

RHYTHMS OF UNITY: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF IZON (IJAW) DANCE AND MUSIC IN FOSTERING NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN NIGERIA'S AI-DRIVEN SOCIETY

OPUOWEI, Joseph Zuobofa, PhD

Nigerian Maritime University, Okerenkoko, Delta State, Nigeria
opuowei2014@ gmail.com

Abstract

Many studies have established that music and dance perform multipurpose functions in Africa. This ranges from worship to recreation, entertainment, didactic, and informative functions. However, little if any reflective perspective research has investigated the use of music and dance as a tool for national integration and development or as a part of the national strategy for solving problems relating to diplomatic issues. It is argued that the major music and dances performed represent the dominance of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria which by extension undermines the political power of the minority groups. The study therefore examines the socio-cultural relevance of music and dance as veritable tools in nation-building by exploring the role of Ijaw dance and music in promoting national integration and cultural exchange in Nigeria, especially in the context of an AI-driven society. As one of Nigeria's most significant ethnic groups, the Ijaw people have a rich cultural heritage that includes distinctive dance and music forms. This study delves into how these cultural expressions contribute to uniting Nigeria's diverse population while examining the implications of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), on preserving and transforming cultural practices. The study reveals that Izon (Ijaw) dance and music go beyond the purview of entertainment. The thematic preoccupations are part and parcel of the story as a whole as they define and redefine the existence of our nation as a united entity. We conclude that if properly employed, music and dance could be an invaluable tool for national cohesion.

Keywords: National integration, Ijaw, Izon, music, dance, AI, unity, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups, is a country rich in cultural diversity, yet historically challenged by ethnic and regional tensions. National integration which can be defined as the process of creating a sense of unity and shared identity among a nation's diverse population, remains a significant challenge for policymakers (Osaghae, 1995). Cultural exchange, a tool for fostering understanding and harmony, has played a critical role in addressing these challenges. Among Nigeria's numerous ethnic groups, the Izon (Ijaw) people, who reside primarily in the Niger Delta, offer vibrant cultural forms that can contribute to national cohesion. This research examines the potential of Ijaw dance and music to foster national integration, particularly in Nigeria's AI-driven society. In the diverse cultural landscape of Nigeria, the Izon (Ijaw) people, one of the country's largest ethnic groups, possess a rich heritage of music and dance that reflects their deep-rooted traditions and values. Historically, Izon music and dance have served as powerful tools for storytelling, communal bonding, and the expression of social identity. As Nigeria continues to evolve into an AI-driven society, characterized by rapid technological advancements, the role of cultural practices like Izon dance and music takes on new significance.

In this context, exploring the role of Izon dance and music goes beyond mere cultural preservation. It highlights their potential as instruments for fostering national integration and promoting cultural exchange in a country with over 250 ethnic groups. Music and dance can bridge divides, creating shared experiences that transcend ethnic, religious, and geographical boundaries. The fusion of traditional practices with modern technology also presents opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and collaboration, both within Nigeria and on a global stage. This paper seeks to investigate how the cultural expressions of the Izon people in the form of music and dance can contribute to strengthening Nigeria's unity and leveraging AI-driven platforms to share these vibrant traditions with wider audiences, thereby fostering a deeper sense of national cohesion in a digitally interconnected era.

The Izon (Ijaw) People and Their Cultural Significance

The IZONS people, otherwise known as the Ijaws are an ethnic group found in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, with significant population clusters in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. They also

occupy Edo, Ondo, and small parts of Akwa Ibom. Many are found as migrant fishermen in camps as far west as Sierra Leone and as far east as Gabon. They account for about 1.8% of the Nigerian population according to the CIA Factbook (Appiah and Gates, Henry, 2010; John, 2011). The Ijaws are one of the most populous tribes inhabiting the Niger Delta region. They have long lived in locations near many sea trade routes, and are well connected to other areas by trade as early as the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The Ijaw ethnic group in the oil-rich Niger Delta region in Nigeria has a cultural identity that is deeply rooted in dance, music, festivals, and oral traditions. These cultural elements not only serve as forms of artistic expression but also play important roles in storytelling, rituals, and ceremonies (Ekine, 2011). Dance and music, particularly, are central to Ijaw life, providing a platform for the community to celebrate their history, communicate values, and express collective identity. The Ijaw dance, on the other hand, is characterized by rhythmic movements and vibrant costumes and is traditionally performed during festivals, ceremonies, and communal gatherings. These dances often tell stories of the people's origins, struggles, and victories, thereby keeping history alive for future generations (Oriji, 1991). Similarly, Ijaw music is renowned for its use of drums, flutes, and songs that evoke deep emotional and spiritual responses. It often accompanies dance performances and contributes to the transmission of cultural knowledge (Echeruo, 1989).

National Integration

An analysis of pertinent concepts, particularly those related to national integration, is an inevitable first step for any discourse of this sort. Drawing inspiration from the definition of "integration," which is the act of combining two different entities or phenomena into a single entity, national integration is the term used to describe any program, activity, or procedure that aims to incorporate the estimated 250 different ethnic groups (Epelle, 2015, p. 173) into a single, cohesive whole. Or, to put it another way, national integration as it is used in this study refers to the process of fusing the diverse ethnic groups that comprise the nation into a cohesive and cohesive whole.

Integration can signify different things, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It can refer to the composition of a whole by joining or integrating different parts; it could also mean the process of bringing out or attaining equal membership in a population or social group, as well as the elimination or lack of discrimination against a group or individuals based on race or culture. The

work of Alao (1986) has cited different scholars like Odetola (1978) and Binder (1964) that have dealt with the meanings of national integration. Odetola (1978) defines national integration as meaning the establishment of a close interdependence among the various component units of a state and the creation of higher loyalties to the nation that will supersede parochial loyalties to sub-national communities, ethnic groups, or regions while Binder holds the view that national integration involves the creation of “a cultural-ideological consensus of a very high degree of comprehensiveness”. Alao also cited John Paden and Edward Soja (1971) who explain national integration as the aggregation of erstwhile autonomous, independent, and primordial groups into larger, more diffuse units whose implicit frame of reference is not the ethnic sphere, but the nation-state. Alao claims that national integration in a plural society could refer to the process of combining smaller units that already exist into a larger unit and creating shared central institutions to which the constituent units pledge allegiance. However, it should be remembered that practically speaking, maintaining a certain level of allegiance to one's ethnic group does not always conflict with national integration.

Impediments to National Integration of the Nigerian People

Pertinence calls for an examination of the challenges to national integration in Nigeria, for an understanding of how music and dance can contribute to solving the problem. One of the major factors which hinders the integration of the Nigerian people is cultural diversity. Nigeria is a heterogeneous nation with people of varied cultures. Thus, it is very difficult for people of diverse entities and cultural origins to be joined together under one national culture without rancor.

Due to their own self-serving goals, which went against the interests of the many tribes, British colonial authorities combined the northern and southern protectorates into one single governmental entity. They neglected to mention that the cultural diversity of the populace in such protectorates results in different governing practices. According to Ezeugwu in Okafor et al. (1999), most tribes would have rather had political independence than be a part of the corporate political entity known as Nigeria. Many contend that a unified Nigeria is unattainable, if this is to be taken into consideration. They support the country's partition into several ethnic groups, each of which should become an independent country.

Most individuals think that the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo nations should be divided into three nations. This explains why there are still ongoing crises in many areas of the country, particularly in the Niger Delta. Even though their soil is the primary source of the country's riches (crude oil), Nigerians in the Niger Delta feel developmentally disadvantaged due to the absence of basic infrastructure. There are good grounds for other tribes to want to secede. As a result, there is instability and a lack of development in all of the country's socio-institutional systems. It is important to remember that religion has played a significant role in Nigeria's integration crisis

. However, to mitigate the dissension caused by cultural diversity the government promulgated programmes meant to achieve national unity they include but are not limited to the establishment of unity schools where children from different ethnic groups can mingle and learn together thereby creating room for interactivity and bonding. Others include the NYSC scheme that bundles people from different parts in one location to interact and bond. Despite these governmental efforts, national integration is still a pipe dream. It is this situation that calls for the examination of the culture of music and dance as a panacea to the impasse seeing that music and dance have a universal language that promotes joy, interactivity, and love. The bucolic beauty of most traditional dance steps and the aesthetic and philosophic appeal of most traditional music have unifying potentials as everybody enjoys and appreciates good music and dance and need not necessarily have to be from the same ethnic group as the musician or dancer. It will be pertinent to examine the concept of dance and its potential as a unifying agent.

Dance as a Unifying Agent

Dance as a term is not new to man; Bakare (1994) describes dance as “the rhythmic movement of the human body in space and time to make statements” (1). Another way to define dance is as an artistic medium through which ideas, emotions, and experiences are conveyed via the movement of people. As old as man and his need to express himself, transmit his pleasures and sorrows, celebrate and mourn with the most immediate instrument: his body, is believed to be the art of dance (Sorell, 9). It is a worldwide phenomenon that plays an essential function in human civilization in an endeavor to build social cohesiveness or togetherness, causing them to feel a strong sense of communion with one another. People are thus freed from the constraints of individuality (Lange, 92).

Humans have long used dancing as a means of self-expression and a means of sharing ideas about their surroundings and themselves. In addition to being a vehicle for the transfer of knowledge, dance fosters the development of kinesthetic skills, problem-solving strategies, communication skills, and critical thinking abilities (Minneapolis Public Schools, "The Elements of Dance"). Judith R. Mackrell in her article "Dance", characterizes dance as the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, to express an idea or feel, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. She goes on to say that while dancing is a strong impulse, the art of dance is the channeling of that impulse by talented artists into something very expressive that can enthrall even those who have no desire to dance (Academicroom.com). Dancing is used in religious, social, and cultural contexts throughout Africa and Ijaw country. It fulfills a multitude of functions and is intricately interwoven with African society. According to Mackrell, Aristotle stated in his Poetics that the fundamental function of dance as a form of expression is "to represent men's characters as well as what they do and suffer." Dance is a rhythmic movement. Hence African dances are imbued with dramatic elements that in themselves not only identify and represent the lives of the people but also play didactic roles to ensure the conformity of individuals within social groups and institutions, as well as the maintenance of social order and stability in the society.

In a paper titled "Nigeria Dances and Cultural Diplomacy," Aondo and Tsevende note that the inaugural Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture, which took place in Lagos in 1970, was a cultural occasion intended to unite the then-12 states in a spirit of celebration following the civil war. It was planned to foster stronger bonds between Nigeria's numerous ethnic groups. Due to its popularity, it is now an annual event to serve as a forum for unity. The dance and music-focused National Festival of Arts and Culture has developed into a creative tool that brings the country together as well as a legitimate platform for marketing and cross-cultural interaction. Among the goals of NAFEST are to provide a platform for talent search, creative expression, idea exchange, skill and technique development, celebration of the best aspects of our shared history, and promotion of our cultural values of love, peace, understanding, and unity as a nation. The 36 states that make up the Federation as well as the Federal Capital Territory participate, all to uphold the primary goal of fostering national unity. According to Aondo and Tsevende, dance and music dominated the first four NAFEST editions.

Dance functions as an expression of social organization, it safeguards the traditionally established social and political hierarchy and equally emphasizes the standard of behavior, and it instructs on morals within the society. In Nigeria, there exists a lot of dances and the Ijaw dance plays the role of promoting peaceful co-existence and social integration

Music as a Unifying Agent.

Music plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and economic advancement. Few cultural elements allow for the expression of emotions or provide entertainment. Like music, convey information and educate. One potential prophetic and instructional tool for pointing people toward the way of Truth and Light is music. Additionally, music has the potential to be a medium of expression for the country because it not only promotes freedom and the necessity of a democratic society, but it also teaches, entertains, and informs. In today's world, music advocates for equality and justice. Music promotes national unity and the necessity of being resilient and self-sufficient as a whole. Stress can be relieved by listening to music, which supports people's emotional and mental well-being.

From the aforementioned considerations, it is possible to conclude that music plays a crucial role in the development of the individual as well as the growth of society. Above all, though, music serves to unite various societal strata, which is especially important for Nigeria. Due to its expressive qualities, music plays a vital role in social integration. It has several diplomatic roles, chief among them being the promotion of improved relations and understanding within and among ethnic groups as well as the country at large.

In a way, music is a summary of values-expressing activities, a way to disclose the core of cultural psychology without exposing it to as many of the defenses that envelop other cultural pursuits. It serves a similar purpose to other facets of the arts in this regard. Additionally, it maintains the stability of culture by serving as a vehicle for history, myth, and legend. It also highlights the "continuity" of culture through the dissemination of knowledge, the management of misbehaving members of society, and the emphasis on right and wrong.

Its existence provides a normal and solid activity that assures the members of the society that the world continues on its proper path (Merriam, 1964, p. 2550) Obviously, it would be

extremely difficult for the government and the population to appreciate the true value of the music if we are unable to indicate its contribution to national integration.

Izon Dance and Music as Tools for National Integration

A Study of Ijaw dance and music shows that it accompanies practical activities and religious rituals. However, it continues to be an important means of social cohesion and a means of displaying political/social strength and identity. Like several countries in the world that have revived their national dances, the Ijaw dance and music is a way of promoting a strong sense of national identity (Mackrell, "Dance"). Because Ijaw dance and music can cross ethnic boundaries, they have the potential to promote national integration. through theatrical productions that emphasize common human situations like getting married, having children, and dying. Expressions of Ijaw culture can foster understanding and empathy among Nigeria's various ethnic groupings. In a multiethnic community, dance and music offer a nonverbal means of communicating common values, beliefs, and feelings. Nigerians from different ethnic groups can interact with Ijaw culture at venues provided by cultural festivals such as the Amaseikumor (Ijaw Festival of Arts) (Ndiokwere, 1994). These gatherings promote cross-cultural understanding by giving other ethnic groups the chance to observe, enjoy, and even take part in Ijaw music and dancing.

Through these interactions, cultural boundaries are softened, promoting mutual respect and reducing ethnocentric attitudes that often fuel divisions (Osaghae, 1995).

The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Preserving and Promoting Ijaw Culture

With the advent of AI, the preservation and promotion of cultural practices, including Ijaw dance and music, have taken on new dimensions. AI has the potential to document, archive, and analyze cultural artifacts, ensuring that future generations have access to the rich heritage of ethnic groups like the Ijaws. AI-driven platforms can digitize performances, creating virtual archives accessible to both Nigerians and international audiences, thus fostering cultural exchange on a global scale (Tijjani & Aliyu, 2020). Additionally, AI technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), offer innovative ways to engage with traditional Ijaw dance and music. These tools can simulate cultural festivals or dance performances, providing immersive experiences for those

who cannot physically attend. This technological mediation not only broadens access but also enhances cultural appreciation by offering detailed, interactive encounters with Ijaw cultural forms (Jung et al., 2020). Moreover, AI tools can be employed to analyze and interpret the patterns of Ijaw dance and music, providing insights into their structure and meaning. These analyses can then be used to teach or replicate performances, preserving the integrity of cultural expressions. Furthermore, AI-driven platforms, such as social media algorithms, can facilitate cultural exchange by promoting Ijaw music and dance content to diverse audiences, both within and outside Nigeria (Zahra, 2021). It is noteworthy that with AI-driven platforms the meaning, significance, and universality of several themes in Ijaw music can be made accessible to a national and global audience making for deep comprehension, appreciation, and identification with the culture and people of Ijaw extraction.

Challenges and Considerations in Promoting Ijaw Music and Dance in an AI-Driven Society

Although artificial intelligence (AI) offers chances for cultural interchange and preservation, it also brings up serious issues with the legitimacy and commercialization of cultural traditions. The commercialization of Ijaw music and dance in ways that undermine its inherent cultural meanings is a problem posed by AI's capacity to repeat performances (Ezenagu, 2021). Furthermore, when AI-mediated cultural output is exploited without giving due credit or acknowledgment to its original producers, cultural appropriation issues may surface. The establishment of ethical frameworks that direct the application of AI in the cultural sphere is essential to addressing these issues. The integrity of traditional traditions should be protected, equal participation should be guaranteed, and community ownership of cultural content should be given top priority in these frameworks. Only through such measures can AI-driven platforms serve as tools for authentic cultural exchange rather than instruments of exploitation (Tijjani & Aliyu, 2020).

Conclusion

Izon (Ijaw) dance and music hold significant potential for fostering national integration and cultural exchange in Nigeria. By providing platforms for cross-cultural interaction, these art forms can help bridge ethnic divides and promote unity in a diverse society. The integration of AI technologies offers exciting possibilities for preserving and promoting Ijaw cultural practices,

making them more accessible to both local and global audiences. However, as AI reshapes the cultural landscape, it is important to remain vigilant against the risks of commercialization and appropriation. In doing so, Nigeria can leverage both its rich cultural heritage and emerging technologies to promote national cohesion and cultural dialogue. Generally, society and young men in particular look up to music and dance as an avenue for creative expression, an escape from potential self-destruction, a way of caring a living, and a vehicle for achieving a feeling of some sense of self-worth. It contributes to the perception of the country in the tourism sector and also serves the tourism sector. In support of the above, the chairman of the Local Organizing Committee (LOG) of the World Music and Dance has as objectives; to entertain, inform, and educate Nigerians. It also aimed at uniting the Nigerian family, and fostering cultural re-development in Nigeria by bringing about a re-birth and repositioning of the moral and spiritual essence of our rich cultural heritage (The Guardian, June 2nd, 2003: 63).

Recommendations

It is recommended that the government of the day should put in place machinery for the preservation and propagation of Ijaw dance and music as a strategy for achieving national cohesion. Concerted efforts should be made in the direction of applying AI to music as it has the potential for enabling its preservation and promotion in unique ways that suppose the efforts hitherto expended in preserving and propagating it. There is a need to maximize the potential for Ijaw music and dance as it could be a veritable product for cultural exchange and a unifying agent.

References

- Alao, A. (1986). An analytical study of the contributions of the military to the promotion of national integration in Nigeria between 1966 and 1979. M.A. History Dissertation, University of Ile-Ife.
- Appiah, A., and Gates, H.L. (2010). *Encyclopedia of Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Bakare, O. R. (1994). *Rudiments of choreography*. Zaria: Pace Publishers.

- Binder L. (1964). National integration and political development. *American Political Science Review*, 58(3):622-631. doi:10.2307/1953137
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2020). Africa: Nigeria. *The World Factbook*.
- Echeruo, M. J. (1989). *Drama and Theater in Nigeria: A critical sourcebook*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing.
- Ekine, S. (2011). *The Niger Delta: The true story*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Epelle, A. (2015) Evolution of Nigeria as a political unit. In L.C. Nwachukwu, M.I. Okeke, D.C. Chukwurah and S.J. Pepple (ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian people and culture*. Owerri : Applause Multi-Sectors Limited
- Ezenagu, N. (2021). The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on cultural preservation in Nigeria. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33(4), 542-559.
- Fakunle, M. (2022). Top 10 oldest tribes in Nigeria. *Nigerian Infofinder*.
Guardian. (2 June 2003). *Broadcasting and Music in a developing country*.
- Ijo . Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life. Retrieved December 18, 2024, from Encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ijo>
- Iorngurum, A., Saa, D and Tsevende, R. Nigerian dances and cultural diplomacy. *Global Advanced Research Journal of Peace, Gender and Development Studies*, 2 (3):054-060.<http://www.garj.org/garjpgds/index.htm>
- John A. (2011). *Ethnic groups of Africa and the Middle East: An encyclopedia*. Santa Babara: ABC-CLIO.
- Jung, T., Dieck, T., & Moorhouse, N. (2020). Cultural heritage in virtual reality: A collaborative approach. *International Journal of Digital Culture and Electronic Tourism*, 1(1): 47-60.
- Mackrell, J. R. (2013). Dance. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150714/dance/25694/Music>
- Merrian, A. P. (1964). *Anthropology of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ndiokwere, N. (1994). *The Amaseikumor festival of Arts: Unity in diversity*. Abuja; Caltop Publications.

- Odetola T.O, (1978) Military politics in Nigeria: Economic development and political stability. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Orij, J. (1991). *Traditions of the Ijaw people*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Osaghae, E. E. (1995). Structural adjustment and ethnicity in Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 4(1): 69-82.
- Pulse Nigeria. (2022). Ijaw culture: A brief walk into the lives of one of the world's most ancient people. <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/lifestyle/food-and-travel/ijaw-culture-a-brief-walk-into-the-lives-of-one-of-the-worlds-most-ancient-people-2024073114500229772>
- Sorell, W. (1967). *The dance through the ages*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Teitelbaum, M.S. (2024). Population. *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/science/population-biology-and-anthropology/Mortality>
- Tekena, M, G. (2014). Dance as a tool for ethnic integration in Nigeria: A study of selected Kalabari dances in Rivers State. *The Crab: Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*, 9, 187-201.
- Tijjani, M. & Aliyu, A. (2020). Artificial Intelligence and cultural heritage preservation in Africa: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of AI and Society*, 12(2): 211-229.
- Zahra, A. (2021). AI and the commodification of African cultural practices. *Global Media Journal*, 19(2): 85-102.