

ETHNIC AND REGIONAL IDENTITIES IN NIGERIAN POPULAR MUSIC: A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE EDO

by

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Introduction

Nigeria has a population of over 150 million people with a population density of 184.2 people per square kilometre (477 people per square mile) and runs a federal system of government and a bi-camera legislature. For administrative purposes, the country is divided into 36 states and 774 local government areas. Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups. However, the three major ethnic groups as recognised by the federal government are: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba (known in local linguistic parlance as *Wa Zo Bia*, terms which mean 'come' in the three languages). Since independence, these three major ethnic groups have dominated the political scene with many ethnic minorities feeling marginalized. Even among these 'big three', the issue of marginalization is still a problem which has led to various zoning formulae in governance. Also, these three major ethnic groups are not entirely homogenous. For example, the Yoruba who inhabit the south-west region consist of various sub-groups such as Ijesa, Ijebu, Eko, Ibolu, Okun and Igbomina amongst others. In the same vein, while Hausa people are generally believed to be the main inhabitants of northern Nigeria, the reality on the ground shows that there are many smaller groups who are generally subsumed under the name Hausa by outsiders. This phenomenon further complicates the internal structure of the nation state through over simplification of ethnic group categories. None of the major languages are official. English is the official language of business in Nigeria.

Barely half a decade into independence, ethnic tension escalated in Nigeria and reached a climax in a 30 month civil war between June 1967 and January 1970. 'To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done' became the slogan of the federal military government all through the war period. Yet, the civil war further accentuated the issues of ethnicity, ethnic identity, marginality and power relations in Nigeria. Today, echoes of the Nigerian civil war still resonate through the polity, finding new expressions in various ethnic militia and civil rights groups spread across the various regions of the country.

It is against this backdrop that this article examines some issues in the ethnicization and regionalization of Nigerian popular music. With a focus on the Edo, it examines ways through which non-traditional, urban-derived popular music has been used

to articulate ethnic and regional identities in Nigeria. Based on research conducted on ethnic-based popular dance bands between 2011 and 2012, I ask how ethnic minorities comprising various subgroups define their identities through musical and extra-musical means. I demonstrate how a thriving popular music tradition has been appropriated and localized to define subgroup identities within a pan-Edo identity through the music of their immediate neighbours, the Yoruba and Igbo. In doing this, I focus exclusively on ethnic-based popular music and musicians living and practicing their art in towns and villages using indigenous languages. By this clarification of scope, this paper excludes discussions on pop stars and hotel-based 'cover bands' that play a variety of contemporary Western-derived pop music especially in the cosmopolitan city of Benin and others whose linguistic identities lie outside the pan-Edo identity.

Music and ethnic identity: a conceptual framework

Music, whether in live performances or in its media representations, has deeper meanings beyond immediate visual and the aural perceptions. It is also the particular space of negotiation over identities, ethnicities and human relationships (Kirkegaard 2002: 47). Many scholars have written and theorized on music and identity (e.g. Smith 2008, Hargreaves *et al* (eds.) 2002, Kirkegaard and Palmberg (eds.) 2002, Frith 1996, Hall 1996, Seeger 1996 and Nagel 1994). Since the issue of identity is a theoretical minefield, highly problematized by postmodernist and social constructionist discourses on shifting and multiple identities, a review of relevant literature serves to situate my analysis within a conceptual framework. I follow the observation of David Maybury-Lewis (1996: 1) who says,

To be human is to make music and the music we make says a great deal about who we are or who we think we are...It is also a way in which each piece of humanity lays claim to its particular character. Music is thus ambiguous; it unites all of humankind because there are no people who do not make music, yet it also separates people, for it is so often an important way of defining the identity of groups and distinguishing them from others.

Fundamentally, ethnic identity is constructed out of the materials of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry or regionality and the location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized both by ethnic group members and outside observers (Nagel 1994: 153). Broadly speaking, what we refer to as ethnic groups in Nigeria and in most parts of Africa, reflects these elements of commonality in terms of language, religion, ancestry and other cultural practices. Location and regional boundaries do also change as seen in the splitting of the former four regions in Nigeria as at 1963 into the current six geo-political zones (see Figures 1a and 1b). With this new arrangement, some ethnic groups like the Ijaw are now spread across two regions. How people deal with these boundary changes further complicates issues of identity. Although ethnic groups are bound together with identifiable elements of commonality, they may by no means be entirely homogenous. This is the case with the Edo people; yet, there are centrally binding cultural elements

and kinship ties to justify reference to them as ‘collectives’, a place community and - as a popular dictum among natives - ‘people of Edoid extraction’.

Although the Edo live in communities with defined boundaries, these boundaries are not immutable. For example, the Igbanke people in the southernmost part of Edo State are closer culturally and linguistically to the Igbo-speaking people of the Niger Delta. But they are grouped administratively under Edo State, which means they are considered to be part of the Edo people. In the Akoko-Edo area in the northernmost part of the state, the languages are so diverse that it is difficult to ascribe to them an Edo identity. During the colonial period, Akoko-Edo was grouped under Akoko Division with its headquarters in the then western region. In today’s political arrangement, the Akoko people are spread across Edo and Ondo States which are in south-south and south-west respectively. Thus the boundaries of what is today known as Edo State do not necessarily correspond to the area occupied by the Edo-speaking people. The people also have multiple identities. For example, if you were to meet someone from outside Edo State and pose the question: where do you come from? The obvious response will be ‘I come from Edo or I am an Edo man/woman’. If you were to pose the same question within the boundaries of the state, the response might be ‘I come from Esan’ or other similar subgroups. Even within the confines of their ethnic groups, the response to this question will tend to stress a primordial attachment to a particular settlement, town or village. However, the fact that the people live in an administrative area now known and referred to as Edo State, a name derived from historical antecedents, gives this group a strong sense of ethnic ‘oneness’ and differentiates them from other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

An important way to conceptualize ethnic identity is in reference to the ‘outside’ or in relation to ‘other (s)’. As Stuart Hall points out:

Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference... it is only through relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term - and thus its identity can be’ (1996: 5).

Because the Edo are not entirely homogenous, I use the word ‘identities’ rather than the singular ‘identity’. This is to stress that the Edo can be treated as ‘collectives’ but not without some differences between them. These differences become identity markers which ethnic-based popular musicians have used to their advantage. Thus, in discussing music and ethnic identity, my focus is on the ways popular music is used to construct and reinforce ethnic identities among the various sub-groups without necessarily losing their sense of oneness as Edo people. What follows shows that they need this sense of oneness to make their voices heard as a minority group in Nigeria and further that “identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’ ” (Hall 1996: 5).

Simon Frith’s concept of ‘cultural essentialism’ is also important to this discussion. According to him, “the rise of identity politics has meant new assertions of cultural

essentialism; for example that only African Americans can understand African American music” (1996: 108). In philosophy, essentialism posits that for any specific kind of entity, there is a set of characteristics or properties which constitute the essence of that entity. This essence is held to be permanent and unalterable. An essentialist position on various societal issues such as ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality and others is that these categories have fixed traits which are unalterable by social forces. While Nigerian popular music styles may have identifiable characteristic features, these are by no means fixed and immune from social changes and cross-cultural influences. Since culture is dynamic, change in musical traditions becomes a direct reflection of cultural change. Rather than espouse cultural essentialism, the focus here is on the balance between continuity and change and how this affects our perception of music and identity.

Much of Nigerian popular music displays ethnic and regional identities, but the musical resources which define these identities may not be exclusive to the ethnic groups involved. Regions may have qualities which define their music in ethnic terms, but that does not foreclose other ethnic groups since music is a fulcrum of meanings which go beyond song texts or participation in its performance. The differences in music from place to place are in the organizing principles and musical instruments used, and its cultural significance among those involved. Groups may develop certain ways of organizing their music and over time become a symbol of group or ethnic identity and often the core element in the cultivation of musical sensibilities. Many times, musicians ‘go beyond borders’ by playing music which borrows musical materials and organizational principles from other ethnic groups/regions to meet their audience tastes or reach a wider audience. This is usually considered as innovative and is something musicians do constantly to remain in demand in the market place. In discussing music and ethnic identities, it is necessary to be mindful of these complications and every attempt has been made in this paper to treat these issues with objectivity.

History of ethnicization and regionalization of Nigerian popular music

What is today known as Nigerian popular music is an aggregation of ethnic and regional styles which reflect the country’s cultural pluralism. Although there is a new geo-political zoning in Nigeria (Figure 1b) as opposed to the former four regions (Figure 1a), the old regional identities still subsists in the minds of many Nigerians, especially the older generation. For example, the term northern Nigeria is still a strong regional label despite its current sub-division into north-east, north-west and north-central zones. This can be seen in the formation of the regional body ‘Northern Elders Forum’ which is an umbrella name for leaders of thought in this former region. Again, the former midwestern region still retains much of its old identity culturally speaking. Its current classification into the south-south geo-political zone has not distorted its historical identities; the boundaries have only been expanded. I will use both the old and current geo-political zones interchangeably for emphasis and cross-referencing.



Figure 1a. Map of Nigeria showing the four main regions 1963-1967.

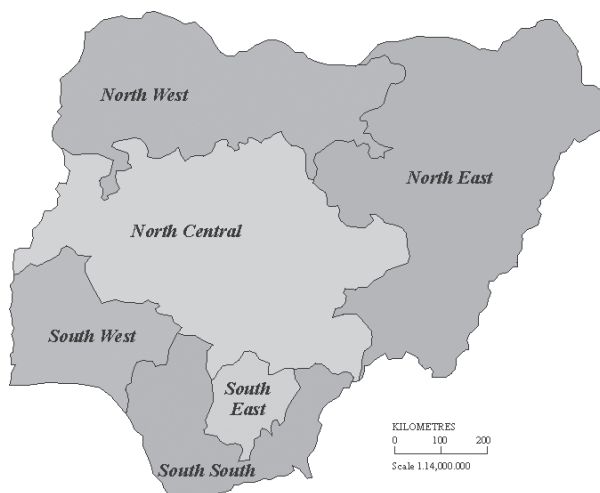


Figure 1b. Map of Nigeria showing the current six geo-political zones¹.

Nigerian popular music, as in most parts of Africa, either developed as modernized forms of existing traditional music styles or as indigenized forms of imported Euro-American popular music². While conceding to linguistic and stylistic variants among the various ethnic groups of each region in Nigeria, there are also common musical

¹ Original maps were derived from Macmillan Nigeria Secondary Atlas (2006) but redesigned by my personal cartographer in 2011.

² For more on this, see my article "Some Theoretical Perspectives on African Popular Music," *Popular Music* (2011) vol. 30/3 pp- 371-388. Doi: 10.1017/S0261143011000249

resources that give a sense of regional identity. In *Popular Music in Western Nigeria* (2006), Bode Omojola explores the themes, styles and patronage system of popular music in what is now the south-west region of Nigeria. The author's use of the term 'Yoruba popular music' interchangeably with 'popular music in western Nigeria' suggests that popular music in western Nigeria is synonymous with Yoruba popular music. However, since the 1950s, the western region has been home to many non-Yoruba musicians and settlers from all over Nigeria and other parts of Africa playing various styles of music to cater for migrant populations. The term Yoruba is a modern coinage, a pan-identity which treats the Yoruba as group but allowing that the Yoruba are not entirely homogenous (see Waterman 1990: 369-372).

Sub-group identities still exist within a corpus of 'Nigerian popular music'. As Omojola rightly observes, Nigerian traditional music is a body of musical traditions, which, though it consists of individual ethnic-bound idioms, also articulates some centrally binding concepts that point to a nationalistic outlook (Omojola 2006: 3). Highlife emerged in the 1950s as a national, rather than ethnic or regional-based music. The development of Highlife was one major attempt at forging a mainstream national music in Nigeria and by implication, a sense of national rather than ethnic consciousness. Obidike (1994: 2) highlights the unique place of Highlife music in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s saying, "Highlife was more or less Nigerian's truly national musical idiom... It had neither tribal, cultural nor political barriers".

The Nigerian civil war, which began with the declaration of the 'Biafran Republic' by the Igbo-speaking people, drove wedges into the social and political fabrics of the nation state of Nigeria. One immediate implication was that many Highlife musicians from the eastern region, who dominated the music scene especially in the western region, relocated home for safety reasons. With the exit of Igbo Highlife musicians from Lagos and Ibadan Juju, a pan-Yoruba ethnic based music, took over as the mainstream music in the western region (see Emielu 2013: 83-86). The Igbo also developed their own indigenous styles during the civil war years and by the end of the civil war in 1970, guitar bands became a hallmark of Igbo Highlife. Also, with the exit of notable non-Hausa musicians from the north during the civil war, the stage was set for the development of ethnic-based popular music and neo-traditional styles in the north. The minority groups in the south especially in the old midwestern region, sometimes mistaken for people of Igbo extraction, also began to develop their popular music styles around their indigenous musical traditions during and after the civil war.

Another major factor which has affected the ethnicization of Nigerian popular music hinges on the patronage system. Although Western concert music tradition emerged in Nigeria in the 1880s as documented by Leonard Lynn (1967), coupled with the emergence of localized versions of concert music in hotel-based Highlife bands in the 1950s and 1960s, much of the patronage of Nigerian popular music, especially after the civil war, has been built around traditional social ceremonies. These include but not limited to wedding, funeral, child naming, chieftaincy installation and other similar ceremonies sponsored by individuals or families in community contexts. In such

traditional community-based ceremonies, music performed in local languages whether in traditional or popular genre, is usually preferred. Important dignitaries present are recognized by the musicians, singing their praises to which the patrons respond by 'spraying money' on them as a form of support. In Nigeria, popular musicians make money largely from patronage by their own people in form of 'spraying money' in public performances, direct selling of their recordings to community members, commissioned songs in honour of successful business people, social clubs as well as freewill donations and material gifts from patrons.

Over the years, the various regions have also produced many notable figures whose styles have become iconic in the development of streams of ethnic and regional-based popular music in Nigeria. In the north, we had the late Bala Miller who pioneered what may be regarded as Hausa Highlife plus Dan Maraya Jos and Mamman Shatta two major representatives of neo-traditional popular music in northern Nigeria. In south-east, Osita Osadebe, Celestine Ukwu, Muddy Ibe, Nico Mbarga, Oliver de Coque, and Oriental Brothers and many more make up the two main axes of Igbo popular music namely - brass band Highlife of the 1960s and the post-civil war guitar bands. In the south-south, Sir Victor Uwaifo, St. Augustine, Charles Iwegbue, Inyang Henshaw, Popular Cooper, Rex Lawson, Anco Momodu, Alhaji Waziri Oshomah and General Bolivia are important ethnic-based popular musicians who live among their own people and sing in their local languages and dialects. In the south-west, Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Wasiu Ayinde, Barrister, Kollington and Haruna Ishola have become rallying points in the development and sustenance of a variety of popular music styles which draw heavily on Yoruba traditional music, folklore and cosmology.

In the north-west and north-east regions occupied mainly by the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, Jukun and a host of other minority tribes, there are many neo-traditional and Islamic-influenced popular music styles. Defining characteristics in these regions include the use of the one-string fiddle *kutigi/goje*, blowing instruments like the *algaita* and a range of traditional drums like the *kalangu*. Recently, love of Indian films and soundtracks in these has created new forms that are an eclectic assemblage of Western European, American, Indian, Asian and indigenous influences. Song themes are usually but not always built around love and romance and sung mainly in Hausa language. The emerging sounds have become the defining sonic characteristic of what we may term loosely as contemporary Hausa popular music. In the north-central zone, home to the Idoma, Tiv, Ebira, Birom and other minority groups, popular music styles are built around traditional music of *Swange*, *Balu*, *Dadakuada*, *Senwele*, *Were* and *Fuji*. In the south-west, made up of essentially Yoruba-speaking people and their dialectal sub-groups like Ijebu, Egba, Ijesha, Ekiti, Ikale and Okun-Yoruba among others prominent styles are Juju, Afro-Beat, Highlife, Gospel, *Apala*, *Fuji*, *Waka* and *Were*. The Igbo people are the dominant group in the south-east and the dominant popular music is Highlife. There are also other community-specific neo-traditional popular forms like *Ekpiri*, *Ogene*, *Nkwa* and *Nkwokirikwo*. The south-south, made up entirely of minority ethnic groups including Isoko, Urhobo, Ukwuani, Ijaw, Kalabari, Efik, Ibibio, Itsekiri,

Bini(Edo), Etsako, Owan and Esan, is a hot bed of assorted ethnic-based guitar bands. Also found are neo-traditional styles like Akwa Ibom *Ekombi*, the Ijaw *Egbelegbele*, the Esan *Asonogun* and *Agbi* music of the Etsako people. The above listing is abridged and does not include all the music genres found in these areas.

Generally speaking, certain music styles are predominant in specific regions in Nigeria. This should not be read however, as an oversimplification of the distribution of Nigerian popular music. Modern societies include many migrant groups of varied ethnic origins who many times carry their musical traditions with them, creating 'musical communities' catering for specific groups within their host communities. The broad ethnic and regional groupings of Nigerian popular music should therefore be seen as a reference guide and not in terms of its absoluteness. What follows examines how ethnic identities are played out within a fairly homogenous group like the Edo who move between maintaining a pan-Edo macro identity and loyalty to micro identities of constituent subgroups.

The Edo

The Edo are located in Edo State which was part of the old midwestern region but is now part of the south-south geo-political zone. Its administrative capital is Benin City, the nucleus of the ancient Benin Empire which in its heyday extended to present day Benin Republic. Benin City, as capital over the years, reflects the significance of this ancient city among the Edo and power relations that exist between Benin and other sub-groups of the Edo³. The Edo are made up of the core Bini (Edo) and other peripheral subgroups generally regarded as *Ivbi-Edo* (children of Edo). These include the Owan, Etsako, Esan and other groups in the Akoko-Edo area. But, the Edo do not fall into neat ethnic classifications as listed above. For example, Akoko-Edo represents more of an administrative region than an ethnic subgroup. This area is the most diverse in terms of ethnic, tribal and linguistic groupings which include but not limited to Okulosh, Okpameri, Igarra, Ososo. Among the Owan, there are groups of Ora origin and many others who are not.

From the 2006 national census figures (quoted in Igbintia 2010: 56) Edo State has a total population of 3,233,336. The Bini people have a population of 1,686,044 (representing 53% of the total population) and it is the largest and dominant subgroup in the state. The popular saying '*Edo Odion*' (Edo is senior) is a fact that all other subgroups in Edo accept. The Esan (591,534), is the second largest group after the Bini;

³ According to Igbintia (2010: 12), the original name of early Benin settlement was Igodomigodo (the town of Igodo) under its first ruler Ogiso Obagodo. The city was re-named Ile Ibinu by Prince Omonoyan (Oranmiyan) and later as Ubinu (Ubini) by Oba Ewedo in about 1255 AD. The name Ubini was said to have been corrupted as 'Benin' by visiting Portuguese traders. In about 1470 A.D., Oba Ewuare changed the name 'Benin' to Edo. Today, the name 'Edo' though synonymous with Benin, has become an umbrella name for both the native Bini (Edo) speakers and Bini descendants who occupy the length and breadth of what is now Edo State. I draw a distinction between Bini as an ethnic/language group, Benin as a town and Edo as a family name encompassing the various sub-groups.

Etsako (440,538) are spread across the northern part of Edo state. The Akoko-Edo (261,567) occupy the northernmost part and are very diverse linguistically. Most musicians I talked to said this diversity is a serious problem in terms of language of expression and the creation of an Akoko-Edo musical and ethnic identity. The Owan (253,686) have the least population. All the subgroups are said to have migrated from the ancient Benin Empire.

The Edo have various traditional forms of music and dance, some of them ethnic-based, while others share similar materials and structures with other subgroups, but differ in nomenclature. Bini traditional dances include the Careta dance, said to have been imported from Brazil in the 1920s as well as *Ugho*, *Esakpaide* and *Orogho* war dance among several others. *Igbabomelimhin* is a popular masquerade performance for which the Esan are well known. It involves intricate acrobatic displays and dance movements. Musical instruments used include double-headed cylindrical drums, bells, shakers and hand claps. *Asonogun* is a social recreation dance among the Esan which is performed by both men and women, old and young. In the past, musical accompaniment was provided by male musicians while women danced, now both men and women dance in turns. *Afan* (*Afalan*) music built around an 8-string instrument similar to the Bushman pluriac in Angola used to be a very popular entertainment form among the Esan. *Ivbiagogo* is an instrumental and vocal ensemble performed by men for social ceremonies and is common in Owan especially in Uhunmora, Eme Ora, Ohia and surrounding villages. Among the Etsako, traditional forms include *Ilo*, *Igioge*, *Agbi*, *Ukeke*, *Anukpe*, *Ukeh* dance for women and *Igioge* dance for girls.

These ethnic-based traditional music and dance forms have become significant sites for the construction of subgroup differences and community attachment. They are provided here to assist in understanding the relationship between traditional and modern dance bands and how popular musicians construct and articulate their ethnic identities through historical reconnection with some of these traditional forms.

Musical characteristics of Edo popular music

Edo popular music tradition exists structurally and socially between Yoruba Highlife/Juju in the south-west and Igbo Highlife in the south-east. Most songs begin with a guitar introduction, followed sometimes with horn phrases, verse and chorus. Often a song opens with a chorus part or a call and response pattern where the lead vocalist sings the first phrase and the chorus supplies the concluding phrase. Song melodies are usually simple and derived from the Western diatonic scale. There is however, occasional use of the pentatonic scale in the middle of a song especially in the Esan and Bini patterns where the song may begin in 4/4 and transits to 12/8 time from the middle to the end. There is also a close relationship between speech and melody as musicians struggle to align melodic contour with the linguistic demands.

The defining instruments of dance bands are electric guitars; usually a 6-string rhythm guitar and a 4-string bass guitar. In small ensembles, the guitarist moves between chordal accompaniment, playing riffs and taking solos. In larger ensembles,

a third guitar or keyboard could be added to the instrumental density of the ensemble and for proper assignment of musical roles. Since these popular bands developed around the guitar and the personality of the guitarist, most band leaders combine the roles of guitarists and lead vocalists much the same way as in Juju and Highlife music. Horns, especially trumpets are also common and the flute was also used by Sir Victor Uwaifo and Osayomore Joseph based in Benin City. Harmonic progression using a repeated two-chord formula or a straight I-IV-V progression is common. The time range for recorded songs is from 5 to 25 minutes. A cyclic two-chord formula usually involves progressions from I-V; IV-iii; V-vi, V-iv and sometimes I-ii. In *Esan* music, the influence of the traditional *Afan* chordophone music, with its melo-rhythmic functions based on its limited melodic range, can be heard. The harmony consists usually of primary and secondary chords in their triadic forms. Chord extensions like the added 6th, dominant and major 7th, 9th chords and suspensions are virtually absent from their harmonic vocabulary. Except for some guitar solos of Sir Victor Uwaifo which use chromatic notes, chromaticism and modulation are also not common features of Edo popular music.

Since the music is essentially dance music, percussion includes gong/cow bell, gourd rattle, talking drums, trap drum, bongo/conga drums and timbales. However, the most basic percussion common to all ensembles is the Western drum kit. Among *Esan* musicians, the cow bell, twin conga drums and timbales are quite prominent in the overall sound. In more recent times, the Yoruba hourglass 'talking drum', especially the high pitched drum called *omele* of the *dundun*/Juju ensembles and the cylindrical *sakara* single head drum used prominently in Fuji music, are increasingly used to increase the rhythmic density of band sound. The gourd rattle is also a key instrument in most *ensembles* as a complement to the hi hat of the Western drum kit. There are many musical characteristics common to all the subgroups which give them a sense of pan-Edo identity. Yet, a sense of difference is created as musicians struggle to define themselves in ethnic terms through musical and extra-musical mappings.

Popular music and ethnic identities among the Edo

Ways in which people from the same subgroup and people from other subgroups articulate their identities within an overall pan-Edo identity are now discussed in terms of: how identities are constructed and articulated through interaction of traditional ensembles with modern dance bands; how state-owned radio is promoting ethnic identities through music programming; how ethnic-based musicians have re-interpreted imported music traditions and responded to cross-cultural socio-musical influences from their immediate neighbours, the Yoruba and Igbo; and how ethnic/subgroup identities are shown on street signboards and album sleeves.

Many of the musicians I interviewed had at one time or the other played in traditional ensembles. The modern dance bands represent to many of them 'better ways of doing old things'. Oslo King, a musician in Akoko-Edo, sees the modern guitar bands as pastiches of existing traditional music and songs which have been



Figure 2. Ebobogbe Dance Band of Eme Ora. Photo by author.

given modern coloration with the inclusion of Western instruments like the guitar and keyboard (Interview, 30 October 2011). In a similar vein, Leo Fadaka, a leading musician in Akoko-Edo describes his style as *Izoka* hymns which has roots in his native Okpameri music. He says, “We did a deep research into the people’s music and we modernized it in terms of rhythms and the use of folks songs... We also followed the patterns and inspiration of Victor Uwaifo in his adaptation of Bini rhythms and folktales” (Interview, 1 November 2011).

The Ebobogbe dance band from Eme Ora began first as an *Asologun/ Ivbiagogo ensemble*, before the band leader Orlando Oviegwa introduced piano accompaniment in response to the prevailing trend (pers. comm. 3 Oct. 2011). However, the band continues to carry a dual musical identity as a traditional *ensemble* performing with *Asologun/Ivbiagogo* traditional instruments and a modern one when these instruments are combined with keyboards and guitars. When asked of the name of the new sound created by this interface, one of his band members described it in his native Ora language as *Ivbibe ghi piano*, translated literally as ‘small drums and piano’.

In some cases also, traditional forms were modernized to create a sense of ‘newness’ by utilising current technologies and as a response to prevailing musical trends. For example, Etsako popular musician Alhaji Waziri Oshomah began his musical career by playing *Agbi* traditional music. He says, “*Agbi* is a traditional music used to express

the happenings in society whether good or bad. Usually in the harvest period, the old men assemble with drums and percussion, with a lead singer and a large chorus...I modernized *Agbi* music” (Interview, 8 July 2011).

Oshomah’s early recordings were listed in Decca West Africa catalogue generically first as *Agbi* music, the native blues, and Highlife reflecting transformational changes in the music. In a similar vein, Paulina Ogenete (the only female band leader in Esan) said the need to ‘modernize’ the native *Asonogun*⁴ music led her to start her own popular dance band (pers. comm. 10 Aug. 2011). Having started her music career as a child at the age of six with her late father who was an *Asonogun* exponent, she decided to set up a guitar band as modern form of *asonogun* and to preserve the legacies of her father. Like the Ebobogbe dance band above, Paulina maintains a dual identity as the leader of a modern dance band and a traditional *Asonogun* musician.

Due to the significance of the *afan*, an instrument that was popularized by Chief Umuobarie Igberase as an accompaniment to storytelling sessions from around 1922 (Umuobarie 2004: 67), modern dance band music among the Esan has been described simply as *Ekede bi afan* by prominent musician Monday Ebor. This is translated to mean the combination of *Ekede* (drum) and the stringed instrument *afan*, shown in Figure 3 below. To him, *afan* represents the modern guitar now popular in Esan music which is combined with drums and drums patterns of Esan traditional music like *Asonogun* and *Igbabonelimhin* (Interview, 9 August 2011).



Figure 3. The *Afan*. Photo by author.

These observations from field research lend further credence to Kirkegaard’s (2002: 13) observation that modern popular music is not all about foreign influences, but also about transformation and modernization of local musical traditions to make them relevant in their local communities. Thus, even when musicians play under a pan-Edo identity, a sense of subgroup difference is established through historical and

⁴ Note the change in spelling: *Asonogun* among the Esan and *Asologun* among the Owan people.

stylistic connections to traditional music peculiar to any given ethnic subgroup. Thus, the modernization of existing traditional forms of music in response to social changes represent what Agawu (2003: 123) describes as a 'self-conscious renewal of musical traditions' and helps musicians to articulate their ethnic identities even while playing in modern dance bands.

Radio programming is another way through which ethnic identities are articulated. Five major radio stations serve the Edo people: Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS), Independent Radio, African Independent Television (AIT) Radio, Silverbird Radio and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) Bronze FM. The Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS) is the oldest radio station dating back to the 1950s and owned exclusively by the Edo State government. The station over the years has grown to be a major avenue for expressing group sentiments and propagating ethnic traditions and values. The station does this through a 'quota system' where certain amount of air time is devoted to broadcasting music of particular subgroups each day, while at the same time not relegating pan-Edo identity to the background. EBS radio begins daily (except Sundays) with 'Edo Echoes' at 5:20a.m. local time for thirty-five minutes. The programme features traditional and contemporary popular music of ethnic subgroups irrespective of where they come from in the state. Choice of music is at the discretion of the presenter. Music played is further complemented with historical, cultural and geographical information on selected places and people in Edo by the presenter. According to the deputy general manager, programmes Mr. Harrison Asemota, "Edo Echoes is a programme that establishes the identity of the Edo people; a programme that unites as well as establishes the cultural and musical identities of the people" (Interview, 6 December 2011). It serves to create a pan-Edo identity and at the same time to distinguish the Edo from their immediate neighbours, the Yoruba and Igbo especially since the broadcast range extends far beyond the geographical boundaries of Edo State.

Additional programming includes 'Tips and Tunes', popular music of particular subgroups at 10:00a.m.: Monday (Bini), Tuesday (Esan), Wednesday (Etsako), Thursday (Igbanke)⁵, Friday (Owan) and Saturday (Akoko-Edo). Music is interspersed with social commentaries, advice and native philosophies by the presenter who is a native of each subgroup. A request programme for the various ethnic groups airs at 7:00p.m. each day hosted by a native presenter. In these programmes, the music played is restricted to popular music from each particular subgroup. The only exception is *Eto Kini* for the Akoko-Edo people which features much Yoruba music because of the cultural/linguistic diversities and the proximity to the Yoruba in the south-west. As stated earlier, this area was part of the old Akoko Division with headquarters in Yoruba land during the colonial period. Many locals bear Yoruba names and are fluent in Yoruba language. This has created a crisis of identity for popular musicians in this area. A comment to me

⁵ This ethnic group, though geographically located in Edo State, shares cultural/linguistic affinities with the Igbo-speaking areas of the south-east and was therefore not covered in my research

was, “if we sing in a native dialect, how many people will buy?” (P. Brai pers. comm. 30 Oct. 2011). To resolve the identity crisis, many of the musicians either sing in English, combine their native dialects with English or Yoruba or play cover versions of popular gospel songs irrespective of the languages/dialects used. The above documents that deliberate radio programming using a quota system is used to sustain ethnic identities in a multi-ethnic society.

Outside influences on Edo popular music

Since the 1940s, performing musicians from the western and eastern regions were strong agents in the spread of popular music and theatre traditions to towns and villages in Edo. The Yoruba travelling popular theatres of Hubert Ogunde and Moses Olaiya (Alawada Theatre) are examples. They had significant impact on the social and musical life of the Edo until the late 1970s to early 1980s. Yoruba Juju music was said to have been introduced to Auchi and Afemai land in the 1940s by young men who had lived in Lagos and Ibadan. Subsequently, local dance clubs experimenting with imported Juju music were formed from the 1950s. This became a novel popular entertainment in Auchi and adjoining towns (Harunah 2006: 271). On the Yoruba influence in Auchi and its environ, Prof. Zakariyau Oseni told me, “Yoruba influence was much because we were part of the old western region; a small group close to a larger one... they were more enlightened, had better facilities, established artists as well as their large number” (Interview, 12 September 2011). Several Ghanaian bands, including the very popular E.T. Mensah and the Tempos Band, Ramblers and Big Beats led by Linden Lea, also visited Edo on performance tours. The historic performance visit of legendary American soul singer, James Brown to Benin City on December 4, 1970 had great influence⁶. In the 1970s, there were James Brown fan clubs. Rock ‘n’ Roll also made tremendous impact even in remote villages in Akoko-Edo as some of the musicians told me. Visiting bands on performance tours created awareness of new music and musicians, introduced new instrumental resources and inspired traditional musicians to adapt new music styles, musical instruments and new organizing principles in their compositions. These outside forces were important constitutive elements of what evolved ‘inside’. Ethnic-based musicians responded to cross-cultural influences through localization, re-interpretation or indigenization. The external socio-musical influences served to enrich existing musical traditions rather than take away from them or annihilate them. For example, many popular bands in Edo now use Yoruba drums such as the *gangan*, *omele* and *sakara* for their rhythmic potential, not because of their cultural meanings among the Yoruba such that the *gangan* (talking drum) is not used as a speech surrogate as it is among the Yoruba. Rhythms from Igbo Highlife recordings are also used, but musicians continue to sing in their indigenous languages and use other musical resources as identity markers.

⁶ See Nigerian Observer, Friday November 6, 1970 p. 5.

Street signboards and album sleeves

Another significant way subgroup identities are constructed is through street signboards and album sleeves of musicians. A typical street signboard carries as important iconographies, a picture of an electric guitar, some traditional musical instruments peculiar to that ethnic group and the home base of the musician. Names such as Dr. Afile Dance Band of Uromi, Tony Otor Dance Band of Irrua, Ebobogbe Dance Band of Eme Ora, Chief Vincent Ugabi Dance Band of Agenegbode, Amin Man and the Shining Stars of Benin, reflect the ways through which popular musicians create a sense of subgroup identity within their immediate communities and against the backdrop of an overarching pan-Edo identity. Signboards also define inter-ethnic boundaries and cultural space within the broader framework of the Edo community (see Figures 4a and 4b).



Figures 4a and 4b. Typical music group street signs. Photos by author.

The information on street signboards is also replicated on album sleeves. The three examples below show different levels of identification. The first level emphasizes the home town or home base of the musician as it appears on street signs. This is quite common among musicians as identifying with a home town or home base on an album sleeve automatically suggests the ethnic subgroup affiliation of the musician in a pan-Edo setting. The example given (see Figure 5) suggests to an Edo person within or outside Edo State that since the musician is based in Uromi, the musician is of the Esan subgroup and most likely a native of Uromi.

On another level, some musicians may expand ethnic boundaries through an amalgam of communities that have common historical ties or ancestry. For example, Benji Igbadumhe tags himself as 'the golden tower of Afemai music'. Benji has been invited to perform at the Afemai World Congress in California, Atlanta and New Jersey (Interview, 8 July 2011) justifying somehow his title of 'golden tower of Afemai music'. This is a cultural space which includes Etsako, Owan and parts of Akoko-Edo which were historically known as Afemai Land during the colonial period. Some musicians I interviewed in Akoko-Edo say they play Afemai music, and this is understandable given this historical antecedent.

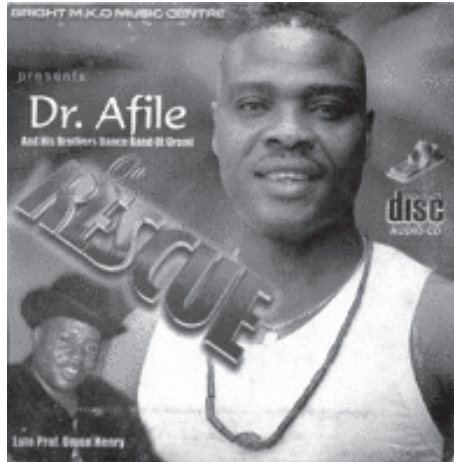


Figure 5. CD cover. Dr. Afile and his Brothers Dance Band of Uromi.



Figure 6. CD cover. King Benji Igbadumhe and his Okeke Sounds International (The golden tower of Afemai music).

In the last example below, the group, made up of servants of the Oba of Benin and based in the palace of the monarch in Benin City⁷, presents a dual identity: a band of Bini musicians and a band that seems to represent a pan-Edo identity through the use of the term 'Benin kingdom'. As mentioned earlier, Benin City is the nucleus of the ancient Benin Kingdom/Empire and the Oba of Benin is the permanent chairman of Edo traditional rulers' council. As the sayings go among natives: '*Edo odion* (Edo is senior); *Edo ri si agbon* (Edo is the owner of the land). In a sense therefore, the use of the term 'Benin kingdom' on an album sleeve, though not common among Bini musicians, reawakens a

⁷ The picture of the Benin monarch is shown on the album sleeve wearing a beaded crown

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