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## **A COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE ON THE WESTERN CONCERT FLUTE AND THE OJA FLUTE OF THE IGBO IN NIGERIA**

### **Abstract**

*This comparative discourse focuses on the Western concert flute and the Oja of the Igbo people in Nigeria. Both are samples of esteemed wind instruments from the aerophone family. Aerophones are instruments that produce sounds through the vibrations of an air column, which is blown into a pipe. Other examples of such instruments used in Nigeria are the algaita, whistle, trumpets, clarinets, and saxophones, to mention a few. The Western concert flute and the Oja, are both prominent musical instruments in their cultural settings, respectively. As popular as the Oja is in the Nigerian cultural space, not much has been done on the comparative structural and performance analyses of its prominence among other flutes in the aerophonic African musical instruments. This comparative discourse explores the characteristics, cultural significance, and playing techniques of the two distinct types of flutes. The study is premised on cultural relativism theory.*

**Keywords:** *Concert flute, Oja, Speech Surrogate, Southern Eastern Nigeria, African Traditional Musical Instrument*

### **Introduction**

Humans have always needed to produce musical sounds through different methods, whether by clapping, vocalizations, or striking sticks against rocks. Musical instruments can be described as the tools or mechanisms selected and/or put together to generate musical sounds in the context of musical performance. Wades-Matthews et al (2011) describe musical instruments as the practical devices by which the acoustic properties of nature are managed for the artistic purposes of music that begin with the player. Thus, one can conclude that they include any gadget or contraption used by a musician to project his or her message to the intended audience. They were created by humanity to give our muses a voice because of our constant urge to produce fresh and expressive sounds. The two basic media that are employed in producing musical sounds are the human voice and musical instruments. The musician is at liberty to use any one, or both media according to his purpose, capability, or the limitation of each medium. For instance, the human voice can be split into four main sections: Soprano (high female voice), Alto (low female voice), Tenor (high male voice), Bass (low male voice), and musical instruments can be grouped into either String, Woodwind, Brass and Percussion or more appropriately. Suffice it to state that there are several classifications for musical instruments, some overlapping.

For instance, there are Western and African classifications among many others. As early as the first century BC, Hindus recognized a different fourfold classification: wind instruments,

wood or metal percussion instruments, stringed instruments, and percussion instruments with membraneous heads (i.e., drums). The Chinese categorize them based on the material they are made of, such as metal, silk, wood, and stone. On the other hand, three primary categories of instruments were identified by Greco-Roman writers: wind, string, and percussion. This classification was maintained during the Middle Ages and continued for several centuries; some writers still favour it now, albeit with the advent of electronic instruments. The musical theorist Lodovico Zacconi (1555 – 1627) went so far as to eliminate all percussion instruments from this group, leading some writers of the 16th century to create their fourfold divisions as wind, keyed, bowed, and plucked instruments.

Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841-1924), a Belgian acoustician and instrument maker, adopted this ancient system based on the material that produces sound. He named his four main classes autophones, which are instruments made of a sonorous material that vibrates to produce sound (such as bells and rattles); membranophones, which are instruments made by causing a stretched skin to vibrate (such as drums); aerophones, which are instruments made by a vibrating column of air (wind instruments); and chordophones, or stringed instruments.

Mahillon's fundamental division was adopted and extended by the Austrian musicologist Erich von Hornbostel and his German colleague Curt Sachs in their extremely significant studies of musical instruments, resulting in the categorization currently employed in the majority of systematic examinations of instruments (Oyer, 2025). This 1914 taxonomic system of Curt Sachs and von Hornbostel grouped these instruments in terms of their technological characteristics and playing style, into

*“...four main organological categories in common usage in the field of ethnomusicology and these are idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, and chordophones.” (Omibiyi 1977:14).*

This was to help ethnographic museums organize their enormous collections of musical instruments. Autophones were replaced with idiophones, and each class was further segmented using a botanical-style process. Later, a fifth class, the electrophones, which use oscillating electric circuits to produce vibration, was added.

## **The Idiophones**

The idiophones are self-sounding instruments, i.e. sounds are produced through the direct impacts on the substance of the instrument itself, which can be made up of gourd, metal, wood, or some other materials. The instruments in this category may be classified as primary or secondary idiophones, which can be either shaken, struck, stamped, or scraped (Machlis & Forney 1995:36). In addition, they can be for rhythmic functions only, or they may be deployed to execute melo-rhythmic functions depending on their structural make-up. The primary idiophones are made to produce their sounds from the actual direct bodily impact exerted on them. Examples of such instruments are sekere (rattle), agogo (gong or bell), agidigbo, mbira, or ubo-aka (thumb-piano), among others. The secondary category consists of those idiophones that are decoratively attached to the body parts of dancers or on principal instruments such as lutes and the mother (talking drums). Some examples of these are groups of small bells, pebbles, beads, dried seeds, etc.

## **Membranophones**

These instruments produce sounds through the vibrations of tightly stretched membranes or animal skins over hollowed-out logs of wood, earthenware, gourds, or tins. Other materials used for their construction also include earthenware vessels, strips of wood bound together by iron hoops, and potsherd (Nketia, 1982). The generic name of these instruments is 'Drum'. Depending on the geographical location, these drums come in various designs and constructions, such as cylindrical, bowl or cup shape, conical, or hourglass. Examples are Dundun, Djembe, Kotso, etc. The common practice on the West Coast of Africa, especially among the Yoruba, is to have these membranophones being played in a set of either a large ensemble or in a pair. The large ensemble usually consists of the mother drum, which does all the speech surrogacy, the father, and two or three children. In the Yoruba dundun ensemble, these are the *iya ilu dundun*, *gudugudu*, *omele isaaju*, *omele atele*.

## **Chordophones**

These include the instruments that make sounds through the vibrations of attached strings that are either bowed, strummed, or plucked. According to Nketia (1982), the musical bow is African societies' most widely spread chordophone. Other instruments in this group include the lyres, zithers, lutes, and harps. Some common Nigerian examples of these instruments are the one-string *goje/goge*, two-string *garaya*, four-string *taburu*, and the nine-string harp *molo*, etc. A few examples of chordophone ensembles with other instruments are bowed lutes and rattles (Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria); harp lutes and xylophones (Senegal); one to three lutes, tube zither, and rattle (Malaga); and a combination of bowed lutes and rattles (Uganda, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria). Chordophones are especially well suited for solo use, and they can accompany narrative songs, praise singing, recitations of poetry, and singing.

## **Aerophones**

These instruments, which are traditionally made from materials with a natural bore, such as animal bone, bamboo, cane husks, millet stalks, and the tip of an animal horn or gourd (1982), produce sounds through the vibration of an air column blown into a pipe. It must also be pointed out that there are instances where these instruments are constructed with either clay, dried shells of fruits, or metal tubing materials. Examples of such instruments, across all world cultures, are all known wind instruments such as *algaita*, whistle, trumpets, *kakaki*, clarinets, and saxophones. In addition, there is also the group with the generic name of 'flute' which is the main focus of this study, as it is a prominent instrument in many musical traditions around the world.

The Western concert flute is fabricated with metal tubing, while the others are ocarinas (round, oval-shaped instruments with finger holes and a mouth hole) and clay flutes. These musical instruments can be stopped or open-ended, and they can be played transversely or vertically. Each variety of flutes has a different number of finger holes depending on its intended function, and vertical or end-blown flutes might have a round or notched embouchure.

This concert flute, also known as a side-blown or transverse flute, is held sideways and played by blowing across the embouchure hole. It has a rich history dating back to ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece. Over time, its construction and playing techniques have undergone significant evolution. Contrastingly, the *Oja* is a traditional Igbo flute deeply rooted in Igbo culture over generations, originating in the pre-colonial era and serving various ceremonial and social purposes. In addition, this instrument is a vertical end-blown instrument almost the same sound-producing method is used for the concert flutes of all types; the difference is that the flute body is sideways to the mouth, and instead of directing the air over

a notch it is split off the far edge of a round or oval hole at one end of the tube, which is closed at the mouth end. The advanced learner's dictionary describes the flute as "... a musical pipe with finger holes (and keys). Christopher et al (2005) explain that the term "flute" is very ambiguous in that it has both generic and specific meanings. For example, when used specifically, it refers to any (particular) kind of flute, such as the concert flute. But when used generically, it encompasses pipes, fifes, recorders, and any other instrument that has a similar timbre or tonal quality as the concert flute. Almost the same sound-producing method is used for the concert flutes of all types; the difference is that the flute body is sideways to the mouth and instead of directing the air over a notch it is split off the far edge of a round or oval hole at one end of the tube, which is closed at the mouth end. The two sonorous bodies in this category, which will be discussed here, are the Western concert flute and the 'Oja', which is found among the Igbo from the eastern part of Nigeria.

### **Structural Differences between the Concert Flute and the Oja**

The Western concert flute is the most common member of the transverse (side-blown) woodwind instrument family of the Orchestra. Constructed from silver alloy and other denser metals such as gold or platinum, the Western concert flute features a cylindrical tube (Machlis & Forney 1995:40) and a sophisticated system of keys and pads, enabling a wide range of notes. It usually comes in three detachable parts: of head joint, the middle joint (body), and the foot joint. It has sixteen holes, 23 levers, and keys that operate both independently or interact with each other as required during performances. It is played horizontally, with air blown across the mouthpiece to produce sound.

The round embouchure or mouthpiece of the concert flute is fixed to the head joint, while that of the Oja is notched and is at the top end of the instrument. The player produces sound by blowing air directly into the instrument through a small aperture, resulting in a unique resonant tone.



*Photo 1: Picture of the concert flute. (Source: Author's Library)*

In contrast, the Oja, a small, wooden, high-pitched flute that is about seven inches (18 cm) long (Carter-Enyi et al., 2021), exhibits a simple cylindrical design. It has just three finger holes that can be covered with different combinations of the player's fingers when performance is in progress.

It is pertinent to note that both flutes possess distinct musical characteristics reflecting their cultural heritage. The Western concert flute is renowned for its clear, bright tone capable of producing intricate and melodious musical passages, making it a staple in classical, jazz, and contemporary music. The Oja, however, emits a warm, earthy sound deeply rooted in Igbo folklore and traditional music, often used in ensemble playing to support Igbo folk songs and dances rhythmically and melodically. Despite its widespread use, its speech surrogacy role is



*Photo 2: Picture of Oja. (Source: Author's Library)*

Chanting which is an extended form of speaking, rather than singing (Lo-Bamijoko, 1987). For amusement, praise singing, or leisure, the Oja is performed for the Igwe (traditional ruler), prominent chiefs, or other powerful members of the community. Additionally, it could become more significant during laments for the deceased, life-cycle events like naming ceremonies or the marriage of a new bride. One could consider the Oja to be the essence of Igbo traditional music.

### **Playing Techniques**

According to Nketia, "...flutes may be open-ended or stopped, and may be designed for playing in a vertical or transverse position." (Nketia, 1982:92). The foregoing statement is true in the case of the two instruments that are being discussed in situ.

The performance techniques of these flutes also differ significantly. The Western concert flute is held with both hands and positioned at an angle of  $90^{\circ}$  across the mouth of the player and to the right side, i.e. in a transverse position, with nine of the player's fingers. This necessitates precise fingerings and embouchure control, leading to a distinct pedagogical tradition focused on breath control, tone production, and expressive phrasing. The concert flute fingers work on the flute keys alternatively and in varied combinations to produce the required sounds during performance. These flutes became known as "German flutes" to distinguish them from others, such as the recorder, etc. On the other hand, the Oja relies on particular breathing techniques and subtle finger pressure variations to achieve different pitches and tonal colours, emphasizing tonal and melo-rhythmic patterns and ornamentation integral to Igbo musical expression.



*Photo 3: A flutist playing the concert flute. (Source: Author's Library)*

The Oja is mainly held between the first and second fingers of the right hand and supported by the thumb and the index finger of the left hand while the thumb of the right hand plays the bottom hole, the thumb and the index finger of the left hand play the two holes at each side of Oja. A left-handed performer will need to reverse the foregoing holding and playing techniques.



*Photo 4: An Oja performer in action. (Source: Author's Library)*

The embouchure or mouthpiece of the concert flute into which the performer blows is placed at the side of the instrument. This is why it is known as a transverse or side-blown flute, while Oja, one of the end-blown flutes found in Africa, has its mouth hole or embouchure at the top end of the instrument.

### **Tonal Compass and Scale Structure**

The Oja can easily produce four distinct basic tones of the tetratonic scale, which are found within one octave, e.g. C – F#. However, with the deployment of extraneous fingering and over blowing techniques, more tones of higher pitches can be flawlessly executed by a professional Oja player. Conversely, its transverse counterpart, the western concert flute, can produce a whole chromatic range of 3 octaves, i.e. from middle C<sup>1</sup> – C<sup>4</sup> above the treble staff. Suffice it to say that because the western concert flute has a wider tonal compass than Oja does not necessarily mean that it is more important or superior. It is just that flutes are made according to the cultural dictates and specifications. Nketia opines that "...the number of finger holes (or stops) provided for each type of flute depends on the way the individual instrument is used" (Nketia 1982:93).

While the concert flute is constructed to conform to the equal-tempered chromatic tuning system of the Western world and an evident sense of tones and semitones, Oja, on its own, just like other melodic instruments in Africa, is constructed within the constraint of African melodic form. In describing this melodic form, Akpabot (1998) states that "... these melodies are either word-born (logogenic) resulting in what is known as speech melody, or emotion-born (pathogenic) where the musicians compose their melodies" (Akpabot 1998:26). A good example of logogenic melodies is the traditional praise poetry while pathogenic melodies include all the contextual improvisations and embellishments executed by the musician in a performance. It is pertinent to note that the Oja can perfectly execute all the foregoing melodic structures in its performance process, and that all its melodic phrases are in agreement with the Igbo tonal inflection, which is always applied depending on the context of performance (Onyekwelu 2012:106). This means that it can play melodies and imitate speech forms that are intrinsically linked to myths, legends, and proverbs found among the Igbo.

The main reason for the difference in scale structure between the two flutes is that the Western organologists or instrument makers abide strictly by the equal-tempered system of tuning, which is used all over the Western world. On the other hand, their African counterparts do their construction and tuning in conformity with the speech tones and the contextual musical needs of the people concerned. In addition, the material that is used for constructing the musical instrument also determines either its overall key or pitch. This explains the reason why two identical African musical melodic instruments made by the same technologist and which have the same scale structure will be tuned to different keys when viewed from a Western point of view. An Ibadan-based Oja flute maker opines that "...the melodic instrument must be able to 'talk', i.e. imitate the speech patterns and tonal structure of the people" (Adeyeye Adesanya, during an interactive session, 12 December, 2024).

### **Similarities in Performance Practices**

Despite the notable differences caused by their different cultural affiliations and physical structure, these two flutes can perform similar functions and can be found in similar musical situations. For example, they both can be used as (a) solo instruments, (b) instruments in an ensemble or orchestra and (c) as social instruments. However, while the western concert flute can be played by either male/or female instrumentalists (s), the traditional performance practice of the Oja is patrilineal since it features prominently as a solo or lead instrument in an ensemble.

It is a known fact that the purpose of flute making can be either as toys for the use of children, or as a professional instrument to be used by adept performing artists. Furthermore, due to their tonal quality or timbre, flutes can perform expressively as solo instruments and have been used as such from time immemorial to date worldwide.

Depending on the occasion, the flutist can play acappella; either to entertain himself or another individual without accompaniment. For example some shepherds and cattle rearers do play flutes to entertain themselves on the field while tending to their respective flocks. Flutes are also found in an ensemble where they may sometimes play the melody in conjunction with other melodic and/or percussive instruments. Also, there may be a musical arrangement where the flutes play together as duets, trios, quartets, etc.

## Flutes as Social Instruments

Generally speaking, most flutes, especially those having three holes upwards (these include the concert flute and the Oja), have surrogate tendencies. This means that they can be used to imitate the speech or song rhythms of a particular community. This explains why the Oja is referred to among the Igboas "*osikpolinaekwuokwu*", i.e. the dry wood that talks.

Therefore, in all cultures where they are found, flutes are used either to provide supportive roles in an ensemble or to extemporize or improvise on the vocal activities within the ensemble. Flutes are social instruments as they may be used in life cycle ceremonies in some cultures, and in the hands of an experienced flutist, the instrument can express either melancholic or joyous sounds. In an interactive session with a music scholar, Chris Onyeji (April 3, 2025), he asserts that the sound of Oja can be heard in ensembles such as Atilogwu, Mkpokiti, Egwu Ogene, and many other Igbo traditional musical ensembles where it serves as the main melodic instrument. While its Western counterpart, the concert flute, is used in concert bands, marching bands, jazz, and the orchestra, to mention a few. If played in a typical traditional celebration by a flutist (very well entrenched in Igbo culture), the concert flute can also function as a surrogate musical instrument just like the Oja.

In the same vein, Oja can add its sonorous sound effects to the total output of all the other instruments being used in a contemporary popular band. However, because of its tetratonic scale pattern, which is rather narrow in scope, the melody meant for Oja must be shared among many such instruments to form a whole by using the hocket technique. It can also function as a melo-rhythmic instrument whereby it uses ostinato melodic rhythm as a background accompaniment within the band.

## Cultural Significance

Beyond their musical attributes, both flutes hold significant cultural value within their respective communities. The Western concert flute has been embraced worldwide as a symbol of grace and sophistication, prominently featured in orchestras and chamber ensembles, solidifying its status as a prestigious instrument with a rich cultural legacy. The *Oja* is a traditional Igbo flute that is widely used in the south-eastern region of Nigeria, particularly in ceremonial and cultural settings. The flute is important in various rituals, festivals, and social events and its playing techniques reflect its deep connection to Igbo cultural expressions.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

In this paper, we have been able to concur with the appropriateness of Sachs and Hornbostel's 1914 taxonomic system, which classifies musical instruments according to the way their tones are produced. This classification system of African musical instruments was effective in that it helped the curators of African ethnographic museums to organize their enormous collections of musical instruments for archival and identification purposes. This has also shown that the concert flute is from the woodwind family of the Western orchestral instruments, while the Oja is an aerophonic instrument. We have also been able to look at other similar and differing characteristics in structure and tonal capacity between the Western concert flute and the Oja flute, which is typically found among the Igbo of the Eastern part of Nigeria.

These two musical instruments, though from different cultures, are both flutes. By their sonority and functions in performance situations, they are both significant and recognized as solo instruments or as instruments within an ensemble or an orchestra. The advancement of the digital system of archiving, recording, and performing, which has turned the world into a global village, has also made it necessary that music students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, especially those who are studying the western flutes, be exposed to the rubrics of Oja performing techniques. Professional woodwind or aerophone players should also explore how they can creatively use this African, and indeed Nigerian Igbo musical instrument, in their performances and recordings.

The Western concert flute and Igbo's Oja epitomize distinct yet equally captivating traditions in the flute world. Their historical, cultural, and musical significance sheds light on the diversity of human creativity and expression. In summary, playing the *Oja* flute requires a combination of technical skill, cultural understanding, and an intuitive connection to the music and its performance context. Mastery of the instrument involves practical techniques like breath control, finger placement, and rhythmic complexity, as well as the ability to express emotions and tell stories through music.

A genuine appreciation of the unique characteristics of each flute fosters a deeper understanding of the universal language of music that transcends geographical boundaries and unites us across cultures. Thus, the study not only contributes to the ongoing discourse about the performance and appreciation of intercultural music but also aims to provide justifiable reasons why Oja should be projected to the international music scene, and promote Igbo cultural identity and unity.

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## Interviews

\*\*\*\* Interactive session was carried out on 3 April, 2025 with Chris Onyeji, a composer and a Professor of African Musicology who has done a lot of researches into Popular Culture, Igbo traditional music, and the Oja flute among others. He is the current President of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists (ANIM).

Mr. Adeyeye Adesanya the former Senior Lecturer, Department of Music Technology, The Polytechnic, Ibadan is a researcher and technologist who had carried out more than twenty-five designs and constructional production of various African and Western musical instruments using local raw materials. He is the Executive Director of the African Institute of Arts Technology, Ibadan which deals in the fabrication and construction of different types of African traditional musical instruments.

## End Note

### 1. Blowing Technique

- The primary technique for playing the *Oja* involves blowing air through a narrow opening, usually at the top of the flute. The player controls the pitch and tone by varying the force and direction of their breath. The sound is produced by the air splitting against the flute's mouthpiece, similar to how wind instruments like the recorder or concert flute work.
- Players often use controlled and steady breath, with periodic changes in pressure to produce varied notes and melodies.

### 2. Fingering and Note Variation

- The *Oja* has finger holes along its body, which are covered or uncovered by the player's fingers to change the pitch. The positioning of the fingers on the holes is crucial for producing the desired sound. Like most woodwind instruments, a good mastery of finger placement is key for smooth transitions between notes.
- Players often use half-covering finger holes to achieve microtones and create a specific tonal quality, which is unique to Igbo traditional music.

### 3. Pitch Bending and Ornamentation

- A distinct technique in *Oja* playing is pitch bending. This involves subtly manipulating the pitch of a note by adjusting the embouchure (the shape and positioning of the mouth) or adjusting finger placement slightly to create slides or bends between notes. This adds expressiveness and emotional depth to the performance.
- Additionally, players incorporate ornamentation techniques such as trills, vibrato, and grace notes. These decorations enrich the sound and give the music a dynamic character.

#### 4. Use of Rhythmic Patterns

- The *Oja* is often played in conjunction with drums or other percussive instruments. The rhythms played on the flute are deeply tied to the pulse of the ensemble, with the player following or complementing the beat. The *Oja* is commonly part of an ensemble that includes the *udu* (clay pot drum) and \* igba\* (large drum), creating a rich interlocking rhythmic texture.
- The performer may incorporate rapid note patterns, known as “fingering runs,” which are essential for creating complex rhythmic layers.

#### 5. Improvisation

- Improvisation is an important skill in *Oja* playing, where musicians adapt and elaborate on the core melody to reflect their style or the current mood of the performance. This flexibility is vital in ceremonial contexts such as festivals, initiations, or religious rituals.
- The ability to improvise with dynamic shifts—such as changes in tempo, scale, or rhythm—is an essential aspect of the performance.

#### 6. Cultural and Ritual Context

- The *Oja* is played during various significant cultural occasions. Its tone and rhythm are said to have spiritual significance, and players often use specific techniques to evoke particular feelings or moods. The sound of the *Oja* is considered to be a bridge between the earthly and spiritual realms, and its performance can invite blessings or protection, depending on the occasion.
- *Oja* players might use specific melodies that are passed down through generations, some of which are meant to communicate with ancestors or to accompany dances and songs.

#### 7. Interaction with Other Instruments and Dancers

- According to Onyeji (2025), the *Oja* is frequently used to accompany dancers during traditional Igbo performances. The intricate melodies and rhythms of the *Oja* complement the movements of dancers, contributing to the storytelling aspect of the dance.
- The performer is often in sync with the ensemble and responds to the movements of other musicians, showing the deep interdependence between music, dance, and spirituality in Igbo culture.