

Dance Music in Igbo Culture: A Study of Akubumma Cultural Dance of Uli

Modestus Chimezie Abaliwu

Abstract

One of the most captivating traditional music genres in Igbo culture is dance music. In Igbo land, the organisation and performance of dance music reflects a community's beliefs, orientation and the purpose necessitating the music and the dance. Basically, dance music is utilized by folk groups as a way of showcasing and strengthening their cultural identity and oneness as well as a means of celebrating events of customary or social relevance. In Uli, there are various dance music types; they include those for individuals and groups, women, children, youths and elderly men and women. This study is focused on the activities of Akubumma Cultural Dance, a dance music type performed by the folk men of Umuoma community in Uli, Anambra State. The study covers the organisation and performance techniques of the dance. Data collected for the study emerged from the field work undertaken by the researcher as well as from secondary sources. The result of the research indicates that traditional music is one of the foundational aspects of Igbo culture, one that should be sustained by ensuring its intergenerational transmission through the involvement of children and youths in dance music development and performances. The study recommends that the performance of traditional music should be made a major entertainment feature of various communal festivities and events in order to reinforce its value as a unifying and health-enhancing cultural expression.

Keywords: dance music, Igbo culture, Akubumma, Uli

Introduction

Igbo people are found mostly in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. They constitute the overwhelming majority of Nigerians dwelling in Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo States. A sizable number of Igbo-speaking people are also found in Rivers and Delta States. The Igbo are very industrious; they are seen as agents of development wherever they dwell, be it within or outside Igbo land. Okafor (2005:26) observes that "Igbo people are basically farmers, traders and craftsmen". Generally, they do well in

whatever business venture they undertake. They use traditional music and dance to celebrate rites of passage and to display their cultural heritage.

Agu in Okpala (2016:49) affirms that in African societies, all aspects of life, ranging from birth to death, are believed to be integrated with music making. Music is featured in all cultural activities in Igbo land. Besides its entertainment and aesthetic values, music serves as mark of identity and unity that tie the people together. Euba in Okpala (2016:96) states that music is a powerful tool that encourages unity among people irrespective of their age and social status.

On the nature and interconnectedness of music and dance in a traditional African setting, Nwachukwu (2024) states:

In African culture, music and dance are two inseparable cultural elements that complement each other. From the rhythmic beats of the diverse traditional instruments to the heterophonic African music and the jaw-dropping dance movements, music and dance have been an integral part of the African heritage for centuries. Both elements are deeply rooted in the expressive nature of African culture, where movement and rhythm synchronize to create a dynamic art form... In most African cultures, the connection between music and dance remains unbreakable because they share a common purpose of celebrating culture, life, heritage, and communal living.

Music performance groups are organized by people in some kind of social relationship among the Igbo communities. The performance groups may be organized at clan, age grade, church, or village levels or they may be organised by either male or female groups to meet social and cultural demands of the people. Dance music is one of the most beautiful traditional music forms in Igbo culture. *Akubumma* Cultural Dance is dance music organized by the men folk of Umuoma village, Uli. Their principal goal is to encourage unity, progress and love in the community by participating and sharing in communal experiences.

Historical Background of Uli People

Uli is in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. Oral tradition traces the origin of Uli to Ogidi, one of the communities in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State. According to this source, Ogidi had many children. At one time in the distant past, one of his sons called Achara left his father's home in search of a new settlement. When he came to the present day Ihiala Local Government Area, he settled there. At Oduga, where Achara founded a new settlement, he married Ugwoaku from Awoidemili. This woman gave birth to nine children but only four of them

named Okija, Ihiala, Uli, and Ihembosi, who are today part of the communities in Ihiala Local Government Area, survived. Because these four communities descended from Achara, the son of Ogidi, they often times refer to themselves as the sons of Achara Ogidi.

Udeagu (1987) discussing the history of Uli, stated that Achara left Ogidi due to death of his parents and brothers who had offended one deity called *Ogba*. For fear that he might also die at Ogidi, he decided to find a new settlement elsewhere. However, his half-brothers remained at Ogidi, and nothing happened to them. The fact was that it was Achara's mother who provoked the *Ogba* deity, so when *Ogba* sent death as punishment, it was only Achara's brothers and mother that were affected. However, after Achara's departure from Ogidi, he still remembered his relationship with the other sons of Ogidi. One implication of this was that none of the descendants of Achara could marry from Ogidi; in recent times, however, they started to inter-marry.

Achara's four surviving children were farmers. At a time, they had a serious land dispute which resulted in separation among them, They moved to different locations. Okija, the senior one, moved to the *Uras*i river area and founded a new settlement there. Ihiala moved to *Ugwuororonwanne* where he settled after waging wars with the occupants of the place. Ihembosi moved to the area called Apani which is along the present Ozubulu-Nnewi road. He founded the settlement known today as Ihembosi. Uli moved from Oduga to Akaba which was an open land with *Ukpaka* trees all over. He settled there as a farmer, but the place was not fertile. For this reason, he left Akaba and moved to Mputu which was more fertile. There he founded a permanent settlement which is today known as Uli community. Uli got married and had three sons, namely Eziam, Aku, and Oma. It was through these three sons that Uli's genealogy continued uninterrupted until twenty-five villages that formed Uli today had emerged. Uli, therefore, is a community founded by Achara, a notable farmer from Ogidi (Udeagu 1987:24).

At present, Uli is an autonomous community that has produced notable men and women. Uli people participate in a number of cultural activities that bind them together. Just like other Igbo communities, music is an integral part of culture in Uli.

The Concept of Dance Music

Onyekwelu in Okpala (2016) defines dance as "a response of physical body to the stimulus of organized sound". Mackrell in Albert (2019:198) defines dance as "the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music

and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy or simply taking delight in the movement itself". He further states that "dance is powerful impulse challenged by skilful performers into something that becomes intensely expressive and that may delight spectators who feel no wish to dance themselves" (p.189). The above submission by Mackrell is correct because there should be a kind of music that stimulates one to dance. From the above, it is clear that dance is inseparable from music. Dance is a sequence of rhythmic steps or movements usually performed to music, for pleasure or as a form of social interaction.

Okpala (2016:98) observes two aspects of dance, namely, the free medley and stylized dance. Discussing further, she states that: "the free medley dance is seen as a powerful impulse that requires individuals' freedom in its composition and movement. The stylized dance is a skilfully choreographed art practiced largely by a professional. It requires fixed choreographical patterns and sequence with varying signs of aesthetic communication". *Akubumma* cultural dance is a free medley dance performed by the male folk of Umuoma village, Uli.

Music and dance are aspects of culture in Igbo that impact much on the life of the people. They are widely practiced by every community in Igbo land. Dance music seems to be the most captivating music genre engaged in by many cultures. However, studies by some scholars have shown that there are some music ensembles that do not include dance in their performance. But that which involves dance are far greater in number. Nketia in Okpala (2016:98) notes that although purely contemplative music, which is not designed for dance drama, is practised in African society in restricted contexts, the cultivation of music that is integrated with dance or music that stimulates affective motor response is more prevalent.

Dance music has different categories as observed by Okpala (2016) in Okpala (2021); she states that dance music could be viewed in three categories, namely, instrumental dance, vocal dance, and the combination of both vocal and instrumental dance (p.17). The vocal or instrumental parts produce the rhythm which the dancers dance to, and this demonstrates that without vocal or instrumental music, dance will be insignificant. This aligns with Onwuka (2012) which states that dance cannot be meaningfully performed without music. He further notes that "dance is stimulated and accompanied by appropriate music which makes the wonderful art of traditional performance spirit-lifting and edifying" (p.2). The dance group in this study is an instrumental dance group.

The Organization of Akubumma Cultural Dance

The awareness of the historical background of any musical ensemble is required in order to grasp its performance and functionality. Igbo communities practised music borrowing and they are still practising it today, especially in Uli town. The music under discussion was borrowed from Orsu-Ihiteukwa of Imo State in 1989. They discovered the dance from an event they went to at Orsu-Ihiteukwa and they decided to borrow it from them. After discovering it, they invited Orsu-Ihiteukwa people and made their motive known to them. The owners of the dance gave them their requirement which they partially fulfilled, as agreed. The training lasted for about two years due to lack of funds to enable them fulfil all the demands of the Orsu-Ihiteukwa people.

The establishment of *Akubumma* cultural dance in Umuoma Uli was to accomplish their desire to:

- Foster unity and progress in their village.
- Have a sustainable village identity.
- Entertain people during functions like ceremonies, festivals and other cultural and social events in Umuoma, Uli town and environs.
- Contribute in the development of their village and community through the money realised by the group.

The group started with about twelve members who financed the long period of training. The training took a long time because the members were few in number and had inadequate financial resources. But at the completion of the training, the dance came out in glory at Ogbuehi Ernest Mbaekposi's compound (Ezeudo), where the first public outing (*ibuputeegwu*) took place. He was the Chairman of the group at that time.

Some members of the group were elected into leadership positions to improve the smooth running of the group. This aligns with Onwuka (2012) who posits that a typical Nigerian traditional or contemporary dance group consists of elected members who are functionaries, expressive artistes or attendants. They also appointed *ndinna-egwu* and *nne-egwu* (patrons and patronesses).

Criteria for Recruitment of New Members

The recruitment of new members into *Akubumma* cultural dance group is via interview with prospective members. There is no monetary implication

neither is there any ritual to be performed. However, new members are required to bring one carton of Life beer which the old members will drink to mark the acceptance of the new members. There is no age limit in the recruitment of new members; with this, the group has been functional till date. The group involves children, youths and old people in their musical activities, and this has kept the group alive, notwithstanding the influence of Western culture over the younger ones in the society. Okpala (2016:100) has noted that “most traditional music ensembles are at the verge of facing total extinction because of the lack of interest of the younger generation in their traditional music activities”. She further explains that some music groups are no more functional because the people that initiated them are no more or have grown too old to continue with their musical activities.

Prospective members who are known to be dishonest are not allowed to join the group. Approved new members join the group during its monthly meeting or whenever it has emergency training sessions.

Venue and Periods of Rehearsals

When the group was formed, the rehearsal venue was at Ogbuehi Ernest Mbackposi's compound. After his death, the venue of the group's rehearsals was shifted to Nze Micheal Onyebuo's compound (*Nzeakonobi*).

The choice of Nze Michael Onyebuo's compound as the place of rehearsals was because he is the current chairman of the group and it is in their law that the venue of rehearsals will be the chairman's house. Some researchers are, however, of the opinion that the venue of rehearsals should be chosen based on the centrality of the place. *Akubumma* cultural dance group has no specific day for rehearsals. They rehearse on the eve of the day before any event they are invited to.

Costumes

Costumes form part of the movement complex in dance. Agu (2001) posits that “costumes are carefully selected to portray the mood of the music and also to transmit the message of the group to the audience” (p.120). Costumes add beauty to dance performance. In *Akubumma* cultural dance group, local materials are used for their costumes, except the foot wear. The group has one type of costume for the dancers and a different one for the instrumentalists and other members.

The dancers usually wear wood-carved face masks which they use to cover their face while dancing. This is in line with what Nze Micheal Onyebuo said during an oral interview that “in the olden days before the

independence, children wore wood-carved face mask to entertain elderly and wealthy men; this is part of African culture” (27-8-2023).

The wood-carved face mask costumes include the ones for the father, the mother and their daughter. Each play vital roles during any performance. The three dancers wear lace, wood-carved face masks, and leg rattle, hand gloves, a pair of flat canvas and a chieftaincy cap designed with green, black and white colours.



The costume of the dancers

Performance Situation of *Akubumma* Cultural Dance

The performance of *Akubumma* cultural dance is based on invitation to both sacred and secular functions. They perform not only in Uli, but within the neighbouring towns and outside the State.

Akubumma is a respectable, mobile cultural dance that combines both the free medley dance and the stylized dance pattern. The dancers are only three in number, and comprise of the father, the mother, and the daughter, as earlier mentioned. The fatherly wood-carved face mask plays the role of father in the dance. He doesn't dance much, his work is to protect his wife but sometimes he dances an energetic dance to show that he is the father of the dance. The motherly wood-carved face mask takes the lead dancer role which makes the dance and the atmosphere very unique and memorable. The child wood-carved face mask signify that children are also welcome into the group and that children can dance the dance steps very well, as displayed in every performance. *Akubumma* is a dramatised dance ensemble that represents the activities in the family. During performance, the instrumentalists and other members move into the performance arena, they play to entertain the audience and get the environment charged.

The flutist plays a very important role but has no specific position. He calls out the dancers at the appropriate time; once the dancers appear, both the instrumentalists and other members move round with them in the performance arena.



The group performing in an event

The coming out of the tree dancers is in hierarchy: the father dancer will come out first, followed by the mother and then the child. They dance to the rhythm of the music played by the instrumentalists. The flautist plays some melodic phrases, which other instrumentalists respond to. There is no stopping of dancing or instrumentation until they leave the performance arena.

Instruments of the Dance

Okpala (2016) states that “the selection of musical instruments by African music ensemble is done based on the orientation of the group” (p.106). Agu (2000:80) opines that “the function and utility of the music performed by the group determines the size and composition of the instruments to be used by any group”. *Akubumma* cultural dance is a mobile group, they use little musical instruments they could carry around while performing. Their instruments are made up of three membrane drums: *okeigba*, *nwunyeigba*, and *nwaigba*. The membrane used in making the drums is that of *mgbada* (gazelle). Other instruments of the group are *udu* (musical pot), *okpokolo* (wooden block), *ogene* (metal gong), and *oja* (local flute).

Role of Dance Music in Igbo Culture

Music and dance play prominent roles in preserving the culture of its owners and in shaping the lives of the people positively. Oriloye (2011)

notes that “Music and dance appeal to the emotions”. They enhance group feelings and solidarity (p.16). Music and dance are also used for communication. They send messages across to people. Despite the emerging influence of Western culture in Igbo traditional music, cultural dances like the *Atilogwu*, *Egedege*, *Mkpokiti* and many more still exist; this is possible because of the cultural roles they play. Music is an indispensable part of the Igbo culture. Its impact in the life of the people cannot be over emphasized. Dance music events are, therefore, appropriate occasions for assessing the social life of any community.

Conclusion

Music performance is so much a part of everyday life in Uli that there are lots of musical ensembles found among the people. There are different types of music genres performed by the different categories of musical groups in Uli, ranging from children to adult groups. This agrees with the view of Agu in Okpala (2016) that Nigerians are great lovers of music who create and perform music to enrich every activity, ranging from birth to death. All musical creations serve specific purposes and all performances are carefully chosen to fit specified functions and activities appropriately (p.97). Agu further observes that:

Music and musical activities have been seen as an important aspect of every culture. There exists well established musical tradition in all Nigerian cultures. And every ethnic community has some guidelines and well established norm as regards its musical activities and practices (p.106).

This study has portrayed dance music as an indispensable part of culture in Igbo communities and in Uli in particular. Through music and dance, the social life of the people is enhanced and the bond that holds them together is made stronger. *Akubumma* dance ensemble is an outstanding dance group that the owners are very proud of.

This study recommends that the *Akubumma* dance ensemble should include more young people in their activities, as this will contribute to the continuous existence of the group. The researcher encourages other dance music groups to do same. This study also recommends that the performance of traditional music groups should be actively encouraged in various Igbo communities and should involve the younger generation who should be able to carry on when the elderly members of the group pass on.

References

Agu, D.C.C. (2000). Music in the Nigeria culture: types and

practice. In N.E. Orjiakor, G. C. Unachukwu and A. Obiajulu, (Eds.). *Challenges of National Growth and Development in Nigeria*. (pp.79 -88). Enugu: John Jacobs Classic Publishers Ltd.

Nwachukwu, K. (2024). African Music and Dance: An Enduring Bond within African Culture. <https://africanmusiclibrary.org/blog/african-music-and-dance-an-enduring-bond-within-african-culture>

Okafor, R. C. (2005). *Music in Nigerian society*. Enugu: New Generation Books.

Okpala, H.N. (2016). Dance music in Igbo culture: A Descriptive Study of *Igba Akwu Na-Eche Enyi* of Ichida. *Awka Journal of Research in Music and The Arts (AJRMA)*. 11, 95 - 108.

Okpala, H. N. (2021). *Dance music in Igbo culture: a study of Iduu cultural dance of Akpo and Odezuruigbo cultural dance of Awka*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation submitted to the Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Onwuka, U.A. (2011). *A basic text for dance education in Nigeria*: Onitsha: Jenison.

Oriloye, S. (2011). The Organization and Performance of *Rankim* Dance among the Kabwir-Ngas of Plateau State of Nigeria. *OBODOM Journal of Music and Aesthetics (JOMA)*. 1(2),16 - 20.

Udeagu, E.O. (1987). *Ozo Title Institution in Uli from Pre-colonial to Colonial Time*. Unpublished Research Project Presented To The Department of History, College of Education, Nsugbe.

Writer's Brief Data



Modestus Chimezie Abaliwu is of Department of Music, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria. Email: abaliwumodesty@gmail.com



CITING THIS ARTICLE



APA

Abaliwu, M. C. (2025). Dance Music in Igbo Culture: A Study of Akubumma Cultural Dance of Uli. *Journal of Education, Humanities, Management and Social Sciences (JEHMSS)*, 3(1), 22-32. <https://klamidas.com/jehmss-v3n1-2025-02/>

MLA

Abaliwu, Modestus Chimezie. "Dance Music in Igbo Culture: A

Study of Akubumma Cultural Dance of Uli”. *Journal of Education, Humanities, Management and Social Sciences (JEHMSS)*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2025, pp. 22-32.
<https://klamidas.com/jehmss-v3n1-2025-02/>