

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE IN CHILDREN'S ENSEMBLES: A CASE STUDY OF EKEMINI THEATR TROUPE, UYO, AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

This ethnomusicological study investigates the interplay of contextual factors and social dynamics influencing musical performance and collaborative creativity within children's ensembles in Ibibio society, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. While existing research often focuses on informal music or individual instrument pedagogy, a significant gap remains in understanding structured children's troupes. This paper addresses this by examining the Ekemini Theatre Troupe as a case study, exploring how social, cultural, educational, and environmental elements shape their performances and collaborative processes. Employing a qualitative case study design with interviews, observations, and document analysis, and framed by Schechner's performance studies paradigm, the research reveals how elements of play, games, theatre, and ritual are integral to the troupe's social dynamics and musical development. The findings highlight the critical role of communal learning, family-like structures, and a blend of competitive and collaborative interactions in fostering creativity and cohesion. This study offers a holistic understanding of young musicians' development in a formal, culturally embedded setting, contributing new theoretical lenses to ethnomusicology and music education.

Keywords: Children's Ensembles, Ibibio Music, Contextual Factors, Social Dynamics, Collaborative Creativity, Performance Studies, Ekemini Theatre Troupe.

Introduction

The study of musical performance in children's ensembles within the Ibibio society of Akwa Ibom State operates under a dynamic cultural landscape, influenced by a variety of contextual factors. Research has shown that music is deeply integrated into the social and cultural fabric of the Ibibio people, serving numerous functions beyond mere entertainment (Udok, 2017). As such, understanding children's musical ensembles requires an examination of the social and cultural, as well as educational and environmental elements that shape their performances and collaborative processes.

Existing literature on Ibibio music offers valuable insights into its socio-cultural functions (Akpakpan et al., 2023), its educational impact on children (Ikpe & Effanga, n.d.), and the pedagogy of specific instruments (Ekong & Udoh, 2018). However, a significant gap remains. The current body of research primarily focuses on informal recreational music or the learning of individual instruments, overlooking the structured dynamics of formal children's ensembles.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the Ekemini Theatre Troupe in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. It provides a focused case study on how social, cultural, educational, and environmental factors intersect to influence musical performance, collaborative creativity, and group cohesion within this specific, organised context. This research will offer a deeper understanding of how these holistic factors shape the development of young musicians in a structured performance setting.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to examine the contextual factors and social dynamics that influence musical performance and collaborative creativity in children's ensembles, using the Ekemini Theatre Troupe in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, as a case study. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the key contextual factors that influence musical performance in children's ensembles within the Ekemini Theatre Troupe
2. Assess the social dynamics and group interactions that contribute to collaborative creativity and ensemble cohesion during musical performances in Ekemini Theatre Troupe.

i. Cultural and Social Context:

In traditional Ibibio society, music is not considered a luxury but an integral part of life, accompanying individuals from birth to death (Warren & Warren, 1970). Music plays significant roles in social, religious, economic, and moral aspects of life (Ekong & Udoh, 2018; Udok, 2017). An individual's inability to participate in traditional music was once considered a sign of a social misfit (Antia, 2005). The Ibibio culture is rich in traditional musical instruments, which are often made from materials found within the environment (Ekong & Ufford-Azorbo, 2016). However, there is a growing concern that these traditional instruments and their

associated cultural values are being abandoned in favour of Western counterparts, a trend that is seen as an unhealthy erosion of cultural heritage (Akpakpan, Akpakpan, Ayebatonye-Fatayi, & Ibekwe, 2023).

Children's recreational music, particularly during activities like moonlight play, has been identified as a critical site for socialisation and education (Udok, 2017). These activities foster a sense of togetherness, teamwork, and shared joy among peers from neighbouring compounds (Udok, 2017). Through recreational folk music, children learn about Ibibio cultural values, develop social and moral ethics, and retain their language (Udok, 2017). The performance of this music is a form of oral tradition, passed down through generations, and often occurs without a specific theme or season, primarily for relaxation and amusement (Akpabot, 1986; Nzewi, 2007; Udok, 2017).

ii. Educational and Environmental Context

The educational value of music for children has been a subject of scholarly attention in Uyo. Studies by Ikpe and Effanga (n.d.) investigated the impact of songs on the practical learning of pre-scholars, concluding that music and humour in the classroom have both linguistic and cognitive values for strengthening learning acquisition. They found that songs create a more interactive and relaxing learning environment, helping students feel safe and improving their ability to concentrate, process, and retain information (Ikpe & Effanga, n.d.). The use of songs is also seen as a way to enhance students' participation in the teaching and learning process (Ikpe & Effanga, n.d.).

The physical environment and the occupations of the people also influence the type of musical instruments and music produced (Akpabot, 1998; Akpakpan et al., 2023). For example, forest dwellers, like the Ibibio, surrounded by wood, produce flutes and xylophones (Akpabot, 1998). A case study on the teaching and learning of the Ikon (xylophone) by the New Dawn Entertainers in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, reveals specific procedures for knowledge transfer, highlighting the importance of apprenticeship in preserving indigenous musical practices (Ekong & Udoh, 2018). This study underscores the need to encourage young people to engage with indigenous music to maintain cultural identity in the face of modern media and popular culture (Ekong & Udoh, 2018).

Creative Processes and Improvisational Techniques in Musical Ensembles

The creative processes involved in children's ensemble performances encompass improvisation, collaborative composition, and interpretative decision-making, all of which contribute to the development of musicality and group cohesion. Sawyer (2012) emphasises that group creativity is an emergent phenomenon where individual contributions interweave dynamically to form a cohesive musical expression. In children's ensembles, these processes are often scaffolded by educators, who guide students through structured improvisation and compositional frameworks to encourage technical proficiency and expressive agency (Burnard, 2012). The extent to which these processes impact performance quality depends on various factors, including the developmental stage of the children, the pedagogical approach employed, and the ensemble's social dynamics. One crucial aspect of creative engagement in ensemble settings is its role in fostering deeper musical understanding and expressive interpretation.

According to Custodero (2005), children who actively engage in musical problem-solving within an ensemble setting develop a heightened sensitivity to phrasing, dynamics, and timing. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning occurs within a collaborative framework where more experienced peers or instructors scaffold knowledge. In children's ensembles, this manifests as a balance between structured guidance and the freedom to explore interpretative choices. Such processes cultivate a sense of ownership over musical performance, enhancing motivation and engagement (Hickey, 2009). The concept of 'referential creativity' emerges as a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how traditional patterns serve as creative stimuli for contemporary musical expression.

Onyeji's (2005) concept of the 'phrasing referent creative stimulation layer' illustrates how a single melodic-rhythmic pattern, repeated as in Igbo traditional music, provides creative stimulation for the sequencing of surging musical motions. This theoretical framework challenges Western notions of creativity as entirely original expression, instead positioning creativity as emerging through dialectical relationships between tradition and innovation. The theoretical implications of referential creativity extend to fundamental questions about the nature of musical innovation itself. Nketia's (1975) observation that "phonological characteristics of speech—namely, rhythm and speech intonation correspond to analogous features of song" (p. 180) reveals how creativity in African musical contexts cannot be separated from broader cultural and communicative practices. This perspective suggests that musical creativity is inherently socially and culturally embedded, contradicting Western conceptions of individual artistic genius while providing alternative models for understanding creative processes.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises Richard Schechner's performance studies paradigm to analyse the contextual factors and social dynamics within children's musical ensembles, specifically the Ekemini Theatre Troupe. Schechner's broad conceptualisation of performance extends beyond formal theatrical activities, encompassing social practices, rituals, and everyday life (Schechner, 1973, 1985). This perspective is relevant for understanding how young performers navigate the nature of ensemble participation, particularly given the fluid relationship between performers and audiences in children's groups.

Unlike adult professional ensembles, children's theatre troupes like Ekemini operate within multiple overlapping contexts simultaneously: educational, social, cultural, and artistic. These align with Schechner's understanding of performance activities, which he initially identified as seven categories, such as Play, Games, Sports, Theatre, Dance, Music, and Ritual. He later consolidated them into five, with performing arts as a unified category (Schechner, 2002; Bial, 2007). This framework is particularly applicable here because the boundaries between these activities are naturally fluid and interconnected within children's ensembles. The study applies Schechner's theory by focusing on the playful context, competitive and collaborative elements, environmental factors, and ritual dimensions of performative activities within the Ekemini Theatre Troupe.

The playful context facilitates a blurring of boundaries between art and life, allowing young participants to express themselves authentically, much like in natural play behaviours. The competitive and collaborative elements inherent in musical games reflect performance as a social practice, fostering micro-communities where children learn to balance individual expression with collective structures, a vital skill for ensemble success. Environmental factors extend beyond physical settings to include the cultural landscape of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, the troupe's institutional frameworks, and the broader social contexts from which young performers originate. Schechner's approach recognises these layers as active participants in the creative process. Finally, the ritual dimensions of ensemble participation encompass both formal elements (e.g., ceremonies, traditional songs) and informal practices (e.g., warm-up routines, group bonding). These rituals establish group identity, transmit cultural knowledge, and provide predictable structures that enhance young performers' sense of security and belonging. Schechner's framework thus provides robust tools for analysing the contextual factors and social dynamics that influence musical performance and collaborative creativity in children's ensembles, using the Ekemini Theatre Troupe in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, as a case study.

Ekemini Theatre Troupe and Its Role in Uyo's Cultural Landscape

The Ekemini Theatre Troupe, located in Uyo, is a non-governmental organisation and entertainment troupe. The troupe's founder, Prince Patrick Idiong, formally established it in 1992 after a group he assembled won a national competition and then an international children's festival in France in the early 1990s. The troupe has since grown to include over 26 standing members. Its core mission is not just entertainment; it deliberately raises underprivileged children and provides them with a better future through cultural training and education. This unique mission, a crucial contextual factor, recruits talented children from villages and markets who would not otherwise have educational opportunities. The troupe provides free education, free medical services, and meals to its artistes, sponsoring them throughout their development.

The physical and temporal environments are also key factors. Mr. Patrick (2024) maintains a daily schedule that includes waking up early for 'keep fit' sessions to build the stamina required for a 30-minute performance. The children confirmed that a strong sense of pride and improved personal development are key outcomes of their participation. One child stated, "When I was in my village, I did not know anything. When I came here, they improved me" (Participant interview, 2024). The troupe has performed in numerous national and international festivals and events, ranging from the International Children's Festival in Paris to the Pan-African Music Festival in Congo and various government-related functions in Nigeria. These diverse performance contexts expose the children to different audiences and situations, which Mr. Patrick teaches them to navigate.

Playful Context

While the troupe operates under a structured and disciplined environment, there are elements of 'play.' The children's rehearsal process, which involves them setting up instruments and "looking for keys" before beginning to play in a call-and-response format, demonstrates a hands-on, exploratory approach to learning that mirrors playful experimentation. Mr. Patrick revealed that he uses motivational systems, such as rewarding high performers with special outings, which indicate a play-based motivation to encourage excellence.

Environmental Factors

The environment is a crucial contextual factor, especially concerning the instruments. Mr Patrick emphasised the importance of keeping traditional instruments like drums covered for 2-4 hours in cool conditions before

use, stating, "If you keep it open like this... you cannot tune it" (Patrick, 2024). This strict protocol for instrument care highlights how the physical environment directly influences the musical performance's technical quality. The troupe's wide-ranging performance history, from vigil nights to national summits, also means the children must constantly adapt to different acoustic and physical environments, a skill they acquire through experience.

Ritual Dimensions

It is observed that the troupe's activities are steeped in 'ritual'. The daily routines, such as the early morning physical training sessions, serve as a ritualistic preparation for performance, instilling stamina and discipline. There is also a ritualistic approach to emotional preparation. Mr. Patrick teaches children the meaning and interpretation of every song, explaining the cultural context and appropriate emotions. This ensures the performance is not just a technical display but a meaningful, ritualistic act of cultural expression, as children learn to match their expressions to the song's meaning. The children's adherence to maintaining strict behavioural standards and etiquette, especially when interacting with officials, adds another layer of ritualised behaviour.

Social Dynamics and Group Interactions That Contribute to Collaborative Creativity

The social dynamics within the Ekemini Theatre Troupe are characterised by a strong sense of family and a clear leadership structure. Mr Patrick, as the founder and Artistic Director, serves as the primary adult supervisor, and he treats all the children as a family unit, ensuring they eat from the same pot and receive equal opportunities. Among the children, a group leader (David, aged 12) is responsible for internal coordination, such as setting up instruments and distributing them to different positions. However, the adult director maintains an exclusive role, as he states, "I do everything all by myself... It is a family" (Patrick, 2024).

Group interactions, particularly during rehearsals, blend collaborative effort and structured instruction. While they use a call-and-response format, the children resolve challenges through both verbal instruction and physical correction, such as 'head knocking' as a teaching method by older, more experienced children. Despite this, no one reported bullying based on gender. The children express a strong sense of pride and happiness when they perform in front of audiences, with one child describing a sense of being 'better' and more knowledgeable due to their participation (Participant, 2024).

Analysis of the Ekemini Theatre Troupe Children's Ensemble in Uyo

The study utilises Schechner's theoretical framework for understanding the specific social dynamics at play, which are a complex mix of competitive games and collaborative theatricality.

Games & Sports

The study discovered the social dynamics of the ensemble involve elements of 'games.' The children's rehearsal process includes tackling challenges like coordination issues when wrong keys are played. This can be interpreted as a game-like challenge where the aim is to achieve a synchronised, flawless performance. Mr. Patrick's use of a reward-based system, where top performers earn special outings, fosters a friendly competition similar to a game in order to motivate the children to excel. This competitive aspect, however, is balanced by the overarching collaborative goal of a successful ensemble performance.

Theatre & Music as Combined Arts

The troupe's dual identity as a theatre and music troupe is central to its social dynamics. The children's performances are not just musical, as seen in plate 1; they incorporate dance and kinetic drama from the young female dancers, as also seen in plate 2, adding a visual and theatrical dimension to the music. This dual focus encourages a high degree of collaborative creativity, as musical ideas must be coordinated with dramatic and choreographic elements. The troupe's director teaches children about traditional dress codes and the proper use of costumes for different ceremonies, emphasising the visual and theatrical components of their art.

Plate 1.

Musical Performance of Ekemini Theatre Troupe, Uyo. Source: Prince Patrick Idiong
Collaborative Creativity



The creative process is a collective effort, though guided by the director. Mr. Patrick's philosophy is not about static preservation but about a dynamic, evolving culture where children are encouraged to build on what has been created. He teaches children to "look for that key" and "just play the music" based on what they hear and have learnt in their rehearsal, which is an intuitive, collaborative approach to musical problem-solving rather than rote learning from a score. This collective, ear-based approach fosters a strong sense of shared ownership and collaborative creativity, reinforcing ensemble cohesion. The children's interviews mentioned how they share travel experiences and express pride in their cultural knowledge, demonstrating how the group's activities foster social bonds and a shared identity.

Plate 2.

Young female dancers of Ekemini Theatre Troupe, Uyo. Source: Prince Patrick Idiong



Findings

This detailed analysis of social dynamics and collaborative creativity within the Ekemini Theatre Troupe fills the identified research gap on structured children's ensembles. While existing literature may describe musical education or performance in general terms, this case study provides a focused, deep dive into the specific ways a real-world setting manages social interactions, leadership, and group cohesion. The findings go beyond a general understanding of Ibibio music performance practice to reveal the specific, practical dynamics of how a group of children, under the guidance of a single director, negotiates creativity and collaboration.

The findings on collaborative creativity and group interaction provide a new dimension to the discussion of musical learning and performance. While Ekong & Udoh (2018) focused on the pedagogy of a single instrument, the study highlights the critical importance of the social and group dynamics *around* the instrument. The children's collaborative approach to "looking for the key" and the family-like structure of the troupe demonstrate that learning is a communal process, heavily influenced by social bonds and collective creativity, not just individual instruction. This expands the understanding of musical pedagogy in Ibibio culture to include the social and performative dimensions of ensemble work.

Furthermore, the findings, analysed through Schechner's framework, introduce a new theoretical lens for understanding musical education and performance in Nigeria. By identifying elements of play, games, theatre, and ritual within the troupe's social dynamics, the study moves beyond the current literature's focus on socio-cultural functions or educational impact alone. The evidence that children's musical learning is intertwined with playful challenges, theatrical performance, and ritualised group behaviour argues for a more holistic, performance-centred approach to understanding the development of young musicians in this cultural context. This opens up a new conversation about how these interconnected performative activities shape artistic and social development.

Contribution

The study has shown that musical performance in the Ekemini Theatre Troupe is not a solitary or purely educational activity but a multifaceted endeavour shaped by a complex interplay of contextual factors and social dynamics. Key contextual factors include the troupe's social mission to uplift underprivileged children, its ritualised daily schedule, and the disciplined approach to instrument care. Social dynamics, informed by a family-like structure and a blend of collaborative and competitive interactions, are central to the troupe's collaborative creativity and ensemble cohesion.

This study also contributes to ethnomusicology, music education, and performance studies by providing a case study of a structured children's musical ensemble in Uyo, Akwa Ibom. Schechner's theoretical framework offers a way of understanding the children's musical and social development, moving beyond conventional analyses of performance and pedagogy. The study further addresses the identified research gap by providing a focused, holistic investigation into the contextual factors and social dynamics of a formal children's troupe. It demonstrated that the musical education and performance of children in such a setting are profoundly influenced by factors that are not fully captured in studies focused solely on recreational music or individual instrument pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study examined the social dynamics and collaborative creativity within the Ekemini Theatre Troupe Children's Ensemble in Uyo. The comprehensive pedagogical approach employed by Mr. Patrick, which combines competitive and cooperative elements with multidisciplinary performance practices, supports Schechner's theoretical framework that performance includes aspects of play, games, theatre, and ritual. The study shows that children learn through both direct instruction and collaborative problem-solving, gaining important knowledge and skills in musical, theatrical, and cultural practices through intuitive, ear-based methods and shared creative processes.

The findings show that the troupe's family-like structure and reward-based system foster an environment where individual excellence is pursued alongside collective achievement. The children's collaborative approach to "looking for the key" and their integration of music with dance, kinetic drama, and traditional dress codes demonstrate how cultural learning takes place through diverse performative activities rather than through isolated musical instruction.

Since structured children's ensembles have become increasingly important vehicles for cultural transmission in contemporary Nigerian society, their role in fostering both artistic development and social cohesion cannot be underestimated. This research contributes to ethnomusicology, music education, and performance studies by providing a detailed ethnographic analysis that goes beyond conventional pedagogical approaches to reveal how social dynamics, collaborative creativity, and contextual factors intersect to shape meaningful cultural learning experiences for young performers.

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Plates

Plate 1. Musical performance of Ekemini Theatre Troupe, Uyo. Source: Prince Patrick Idiong

Plate 2. Young female dancers of Ekemini Theatre Troupe, Uyo. Source: Prince Patrick Idiong