Cultural Significance of Dance and Music in the Okolode New Yam Festival of Agudama/Ekpetiama

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Abstract
Festivals in African societies function as periodic cultural events that mark special occasions, commemorate historical experiences, and celebrate communal identity. In the Okolode New Yam Festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people of Bayelsa State, dance and music are often regarded merely as instruments of entertainment, with limited recognition of their broader cultural roles. This article examines the cultural significance of dance and music in the Okolode New Yam Festival, arguing that these performance elements function as vital instruments of communication, identity formation, ritual expression, social cohesion, and aesthetic experience. The Performance Theory is the theoretical framework for the study, and the study adopts a qualitative case-study design, drawing on oral interviews with community informants, ethnographic description of festival activities, and relevant scholarly literature on African festivals, dance, and music. Findings reveal that dance and music are central to the festival's structure, shaping its ritual sequence, directing communal participation, expressing collective emotions, and preserving historical memory. The article concludes that dance and music are constitutive elements of the Okolode Festival rather than supplementary entertainment, and recommends greater institutional support for their preservation and development.

Keywords: *Okolode Festival, Agudama/Ekpetiama, dance, music, festival performance, Ijaw culture, Nigerian festivals*

Introduction

Festivals occupy a central position in African cultural life, serving as occasions for communal celebration, ritual observance, historical remembrance, and artistic expression. In many African communities, festivals embody the cultural totality of the people, integrating beliefs, values, occupations, food culture, religion, dance, music, costume, and other expressive forms into a unified performance of identity. As E. Austin Anigala observes, "festival is a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making or feast day of special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrant" (17). Anigala further explains that "the festival period, therefore is a social occasion for communal celebration. It is a periodic recurring time of gaiety or rejoicing set aside by a community, tribe or clan for the observance of sacred celebration… and traditional performance of special significance" (17).

Within this context, the Okolode New Yam Festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people of Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, stands as a significant example of how a community uses periodic celebration to mark agricultural cycles, reinforce social bonds, and display cultural heritage. The Agudama/Ekpetiama people celebrate an annual festival which is popularly known as Okolode New Yam Festival, and this festival is an embodiment of all embellishments and festivity in the African society, including dance, music, and costume.

Scholars have long recognized that music, dance, and costumes play vital roles in African festivals, as a festival cannot be functional, entertaining, and recreational without the presence of these basic components. According to Robert Cohen, theatre and performance events depend on the integration of multiple artistic elements to create meaningful experiences for participants and audiences (200). Similarly, Ilami Clive notes that festivals may serve both ritual and entertainment functions, depending on how they are contextualized within the community (32).

Despite the centrality of dance and music in African festivals, these elements are frequently perceived primarily as means of entertainment rather than as vital instruments of cultural communication and social organization. In the Okolode New Yam Festival, as in many other African celebrations, dance, music, and costume are often seen as decorative additions rather than as essential components that structure the festival's meaning and function. This perception limits the understanding of how these performance elements contribute to the festival's ritual significance, historical continuity, communal participation, and aesthetic appeal.

The problem this article addresses is the neglect of the broader cultural roles of dance and music in the Okolode New Yam Festival. While these elements are visibly prominent throughout the celebration, their significance is frequently reduced to entertainment value, with little attention paid to their functions as instruments of communication, identity performance, ritual expression, and social cohesion. This article therefore seeks to examine the cultural significance of dance and music in the Okolode New Yam Festival, demonstrating that they are integral to the festival's structure and meaning. The primary objective of the study is to provide a detailed examination of the significant roles of dance and music in the Okolode New Yam Festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people. Specifically, the article explores the definitions and meanings of dance and music as articulated by scholars, examines the historical background and occupation of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people, traces the historical development of the Okolode Festival, and analyzes the performance styles and organizational patterns of the celebration. The study also considers the significance of dance and music within the broader context of African festival performance and theatre practice. This article is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the documentation and promotion of the Okolode New Yam Festival, thereby supporting cultural preservation efforts within the Agudama/Ekpetiama community. Second, it provides theatre arts scholars, students, and researchers with a focused case study on the roles of dance and music in festival performance, enriching academic discourse on African traditional theatre and cultural studies. Third, the study offers insights that may inform policy and development initiatives aimed at supporting indigenous festivals, cultural tourism, and community-based arts in Nigeria. The scope of the study is limited to the Okolode New Yam Festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people. While references are made to African festivals and performance practices in general, the primary focus remains on the specific cultural context of the Okolode celebration. The article draws on oral interviews, ethnographic description, and relevant scholarly literature to construct its analysis.

Literature Review

Conceptual Connotation of Dance

Scholars and reference works have offered various definitions of dance, reflecting its multifaceted nature across cultures and contexts. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, dance is "a sequence of rhythmic steps or movement usually performed to music for pleasure or as a form of social interaction" (379). This definition emphasizes the rhythmic and musical qualities of dance, as well as its social and recreational functions. Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines dance as "a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music" (234). Both definitions highlight the centrality of rhythm, pattern, and music in dance performance.

Harriett Ebiegberi Spiff, in her research work "Forms and Content in Iworoko Dance," states that "dance means different things to different people. While to some, it is a means of expression of one's feelings of joy, hope, aspiration, hatred and happiness, some people see it as means or channel of communication" (6). Spiff further notes that "these different views of the meaning of dance is ethnic based, to some extent. That is, the meaning of dance could vary from one ethnic group to the other depending on the purpose it serves to the people" (6). This perspective underscores the cultural specificity of dance meanings and functions.

Esther Ariteshoma Monday, in her project work, states that "dance is referred to as the mother of all arts. Looking at dance through the ages, we find that it (dance) has played a role in education, since the beginning of mankind. It is a universal phenomenon which has a biological base. In some societies where formal education did not exist, children learn from the elders all the skills necessary for adult living" (6). Monday's observation positions dance as both an educational and developmental tool within traditional societies. Suzanne Coungerman states that dance is "a multi-faced phenomenon in any society. For the purpose of analysis, dance can be separated conceptually into four general aspects, first of all it exists in time and space as dance, is a physical phenomenon and cultural product. Secondly, it is made visible as dancing, the manner in which it is performed. Thirdly, a dance is an event, a behavioural process which takes in a particular culture context. Finally, dance exists as a body of concepts and feeling the cognition and effective dimension that are associated with dance on each 'level'" (116). Coungerman's analysis presents dance as both a physical and conceptual phenomenon embedded within cultural contexts. Ojo Rasaki Bakare, in Rudiments of Choreography: An Introduction, states that "dance composition is divided into the following types: pure, study, abstract, comic, dance drama etc. pure dances are created mainly to exhibit moments, study dance is almost the same thing as pure except that in pure dance, composition is open to a wider range of body movements materials. Abstract dance is created from ideas. Dramatic dance concentrates on a particular mood. Dance drama is a narrative dance, while comic dance evokes laughter. Mime uses only facial expression and gesture to tell a story. Pantomime is a kind of language drama based on fairytales or traditional story with music dancing and drumming" (4). Bakare's classification demonstrates the diversity of dance forms and their communicative potentials. Columbus Singer Irisoanga, in "Basic Dance Experiences," states that "dance is not a substance that can be felt, lifted or weighed. It is something that happens when a human move rhythmically in a directed or designed pattern, consciously performing specific movements. This is seen as an experience or phenomenon" (102). Irisoanga's definition emphasizes the experiential and ephemeral nature of dance. Opuke A.M and Willes Bell C.S, in their assertion on the essence of dance, state that "for to us, life, its rhythm and circle is dance. The dance is all expressed in dramatic forms, the most important events in the community have special dance to enhance their meaning and

significances. To us, the dance is a language, a mode of expression which addresses itself to the mind through the heart using related relevant and significant movements to musical, poetic stimuli" (15). They further explain that through dance, "for a deeper insight into our way of life, our labours, material cultures, aspirations, history, socio-economic conditions, religious beliefs and disbeliefs, moments of festivity and sadness in life and soul, and the realities, perceived, conceived or felt that makes us the people we are at present, are revealed to the serious seeker in our dance" (15). This assertion positions dance as a comprehensive cultural text that encodes the totality of communal life. Ojo Rasaki Bakare, in Rudiments of Choreography, says that "dance is the rhythmic movement of the human body in space and time to make statements. Following the above definition, one discovers that the essentials of dance are rhythm, human body, space, time and communication, the greatest tools of dance is the human body. Everybody movement is however not qualified to be called dance. For a body movement to qualify as dance, it must have RHYTHM" (3). Bakare further explains that "rhythm is the underline beat that animates movement. This is where the time comes in. rhythm is created when the movements happen at specific time. Without timing, there can be no rhythm and without rhythm dance cannot occur. Even when there is rhythm, the body that is about to move rhythmically needs to occupy a space. These then goes to mean that dance can only take place when the body, rhythm, space and time is present" (3). Myron Nadel says "dance is not a substance that can be felt, lifted or weighed. It is something that occurs when a human entity moves in directed patterns consciously performing specific movement" (1). Nadel's definition aligns with Irisoanga's emphasis on conscious, patterned movement. Laban Rudolf, in Modern Educational Dance, states that "dance is a physical representation of the activities of man in a perfomative medium" (3). Rudolf believes that dance moves and patterns are not created in a vacuum but based on the sum total manifestations in man's contests and conflicts in life. Alma Hawkins, in Creation Through Dance, talking about the feeling derived from dance, says: "dance gives its creator a feeling of self-integration and harmonious relationship with his world" (4). This shows that the dancer or creator of a dance feels his world, which is either the feeling he gets as he creates or performs his dance. Lifford Ikike, in his article "Dance in Drama," states that "Peggy Harper… identifies two categories of dance: The ethnic and theatrical dances. To her, ethnic dance rarely has an exact time limit but expresses 'the beliefs, attitudes and habits of people living within a homogeneous community'. Ethnic dance is participatory, displaying the characteristics and temperament of the people who created it and is usually passed from one generation to another" (262-263). Ikike further notes that "theatrical dance has a 'definite duration as determined by a choreographer and his dancers for an unfamiliar audience'. This is done by professionals and therefore commercially oriented. It is a carefully choreographed artistic performance which sometimes explores a particular theme. The dances associated with theatrical dance are meant to contribute to the full perception and understanding of the dance as it is a universalized representation of life" (262-263). He further states that "dance is an ephemeral act, which exists in space and vanishes. It could be studied through various perspectives like; the sociology of dance, which has to do with the functions of dance in the society" (263). Treva Bedinghaus explains that "humans have been dancing to express themselves since the dawn of time, and from those earliest gatherings spring the many types of dance we know today. Some, like folk dancing, have roots that go back centuries; other styles, like hip-hop, are decidedly modern. Each form has its own style, but all of them are united by their common goal of artistic expression and the celebration of the human body" (online). Bedinghaus lists twelve popular types of dance, including ballet, jazz dancing, tap dance, hip-hop dance, modern dance, swing dancing, contra dance, country and

western, belly dancing, flamenco, Latin dance, and folk dance (online).

Conceptual Exploration of Music

A definition of music endeavors to give an accurate and concise explanation of music's basic attributes or essential nature, and it involves a process of defining what is meant by the term music. Many authorities have suggested definitions, but defining music turns out to be more difficult than might first be imagined, and there is an ongoing debate about the meaning of music. A number of explanations start with the notion of music as organized sound, but they also highlight that this is perhaps too broad a definition and cite examples of organized sound that are not defined as music, such as human speech and sounds found in both natural and industrial environments. Thomas Clifton, in Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology, defines music as "an ordered arrangement of sounds and silences whose meaning is presentative rather than denotative This definition distinguishes music, as an end in itself, from compositional technique, and from sounds as purely physical objects. More precisely, 'music is the actualization of the possibility of any sound whatever to present to some human being a meaning which he experiences with his body-that is to say, with his mind, his feelings, his senses, his will, and his metabolism'" (1). Clifton further explains that music is therefore "a certain reciprocal relation established between a person, his behavior, and a sounding object" (10). Clifton accordingly differentiates music from non-music on the basis of the human behavior involved, rather than on either the nature of compositional technique or of sounds as purely physical objects. Consequently, the distinction becomes a question of what is meant by musical behavior: "a musically behaving person is one whose very being is absorbed in the significance of the sounds being experienced." However, "it is not altogether accurate to say that this person is listening to the sounds. First, the person is doing more than listening: he is perceiving, interpreting, judging, and feeling. Second, the preposition 'to' puts too much stress on the sounds as such" (Clifton 2). In this framework, Clifton finds that there are two things that separate music from non-music: (1) musical meaning is presentative, and (2) music and non-music are distinguished in the idea of personal involvement. "It is the notion of personal involvement which lends significance to the word ordered in this definition of music" (Clifton 3-4).

Clifton further states that "music is not a fact or a thing in the world, but a meaning constituted by human beings to talk about such experience in a meaningful way demands several things. First, we have to be willing to let the composition speak to us, to let it reveal its own order and significance. Second, we have to be willing to question our assumptions about the nature and role of musical materials. Last, and perhaps most important, we have to be ready to admit that describing a meaningful experience is itself meaningful" (Clifton 5-6).

The list of genres of music is one that is endless. But some of these genres of music include Afrobeat, jazz, pop, R&B, reggae, hip hop, African heavy metal, Apala, Benga, Boomba, Bongo Flava, Bikutsi, Cape Jazz, Chimurenga, Congolese rumba, Coupé-Décalé, Fuji, Genge, Highlife, Hiplife, Igbo highlife, Igbo rap, Isicathamiya, Jit, Jùjú, Gospel, Gqom, Kadongo Kamu, Kizomba, Kuduro, Kwaito, Kwela, Makossa, Maloya, Marabi, Marrabenta, Mbalax, Mbaqanga, Mbube, Morna, Ndombolo, Ohangla, Orutu, Palm-wine, Raï, Sakara, Sega, Seggae, Semba, Shangaan electro, Soukous, Kwassa kwassa, Taarab, and Zouglou ("List of popular music genres").

Conceptual Overview of Festival

Austin Anigala explains that "festival is a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making or feast day of special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrant… festivals… involve

one or more activities (it) is an occasion for general merriment or rejoicing" (17). From this, we understand that festivals are of great significance to the community that is hosting it, as it is a special occasion in such community's calendar. Further, Anigala states that "the festival period, therefore is a social occasion for communal celebration. It is a periodic recurring time of gaiety or rejoicing set aside by a community, tribe or clan for the observance of sacred celebration… and traditional performance of special significance" (17).

Seeing festival as part of the society, Ilami Clive explains that "festivals may be formalized or un-formalized rituals that aid the cultural, expression of a people in attempt to maintain a balanced environment. Festivals may be formalized rites that may have lost potency or taken out of the original context. Such a festival serves for entertainment and can be performed out of context" (32). This shows that some festivals have potency and serve other purposes while others have lost potency and serve the purpose and function of entertainment.

Razia Ahmed explains that "a festival or gala is an event ordinarily staged by a community. Centering on and celebrating some unique aspect of that community and its traditions, often marked as a local or national holiday, mela or eid. Festivals often serve to meet specific purposes, especially in regard to commemoration and/or thanksgiving. They are associated with celebration and may also provide entertainment, which was particularly important, to local communities before the advent of mass-produced entertainment" (1-2). Festivals were one of the major sources and times of entertainment before the invention of mass and electronic means of entertainment. Even though entertainment and mediums of getting entertained are fast rising in present time, festivals still remain another medium of entertainment both in the local and international world. Razia further states that festival "celebrations offered a sense of belonging for religious, social or geographical groups. A festival is a special occasion of feasting or celebration, usually with a religious focus. Aside from religious and sometimes folklore, another significant origin is agricultural. …many festivals are associated with harvest time" (3). This shows that most African festivals which have religious origin are still tied to agriculture. Most of these traditional festivals started as thanksgiving to gods (religion) for a successful and bountiful harvest (agriculture). So, festivals are mostly rooted and start as a cultural activity to mark either a religious or agricultural event or season.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Performance Theory, which provides a robust lens for analyzing dance and music as constitutive elements of festival practice. Performance Theory, as developed by scholars such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, posits that culture is not only possessed but also enacted through repeated public behaviour. Turner's concept of social drama explains how ritual and communal performances temporarily reorganize ordinary social relationships and create heightened unity, while Schechner's understanding of performance as restored behaviour emphasizes how traditions are repeated and reinterpreted across generations. Within this framework, the Okolode New Yam Festival is understood not as a static cultural event but as a dynamic performance space in which the Agudama/Ekpetiama people enact their history, values, social relationships, spirituality, and collective identity. Performance Theory is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for the examination of dance as embodied communication, music as a structuring force for communal performance, masquerade appearances as dramatic representations, boat regattas and processions as public cultural spectacles, and festival participation as a form of identity performance. The theory also illuminates the relationship between performers and audiences and the way repeated

performances preserve and renew tradition. As Lifford Ikike notes, "dance is an ephemeral act, which exists in space and vanishes. It could be studied through various perspectives like; the sociology of dance, which has to do with the functions of dance in the society" (263). This perspective aligns with the study's aim to analyze the functional and symbolic roles of dance and music within the festival. In addition to Performance Theory, the study draws on Functionalist Theory, which explains what dance and music do within the community. From a functionalist perspective, the elements of the festival contribute to social continuity by reinforcing communal identity, educating younger members, preserving historical knowledge, marking agricultural cycles, strengthening relationships between families and villages, providing a structure for communal participation, and creating opportunities for cultural and economic exchange. This theoretical orientation helps move the article beyond the claim that dance and music are "important" to specifying their social functions and demonstrating how each function operates within the festival.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case-study design, which is appropriate for an intensive examination of a single cultural event within its historical and social context. The research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include oral interviews with Pa Opuowoe Igbori and Ma Inongoma Agbadani, direct observation of festival activities, descriptions of dance, music, masquerade, regatta, games, processions, and thanksgiving, and community accounts of the festival's organization and historical development (Pa Opuowoe Igbori; Ma Inongoma Agbadani). Secondary data include books on African festivals and traditional theatre, scholarly works on dance, music, choreography, and performance, studies of cultural identity and communal memory, relevant reference works, and existing scholarship.

The study used purposive selection to identify community members with knowledge of the history and performance practices of the Okolode Festival. Two principal informants, Pa Opuowoe Igbori and Ma Inongoma Agbadani, were selected because of their familiarity with the historical development, organization, and cultural meanings of the festival (Pa Opuowoe Igbori; Ma Inongoma Agbadani). The interview data were collected through semi-structured oral interviews focusing on the origin of the festival, the meaning of the name "Okolode," the relationship between yam harvesting and fishing, the development of the festival, the role of dance and music, the participation of different communities, and the historical changes affecting the celebration. The collected data were analyzed thematically.

The oral accounts used in the study were obtained with the knowledge and consent of the informants. Their names and community affiliations are retained because they are cited as cultural authorities whose testimonies provide historical information about the festival. As a qualitative case study, the research does not claim to represent every New Yam Festival in Nigeria or every community within the Ijaw cultural area. Its purpose is to provide an intensive interpretation of the Okolode Festival and to demonstrate how performance functions within this particular cultural context.

Data Presentation

History of Agudama/Ekpetiama

Agudama/Ekpetiama is situated in present-day Bayelsa State in Yenagoa Local Government Area. In an oral interaction with Pa Opuowoe Igbori on the historical development of Agudama/Ekpetiama, he states that: Agudama/Ekpetiama is an ancient kingdom whose ancestry

is traced far back to the origin of the Izon nation. Some of its descendants had some dealings with the British imperial government in the colonial era and has long existed as a united people.
The Agudama/Ekpetiama people descended from the ancestor Opu-ogbo who lived in the Isoma-bou (Opuan-bou) ancient settlement.
Between 700 and 1000 AD the ancestors remained in that ancient settlement from this Isoma-bou area the ancestors founded a settlement, which was named Ekpetiama, within the same vicinity. From this settlement descendants founded the towns of Tombia, Bumuondi, Agudama, Akaibiri and Gbarantoru (Pa Opuowoe Igbori).

Occupation of the Agudama/Ekpetiama People

The people of Agudama/Ekpetiama are basically farmers, and farming is done predominantly by the women. In addition to farming, they also do fishing at the River Nun, forest swamps, hand-dug ponds, and lakes in the surrounding forest. Fishing is mainly done for domestic consumption and trade in the neighboring communities. The men of the Agudama/Ekpetiama also do hunting of animals and setting of traps. There is also a record of the palm kernel business done by the people of Agudama/Ekpetiama (Pa Opuowoe Igbori).

Exploration of the Historical Development of the Okolode Yam Festival

Pa Opuowoe Igbori, on the history of the Okolode festival, explains that the Okolode festival is as old as the settling of Aguda's descendants on the shores of the River Nun. When one of his sons Ewere after exploring the Ayalla Dunoun, always fished on it during the harvesting of new yams making fishes surplus for roasting. Thus, the women celebrated their husbands by making a special day as they gave special treatments to their husbands during this traditional banquet in harvest time which started from Ewere and was celebrated by all their brothers hundreds of years ago (Pa Opuowoe Igbori). In another interaction with Ma Inongoma Agbadani, she explains that formally, the festival started in ancient times in a way that every season within May, June in the Izon calendar, when the moon is full and shining (Akaludeeh) which is believed to be a connotative to the popularized version "Okolode." During this time, women of Agudama roast new yams with fish or pepper soup accompanied with fresh palm oil and presents it to their husbands at home in a special way and make merry to mark the harvesting of new yams which is done so that the adult male can traditionally now start eating the new yams which is the foundation and origin on which the Okolode festival stands (Ma Inongoma Agbadani). From the name Okolode, which is the name of a land owned by Agudama people, settles the fact that the festival has its origin from Agudama community. The Okolode festival originated from this ancient community which is a ceremony marking harvesting of new yams (Buru Sou Uge as she puts it). The name of the festival came from the fact that Agudama people has a lake called "Ayalla Dunoun" which is the origin of the festival. Akan from Ewerewari compound of Agudama was a priest to Onini, a deity believed to be in charge of the forest (Okolode Bou) where the lake is located, always prepared the lake to be fished when the period of new yam harvest celebration approaches, formally called (Ayahun Sou Ifie). It was this connection of the lake to the celebrations of new yam that eventually brought the general name of the festival to Okolode since it supported the festival in making fishes available during the harvest celebration. The ending part of the lake which is deeper is called Onini Ogugu, named after the Deity even till date. Earlier, the Agudama people celebrated it alone in their various big families. Even as other communities may observe, not until the Agudama women led by Lady Lucy Tulagha, wife of Chief A.D. Tulagha, around 1965 dressed themselves as men and moved round Ekpetiama

Clan, taking the Agudama Okolode festival as considered then, round Ekpetiama clan in that year. Late Lady Lucy Tulagha brought the light of socialization to the women of Ekpetiama clan, and in 1966, she gathered some women and still made men dress and moved round the clan which comprises of five villages then with a ceremonial boat to the admiration of the whole clan. This boat is referred to today as love boat.

At a point they had some challenges when one of them died, which was Late Ovuru Ikiyeseingha in 1967, and in 1968 during the Nigerian Civil War, when the entertainment boat arrived Tombia as people called them to performance at Baramia Ikpaikpai's water front, Biafran army arrested them at finding a Nigerian flag in their boat and also seized Iberegu Ikpaikpai as the women ran into the bush to hide until the tension was diffused and later Iberegu Ikpaikpai was set free.

After the Civil War, B.L Ene, R.T Okoya, L.A Feinfa, J.O Okpotolomo, N.A. Nimizuoa, which were all very social, joined the women as they also made uniforms and involved all communities in the clan to celebrate this festival together, and it was agreed to be celebrated and to be hosted by each community in Ekpetiama clan starting from Gbarantoru, and giddiness were set to make the event vibrant (Ma Inongoma Agbadani).

Organization of the Okolode Yam Festival

Before an event takes place in any organization or community, there are people assigned to the planning and organizing of the event. Therefore, the Okolode festival is not an exception. Before the end of May, a seven-man committee is set up by the clan to plan how the Okolode will look like. When this committee is set up, they go about planning the various events as it is done by every community. The committee comprises a representative from each of the seven villages that make up the clan/kingdom, which are Agudama, Gbarantoru, Tombia, Akaibiri, Bumoundigbene, Ikibiri, and Bumodi. The Okolode yam festival starts from June 1st and lasts for seven days. It starts with a gunshot at exactly 12am to open the River Nun that flows through the clan for fishing to take place after a long reserved time of six months, as no Ekpetiama man fishes at the river from 1st of January at exactly 12am except at night, until the 1st of June when the cannon shot opens the river for fishing. This is done with a rationale that fishes are left to grow in the river when untouched for this period of time so that there will be surplus of fish during the festival of the clan. After the opening of the river, the first community, which is Gbarantoru, followed by the other villages according to an orderly placed manner, comes to the host community to perform some cultural display like masquerade dance, wrestling contest, etc. It follows this order until all communities have participated as aforementioned.

Irrespective of the hosting community of the year, all the communities in Ekpetiama gather at the Atabuko auditorium, an auditorium named after the late king Atabuko of Agudama, whose fighting prowess became famous in the Historic Akassa Raid by the British in 1894 during the reign of King Koko. After the gathering at the Atabuko auditorium, different kinds of games like the canoe race by men and women, tug of war, all these are rounded off by the preparations to bring the king from his palace, but before then in the early morning hours, a series of cannon shots announce the Agudama day like 21 cannon shots, meanwhile the youth group indulge in Ogele (gyration) at exactly 5am to stop at 6am.

Some masquerades come out, going around the community, and all the houses give yams to them; they are given powers to flog when you try to cross their path. All these lead to the eating of the new yam by the king and his cabinet, the elders, and adults with one or two chieftaincy titles. The final day of the festival, which is the seventh day, is set aside for thanksgiving service by all the villages in their various churches to thank God for bringing the festival to a successful end

and also to pray for another year of bountiful harvest.

Discussion

Role of Dance in the Agudama/Ekpetiama Okolode New Yam Festival

Dance is a prominent artistic element throughout the celebration. The findings state that "there is no festival that can be successfully done in the African society without the art of dance, as dance is one of the performative arts of festivals" and that "people attend this Agudama/Ekpetiama Okolode yam festival because of the charming display of dance." The dance in the festival includes masquerade dances, traditional Ijaw dances, and the Ijaw Agene dance, which is performed to express emotions about the festival. Dance also accompanies boat regattas, beach parties, and other activities. From a functionalist perspective, dance serves multiple purposes: it entertains, educates, communicates cultural values, and reinforces social bonds. The finding that "every activity in the festival moves on the wheels of dance" indicates that dance is not supplementary but central to the festival's operation. The Agene dance, as a traditional Ijaw performance, functions as a marker of ethnic identity, distinguishing the Okolode Festival from other New Yam celebrations in Nigeria. Performance Theory provides a deeper understanding of how dance operates as embodied communication. As Opuke A.M and Willes Bell C.S assert, "to us, the dance is a language, a mode of expression which addresses itself to the mind through the heart using related relevant and significant movements to musical, poetic stimuli" (15). In the Okolode Festival, dance encodes the community's relationship with the land, the river, ancestral figures, and deities. The masquerade dances, performed to specific drum beats, enact spiritual presences and regulate audience behaviour. The boat regatta dances celebrate the community's connection to water and fishing. Through these performances, participants do not merely display culture; they embody it. Lifford Ikike notes that "dance is an ephemeral act, which exists in space and vanishes. It could be studied through various perspectives like; the sociology of dance, which has to do with the functions of dance in the society" (263). In the Okolode Festival, dance's ephemerality is precisely what makes it powerful: each performance is unique, yet the repetition of dance forms across years ensures cultural continuity. The finding that "without dance, much artistry and aesthetics cease to exist in the festival" confirms that dance is constitutive of the festival's meaning, not decorative.

Role of Music in the Festival the Agudama/Ekpetiama Okolode New Yam Festival

Music and songs are "essential artistic ingredients of traditional African festival" and "the spirit that keeps the festival alive." The songs investigate themes relevant to the history of the festival and the general social life of the community. Music is used together with rhythmic drumming that sets the general atmosphere and dictates dance speed, energy, and style. The drums proclaim the coming of different masquerades, with each masquerade associated with a particular drum beat and rhythm. For example, the Benikurukuru masquerade is announced by specific drums that create awareness for the audience to give way. From a functionalist perspective, music coordinates collective action, regulates performance tempo, and creates emotional intensity. The finding that "no performance in the festival exists on its own without the use of songs and music" indicates that music is indispensable to the festival's operation. The songs that investigate the history of the festival function as oral historiography, transmitting knowledge about the festival's origin, Lady Lucy Tulagha's boat procession, and the Civil War experiences.

Thomas Clifton defines music as "an ordered arrangement of sounds and silences whose meaning is presentative rather than denotative" (1). In the Okolode Festival, music is

presentative: it does not merely describe the festival; it constitutes it. The drumbeats associated with the Benikurukuru masquerade do not simply announce its arrival; they create the acoustic space within which the masquerade's power is recognized and respected. The finding that "without music and drums, these activities are rendered spiceless, with no art of attraction" confirms that music is not background accompaniment but the structural framework that holds the festival together. Performance Theory explains how music functions as a signaling system that organizes performance sequence and audience response. The different drum beats for different masquerades operate as a code that performers and audiences understand. This code regulates movement, creates anticipation, and marks transitions between performance segments. The entire range of musical groups produces melodies that "capture the performers and the audience with concentrated beat and music which enjoys general acceptance," demonstrating how music creates the emotional atmosphere that sustains engagement throughout the seven-day celebration.

Dance, Music, and the Performance of Cultural Identity

The data and analysis above demonstrate that dance and music in the Okolode Festival are not peripheral entertainment but central mechanisms through which the Agudama/Ekpetiama people perform their cultural identity. From a functionalist perspective, the festival serves to mark the agricultural cycle, regulate fishing activities, reinforce social hierarchies, transmit historical knowledge, and provide structured communal celebration. From a performance perspective, the festival is a dynamic enactment of history, identity, and values through embodied practice.

The oral testimonies of Pa Opuowoe Igbori and Ma Inongoma Agbadani establish the historical depth of the festival, while the organizational data show how the festival structures communal participation. The findings on dance and music reveal how these performance elements encode cultural meanings, coordinate collective action, and create emotional intensity. Together, these elements constitute a performance system through which the Agudama/Ekpetiama people reproduce their culture across generations. Austin Anigala explains that "festival is a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making or feast day of special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrant" (17), and further states that "the festival period, therefore is a social occasion for communal celebration. It is a periodic recurring time of gaiety or rejoicing set aside by a community, tribe or clan for the observance of sacred celebration… and traditional performance of special significance" (17). The Okolode Festival exemplifies this definition by marking the agricultural cycle, commemorating ancestral practices, and renewing communal bonds through performance.

Findings

Based on the data presented and the discussion above, the following key findings emerge:

1. Dance is a central element of the festival, with masquerade dances, traditional Ijaw dances, and the Ijaw A gene dance performed throughout the celebration. Dance accompanies boat regattas, beach parties, wrestling contests, and other activities. The findings confirm that "every activity in the festival moves on the wheels of dance" and that "without dance, much artistry and aesthetics cease to exist in the festival."
2. Music and songs are indispensable to the festival, functioning as "the spirit that keeps the festival alive." Songs investigate themes relevant to the festival's history and community life, while rhythmic drumming sets the atmosphere and dictates dance speed, energy, and style. Each masquerade is associated with a particular drum beat and rhythm, with the Benikurukuru

masquerade serving as a notable example.
3. Dance and music are not peripheral entertainment but constitutive elements of the festival. They function as mechanisms of cultural communication, identity performance, historical transmission, and communal coordination. The festival operates as a living archive through which the Agudama/Ekpetiama people preserve and renew their cultural heritage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:
i. The organization of the Okolode Festival should not be left solely in the hands of the community. Government agencies, cultural organizations, and non-governmental bodies should assist in providing funds for the proper and adequate packaging of the festival, with dance, music, and costume given higher priority.
ii. Efforts should be made to document the oral histories, songs, dance forms, and organizational practices associated with the festival. This documentation will serve as a resource for future generations and support cultural preservation initiatives.
iii. Younger members of the Agudama/Ekpetiama community should be actively involved in the festival's performance and organization. This engagement will ensure intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and sustain the festival's relevance in contemporary contexts.
iv. The festival's high artistic and audience appeal can be leveraged for cultural tourism. Proper packaging and promotion of the festival can boost not only the economy of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people but also contribute to the cultural and economic development of Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large.

Conclusion

This study has examined the cultural significance of dance and music in the Okolode New Yam Festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people of Bayelsa State. The findings demonstrate that dance and music are not merely instruments of entertainment but vital components that structure the festival's ritual sequence, coordinate communal participation, express collective emotions, and preserve historical memory. The oral testimonies of Pa Opuowoe Igbori and Ma Inongoma Agbadani establish the historical depth of the festival, tracing its origins to ancestral harvest celebrations tied to yam production and fishing. The organizational data show how the festival structures communal participation through a seven-man committee, rotational hosting, and a seven-day performance sequence. The findings on dance and music reveal how these performance elements encode cultural meanings, regulate performance tempo, and create the emotional atmosphere that sustains engagement throughout the celebration.
From a functionalist perspective, the festival serves to mark the agricultural cycle, regulate fishing activities, reinforce social hierarchies, transmit historical knowledge, and provide structured communal celebration. From a performance perspective, the festival is a dynamic enactment of history, identity, and values through embodied practice.
Conclusively, dance and music are major significant elements in the Okolode yam festival of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people, and if well managed, they can boost not only the economy of the Agudama/Ekpetiama people but that of the state and nation at large. These key elements of the festival should be given much priority and place in the celebration of the festival.

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