

# THE AGOGÔ IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE: ETHICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS AMONG THE IKA SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** The Agogô is a traditional musical instrument of the Ika people of Delta State, Nigeria, performed during festivals, ceremonies, dances and storytelling. It sustains rhythm while deepening the spiritual and cultural texture of community events. In the technological age, however, the creativity and expression surrounding the Agogô are being reshaped in ways that raise ethical and religious concerns. This article examines how technological interventions affect the artistic life of the Agogô. Using philosophical analysis, the authors argue that technology has aided documentation, dissemination and preservation of the instrument, while simultaneously contributing to cultural dilution and commodification. Safeguarding the Agogô, therefore, requires frameworks that hold innovation accountable to cultural heritage and promote inclusive, culturally grounded development of digital tools and artistic practices for the common good. The article concludes that a native-centric ethical approach, rooted in community values and cultural respect, is essential for addressing technological impacts and protecting the integrity of this heritage.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary technological advances allow musicians to integrate Agogô sounds into compositions with unprecedented flexibility, digitally reshape timbre, and produce innovative sonic textures (Akere, 284). This interaction between traditional craftsmanship and digital technology expands the expressive range of the Agogô, enabling it to engage modern musical idioms while preserving its cultural resonance (Amakye-Boateng, 95). Agogô tones can now be recorded, edited, mixed, and sampled into genres such as Afrobeat, hip-hop, and gospel, thereby extending the instrument beyond exclusively traditional performance settings. In this context, Ika musicians experiment with new rhythmic patterns and transnational collaborations, introducing the Agogô to wider audiences. Rhythm, within the Ika worldview, functions not merely as a musical device but as a philosophical principle ordering life events and cosmic relationships, encoding collective memory, struggle, and aspiration. Digital platforms such as YouTube, social media, and online learning applications accelerate the global circulation of Ika music (Ikem and Margaret, 2). They also enable younger generations to observe master performers, learn techniques, and contribute creative interpretations (Adeyeye, 2), strengthening intergenerational transmission while encouraging innovation.

However, as Herbert Marcuse warns in *One-Dimensional Man*, uncritical technological adoption can reinforce capitalist logics, weaken cultural autonomy, and distance communities from meaning-bearing practices (2). The growth of digital recording and online distribution has simultaneously enabled the commodification of Ika cultural expressions, often circulating them for profit without adequate recognition or compensation for the originating communities (Tzanell, 5). Such processes risk undermining cultural authenticity and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Technology also plays a crucial archival role by preserving oral traditions and musical techniques through audio-visual

documentation, interviews with elders, and the digitization of repertoires. These efforts create durable digital archives of Agogô rhythms and their cultural meanings, ensuring that the instrument’s creative history endures (Idris, 2). Yet this preservation introduces a paradox: the potential erosion of the individuality and spiritual intentionality embedded in handcrafted Agogôs. Mechanized production may deskill artistic practice, displace ancestral craftsmanship and detach the instrument from its ritual and popular essence (Diagne, 59). These tensions indicate the need for digital decolonization grounded in native-centric ethics in the development and use of Agogô-related technologies. Replacing spiritually grounded instruments with technological imitations risks imposing external materialist frameworks onto indigenous epistemologies, distancing Ika musical practice from its cultural foundations.

While global accessibility through digital media broadens appreciation of the Agogô, it can also dilute its contextual depth and sacred meanings (Ikem and Margaret, 2). The ‘digital Agogô’ thus raises a critical question: whether the tradition is being preserved or merely archived in static form. At the same time, technological infrastructures allow for the commercial scaling of Agogô production through e-commerce and social media, often without equitable benefit to traditional craftsmen. From an Ika ethical standpoint, economic gain must remain subordinate to spiritual value and social purpose. Nevertheless, some Ika musicians creatively integrate traditional Agogô rhythms with Afrobeat, hip-hop and EDM through digital interfaces—an evolution that could remain culturally rooted through the application of native-centric ethical principles.

## **2. The Traditional Agogô Among the Ika People**

‘Agogô’ is etymologically of African origin and is used among the Yoruba, Igala, Ika, and Edo peoples of Nigeria to denote a single- or double-bell clapperless idiophone (Gourley et al., 33). The Agogô is also prominent in Afro-Brazilian culture, where it has become a standard instrument in Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian popular music. Performers frequently incorporate the Agogô into rhythmic sections, particularly when Afro-Brazilian grooves and

patterns shape a song's musical texture (Reily, 310; Béhague, 345). Adeyeye (2019) explains that the Agogô is played by striking it with a stick held in the right hand while the handle is supported in the left, with the bell opening directed outward from the player. The point of contact along the bell affects the timbre, ranging from a drier tone near the handle to a fuller, more resonant sound toward the open end (7).



This traditional instrument is widely used among the Ika people of Delta State, Nigeria, where it appears in ceremonies, festivals, and musical performances and is closely associated with spirituality and communal life (Nketia, 642). Beyond its musical role, the Agogô expresses communal values through its use in rituals, dances, oral storytelling, and even in traditional courts to signal order and attention (Tume, 12; Stefanie, 2). Structurally, it typically consists of one or two conical iron bells of different sizes and pitches, struck with a wooden stick to produce a sharp, penetrating tone. Blacksmiths traditionally forge the instrument

from locally sourced iron, shaping the bells by hand (Brown, 7). While metal Agogôs are more common, wooden variants also exist; these are carved from dense, resonant woods and hollowed to produce a deeper sound (Naija, 5; Smith, 25).

The creation of the Agogô involves careful hammering, shaping, and tuning to achieve the precise pitch, resonance, and durability required for traditional performance. This knowledge is transmitted across generations through apprenticeship and embodied practice. Specialized blacksmiths—such as Agbede Adodo of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria—apply refined metalworking techniques to forge the instrument from iron, ensuring both its structural form and acoustic quality (Adeyeye, 2). Craftsmanship depends on the instrument’s intended context, whether ceremonial or recreational, which determines its size, tone, and ornamentation. Among the Ika, Agogô making is not merely technical but epistemological: knowledge is shared, sacred, and communal. The artisan serves collective memory rather than individual profit, reflecting a relational philosophy of knowledge (Adeyeye, 2). In performance, the Agogô regulates the pulse of ceremonies, directing dances, rituals, and oral expressions through patterned rhythms, including forms such as the Konkolo rhythm (Adeyeye, 2019: 8–9).

Adeyeye (2019:11) cited Akpabot (1986:52 & 84)

The rhythms illustrated above represent only a small portion of the diverse timeline patterns traditionally performed on the Agogô. Today, many of these are eclipsed by digitally sampled patterns derived largely from Yoruba or Ika Konkolo variants (Adeyeye, 11). The spread of mass-produced and sampled instruments has reduced demand for handcrafted Agogô practice, while urbanization and declining youth interest threaten the continuity of Agogô-making skills among the Ika (Fiveable, 5). In Ika musical life, the Agogô functions as a core timekeeper. Typically formed by two or more metal bells attached to a handle and struck with a stick, it establishes tempo, sustains pulse, and adds rhythmic accents that energize ensemble performance (Fiveable, 5). Its repetitive patterns create continuity and momentum, guiding other musicians and shaping the music's dynamic character. Across Nigeria and the diaspora, the instrument appears under various names—Gong, Cowbell, Wowowaa, Alo—and historically signified political authority within the Ekpe society of pre-colonial southern Nigeria. In Owerri funeral processions, raffia palm leaves (Omu) tied to the bell announce the procession's passage (Adeyeye, 11). Beyond technique, Agogô craftsmanship expresses philosophical dimensions of identity, aesthetics, ontology, and ethics within Ika thought, where making and playing the instrument carry cultural meaning as much as musical function.

### **3. What is Digital Agogô?**

A digital Agogô is a software- or sample-based rendering of the traditional African Agogô bell sound, used in contemporary music production without the need for the physical instrument (Self, 1; Scott, 8). It is an electronic or synthesized adaptation embedded in digital environments such as DAWs, drum machines, mobile apps and virtual instruments (Mulder & Fels, 15). Instead of striking metal bells by hand, musicians trigger Agogô tones through MIDI controllers, pads or keyboards. This form represents a meeting point between African musical heritage and modern audio technology, enabling global collaboration and experimentation while raising questions about cultural continuity and responsible use.

The following are the main forms of Digital Agogô:

- a. Software-Synthesized Agogô: Created through sound synthesis in programs like FL Studio, Ableton Live, or Logic Pro, where rhythms are programmed digitally (Parreiras et al., 1).
- b. Sample-Based Digital Agogô: Uses pre-recorded Agogô sounds stored in libraries such as Splice and Loopmasters, manipulated via MIDI and editing tools.
- c. Virtual Instrument Plugins: Plugins like Kontakt and Battery simulate Agogô with multiple tunings and velocity layers for realistic performance.
- d. Mobile and Tablet Apps: Applications such as GarageBand, Groovepad, and Koala Sampler include Agogô sounds in virtual drum kits for accessible music creation (Michon, 8).

#### **4. Ethical and Cultural Implications**

Technology has expanded the Agogô’s global visibility while introducing ethical and religious questions (Emmanuel, 4). Drawing on the thought of Martin Heidegger, Cooper highlights the warning that technology “enframes” human thinking, leading people to regard the world as a resource and thereby eroding meaning and essence. This enframing reaches beyond musical instruments to influence values and patterns of life, demanding careful reflection rather than uncritical acceptance (30). When technological shifts undermine community well-being or overlook the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Agogô craftsmanship, a dynamic tradition risks being reduced to static data, with attendant losses in value systems and inherited knowledge (Naija, 6). Such transformations may also intensify identity dislocation among youth when indigenous cultural references are marginalized.

At the same time, digital audio workstations make it possible to sample and loop Agogô sounds within Afrobeat, gospel, and hip-hop, fostering creative fusions that link Ika heritage with contemporary musical expression and appeal to younger generations. Online platforms and mobile applications now offer tutorials for learning the Agogô, allowing younger generations to acquire performance skills without direct access to traditional instructors. However, digitally modified or synthesized Agogô sounds can diverge from their original tonal

qualities, potentially diminishing the authenticity of traditional musical expression (Brøvig and Anne, 4). Excessive reliance on effects and auto-tuning may obscure the natural rhythm and spiritual timbre of the instrument, which is closely associated with ritual practice and oral storytelling. When Agogô sounds are incorporated into commercial or entertainment music without their customary context, the instrument risks being detached from its cultural and symbolic significance.

The religious and symbolic meanings attached to the Agogô in ritual life are often diminished in digital formats, where the instrument risks being treated as a generic rhythmic sound rather than a bearer of cultural identity. Use without awareness of its origins can foster cultural appropriation and weaken traditional craftsmanship and oral knowledge systems (Lamprey, 86). Standardized digital presets further flatten regional differences in tone, form, and performance practice. Within Ika culture, the Agogô holds roles in festivals, ancestral veneration, and oral history; removal from these settings can erode its deeper significance (Ladega and Ashiru, 346). Although fusion practices have helped preserve, modernize, and globalize the instrument's sound, they may also privilege entertainment over cultural integrity, creating broader appeal at the cost of traditional depth and context (Nsiah, 18).

Sustaining the moral and cultural essence of the Agogô requires ethically grounded uses of technology. In *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul describes technological determinism, warning that innovations are often adopted without ethical reflection, narrowing human freedom (51). The digital Agogô expands creative possibilities in global music production, yet it also raises questions of cultural ownership, authenticity and preservation as digital tools abstract the instrument from its African roots. Drawing on the thought of Frantz Fanon, concerns arise that uncritical adoption of external technological systems can weaken cultural identity. When artists and producers profit from Agogô sounds without credit or compensation to originating communities, power imbalances emerge and cultural resources are exploited (20). Respectful acknowledgment, consultation with traditional musicians and collaboration with African artists can

transform such usage into meaningful cultural exchange rather than appropriation.

In many African contexts, the Agogô functions not only as a musical device but also as a spiritual and communicative medium in rituals, festivals, and ceremonies (Anameje, 94). In digital formats, it is frequently detached from this setting and reduced to a rhythmic effect, weakening the values, meanings, and ancestral connections it once carried. Such decontextualization can distance younger generations from their heritage when their encounter is limited to digitized versions. Digital Agogô samples are often drawn from traditional recordings without the consent of the originating artists or communities, raising concerns about ownership, consent, and intellectual property (Onyekwelu, 70). Ethical practice requires transparent sourcing, fair compensation, and the inclusion of traditional musicians in the creation and distribution of digital sample libraries.

The widespread use of digital Agogô samples and electronic drum kits can reduce demand for handcrafted instruments, placing traditional blacksmiths and artisans—custodians of intergenerational knowledge—at economic risk (Adeyeye, 11). As digital tools substitute material craft, younger generations may grow increasingly distant from the tangible heritage embedded in Agogô making. Standardized digital sounds often omit regional variation and expressive nuance, presenting the Agogô as a single, uniform tone and obscuring the diversity of African musical cultures. Such simplification diminishes cultural richness and can reinforce reductive stereotypes (Osebor 2024, 83). Responsible development should incorporate varied samples, clearly document their origins, and explain cultural contexts within sound libraries. At the same time, unequal access to advanced production tools limits the ability of many African musicians to participate fully in the global circulation of digitized Agogô sounds.

## **5. Native-centric Ethics**

Native-centric ethics rearticulate indigenous value systems within contemporary global conditions, transmitted through

storytelling, folklore and myth as living moral frameworks (Osebor et al., 4). Such ethics provide standards for judging right action and support the preservation of traditional artistic practices amid technological change (Osebor 2023, 151). Even in African aesthetics, beauty is closely linked to function, rhythm and participation. The Agogô contributes to layered musical textures that mirror social balance and diversity. The Yoruba aesthetic ideal of *itútù* (coolness)—controlled, composed energy—is rhythmically embodied in Agogô performance (Adeyeye, 11). Within this context, ethical norms privilege authenticity over modernization and discourage mass-produced or digitally synthesized substitutes that dilute musical values. Among the Ika, Agogô making is ritual, cultural and spiritual rather than commercial (Ajose, 17). Craft depends on manual skill, intuition and ancestral guidance, with knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship and oral practice rather than digital mediation (Osebor and Irabor, 81). The instrument's tone is understood to carry ancestral presence; excessive digital alteration may therefore be viewed as spiritually inappropriate.

Traditional practice also binds Agogô performance to ceremonial time and sacred space. Rhythms associated with Ogun carry solemnity and ritual force, serving as medium of invocation rather than casual sound effects (Songs and Alvan, 123). Native ethics thus limit commercial or decontextualized uses. Echoing Molefi Kete Asante, this stance recentres African agency: cultural exchange can enrich, but replacement of local traditions erodes identity (49). Applied to policy and design, native-centric ethics encourage sustainable, respectful engagement with nature and resist production models that privilege speed over ethico-religious harmony. They guide the development of digital Agogô tools so that innovation remains accountable to Ika cosmology, ensuring that technology serves tradition while safeguarding heritage, identity and spiritual reverence.

## 6. Conclusion

Contemporary technological developments reshape artistic practice and redefine creativity, often encouraging the commercialization of the Agogô in ways that conflict with native-

centric ethical frameworks. Within African performance traditions, the Agogô is not ancillary but foundational, structuring musical time and collective participation. Its significance reflects an interdependent worldview captured in the notion of *Ukama* – existence understood in relation to the cosmos and community. In many African contexts, the Agogô accompanies religious, therapeutic and ceremonial practices, carrying moral and spiritual weight that orients communities toward harmony and order. Technological mediation introduces ethical and cultural tensions. While digital tools can extend the reach and preservation of indigenous sound traditions, they can also detach the Agogô from its ritual context, reducing a culturally embedded instrument to a commodified sound object. In Ika musical life, the Agogô functions simultaneously as instrument and symbol, associated with festivals, ceremonies and spiritually meaningful events where its sound is believed to mediate blessing and social cohesion. Its rhythmic and tonal qualities contribute depth, continuity and identity to the musical experience.

The central challenge lies in preventing the dilution of cultural heritage amid rapid technological adoption. A native-centric ethical orientation offers a pathway for sustaining indigenous artistic integrity by prioritizing preservation, contextual sensitivity and social value over purely commercial interests. Such an approach fosters conditions in which Agogô artists can continue to create, transmit and adapt their traditions without severing them from their philosophical and spiritual foundations. Safeguarding the Agogô in a technological age therefore calls for frameworks that hold innovation answerable to cultural heritage, fostering inclusive and culturally rooted development of digital tools and artistic practices for the common good.

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