

THE PECULIAR SIGNIFICANCE OF 'ESE' MUSIC AND DANCE IN MBAISE COMMUNITY OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the creative and aesthetic merits inherent in 'Ese' music and dance in Mbaise clan, Imo state, Nigeria was evaluated. It gears to interrupt willful observations by western-oriented music lovers, contrary to Igbo music realities as demonstrated in the 'Ese' ensemble. The major research approaches applied to realize this were interview and active participant-observation methodologies to discover the details of Mbaise societal intentions on 'Ese' rendition. Theories on the development, growth and nature of the traditional dance music, deduced from its formal structure, are necessary means to an end in appreciating this subject matter. It was concluded that 'Ese', as dance music of indigenous community, translates abstract ideas into societal values, and tends to endow social acts with initiation. Therefore it was vital to explore the dance music to its terminal point through research, and after which, reconcile with the theories on other Igbo music and dances.

Keywords: *Ese, significance/societal values, the ensemble/dancer(s), performance situation and repertoire*

INTRODUCTION

Every musical instrument in a given ensemble plays genuine and unique roles. Consequently, the acoustic properties of 'Ese' (a music cum dance) represent the vocal verse with 'lingua tune' notation. To aurally identify the tone quality (sound emission) of the tonally graded drum chime requires visual cognizance of their physical features. This goes a long way in preserving the music for posterity and invariably, enhances its conventional technique of performance in the absence of score. The application of voice in 'Ese' is not as significant as its instrumentation and choreographic art. The body of this work speaks volumes for that.

The geographical location of 'Ese' is Mbaise, a clan with three local government areas (Aboh, Ahiazu and Ezinihite) in Igbo south, Imo state Nigeria. This traditional community lives both linear and clustered settlement in-between Owerri, Umuahia, Aba and Okigwe roads network respectively. The indigenes are among the earliest beneficiaries of western education in the 19th century. However, before then hunting, subsistent farming (such as peasantry), blacksmith technology, petty trading on mainly food crops, among others were the major occupations of the folk.

Ethnographic reports on the cultural community are of the view that, the fear of 'Ofo' and, of course, superstitious beliefs that belie an Mbaise convict compels him to fulfill without hesitation, any apt propitiatory sacrifice imposed on him by communal consensus. In this respect, the aim for armed law enforcement agents is defeated; while peace and tranquility is maintained. Social services such as sanitation exercise, defensive measures with guards/security are charitably taken care of by the organized peer groups. Short-comings are recorded too. Among which are - inter-village squabbles or rivalries, vendetta, imbroglio, with subsequent bickering and rancour giving rise to disunity.

The administration is not void of laborious and sluggish leadership due to the extremity of democracy. This ugly situation, in any case, is arrested through peaceful co-existence encountered in the course of inevitable social interactions in churches, market square business centres, age-grade meetings, political and academic fora among others. All these flourish with the promotion and implementation of social harmony and co-operation. Keen competitions are equally organized for progress.

These communal efforts with developmental projects are collectively, remarkable of the community. Perhaps this inter-communal association could tell on the traditional communication system, especially dance styles and musical creativities. All these combined factors resulted in my curiosity which impels me to embark on this research, that is so far accomplished with issues positively affecting 'Ese' music and dance of Mbaise clan.

Appended to that, this move will uplift the present stage of 'Ese', so that it can augment to the glare of limelight. Above all, it could support, promote and contribute to further recognition of our cultural heritage. A synoptic scrutiny of this study therefore, hinges on: the skillful devices employed in 'Ese'; the creative ability of the performers, which tell on the composition, all other musical resources drawn upon for further development of the dance music, which are of added advantage in implementing this task surrounded with wrong notion traceable from unfounded allegations. More so, as a medium of enlightenment, this paper aims at bringing to light the true picture of Mbaise communal attributes when subjected to (integrated activity with simultaneous response in stylistic and expressive manner) traditional music and dance.

THE UNIQUE FEATURES AND CONCEPTS OF “ESE”

Recruitment and Membership Qualifications

The Singers: soothing, contemplative and well-blended vocal tones are sought after among those whose voices are being evaluated. The singers' vocal skill must be of little conscious effort, natural and effective to listeners. During the last segment of their membership approval, on the singers/instrumentalists' debut, they are expected to adjust their physical conditions in proportion to the size of spectators by raising the volume of their voices and instruments, in the interest of those in the back row. This dynamic application however, should have some suitable variations.

The Dancer: His first requirement is acumen in dancing behaviour. The dancer should be able to exhibit some antics during the dancing; while his creative inspiration is expected to be thrilling. He has to interpret the tone of the drum by dancing to the

rhythm. A dancer of 'Ese' is expected to be smart and so, has to possess a kind of body structure that will enhance agility. Because he appears almost nude but for a rag-like wrapper or tattered towel specially tied in-between the laps and the buttocks, the dancer is expected to wear a flexibly good body physique. Generally, by virtue of the nature of 'Ese', one noted for twiddling thumbs is said to lack animation, or sense of aliveness that tends to arouse the audience. The dancer's ability to translate the instrumental messages into bodily gestures proves his good sense of rhythm, especially if such interaction synchronizes with the instrumental rhythm.

Active interaction is expected of the dancer with the instrumentalists, who do not just accompany him. This encounter devolves on the dancer from a dialectical point of view to express his life force through celerity in dancing. Cordiality with the rest of performers has to be sought after, if the instrumentalists have to stir the trainee-dancer to sing as he dances. His voice is expected to give meaning to the message through the aural channel, while his physical behaviour has to carry meaning through the visual channel. "At this point in time, his assessors (but audience incognito) will use the aural channel to grasp his ideas, and simultaneously use the visual message he sends to add clarity. These two complementary channels if well made use of can create a better understanding of his presentation" (Okoro, 2000).

Broad movements are energy sapping, because they are full of exertion. Hence, able-bodied men who could withstand such in 'Ese' are most likely recruited-considering other tacit factors. The dancer should have acute gifts of observation, feels himself into the living and recreates with his body appearances - moral actions and essence. The fame of a recruited dancer is then recognized if "the dancer achieves magic powers which brings him victory, health, life, mystic tie which brings together the entire tribe ... and the unconstrained dance of the individual in utter devotion of self" (Sachs, 1937).

Miscellaneous Requisites of the Entire Ensemble: *Ese* is exclusively for men who are capable of understanding the beck and other details involved during its goings-on. By the ensembles convention, highly developed sense of pitch, time duration and variant rhythm; exposure to acoustic properties of 'Ese' instrumental timbre, are inevitable requisites for membership. Reticent, imperturbable, and daring applicants are basically preferred to excitable, abrupt and extroverted counterparts. "Application of individual personality endowed with natural dexterity are of added advantage. Those who model themselves on someone else in lieu of performing publicly as the unique person they really are have narrow chances of acceptability during recruitment exercise" (Okoro 2000).

For its continuity, a musician or dancer-trainee is enrolled in 'Ese' ensemble in his own interest and with respect to recommendations made of him, giving his efficiency in other low scale musical groups where he used to be an active participant. Applicants for apprenticeship whose ages range from 18 years and above are considered due for enrollment in the ensemble, all other things being equal. In the long run, those that scale through the enumerated conditions are certified equal to

the task or worthy of 'Ese' membership. Then by routine, they give out a kind offering, four cola-nuts, a number-two jar of palm-wine, four bottles of beer, and an 'Ora'. That is, a dish of palatable oil bean seed prepared with some slops of meat (Oil-bean salad). Fulfillment of these rites qualified them as full-fledged members of 'Ese' and as such, they deserve token shares after each formal performance outing.

Training Routine

The Dancer: In order to achieve the best results through the medium of the dance communication that projects any plight in a culture-identical society, the 'Ese' dancer is trained to comprehend the language of the instruments and their tone colour, so as to be able to interpret them through dancing gestures. The dancer in alternative response to the vocal and instrumental parts, dictates or calls for their co-operation, and artistry via his informative symbolism and gesticulation. To this end Okoro (2008) avers, "thus, dance, in response to musical stimulus, symbolically expresses human's feeling with strictly regulated movement and steps but convey purposive significance". Music only enhances some expressions of the state of mind and soul with the body. This is because some dances are mime-dramatic, pantomimetic, or performed a cappella, and as such can be danced just by mere humming from one's within, modulated by stamping foot or feet on the ground. In some cases, clapping of hands through this cultural principle depends on human factor. 'Ese' dancer-trainee is made to pass through this orientation as a way of assessing his sense of rhythm in the course of his training mission.

The Entire Ensemble: Training is mostly informal by constant practice or observations. However, before this, the persons will undergo audition for the benefit of the doubt. During their training orientation the trainees are cautioned to be mindful of their conducts to the barest minimum while on the performance scene. This becomes necessary because, impressions are conveyed whether there is any avert action or not. Consequently, ordinary nervousness, fright, or unwillingness manifest on performance impact. This development proves false "the general attitude in the society ... that since music is so readily available and everybody is capable of music of some sorts, then music does not really require great attention in investment and effort" (Okafor, 2005). With time, the newly recruited dancer(s) and singers are made to employ larger gestures, and increase vocal energy respectively. These are necessary compensations for spectators far behind the scene. This necessity to communicate in larger terms, with bigger-than-usual tones or movements is one of the qualities which make 'Ese' performance such a new and strange experience to some people. With practice, the tyros acquire and refine these techniques of effective, nonverbal art and overcome the fears and emotions of strangeness.

DETERMINANT FACTORS INFLUENTIAL IN CHOICE OF PERFORMANCE SITUATION AND REPERTOIRE

Okoro, (2009) discussing a genre of African music south of Sahara opines inter alia:

"The text dwells on admonition, criticism, or encouragement to man in his effort to make a living". This affirmation has a major influence on this sub-topic. The reason is that certain rites, as a rule provoke choice of performance text. This invariably entails music making and dancing which typify the microcosm of life. As a very essential art form, 'Ese' has evolved from fete and past time, to a custom entrenched by tradition. 'Ese' is tied to special events, on the inception or grand finale of which the 'debut of its music and dance wins public applause in the likeness of shouts of approval.

When performed during the 'Okwukwu', a customary funeral, it features as a kind of dirge for the ceremony in honour of an aged traditional title holder and leader of thought who has departed. The highlight of this mournful proceeding is the so-called 'Iwa Nkitaanya' activity, which has to do with superstitious belief that the dead on reincarnation will be as bold as a dog. Similarly, the death of one who embarked on fear-inspiring act attracts the performance of 'Ese' if the performers are invited. More so, in revelry such as title taking, 'Ese' is not left out; though depending on the circumstances of whom it may involve. The performance of this art is limited to a few events indeed, because it attaches much importance to social position, class distinction and pedigree. The performance of 'Ese' takes off from dawn to dusk, thrice a day, with intermittent breaks.

The night presentation is a prelude announcing its arrival in the bereaved family. And this goes with periodic gunshots. At intervals, they raise poetic doxologies to the deceased. The mourners, in whose family 'Ese' is staged for two days (though the duration of stay varies from one locality to another), irrespective of their gender, age, religious denomination, social status, or lineage could voluntarily dance; except, of course, when the dead person's achievements are being recounted. This dance privilege is limited only to the very 'Okwukwu' ritual ceremony. The appearance of 'Ese' marks the climax of the activities to a variety of lively performance that dominate other mournful or merry-making celebrations for which the people converge. 'Ese' has no recess period in terms of seasons of its performance-presentation. During festival celebration in its social entertainment, 'Ese' draws without restriction, a large number of local spectators including well-wishers from neighbouring towns. Being customarily regulated and reserved for specific occasions connected with definable events, the performance-participation is likewise, restricted to the initiated members only. Participation for observation by the audience does not attract ticket fee or compulsory gifts. Rather, all are welcome with open arms to watch the spell-bound performance that lasts for some hours. The mood of the moment, the dance intricacies and duration of the performance all got to enhance the formal presentation of 'Ese'.

It has been observed that the social pattern most commonly reflected in the musical style center on the generally accepted sexual norms, the place of women, and certainly, the treatment of children in, and by the community. The choice of music symbolizes a basic and socio-psychological pattern associated with the selected repertoire in the performance of 'Ese'. Before the audience, the performers' non-verbal communication reveal reflect the content of the performance. Then the spectators are able to decode the feelings of the dancers and their theme-from the ensembles' facial expressions. Summarizing a good deal of research into non verbal

communication processes, a communications scholar, Dele G. Leather in Ehininger (1986) notes that: "feelings and emotions are more accurately exchanged by non verbal than verbal means... The non verbal portion of communication conveys meaning and intentions that are relatively free of deception, distortion, and confusion".

The conspicuous pattern which identifies 'Ese' music and dance are best comprehensive through an awareness of the social context. Sometimes however, as a matter of principles, societal prohibitions also operate against its presentation. Unfortunately this genre of music with restricted range of operation imposed on it by custom and tradition, coupled with the present youths' uniformed criticism grossly reduces the population of its audience to the barest minimum. This is amplified in an African Journal, its author points out that: "In considering the music of Nigeria, its future and past, it is essential that an appreciation of its cultural environment and evolution is taken into account, the present day trends and taste being a direct reflection of traditional modes" (Lane, 1956).

SOCIAL BENEFITS CUM CULTURAL VALUES OF ESE

In Mbaise, Onwumere in an interview points out that a son who invites 'Ese' ensemble for his late father is usually a son that a landed property is bequeathed to him by the late father in accord with the entire family. This is done first before the general share of the dead man's belongings is distributed proportionately among other family members. Besides proceeds that accrue from the performance of the Eze ensemble is also allocated to him. Through 'Ese', feelings are evoked (to induce), for the purpose of satisfying, provoking, titillating, arousing, reassuring, soothing or even persuading the audience. It's power to unite the people for a common cause makes the group indispensable. The educative and historical functions mean life and progress for the well-being of individuals. Satires and proverbs are devised to ridicule and discourage the thief, the liar, the cheat, the gossip, the alcoholic, the dupe, moral misfits and other defaulters in the society. Above all, the topical songs with explanatory tales help to direct people's life styles to expected conduct in the society.

'Ese' is a uniquely human phenomenon that exists and functions only in terms of social situation through interaction. It excites and channels community behaviour and reminds Mbaise folk of social equality, checks irregularities and tendencies inconsistent with social organization. Its musical and dancing relationships no doubt reflect social relationships. As a purposeful and routine performance, 'Ese' in its entirety is comprehensive to the culturally-minded people, it is beyond mere entertainment.

The dance music stresses and validates the social rites of the people thereby making them very resistant to change. It pursues the general well-being of the people, and secures peace and tranquility among the indigenes. As regards its scheme, 'Ese' stands for many things. It could be embraced, to cultivate and enact communal solidarity in order to legitimize the aboriginal status. Through 'Ese', rhythmic movement can be thoughtfully interpreted and the importance of age-old instruments of music more appreciated. It

encourages adaptability for effective co-operation, good spirit of leadership coherence in society. Equally attributed to 'Ese' is its promotion of peace and harmony within the community and its environs.

'Ese' satirizes the ills of Mbaise community, but serves also as channel for promoting cultural values. In the fore-front of social benefits and cultural values of 'Ese' records among individual members of the community is the evidenced in the increasing desire of the Ese dancer to express himself, to communicate his joys and sorrows to celebrate and mourn with the most immediate instrument, his body' (Sorel, 1967). Its members are usually young people within the community that are in the prime of their lives. The reason is that: "with tribal pride giving way to national consciousness and with more and more young people giving all their time and thought to education so as to get better jobs, traditional Igbo dancing is on the decline" (Nzekwu, 1962).

The resounding truth about 'Ese' is that in certain respects, it wards off an affront with its didactic text. It also showers social conviviality with further gratifying entertainment that could pacify an urge to undermine disrupt the society. 'Ese' dramatizes the traits of the people with culmination of permeable ideas. Provision of encouragement for work and courtship are equally extolled. The enculturative function of 'Ese' in helping to shape the social character of the natives is also prominent. This assumes the form of social commentary on people, places and event. Their traditional norms with their in-built constraint, taboos and legendary beliefs are also entrenched. The exoteric rhythm of the Ese instrumentation and dance styles become infections as it seems to carry the cheering crowd along in unison. The dancer shares with the singers, the instrumentalists and with the cheering crowd. To this end, an ethnomusicologist draws a conclusion that:

In this way, the dance produces a condition in which the unity, harmony and concord of the community are at a maximum, and intensely felt by every member. It is to produce this condition that is the primary social function of the dance. The well beings or the existence, of the society depends on the unity and harmony obtain in it, and the dance, making that unity felt, is a means of maintaining it. The dance affords an opportunity for the direct action of the community upon the individual, and it exercises in the individual those sentiments by which the social harmony is maintained (Merriam, 1964).

During dancing, the body in ecstasy is overcome and turned into a receptacle for for what seems like indwelling of the spirits of the ancestors manifested via accelerated body movement liberated from its weight, to the joy of the crowd. It breaches the gap between the body and soul; unites the forsaken expression of emotion and controlled manner of social life and expression of individuality in one's walks of life. By reflecting the values and exposing knavish behaviours in Mbaise culture, 'Ese' in consequence motivates individuals to fulfill their social functions. The dance music is accordingly a valuable tool in the analysis of the society and its culture. The acquired nobility, harmony and graceful attitudes of Mbaise people are all embedded in 'Ese'.

SACRED PERSPECTIVE VERSUS PROFANE ATTRIBUTES OF 'ESE'- THE LIMITS

Social and cultural factors shape music to a great extent. It is held that musical sound instill in people idea of what is faulty or correct in a traditional setting. Every non randomly performed piece of music in existence is a patterned behaviour and thus deserves attention. In contrast to the much emphasized hear say that 'Ese' is unchristian in its musical inclination (that it favours worldly affairs), Onwumere, in his contribution to this public opinion made reference to a renowned Christian family in Ahiazu-Mbaise, whose son is a catholic priest; notwithstanding, their father's death was graced with 'Ese' during internment. In this line of argument, also contrary to the people's stand point, Ukegbu who himself belongs to 'Ese' ensemble, in his own version of the tale says in an interview (1997) inter alia:

In the contemporary time, the deceased family invites 'Ese' because' it has been influenced by ecclesiastical law, unlike in those days when mundane and nefarious affairs were attached to it in honour to a dispensation of providence. Although in extreme cases nowadays, the so-called pagans, atheists and heathens alike, freely invite 'Ese' purely on entertainment basis and as social fulfillment of rites and obligations.

He equally dismissed the allegations that 'Ese' performance is not watched in the night by non-initiates in this statement: "This assumption is 'pseudo'; that people do not watch 'Ese' in the night is just by their choice not by performance principle" (Interview: 1997). Personally, as a member of the culture, the researcher/reporter observes that in accordance with Christian religious ordinances, all the religious rituals or rites and observances associated with 'Ese' were banished forthwith. An example was plain white cloth stretched across two parallel bamboos pitched within the performance arena, with a live cock hung on it. The said cock would remain there until it dies. Thereafter it fell headlong to the ground. Further alleged charges levelled against 'Ese' maintain that it was uncivilized, too tribalistic and limited to secular scope in performance; devoid of musical modernization, technically vigorous and therefore energy sapping; identified with confused and undesirable, loud and unpleasant sound. Worse still, the ensemble is said to be composed of desultory and mundane characters. On the issue of religious overtones observed during the consultation rites at the oracle, the ensemble leader dismissed and quashed the allegation with frown which connotes disapproval.

The closely-guided secret surrounding the dance has given vent to superficial observations, with subsequent hear-say full of formidable and deleterious assumptions. An example is that 'Ese' has mystic tendency, with magic incantation. This fallacious utterance among others, in no small measure, endeavours to stifle the activities of the ensemble and probably, make them feel dazed but to no avail. To the ill-informed and fanatic congregations, the idioms inherent in 'Ese' are very rollicking and have the added value of being more meaningful in sacred devotion among the natives. This remark however, seems thought-provoking questionable, an overstatement and a risible thought. In the height of the aforesaid is the belief

that 'Ese' with its dance creates chasm between this space and that in the realms of the spirit. This lives the dancer's earthly fitters dismantled in order that he feels in tune with the community. Supposedly proclaimed however, is that in an effort to control foreordained events, the dance becomes a sacrificial rite, charm, a prophetic vision and a prayer.

Okoro (2000) is of the view that "the dance aspect of 'Ese' provides forms created from stored-up resources in the tradition of the community. This, when implemented with verve, precision and ingenuity through rhythmical bodily movement with emotion, could avert anticipatory calamity, or even exercise devilish spirit". It creates realm of satiety that dissolves the dancer's earthly contact and rigidity of his existence. At this point in time, it is believed, the dancer has transcended his human and physical entity and therefore, can appease and expiate the people's misconduct, for their relief from nemesis. This avocation is a promising one to those who dangle after the dancer; but leaves much to be desired among both the sanctimoniously feigned and unfeigned natives.

CONCLUSION

Mankind has indeed, always wished to express his desire through any available medium to fulfil himself. Music and dance such as are demonstrated in 'Ese', with its biological base, are found to be useful avenues for this pressing need. Their advent in Mbaise social scheme of things yields physical relaxation and psychic/emotional release to the participants. As dance music of indigenous community, 'Ese' expresses abstract ideas with some social significance attached to it, and tends to endow social acts with initiation. Its creative movement embodies sophisticated meaning and could dwindle tensions. It brings about social cohesion, or togetherness (to those that cherish it), with resultant deep sense of communion and liberation from individual bond among members, although this is only effective with traditional values being intact.

Although influenced by both environmental and occupational features, for entertainment purpose, yet the ensemble is particularly concerned with the audience's delightful astonishment. The cultural attributes and 'adoptive/extrinsic worth' are of tremendous priorities. Both are usually modified to a certain dimension during rehearsals, depending on the context of performance. From this stand point is the fact that certain formats and patterns are fundamental for application in 'Ese', or it loses its originality. While new inventions are brought about by performance situations. Above all, accomplished acts of valour by a son of the soil do trigger off 'Ese' rendition. Also, complexity of its musical structures with impenetrable mystery, thought, and actions at certain points of the performance has close ties to the context of performance. 'Ese' is rarely presented circumstantially; if however, arising out of an event of the day it is performed, then for the most part, it is improvised. But by and large 'Ese' is controlled by a frame of traditional form in all its ramifications.

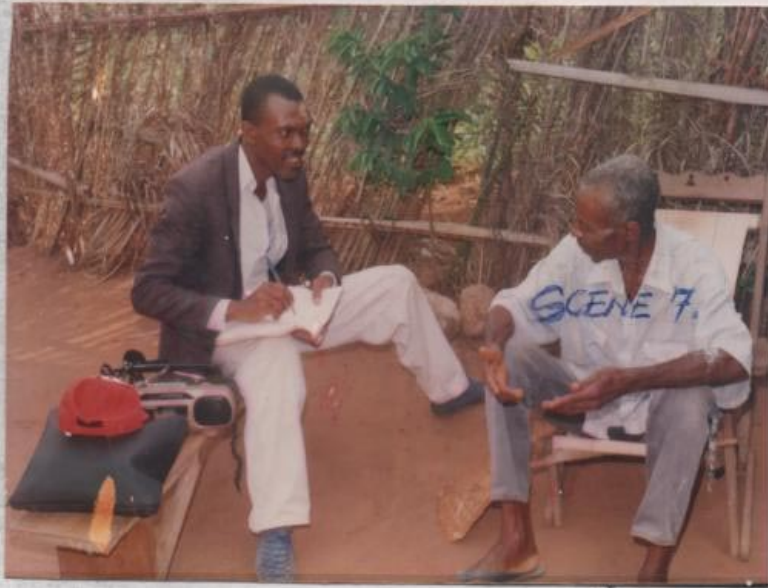
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INTERVIEW

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Scene vii The spokesman and caretaker of the Ese ensemble, Mr. Onwumere Okpe being interviewed by the researcher on miscellaneous issue bordering round ese.



Scene viii: Here, the researcher (as an active participant) was lured into dancing by the 'Ese' music and dancer, which left him in ecstasy. Rather than dance to the tune of the music however, the dancer's captivating and motivating 'walk-dance' propelled him, trying to emulate his steps and movements.

