

# 19

**TRADITIONAL MUSIC COMMUNICATION  
PROSPECTS IN MBAISE BURIAL RITES:  
UKOM'AND'ESE PARADIGMS**

**BY**

**OKORO, BENJAMIN D.**

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC,

FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, PANKSHIN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

## **ABSTRACT**

The performance of 'Ese' and 'Ukom' in Mbaise burial rites is the focus of this paper. This is critically examined to make out what they really represent (as expressive and aesthetic arts) to the generality of the Mbaise people. This conspectus, gears to project the degree of their musical invaluableness in the communal interment plan of action. A showcase of the musical role - values of their respective instrumentations are made manifest in this discourse. The study supposedly creates avenues for appreciating traditional musical genres with their sound volumes or intensity, dynamic application, timbre, performance variations and the like in the interest of promoting music enculturation. This, in no small measure, will apparently yield distinctly positive result, subject to the performance practice being executed as and when due, and invariably sustained to an expected end. Similarly, the quoted author's concepts of 'Ese' and 'Ukom', their respective approaches to study review, etc. are strictly assessed here for effective results. To drive the researcher's points, special reference are made to their hypotheses considered logical enough for conclusive remarks on the subject of the study.

## **INTRODUCTION**

"Only sounds which have been deliberately organized by man to specific ends for expression of emotion, communication of ideas, touching the sense, calming the nerves, turning the minds to certain planes of communication and worship, qualify to be called music" (Okafor 2005:78). However, in the case of traditional music,

It is the folk music of a people which evolves as a corporate communal experience. It has been handed down from generation to generation and continues expanding and enriching its resources

as it evolves. Since it is directly associated with traditional, religious and political systems and preserved by tradition, traditional music generates social experiences which go deep because of the people's experience in their culture which the musical notes and polyrhythmic sounds are signs and symbols (Agu, 1989:80)

Different music scholars' idea of music from ethnomusicological background are considered here as a yard stick to the meaning of 'Ese' and 'Ukom!'. These musical ensembles consist in pleasant rhythm, which might have originated as a stimulus and accompaniment to dance movements. The Study of 'Ese' and 'Ukom' music as a means of communication involves comprehension and receptivity to appreciation of what precisely the music communicates, or how they do it. and to whom, and of course, why. 'Ese' and 'Ukon' are essentially expressed by means of phonic production by musical instruments, other than voice or bodily expressive movements. For instance, as sonic sign-communication, 'Ese' music informs everybody, present or not, about the various stages or activities reached in a funerary scenario. When pieces in the 'ifo' compartment of 'Ese' music performance circle are heard, everybody knows that the final phase of the funerary rites for a deceased is being concluded (Nzewi, 1987:105). Besides, fundamentally and conceptually the 'Ese' instrument is a language communication instrument. The texts, meanings or messages implicated or encoded in 'Ese' musical patterns or statements, and which are intended for mass/ controlled/direct information or lingual communication are understood by the knowledgeable addresses the general dance style is earth-bound, on the spot or with short, light, alternate or double stepping. The characteristics of women's dancing is alternate, gentle quaking of the buttocks with the knees slightly bent and the trunk thrown slightly forward. The men are more energetic and erect. They favour the quaking of the entire waist region of the body (Nzewi, 1987:101). In the case of Ukom, It is dance-oriented because it is essentially structured in a way that will arouse physical response by the listeners. This is particularly evidenced by its moderate, steady tempo and vivacious rhythmic essence" (Uzoigwe, 72).

In view of globalization Idolor (2005:811) affirms,

Globalization is the connectivity of the activities of people irrespective of distance, race and regional boundaries. This is brought about by dramatic shifts in the movement of people, culture, technology, trade in goods and services facilitated by improved information and communication technology, transportation, political and socio-cultural co-operation and applied technological development, all of which turn the world "global village".

### **The Fabric of Mbaise Society**

**Religion:** Against all odds and irrespective of all deterministic plights militating against the natural dwellers of Mbaise community primarily, in the scheme of missionary activity, they are highly reckoned with. Evangelism alongside its objective factors has continually played influential roles in the life of the inhabitants, right from the outset of Christianity and the subsequent western civilization in Nigeria. Consequently the majority of the natives in the con

temporary time have been converted from paganism, heathenism, and Atheism to Christian way of life and belief. So far, traditional form of religion is dwindling to the barest minimum. According to Joseph I. Parker "more than seven per cent of the people of tropical Africa had become Christian adherents. It is true that the large majority of the people of West Africa are still outside the Christian fold, the introduction of Christianity has had an almost universal good influence upon society as a whole" (Onwubiko, 27).

Rickering and rancour, inter-communal squabbles and the like which used to be the order of the day in the said town have declined; paving way for peace and tranquility as well as justice and fair play for which the people are presently known. These are after effect of missionary attributes, which the natives embraced, with throbs of joy and total commitment to their respective social obligations. Life and property are no longer in jeopardy with the abandoned law of the jungle that would have overwhelmed them. Within their missionary fold, Mbaise citizenry do not confine themselves only to the erection of ecclesiastical structures and dissemination of gospel, but also have contributed in no small measures to the welfare of their citizens in all facets of life.

**Education:** Of great significance in the historical development of education in Mbaise is her place in modern civilization and all its influences. Acculturation and enculturation as elements of educational system have been a way of life among the indigenes and is only metamorphosed for or oriented towards the needs of the time. The populous men and women of celebrity produced in all walks of life such as: political veterans, economists, administrators, chattered accountants, priests, medical and legal practitioners, etcetera speak volumes for the above claim.

Reading, writing and arithmetic have remained indispensable among the people; while industrial training and technical education are only not neglected but also in the forefront in the scheme of things. Craftsmanship (visual/creative) and aesthetic Arts are all parts of curricula activities very much in practice in Mbaise. Besides, marriage costumes are socio- culturally modified and improved upon consequent upon their enviable educational status.

Promotion of education has also left a positive landmark by shaping positively their legacy, which invariably reflects in their daily routine. With this enterprise, brotherliness is awakened; hence, communal ties are revived. It is by virtue of the educated elite in Mbaise that the town illuminates with streetlight and enjoys infrastructural amenities /social facilities and other fundamental public utilities such as pipe borne water. Being well equipped by their training and education, they are able to cross words with any power that be, in a bid to procure their legal right without much scrambling, amidst the trend in vogue for securing the so-called 'national cake'.

The Mbaise man if dissatisfied with his position cannot be easily suppressed. A few of the indigenes are among the pioneer beneficiaries of Western Missionary didactic effort in literary skills and techniques and to some extent, European ways of thought. With this development, they are found in all nooks and cranny of the country, serving the government and mercantile firms in

different capacities. In the community and far beyond, the significant role of Mbaise sons of the soil is socially and politically acknowledged as by-product of their educational status quo.

from the fore-going, it stands to reason that, most probably right from the very beginning, the greatest and most spectacular achievement in the town springs from the field of education. with excellence of which they have been endowed.

### **Challenges and Progress in 'Ese and 'Ukom' Traditional Music Communication**

**Challenges:** For reasons of colonization, Nigerians were once enslaved culturally, economically and intellectually. With this development, the essence of our being was drone in preference to the foreign exploiters' desires and satisfactions. And so, as it is, "To rediscover ourselves, define our goals and launch out to impact our talents to a world that badly needs us today, it the task before us" (Olebara, 2007:3).

The task before African Dopolous nation states such as Nigeria is an all-embrace development that benefits the generality of people. This development has to take off from the home cultures, through the musical art, (which 'Ese' and 'Ukom' represent) a powerful tool for promoting this culture. Meaning ful developments spring up from a developed culture of the inhabitants. Cultural policy with adequate funding and willingness to provide facilities will power for those at the helm of affairs to expertly man the government cultural agencies reposed on them is invaluable. A major avenue for enhancing national development is to promote performing artistes for the development of culture. "If the government can provide centers for artistes by building theatre auditorium in every local government area, culture as a whole will be established and Nigeria will soon be a better cultured nation " (William, 2003:32)

**Progress:** A music school of thought under Dalcroze's theory of Eurhythmics (1865-1950) is of the view that music first enters the rear to the mind and eventually effects bodily movement causing people to react in certain ways. Hence, music can urge men to passion and rage, young men can break into a dance at the sound of appropriate music.

Ideas, values and knowledge acquired from culture are musically shared for social action. Also, the total range of traditional activities is transmitted and reinforced in the course of musical performance presentation. Cultural music development takes place in the process of its changes, which follow suit as man changes. The weapon with which man strives to improve himself beyond animal kingdom is culture specific. The cultural music communication impact yields national development. Amadi (1985:63) says, "The world is no longer considering culture only as a means but now as the end of any development, hence cultural development is now part and parcel of any meaningful development of man".

True development therefore, springs up from the people's culture to serve its multi- purpose roles in people's life. It helps to safeguard both the people's identity and their freedom as well as to create an enabling environment for the citizenry's socialization through musical performance

practice. Hence, musical culture in its vibrant dynamic attributes creates economic boom cum its by-product, the technological advancement. This subsequently leads to freedom from western domination in natural environment resources and creative endowment. Therefore, musical "culture is a survival programme whereby man in society copes with the environment in which he lives and solves the problems it poses" Bullivan, (1984:91). As music artistes disseminate cultural information, they invariably uplift the value of culture to a great height. In this manner, the musical theatre entertains, educates, enriches and advances the beneficiaries in all spheres of national life. No wonder Umma (107) avers: "The role of indigenous African theatre was firstly, to educate the audience in matters of life-politics, religion, Marriage, birth, death, etc and secondly to provide them with entertainment".

**Instrumental Performance Roles in Ukom and Ese:** Although four instrumentalists / singers constitute Ukom' ensemble, there are ten drum chimes at their disposal, with one pitch sound per drum. These 'aria nkwa' drums row as Uzoigwe calls them are mortar shells, graduated in sizes, each with monotone. The principal soloist plays active roles in the funeral ceremony. The receiver soloist carries out the function of a chorus as he completes melodic runs the lead soloist introduces the drum row. The metronome and pulse drummers constitute the accompaniment section. The metronome drummer of'ekwe', (slit drum) regularly repeats the reference musical pattern that governs the phrase lengths of theiatic statements and developments of the composition. His phrase-referent in a performance creates room for a steady tempo. But the pulse drummer of 'ebe-elu' (conga drum) only underlines the consistent pulse-sense felt by all present.

The foremost compartment, a solo performance by the leader starts in earnest after tuning the 'aria nkwa' drum row ready to mourn the deceased. With the introductory 'ilulu nkwa' category, he signifies the 'Okwukwu' ritual commencement... The 'ihu-nkwa' third movement performance is the culminating point of social interaction towards which people channel their behaviour and actions for the fulfillment of the burial of the departed, and reenacting and reaffirming their common concepts and beliefs about life and death (Okoro,2000:23-24).

"Ese music informs about a funeral, conducts its ritual-dramatic activities, "Symbolizes" the community's endorsement of the honours and credits accruing from Okwuwu funeral even, whilst still fulfilling the traditional valuation of music as an entertainment implicated art form" (Nzewi, 91)

"Ese is precisely an orchestral music played by five instrumentalists, four instrumental accompanists and the master musician soloist. A tenor, 'nne uhie' and an alto, 'oke uhie' wooden slit-drum are part of the accompaniment instruments played to furnish the main accompaniment structure for a movement. The structural feature of each movement is Identified with combined patterns of the above stated instruments and the five drum row.

**The Musial Form:** Two forms in 'Ukom' are:

The operational form of musical creativity conceptualized by the music specialists as the complimentary of two related musical elements /ideas as well as the socio-musical relationships /interactions between two individual or group of individuals. The hierarchical form viewed by the same specialists in terms of the various levels at which such relationships /nteractions between people, musical instruments, or held social ideas take place (Uzoigwe 1986:80)

Musical form in 'Ukom' is an organizational relationship of various musical and extra- musical activities. The system forms an input, and a processing unit. In genral terms, form as a resultant shape is created by the musicians in an effort to mould their musical conceptions in conformity to the social event structure with which the music and /or musical performance is associated. In effect, “form is essentially conceptualized more as aprocess than as a static product.

it is also musical SHAPE modelled on recognizable social-musical principles of composition within which the composer confines his inner thought” (1986:65) Intervals rhythmic structure, scale-wise considerations play a crucial role in Igbo traditional music. The dual relationship between text and pitch is an essential cultural principle. Intervals are relatively stable within the musical compositions recorded in this tradition. The reason is that tonal companions, as perceived by the players, are structured such that each note is related to a male tone above a female tone. This human attribute distinguishes the drum row, particularly in terms of their timbre.

The relationship between the organization of musical instruments and tonality is an inextricable one. Both elements jointly assimilate Igbo musical models, transforming them into detailed and precise functional meanings. Textual affiliation to the drum language serves as a vital means of organizing scales, ensuring a consistent intervallic relationship between tones despite variations in performance and pitch. Some textually coded musical samples on the drum row aid the player in confirming the exact scale structure and adjusting drum pitches accordingly.

### **Training Process for Recruitment and Qualification**

Ukom players identify individual drums of the 'Aria nkwa' using numerical identification, which is a useful and effective method in training drummers. This process teaches them how to perform on the drum row and how to properly tune the instruments. Players learn to adjust the pitch of each drum by either raising it—done by striking the wooden slabs stringed around its sides with the 'Oso nkwa' wooden mallet—or lowering it by dabbing the membrane surface with slightly wet fingers.

### **Creative Principles in Igbo Music**

The Ukom player must be well-versed in various performances within Igbo society. This includes knowledge of the basic functions of different musical types. A member must also learn

to draw compositional materials from diverse aspects of Igbo life and traditions, as music-making is just a part of a broader cultural expression.

For the music director, clear thought, an understanding of the esoteric nature of ritual events, and musical talent are crucial. These must be complemented by heightened musical receptivity, quick thinking, enthusiasm, and objective realization of self-creativity.

### **Stage Formation**

An ideal stage formation involves varying degrees of participation by the audience, dancers, and instrumentalists/singers. Their distinct yet inseparable contributions at any given time constitute the structure of a particular musical composition.

### **Master Musician's Qualification and Attributes**

The Ese Master Musician is a key figure—a master drummer, composer-arranger, and conductor of the ritual ensemble. He must have deep knowledge of the ritual, theatrical, and social ethics that shape the music's formation, programming, and expression. In a community burial setting, he plays a central role by representing the supernatural through the psychological power of his music. His duty-bound performance includes composition, contextual structuring, coordination, and organization of the music.

Ese music demands deep intellectual and imaginative acumen from its practitioners. As a delegated mourner, the master musician bears the emotional burden of the funeral procession and orchestrates the ritual-cosmic drama. His music creates an atmosphere that transforms burial ceremonies into both celebrations and solemn ritual theatre. Through his expertise, he facilitates the necessary psychic state for the bereaved to carry out their ceremonial duties.

### **Mundane Practices Observed in Ese During Burial Rites**

Burial proceedings in Igbo tradition occur in three main phases:

1. **The Physical Burial:** If a man of significant achievements passes on, esoteric rituals are performed to ensure his transition into the ancestral realm.
2. **'Kpe Okwukwu':** A diplomatic tribunal called 'Amala' gathers to validate the canonization event. This involves socio-cultural considerations and financial evaluations by the deceased's family.
3. **'Okwukwu' (Canonization into Ancestry):** The final burial ceremony, which is both ritualistic and festive. The act of 'killing wealth' is performed, wherein the first son symbolically severs a consecrated he-goat's head, marking the deceased's departure from earthly ties.

Marital rites also play a role in this process, as daughters and wives of the deceased perform symbolic acts to finalize their transition from their earthly connections to the departed.

### **Social Significance of Ese and Ukom Music**

'Okwukwu/Igbusu Ozu' (shooting up of a corpse) is a prestigious ancestral function assigned to eminent deceased adult males. Social, political, and religious responsibilities previously held by the deceased are transferred to his first son, who is responsible for hosting the ceremony. Traditionally, this event lasts for three days, beginning on the major 'Eke' day and culminating on the main 'Afo' market day.

Throughout the event, the Ese musicians perform thematic compositions that console the bereaved and validate the proceedings. The climax involves interrogating the deceased's sons to affirm their suitability for assuming their father's roles.

### **Summary**

Ese and Ukom music are integral to Igbo cultural expressions. They serve multiple roles, from mourning to social communication and ritual enactments. These musical traditions confer ancestral honors upon the departed while elevating the social-spiritual status of the sponsors. The preservation of these musical traditions supports the continuity of Igbo cultural identity and fosters unity, peace, and communal cohesion. Through traditional music, Igbo society sustains its language, dance, dressing, crafts, and other artistic expressions, ensuring a culturally enriched future.

## REFERENCES

Amadi, R. (1985). "Administration and development of Nigerian life and culture a Book of Readings (eds. Oyeneye O.Y. and Shoremi, M.O) Ogun State University. Matters."

Bullivant, B.M. (1984). "Pluralism : Cultural Maintenance and Evolution, Multilingual Idolor Idolor G.E.(2005)." Strategizing Globalization for the Advancement of African n Music Identity In Abraka Humanities Review, A Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Delta State University Abraka. Vol. 1. No. 1, August PP 81-89.

Leshoi, Bob (1975). "The African theatre and African Actor: political Dimension." Umma vo,.

Nzewi, M. (1987). "Ese Music: Honour for the dead. Status for the Sponsor". African music,ne

Okafor, R.C. (2005). Music in Nigeria Society. Enugu: New Generation Books.

Okoro.J.C. (200). Communication and Dance in 'Ese' Music of Enyioyuge, Aboh Mbaise L. C A A-1

M.A. Degree These in African Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Okoro, J.C. (2008). "African Music and Dance in Global Communication". Mojaye, E.M. Ral

(eds) Globalization and Development Communication in Africa. Ibadan: Ibadan

University Press, Pp 101 - 105.

Onwubiko, K.B.C. (1973). The History of West African. Africa Educational Publishers Company

Uzoigwe, J. (1986). "Tonal Organization in 'Ukom' Drum Performance". Vol. 54, No. 3, Pp S3 -

Olebara, N. (2007). "Language, Culture and Power". A paper presented at the 12 Nationalhe

Conference of Association for Promoting Nigerian Languages and Culture (APNILAC),

Imo State University, owerri, Pp 1 -20.

Williams, Lari (2003). "Keep Arts in the Picture". (Stage and Screen) Vanguard, Thrsday June