

# INVESTIGATING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND MUSICALITY IN ESAN, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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**Abstract:** This article examines the *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* acrobatic dances for female and male ensembles. The data was obtained through ethnographic research techniques which include research in the library, interviews, focus group discussions, the use of interlocutors and participant observation. We found that both genres stem from the same source and are similar in dance patterns, repertory and musical instruments. While *Ijieleghe* performers wear light costumes, those of *Igbabonelimin* are heavy and sometimes accompanied by male and female masquerades. In *Igbabonelimin*, however, women are not admitted into any of its departments; while in *Ijieleghe*, male participants are confined to drumming and singing. Only the female participants perform the dance. This paper asks: Why is it that women cannot be admitted into the membership of the sonic space of men in the *Igbabonelimin*? What will happen if these ensembles admit members of the opposite sexes into gender restricted areas? These questions are what this paper intends to answer. However, while we are aware that there are gender-based restrictions that are not conducive to integration in this day and age, it is our view that in the light of present-day realities in Nigeria, gender restrictions should be challenged to lengthen and enhance the longevity of these ensembles.

**Keywords:** dance gestures, equality, Esan, gender, genre, gorilla, masquerades, musicality, Nigeria, performance, repertoire, stereotype

## Introduction

In contemporary Nigeria, there appears to be a sharp decline in the performance of traditional music and dance (Keazor, 2015, Olatunji, 2019 and Onyeji et al., 2021). During major celebrations, where the cultural heritage of the people ought to be on display, one finds negligible numbers of traditional ensembles in attendance. The gradual erosion of traditional cultural practices is not only because of western acculturation which has led to the withering of cultural mores, but also a desire for musical ideas from alien cultures. There is, additionally, disdain for the local musical culture and an unrestrained desire for those of others. In Esan, the *Ijieleghe* and the *Igbabonelimin* remain examples of local music and dance genres. Both *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* are acrobatic. The *Ijieleghe* is generally performed by females and the *Igbabonelimin* by males. These genres have common origins which are attributable to the movements of gorillas. In Ugboha, one of the towns which make up Esan, this genre is called *Ikpegbegban*. In all the names that this genre has borne, the onomatopoeic sound and skipping effects in the dance appears to have been a determinant in its nomenclature.

The dances share a similar repertoire and dance steps. Added to these similarities are their musical instruments which are the bell, and the small and medium drums which are found in both ensembles. These features make them similar on almost all grounds

other than that one is for males and the other for females. A careful analysis reveals that the difference is based on gender disparity, which, in our view, is not in keeping with changes in Nigerian society. The segregation in male and female ensembles may be unnecessary since both genres are acrobatic and they share commonalities in many ways. In this article, we are concerned as to whether the variables responsible for the segregation have a valid basis. This article therefore examines the influence of gender and gender stereotyping in the membership of these two musical ensembles in Esan.

### **Methods and materials**

We relied on an ethnographic method of inquiry to elicit data and provide answers to the questions raised in this work. This method included literature research, interviews, observations, the use of interlocutors, and, focus group discussions (FGD). Our ethnographic approach enabled us to participate in the indoor and outdoor activities as indigenes, an advantage which aided the gathering of first-hand information without the people shielding their actions in any way. The ability to speak the language promoted an intimate understanding and dispelled any suspicion in the minds of the interlocutors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data were elicited from respondents who were male and female elders, middle aged participants, and youths. From these respondents, data were elicited and analysed accordingly.

### **Brief background of the Esan**

Esanland, which is grouped under five local government areas for administrative convenience, is situated in the Edo Central Senatorial District of Edo State, Nigeria. The term “Esan” has dual meanings. It is used to describe a territory occupied by a people of a land and it is the language spoken in that locale. The Esan occupies a landmass of about 2,814 square kilometres (Oseghale, 2019). Owing to its historical origin, the social and political organisation of the people relies greatly on that of Benin. Traditionally, the Esan people, as in Benin, had a monarchical system of government. Before colonial rule in Nigeria, the Esan kingdoms were vassal states to the ancient Benin empire. Esan people believe that they originate from Benin as they share similarities in their customs and worldviews. Their languages are very closely related (Okoduwa 1997, Okojie 1994).

Three religions are practiced in Esanland. These are African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. However, it has been noted that even when Africans convert to Christianity, they are dual worshippers. Emeka observed that “most Africans tend to uphold two faiths—they maintain the Christian faith when life is gay and happy but hold to the indigenous faith when the fundamentals of life are at stake” (1988, 6). However, Erohubie is of the view that “adherents of traditional religion in Esan today are on the decline and that Christianity and Islam had taken over” (2010, 27). This view is not too certain, because we have since observed that most people often keep one foot in their newly-found religion and the other in a traditional, spiritual belief system. In every Esan town and village, one finds *newbouldia* and silk cotton trees whose bases are adorned with white cloths, cowries and native chalk paints. This act points to the

fact that even when the areas have churches, they still worship traditional gods. These villages have different shrines that are mostly visited at night by locals seeking favours from local deities. Those wanting to retune themselves with the environment after having committed offences such as incest or a taboo against the land, and political office seekers who need the protection of those deities, often turn to their traditional faith.

### **Musical performances in Esanland**

In Esan, music has an unsurpassed hierarchy in social structures. This explains why there is music for every event in their lives. There are up to twelve (if not more) performing groups with different musical genres. This is because they originated from different sources and have different instrumentation and dance patterns. Among these genres are the *Ukpukpe*, performed by elderly women who dress in men's clothes to perform at the funeral of an aged man; the *Uleke*, a dance for young women with an emphasis on the waist. Its performance is unrestricted. This means that it can be performed anywhere and on any occasion; and, the *Ohogho*, a dance performed by married women of the Iruokpen community in Ekpoma. It is performed on request of the community and at no cost.

The *Ojieke* is similar to the *Asonogun*. *Asonogun* is a social dance of the Esan people. It is performed by both men and women, old and young and on diverse occasions, from naming ceremonies and other events in between, to funerals. *Agbenojie* means, "dance for the king." In modern day Esan, this genre is not for the king's pleasure alone. It is performed for important individuals who can hire the group's services. Another dance is the *Obodoribhafe*, which means that without the husband's help, the wife's wealth is incomplete. This is a group made up of married women in the community.

The *Uhoko* is a hunters' dance performed by the people of Uhiele in Ekpoma, Edo State. In this performance, the hunters dramatise their experiences in the bush with guns in hand, while dressed in hunters' outfits. It is usually performed for hunters, the hunter's family members and affluent individuals in the community. The *Ujie* is a processional dance for a departed, elderly person. It is performed with *Igbabonelimin* musical instruments to the accompaniment of dirges. *Odide*, is a variant of the Konkomba music of neighbouring Ghana, which was borrowed and adapted by some indigenous cultures in Nigeria. Drums and percussion instruments are used to the accompaniment of voices. The *Afanlan* is a string instrument which was made popular by the great minstrel, the late Chief Umoboare Igberaese of Ewu. While playing the *Afanlan* to the accompaniment of the mbira, bells and gourd rattles, he told stories of both esoteric and exoteric value. He was primarily patronised by royalty. Other Esan genres include *Igbabonelimin*, *Ijieghe*, and so on.

Music functions in almost every event of the Esan by way of life cycle events, festivals, religious and recreational societies, and is influenced by the socio-cultural change resulting from Christianity, Western education coupled with technological development, and the infiltration of alien musical cultures and musical instruments. The latter poses a challenge to the performance of music and dance in this area. The musical heritage that has for several centuries been seen as everyone's property is now being weighed

down even by those who should be its custodians. These factors notwithstanding, the *Igbabonelimin* and *Ijieleghe* are performed during burial ceremonies, initiation into manhood, chieftaincy title taking, coronation and coronation anniversaries of Esan monarchs, and in memorial services.

### **Gender stereotypes in Esan society**

Alade (2012, 30) defines gender as “those characteristics and functions which the society ascribes to being male and female”. In similar vein, Anake and Denga (2014, 164) observe that “gender” refers to the social and psychological dimension of being female or male. In addition, gender roles are the behaviours, interests, attitudes, skills and personality traits that a culture considers appropriate for males and females. In contemporary understandings, “gender” is recognised as a spectrum from male to female and everything in between such as queer or transgender bodies. In addition, cisgenderism, which is sometimes called cissexual or shortened to cis, describes a person whose gender identity is the same as that assigned at birth (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, transgenderism means the condition of someone feeling that they are not the same gender (sex) as the one they had or were said to have at birth. Similarly, “queer is an umbrella term for people who are not heterosexual or those who are not cisgender”. Originally meaning “strange” or peculiar, “queer” was used pejoratively in the nineteenth century against those with same-sex desires or relationships ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer#cite\\_note-QN1-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer#cite_note-QN1-1)). Queer people who have desires for the same sex and feel that they are not what their sex prescribes are insignificant in Esan, although in recent times, some male performers are occasionally seen dressed in female clothing for entertainment purposes.

In Esan, gender roles are ascribed to individuals based on their sex. While discussing stereotypes, Martin and Halverson (1981, 1122) opine that “gender stereotype is one type of subjective perception of what a man or woman should be or how people should behave.” Expounding this definition further, Alade (2012, 32) posits that “gender stereotyping refers to a collection of commonly held beliefs or opinions about behaviours and activities considered by society as appropriate for males and females.” Everyday life in Esan is organised along gender, agnatic and gerontocratic lines. In their traditional way of life, males in the community are perceived as superior to the females. It is the males who are at the helm of affairs in political, judicial and religious matters. This understanding makes it possible for women to only be admitted into musical ensembles which are of little social value. Women are also not permitted to play certain traditional musical instruments such as the drums and horns. Even in female ensembles where drums are needed, it is the men who play them.

### **Origin of *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin***

*Igbabonelimin* is a traditional music and dance form which is uniquely associated with the Esan. Although it is as old as the Esan itself, this genre is beginning to receive

serious attention from scholars of different leanings. Ikhide (1993), Ojiefoh (2002), Omoera and Aluede (2011), Atuegbe (2011) and Omoera and Oseghele (2012), have discussed some of its different aspects. *Igbabonelimin* means “clapping for the ancestors.” Atuegbe (2011, 198) says *Igbabonelimin* is a compound word derived from “*Igbabo*”, which means “to clap”, and “*Elimhin*”, which means “spirit.” Conjunctively, it means to clap for or commune with the spirit. This genre derives its name from the oral tradition which points to communication with the spirits as part of the action in the dance or performance. The masked dancers do not talk or sing and whenever it becomes necessary to do so, they resort to speech surrogacy. Here, speech surrogacy refers to the use of an instrument to imitate verbal speech for the masked dancer to convey a specific message to the local spectators who understand the message. This observation is based on our field experience during the conduct of this research.

In terms of origin, Atuegbe points out that

In Esan, hunters are seen as privileged individuals. They are seen as the closest to the living and the dead because of the odd hours they spend in the forests. So, a story exists in Esan that one night a hunter met the spirits dancing in an arena. He watched this seemingly strange dance and reported to the community of his strong encounter. He taught the dance to members of the community (2011, 197).

The origin of many musical genres is often shrouded in mystery. Certain musical genres in Esan are believed to have originated from the spirit or animal world. In like manner, McClellan (2000) posits that it is doubtful that we shall ever know when or under what circumstances the first musical utterance was made, yet every culture developed some form of musical tradition. Many of them possessed legends that pertain to the origin of music. Almost all these legends attribute a divine origin to music. In no case was music said to be invented by humans. In the world’s mythologies, music was either “discovered” nor bestowed upon us by supernatural beings. This spirit and animal connection in the evolution of musical genres in Esan are evidence of an absence of research which would provide more clarity on the origins of these genres. Humans do not hear the language of the spirits or animals and to have believed that hunters spied on the spirits and animals to develop *Igbabonelimin* could be for want of sufficient data on its evolution. This opinion is further strengthened when one considers the efforts of Aluede (2021) who concluded that the *Asonogun* genre is of indeterminate origin.

### **An examination of *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin***

While *Ijieleghe* is entirely for women with the men drumming for them, the *Igbabonelimin* is for men. The genres owe their origins to the same source, which is the movements of the gorilla. This understanding has made it possible for both genres to use almost the same repertoire of songs which they perform to the accompaniment of their instruments. Their dance movements, which are about twelve in number, are common to both ensembles. These movements are a forward roll, a backward roll, a handstand, a

cartwheel, a “candle stick”<sup>1</sup>, the “crab position”, a “banana jump”<sup>2</sup>, head stand, “tip-up”<sup>3</sup>, somersaulting, and hand-spring. There is also a gestural feature where members mount one another to form a tall structure. This feature is unique to *Ijieleghe* ensembles.

In the photographs below, three examples of the dance movements common to both ensembles are captured. In Figure 1, a female dancer on the left is seen tumbling.

This photograph was taken by the authors at an event which took place on 17 November, 2015, at Udomi, Irrua in Edo State. In Figure 2 below, male dancers are performing the same actions as the female dancers in Figure 1. Tumbling is a characteristic feature of both groups.



Figure 1. An *Ijieleghe* dancer tumbling, a style also performed by *Igbabonelimin* dancers. Photograph by Authors.



Figure 2. A photograph of an *Igbabonelimin* dancer tumbling. Photograph by Authors.

- <sup>1</sup> An exercise done while lying down and facing up with the two hands fixed sideways. The legs are raised facing the sky with the body forming an L shape.
- <sup>2</sup> A gymnastic exercise achieved by standing upright and jumping with both hands pointing up at shoulder length forming an arc in the air and landing on the balls of the toes.
- <sup>3</sup> An exercise performed by two persons. While one person will lie prone, another participant picks up the person's legs as if pushing a wheel-barrow.



As observed, this dance movement is similar to the one performed by the female dancer shown above. This photograph, which was taken on 26 December, 2015, at the Ubiaja carnival arena, shows the similarity in both performances.

This pattern of dance in Figure 3 has to do with taking flight and landing on the hands or legs. This photograph was taken by the authors at an event which took place on 17 November, 2015, at Udomi, Irrua, in Edo State. A variant of this movement is replicated by an *Igbabonelimin* dancer in Figure 4. This photograph was taken by



Figure 3. A photograph of an *Ijieghe* dancer somersaulting (*Ikpikpi*). Photograph by Authors.



Figure 4. An *Igbabonelimin* dancer somersaulting (*Ikpikpi*). Photograph by Authors.

the authors at a burial ceremony on 30 September 2017, at Ewoyi, Uromi in Edo State, Nigeria. In this photograph, the *Igbabonelimin* performer is seen somersaulting backwards. Somersaulting forward and backwards are common features of the dance.

In Figure 5, we present two photographs of *Igbabonelimin* and *Ijieleghe* performers. These photographs were taken on two different occasions; that of the *Igbabonelimin* was taken on 26 December, 2015, at the Ubiaja carnival arena and that of the *Ijieleghe* was taken at a final rehearsal for a performance on 30 January, 2016, at Usugbenu in Irrua, Edo State.



Figure 5. *Igbabonelimin* and *Ijieleghe* dancers in hand-stand position. Photograph by Authors.

In terms of the musical instruments employed in these ensembles, the *Igbabonelimin* ensemble uses two bells and five drums (see Figure 6). Beside these, the elephant tusk features as an aerophone. However, in recent times, elephant tusks are hard to come by. This is because there is a government policy which prohibits the killing of these animals. Poachers are prosecuted decisively. Consequently, carved wood is used in place of the elephant tusk. These drums, which are five in number, are made up of two small-sized drums (*Anukpe*), two medium-sized drums (*Geneghele*), and the mother drum which is a large one (*Okangan*). The photograph in Figure 6 was taken on 26 December, 2015, at the Esan South East Local Government Secretariat public field in Ubiaja.

One of the two bells used in this ensemble is resting on the first drum from the left. Close to it is the drum-stick. Two bells and three drums are used in the *Ijieleghe* ensemble and the whistle is used in the place of the elephant tusk or the carved wood. In





Figure 6. A photograph showing *Igabonelimin* musical instruments. Photograph by Authors.

the case of *Ijieleghe*, we simply named the instruments used as portrayed in the picture below; we are however aware that the whistle is absent in it.

In Figure 7 below, *Ijieleghe* instrumentalists are seen displaying their musical instruments. This photograph was taken at an event which took place on 17 November, 2015, at Udomi, Irrua in Edo State. The instruments are two bells and three drums.

The *Igabonelimin* and *Ijieleghe* have unique songs which are short and sung in stanza form. They are accompanied by the bell and drums of different sizes. Some of their songs are in praise of animals, humans, or based on topical issues in the community. The two song texts presented and translated below are sung to praise the dancers. While the first song encourages the dancer to dance “victoriously”,<sup>4</sup> the second one craves an indulgence to perform a pleasurable dance.

<sup>4</sup> There are always competitive tendencies in traditional performances including *Ijieleghe*. The level of victory in performance is measured by the applause and cash gifts they often receive. It is in this connection that they at times sing of victorious performances.



Figure 7. A photograph of men holding *Ijieleghe* musical instruments. Photograph by Authors.

### 'SABHELEGHO

Voice

'Sa bhe le gho o yo yoa gbe o 'Sa bhe le gho o yoa

gbe o 'Sa bhe le gho o yo yoa gbe o sa bhe le gho o yo yoa

gbe o

Transcription 1. By Charles O. Aluede.

Text in Esan

'Sabhelegho

Oyo yoa gbe e e oo

'Sabhelegho

Oyo yoa gbe

Translation in English

'Sabhelegho

You will dance victoriously

'Sabhelegho

You will dance victoriously

## IAGBOSONYEMEN

Voice 1  
 I a gbo so rye men O rye men O rye men do I a gbo so

Voice 2  
 O rye men O rye men do

6  
 rye men O rye men O rye men do I a gbo so rye men O rye men O  
 O rye men O rye men do O rye men O

12  
 rye men do I a gbo so rye men O rye men O rye men do  
 rye men do O rye men O rye men do

Transcription 2. By Charles O. Aluede.

Text in Esan	Translation in English
<i>Ia gbo so nyemen</i>	Lets dance a pleasurably
<i>Onyemen onyemen do</i>	Pleasurably pleasurably oh
<i>Ia gbo so nyemen</i>	Lets dance a pleasurably
<i>Onyemen onynemen do</i>	Pleasurably pleasurably oh

Out of the twenty-five randomly selected *Igbabonelimin* songs for this research from which data was generated for this article, eleven were used in the *Ijieleghe* ensemble. This forms forty-four percent of the *Ijieleghe's* repertory. Similarly, of the twenty-five randomly selected *Ijieleghe* songs, eleven are in the *Igbabonelimin's* repertory, which represents another forty-four percent. This similarity is contingent on the many features which they share: historical origin, musical instruments, dance patterns and context of performances. Even in light of these similarities, gender segregation in some departments of the two ensembles still exist.

Their contexts of performances are similar. They are usually performed at marriages, naming ceremonies, house-warming parties, and the conferment of chieftaincy titles, the coronation of kings, burial ceremonies and celebrations when politicians are appointed to government. Except for the mother drum, which is employed in the *Igbabonelimin* ensemble, the musical instruments used in *Igbabonelimin* and *Ijieleghe* are the same. One of the differences in the two ensembles is that while *Ijieleghe* performers wear light and short costumes, performers in the *Igbabonelimin* ensemble wear heavy costumes.

### **Examining the possibilities for gender equality in *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* dances**

The *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* were said to have emulated the movements of the gorillas in Esan. While the *Ijieleghe* was conceded to the female, the *Igbabonelimin* was taken over by the male. While *Ijieleghe* has no taboos woven around it, the *Igbabonelimin* has several. Some of the taboos in *Igbabonelimin* performance are that no one passes through the arena during performance; even when one knows the dancer, it is not expected that their names be revealed to spectators; no one points fingers at a performer because such an action is associated with the identification of the dancer; it is a taboo to embrace a dancer as doing so means that the embracer knows the costumed dancer; it is a taboo for uninitiated women to be seen in the performance arena; and women should not see the *Igbabonelimin* costume, not even when it is washed and dried under the sun. The washing and drying are done in secret.

As a result of taboos woven around *Igbabonelimin* spectatorship, the dance has always been associated with fetishism. It was almost an anathema for members of Pentecostal churches, especially the Assemblies of God Mission, to watch the dance because it was believed to be a pagan dance. These views are also captured by Omoera and Aluede (2011) when they interrogated the spiritual functions of the *Igbabonelimin*. Are *Igbabonelimin* dancers, spirits? In a strict sense, they are not. However, human beings have mystified and deified the dance. While the costumes of *Ijieleghe* performers are made in the market-place, washed and hung anywhere to dry, the makers of the costumes of *Igbabonelimin* are a secret. *Igbabonelimin* costumes are always kept out of view of household members and when dirty, they are usually washed in secret. It is this aspect that connects them with the idea of ancestral veneration or the spirit world.

While reporting on musicality in Okpe kingdom in Delta State, Nigeria, Idamoyibo says,

The Okpe believes that the woman's body does not require great striking or vibration that would have strong impact on the buttocks. Any traumatic shock, stroke or vibration that makes a strong impact on that region of her body is capable of generating premature menstruation, and the occurrence of sudden flow unprepared for at a public place would lead to very great embarrassment (2008, 62).

In traditional Esan societies, women in their early stages of pregnancy visit the market, farm and pound yam on a daily basis for their families. Aluede intimates that not having women in the sonic space partly perpetuates conservative gender roles in Africa, and indeed, Esan (2005, 60). From these accounts above, the reasons which favoured the over mystification of certain dances in Nigeria are gradually eroding. The



factors responsible for this gradual erosion are reflective of current challenges in Esan society. Some of these challenges are increasing enlightenment, loss of interest and membership, and rural-urban drift, among others.

### **Expanding the frontiers of *Ijieleghe* ensembles**

In many communities of southern Nigeria, there are firm rules governing the performance of music and dance. In such communities, the rules are contingent on variables which span from the spiritual to the sociological. Somehow, based on personal whim, man has at will evolved rules to check female involvement in musical ensembles. Based on the study of *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin*, there appears to be an absence of any philosophical, religious, sociological and empirical bases for not allowing women to participate in all the male dominated ensembles in Esan. This sense of superiority of the male gender over the female has been mostly responsible for the urge to limit the sonic and performance spaces of women in *Igbabonelimin*. The restriction of women and transgender bodies from playing major roles in male dominated sonic spaces is not peculiar to the Esan people of Nigeria alone. For example, Solomon (2006) reports that a Turkish singer, Bulent Ersoy, in his recording “Aziz Istanbul”, used the sacred sound of the Muslim call to prayer in the recording of a secular song. Apart from this innovation, Bulent Ersoy is well known as a male to female transsexual. In most churches in Nigeria, where women were not allowed to preach, there is now a gradual reconsideration of such positions today. If the church, known for its conservative attitudes, could yield to contemporary realities, it will be anachronistic for any given culture to rigidly maintain archaic practices such as discrimination towards women. Interestingly, some original female ensembles do not waste any time in permitting men in their performances. Ozah reports that men have been accepted in the *Egwu Amala* of the Ogbaru people of Nigeria and that this dance, which was originally for women, now has male dancers. She mentions further that admitting both sexes in an ensemble is a development that has brought contrast. It has also enhanced the performance (2010).

On the possibility of admitting males into hitherto exclusively female ensembles and females into male ensembles, focused group discussions (FGD) were held. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with open ended questions. This technique was used to complement other techniques such as interviews and observations which this study relied on. Some of the responses elicited from the discussions are presented below:

#### ***Why is it that women cannot be admitted into membership of the sonic space of men in Igbabonelimin?***

There was a general consensus among all elderly men that the *Igbabonelimin* is an age-old ensemble for men and that this is one area where men are able to show their superiority. To the men, allowing the women into this group means advocating gender equality. One of the eldest men in the sessions opined that “no matter how small a room is, it must have a corner.” He further affirmed that some women have manipulated their children to the extent that the man of the house is now seen as a “riff-raff” in the home.



The elder believed that it is only through the *Igbabonelimin* that women's excesses can be regulated.<sup>5</sup> According to him, admitting women into the *Igbabonelimin* performance means a total collapse of male authority because their secrets will be exposed.

*What is likely to happen if these ensembles now admit members of the opposite sexes?*

Almost all participants in the FGD groups stated that although nothing will happen, they needed to mystify the dance to gain some respect from their wives. However, a participant who is a younger male adult stated that it would have been better to introduce the women into the ensembles. He said such a trend will enhance the lifespan of the dance. Another reason for including women is that the observances of the old are no longer strictly kept. No matter how they struggled to misinform their wives that the dancers are spirits, the wives know the truth. Besides, in this era, disputes are settled in court or at the police station such that the supposed extra-musical functions of the masquerades have shrunk considerably. All the women present in the FGD sessions admitted that since the dance patterns in *Ijieleghe* are similar to those of *Igbabonelimin*, it would be a great experience to have both sexes in the performance. After all, if women now play football, take part in karate and wrestle, admitting females into all-male ensembles and males in all-female ensembles will engender variety in spectatorship.

How will admitting females into *Igbabonelimin* affect the ensembles?

All the young adults and women present at the session agreed that working together will enhance the performance. They added that since most males are quick at leaving the countryside for the city, thereby depleting the number of performers, recruiting females will be a good initiative.

*Why is it that the mother drum is used in Igbabonelimin but not used in Ijieleghe?*

On this question, all the elderly men in our focus group discussion murmured in disapproval. One of the elders remarked that "help me hold a sceptre while I go ease myself does not make the current holder of the sceptre a Chief Priest." In this proverb, he meant that women who have been given some latitude to use some of their drums should not give them the authority to aspire to also lay claims to the use of the mother drum. Allowing the women access to the mother drum means there is no distinction between husband and wife. He further remarked that "it is the day a pot is made that its mouth is created." In this proverb, it means early in time, men marked out both their territories and the women's own. They cannot now be allowed to use the mother drum. This position is, as a matter of fact, disappearing. The photograph in Figure 8 captures a woman beating the mother drum in public while being watched by men. That the mother drum cannot yet be found in the *Ijieleghe* ensemble is due to the following reasons: drums are mostly owned by men and also beaten by them; some affluent women

<sup>5</sup> Under the guise of spirit or ancestral manifestation, a masquerade could warn an erring woman in the community, pronounce judgments which must be obeyed. A further reading of Omoera, S. & Aluede, C. O. (2011) "Extra-theatrical Functions of *Igbabonelimin* Music and Dance of the Esan" In *Technical Theatre and Performing Arts in Nigeria*. Duro Oni & S.E. Ododo (Eds.) may be helpful.



Figure 8. A Uokha women's ensemble in Ubiaja. A woman is captured beating the drum in public during the Ubiaja carnival on 26 December, 2015. Photograph by Authors.

could purchase theirs which the men will of necessity beat for them; and, men may be reluctant to beat the mother drum for women even if they are able to buy their own.

### **The misconceptions with musical instruments**

There have been many misconceptions and threats associated with women being seen in public playing musical instruments. For example, citing instances from Cameroon, Bebey (1975) acknowledges that the drum is essentially a man's instrument. Women are not allowed to beat it since they are not expected to beat their husbands. The anthropomorphic attributes of Esan drums and their associated beliefs were interrogated by Aluede (2006) who posits that women are not allowed or supposed to touch or play the drums. These days, such positions can be disputed because modernisation has promoted gender equality and economic independence for women in Nigeria. Women now beat drums openly. The photograph below in Figure 9 was taken in a musical carnival where men watched women beating drums. Usually, 26 December, which is Boxing Day, is an annual carnival for Ubiaja people in Esan. During this carnival, different villages and cultural groups come together to entertain spectators. On this occasion, different groups are uniquely costumed as they do processional dances round the performance arena after which the ensembles come with their performers to perform for a given period of time. At this event, one finds groups by the names of *Asonogun*, *Obodoribhafe*, *Agbenojie* and many others.



Figure 9. A female masquerade. This masquerade has a male dancer in costume. He then dances like a female for artistic variety. This event was a burial ceremony at Ewoyi, Uromi in Edo state, Nigeria. Photograph by Authors.

No music culture nor any music genre is immutable. Day in and out, changes occur in consonance with the demands of everyday life which often affect or interfere with established rules. Thus, certain views can always adapt to changing times. This in part explains why musical ensembles borrow and adapt other songs and dance steps of neighbouring ensembles within or outside their immediate vicinity. It was previously said that both *Ijjeleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* songs are in common use among each of the ensembles. Generally speaking, in dances which do not involve high jumps and tumbling, the dancers wear heavy costumes while those which require leaps, jumps and summersaults, wear light costumes. While this principle is obeyed in *Ijjeleghe*, the reverse is true of *Igbabonelimin*. The need to shield the dancers' identities since they are believed to be spirits or ancestors is the reason for the different costumes.

### **The advantages of collaboration between the ensembles**

Most of the reasons advanced by respondents for excluding males in female ensembles and females in male ensembles are not convincing. It is evident that in some traditional performances in Nigeria, those rules that prohibited women from playing the drums are no longer in force. The reasons for repudiating the taboos are not at all because of modernity, but derived from a sense of enlightenment. Over time, the women have come to know the truth as against the traditions they were made to believe. For instance, the consequences previously announced which would befall females should they beat the drums, have not materialised. For example, young women survived unscathed despite being threatened with the onset of early menopause due to ignoring the taboos. This reality gave much impetus to female drumming. Moreover, the consecration of drums and the concept of musical instruments having anthropomorphic attributes are

no longer as popular. No doubt, there is an obvious need to reconsider these age-old traditions which portend threats to musical innovation.

In this era of equal opportunities for all genders in so many sectors, drawing lines of distinction between male and female levels of self-actualisation is prohibitive. There is an African proverb cited in Wilson (2017) which says, “if we educate a boy, we educate one person. If we educate a girl, we educate a family and a whole nation.” There are several reasons why this position needs some amplification. For example, in Esan, while their husbands are away hunting and farming, women are mostly at home performing domestic and economic roles. While preparing meals, women mill palm oil, crack palm kernel, extract palm kernel oil, weave at the loom and their children watch and learn the arts informally. These roles are performed to the accompaniment of music. This reality emphasises the fact that women are likely to be better instructors of their children. It is in this connection that Lester notes that economic activities have moved Vai men<sup>6</sup> to urban areas in search of greener pastures and their women are left at home with their children. To ensure that the musical mores of their people will not disappear, a musical prerogative of the men has now become the women’s. Moreover, the women are in turn teaching their children, irrespective of their gender (1986). The barriers prohibiting women from taking part in some musical performances are gradually giving way (Idamoyibo 2008, Ozah 2010 and Asigbo 2012). Reiteratively, reasons have been advanced why women are likely not to be admitted into all-male ensembles. For the purpose of emphasis, the reasons are: the desire of males to be superior to the females, the desire to avoid equality, the desire to use the *Igbabonelimin* ensemble as an administrative and judicial implement, and, as a means of showing class distinction.

If the love for the art form is primary, these reasons are elusive and illusionary. There is probably no reason why men and women should not dance together in both *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* ensembles. This enforced separation calls for an evolution of a new ensemble which will extract the dance movements of the *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* ensembles where males and females will be admitted into membership on equal terms. In many spheres of everyday life in Nigeria, collective, communal living has been embraced and this should be extended to making music.

Many scholars have addressed the functions of music in many Nigerian societies (Aluede and Izibili 2017, Ologundudu 2020, Vidal 2013). It is important to examine some of the salient aspects of music as they relate to this study. Aluede (2005) avers that the non-involvement of women in the key ensembles in Esan is responsible for the dearth of their practitioners. In the past, every village had ensembles. Men of today are busy with economic activities and some have lost contact with their hometown as a result of urban drift.

It is no longer fashionable for traditional societies to draw lines between gender and genres, about who should play the drum, dance, and who should not. This trend weakens the composition of the ensemble. There are indications that the *Igbabonelimin*

<sup>6</sup> Vai people is an ethnic group that live mostly in Liberia, with a small minority living in south-eastern Sierra Leone



will in not too long a time yield to the forces of modernity, and women will be allowed into its membership. For example, the exclusion of women as spectators is no more observed and women who were not allowed in the arena during performances now go as close as spraying money on the performers' forehead or feet.

In another development, in what appears to be an attempt to bring about variety, *Igbabomelimin* ensembles now have male and female masquerades. They go hand in hand during performance, playing and dramatising wife and husband roles (Figure 9).

No doubt, these tendencies are indicative of the need for a change, a move away from rigidity to flexibility so that the life span of the two ensembles will endure over time. In this age, even children know that the occupants inside the costumes are human beings. It is necessary to address the misrepresentations in the dance. If it is devoid of mysticism, everybody and even Christian youngsters will be interested in participating in the ensembles. Once this occurs, this dance will find its way into co-educational institutions. In these institutions, music, health and physical education teachers could collaborate to have students benefit most especially as music has been subsumed under Civic Education and Creative Arts in primary and secondary schools. The dances have the potential of leading to social cohesion in Esan societies.

## Conclusion

The thrust of this article has been the examination of gender stereotypes and musicality in Esan. We addressed the origin of *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin*, their songs and musical instruments along with the expansion of new frontiers.

Gender segregation is as old as many African cultures and engendered by the patriarchal nature of traditional African society, which has manifested in many of its institutions, including its music and dance performances. This is evident in the *Ijieleghe* and *Igbabonelimin* ensembles of Esan. However, currently efforts are being made to achieve the integration of genders in the dances which gradually will efface gender stereotypes in the traditional music ensembles.

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