

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF EKOMBI DANCE MUSIC AMONG THE EFIK OF CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

Amarachukwu A. DENNIS
dennisa@babcock.edu.ng
&
Alvan-Ikoku O. NWAMARA PhD
Department of Music
Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka

Abstract

The Ekombi dance music of the Efik people of Cross River State, Nigeria, is a prominent expression of indigenous musical and cultural heritage that embodies the people's worldview, identity, aesthetics, and spiritual values. Although the dance has remained an important feature of ceremonies, festivals, and other socio-cultural events, increasing interaction with Christianity, western education, globalization, digital media, and changing social values has influenced its performance practices. This study examined the patterns of change and continuity in the performance practice of Ekombi dance music with a view to identifying the elements that have persisted, the aspects that have evolved, and the factors responsible for these transformations. The study adopted a qualitative ethnomusicological approach employing participant observation, in-depth interviews with aged dancers, cultural custodians, musicians and community elders, as well as documentary sources. Data were analysed descriptively within the frameworks of Cultural Continuity and Change Theory and Performance Theory. Findings revealed that while fundamental musical characteristics, wave-like dance movements, symbolic costumes, communal participation, and the cultural identity associated with Ekombi have remained largely intact, significant changes have occurred in performance contexts, costume designs, gender participation, instrumentation, modes of transmission, and the integration of modern technologies. The study further established that these changes have enhanced the visibility and sustainability of the dance without completely eroding its indigenous identity. It concludes that the survival of Ekombi dance music depends on balancing cultural continuity with adaptive transformation through systematic documentation, preservation, and intergenerational transmission of its musical and performance traditions.

Keywords: Ekombi dance music; performance; cultural continuity; cultural change; Efik people

Introduction

Music is a universal language and a ubiquitous force in human society, shaping cultures, reinforcing social bonds, and influencing individual behaviour (Hargreaves et al., 2012). Beyond its aesthetic appeal, music functions as a medium for self-discovery, emotional regulation, and identity construction (Arnett, 2005). Throughout human history, music has remained an indispensable aspect of communal existence, accompanying social, religious, political, and economic activities while reflecting the aspirations, beliefs, and experiences of different societies. In many indigenous communities, music is not merely performed for entertainment but serves as a repository of collective memory through which history, customs, moral values, and cultural philosophies are preserved and transmitted across generations (Nketia, 1984). Consequently, music performs educational, communicative, ritualistic, recreational, and identity-forming functions that sustain both individual and communal existence.

Within the African cultural environment, music occupies an even broader social significance because it is inseparable from the daily life of the people. Unlike many Western traditions where music may be compartmentalised into concert performances or specialised artistic spaces, African music exists within the totality of community life. It accompanies birth celebrations, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, coronations, festivals, occupational activities, religious worship, healing rituals, funerals, and other communal events. African music extends beyond entertainment to become an essential mechanism for preserving societal values, reinforcing communal relationships, and transmitting indigenous knowledge systems (Nzewi, 2007; Nketia, 1984). Through songs, instrumental performance, dance, and oral traditions, communities preserve historical experiences while reinforcing shared values and collective consciousness. As Schippers (2010) observes, indigenous musical traditions remain central to sustaining cultural identity because they facilitate the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, beliefs, and social values.

The intimate relationship between music and dance further distinguishes African musical traditions. Dance is not an independent artistic activity but an inseparable extension of music through which sound is translated into

meaningful bodily expression. Across many African societies, dance serves multiple functions that extend beyond recreation to include communication, ritual performance, education, entertainment, social regulation, and cultural preservation. Traditional dances accompany important life-cycle events and communal ceremonies such as birth, marriage, initiation, harvest festivals, healing rituals, installation of traditional rulers, warfare, funerals, and religious observances. These performances communicate ideas that are often difficult to express verbally because movement, rhythm, costumes, spatial organisation, and symbolism combine to produce a rich cultural language understood within the community. Welsh-Asante (1997) describes African dance as a holistic cultural expression through which societies communicate identity, spirituality, history, and social values. Similarly, Hanna (1987) argues that dance functions as a powerful form of non-verbal communication that embodies social beliefs, occupations, traditions, and cultural identity.

The importance of dance within African societies derives from its close relationship with culture. Culture encompasses the totality of a people's way of life, including their knowledge, beliefs, customs, language, religion, arts, values, norms, symbols, rituals, folklore, and social institutions (Tylor, 1871). These cultural components collectively distinguish one community from another while providing members with a shared sense of belonging and identity. Traditional dance therefore functions as one of the most visible manifestations of culture because it incorporates music, costume, symbolism, gesture, oral literature, and performance into a unified artistic expression. The movements performed by dancers, the songs rendered during performances, the instruments employed, the costumes worn, and the contexts within which performances occur all embody meanings that reflect the worldview and historical experiences of the people. Consequently, dance becomes an important mechanism through which communities preserve cultural continuity while responding to changing social realities (Schechner, 1988; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Nigeria, as one of Africa's most culturally diverse nations, possesses an extensive repertoire of indigenous music and dance traditions that reflect the uniqueness of its numerous ethnic groups. Each community has developed distinctive performance traditions that embody its cultural philosophies, historical experiences, religious beliefs, environmental realities, and social institutions. These performance traditions remain important symbols of communal identity despite increasing interactions with modernity, urbanisation, globalisation, and technological development. However, the continuous interaction between indigenous traditions and external cultural influences has generated significant transformations in the performance practices of many traditional dance forms. While some performance elements have remained remarkably resilient, others have evolved considerably in response to changing social, religious, political, educational, and technological circumstances. Understanding the dynamic relationship between change and continuity has therefore become an important concern within contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship (Schippers, 2010; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Among the Efik people of Cross River State, one of the most enduring expressions of indigenous musical culture is the Ekombi dance. Widely regarded as one of the most recognisable cultural performances of the Efik nation, Ekombi occupies a prestigious position within the cultural life of the people because of its aesthetic sophistication, historical significance, symbolic meanings, and strong association with communal ceremonies and celebrations. Often described as the Efik equivalent of classical performance, the dance combines graceful wave-like body movements, synchronised choreography, elaborate costumes, indigenous songs, and instrumental accompaniment to create an artistic expression that reflects the intimate relationship between the Efik people and their riverine environment. Traditionally associated with the marine deity (*Ndem*), the dance embodies ideals of femininity, beauty, grace, communal identity, spirituality, and cultural pride while simultaneously serving as a medium for entertainment, social education, and historical remembrance.

The musical component of Ekombi is equally significant because it provides the rhythmic and melodic foundation upon which the dance derives its expressive power. Indigenous musical instruments, songs, drumming patterns, vocal responses, and coordinated bodily movements interact to create a holistic performance in which music and dance become mutually reinforcing artistic expressions. The songs performed during Ekombi communicate moral instruction, historical narratives, communal values, satire, praise, and collective memory, while the accompanying instruments establish rhythmic structures that guide dancers and facilitate communication between performers. Consequently, the performance of Ekombi extends beyond aesthetic display to become an embodiment of Efik cultural philosophy and indigenous knowledge systems.

Despite its enduring cultural significance, Ekombi, like many African indigenous performance traditions, has not remained insulated from the forces of social transformation. Colonialism, Christianity, Western education, urbanisation, migration, tourism, digital media, globalisation, and changing social values have introduced new realities into the performance environment. These influences have affected performance contexts, costume designs,

gender participation, musical accompaniment, modes of transmission, audience expectations, and the overall presentation of the dance. Contemporary performances increasingly occur on festival stages, tourism platforms, educational institutions, digital media spaces, and government-sponsored cultural events, thereby extending the visibility of the dance beyond its traditional ritual contexts. Although these developments have contributed to the survival and wider recognition of Ekombi, they have simultaneously generated important questions regarding authenticity, cultural preservation, and the extent to which the dance has retained its indigenous identity (UNESCO, 2022).

Existing scholarship has documented the cultural significance of African indigenous dance traditions, emphasising their aesthetic qualities, symbolic meanings, ritual functions, and performative dimensions (Nketia, 1984; Nzewi, 2007; Welsh-Asante, 1997). However, relatively limited ethnomusicological attention has been devoted to systematically examining the patterns of change and continuity within the performance practice of Ekombi dance music among the Efik people. Likewise, few studies have investigated how contemporary religious, political, technological, educational, and socio-cultural developments have influenced the preservation, adaptation, and transmission of the dance while sustaining its cultural identity. This gap restricts a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which indigenous performance traditions negotiate continuity and transformation within rapidly changing societies.

Against this background, this study examines the patterns of change and continuity in the performance practice of Ekombi dance music among the Efik people of Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, it identifies the musical and performative elements that have remained stable, examines aspects of the performance that have evolved over time, analyses the socio-cultural forces responsible for these transformations, and explores their implications for the preservation and sustainability of one of Nigeria's most important indigenous musical traditions. In doing so, the study contributes to ethnomusicological scholarship on African performance traditions while providing empirical evidence for understanding how indigenous musical cultures maintain continuity without resisting necessary adaptation to contemporary realities.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The present study is anchored on the concepts of performance practice, indigenous music, intangible cultural heritage, and cultural continuity and change, which collectively provide a lens for understanding the transformation of Ekombi dance music among the Efik people. Performance practice refers to the manner in which music and dance are created, interpreted, transmitted, and presented within their socio-cultural contexts. It encompasses the musical structures, choreography, costumes, performance settings, instruments, modes of transmission, and interactions between performers and audiences. Within ethnomusicology, performance practice is regarded as a dynamic process that reflects the social, cultural, historical, and environmental realities of a community rather than a fixed artistic product (Schechner, 1988; Nketia, 1984). Indigenous music similarly represents a living cultural expression through which communities preserve collective memory, identity, values, and traditional knowledge across generations. Contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship further recognises indigenous music as an element of intangible cultural heritage whose sustainability depends upon continuous community participation, transmission, and adaptation rather than rigid preservation.

The concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is equally central to this study because Ekombi dance music embodies inherited knowledge, artistic expression, oral tradition, and communal identity transmitted from one generation to another. According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage comprises practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage and continually recreate in response to changing environments, thereby providing a sense of identity and continuity. Rather than discouraging change, the UNESCO framework emphasises that living heritage remains sustainable when communities retain ownership while adapting cultural expressions to contemporary realities. This perspective is particularly relevant to Ekombi, whose performance has expanded from indigenous ceremonial settings into educational institutions, tourism festivals, national celebrations, and digital media without completely losing its traditional identity.

The study is theoretically underpinned by the Cultural Continuity and Change Theory, which explains how societies maintain core cultural values while adapting to evolving social, political, religious, economic, and technological conditions. The theory rejects the notion that culture is static and instead views cultural transformation as an inevitable and often necessary process through which traditions remain meaningful and functional. Within ethnomusicology, cultural continuity is reflected in the preservation of fundamental musical structures, symbolic meanings, performance philosophies, and indigenous knowledge systems, whereas cultural change manifests through modifications in performance contexts, costume design, technology, modes of transmission, audience participation, and artistic presentation (Nketia, 1984; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Contemporary studies on music sustainability similarly argue that the long-term survival of indigenous music depends on communities negotiating innovation without compromising the cultural values that define their musical heritage.

The theory provides an appropriate framework for interpreting the transformation of Ekombi dance music because it enables the study to distinguish between superficial changes in performance practice and the preservation of core cultural identity. Although aspects such as staging, costume aesthetics, performance venues, digital dissemination, and educational transmission have evolved over time, the indigenous rhythmic structures, choreographic vocabulary, symbolic meanings, and communal functions of Ekombi continue to define its identity. Consequently, the Cultural Continuity and Change Theory offers a robust analytical framework for understanding how the Efik community has sustained Ekombi as a living musical tradition through carefully negotiated adaptation, thereby ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary society while preserving its cultural authenticity.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnomusicological research design to investigate patterns of change and continuity in the performance practice of Ekombi dance music among the Efik people of Cross River State, Nigeria. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitated an in-depth understanding of the cultural meanings, performance conventions, and lived experiences of practitioners within their natural socio-cultural environment.

The study was conducted in selected Efik communities in Cross River State where Ekombi dance continues to be performed during cultural festivals, traditional ceremonies, and other communal events. The study population comprised traditional rulers, cultural custodians, Ekombi dancers, musicians, community elders, and other individuals with demonstrable knowledge and practical experience of the dance tradition. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that only knowledgeable informants capable of providing reliable historical and contemporary perspectives on Ekombi performance practice were included in the study.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary sources. Participant observation enabled the researcher to observe live performances and document choreographic patterns, musical accompaniment, costumes, performance settings, audience participation, and other performance features. Semi-structured interviews provided detailed information on the historical development of Ekombi dance, the factors influencing changes in its performance practice, and the elements that have remained consistent over time. Focus group discussions further enriched the data by encouraging interaction among participants, while documentary materials, including published literature and archival records, complemented the primary data.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data were triangulated across multiple sources and methods. Interview recordings and field notes were carefully transcribed, organised, and subjected to thematic analysis. Emerging themes were identified based on the study objectives and interpreted within the frameworks of Cultural Continuity and Change Theory and Performance Theory. This analytical approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the processes through which Ekombi dance music has adapted to contemporary socio-cultural realities while preserving its distinctive musical and cultural identity.

Results

Changes in the Performance Practice of *Ekombi* Dance Music

The findings revealed that the performance practice of *Ekombi* dance music has undergone considerable transformation over time in response to socio-cultural, religious, educational, technological, and economic developments. While these changes have broadened the visibility and relevance of the dance beyond its traditional environment, they have simultaneously altered certain aspects of its original performance practice. Data obtained through participant observation, interviews with cultural custodians, musicians, dancers, and community elders, as well as documentary evidence, indicate that the most notable changes occurred in performance contexts, choreography, musical accompaniment, costume design, modes of transmission, and audience participation.

One of the most remarkable changes observed concerns the performance context of *Ekombi*. Historically, the dance was closely associated with the Nkuho (fattening room) institution, where it formed an integral part of the ceremonial activities marking the transition of young women into adulthood. Performances were also associated with traditional festivals, royal ceremonies, and other culturally significant occasions within the Efik community. However, findings indicate that *Ekombi* has gradually transcended these indigenous settings and is now frequently

performed during state functions, tourism events, cultural festivals, academic ceremonies, church harvest celebrations, weddings, political campaigns, and international cultural exhibitions. Participants attributed this transition to increasing governmental interest in cultural promotion, the emergence of the Calabar Carnival, the expansion of cultural tourism, and greater public appreciation of indigenous artistic expressions.

The incorporation of *Ekombi* into contemporary festival performances has equally influenced the organisation of the dance. Traditional performances, which were formerly characterised by intimate interaction between performers and community members, have increasingly adopted stage-oriented presentations designed for larger audiences. Consequently, choreographic arrangements now incorporate theatrical formations, extended entrances, coordinated stage movements, and visually appealing presentations intended to enhance audience engagement without completely departing from the indigenous performance tradition. Field observations revealed that although these modifications have introduced greater artistic flexibility, experienced performers consciously retain the distinctive wave-like arm movements, graceful body coordination, and synchronised footwork that continue to define the identity of *Ekombi*.

Table 1: Major Changes in the Performance Practice of *Ekombi* Dance Music

Performance Component	Traditional Practice	Contemporary Practice
Performance venue	Fattening room, palace ceremonies, traditional festivals	Carnivals, tourism events, educational institutions, civic ceremonies, international festivals
Choreography	Communal circular formations	Stage choreography with creative formations
Audience	Community members	Local, national, and international audiences
Costume	Locally produced traditional attire	Modified costumes using contemporary fabrics and embellishments
Musical accompaniment	Indigenous percussion ensemble	Indigenous instruments with occasional electronic amplification and recorded accompaniment
Mode of transmission	Informal apprenticeship	Cultural troupes, educational institutions, workshops, digital media

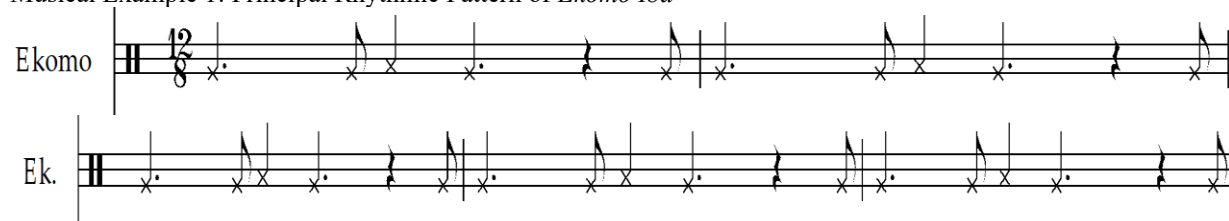
Costume design also emerged as an area of considerable transformation. Participants explained that earlier performances were characterised by relatively simple indigenous attire made from locally available materials, reflecting the modest aesthetic preferences of the period. Contemporary performances, by contrast, feature elaborately designed costumes incorporating velvet fabrics, sequins, beads, embroidered patterns, decorative headpieces, and coordinated accessories. These modifications were generally perceived as responses to changing audience expectations and the demands of modern stage performance. Nevertheless, respondents consistently maintained that the symbolic significance of the costume as an expression of Efik femininity, dignity, and cultural identity has remained unchanged despite these aesthetic improvements.

Figure 1. Contemporary *Ekombi* Costume

Insert photograph from the dissertation illustrating the contemporary performance costume.

The findings further revealed notable developments in musical accompaniment. Traditionally, *Ekombi* performances relied exclusively on indigenous instruments, including the *Ekomo Iba* (principal drum), *Mkpri Ekomo* (supporting drums), *Nsak* (rattle), *Ntakrok* (woodblock), and *Nkwong* (metal gong), which collectively established the rhythmic foundation of the dance. Although these instruments continue to constitute the core ensemble, participants acknowledged that contemporary performances increasingly utilise public address systems, microphones, electronic amplification, and, in some instances, pre-recorded accompaniment where live musicians are unavailable. While many respondents regarded these innovations as practical adaptations that improve audibility during large public performances, others expressed concern that excessive dependence on recorded music could gradually diminish the interactive relationship between dancers and live drummers that traditionally characterises *Ekombi* performance.

Musical Example 1: Principal Rhythmic Pattern of *Ekomo Iba*



The rhythmic transcription illustrates that despite technological innovations in performance presentation, the characteristic rhythmic framework underpinning *Ekombi* dance has remained fundamentally unchanged. The lead drummer continues to regulate tempo, coordinate choreographic transitions, and communicate performance cues using established indigenous rhythmic patterns recognised by experienced dancers and musicians.

Another important finding relates to the transmission of performance knowledge. Earlier generations acquired *Ekombi* almost exclusively through prolonged apprenticeship involving observation, imitation, and repeated participation in community performances. Findings indicate that while apprenticeship remains important, contemporary learning increasingly occurs through organised cultural troupes, schools, universities, cultural centres, workshops, audiovisual recordings, and digital platforms. Participants noted that the availability of video recordings and social media has significantly expanded access to *Ekombi*, enabling younger performers to learn movements beyond their immediate communities. Although this development has contributed to wider dissemination of the dance, some informants observed that digital learning cannot entirely replace the experiential knowledge acquired through direct interaction with master performers within the traditional cultural setting.

Field observations also indicate that audience participation has undergone considerable transformation. Traditional performances encouraged active communal involvement, with audience members responding spontaneously through singing, clapping, verbal encouragement, and occasional participation in the dance. Contemporary performances, particularly those staged during carnivals and formal cultural events, are increasingly characterised by a clear distinction between performers and spectators. Nevertheless, participants observed that audience enthusiasm remains an essential component of *Ekombi*, particularly during community festivals where interactive performance conventions continue to flourish.

The findings demonstrate that the performance practice of *Ekombi* dance music has experienced substantial modifications in response to changing socio-cultural realities. These changes have largely affected the contexts, presentation, costume aesthetics, transmission processes, and technological dimensions of performance, while the essential musical and choreographic identity of the dance has been consciously preserved by practitioners. This suggests that adaptation has served not as a departure from tradition but as a strategy for ensuring the continued relevance and sustainability of *Ekombi* within contemporary society.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the performance practice of *Ekombi* dance music among the Efik has undergone significant transformation without compromising its core cultural identity. Although changes were observed in performance contexts, costume aesthetics, audience composition, modes of transmission, and performance presentation, the essential musical, choreographic, and symbolic characteristics of the dance have remained remarkably resilient. These findings reinforce the argument that indigenous musical traditions are not static cultural artefacts but living systems that continually negotiate between preservation and adaptation in response to changing socio-cultural realities (Nketia, 1984; Brown, 2003; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). Contemporary heritage scholarship similarly argues that the sustainability of indigenous music and dance depends not on resisting change but on maintaining cultural continuity through community-centred adaptation and intergenerational transmission (UNESCO, 2023; Blake, 2019; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

One of the most important findings is the transformation of *Ekombi* from a performance traditionally associated with the Nkuho (fattening room) institution and other indigenous ceremonial contexts to one presented during carnivals, tourism festivals, state functions, educational programmes, religious celebrations, and international cultural exhibitions. This transition demonstrates the capacity of indigenous performance traditions to respond to changing social environments while preserving their cultural significance. Nketia (1984) observed that African music derives its meaning from its social function and therefore evolves as society changes. The present findings corroborate Hogan's (2016, 2020) position that African dance remains a dynamic cultural practice whose functions expand in response to changing societal needs. This observation also aligns with UNESCO's Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasise that intangible cultural heritage remains viable when communities continually recreate it in response to changing environments (UNESCO, 2022). Similarly, Blake (2019) argues that expanding performance contexts enhances public appreciation and strengthens the long-term sustainability of living heritage when community ownership is maintained.

The observed choreographic developments further illustrate the adaptive nature of *Ekombi* performance practice. While contemporary performances increasingly incorporate theatrical formations, stage choreography, and coordinated entrances designed for festival and public presentations, the characteristic wave-like arm movements,

graceful body coordination, synchronised footwork, and rhythmic interaction between dancers and drummers remain central to the identity of the dance. This finding supports Schechner's (1988) conception of performance as restored behaviour through which inherited cultural practices are continually re-enacted and reinterpreted without losing their essential meanings. Similarly, Adegbite (1992) argues that innovation within African musical traditions often occurs around peripheral performance elements while preserving fundamental musical structures. These findings further agree with Tiérou (2019), who maintains that African dance traditions continually adapt choreographic presentation to new audiences while retaining their indigenous movement vocabulary and cultural philosophy. Likewise, Nzewi (2007) observes that the continuity of African musical performance depends more on preserving indigenous aesthetic principles than on maintaining rigid performance forms.

The study also revealed that costume modifications have enhanced the visual appeal of Ekombi without altering its symbolic significance. Participants consistently maintained that although contemporary costumes incorporate modern fabrics, embellishments, coordinated colours, and improved tailoring, they continue to represent Efik ideals of dignity, femininity, elegance, and communal identity. This observation is consistent with Brown's (2003) proposition that cultural continuity resides primarily in the preservation of meaning rather than the permanence of physical forms. It also supports recent heritage perspectives that distinguish between superficial material modifications and the retention of symbolic knowledge that gives cultural practices their identity. Smith and Akagawa (2009) similarly argue that safeguarding intangible heritage requires preserving the social meanings attached to cultural expressions rather than freezing their material appearance. Blake (2019) further maintains that adaptive visual representation contributes positively to heritage sustainability provided that communities continue to determine the symbolic significance of their traditions.

The findings relating to musical accompaniment equally demonstrate the resilience of indigenous musical systems. Although electronic amplification, microphones, and occasionally recorded accompaniment are now employed during large public performances, the indigenous percussion ensemble continues to provide the rhythmic foundation of Ekombi. The *Ekomo Iba*, *Mkpri Ekomo*, *Nsak*, *Ntakrok*, and *Nkwong* remain indispensable in regulating tempo, coordinating dance movements, and preserving the characteristic rhythmic identity of the performance. These findings agree with Adegbite (1992), who maintains that technological innovation does not necessarily undermine indigenous musical structures where communities consciously preserve traditional performance conventions. Similar conclusions are reached by Schippers (2010), who argues that sustainable musical traditions successfully integrate appropriate technological innovations while maintaining indigenous systems of knowledge and performance practice. Likewise, UNESCO (2023) emphasises that technological documentation and amplification should serve as complementary tools for safeguarding rather than replacing community-based musical knowledge.

Changes observed in the transmission of Ekombi further reflect the dynamic interaction between continuity and innovation. Whereas performance knowledge was traditionally acquired through apprenticeship, observation, imitation, and prolonged participation in community performances, younger performers increasingly access the tradition through cultural organisations, educational institutions, workshops, audiovisual documentation, and digital media. Although some participants expressed concern that virtual learning cannot fully replicate experiential apprenticeship, the findings indicate that these alternative transmission pathways have expanded opportunities for cultural preservation among younger generations. These findings support Schippers (2010), who argues that sustainable transmission increasingly depends upon combining traditional apprenticeship with formal education, documentation, and digital preservation. Similarly, UNESCO (2022) identifies education, documentation, and community participation as complementary safeguarding measures that strengthen intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Another significant finding concerns the expansion of audience participation beyond the immediate Efik community. Traditionally, Ekombi performances primarily served local audiences who possessed the cultural competence to interpret the symbolism embedded within the music and dance. Contemporary performances now attract national and international audiences through festivals, cultural tourism, academic programmes, and digital platforms. This broader exposure has enhanced public awareness of Efik cultural heritage while creating new opportunities for documentation and preservation. UNESCO (2023) recognises increased visibility, responsible cultural tourism, and public education as important mechanisms for ensuring the continued viability of intangible cultural heritage while emphasising that source communities must retain ownership and authority over cultural expressions. Blake (2019) likewise argues that wider public engagement contributes positively to heritage sustainability when it supports rather than replaces community custodianship.

Collectively, the findings strongly validate the propositions of Cultural Continuity and Change Theory. The study demonstrates that continuity and change should not be understood as mutually exclusive processes but as complementary mechanisms through which indigenous cultures negotiate survival. While certain external features of *Ekombi*—including performance venues, costume aesthetics, presentation style, and modes of dissemination—have evolved, the fundamental musical structures, choreographic vocabulary, symbolic meanings, and communal identity associated with the dance remain substantially intact. Similar conclusions have been reported by Schippers (2010), who demonstrates that musical traditions remain resilient when communities actively negotiate adaptation while preserving indigenous knowledge systems. UNESCO (2022) likewise identifies community participation, intergenerational transmission, and local custodianship as the principal determinants of the sustainability of living heritage. Comparable observations have also been made by Smith and Akagawa (2009), who argue that successful heritage preservation depends upon balancing continuity with carefully negotiated cultural adaptation.

This study contributes to ethnomusicological scholarship by demonstrating that the enduring relevance of *Ekombi* dance music lies in its ability to accommodate carefully negotiated innovation without compromising its indigenous musical philosophy and performance identity. Rather than signalling cultural erosion, the observed transformations reflect a deliberate process of cultural adaptation through which the Efik community continues to preserve, reinterpret, and transmit one of its most distinctive musical traditions. These findings reinforce current scholarship advocating community-led safeguarding, documentation, intergenerational transmission, and participatory heritage management as essential strategies for sustaining Africa's intangible musical heritage in the face of rapid social and technological change (Schippers, 2010; Blake, 2019; UNESCO, 2023)

Conclusion

This study examined the patterns of change and continuity in the performance practice of *Ekombi* dance music among the Efik of Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that *Ekombi* has remained a resilient indigenous musical tradition despite the socio-cultural, religious, educational, and technological transformations that have shaped its contemporary performance. While noticeable changes have occurred in performance contexts, choreographic presentation, costume aesthetics, audience composition, musical accompaniment, and modes of transmission, these adaptations have not diminished the essential musical, symbolic, and cultural identity of the dance. Instead, they have enabled *Ekombi* to remain relevant within changing social environments while preserving its distinctive artistic and cultural character.

The study further reveals that the continued vitality of *Ekombi* is rooted in the deliberate preservation of its core performance elements, including its indigenous rhythmic structures, characteristic wave-like movements, symbolic costumes, traditional instrumental ensemble, and strong communal significance. These enduring features demonstrate that continuity within indigenous performance traditions is achieved not through resistance to change but through the careful retention of those elements that embody the collective identity and cultural philosophy of the community. At the same time, the selective incorporation of contemporary performance practices has expanded the visibility of *Ekombi* beyond its traditional setting, creating new opportunities for cultural promotion, education, tourism, and intergenerational transmission.

By documenting both the changing and enduring dimensions of *Ekombi* performance practice, this study contributes to the growing body of ethnomusicological scholarship on African indigenous music and dance. It provides a clearer understanding of how traditional performance practices negotiate the relationship between preservation and innovation while remaining culturally authentic. Ultimately, the study affirms that the future sustainability of *Ekombi* dance music depends on continued community participation, systematic documentation, effective cultural education, and the preservation of its indigenous musical aesthetics, ensuring that this important aspect of Efik cultural heritage continues to thrive for future generations.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the need for deliberate and collaborative efforts to preserve the musical and cultural integrity of *Ekombi* dance music while embracing appropriate innovations that enhance its relevance in contemporary society. To ensure the long-term sustainability of this important aspect of Efik cultural heritage, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Traditional institutions and cultural custodians** should strengthen community-based apprenticeship programmes to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of *Ekombi* dance music, ensuring that its indigenous performance techniques, musical repertoire, and cultural values are passed on to younger generations.

- **The Cross River State Government and relevant cultural agencies** should provide sustained financial and institutional support for the documentation, preservation, and promotion of *Ekombi* through cultural festivals, archival projects, and heritage preservation initiatives.
- **Higher institutions and departments of music, theatre arts, and cultural studies** should incorporate *Ekombi* dance music into teaching, research, and performance activities to encourage scholarly engagement and practical training in indigenous musical traditions.
- **Performers and cultural troupes** should ensure that contemporary adaptations, including changes in choreography, costume design, and performance presentation, preserve the essential musical aesthetics, symbolic meanings, and cultural identity that distinguish *Ekombi* from other indigenous dance traditions.
- **Digital documentation and audiovisual archiving** of *Ekombi* performances, musical repertoires, choreographic patterns, and indigenous instruments should be prioritised to create accessible resources for research, education, and cultural preservation.
- **Future research** should undertake comparative studies of *Ekombi* and other indigenous dance music traditions within and beyond Nigeria to deepen scholarly understanding of cultural continuity, performance practice, and the sustainability of African musical heritage in an increasingly globalised world.

References

- Adegbite, A. (1992). *The drum and its role in Yoruba religion*. Bayreuth African Studies Series.
- Arnett, J. J. (2005). The psychology of globalization. *American Psychologist*, 60(8), 774–783.
- Blake, J. (2019). *Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage: Challenges and approaches*. Institute of Art and Law.
- Brown, K. (2003). *Cultural continuity and cultural change: A discussion of heritage processes*. Routledge.
- Hanna, J. L. (1987). *To dance is human: A theory of nonverbal communication*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hargreaves, D. J., MacDonald, R., & Miell, D. (Eds.). (2012). *Musical identities* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Hogan, E. (2016). *African dance: An artistic, historical and philosophical inquiry*. McFarland.
- Hogan, E. (2020). *African dance: Evolution, transformation and contemporary practice*. McFarland.
- Nketia, J. H. K. (1984). *The music of Africa*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Norton, B., & Matsumoto, N. (Eds.). (2019). *Music as heritage: Historical and ethnographic perspectives*. Routledge.
- Nzewi, M. (2007). *A contemporary study of musical arts: Informed by African indigenous knowledge systems* (Vol. 1). Centre for Indigenous Instrumental Music and Dance Practices (CIIMDA).
- Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance theory* (Rev. ed.). Routledge.
- Schippers, H. (2010). *Facing the music: Shaping music education from a global perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Schippers, H. (2015). Applied ethnomusicology and intangible cultural heritage: Understanding "ecosystems of music" as a tool for sustainability. In S. Pettan & J. T. Titon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of applied ethnomusicology* (pp. 134–156). Oxford University Press.
- Seeger, A., & Schippers, H. (2022). Introduction: Approaching music as intangible cultural heritage. In H. Schippers & A. Seeger (Eds.), *Music, communities, sustainability: Developing policies and practices* (pp. 1–18). Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L., & Akagawa, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Intangible heritage*. Routledge.
- Tiérrou, A. (2019). *Doopie: The eternal law of African dance*. Routledge.
- Tylor, E. B. (1871). *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom* (Vol. 1). John Murray.
- UNESCO. (2022). *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.
- UNESCO. (2023). *Basic texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2023 ed.). UNESCO.
- Varnum, M. E. W., & Grossmann, I. (2017). Cultural change: The how and the why. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(6), 956–972.
- Welsh-Asante, K. (Ed.). (1997). *African dance: An artistic, historical, and philosophical inquiry*. Africa World Press.