


Beyond Telling the Mind's Story and Minding the Story: Tracing *Asonogun* Music Ancestry in Esan, Edo State, Nigeria



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolutionary tendencies - the origin of *Asonogun* music genre of the Esan. This has become necessary in the light of earlier efforts which appear to be speculative. The focus of this present study is not to determine the age of this musical practice but to clear the seeming ambiguities peddled by previous researchers who believe that it is a spinoff of the music used in the worship of the god of iron in Esan. Of the thirty-five kingdoms in Esan, data was drawn from twenty towns that were adjudged to be still consistent in the performance of this music. Five major musical ensembles were later further investigated, one each from the five local government areas in eliciting data for this study. The study revealed that *Asonogun* is simply a recreational type of music and dance performed by both male and female participants whose origin has nothing to do with the worship of the god of iron. The study arrived at key conclusions that in this current era of globalisation, it is paramount that in-depth research is conducted before making public any findings because christening a social/ recreational musical genre fetish could generate apathy for the genre. This in turn could restrict audience participation and lead to the annihilation of the musical practice.

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INTRODUCTION

This research started on the 30th of August, 2015 at the instance of the Association of Esan Professionals' commission to document certain aspects of Esan mores and culture. The author had the privilege of serving in one of the sub-committees that investigated Esan cultural heritage. A team of three experts headed by Professor Matthew Ogbeide Omo-Ojugo, the Author and the third member being Mr. Patrick Ube conducted this research. In the course of field investigation, this Author stumbled into something germane to his specialty whose originality needed to be explored and presented in contemporary parlance.

Globally when issues relating to the exact origin of music are mentioned, one is faced with uncertainties in addressing the matter to exactitude. The major challenge in this search is that one is faced with the dilemma of talking about an art that one's progenitors never experienced. An art that may be associated with prehistoric man and which predates record keeping. While archaeological finds have led quite a lot of researchers to ideas of musical instruments used in certain epochs and showed the collective nature of music-making, one does not expect to find the documentation of the corpus of songs used in that era or the events that necessitated such musical experiences. As one would probably observe in the preceding segments in this presentation, music's origin is commonly believed to be God's handiwork. However, not all musical genres are of indeterminate origin and *Asonogun* which is the primary concern is one. It is in this connection that this study asks: What is *Asonogun*? How did it originate? Has *Asonogun* musical instruments changed since its evolution? Has its performance style changed between then and now? Who are the proponents of the *Asonogun* gene?

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that musical practices can never be static.

Still on the origin of music, McClellan posits that it is doubtful that it would never be known when or under what circumstances the first musical utterance was made, yet every culture developed some form of musical tradition and many of them possessed legends that pertain to the origin of music.⁷ Almost all of 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 or was bestowed on mankind by supernatural beings. The duo, Aluede & Aluede observe that in the Vedic culture, music is viewed as the prerogative of the gods and that it was later made known to men so that they too could share its features.⁸ In all the submissions above, one pertinent fact is that music is closely knitted with religion and it resides in the dwelling place of God. While talking about music's origin early in time, Edwards opined that "God is its author and not man. He laid the keynote of all harmonies; He planned all perfect combinations, and he made us so that we could hear and understand".⁹ From the opinions above, nowhere is music's origin attributed to humans but God. This view is further enhanced by the volumes of folk and fairy tales which ascribe the origin of a lot of musical genres to the supernatural.

The *Asonogun* Genre and the Theory of Its Origin

Aluede lists *Asonogun* as one of Esan's musical genres.¹⁰ *Asonogun* is sometimes called *Abayon*. Just as very beautiful songs have been parodied, great works of art corrupted, the Esan *Asonogun* which is the primary concern of this article has also suffered a similar fate. *Asonogun* is also known as *Abayon*-a derogatory term which means the father of drinks. This genre is so called because where ever it is performed, drinks are served and consumed by its performers. According to Emielu, *Asonogun* is a social recreation dance among Esan people. It is performed by both men and women, old and young. Emielu cites Paulina Ogenete (an *Asonogun* dancer and the daughter of a great *Asonogun* exponent, Ogenete Ukpeta) as saying that her father popularized the genre. She opined further that *Asonogun* was first played on empty bottles. Considering the danger in playing with bottles, Ogbidi Okojie I (1857-1944) the then Onojie of Uromi went to Igun quarters in Benin City- a quarter known for bronze casting and metal works to buy three gongs to replace the bottles as *Asonogun*'s principal instruments. Later, Samba and gourd rattles were added.¹¹

Very brief attention is intended to be given to the issues raised above to save the soul of this presentation. As it is often common in oral tradition, two contestable issues have evolved and they are that:

Ogenete Ukpeta a popularised *Asonogun* in Esanland; Uromi is the home of *Asonogun* and that King Ogbidi Okojie was more or less the patron of the genre hence he went to Benin to buy bells to replace bottles which were previously used as its musical instruments. And so bottles were the precursors of *Asonogun* musical instruments. This obviously cannot be the case as early in time, Aluede and Ekewenu discussed the use of non-musical instruments in the accompaniment of songs for a notorious thief and women infidels. The non-musical instruments so referred to are bottles, pans and old pots. These are derogatorily used to spite the person for whom the music is made and to serve as a deterrent for whoever would have been tempted to indulge in such infamous activities.¹²

Secondly, the testimony of Ogenete's daughter recognizing her father as the one who popularised the genre in Esan is not surprising. To this Author, this tendency is either borne out of the quest to write her father's name in the annals of history or egoistically create a niche for the family. The reason for this assertion is that Esanland which is made up of about thirty-five independent kingdoms has always lived independently with limited means of communication in the past and to determine who made a genre popular may be difficult. This position is further strengthened when from available records, it has been discovered that Kesii Ejiogbon of Ugbaha was the first in Esan to wax a debut single of *Asonogun* genre, Ogenete of Uromi also followed closely and that is of course why it may not be wrong to say that these two *Asonogun* exponents were contemporaries. Without contradiction, Ugbaha in Esan South East Local Government Area of Edo State is the home of *Asonogun* exponents and it has a greater collection of impressive *Asonogun* ensembles within Esan towns. Some of the *Asonogun* exponents then were J. O. Akhogba, O. Agbaska, Ipecco, Abejaa, Akuete, Amiebaho and women such as Esther, Felicia Adesua Masade, Elizabeth Akhimien and Paulina Ogenete. While discussing the origin of this genre, Ibhaze and Ebosele opined that *Asonogun* literarily means *Asonin Ogun* meaning 'we are hailing *Ogun*' (*Ogun* was the popular god of iron among the Esan people). This dance therefore was a kind of dedication to the god of iron.¹³

⁷ Randall McClellan, *The Healing Forces of Music* (New York: Excel Publishers 2000)

⁸ Esther Omone Aluede & Charles Onomudo Aluede, *The Ujie Music and Dance of the Esan, Edo State, Nigeria*. (Berlin, Germany: Lambert Publishers 2012)

⁹ John Harrington Edwards, *God and Music*. (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co. 1904)

¹⁰ Charles Onomudo Aluede, 'Esan Contemporary Musical Genres'. *UNE Journal of the Department of Music*, 3 no 2 (1997):18 –26.

¹¹ Emielu, 'Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria,.'

¹² Charles Onomudo Aluede & Bruno Dafe Ekewenu, 'Social Control and The Performance of Traditional African Music: A Study of Ikoghe Music of the Esan' *Castalia* 13 no 1 (2003) 1 – 10.

¹³ Kelvin Ibhaze, & Augustine Ebosele, 'The Nature of Esan Afro-Centric Music and Dance' *Esan People: Our Culture and Faith*. In Matthew Ihensekhien (Ed.) Ekpom: Seminary of All Saints. 1 (2012) 41-51.

The views of the duo, Ibhaze and Ebosele do not appear to be tenable. This view may not be too exact because in Esan societies, music for worship in traditional religious societies does not yield to forces of modernity so easily. The use of such music is regulated socially. For example, in Esan, there is *Ikhièn Ọ̀bo* or *Ikhièn È̀bo*- this means music for native doctors. This musical type has its own songs and musical instruments which have not found their way into any social entertainment musical forms. Similarly, *Ikhièn Ebo* which is music and dance for river deity also has its prescribed musical instruments. These instruments are peculiar to the various religious societies. To some scholars, this postulation may have no theoretical foundation. In this modern and global world, one may doubt if there is any musical instrument anywhere specifically reserved for any deity, society or cult that cannot be bought from the market and used for social entertainment as any group deems fit. To these queries, the answer is yes, there are. For example, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the cowry beaded *Sekere*, some *Ifa* and *Ogboni* drums are not in the public domain. In other parlances, there are instruments which when bought from the market are consecrated for sole use in specific societies. And once consecrated for use in such a shrine, it is not used for mundane activities. To regulate the use of such instruments and ensure that they are not abused, some caste members venture into the production of such instruments and are consequently sold among members of the caste. Aside from these are the fact that in Africa, some musical instruments have anthropomorphic attributes and as such, they are treated as deities or humans¹⁴ and so they are rather handed down from generation to generation than simply being purchased from the market.

In Esan, there is no *Ikhièn Idigun* as such and to date whenever sacrifices and libation are to be poured for the god of iron, the devotee simply starts his prayers by hitting a hammer or a similar item against an anvil amidst incantations. Without a doubt, music in these religious societies is normally in praise of their god and for the aesthetic enjoyment of its members.

Secularizing the sacred or making mundane the sacred does not come easily. This is perhaps why not all traditional religious musical instruments can be admitted into the musical ensembles of parish choirs to praise God. In a further search for the origin of *Asonogun*, at Ugboha during a group discussion, this apt account was discovered about this genre's origin and it is considered worth sharing here. In a particular Esan community lived Ogun who was a blacksmith. As a blacksmith, he specialized in the production of hoes, cutlasses and pans. He was married for decades to a beautiful lady without any child. Much later they eventually had one. The news of the birth of a child to the family of Ogun drew friends, families and well-wishers to Ogun's house. In their joyous state, they picked hoes, short cutlasses and pans and converted them to musical instruments to accompany their songs. The noise oozing from the home of Ogun became too loud that people started wondering what was happening in Ogun's house and it was reported that: *Asonogun*-the people are shouting for Ogun. Put differently or aptly, people are hailing Ogun. To date, this name has remained with the dance. Although it cannot be pinpointed exactly, the town where *Asonogun* originated from in Esan, there are however, some constants which cannot be disputed about *Asonogun*'s theory of origin. It is these constants that are explored in the preceding segment.

Ogun among the Yoruba of Nigeria is the god of iron. *Idigun* in Esan is the god of iron and *Ojogun* is a blacksmith. In certain circumstances in Esan, the caste system is still intact. Just as there are the families, lineages and villages of native doctors and healers¹⁵, so also are the families of blacksmiths, traditional morbid anatomists, weavers and carvers to mention a few. The story of Ogun being a blacksmith is first of all very informative in that in Esan, names given could lead one to the caste or lineage of its bearer. For example, *Oko-Ogun* means child of Ogun just as *Oko-Idigun* means child of Idigun and *Oko-Ebor* means child of Ebor. Summarily *Asonogun* first started from the family of the blacksmiths and this is further corroborated by the instrumental resources of the ensemble.

Theories of how music may have evolved are not somewhat sacrosanct or rigid but rather divergent. This study is based on two major theories. First amongst them is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DIT) and second is Emielu's theory of Progressive Traditionalism (PT).¹⁶ The diffusion of innovation theory explains how innovations are taken up in a community. According to Rogers,¹⁷ the theory has a radical approach to change, instead of focusing on persuading individuals to change. It sees change as being primarily about the evolution or "reinvention" of products and behaviours so they become better fits for the needs of individuals and groups; adding that five qualities which determine the success of innovation are relative advantage, compatibility with existing laws and practices, simplicity and ease of use, "trialability", and observable result. This is so in that culture is dynamic and so is musical culture, this view is strengthened by the theory of progressive traditionalism.¹⁸ Emielu challenged the notion of rigidity and fixity by

¹⁴ Charles Onomudo Aluede 'The Anthropomorphic Attributes of African Musical Instruments: History and Use in Esan, Nigeria'. *The Anthropologist* 8 no.2, (2005) 156 – 160.

¹⁵ Ogwa in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State has families and lineages of traditional bone setters and in Irrua and Ekpoma in Esan Central and West Local Government area are Idumu-Ebo which are the quarters of native doctors.

¹⁶ Emielu, 'Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria'.

¹⁷ Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Austin Emielu, 'Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria: Toward a Theory of Progressive Traditionalism' *Ethnomusicology* 62 no 2 (2018) 206-229.

showing in his study of Edo people how specific dance bands are redefining traditional music through innovations. As with the case of dance bands, so is *Asonogun*. No doubt, musical practices can never be static thus as we yet discuss *Asonogun*, the author has discovered a new tendency that tilts towards the evolution of *Igbaboasono*.

***Asonogun* Then and Now in Esan Soundscape**

According to Titon, every human society has music.¹⁹ Although music is universal, its meaning is not. Just as landscape refers to land, soundscape refers to sound: the characteristic sound of a particular place, both human and nonhuman. The examples so far present today's soundscapes, but what about the soundscapes of the past?²⁰

By this question and enquiry, there is a need to look at this genre as it was performed in the past and in the present. *Asonogun* whether in the past or present has always been a social and recreational dance with graceful steps and this makes it possible for children, young adults, adults and the aged irrespective of their sexes to perform it. Up to about four decades ago, this genre was still a communal property. By this, it alludes that these ensembles were owned by villages. When it was communally owned, the onus was on their parents to bring in their young children and wards to rehearse and perform the dance. This mechanism engendered not only continuity in the practice but ensured that the art was practised at the grassroots in line with its original tenets and performance practice. The genre then was primarily servicing the musical taste of the communities within the province. With *Asonogun* now in the hands of connoisseurs and impresarios, there is a palpable struggle between keeping the original musical tradition and expanding its performance horizon to capture the attention of spectators of different cultural backgrounds. This is reasonable so because these groups now perform in many Nigerian cities. To be able to competitively perform with many other troupes, *Asonogun* has borrowed much of the *Igbabonelimin* dance steps to enrich and complement theirs. Today, it is no longer strange to see an *Asonogun* performer taking flights, doing forward and backward roll, somersaulting and going into quasi tumbling. This has led to a preliminary postulation on the evolution of *Igbaboasono*- a mixture of *Igbabonelimin* and *Asonogun*, a tendency that is trending as we examine *Asonogun* right now.

Musical Ensemble Membership and Training in Esan

Membership of musical ensembles in Esan is optional. It starts with the trainee going with gift items like Kola nuts and gin to symbolize interest and membership after which, the candidate is accepted after auditioning. This initial move is usually done with the consent of the candidate's parents or wards. While talking specifically of the rehearsals and training procedures involved in *Ijieleghe*, Aluede observed that:

Rehearsals are held twice a week, each lasting for at least three hours and this continues for three years before the trainee is allowed to perform at a public gathering. The manner in which the skills are imparted is very formal. Each leader is assigned to group of trainees, since these leaders are experts in different techniques, after three months, a group graduates from one leader's class to another. Each leader picks and teaches a particular dance style on weekly basis, he may however, extend the duration if the trainees are slow in mastering the technique.²¹

Ijieleghe is an acrobatic dance of the female folk. Being so, it takes much time to master. However, this is not the case with *Asonogun* trainees. As a social and recreational genre, almost everyone in Esan traditional setting knows the songs and with little efforts are able to dance to its music. The home of the *Asonogun* ensemble leader is usually the rehearsal venue. Their rehearsals are usually in the late afternoons of the Esan traditional Sabbath day (Edewo or Edeze). Their rehearsals are usually held for a maximum of two hours. During training, there are usually ground rules laid out which are religiously observed. Elsewhere Aluede maintained that some of the rules governing rehearsals are that a poor dancer should be encouraged and not laughed at, members should not miss a rehearsal, whatever happens during rehearsals should not be in the public domain etc. Within six to twelve months, the new entrants who have been regular with rehearsals are taken along and presented for public performances.²² Having said the above, it is considered important to know that not all Esan musical genres are rehearsed. Studies have shown that *Ikoghe* and *Ujie* music are danced never rehearsed.²³

Costumes of Selected Esan Musical Ensembles

Aluede opined that:

In all Esan dance ensembles, whether those for males alone, females alone or mixed, costume is very significant. While dancers involved in dances with majestic or graceful body movement wear heavy costumes like hand woven cloth (Georges, real wax) along with coral beads which are worn around the necks, those who perform flighty dances wear

¹⁹ Jeff Todd Titon, *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to The Music of the World's Peoples*. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer 2005).

²⁰ Titon, *Worlds of Music*. 1.

²¹ Charles Onomudo Aluede, 'Promoting African Indigenous Dances: A Case Study of *Ijieleghe*'. *The Crab-Journal of Theatre Arts*. Port Harcourt.2 (2007).19-30.

²² Aluede, 'Promoting African Indigenous Dances: A Case Study of *Ijieleghe*'.

²³ Aluede and Ekewenu, 'Social Control and The Performance of Traditional African Music.'

simple less expensive and short costumes.²⁴

While male *Asonogun* dancers wear T or sport shirts on top of shorts as underlay clad with wrapper, the females wear blouses, T or sport shirts on top of two wrappers which are tied around the waists.



Fig. 2, a photograph of a male *Asonogun* dancer, photograph taken by this Author during field investigation.



Fig. 3, a photograph of a female *Asonogun* dancer, photograph taken by this Author during field investigation.

Performance Context and Practice in *Asonogun*

To talk of the context of a musical performance refers to the avenue in which a particular musical genre is performed. As a genre that has no link with anything fetish both in its tradition of the origin and contemporary stance, *Asonogun* is

²⁴ Aluede, 'Promoting African Indigenous Dances' 19-30.

performed on a very wide variety of occasions. From marriage, child dedication, house warming, age-grade initiation, new yam festival, election victory and court cases to burial of the aged in the community, this brand of music is profusely performed. Most *Asonogun* ensembles start performances with singing songs in an unaccompanied form and as time goes by hand-clapping is introduced before it slides into a full performance involving all other instruments. As with many other Esan musical performances, that period of first singing without accompaniment to gradual accompaniment with hand clapping is called heating the spirit²⁵.

The musical instruments in use in *Asonogun* performance

As already mentioned above, when the birth of the long-awaited child was announced, the available implements converted for use as musical instruments were hoes, cutlasses and pans. This tendency has an overriding effect on the ensemble to date. *Asonogun* groups have three bells, one samba-a small membranophone and in recent times, gourd rattles are sometimes found in the group for want of rich and varied tonal quality. Below are two scored *Asonogun* songs.

10. UKI HENLEN

Voice 1
U ki hen len 'gho la a U ki hen len 'gho

Voice 2
feo 'khun ghe

la a
feo khun ghe

UKI HENLEN

Text in Esan	Translation
Call: Uki hen len 'gho la	The moon has risen, the star
Res: Feo 'khun ghe	check the sky
Call: U ki hen len 'gho la	The moon has risen, the star
Res: Feo 'khun ghe	check the sky

18. UZO NE GHENE HA GBE

U zo ne 'ghe ne ha gbe O man lin gbo le O ya 'ghe ne

hi vie O ya 'ghe ne hi vie O ya 'ghe ne hi vie man lin gbu zo

²⁵ Heating the spirit- a term first used by Friedson when he described the Tumbuka music healing tradition. Steven Friedson, *The Dancing Prophets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996).

UZO NE GHENE HA GBE

Text in Esan

Uzo ne ghene ha gbe
omanlin gbo le
oya ghe ne hi vie o
oya ghe ne hi vie o
Omanlin gbu zo

Translation

The antelope the youth ought to kill
the elderly has killed it
the youth is sorrowing
the youth is sorrowing
that the elderly has killed it



Fig.4. A photograph of an ensemble with three *Agogo* and one *Samba* in a performance, the photograph was taken by this Author during field investigation.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this work, the theory surrounding the origin of *Asonogun* genre of the Esan people of Edo State of Nigeria has been examined. Before dwelling on the main study, the Author tried to situate the study by first of all describing the historical origin and location of the Esan people whose musical practice was being studied. In the course of conducting this investigation, it was revealed that:

1. *Asonogun* is simply a recreational type of music and dance performed by both male and female participants in the region. Its origin has nothing to do with the worship of the god of iron as claimed by earlier researchers.
2. *Asonogun* genre evolved in the home Ogun the blacksmiths as simply a social and recreational dance.
3. *Asonogun* musical instruments have undergone some expansion. What started with irons in the blacksmith's workshops now has bells, samba and a whistle as their instrumental resource.
4. Just as the case with its musical instruments, its performance style has had some transformation and as we speak, the dance is gradually turning acrobatic, hence we talked of *Igbaboasono*.
5. Currently, the proponents of this genre are Ipecco, Abejaa, Akuete, Amiebaho and women such as Esther, Felicia Adesua Masade, Elizabeth Akhimien and Paulina Ogenete. No doubt, there are always reasons to research an already searched matter. This is necessary if there were methodological defects in the previous study which could bring forth implausible result if the area covered was too small yet a generalized result has been provided if the researchers do not have enough training or craftsmanship to distil the facts in their research and if the previous work lacks originality or is beset with speculative postulations among many others.

The study arrived at key conclusions that in this current era of globalisation, it is paramount that in-depth research is conducted before making public any finding because christening a social/ recreational musical genre fetish could generate apathy for the genre. This in turn could restrict audience participation that may lead to the annihilation of the one-time treasured musical practice.

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