries on communal events.” When it derides and satirizes, it generally avoids mentioning names of people except when it necessarily has to do so; but it lays out the entire facts clearly and introduces the use of proverbs and expressions that make it easy for a clearer understanding of the message. The famous ‘*adighi onye anyi kporo aha*’ is always very conspicuous in *abigbo* songs.

The Mbaise people are very egalitarian and at the same time, light-hearted and easy going by their disposition. Being predominantly subsistence farmers, traders and fishermen for those up north who are bordered by the Imo River, they have an active lifestyle wherein music (of all types) plays a special role. Music accompanies their daily life and activities as well as punctuate their entire life. After the hassles and tedium of daily labour, it is normal sight to have musical recreations.

*Abigbo* serves the social functions of recreational entertainment and social reformation since it gives life to social conscience. Since a light-hearted people have no place for enmity and rancor among them and between them and the supra-sensible realities that share the same ambiance with them, there has to be a 'light-hearted' avenue for calling out errors, social deviants and dissident acts, and to praise and encourage diligent, patriotic and successful members of the society. This is exactly what *Abigbo* does. *Abigbo* music is seen beyond the perspective of sound as it has become a socio-cultural reality which occupies a central position in every Mbaise society (Abiakwu, 2016). It is in fact as Umezina (2009) puts it, 'a living force.'

Furthermore, a society cannot exist and function maximally only by its own merits; there must be communication with other societies, neighbors with whom certain traits, likes, dislikes and aspirations are shared. *Abigbo* comments on this relationship. Praiseworthy achievements of neighboring communities are celebrated in *abigbo* songs and recommended to the Mbaise listening audience while anti-social trends from neighboring communities are derided.

The sacredness of truth as well as the moral duty to protect the harbinger of truth are both hallmarks of *abigbo* music; hence, *abigbo* stands for social justice and equity. It is the society's conscience as it protects the values and norms which the Mbaise society holds dear, a fact is supported by Okafor (2005) who stated that "The musician has a role as a keeper of public conscience and as a man who has his hands on the social control lever." The mere fear that one's action would definitely become a theme song in the hands of the *abigbo*, is more than enough to deter anyone from anti-social behaviors.

It is therefore these roles of providing light-hearted entertainment/recreation while at the same time satirizing or celebrating, deriding or encouraging individual and collective acts, that mark *abigbo* out as a special ensemble, a social muster point and a shared identity among all Mbaise people. In recent times, *abigbo* has contributed to socio-political discourses, setting the pace and affecting choices through its music and messages. Mention must also be made of the

numerous economic benefits it brings with it, both to the performers and to the economic environment where it performs.

### **The Udumala Drum**

The drum from all over Africa can be discussed musically as an instrument that produces two or more primary levels of tone (not definite pitch). As such, the African drum is normally used as a singing or talking musical instrument. (Nzewi, 2007:1)

The above succinctly describes the *Udumala* drum, which is the largest of *abigbo* drums. The others are a middle sized *Edimala* and a small high-toned *Ekelebe*. *Udimala* as the mother drum of the ensemble is responsible for over five levels of tone, depending on the dexterity of the player. Although according to Onyeji (2004) *abigbo* comprises of a sequence of songs with light instrumental accompaniment and dancing, and extemporization is minimal during the vocal sections," instrumental interludes and solo passages punctuate the event especially during yodeling and ululation sessions of the music event. The *Udumala* is principally responsible for the instrumental interludes, during which it extends the conversations to other verbal symbolism by its own melo-rhythmic conversations with both players and audience.

### **Construction:**

The *Udumala* is usually the largest instrument of the ensemble. It is made from tree trunks and it is an open ended membrane drum. The trunk is shaped in such a way that the hollow increases in breadth towards the membrane, giving the semblance of a wide circumference membrane and a smaller circumference open hollow at the rear. The choice of wood for the frame-work is carefully made; then the framework after being hollowed is smoothed since the player will most certainly sit on the wooden framework while playing the drum.

### **Tuning:**

A membrane produced from skins/hides of animals is treated with fire or sun-dried to ensure that its tensile strength doesn't get loosened easily. It is then placed on the wider area of the circumference/hollow. This membrane is further fastened with about five to seven pegs (depending on the circumference) around the hollow. Ties and binding cords are utilized to hold the pegs in place firmly. These pegs ultimately perform the function of tuning. The more tightly the pegs are fastened to the cords either by hitting the pegs or by sunning the membrane,

the more the membrane gets stretched and the pitch of the drum is higher. If a lower pitch is desired, the reverse becomes the case; once the grip of the cords/tie on the pegs is loosened, the membrane gets dampened and the pitch becomes lower.

## **Performance and Play Technique/Template**

### **Posture:**

The player of the *Udumala* drum must sit on the wooden framework of the drum while the drum is set horizontally on the floor. Usually, the best position is to sit upright about 3 inches to the drum-head, with one leg stretched out in front of the membrane towards the center of the circle which harbor other instrumentalists. The other leg is placed at an angle of 45 degrees very close to the face of the membrane.

### **Playing Styles:**

The Player primarily produces three levels of tone on the surface of the membrane. The first level is the tone produced by hitting the center of the membrane and immediately lifting the hands. The second level of tone is produced by hitting the membrane and retaining the hands on the membrane a little longer before lifting it. This second level of tone is almost an interval of a 6<sup>th</sup> lower than the first level. The third level of tone is produced when the player uses the tips of the fingers to play very close to the edges of the membrane. The tone produced is often almost a 3<sup>rd</sup> higher than the first level of tone.

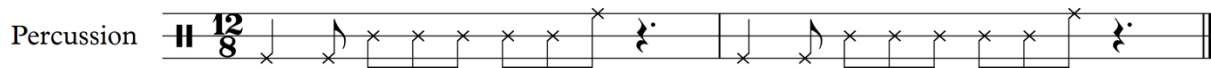
### **Melo-rhythmic Contour:**

The vocabulary/tone range of the *Udumala* is derived from a skillful combination of the three primary levels of tones. And this agrees to the three basic speech levels of most African languages; High, mid-range and low. The entire range is further expanded by the secondary levels of tone which eminently make the *Udumala* a talking drum. This secondary level is produced when the player uses the foot which is placed at an angle of 45 degrees in front of the membrane to press the drum head and by so doing, he heightens the tension on the membrane before playing. This technique expands the range between a 5<sup>th</sup> and an octave higher, depending on the amount of force applied by the foot to the membrane.

It is therefore evident that the *udumala* imitates the speech message of the vocalists and further communicates. A player of this important instrument must be aware of the following:

1. The tonal inflections of the community he is playing for
2. The position of both the primary and secondary levels of tone
3. The technique required to reach and produce the desired tone
4. The requisite skill to combine different levels of tone to produce a recognizable rhythmic syntax
5. The finesse required to alternate between fast and slow rhythms and to punctuate the various sessions of the performance.

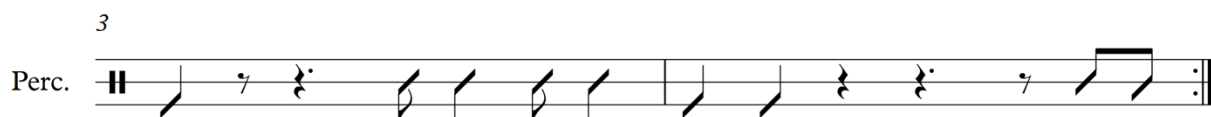
In example 1 below, the first and second primary levels of tone are combined with the secondary level of tone to create a recognizable grammatico-rhythmic syntax:



The rhythmic example above is heard when the *udumala* speaks thus: “*Bia, I gbakwa aka bia ile m*” (Have you come to watch me with empty hands?). It is a satirical rhythmic phrase for an unappreciative audience. The vocalists do not need to verbalize/sing the lyrics in spoken language, but the audience already Understand the message and before you say ‘jack’, gifts of money and edibles are provided for the performers, from the audience.

### Some Rhythmic passages played by the *Udumala*:

#### 1. Basic *Udumala* Rhythm:



The example above is a basic *udumala* drum-line at the beginning of every *abigbo* performance. This rhythm is the basis for further extemporizations. Notice that this basic rhythm is performed only on the primary levels of tone. Most of the times, the player is required to maintain the primary levels of tone for a while before introducing the secondary level. The player is also at liberty to extemporize this basic rhythm though not arbitrarily so as not to compete with the vocal lines which carry the message of the performance and enjoys preeminence.

## 2. Osonkwa for the Udumala:

Percussion 

4  
Perc. 

The above example is the rhythm for *osonkwa*; this is a section in the performance of *Abigbo* when, all singing is stopped and the attention thrown to dancing. All members of the ensemble who are not busy with any musical instrument, are both chorus and dancers. At the time for *Osonkwa*, the leader of the troupe who is often the lead vocalist rings his bell (*atani*) or blows his whistle to signify a heightening of the performance; the tempo gradually becomes fast and steadily rises into a frenzy with all dancers pacing round the instrumentalists in accurate fashion. The dance at this period is not a free medley as the dancers must maintain equal steps and similar body movements back and forth. There's usually no singing during this gesture, both yodeling and ululation can be heard from the lead vocalist or any other member of the troupe.

## Conclusion

So far, the torchlight has been on the *Udumala*, which is the mother drum of the *abigbo* ensemble and a very crucial soloist within the contexts of *abigbo* performances. This work is intended to serve as a simple learning template for a newbie who wants to play the *udumala*. The rhythm has been written on three lines:

- The lowest line is for notes played on the lowest level of tone which is achieved by playing and holding the membrane of the drum a little while longer before lifting the hands.
- The middle line is for notes played on the second primary level of tone which is produced by playing the membrane of the drum and lifting the hands immediately.
- The topmost line, is for notes played on the secondary level of tone which is produced by increasing the tensile strength of the membrane using the foot which is positioned in front of the membrane. The foot is used to apply pressure on the membrane to produce a much higher tone level.

It is my view that further research is carried out into the *Udumala* and other African drums and documentation on their playing techniques made; this will aid students and performers of African music to master the art of African drumming with less hassles.

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