



# Conceptual Study of *Uloko* Music Ensemble in Ebedei Uno, Delta State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

*This study investigates and discusses the concept of uloko music in Ebedei Uno. It utilized ethnographic research method and data obtained via non-participant observation of a purposively selected uloko music group in Ebedei Uno, Delta State, Nigeria. Its findings indicate that Ebedei Uno community in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria has Bini ancestry with predominantly Igbo cultural influences; that uloko music is a fusion of indigenous choral, orchestral, costume, and dance music that contains, preserves, and disseminates cultural values in Ebedei Uno community through its performance in social events. The choral, orchestral, costume, and dance dimensions of the music are basis for the identification of the music individually and/or collectively. These underscore the concept of uloko music as a fourfold of orchestra, choir, costume, and dance. uloko music as such reflects the nature of African music as an integrated art; and underscores the brotherhood of the musical arts in Africa. These reflect the concept of music in Ebedei Uno in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, contribute to further understanding of African music; and could be useful for the education of students in music fundamental in line with the kinship of the arts in the African continent.*

**Keywords:** *Uloko; African Orchestra; African Dance; African Music.*

## INTRODUCTION

Concepts provide insight into the nature, structure, and operation of a thing, phenomenon, or an art. Thus, in theatre art, fine and applied arts, religion and music, conceptual studies remain vital introductory sections of the subject areas. Although concept of music in general receives scholarly attention in lectures, textbooks, projects, dissertations, thesis, and journal articles, the ideas expressed are mainly non-African. As Akuno (2000/2001:3) observes:

“Music education . . . has been, and continues to be conducted along Western theories which fall short of defining music as experienced within traditional African cultures . . . Research in music, an attempt to find reality and meaning in it, involves discovering its components, how they make a cohesive and comprehensible whole, and how the produced item functions in the economy of the culture that produces and consumes it. Since music must be understood from the participants ‘point of view, a true understanding involves analysis within the context in which it is created and practised”.

The prevalence of Western music theories even in the explication of African music implies that African concept of music is scant in literature just as focused conceptual studies on specific African indigenous music forms. Thus, many African indigenous forms of music exist mainly in the “eyes”, and memories of practitioners. This leaves them outside the realm of academics where they could be useful in chatting improved understanding of African music in global scholarly pull and politics. This study, utilizing ethnographic research method, and data obtained through a non-participant observation of a purposively selected *uloko* music group and interview of select cultural custodians of Ebedei Uno, investigates and discusses the concept of *uloko* music in Ebedei Uno, of Ukwani Local Government Area, of Delta State, Nigeria. This brings to the fore the concept of the indigenous music in the community; and further provides insight into the nature and structure of African music.

Music has been defined by several authors in several ways. Some trace the etymology of the word, music, to Greek goddess. However, order and sound are central to many scholarly definitions of music. For example, Ipere (2002:42)

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notes that music “is derived from the Greek word, *muse* (goddess associated with music and poetry”. While her observation is etymological, and alludes to deism, music has been associated with different spirits from one part of the world to another. Thus, Enoh (2006) is of the view that music is a universal language for everybody and every culture recognizes music when he or she sees or needs it. We note that though music is present in every part of the world, it is shaded by different cultures of the world; thus, music in one culture may be different from music in another. It is in view of that that Okafor (2001) clarifies that music is culture-bound, stating that there is no single answer to the definition of music, for very culture decides on what its music is; that every culture defines its music, just as Nnamani (2004) avers that music is an integral part of a people’s culture; music plays very significant roles in every aspect of traditional and modern societies, from birth to death. Idolor (2002) observes that music is conceptualized according to the cultural standards of rhythm, melody and harmony; that the goal of music is to please the intellect in accordance with societal theoretical framework. The crux of the observation is that societal theoretical framework, cultural standards of rhythm, melody and harmony are crucial to the conceptualization of music.

On forms of music, Silver, Lee, and Childress (2016) observe that forms of music is conditioned by structures of melody, lyric, mood, rhythm, harmony, and instrumentation. They state that forms are based on the listed musical elements in a musicological endeavour that is realized through the analysis of musical, and lyrical contents of a music, as well as its internal structures. It is worth clarifying that the consideration of musical elements in tagging genres is vital for proper understanding of music and its forms. Thus, Lena (2012) observes four (4) major forms in American popular music, namely: (1) avant-garde, (2) scene-based, (3) industry-based; and (4) traditionalist. While there view sheds light on the context of popular music in America, the typologies of music forms are clearer in Fabbri (1982), Frith (1996), Negus (1999), Borthwick and Moy (2004), and Holt (2007). They listed music forms along national, international, historical, and contemporary lines with many sub-forms under each category. Thus, there are Afro, Arabic, Asian, avant-garde, blues, Caribbean, country, comedy, electronic, folk-songs, hip-hop, jazz, Latin, pop, rhythm and blues and soul, rock, and classical music genres. The forms and sub-forms point to the universality, history, geography, and cross-culturalization of music.

To understand African music, Akuno (2000/2001) observes the import of culture, and context to African musicianship. He notes that in African music there is no distinction between music makers for master musicians combine with “audience” in performance and results in continuous variation. He further observes that African music is a vital part of social and/or sacred functions; that African music that is associated with rites is assigned to specific activity. This, he states, results in loss of meaning when such music is

performed outside its appropriate environment, for what is perceived as music in a circumstance may provoke another reaction in another. He avers that culture, and context are vital determinants of African music creativity. His view brings to the fore the nature of African music as a communion of musicians, audience, time and community.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses Nzewi’s (2006) science of musical structures which is one of the three theories he propounded in *African Music Creativity and Performance: The Science of Sound* that were propounded to explain the nature of African music. In the theory, Nzewi (2006) observes that “without cognitive understanding, what we do with extant indigenous knowledge manifestations will be abstracted misrepresentations and misimpressions that problematize contemporary advancement and re-deployment in initiatives” (n. p. n.). To foster an understanding of African music, he propounded the theory stating that humans and contextual intensions inform theoretical premise of African musical arts. He observes that although entertainment underscores African arts purpose, its musical components are sonic transformations of human and communal ideas that aim to humanize the individual and bind humanity. He avers that the:

“human meaning embodied in ...African melodic or harmonic constructs is that an individual must take cognizance of the community, real or imagined, in exploring creative originality or self-affirmation...It is for the same reason that traditional performance convention coerces everybody to share the psychophysical wellness afforded by indigenous musical arts by partaking at various degrees of active participation” (n. p. n.).

The aspect of the theory that recognizes African communities as custodians of African traditional musical arts are vital to the study.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This is a qualitative research that utilizes ethnographic research method. This research method is a means wherein researchers investigate a field or interact with study’s participants in their real-life environment. Ethnographic research method is popular in anthropology, and music; however, it is profusely utilized in the social sciences. In respect of the study, the research method enabled the researcher to observe, and investigate *Uloko* music in the original environment of its select practitioners in Ebodei Uno, Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. This made it possible for the researcher to gain knowledge of the music in its dimensions in the understanding and usage of its practitioners. To execute the study, the researcher stayed in Ebodei Uno for a period of three (3) weeks, interacting with the community, *Uloko* practitioners through personal communications, and non-participant observation of the music in several rehearsal sessions. These provide insight into the concept of *Uloko* music in the community. The study was executed in strict adherence to research ethics.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analyses data under the following sub-headings: a history of Ebodei Uno in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, and concept of *Uloko* music in the community.

A Brief History of Ebodei Uno in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria

Ebodei Uno is a community in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State that is bordered by Umutu, Owah Abbi, Eke, and Obiakambu at North, West, East, and South, respectively. Like many other Ukwani communities in Ukwani, Ndokwa West, and Ndokwa East Local Government Areas of Delta State, Nigeria, Ebodei-Uno claims an ancient Bini ancestry. In an interview, Elemeju (2025), an Ebodei community historian, states that the ancestor of Ebodei Uno was a man called Udei who migrated from Bini and settled in Aboh, in present day Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State. There, he had two children, named Okpu and Ezie-Ogoli. She notes that both children founded the Ebodei community when they left Aboh and settled at the present location of Ogume in Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. She observes that due to lack of farm land, Okpu migrated further across Okumeshi River in Amayi, Ukwani Local Government Area, and settled at its present location. There he built an altar called *Ani* (earth god), indicating his right of ownership of the place and invited Ezie-Ogoli to join him.

Thus, Okpu and Ezie-Ogoli lived at its present site before Ezie-Ogoli moved to Ogbe Ata, and then to where is today known as Umu Ezie-Ogoli quarter of Ebodei Uno after a fight with a neighbouring community. Joined by other batches of migrants from Akarai in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State, Bini, and Ogume in Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, Ebodei divided itself into four (4) quarters, namely: Ogbe-Uzu, Umu-Osele, Isemelu, and Ukwu-Ole quarters.

Emphasizing its community of origin, Ebinum (2025) Ebodei came from Umu-Ogwezi kindred of Aboh, Ndokwa East, Delta State, Nigeria, thus, they are nicknamed *Nwa-Dei*, meaning the freeborn children of Aboh. He observes that their practice of not carrying people on shoulders is traceable to their Aboh ancestry for according to the Aboh tradition, only the Obi of Aboh could be carried on shoulders. It is worth noting that the suffix “*Uno*” affixed to Ebodei is in reference to its original settlement near *Ani*, the earth god, to differentiate it from the neighbourhood the community has spread to in quest for proximity to farm lands, and development.

Furthermore, all the communities mentioned in the tradition of origin claim Bini ancestry, however, ancient Bini Kingdom transcends current Edo State to many communities West of the River Niger; thus the Bini ancestral claim could be a reflection of their history of being part of the ancient Bini Kingdom; and not necessarily of being Bini origin. For there were non-traditionally Bini communities in the Ancient Bini Kingdom, given its vast geography. While their link to Bini

is noteworthy, vital signs of culture in Ebodei community, namely: language, dressing, and festivals are pro-Igbo. Thus, Ebodei is one of the communities informally identified as Delta-Igbo.

## CONCEPTS OF *ULOKO* IN EBODEI UNO

This section discusses the concepts of *uloko* in Ebodei Uno. Data obtained in respect of the study indicate that *uloko* is an instrumental music, a vocal music, a costume, and a dance.

### *Uloko* as an Instrumental Music

*Uloko* is an instrumental music that consists of *odu* (pot drum), *ishaka* (rattles), *ibome uku* (big gongs), *ibome nta* (small gong), *okpokolo* (slit drum) and *ngba* (clappers). The orchestra of six (6) instruments performs a unique instrumental music that incepts, and accompanies other dimension of *Uloko* music. Although the orchestral section of the music functions mostly in tandem with other sections of *uloko*, it also has its own identity within *uloko* music tradition, and without other sections of the music. Thus, informed members of the community have learnt to identify the instrumental section of the music by its character, even without the other sections of the music in sight. In respect of the study, figure 1.1 shows the constituent members of *Uloko* orchestra.



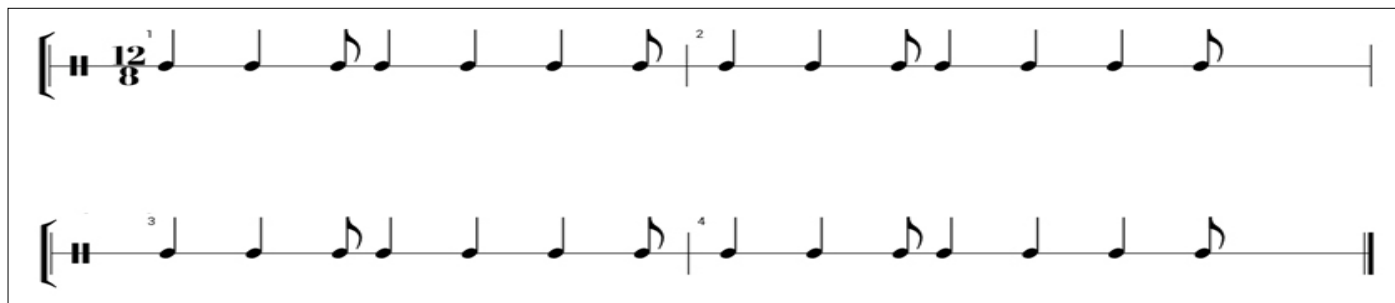
**Figure 1.1.** Instruments of the *Uloko* Orchestra

Source: Field Work, 2025.

The use of the *ibome nta* and *okpokolo* simultaneously in the music is optional for they mainly perform the timeline; thus, either the *okpokolo* or *ibome nta* is used to play the timeline of the music with the aid of *eka nkwa* (a stick). The timeline is usually in compound-quadruple metre. However, when both the *ibome nta* and *okpokolo* are available, *ibome nta* plays the time line, the *okpokolo* executes a shorter rhythmic pattern that supports the timeline in four places: at the second sub-beat of each grouped three sub-beats in a compound quadruple metre. The *ishaka*, rattled with the palm, incepts immediately with rattling sound that supports the other

sections of the instruments. In response to the established instrumental lines, the *odu* aids in articulating the strong beats of the metre. All the aforementioned instruments are under the leadership of the *ibome uku*, which directs the rest

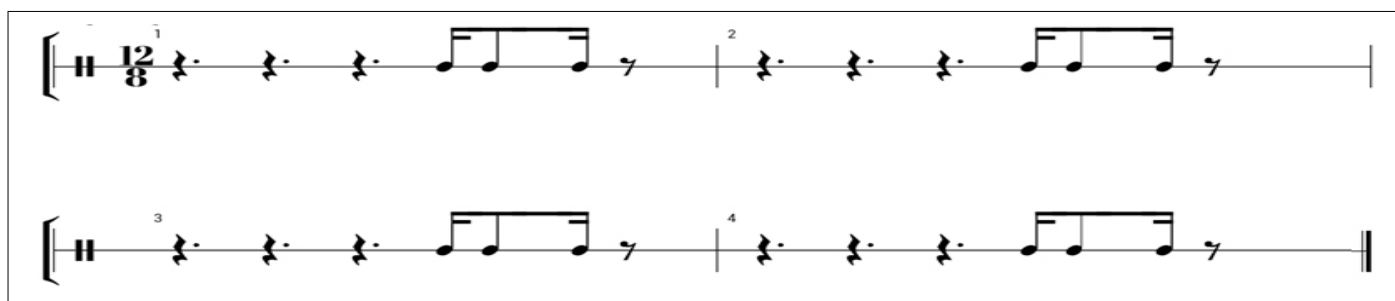
*Ibome Nta* (Small Gong)



**Figure 1.2.** An Excerpt of *Ibome Nta* in *Uloko* Music

Source: Field Work, 2025.

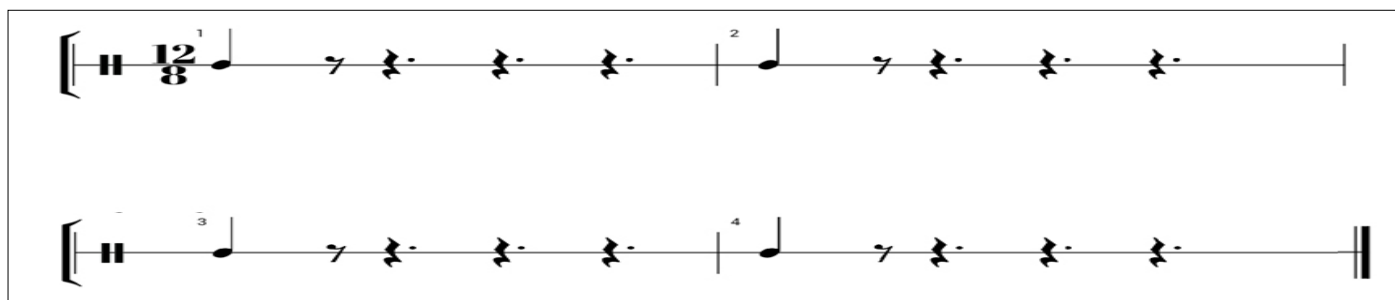
*Ibome Uku* (Big Gong)



**Figure 1.3.** An Excerpt of *Ibome Uku* in *Uloko* Music

Source: Field Work, 2025.

*Odu* (Pot Drum)



**Figure 1.4.** An Excerpt of *Odu* in *Uloko* Music

Source: Field Work, 2025.

Performing on the *ibome uku* requires alternating techniques between the utilization of its padded stick on the right hand and the left palm, intermittently. It is through the *ibome uku*'s melo-rhythmic dictation that intra-sectional and inter-sectional leadership is established within the instrumental section, and between the instrumental and dance sections, respectively. Thus, the instrumentality of the *ibome uku* is critical in achieving the needed collaboration between sections of the *uloko* music. The *ngba* (clappers) is an *uloko* musical instrument made with piece of foam, a stick, and a piece of cloth. The foam is wrapped with the pieces of cloth, which is then fixed to an end of the wooden stick. Two

clappers are struck together intermittently to produce muted acoustics, occasionally. The clappers are utilized to solidify the percussive base of the music and to announce vital spots of the music where *tutti* is required.

*Uloko* orchestra reflects the affinity between the people's cultural nuances and their musical arts. For example, *ibome* (gong) is an important cultural element of the people used for communication apart from its musical usage. This communicative ability of the gong is evident in the instrumental aspect of *uloko* music, as it is used to announce, thus communicate timeline, metre, tempo, and other dynamic



aspects of the music. Furthermore, the slit-drum is a wooden musical instrument underscoring the affinity between the musical arts and the people's environment. It is note-worthy that Ebodei Uno is a predominantly agrarian community, whose farming activities involve brushing, cutting of woods, staking of yam plants, and fetching of fire-woods. All these involve the use of the wood, which is not only needed for staking yam plants, beans plants, and cooking, but also for aiding the rhythmic and percussive course of *uloko* music. Thus, beyond being the slit drum for *uloko* music, the wood is the drum beat of life in Ebodei Uno, Nigeria.

The leadership and supportive roles of the *uloko* musical instruments used in the ensemble reflect family and

communal leadership in Ebodei Uno. Although the husband is the head of the family, it takes the supportive role of the wife, the obedience and contribution of the children to make a successful family. Furthermore, the community has the tradition of enlisting the oldest man in the community as its leader; different age groups are traditionally assigned to support the leadership through diverse roles. Thus, the leadership of the *ibome uku* (big gong) through its intra-sectional and inter-sectional interactions among the diverse instruments that constitute the instrumentation, and between the instrumentation and dance sections is a supportive correlation needed for achieving unity and order in the performance of *uloko* music. Hence, general and sectional leadership work for order in the community.

### *Uloko* as a Vocal Music

Singing is a vital section of *uloko* music; this is performed by a choir who combines singing with clapping, and feet-stamping. While some of the songs are in appreciation of *uloko* music itself, others deal with some issues that are dear to the group itself and the community in general. Figure 1.5 illustrates *uloko* as a vocal music.



**Figure 1.5.** An Excerpt of *Uloko* Song

Source: Field Work, 2025.

#### Ukwani Language

Nyon yo nyao ewao...

Ikolobie ghali uloko

Keko nete?

Uloko, egu ogelenya.

#### English Translation

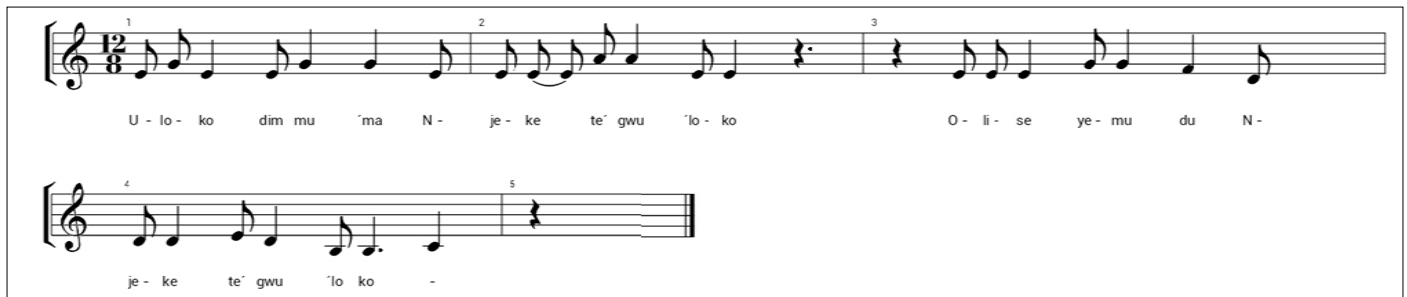
Exclamation

If a young man stops patronising *uloko*

What would he patronise?

*Uloko*, a wealthy dance.

*Uloko* songs are responsorial. The soloist incepts the singing, while the chorus responds with the same melody and texts initiated by the soloist. Although the soloist has the freedom to alter his or her text and the song's melodic line, the chorus responds with a refrain that is hardly altered. Appendix two presents the solo and chorus in the responsorial singing. The song acknowledges *uloko* as a worthy dance which the young can engage in. It is note-worthy that an appreciation of musical arts is a duty of the audience as well as the performers. However, it is through self appreciation that performers find the initial encouragement needed for the performance of *uloko* as musical arts. Therefore, apart from announcing to the audience that *uloko* is a worthy music, the song encourages the performers to continue in their patronage of the music, as a worthy venture. Furthermore, the song discourages the erroneous perception of those who engage in musical arts as beggars by letting the audience know that there is dignity in the music. To express their pledge to *uloko* music, I use figure 1.6 to illustrate a song in respect of the study.



**Figure 1.6.** An Excerpt of *Uloko* Song

Source: Field Work, 2020.

#### Ukwani Language

Uloko di mu mma

Njeke ete egu uloko

Olise ye mu ndu

Njeke ete egu uloko

Haven announced the worthiness of the music and haven pledged to engage in the music, the performers respond with their voluntary resolve to perform the dance as long as life endures. The song unfolds an undeterred commitment to the performance of *uloko* music. It is note-worthy that successful performance of musical arts requires great measure of willingness and life-time commitment to the arts. It is with commitment that rehearsal sessions are attended and learnt performance nuances are embodied, memorized and personalized. It is with commitment that the turns and bends required in the performance of the music are executed despite physical and technical challenges. Indeed, this life-long resolve is necessary for successful performance of the music.

Other themes expressed through *uloko* songs include love and respect in matrimony, respect for constituted authorities, peaceful coexistence, and unity. Song themes in *uloko* music reflect communal values in Ebodei Uno, Nigeria. Thus, beyond musically engaging their audience, *uloko* musicians communicate and/or teach communal values through their repertory and performances. This re-echoes the role of the traditional musician as an artist, a custodian of indigenous culture, and a communicator.

It is evident that singing is a prominent aspect of *uloko* music. Through the singing, the music is heard and audience learns to associate each song with the music. It is through singing that *uloko* music promotes the ideas that it holds dear among the members of its group and in the community. Through the singing, the community records its cultural nuances, broadcasts same to the present generation and transmits same to the next generation. It is through singing that kolanuts are received and broken, the group is announced, the music incepts, proceeds and punctuates. It is through singing that dancers process to and recess from stage.

#### *Uloko* as Costume

This refers to the outfit in which *uloko* musicians are dressed.

#### English Language

Uloko is good to me

I commit to *uloko* music

God giving me life

I commit to *uloko* music.

Costume in respect of the study includes a cloth, shirt, hand fan, horse tail, rattles and beads. The cloth is tied around the waist allowing the length to get above the ankle. The shirt is usually with short sleeves. The beads are won around the neck, while the rattles are worn around the legs, above the ankles. The horse tail and hand fans are held by dancers. Figure 1.7 illustrates costume in *uloko* music. However, male members of the group dress in similar cloths and tops without beads. Furthermore, the instrumentalists and singers are not required to put on beads, and rattles.



**Figure 1.7.** *Uloko* Costume

Source: Field Work, 2025.

Although orange and red are the predominant colours in figure 1.7, however, other colours of costumes are utilized as the performers deem necessary. *Uloko* as a costume reflects the tradition of Ukwani people in general, and Ebodei people in particular, as well as, the kinship of the musical arts. Beads, hand fans and horse tail are traditional elements in Ebodei Uno community. They are utilized in traditional and social ceremonies such as chieftaincy rites, marriage ceremony

and other social gatherings, while the rattles are musical instruments that are also used by other music groups in the community. The wearing of rattles around the legs enables the dancers to double as instrumentalists. While dancing, each dance step and body movement shake the rattles; thus causing them to sound in tandem. This underscores the relationship between the musical arts, as the dancers also function as instrumentalists. The sounds of the rattles contribute to the overall acoustic of the instrumentation, while aiding in articulating the dance rhythm patterns. Although costume has been discussed as an aspect of *ulo*, costume has its identity without the other sections of the music. For it was observed that informed members of the community identify the costume *ulo*, even without *ulo* orchestra, songs, and dance in force.

### *Uloko as Dance*

This is an aspect of *ulo* music. It is performed by seven (7) and fifteen (15) dancers. Dancing with regards to this study is a function of sequence, order, and style.

### *Uloko Dance Sequences*

This refers to the formations with which the dancers appear and manage the stage. In *ulo* music, dance formations are in solo, straight line, circular, two lines, and “V” formations.

#### *Solo Formation*

In this formation, only the lead dancer appears on stage at the beginning of the performance. The formation is utilized to begin the performance of *ulo* dance to acknowledge the contribution of the instrumentalists, as the lead dancer dances and kneels before the instrumentalists. The dance formation is also used to display individual dancer’s prowess during performance. Figure 1.8 illustrates a dancer in solo formation, in respect of the study.



**Figure 1.8.** *Uloko* Dance in Solo Formation

*Source: Field Work, 2025.*

#### *Straight Line Formation*

This formation is used by the dancers to process to the stage,

with the lead dancer who had earlier appeared on stage, leading the line as other dancers follow in a straight line. Figure 1.9 illustrates dancers in straight line formation.



**Figure 1.9.** *Uloko* Dancing in a Straight Line Formation

*Source: Field Work, 2025.*

#### *Circular Formation*

Have appeared on stage, the dancers move in a circular motion, under the leadership of the lead dancer. In respect of the study, figure 1.10 illustrates dancers in circular motion.



**Figure 1.10.** Dancers in Circular Formation

*Source: Field Work, 2025.*

The circular formation is a technical modification of the earlier straight line which begins to curve in line with the circular setting of the stage that is characteristic of the dance.

#### *Two Lines Formation*

The two line formation in respect of the study arranges the dancers in two lines, with the dancers facing the instrumentalists. Figure 1.11 illustrates the formation.





**Figure 1.11.** *Uloko* Dance in Two Lines Formation

Source: Field Work, 2025.

### “V” Formation

This formation is utilized by the dancers as a variation of their performance formation. In respect of the study, figure 1.12 illustrates the “V” formation.



**Figure 1.12.** The “V” Formation in *Uloko* Dance

Source: Field Work, 2020.

According to Onyekwelu (2012) dance is a response of the body to the stimulus of sound; adding that dance is a kind of reflex action, in a sense. Although the connection between dance and sound is not in doubt, it should be clarified whether dance as a “reflex action” is premeditated or not. On the significance of dance, Enekwe (1991) observes that dance remains a dynamic and vital art which serves as a vehicle for solidarity and cultural continuity. His view confirms that the culture of a people can be seen in their music. Thus, Oko-Offoboche (1996) and Bakare (2000) view dance as a the act of a poet, stating that dance is a poetry spoken with the human body in time and space. According to Okafor and Emeka (2004), dance mirrors the geographical terrain

and daily routine of a people, they observe that people who live in the hills have energetic dances and use their hips a lot while dancing, and that coastal people’s dance unveils much about canoe movement and paddling. His observation unveils the reflection of a people’s terrain in their dance. As observed in *uloko* as a dance, the occupational, and other cultural routines of Ebedei Uno people are evident. From the foregoing, it could be deduced that *uloko* as a dance, is a cultural art within *uloko* musical artistry and Ebedei Uno cultural creativity.

### CONCLUSION

This study focused on the concept of *uloko* music in Ebedei Uno, Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, using ethnographic research method. Findings indicate that the music is a fourfold phenomenon: orchestra, choir, costume, and dance. While the four dimensions constitute the music in rehearsal and performance sections, each of them assumes its identity within the music, and even without the other sections of the music in force. This illustrates the concept of the music as an integral art with intra-sectional and inter-sectional identity. Although findings have been largely discoursed within the scope of the study, such findings are not exclusive to *uloko* music of Ebedei Uno, Delta State, Nigeria.

In other parts of Delta State, Nigeria, many indigenous music forms are conceptualized and identified with their instrumental, vocal, costume, and kinetic characters, individually, and/or collectively. Thus, *Amala Buyo* ensemble of Aboh in Ndokwa East, *Midiaka* ensemble in parts of Urhobo, and *Omoko* ensemble in parts of Itsekiri (Ossaiga 2015) all of Delta State, Nigeria have the four sections with their individual and collective characters through which the ensembles are identified. However, the study brings to the fore multifaceted nature of music in the community where music is conceived with sonic (orchestral and vocal), kinetic (dance), and costume elements. It points to the concept of music in the intellect of native practitioners who do not discriminate between acoustic and non-acoustic elements in their understanding of music. This contributes to the efforts of other scholars in the conceptualisation of African music in tandem with practitioners’ native intelligence, the nature of African music and for the education of students in music fundamentals in the African continent.

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