Conflict as a Bane for the fall of Eri Ozurumba Dance Group of Agba Ndele Community, Rivers State, Nigeria

By

Ezebube, Augustina Chizoba
Department of Music
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt, Rivers State.
tinaezebube1969@gmail.com

Abstract

Agba Ndele, a community located in Emuoha Local Government Area of Rivers State, South-South Nigeria, has long been recognized for its peaceful coexistence and strong communal ties. Central to its cultural identity is Eri Ozurumba, a dance whose name translates to "the dance whose fame reigns in all communities." The Eri dance group has historically served as a unifying force within the community and stands out as one of its most esteemed cultural ensembles. However, the outbreak of a prolonged crisis from 2016 to 2019 disrupted the social fabric of the community and led to a significant decline in the dance group's activities and prominence. This study examines the historical development, decline, and ongoing revival of the Eri Ozurumba dance group. Originating from the neighboring Choba community, the dance was adapted and localized in Agba Ndele, where it became a collective cultural asset. Membership has traditionally been open to all community members, regardless of age or gender. The research draws on both primary and secondary sources, including interviews with key stakeholders, as well as analysis of relevant books, journals, and conference proceedings. Following the restoration of peace, efforts to reactivate the group were initially slow, as members remained reluctant to resume performances. In response, community leaders and dance group executives initiated a membership recruitment drive to reinvigorate participation in this communal art form. The study recommends structured training programs for new members, particularly in the area of instrumental performance, to support the sustainability and growth of the group moving forward.

Keywords: Conflict, Bane, Eri Ozurumba Dance and Agba Ndele Community, Culture

Introduction

Dance is an integral element of musical expression across communities, often manifested through bodily movements that align with the rhythms produced by musical instruments. In Agba Ndele community, the Eri dance holds considerable cultural significance, serving not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a tool for fostering unity, happiness, and communal love among its people.

According to Onwuka (2012), “every community practices the art of music making and dancing, for ritual, ceremonial or sociocultural purposes” (p. 2). In line with this perspective, the Eri dance is primarily performed for ceremonial and socio-cultural functions. The dance troupe regularly participates in local celebrations and also responds to invitations from neighboring areas, making their performances both a communal and external cultural engagement. Oguno and Nwamara (2014) posit that:

> The present generation can learn a lot about the past life and values of his community by listening to and take part in folklores. Through folklores, proverbs could be taught and better appreciated in schools because examples are drawn from the child's immediate environment (p.116).

Both elders and youth in Agba Ndele community acquire knowledge of their cultural norms, values, and ancestral lineage through the music and performances of the Eri Ozurumba dance group. Participation in this cultural expression helps individuals develop a deeper understanding of their environment and reinforces their identity within the community. Traditional songs often passed down orally are preserved and transmitted across generations, serving as tools for promoting social cohesion, regulating behavior, and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. As noted by Agu (1996), "traditional music is rooted and perpetuated by the people, race, region or nation. It is more directly associated with traditional, religious and political systems" (p. 15). The Eri Ozurumba dance reflects this connection, as it is embedded within the cultural, religious, and political life of Agba Ndele. The group performs at political gatherings, festivals, and religious or cultural ceremonies, making it relevant to both sacred and secular spheres of community life.

While communities may enjoy periods of peace and stability, unexpected conflicts can disrupt that harmony, displacing families and dismantling longstanding traditions. In an oral interview conducted on September 25th, Chief Elder Stephen Wachuku recounted how Agba Ndele once a peaceful, united, and prosperous community was severely impacted by a conflict that persisted from 2016 to 2019. This crisis not only forced many residents to flee and seek refuge in neighboring communities but also led to the decline of the Eri Ozurumba dance ensemble, which had long been a source of cultural pride and communal joy.

Historical Background of Rundele Community

Chief Elder Stephen Wachuku of Rundele community, in a personal interview conducted in 2021, recounted the genealogical and cultural origins of Agba Ndele, the youngest of the five villages that constitute Rundele community. These villages include Mgbuolua-Rundele, Mgbulia-Rundele, Omofo-Rundele, Egamini-Rundele, and Agba Ndele. Historically, the members of these communities cohabited in the territories of Mgbuolua and Mgbulia.

According to oral tradition, Ndele, the patriarch of the community, had several children, among whom Ohia was a skilled and adventurous hunter. On one of his expeditions, Ohia ventured deep into a dense forest until he arrived at the Sombrio River, where he encountered a fisherman. Initially, Ohia prepared to shoot, but the man signaled to him not to attack. The fisherman, known as Obomate, was from the Bille Kingdom in Degema Local Government Area and the son of a man called Mr. Slink. Although they did not share a common language, Ohia and Obomate communicated using gestures. Their interaction evolved into a friendship characterized by the exchange of food: Ohia offered roasted yam while Obomate reciprocated with dried fish.

This cultural and interpersonal exchange took place in a location that came to be known as Amakalabari, a site that retains symbolic significance to this day. Their meetings became routine, occurring every eight days at a site that later developed into the Ahia-gbo market,

now a thriving commercial hub. This relationship between the Bille and Ndele people introduced a greeting tradition "Bille-Ndele" and "Ndele-Bille" which reinforced cross-community relations across generations. Consequently, the Bille Kingdom frequently extends invitations to Agba Ndele during important events, often accompanied by gift exchanges during traditional and chieftaincy ceremonies. Upon returning home, Ohia narrated his experience to his father, Ndele, describing both his encounter and the fertile land he had discovered. However, instead of rewarding Ohia, Ndele sent another son, Ehior, along with his wife, to occupy the newly discovered land. This led to Ehior's family claiming a substantial portion of the land, giving them the largest agricultural holdings in the area.

Ehior later founded the Agba Ndele community, together with his brothers Ozogwu, Orlu, and Okparaeri. Ohia and other siblings such as Aita, Wodno, and Okne arrived later and established their own lineages. These lineages have evolved into eight distinct family groups within Agba Ndele: Rumuozogwu (formerly Ozogwu), Rumuorlu (Orlu), Okparaeri, Ovhia (Ohia), Atata (Aita), Eleke-Wodno (Wodno), and Eleke-Oknem (Okne). These family lines are now integral components of Rumundele town, where vital ancestral rituals are primarily conducted by the Ehior, Rumuozogwu, and Rumuorlu families. Economically, Agba Ndele people are predominantly engaged in farming and fishing. They are particularly renowned for producing high-quality yam and cassava, and for their locally processed garri, which ranks among the best in Emuoha Local Government Area. The community is also distinguished for its cultural vibrancy, especially through its traditional wrestling festivals and dance performances, notably during the annual new yam festival.

Agba Ndele upholds a number of deeply rooted customary laws, the violation of which carries grave consequences. Some of these prohibitions include engaging in sexual activity on bare ground, flogging an indigene with a broom, recklessly pouring water on a community member, locking someone indoors out of anger, and committing abortion. Breaches of these norms are believed to provoke spiritual retribution. For example, unconfessed sexual activity on bare ground is thought to result in a mysterious illness that may lead to death, with the victim's remains relegated to burial in an unholy forest.

This deep commitment to cultural preservation including language, folklore, customs, arts, agriculture, and communal sports is embodied in the revered Eri Ozurumba dance. This cherished dance remains central to community festivals, reinforcing Agba Ndele's identity and sustaining its cultural legacy.

Origin of *Eri Ozurumba* dance music group in *Agba Ndele* Community

In the Agba Ndele community, Eri Ozurumba translates to "the dance whose fame transcends communities," and it is widely known simply as the Eri dance. According to Elder Stephen Wachuku (personal interview, 2021), the dance group was established in 1985 and quickly gained prominence within the community. Although many of its founding members have since passed on, the legacy of the dance remains strong.

Traditionally, Agba Ndele custom mandates that whoever is coronated as the Oha (community leader) of Rundele also assumes the role of leader of the Eri Ozurumba dance group. At the time of this study, the group was led by 83-year-old Chief Ohana Odemelem

Obodo, the reigning Oha of Rundele. However, due to his declining health, leadership responsibilities have been partially delegated to his deputy, Elder Chief Stephen Wachuku, who actively works to sustain the group's operations.

Elder Wachuku further explained that the Eri dance was not indigenous to Agba Ndele but was adopted from Choba, a neighboring community in Rivers State. After witnessing a vibrant cultural performance in Choba, a group of individuals from Agba Ndele both elders and youth were inspired to introduce the dance into their own community. Following a series of consultations and planning sessions, and after securing permission and formal agreements with Choba representatives, the dance was officially brought into Agba Ndele and incorporated into its cultural life.

Importantly, the Eri Ozurumba dance is regarded as a communal heritage rather than the property of any individual. Membership in the group is open to all community members, and any financial proceeds from performances are considered communal resources. The group is structured with a formal leadership hierarchy that ensures proper organization and sustainability.

Since its inception, Chief Ohana Odemelem Obodo has served as chairman of the dance group. Supporting him are other executive members who handle various aspects of administration. These include Chief Anthony Wigbudu (vice chairman), Elder Stephen Wachuku (secretary), Chief Raphael Ehior (financial secretary), Elder Nmekini Wigbudu (treasurer), Elder Boniface Agumagu, and Mr. Alete Monijor. Together, these individuals are responsible for managing the day-to-day affairs of the dance group, ensuring its continuity and alignment with community values.



Photo 1:
Chief Ohnademelem Obodo (Oha of Rundele) the chairman of Eri dance music group

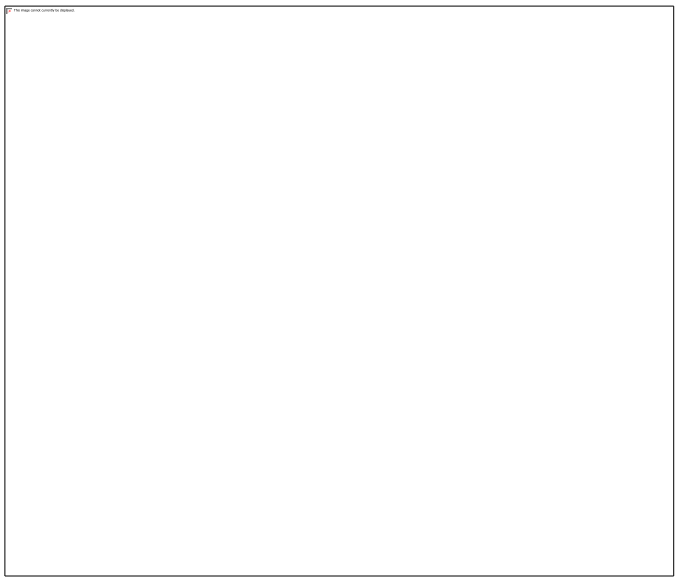


Photo 2: Members of the executives. From the right, the Chairman, Chief OhnaOdemelemObodo, Elder Stephen Wachuku, Secretary and other elders

Recruitment/Membership

The Eri dance is fundamentally a communal enterprise, characterized by inclusivity across age and gender. Both young and elderly individuals male and female alike are eligible for membership, and historically, the group has recorded over 2,000 participants. Membership is unrestricted and open to all, reflecting its role as a unifying cultural practice.

Seventeen distinct masquerades are affiliated with the dance, enhancing its visual and symbolic richness. Registration into the dance group is entirely free of charge, reinforcing its communal ownership and cultural significance. Performances are typically staged during major communal events, including Christmas and New Year festivities, cultural celebrations, chieftaincy coronations, burial ceremonies, and heroic homecomings. These occasions often serve to honor distinguished sons and daughters of the community, both those residing locally and those who have excelled beyond its borders.

Additionally, the group regularly responds to invitations to perform at events within and outside the community, further promoting cultural exchange and the visibility of Agba Ndele's heritage.. For invitations coming from outside the community the following items listed below must be presented to the Leader:
Cash of one thousand naira (N 1,000)
2 bottles of dry gin
1 carton of beer
1 crate of mineral

On presentation of these items to the leader, the leader invites all the members of the *Eri* dance group and presents the items before them. They in turn accept these items and thereafter, honor the invitation as agreed. However, at the end of the performance, the invitees are obliged to provide another set of items to the performers. Items presented at the end of the performance to the dance group include:

1 big ram
10 tubers of yam
5 crates of mineral
4 cartons of beer
4 bottles of dry gin
2 crates of malt
Kola and alligator pepper
1 fowl (cock)
A bunch of plantain

These items are provided because of the number of persons that are involved in the performance since it is a community affair and the items presented are for their relaxation and merriment after the performance.

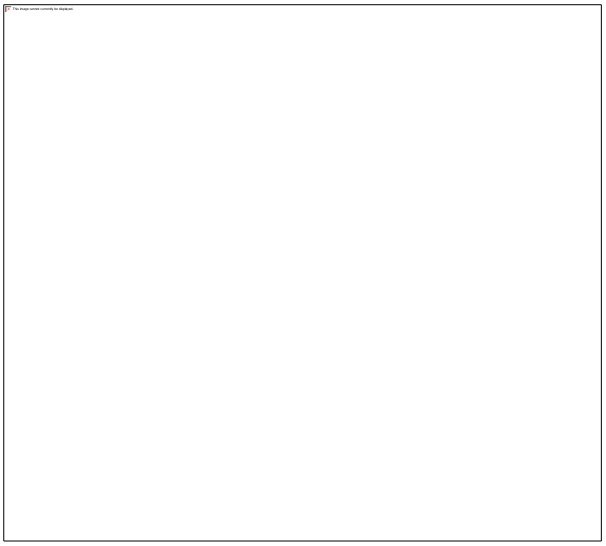


Photo 3: The Eri Dancers

Costumes
In 1985 when the group came into existence, they had a particular uniform but due to insecurity in the community, uniform was abandoned, replaced with plain George wrapper on white t-shirt at performances.

Rules/Regulations and Rites of Death
The Eri dance group of Agba Ndele community upholds a strict code of conduct that reflects the moral and ethical values of the society. Members are expressly forbidden from engaging in acts of theft or physical altercations, whether within the community or beyond its boundaries. Violations of these rules attract penalties, with offenders required to pay fines that are proportionate to the severity of the misconduct.

In the event of a member's death, it is customary for the deceased's family to notify the group's chairman and executive members. As a mark of respect and solidarity, the dance group performs during the burial ceremony to honor the life and contributions of the departed member, reinforcing communal bonds and the group's commitment to collective values.

Conflict in the fall of *Eri Ozurumba* Cultural Dance Group

In a personal interview conducted on September 25th, Elder Stephen Wachuku, who serves as the secretary of the Eri Ozurumba dance group, offered further insight into the organization and execution of the group's performances. According to him, the dance is held on a date chosen collectively by the community elders. On the designated day, drummers arrive at the village square as early as 5:00 a.m. to set up their instruments, creating an atmosphere of excitement that signals the beginning of the much-anticipated celebration.

The main performance officially begins at 12 noon, marked by Eri songs accompanied by rhythmic drumming. Dancers, instrumentalists, and community members don coordinated attire that reflects the festive nature of the occasion. The celebration includes a variety of cultural dances performed by several masquerades, each showcasing unique movements and symbolic expressions. Among the masquerades featured are Torki, Ugo, Nwabyimaranma, Ogbuekinima, Wodiria, Agadinwanyi, Egbene, Obenekwe, Evulu, Ohia, Sweet and Bitter, Aranorgba-mba, Ortusubar, and Ozurumba.

During the event, community members express appreciation and support by offering items such as drinks, money, yams, and plantains to the dancers and instrumentalists. Even those unable to participate physically often show engagement by nodding their heads or tapping their toes in rhythm. After the performance, the financial proceeds are distributed among members on a date agreed upon by the group, with a portion of the funds reserved for the group's maintenance and future activities.

At the height of its influence, the Eri Ozurumba dance group held the distinction of being the most respected and celebrated cultural group in Agba Ndele. However, the group's prominence was severely disrupted in 2016, when the community was plunged into a period of violent conflict marked by arson, manslaughter, thuggery, and general insecurity. Fearing for their safety, members of the dance group fled, and performances came to a halt.

The unrest, which persisted from 2016 to 2019, led to the total abandonment of the Eri Ozurumba group. Even after peace was restored, efforts to revive the group were met with hesitation and difficulty, as the trauma of the conflict lingered and the once-thriving cultural symbol struggled to regain its former stature.

***Eri Ozurumba* Musical Instruments**

Musical instruments serve as the foundation of any performance, providing the rhythmic structure that guides the dancers' movements and showcases their skill. As noted by Onwuka (2012), "each musical instrument of a dance ensemble is socio-culturally chosen in consideration of its propensities to perform one, two or more sociocultural roles" (p. 47). In line with this, the instruments used in the Eri dance ensemble are carefully selected to align with the group's cultural and performance needs.

These instruments are handcrafted using locally sourced materials, reinforcing the community's connection to its environment. All components required for their construction are readily available within Agba Ndele or nearby areas, and the instruments themselves are assembled by local artisans. Supporting this view, Okafor (2005) observes that "Nigerian

musical instruments are virtually all made of materials sourced from the local governments," emphasizing the indigenous nature of traditional musical craftsmanship. (p.66)"Agu (1990) supports that,

> Nigerians are great lovers of music. As they create and perform music so also, do they manufacture the musical instruments. The production of the variety of instruments by Nigerians was made possible by their ability to harness their environments as much as possible making effective use of local materials around them with good results (p. 55).

The musical instruments used in the Eri dance are crafted by skilled artisans within the Agba Ndele community. These include various types of drums and slit wooden drums, categorized under the idiophone and membranophone families, which serve both tangible and intangible purposes in the cultural setting.

According to Onyekwelu (2011), the oja, a traditional instrument in Igbo musical culture, "plays multiple roles and operates in both physical and spiritual worlds, implying that the two worlds share the same experience" (p. 41). Similarly, in the context of Eri dance, these instruments not only inspire physical movement and community gathering but also evoke spiritual and emotional responses.

During performances, the sound of the instruments draws people together, encouraging expressive dancing and showcasing physical agility. Beyond their entertainment value, these instruments are believed to possess therapeutic and symbolic significance. They uplift the spirit, offer emotional relief, stimulate communal motivation, and nurture a sense of love and unity among participants.

Onwuekwe (2011) further supports this notion, stating that "apart from music making, Nigerian musical instruments perform other functions. These include solo instruments, communication, therapy, sorrowing and mourning, symbolism, and court instruments" (p. 141). In Agba Ndele, the instruments used in Eri dance are not merely for accompaniment—they are viewed as tools with healing potential. They are believed to invigorate farmers and laborers, helping them to cope with the physical demands of their work by alleviating fatigue and accelerating productivity through rhythmic stimulation.

The musical instruments of in *Eri* dance are:



Photo 5: Okwo (2 Big Slit Wooden Drums

Masquerade Dancers) **slit wooden drum). It is only the Elderly members from 80 years and above that are allowed to sit on these Ngadachairs**



Photo 8: Eri Dance Musical Instruments

While all the musical instruments used in the Eri dance ensemble contribute meaningfully to the overall performance, the pair of okwo (slit wooden drums) holds particular cultural and musical importance. These instruments are central to the rhythm and structure of the dance, while the others serve complementary or supportive roles.

During performances, the smaller okwo drums work in tandem with the eukwaa (large drum) to produce layered rhythmic patterns that guide the dancers. In addition, long rattles are incorporated as part of the masquerade ensemble, enhancing the visual and auditory impact of the event.

Complementing the instrumental arrangement are specially crafted wooden chairs, traditionally made within the community. These chairs, distinguished by their three-legged design, are reserved for the elderly specifically, individuals aged 80 and above. They are positioned at performance venues or rehearsal grounds to provide dignified seating for senior community members, symbolizing respect and reverence for age and wisdom during cultural events.

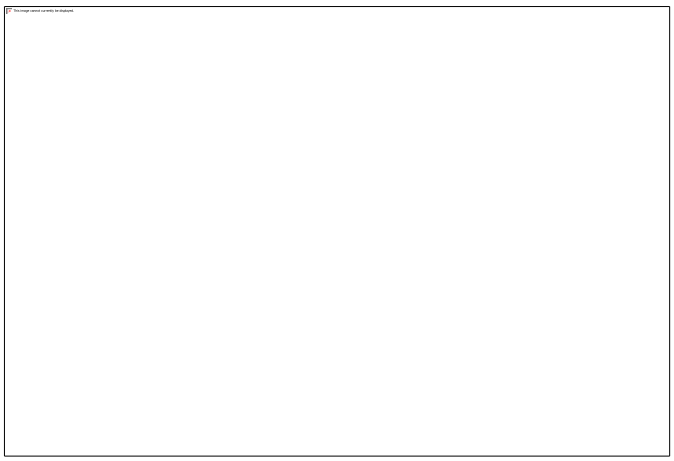


Photo 9: Elders Special Chair

Conclusion

The Eri dance group stands as the most distinguished and influential cultural ensemble in the Agba Ndele community. Its membership process is entirely communal, reflecting the inclusive nature of the group's structure. The local economy is primarily sustained through fishing, farming, and trade, which are the key sources of livelihood for the people.

As a cultural expression, the Eri dance plays a vital role in promoting joy, unity, peace, and social engagement among community members. Cultural preservation is essential for the continuity of a people's identity across generations. Although the outbreak of insecurity in Agba Ndele disrupted Eri dance activities for a period of three years, the return of peace has paved the way for the group's revitalization unlike many other cultural groups that have faded due to internal conflict.

The resilience and sustainability of the Eri dance group are rooted in its intergenerational appeal, with both youth and elders actively participating. Moreover, the instruments used in performances are crafted locally from readily available materials, ensuring continuous

production. This not only supports the cultural tradition but also contributes economically by generating income for local artisans involved in the creation of these instruments.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

Eri Ozurumba songs and dance should be properly recorded, scored and documented in the archives

Rivers State Government and Emohua Local Government should sponsor the performance of *Eri* dance for the upliftment and promulgation of culture and unity of the people at the local and state levels.

The *Eri* dance songs should encourage the youths to desist from social vices capable of destroying the community which was handed over to them by their forefathers.

Many instrumentalists should be trained so that there will be no vacuum in the performance of any instrument as this will aid in the fast rebuilding of the dance group.

The instruments should be preserved in the chairman's residence for accessibility and sustainability of the group.

References

Agu, D. C. C. (1990). The primary of music in Igbo traditional religion. In Ekpunobi, E. and Ezeaku, I (Eds).*Socio Philosophical Perspective of African Traditional Religion.* New Age Publication.

Agu, D. C. C. (1996). *Music types and music making in Nigeria*.University of Nigeria Press.

Azivudu, C.A. (2021). *Eri*dance and its relevance to the people of AgbaNdele community in Emuoha local government area of rivers state.An unpublished project work, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Okafor, R.C. (2005). *Music in Nigerian society*. New Generation Books.

Onuora-Oguno, N. and Nwamara, A. (2014).Sustainable development and folklore in the traditional Igbo society, challenges and solutions.*Awka Journal of Research*. 114-122

Onwuekwe, A.I. (2011). Nigerian musical instruments.*Journal of the Department of Music, University of Uyo, Nigeria* (*JOMA*), 134-142.

Onwuka, U.A. (2012). *A basic textbook for dance education in Nigeria*. Jenison Publishing Company.

Onyekwele, N.C. (2011). Oja, a dynamic musical instrument east of the Niger: Possibilities and challenges in the global musical art. *Journal of the Department of Music, University of Uyo, Nigeria* (*JOMA*), 41-46.