

## Elements of Form and Structure in *Ekpo* Music of Annang/Ibibio People, Nigeria

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*Ekpo* society of Annang/Ibibio culture has a multivarious dimensional: religious musical and dramatic. It is factual that many traditional groups in Nigeria have not been given the in-depth study they deserve by scholars. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the practices of *Ekpo* traditions with special reference to its instrumental music aspects. This study adopted the naturalistic method by which the researcher undertook field studies, recording and participated in some aspects of the musical presentations of *Ekpo* ensemble. The secondary mode of data collection was through literarily works and the other archival documentation on *Ekpo* music and other related genres. Musical examples collected during the fieldwork were transcribed and analyzed. This study revealed that: the rhythmic motifs found in *Ekpo* music were also the foundation of some other musical types embed within the culture understudy, the onomatopoeic representations and other poetic devices found in *ekpo* music were also the bases for other coded communicational techniques in Annang/Ibibio culture, instrumental music of *ekpo* forms comprised a collection of rich and sophisticated dances that could likened to 'African Suites.' And that some other cultural music types derive inspiration and sometimes content and styles from *ekpo* music. Consequent upon the forgoing, compositional materials and other thematic ideas are often derived from this medium for wholesome musical works. In fact, some musical compositions based on these studies are emerging. More research work and adaptations of materials from such studies for cultural civilization in the third millennium musical needs are inevitable and desirous.

**Keywords:** Annang, *Ekpo* Music, Indigenous Compositions, Ensemble, Millennium.

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### I. Introduction

The history of *Ekpo* in Annang/Ibibio culture has hoar antiquity. The word, *Ekpo* literally translates as a ghost (spirit of the departed ancestors). Akpaobot 1975 submits that "the spirits of the ancestors usually come back in the form of *Ekpo* to help in the government and social control of their community" (page 25). It has been practised as an esoteric society exclusive to men in a religious context. *Ekpo* tradition has been relapsing in its original adjustive purpose in Akwa Ibom State over the years. This may not be unconnected with the Nigerian social milieu which is surrounding her festivals and is often prone to changes. Historiographical consciousness is often beclouded and even almost extinct in the prevailing circumstances. As in the words of Kubik (2001), while ethnomusicologists and commercial record companies worldwide have become interested in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century popular (traditional) music in Africa, historical consciousness remains low in the general African public. Mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century styles are quickly diminished as "out of date" or "colonial" by young people (207). This may be seen as reminiscent of *ekpo* traditions whereby the weakness and threats associated with it overwhelm the strength and opportunities it offers.

The raison d'être of the diminishing of the original purposes of *ekpo* is not within the scope of this study. The study is rather x-raying the formal structures of *ekpo* music in order to portray how this seemingly dysfunctionalised art form is serving as a nexus of the creative and material aspects of Akwa Ibom culture. This study is focusing instrumental music forms (*oduoduok ekpo*) rather the vocal music forms (*okwokwo ekpo*). The broad outline of the considerations herein is:

Concepts of form in the study

*Ekpo* musical presentation

The formal structure of *ekpo* music

Modern trends in *ekpo* music

Derivations from *ekpo* music

Conclusion

### 1. **Concept of Form in the Study**

For the purpose of this discussion, the writer accepts Arnold's (1984) postulation that: 'Music is the attempt to shape experience in terms of sound. It can thus be said to have form'. (669). Arnold and other theorists have deciphered the micro and macro fabrics in music which are tailored together to make a whole work of art – musical work, musical presentation, and musical event. The techniques involved in the weaving of the single fabrics into a whole product are exemplified herein. The theorists outline two types of forms: pure (musical) form and form with extra-musical elements, that is, those that combine sound with words, acting and other art forms to shape experience. Whatever the dichotomy between so-called pure and impure (forms with extra-musical elements) forms, this article accepts the position of Kubik (2001) that "musical practices flourish within sociocultural contexts". (205). It is therefore imperative that musical events which shape experiences derive their potency from a combination of sound and time (as the materials of music) with other sociocultural contingencies to make meaning and leave a lasting impression among the participants. The *ekpo* music used in this study has been intensively reviewed over a period of time, that is 1983, 1986, 1990, 2005, 2011 and 2019. Akpakpan (2011) has also researched extensively into this musical tradition.

### 2. **Ekpo Musical Presentation**

*Ekpo* instrumental music presentation is a collaboration between members of a graded membrane drum orchestra and a set of dancers to affect an inspiring music drama. The orchestra is made up of a master musician (instrumentalist) who stands in the middle of the arena flanked on either side by an equal number of drummers on open-ended skin drums of varying sizes. The master musician plays on a set of four tonally graded skin drums of the same shape as those of the other instrumentalists except they are smaller. The scientific rule on pitching is exemplified in that the smaller the drum the higher the pitch and vice versa. It is worthy of note that: Musical intervals and scales, although they depend in part on acoustic factors are primarily psychocultural entities – not mathematics or physical. Intervals are historically and culturally variable distances that are learned from oral tradition (Richard Parncett & Graham Hair 2018).

Thus, the master musicians' historical instrument is made up of four definite pitches which plays the melody while the other instruments of the orchestra are deeply toned and they provide the accompaniment. There is also the woodblock which plays the role of marking the phrases in the ensemble. Each instrument fulfils a unique orchestral role in the ensemble although some may serve to double the desired effect. For example, the master musician's instrument *nkoron* is melodic in essence and plays the role of the solo or concertino, or the main singer/ player. Okon Unanam (1990) the master musician calls himself the "choirmaster" (Oral Interview) in the group. The other drums play the *oboro*-accompaniment or *tutti*, *ripieno* or *concertante*. Some of them do the pulse marking, *ostinato* as the case may be. The resultant effect is a thick Melo-rhythmic/rhythmic percussion music with the *nkoron*'s sonic production akin to that of the xylophone, all of this in a seemingly *concerto grosso* style.

The orchestral music is conceived for dancing by seven different characters who are mystically represented by *masquerades-ekpo* (ghosts). Some of these "spirits" appear elegant while others are grotesque according to their symbolism.

### 3. **The Formal Structure of Ekpo Music**

#### **Introductory Music**

When the stage is set for the commencement of *ekpo* music drama, the master instrumentalist starts the musical prelude by playing a series of compositional themes as described by Nzewi (1986) thus:

The master musician draws his compositional idioms from categories of significant or abstract compositional themes and uses them to develop a performance composition. Such thematic idioms include alert themes to call the orchestra to attention, complimentary units of phrases, usually in pairs, reiterated and/or sequentially treated. Also, fragments of such phrases are used for emotive build-up when stated at various melo-rhythmic pitches (59)

All these extemporizations may last for two to three minutes. The introductory music thereafter terminates with a cadential formula which meddles into the dance music proper.

#### **Ntok Ekpo**

The master musician at this juncture plays a representative motif (Thompson 1984:1056) to usher in the first set of "spirit" dancers who emerge from the grove (backstage). They are called *ntok ekpo* (general or unspecified characters) because they are not the main cast.

The *ntok ekpo* are meant for the introductory scene of the play. They perform graceful dancing in  $\frac{12}{8}$  time to enhance the aesthetic/artistic dimension of the play. The orchestra (*oboro*) takes on an elaborate accompaniment

of the thematic idea that was introduced by the master musician. The latter gives further development of the dance as he communicates freely with the dancers and other instrumentalists on the *ηkoron*. This transaction- (s) between the orchestra and “spirit” dancers form the basis for dramatization in the music. At the climactic section of the music-drama various cue patterns are played by the master musician to usher in the roll section *afia fiak ekpo* (a name denoting the twist-like dance steps associated with the music). This segment is characterized by sustained, alternate stroke rolls and a barrage of significant patterns. It is a very important segment in the dance drama:

- Herein a dialogue ensues between the master musician and other artistes. He directs them on what to do via linguistic simulations on the *ηkoron*.
- This segment is a recurring episode which serves as a link between the various sections of the music. (ibid: 20)

The various *ntok ekpo* dancers emerge, based on the communicational pleasantries by the master musician. They take their turn and twist around and offer a tripartite salutation formulae in agreement with the instrumentalists. Other initiates in the audience who are not masked are free to join the dance and salute the participants as directed.

### Ntok Ekpo



When all the “spirit” dancers and inspiring initiates in the audience have all taken their turns in the twist-like dance and salutations as the occasion demands, the music punctuates with tangible cue patterns and meddles into the next dance conceived for the *ekpo* teacher (*titia ekpo*).

### Titia Ekpo

As the music for *titia ekpo* is introduced, the *oboro* (chorus) gives a thunderous response to the thematic motif with the required developmental techniques. The master musician takes his turn by directing the actor-*titia ekpo* – on what to do on stage. Once the teacher emerges, he assumes the role of the contemporary school teacher. The music is in  $12_8$  time with a moderate tempo. The resultant musical line is singable thus:

*Titia abobọ mbobọ aka uke?*

*Titia abobọ mbobọ aka inọ ntororo*

Translated to read:

*Where is the teacher going with such an elegant dressing?*

*The teacher is neatly dressed to go and steal cassava.*

### Titia Ekpo



The teacher is a funny character but is elegantly dressed as the song suggests. The attack on the teacher’s character is merely a misrepresentation by biased subjects. The dance conceived for the teacher ends with the appropriate cadential cue and changes into the roll section as described earlier. The roll section connects the next dance for *abaike ekpo* (the maiden masquerade). But take note, the teacher at this point assumes his role as a Career Leader: leading other subsequent actors in and out of stage, critically assessing their various roles in the performance and publishing the results in his notebook (report card) for public consumption.

### Abaikpa Ekpo

The representative motif for the maiden masquerade is a contemporary popular music item, for example, a highlife tune. The *oboro* plays the main tune as the *ηkoron* does meaningful musical sentences to decorate the theme. The *ηkoron* also provides conversational pleasantries to the maiden. The maiden, as in a typically Annang/Ibibio culture, is the epitome of beauty. Thus, this actor is beautifully decorated and displays stylish dance steps to add colour to her character. It is worthy of note that the song associated with the maiden dancer has been recreated with new words for use in the church, the song goes thus:

**Song**

*Abasi enyemi ayaya oboho*  
**Kop nana ase anana k'idem**

**Translation**

This God is so marvelous  
Look at how this fancies my imagination



The teacher gives her the necessary compliments, admiration and a certain element of teasing as due to maidens. The dance for this character terminates after the required musico-dramatic contingencies have taken place. The roll and salutation segments lead to the next dance conceived for *inyon ekpo* (cripple masquerade).

**Inyon ekpo**

The thematic material for the cripple masquerade dance is based on a song text. The master musician warns him in a song thus:

*Inyon ekpo k'utop idan ke urua - oh! Jegeje jeg jeg!*

Translated to read:

*Cripple masquerade do not shoot your arrow in the market – oh*

### Inyon Ekpo



The chorus responds: *jegeje jeg jeg* constituting non-sense syllables to fill in the pattern that is, to complete the sentence. This song is informative to both the audience and the actor, the latter, who, because of his crippled nature is always emotionally upset. He often causes a nuisance by shooting his arrow indiscriminately at the crowd to pacify his nature-imposed infirmity. The music for *inyon ekpo* is in a slow tempo to compensate for his physical challenges of inability to walk as fast as his contemporaries. The roll and salutation patterns symbolize his exit. The teacher awards him due recompense for behaving unseemly. The next character to appear on stage is the mother masquerade *eka ekpo*.

**Eka Ekpo**

The leitmotiv is introduced by the *ηkoron* and handed over to the *oboro* to interpret as the chorus. The dance is slow in tempo but not as slow as that of the cripple masquerade. It has a syncopated rhythm to give the mother masquerade freedom to calculate her steps. The mother wears a huge mask with smaller masks attached to her depicting the number of children she possesses. The teacher and the master musician give her the necessary encouragement and systematic directives on stage. The music cadences with the roll and salutation episodes in a majestic style. The music conceived for *abiakpo ekpo* (stilt-man masquerade) follows.

### Eka Ekpo



**Abiakpo Ekpo**

The music for the *ekpo* stilt-man is in a walking tempo because of the elongated nature of the gait of the actor which requires an economy of movement. The music herein has a song text derivation thus:

The *ηkoron* starts

*abiakpo ntok ukot* and the

*oboro* responds:

*sanga usuk usuk ka iso tinjek*

meaning:

*ηkoron*: Tiny-legged masquerade

*oboro*: walk slowly, move on, tinjek.

## Abiakpo Ekpo



*Tinjek* is a series of nonsense syllables to complete a sentence. The roll section takes over and meddles into the *akpan ekpo* (male-born masquerade) dance.

### Akpan Ekpo

The male-born masquerade always emerges last from the backstage because he is very energetic and chases other people away. He is also a fast runner. Thus, his music is marked *prestissimo*. After all the performance requirements are duly accomplished the music accelerates into a climactic section and culminates with the roll and salutation patterns as signalled by the master musician. Thus, the *ekpo* performance finally ends.

## Akpan Ekpo



### The Formal Structure of Ekpo Music

The *ekpo* instrumental music drama in the display shows a whole musical work/event comprising of seven different movements connected together with the roll section and 'salutational' formulae at the end of each movement. The different movements have distinctive thematic ideas (representative motifs) which are meant for a particular actor(s). Anybody who is familiar with *ekpo* music herein can identify which actor is on stage even if he is listening to the music from a distance. Physical presence will only add value to the listener. The musical event is indeed an *okop umehe* meaning you hear the music and you long to watch the performance. Yet, the musical event even without written notation, when performed on another occasion will follow the same structural format while yielding itself to certain social contingencies, for example, the exclusion of a certain actor(s).

Thus, *ekpo* music has shapes, various shapes for that matter. It is a cyclic form, a piece of programme music, a collection of instrumental music/dramatization of some sort strung together by episodes. A graphical representation of the formal structure is shown below.

A	B	A <sub>1</sub>	C	A <sub>1</sub>	D	A <sub>1</sub>	E	A <sub>1</sub>	F	A <sub>1</sub>	G	A <sub>1</sub>	H	A <sub>1</sub>
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A	=	Introductory music
B	=	Music for <i>Ntok ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
C	=	Music for <i>Titia ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
D	=	Music for <i>Abaikpa ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
E	=	Music for <i>Inyon ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
F	=	Music for <i>Eka ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
G	=	Music for <i>Abiakpo ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section
H	=	Music for <i>Akpan ekpo</i>
A <sub>1</sub>	=	Roll section (Finale)

The presentational form herein is dramatic. It is, in addition, a social form in that it mirrors the society. It is a collection of dances strung together by trill sections and can be linked to an African (Akwa Ibom) Suite.

### Derivations from Ekpo Music

The instrumental music components of the *ekpo* tradition have been distilled from the seemingly dysfunctionalised aspects of the art forms and used for meaningful recreational/ developmental purposes such as:

(a) Onomatopoeic representations embedded in *ekpo* music dramatic language are used as the basis for valuable idiomatic expressions and moral lessons within the State. The writer of this article uttered one such representation conceived for Eka ekpo in an African Music class at the University of Uyo:

*Eyen uso unyana nkpo* - *yak no*  
*Mbohidun unyana nkpo* - *yak no*  
*Yak no, Yak no, Yak no,*  
*Ke iboho itie tie idia,* - *yak no*

**Meaning:**

Your stepbrother struggles over a property with you - Leave up  
Your neighbour struggles, with you over a property - Leave up  
Leave up, leave up, Leave up  
He will not stay long to enjoy - Leave up

A Reverend Father from the said class used this truism as an illustration in a homily and reported back the positive resultant effect on his audience.

- (b) Rhythmic motifs derived from *ekpo* instrumental music are used for contemporary artworks in the sacred and secular world. For example, the song *Mkparawa obio nnyin emenere idem*.
- (c) Current research interests on *Ekpo* music are expressed by some other researchers from the University of Uyo because of its richness.
- (d) *Ekpo* music has leaned itself and as a vehicle of social cohesion within and outside Akwa Ibom State. Whenever the music is performed, initiates and enthusiasts will conglomerate to enjoy the *okop umeh* (You hear the music and long for encores)
- (e) Advertisements and social campaigns are often carried out with the musical themes from *ekpo* music to create a social identity among the people.
- (f) Commercialization of the music is achievable as some of its items are recorded and stored in archives.
- (g) Proposals are underway to include this music as a learning experience in the University of Uyo's Department of Music. Theatrical outfits are emerging within the Nigerian context. Some of the insipid performances can be replaced with inspiring musical practices and content from *ekpo* music. This music will learn support to the capacity-building campaign in Nigeria by providing a training ground for the teeming population of talented youths involved in artistry and peace studies.

## II. Conclusion

The *ekpo* instrumental forms used in this study display the features of the interrelationship between different patterns of sound which yield themselves into various movements joined together to form a masterpiece. It is a collection of dances which tell stories and shape experiences. Besides, music has formed a part of the people's way of life. For example, *ekpo* musical events in the Annang/Ibibio culture have a standard structural layout. The music is very rich and can offer itself as a meaningful vehicle of inculturation to create viable modern meanings. Even those who have an obvious reason to dismiss certain aspects of *ekpo* routine as being out of date still have the need to take delight in its musical works. In a way, the old music has been brought back (Nettl, 1985:162).

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