

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

### **IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES OF ESE MUSIC THROUGH OMENKA ADIBE'S RECORDINGS: A SURVEY**

Chima Albert Abiakwu

#### **Abstract**

Ese and Uko ensembles have been handed on through oral tradition like most other native ensembles and quite like others, while the thematic, rhythmic and philosophical ideologies have lived-on, the performance techniques and dexterity of their performers have continued to dwindle. There is in fact a general opinion of a drop in skill-level among current performers of these ensembles. OmenkaAdibe, a renowned master of these art forms, saw beyond his time and recorded some of his performances. These recordings have become the canon for appraisal of Ese and Uko Performance Techniques in his native Ahiara, AhiazuMbaise. The researcher carried out preliminary surveys of native audiences, his musical heirs and former apprentices. This survey confirmed the general opinion of a dwindling dexterity. However, the survey revealed that Egbeahiaogu's use of Adibe's recorded performances during rehearsal sessions led to improved dexterity. The study therefore discovered from the surveys, that there is a positive relationship between the study of archived performance techniques of master performers on one hand and improved performance skill-levels of current performers on the other. It is the recommendation of the researcher that the works of OmenkaAdibe and indeed other master performers of other native ensembles be made available to current performers of Ese, Uko and other native ensembles for improved performance dexterity and skills which is the best way to ensure conservation, sustainability, efficient documentation and handing-on of these art-forms to younger generations.

Keywords: Performance Technique, Extemporization, Native Ensemble, Ese, Mbaise.

#### **Introduction**

Music is a universal phenomenon, a reality that is not only alive but functional among virtually all men, all societies and in all civilizations. Its origins have been traced to the very origin of men as some say it is as old as man. Societies and cultures have varying demands for it of course, but among all these demands, one basic fact is prevalent: that is the belief that music is a potent instrument for social cohesion, correction and advancement. Mbaise as an ethnic nationality is blessed with a plethora of original native ensembles ranging from those for rituals and work, to gender and age reserved ensembles. Ese, Uko, Mgba, Agborogwu, Ekpe, Abigbo, Ogbengleng, Alija, Agbach-a-ekurunwaetc are among the numerous native ensembles indigenous to Mbaise. Current performers (of these ensembles) have therefore learned their art from masters and their skills have been honed principally through observation and constant exposure to renowned performances Masters. Whereas the onus of hard-work is on the aspirant performer to study and learn from masters, the task of critiquing dexterity falls on the audience who are very knowledgeable about these ensembles and can detect from afar which ensembles is on display,

despite the similarities in instrumentation and performance organization.

Since the medium of transmission is oral (i.e not written down) memorization of their performance style is the norm and since it has to be reproduced, improvisation is a major component of most African music. However, technology has availed us the opportunity to do the unthinkable; to capture those elusive moments of creative genius. What could we do if we can capture, save and build on those skillful improvisation which formed parts of the mastery of renowned performers? It (Ese) utilizes the principles of dialogue and conversation among several drums and other percussion instruments to entertain while discussing prevalent social phenomena. The Ese ensembles is a melo-rhythmic organization, it speaks, laughs, cries etc. Larson (2012) captured the scenario so well when he stated that African music is characterized by the close relationship between instrumental music and speech. Most African instruments are played in a way that imitates the human voice.

### **Music in Mbaise Socio-Cultural Milieu**

Mbaise area became a British colonial administration unit in the early years of the twentieth century (Nwala, 2005). Mbaise as her name implies refers to 5 towns. These are five independent clans whose merger came from the administrative convenience of the colonial masters. These five blocks are Oke-Ovoro, Ahiara, Ekwereazu, Agbaja and Ezinihitte. These five autochthonous clans according to Agulanna (1978:28) “occupy what can be said to be the central part of the area that later became Imo State.” Mbaise is comparatively a flat land, but around the eastern boundary towards the Imo river, it slopped to the river with about 200 or 300 feet below sea level (Eluwa, 1991:2). The Imo river separates the eastern part of Mbaise from Ngwaland, as it (Mbaise) is bounded to the north by Obowo, to the south by Ngor-Okpala and to the west by Ikeduru.

For Mbaise as a people, music plays a major role in everyday life. As is the case in numerous other Igbo societies and in Africa as a continent, there is music for every season, task, chore, situation etc. The Mbaise dialect is so rhythmic and troupes are available in this home of hospitality and wisdom. The Abigbo is perhaps the most widely known native ensemble of Mbaise origin partly because of its dialectic, cajoling and derogatory function, the exposure that it has received over the years as it is synonymous with Mbaise concepts and its fluidity in terms of performance context. Virtually every Mbaise town and village has an Abigbo troupe yet there still exists the general assertion that "AbigboMbaisewuotu" (AbigboMbaise is one) for while it exist among the various villages, its message is one; social cohesion and peaceful co-existence.

Among the Mbaise people arguably, the second most popular and frequent musical ensemble is the Ese ensemble, which is purely a male ensemble. Ese performs at a multiplicity of social contexts; its importance and place in Mbaise socio-cultural consciousness is very awe inspiring that so many regard it as ritual in nature, but this very idea is important to most African native music, they have this penchant for being relegated/exalted to ritual, by those who do not comprehend their complex rhythms nor key into their deep philosophy. little wonder Okoro and Okoro (2010) Noticed that "Ese is exclusively for men who are capable of understanding the details involved during its goings-on." Without much ado, as this work does not seek to give a structural and historical account of the Ese in detail, we leave it at this crossroad, to discuss some other native ensembles of the Mbaise people.

Closely related to Ese is its female counterpart, Uko. Their instrumental make-up are almost the same with very little difference, Uko performs for a female what Ese does for the male. Other native ensembles of Mbaise includes Alija which is a youthful ensemble and one that

incorporates all the calisthenic properties and features observable in youthful exuberance. it is very lively and fast paced. Ogbengelenge is a native xylophone based ensemble that inundates dance with a smooth collaborative discussion between vocal melodies and instrumental 'lyrics' designed from wooden pads placed on banana benches (as resonators). Then there is Ekpe, a drum- based ensemble built on the principle of hocket techniques. Ekpe is also a male dominated ensemble and is equally given a special place at ceremonies and functions. Agborogwu, and Agbachaekwurunwa are other native ensembles that punctuate the various life cycles of the Mbaise nation. In fact it is impossible to remove the prominence of traditional music from the Mbaiseness of Mbaise. The level of functionality upon which music operates within Mbaise society fits perfectly into the ambiance of social control as averred by Okafor and Okafor (2009) thus:

Approved agencies sing songs about actual evils perpetrated in the society. References are made to transgressors and they dare not retaliate. These songs (of derision) are commonly heard in the village streams, market, square, where women weave their hair and in social parades and processions which conveniently but embarrassingly pass where the transgressors can notice...(thus) is one of society's weapons of offense and defense (p.87).

This is true about music in Mbaise society and beyond derision, valiant and positive accomplishments are also appreciated and commended. Even in mainstream popular music the musicality inherent in Mbaise naturally prepares young minds for the trending metamorphosis from traditional to popular music. This is a very recognizable feature in the music of Prince Okunwamama and even of the Late (Dr.) Sir. Warrior of Oriental Brothers International Band.

### **Recording and Documenting Ese Ensemble: Prospects and Challenges**

It is an established fact that most forms and features of African tradition were handed-on by oral means; hence traditional music is passed-on from one generation to the next by memorization rather than by writing. Most schools of thought see this as an evidence of lack of civilization, while some others opine that it is an intrinsic consequence of the high mental capacity of the African intellect to memorize and hand-on facts and figures with legendary accuracy. Whichever school of thought is more superior is a debate for another day.

The unfortunate reduction in patronage and requisite acknowledgment of Mbaise ensembles (among which is the famous Ese) have made it worthwhile to chart means for functional and efficient archiving and documentation of all native ensembles and art in general. This is a fact that holds water for most African arts. The Mbaise situation, although not an exemption, is a peculiar case. The situation is no longer a fight to prevent extinction; it is now a fight for increased patronage beyond Mbaise and better remuneration. The native ensembles of Mbaise are still very much alive and active in almost all the towns and villages that make up Mbaise, from Abigbo, Ese/Uko, Mgba to Ekpe and Ogbengelenge, you notice an encouraging availability.

However, the need for increased patronage, remuneration and wider appeal to global audience has recorded varying degrees of success. In the 1970s, Prof. Nwoga took an Abigbo troupe to the United States of America, various Ese, Uko and Mgba ensembles were in the 80s and early 90s invited by agencies of government to perform at various cultural and culture-related events and fairs. The enthusiasm of adventure and exposure attracted lots of young people to apply for membership and consequently play lots of roles that prepare them for taking over the mantle. In recent times, these ensembles have seen though a multiplicity of performances, but only within Mbaise and a rarity among her neighbours. That enthusiasm of performing at prominent stages

and platforms and the satisfaction of showcasing your art to a captivated external audience, is dangerously lacking; as a consequence, young performers are in short supply. Therefore, with an increasing percentage of aging skilled performers, there has arisen the need to sustain and archive their performances both for posterity and as a technique repertoire for younger performers.

OmenkaAdibe is a pacesetter in this all important task of documenting and sustaining the very essence and performance techniques of Ese; this, he made evident in his 2015 recording produced and marketed by Bartho Electronics W/A Ltd. It is an album of 7 tracks wherein varying rhythmic and thematic ingredients were utilized. Despite the novelty of his approach to sustenance and archiving of this art, very obvious hitches must have been encountered. These are factors which may or may not lie within his control; hitches, which he needed to overcome. Chief among them is the problem of performance context.

### **Problem of Performance Context:**

The social context for Ese performance is an outdoor setting with membrane drums set on a stand/pad placed on the floor and wooden slit drums also set on the floor. In special cases (as seen in performances eulogizing great personalities) the entire ensemble could be situated on a raised platform in which case it is called Ese-elu or Ese-ike. The ensemble is then surrounded by an enthusiastic audience who not only are active participants in the performance but also efficient critics and adjudicators. Their participation by way of appreciation and singing the praises of the lead drummer, encourages the performers and spurs them to do more. There is almost always the awe-inspiring presence of both formal and non-formal dancers. When it plays at funerals, these dancers are members of Ndiopara (cult of first-sons) who must have done the ritual okwukwu for their late fathers. When Ese performs in any other social event, the dancers are all accomplished males of the society who wish to join.

Decorated with such glorious traditional stipulations, it would seem almost impossible to replicate a native Ese performance with all its attendant pomp and pageantry, inside a recording studio. The performer inside a studio would definitely be without the social space for his art, the encouragement of his cheering audience and the communication he enjoys with his dancers. Yet he has to do the needful. We agree that it is near impossible to replicate the traditional performance context of the Ese ensemble inside a recording studio. An alternative would be to attempt live recording while the performance is going on in its natural context. While this would most likely yield results, it would still face the hitches of space as dancers will obstruct the placement of the recording equipment.

### **Problem of Amplification:**

The need to amplify instruments during recording is obvious, however, some instruments play minor roles in the whole Ese dialogue. Such instruments may necessarily not require amplification. But with the nature and set-up of recording studios, such instruments will unintentionally be amplified since the acoustic setting of the studio space reverberates sound and the engineer may not be aware that such instruments should be tuned down, or may not remember to tune down their volumes even if he is aware. Again the mixing and mastering process may alter the characteristic and dialectic intonations and timbre of certain drums, thereby blurring some speech passages, resulting to what the Mbaise would term “mmaduagaainyu-anyu, jeezoroazoro.”

### **Relationship Between Archived Resources and Current Performance Corpus**

Oral tradition according to Asigbo and Aniagboso (2016) thrives in improvisation; improvisations mostly come 'unplanned' and at the spur of the moment; this is without doubt, a

fact. In linguistics, new words are from time to time added to the vocabulary of languages, a practice which keeps languages alive and ever growing. Again, in sports, geniuses invent some 'extra-terrestrial' skills which over time are imbibed by others and rules are often evaluated, with obsolete ones obliterated while new ones are added to suit contemporary demands.

The above examples underscore the idea that improvisation is worth handing-on although it is difficult to preempt, capture and store them since they come unplanned. But what if the difficulties of preempting, capturing and storing those moments of uncommon genius, cease to exist? What if those elusive flashes of brilliance can be captured and stored? If genius can be stored, replayed and documented, it forms the background for further genius. Modern technology has availed us the hitherto impossible ability to capture, store and playback sites and sounds. This opportunity was harnessed by OmenkaAdibe and it is our task in this paper to vivify the influential relationship between archiving Ese performance techniques as done by Adibe, and the dexterity of current performers of the ensemble.

The Igbo Adage 'Ohajianya' hints around the humanist philosophy of homo mensuraomnes. The people (informed audience) are the actual and efficient critics, commentators and adjudicators of a performer's skill level and of the quality of performance. This is true because they (informed audience) are the actual owners of all native ensembles and active participants within a native theatre since all music are fundamentally folk (Stokes, 1994). Masters of Ese ensemble have overtime, trained and tuned the ears of their informed audience to the in-exhaustive dialogue that ensues in all Ese performances. Larson (2012:14) captured the situation when he opined that "another general characteristic of African musical tradition, is the blurring of the distinct line between the performer and his audience." Adibe had literally perfected in Ahiara people, the important skill of listening. This phenomenal influence is even noticed during Ese performances by other native musicians; their dexterity is almost always compared to those of OmenkaAdibe, and appreciation is dependent on how close or distant their skills are from his. The following is an excerpt from the dialogue between the researcher and a resource person, Mr. ChukwuemekaOgu who is a native of OtuluAhiara.

**Researcher:** What will you say about the proficiency of current Ese performers?

**Chukwuemeka:** They give their best, but we still miss the genius of Mmaduadibe.

**Researcher:** You seem to be a huge fan of Adibe; what was so wonderful about his performance?

**Chukwuemeka:** A whole lot. His Ese drums speak so clearly that we hear and respond. No one around now plays like him.

**Researcher:** But some of his musical sons are performing well also.

**Chukwuemeka:** Of course, Emeka his son plays well and has inherited the Odinimo cultural troupe. Lots of his progenies too are doing well. Notable among them is Kelechi 'Egbeahiaogu' from Aguneze, Ahiara. We consider him the closest to Mmaduadibe's aka-nkwa (talking of dexterity). The truth remains that if it is not Mmaduadibe, it is not Mmaduadibe.

The above represents the opinion of most OtuluAhiara people, young and old alike. The researcher did a follow up and met Mr. KelechiOnyekachi a.k.a. Egbeahiaogu, who is said to be the closest in skill level to Adibe. The meeting was at his country home in Aguneze; after the normal greetings and presentation of kolanuts, we were allowed a couple of minutes of interaction. The following is an excerpt from the conversation:

**Researcher:** We have heard encouraging stories about you and your troupe. How often did you

perform with Mmaduadibe?

**Egbeahiaogu:** Thank you for the compliments. I started following Mmaduadibe as a young boy. From that time, I was in most of his performances.

**Researcher:** We heard you got the genius of your master. What would you say about that?

**Egbeahiaogu:** Well, it is impossible to compare myself or anyone else with Mmaduadibe. I have my strengths and weaknesses just like every other Ese performer, but Mmaduadibe was in a class of his own. His hands were so fast, both hands moving effortlessly as they play different rhythms at the same time. I try during my rehearsals to imitate his style and add to mine.

**Researcher:** You still remember his styles even long after his demise?

**Egbeahiaogu:** I spent so many years with him and I have his record (audio) with me. We (referring to his troupe) listen to it very often and use it for our rehearsals.

The interview explored other areas like construction of the Ese instruments, tuning, statutory remuneration, etc which do not fall within the scope of the present paper. However, the short discussion above was enough proof that archived documentaries can influence performance skills and as such can function as a repertoire of styles and technique. While it is true that genius and creativity is subjective, it is indubitable that training improves dexterity. Training is further enhanced when there are instructional materials. This is where archiving and documentation of the performance technique of masters of the Ese ensemble comes to the fore. When they are documented, they become repertoires, performance and instructional guides for other performers.

### **Conclusion:**

Most African societies reserve a leading role to the most highly skilled in each art form. This role is officially or unofficially bestowed, but in any case, there exists in the consciousness of the society, the concord that certain persons are the custodians of certain art forms at least within a certain period of time. This often places on these masters the burden of improvement and sustenance of those art forms. As Larson (2012) noticed, in addition to serving in the role of professional musician and entertainer, this leader is also in charge of maintaining the oral history of his art. This was the role Adibe occupied in his OtuluAhiara community as regards Ese, Uko and Mgba ensembles; some argue that his prowess extended beyond the entire length and breadth of Imo State. It may have been in keeping to the societal mandate of maintaining the Ese custom that he went as far as breaking the barriers of space and context, to record his art. He did not only pick and train apprentices who have taken over from him, but he saw into the future to record and archive. The Egbeahiaogu revelation has justified that singular effort. It is thus the recommendation of the researcher from the foregoing that recording and documentation of performances of Ese performances as well as other native ensemble performances is a step in the right direction for their sustained as well as improved survival and that of the essences they represent.

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