

Gendered Musicking Among

the Ebira People of Kogi State, Nigeria

CHARLES ONOMUDO ALUEDE

Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria

Email: coaluede@gmail.com

AGATHA NGOZI ABDULLAHI

Federal College of Education, Okene- Kogi State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The Ebira people view women as the weaker sex. Women are barred from touching and playing certain musical instruments. This study investigates the Ebira people and their musicality. It assesses the basis for such restrictions in the light of the possible benefits to the community if they were removed. In this study, we relied on data gathered through oral interviews, personal observation, and a review of relevant literature. The findings reveal that out of the twelve musical instruments in Ebiraland, women perform only on one which makes up 8% of the total ensembles in the area. It was also observed that of the seven musical ensembles in Ebiraland, women play instruments in two, that is, 29%. This disparity can be attributed to spiritual and masquerading activities. If women, who are more numerous, are discouraged from participating in Ebira art forms, those forms will dwindle. It is recommended that gender politics should be avoided for the sake of cultural advancement.

Keywords: gender and music, traditional musical instruments, women's segregation in performance

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, women are conceived as the weaker sex and barred from taking up certain occupations. Owing to their determination, women have begun to get involved even in those occupations previously known to be exclusively for men. Taking part in certain musical performances and playing musical instruments are also regulated. Okechukwu remarks that the journey of gender inequality could historically be traced back to the earliest times of our forefathers.¹ She further comments that archaic, primitive, and superstitious beliefs about most of the African musical instruments, and the materials they are made of, are as old as Africa itself. In Ebiraland livelihood amongst the common folk is mostly earned through farming, cloth weaving, hunting, animal husbandry, iron technology, and blacksmithing. Ahmed points out that the nature of the physical environment influences not only the land tenure system but also agricultural practices, which are germane to the people's economy.²

Ebira women are industrious especially in farming, weaving, and business. Due to the polygamous nature

of most homes, women are often the breadwinners who care for their children. Given this background, it may seem surprising that in musical performance there is an overrepresentation of male musicians, and women are banned from playing certain musical instruments. Discrimination has become a strong social construct. Especially in Africa, among members of the society, there is the belief that gender inequality is a natural phenomenon and should be viewed and upheld as such.³ Beyond Africa, Lichtenstein remarks that in the United Kingdom women make up only 16% of the leadership within the music business. She further comments that only limited data are available on the status of women in music throughout Africa.⁴ Many reasons have been advanced for the gender restrictions in Ebira musicking; the reasons are hinged on issues of male superiority and spirituality.

We will therefore examine the original traditions of the Ebira people and the music of Ebiraland, attempt to profile Ebira musical instruments, identify those played by males and females, and inquire into the reasons for gendered musicking among this people. Questions will be asked to elicit data, such as: Why are women restrained from playing some musical instruments? Why cannot they perform together on musical instruments? Are Ebira musical instruments still being consecrated? If yes, what makes the females impure and thus prevents them from holding and playing such instruments? Is there any basis for these restrictions? The Ebira position on the nature of their musical instruments will be weighed against contemporary realities to guide the people's musical life. In the contemporary societies, where genderism is eclipsing fast, hanging tightly on to such customs smacks of anachronism, and is capable of negatively impacting the people's musical development.

¹ Peace Okechukwu Ifeoma, 'Gender inequality in membrane drum (Igba) Musical instrument performance among the Igbo people of contemporary Nigeria', *International Journal of Gender Studies & Research*, 7/1 (2022), 160.

² Ahmed An-Na'im Abdullahi, 'Ebira People's Perception of the Erosion of Gender Roles in Echane Festival', *International Journal of Gender Studies & Research*, 7/1 (2020), 126.

³ Rita Modeme Eyiuche and Samuel C. Nnodim, 'Empowering women in music through information and communication technology for enhanced gender equity in Anambra state Nigeria', *International Journal of Gender Studies & Research*, 7/1 (2022), 87.

⁴ Amanda Lichtenstein, *East African women in the music industry sing out against male domination*, Global Voices, (2018), <https://globalvoices.org/2018/02/14/east-african-women-in-the-music-industry-sing-out-against-male-domination/>, accessed 16 July 2022.

THE EBIRA FROM A HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Ebira people occupy the southwest of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. However, there are also some Ebira settlements in the northeast of the confluence. Ebira literally means character, integrity, and high moral standards. Oral tradition has it that the Ebira people's ancestry can be traced to Wukari (the present Taraba State of Nigeria) where they were established as part of the Kwararafa confederacy.⁵ The migration of the Ebira people to their current region is largely a conjecture based on oral history. A key relic from their origins in Kwararafa is the *apete* stool, symbolizing their authority and group identity within the kingdom. Today, the *apete* is the titular instrument of the Ozumi of Okene. After leaving Kwararafa, the Ebira initially settled with the Igalas, and lived alongside them for about three hundred years. A dispute eventually led the Ebira to move southwest of the River Niger to their ancestral home, Ebira Opete, near Ajaokuta.

Further expounding on this subject from the geographical point of view, Ahmed posited that:

The Ebira Okene occupy the hilly stretch of land southwest of the Niger – Benue confluence area and share boundaries with the Yoruba-speaking people of Akoko, Owe, and Ijumu to the west; the various Akoko-Edo people to the south and southwest; the Hausa, Nupe, and Ebira groups at Lokoja to the North; and the river Niger to the east. A common physical feature of Ebiraland is the conspicuous presence of blocks of dissected hills and the metaphoric rocks enveloping the greater part of the land. The hills rise to a peak of 2000ft.⁶

It is worth noting that there are other Ebira groups spread across the country. The major focus of this study are the people of Okehi, Adavi, Okene, and Ajaokuta local government areas of Kogi State.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopts an ethnographic research approach consisting in conducting interviews and applying observational techniques to generate primary data. Secondary data was sourced through journals, books,

and websites. Since we were working in areas where women should not tread, we involved many males and only few females as interviewers and interlocutors and at the focus group discussions (FGD) level. One of the authors' ability to speak the language promoted an intimate understanding, which was an advantage. Twenty research assistants were engaged, five from each local government, who were first trained in the technicalities and principles of the study, including ethics.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF GENDER, GENDERISM, AND TRANSGENDERISM

Gender has been defined by the United Nations as the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men, girls and boys, as well as the relations between them. Gender is also interpreted as cultural and psychological attributes of men and women in relation to their economic contributions, expectations, and limitations.⁷ According to Ofuani, women are often viewed as wives and mothers, who are marginalised educationally, politically, and socially. She reiterated that cultural and religious practices in Nigeria have relegated women to the background and the girlchild is seen as inferior to boys.⁸

Genderism is also known as gender binarism, which connotes the assumption that there are only two human genders and that a person's gender is fixed at birth. In the era of internet, the world has shrunk into a cultural microcosm and in Nigeria we also find crossdressers and gays. Thus, Nigeria is not insulated from these cultural undercurrents.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this study include:

- identifying the musical instruments in Ebiraland that women are prohibited from handling and playing,
- identifying the musical instruments that women play in Ebiraland,

⁵ Daniel Adeiza, *History of the Ebira People (Itopa Ane Ebira)*, <https://www.opinionnigeria.com/the-history-of-ebira-people-itopa-ane-ebira-by-adeiza-daniel/>, accessed 16 July 2022.

⁶ An-Na'im Abdullahi, 'Ebira People's Perception...', 124.

⁷ Modeme Eyiuche and Nnodim, 'Empowering women', 85.

⁸ Felicia N. Ofuani, 'Influence of functional literacy on women success at the market place', *International Journal of Gender Studies & Research*, 7/1 (2022), 41.

- investigating why women cannot be admitted into the membership of some Ebira musical ensembles,
- examining the likely variables responsible for these restrictions on female musicality in Ebiraland,
- investigating what may likely happen if women are allowed to play the prohibited musical instruments,
- finding out if some of these ensembles now admit members of the opposite sex into the gender-restricted areas.

MUSICKING ALONG GENDER LINES IN NIGERIA

The term Musicking was coined by the musicologist Christopher Small (1927–2011). It denotes any activity involving or related to music performance, such as performing, listening, rehearsing, or composing. He explained:

The essence of music lies not in musical works but in taking part in performance, in social action. Music is thus not so much a noun as a verb, 'to music'. To music is to take part in any capacity in a musical performance, and the meaning of musicking lies in the relationships that are established between the participants by the performance. Musicking is part of that iconic, gestural process of giving and receiving information about relationships that unites the living world, and it is, in fact, a ritual by means of which the participants not only learn about, but directly experience, their concepts of how they relate, and how they ought to relate, to other human beings and to the rest of the world.⁹

By musicking along gender lines, we thus simply mean the cultural regulations or restrictions placed on those who take part in any musical activity such as music performance, listening, rehearsing, or composing as a result of one's sexual characteristics in a given society.

Gender inequality in Nigeria has become a major cause for concern. In every sphere of women's lives, they are subjugated and relegated. Writing on women's marginalisation in traditional music performances, Abdullahi reports that the original aim of the Echaane festival of the Ebira in which women are honoured and celebrated has been hijacked by men.¹⁰ This indeed shows men exercising their chauvinistic strength over women. Women are also barred from playing certain musical

instruments; the reasons behind these are sometimes superstitious beliefs. Discrimination of the female gender in music performances is deep-rooted in the culture of the northern part of Nigeria. For example,

Traditionally, the woman in Hausa custom is put in seclusion through asystem called Kulle (wife seclusion) and it is almost mandatory and expected that the woman should be invisible and inaudible. She is not allowed to mingle with men who are not related to her. In addition to being a female, the Hausa woman is expected to be feminine in her behavior. She is expected to be a good wife, a good cook, a good mother, silent, and submissive to her father, uncles, brothers, and later to her husband. Her voice must not be heard by men who are not her kin. Despite this seclusion Hausa women have been singing in seclusion from time immemorial.¹¹

MUSIC MAKING IN EBIRALAND

Ebira nation has a rich cultural heritage. Their music is characterised by complex rhythm and moral values which are taught by the elders in the people's vernacular through folk songs. This makes it possible for the younger ones to learn early in life about what is wrong and right through songs. Ebira music educates through the use of direct statements, idioms, or proverbs. According to Omotoso, one's first contact with Ebira music performance may not give a clear understanding of what the people cherish so much in their traditional music. Only an in-depth understanding can give a clearer picture.¹² There are various types of traditional music performed by the Ebira, some known to be performed exclusively by men. Thus, women are prohibited from performing such music. Some ensembles are mixed. The table below shows musical ensembles in Ebiraland.

In the mixed ensembles, men drum for the women. In the case of the female ensembles, men also drum for them. In the absence of males, only instruments for the females are used.

⁹ Christopher Small, 'Musicking – the meanings of performing and listening. A lecture', *Music Education Research*, 1/1 (1999), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461380990010102>, accessed 16 July 2022.

¹⁰ An-Na'im Abdullahi, 'Ebira People's Perception...', 120.

¹¹ Oluwatoyin Bimpe Jegede and Maryam Yusuf Magaji, 'Gender space and the paradox of self-assertion in Amada song performance in Katsina state, Nigeria', *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science* (2018), 4.

¹² Christopher O. Omotoso, 'Preservation of Ebira musical instrument for posterity', *Journal of Nigeria Music Education*, 9 (2017), 100.

Table 1. Ensembles in Ebiraland, their description and members.

SN	ENSEMBLE	DESCRIPTION	MEMBERSHIP
1	Ivaa	They perform during wrestling matches, communal activities, or any joyful occasions for peer groups. Hand clapping is also done by men.	Males
2	Eku	Masquerades by males. Women are forbidden to watch the night masquerades. They may, however, watch the daytime ones. Here, men play the drums.	Males
3	Ichekene	Mixed ensemble, males play the musical instruments, while the women dance. The music is named after Ichekene – a local instrument. It is played by men.	Males and females
4	Onyimi–Ruweyi	Women perform this during marriages and funeral ceremonies and women play the instruments.	Females
5	Echori	Now a mixed ensemble. Echori music is performed during new yam festivals for the deity in charge of harvest. It is the men who drum.	Males and females
6	Okonno	This is a mixed ensemble whose songs precede storytelling at gatherings of people of the same age. Men strike the stones.	Males and females
7	Ozomeche	Females dressed in white. This music is for merry-making occasions and the soloist is adorned with traditional attire and beads.	Females

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN EBIRALAND

Of the various types of musical instruments, only three are in use among Ebira people (idiophones, membranophones, and aerophones). Similarly, of musical instruments available in Ebiraland, only the gourd rattle and hand clapping are used by women.

Idiophones

These musical instruments that are made of sonorous bodies. They are either played directly by striking and shaking or attached to the bodies of other primary musical instruments. Examples of such idiophones in Ebiraland are *usse*, *ahibia*, *agidigbo*, and *ireta*.

1. *Usse*

This bell is played by men, side by side with the beaded gourd rattle. It is used during night masquerades to avert danger and untimely death and by day accurately to forecast the future, bring good tidings for barren women and ward off sickness. Red oil, salt, and blood of a rooster are usually sprinkled on it before it is used. This instrument is not for entertainment; it represents the extramusical functions of the Ebira musical instruments.



Figure 1. A photo of *usse*.

2. *Ahibia*

It is commonly played by women, who hit it with an open palm to create a rhythmic sound to which they dance. It is usually played during births of babies or the funeral ceremonies of notable females. It is also played during women's gatherings accompanied by songs and dances.



Figure 2. A photo of *abihia*.

3. *Agidigbo*

This instrument is made of wood, with holes carved out at the ends. There is a rectangular opening on the top, stretching from one end to the other. These openings are significant in that they enable the instrument to sound when struck. Women are barred from playing this musical instrument and its ownership is restricted. It is usually owned by the oldest man in a clan and by traditional rulers. Women are usually not participants of festivals where *agidigbo* is played.



Figure 3. A photo of *agidigbo*.

4. *Ireta*

Unique to the Ebira people (a subject that may arouse the curiosity of ethno-organologists) is the use of stones as musical instruments to accompany folk songs during storytelling. This is a clear example of relying on one's environmental resources for the making of musical instruments.



Figure 4. A photograph of *ireta* held by its player.

5. *Ichekene*

This plant is actually called roay poinciana. Its botanical name is *Delonix regia*, and it is called *Ichekene* in Ebiraland. It was one of the earliest ornamental plants; the fruit is enclosed in a curved greenish pod which turns brownish when dry. Once dry, the seeds shrink within their originally occupied space thereby creating an orbit which allows them to create rattling sounds.



Figure 5. A photo of two *ichekene* pods used as musical instruments, showing their handles.

Membranophones

In Ebiraland, four (4) membranophones are used: *anuva*, *okanga*, *igabana* and *igogonyi*

6. Anuva

This is a pot drum. A fairly large pot is covered with dried goatskin, pulled and strung around it. A resting pad is attached to the bottom of the pot to facilitate its placement on the ground. This local drum, played with both palms, is exclusively reserved for males.



Figure 6. A photo of *anuva*.

7. Okanga

Okanga is a big drum carved out of a special tree trunk, hollowed out and covered at both ends with dried goatskin. A stick shaped like the digit seven is used to beat the drum on one end and the palm is used to alter its tone at the other end. This drum is played by men.



Figure 7. A photo of *okanga*.

8. Igabana

This is a plate drum, made of a medium-sized bowl whose edges are pierced do as to enable threads to be run through it to fasten the membrane to its open surface. It is hung on the neck, with the drum resting a bit below the player's waist. *Igabana* is played by men.



Figure 8. A photo of *igabana* plate drum.

9. *Igogonyi*

This is a tension drum, and it is often called a talking drum because of its ability to play some melodic notes. Although originally unique to the people of western Nigeria, it is found all over the country and among Ebira people today. Women do not hold or play it.



Figure 9. *Igogonyi*.

Aerophones

In Ebiraland, *opanyi okokoro* and *iziva* are aerophones used in ensembles.

10. *Opanyi*

Opanyi is a local trumpet for men. It is made of the horns of deer and buffalo. A thumb-sized hole is carved at the loose end of the horn while a mouth-sized opening is also formed at the middle. Air is blown into the opening sporadically to determine the melody. It is played by men.



Figure 10. A picture of *opanyi* (local trumpet).

11. *Okokoro*

Okokoro is a flute carved out of a wood trunk. It is hollowed out, with one side designed for the lips and a tail end. It is played by men.



Figure 11. A photo of *okokoro*.

12. *Iziva*

Remote is shrouded in mystery, this instrument is made of a large piece of calabash on whose neck is tied a strong rope. It is whirled rapidly over the head to produce a zooming sound. Sometimes small pebbles are placed in the calabash to further variate the sound. To its users, the instrument is a medium of communication with the spirits and gods. Though slipping into extinction, it used for nightly performances by women.

WHAT IF GENDER INCLUSIVENESS IS EXTENDED TO MUSICKING IN EBIRALAND?

There have been many physical and spiritual threats associated with women being seen in public playing musical instruments. Nigerian communities believe that the drum should not be played by women. For example, it is reported that among the Esan of Edo State of Nigeria, the mother drum is used in *Igbabonelimin* (an all-male acrobatic dance) but not in *Ijielegh*e (a female acrobatic dance). When asked about this development, all the elderly men in our focus group discussion murmured in disapproval. One of the elders remarked: 'helping me to hold the sceptre while I go ease myself does not make the current holder of the sceptre the Chief Priest'.¹³

¹³ Esther Omone Aluede and Charles Onomudo Aluede, 'Investigating Gender Stereotypes and Musicality in Esan, Edo State, Nigeria', *Journal of the International Library of African Music*, 11/3 (2022), 83.

This expression conveys a deep-rooted desire to ensure a continued wide gap in the kind and quality of music men would like women to enjoy – music of an inferior kind!

As paradoxical as it may sound, the Ebira people believe women to be less religious than men. Trzebiatowska, and Bruce, for instance, note that women are more religious. Despite being excluded from leadership positions, in almost every culture and religious tradition women are more likely than men to pray, worship, and claim that their faith is important to them. Women also dominate the world of ‘New Age’ spirituality and are far more superstitious than men.¹⁴ The below-quoted survey on religion provides telling data:

In 46 of the 84 countries for which data are available, women and men are about equally likely to say religion is ‘very important’ in their lives. But in 36 other countries, women are more likely than men to regard religion as very important – often by notably large margins. Only in Israel and Mozambique are men more likely than women to consider religion very important to them personally.¹⁵

In the view of Smith and Schapiro, women are more spiritual than men. In African traditional religion, women play a significant role in the religious activities of the society. One of the important roles is offering prayers for their families in particular and their community in general. In some African communities women are priestesses, and in almost all African societies women are traditional medical practitioners. Those who experience spirit possession are in most cases women. Women are mostly health practitioners in charge of children’s and other women’s medical needs. Therefore, to say that women are not spiritual is not only antithetical but a total farce.¹⁶

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study inquired into why females are barred from many sonic spaces. We discovered that Echori (originally performed by males) now have female membership. This

¹⁴ Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, *Why are Women more Religious than Men?* (Oxford, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199608102.001.0001>, accessed 16 July 2022.

¹⁵ Conrad Hackett, *The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World*, Pew Research Centre, 22 Mar. 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>, accessed 16 July 2022.

¹⁶ Tom W. Smith and Benjamin Schapiro, *Spirituality and Religion in the United States, (1998–2020)*, 11 May 2021, 7, <https://www.norc.umd.edu/content/dam/norc-org/pdfs/Spirituality%20and%20Religion%20in%20the%20United%20States,%201998-2020.pdf>, accessed 16 July 2022.

is indicative of the possibility of relaxing age-old beliefs that tend to curb musical growth. The quick survey of the membership of the seven musical ensembles in Ebiraland demonstrates even distribution along gender lines. This is not confirmed, however, by the data below:

1. Of the seven ensembles, men have two (Ivaa and Eku), which makes up 29%.
2. Females also have two ensembles (Onyimi–Ruweyi and Ozomeche), which makes up 29%.
3. The other three (Ichekene, Echori, and Okonno) are made up of both males and females.
4. Further research reveals that of the seven (7) musical ensembles in Ebiraland, women play instruments in two (2), which makes up 29%.

Of the twelve (12) Ebira musical instruments (*usse, ahihia, agidigbo, ireta, ichekene, anuva, okanga, igabana, igogonyi, opanyi, okokoro, and iziva*), only one (*ahihia*) is played by women (8% of the total number of Ebira musical instruments listed).

The percentage of male and female players performing on Ebira musical instruments

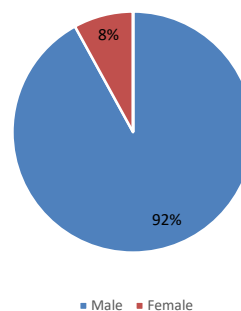


Figure 12. A graph showing Ebira musical instruments played by males and females.

Percentage of male and female performers in Ebira music ensembles.

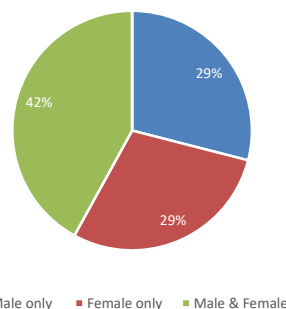


Figure 13. A graph showing Ebira musical ensembles and their make-up.

Concerning what might happen if women were admitted into the sonic spaces of men, we encountered stiff opposition to such ideas even though we have already seen such an initiative in the Echori musical ensemble. From our investigation, instruments that are locally sourced do not go through any form of consecration that would prohibit their use by women.

Aside from the spiritual factor, Ebira men claim that the reason why gender inequality is evident in both music-making and instrumental performance is that playing some musical instruments is laborious and energy-consuming. Women, who are considered as the weaker sex, therefore cannot handle them. This may sound as common sense. However, from a quick survey of Ebira musical instruments, none of them is too hard for women to hold or play. In the same area, we have found women playing brass instruments. This fact shows that females are not as weak as men have made them look.

Progressive thinking no longer accepts such rigidity. In the era of global connectivity, embracing genderism and turning the eyes away from transgenderism is hypocritical. According to Aluede and Ogisi, the quest for better sources of livelihood is now making men wander far from home, which are left to be managed by their wives... who spend an ever greater proportion of their time in home management. Restricting them from taking active part in musicking is harmful to musicianship. Hence the title of these authors' paper: 'Let These Women Drum So That Our Children Can Sing, Drum, and Dance'.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In this article, we discussed music in Ebiraland, which is made along gender lines. Thus, of the various types of traditional music performed by the Ebira, some are known to be meant exclusively for men and women are prohibited from performing them. The study reveals that some of the musical instruments that women are banned from playing are believed to possess spiritual attributes, and therefore women who decide to play them may face negative spiritual effects. These gender-based barriers, upholding male domination, are harmful to the artistic life and should be discouraged so that the people's art may thrive. Gender restrictions that are not conducive to social cohesion should be challenged to promote gender equality.

¹⁷ Aluede, Charles Onomudo and Arugha Aboyowa Ogisi, 'Let These Women Drum So That Our Children Can Sing, Drum and Dance', *JANIM: Journal of Nigerian Musicologists*, 12 (2018), 53.

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Charles Onomudo Aluede, PhD

Charles Aluede is a Professor of Music (Ethnomusicology and Music Therapy) at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria. He is a performer and African music expert, with emphasis on African indigenous knowledge systems. He is currently the secretary of Hearts of Music Foundation (HOMF). ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2701-5419>

Agatha Ngozi Abdullahi, PhD

Agatha Ngozi Abdullahi teaches Music at the Federal College of Education, Okene- Kogi State of Nigeria. She holds a PhD in Music Education. She specialises in African Musicology and Music Education.