

## **ESE MUSIC: HONOURS FOR THE DEAD: STATUS FOR THE SPONSOR**

*by*

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1. The Igbo society<sup>1</sup> is a distinct culture area in the political entity called Nigeria. Nigeria, population estimated at over 88 millions, is a country populated by over 248 distinct linguistic-cultural groups. A fast modernising nation naturally endowed with mineral (predominantly oil) wealth, and now practising a presidential system of modern government (since October 1979) after 13 years of military rule, Nigeria is a nation where modern technology and value systems operate in apposition with traditional belief systems. Thus, for instance, the average modern educated Nigerian belongs to one of the many modern religious organisations and enjoys scientific appurtenances of modern living and habits at the same time as he observes, with deep spiritual attachment, the traditional precepts and obligations regarding his customary relationships with his kins, living and dead. On the other hand the average traditionally educated Nigerian is attracted as well as awed by the sophistications of the modern state system with its religio-economic trappings. At the same time he disapproves of their disorganising influences on his more cherished tradi-cultural values and belief systems.

It is possible to identify Igbo music as a distinctive musico-traditional sound within the diverse milieu of Nigerian musical cultures. At the present stage of Igbo music research in the context of Nigerian musics, it is not yet possible to itemize those specific elements of musical sound that give Igbo music its distinctive sound quality. There is no doubt that at the deep structural level there are common features of style and practice which characterise Igbo music. At the very superficial and general levels, there are distinguishing features. Thus, apart from the presence of text in vocal music types, there is such an identifying feature as multi-dimensional approach to rhythmic organisation even in a homophonic composition. There is also a tradition of institutional designation of musical conceptions and usages. In this context, although a common cultural institution with common ideational formulations will prescribe specific music that identifies it and accompanies its activities in private or public, the details of a musical construct (form, compositional features, instrumentation, organisation and presentation) which has been created and adopted for such an institution will vary from one Igbo area to another. Thus there are ritual/institutional celebrations like funerary rites, which are common to all Igbo. But funerary music has different names, instrumentation, characteristics of form and structure, organisation and contextual roles in different Igbo areas. Equally, there are age-sex considerations as well as factors of status of death which prescribe the presence or absence of music, and specify the type of music institutionalized or featured for funerary events in a given Igbo community. Thus, in Uratta, central Igbo, *oghom* music is established for the funerary rites in honour of deceased adult men generally; while *ogidi* music is specially designated for meritocratic men in the same community. In Nkwere, north of

Uratta, *abia* is the music for the funerary rites of fully mature and accomplished men. But to announce the death of adults there are two ritual wooden slit-drums called *nkwishì*. One is used to announce the death of a woman, the other the death of a man. The sound of a drum signifies the sex of the deceased. The name of the deceased is also encoded during the obituary announcement. In Ihiala, north central Igbo, *uhie* music performance symbolizes the proper burial of a fully titled adult man. In Ngwa, southern Igbo, *ukom* music is institutionalized for the funerary rites of a woman of achievement; while the sound of *ese* music signifies the death and funerary events of a male 'person' of achievement.

A funerary situation of any significant ritual or celebratory dimension in Igbo society will ordinarily attract a variety of musical presentations. But only the designated funerary music will accompany the funerary rites. (There could be more than one institutionalized music type/item specified for the various aspects of the rites). The other non-funerary musical presentations featured will include those sponsored by various categories of people/societies, like affines and clubs, associated with the deceased or the sponsors of the funerary occasion. These supporting musical presentations have no ritual or structural significance in the funerary context, but they signify the interest groups officially involved or represented, as well as generally help to boost the scenic-festive atmosphere of the occasion — especially if it is the *okwukwu* 'canonization' — the final funerary celebration.

2. There is sufficient ethnomusicological and musicological literature to suggest that all over the world certain musical sounds, instruments or other musical rationalizations signify or symbolize other cultural meanings, events, situations and ideas. These are culturally ascribed symbolisms, basic to cultural phonic preferences, which inform creativity and presentation. In his fundamental book, *The Anthropology of Music*, Merriam has dwelt with analytical insight, on the symbolic and significant perspectives of music (instrument and sound) in various world cultures. We know from his account about the Western ascriptions to certain Western instruments and music sounds; the ascription of moods to the Indian raga; the philosophical rationalizations of the degrees of the Chinese pentatonic scale and the *Huang chung* (fundamental tone); the political (kingship) meanings associated with certain drums (structure and distinguishing sound) in parts of Africa (see also Nketia 1963, 1973; Carrington 1949, 1956; Blades 1975).

The mass communication intentions of traditional music have been studied and analysed to show that they are implicated in the concepts and principles informing the construction and usage of musical instruments as well as in the creative-utilitarian formulations informing musical composition and presentation in the Igbo society (Nzewi 1980). It is partly from this perspective of musical thinking that we have to understand the centrality of the *ese*<sup>2</sup> as a musical instrument as well as a musical form in the funerary context for which it was conceived and institutionalized: *ese* music informs about a funeral, conducts its ritual-dramatic activities, symbolizes the community's endorsement of the honours and credits accruing from an *okwukwu* funerary event, whilst still fulfilling the traditional valuation of music as an entertainment implicated art form.

To appreciate the centrality and role of *ese* music in a funerary celebration for adult

men, an understanding of the form and structure of funerary events in the Ngwa community of the Igbo is prerequisite. The Ngwa concept of a 'person', *madu*, is an individual who has i) established his own nuclear family (wife/ wives and children), ii) buried his father (with *ese* music) and mother (with *ukom* music), iii) become head of an agnatic lineage or a patrilineage, iv) achieved membership of the *okonko* socio-political title association, v) captured the chimeric spirit-agent, *agwu*, and thereby become a spiritualized *dibia* (sacred person), and vi) achieved the highest socio-economic title, *eze ji* (yam chieftain). The first two are the most fundamental to make an individual acceptable in the community as a 'person' and an *amala* (member of a community's socio-political caucus). The others accrue higher social, political and religious stature.

There are three types of *ese* (three distinct instrumentations, musical constructs and utilitarian conceptions) hierarchically classified as follows: *ese elu ulo* (roof-top *ese*) the highest, is played at the physical burial of a man of extraordinary social, economic and political distinctions; the next, *ese ike* (powerful *ese*) is played for a man of above average merits; and *ese akpukpo* (skin [melodic] *ese*) is played for a 'person' of fundamental achievements. These classes of *ese* correspond to hierarchies of death. Thus for the highest category of death all three will be expected to be featured at the appropriate phases of the funerary events, and for different, specified aspects of a funerary scenario; for the next category, *ese ike* and *ese akpukpo* will be featured; while *ese akpukpo* generally referred to simply as *ese*, (and hereafter to be referred to as *ese*) is fundamental to symbolise, as a social fact, the funerary events of an average deceased male 'person'. When only *ese* is featured it conducts all the funerary proceedings including those that would have been reserved for the higher classes of *ese* were they also featured. For the purpose of this paper we shall be concerned with the role, the musical features, the instrumentation and the social-musical meaning of the fundamental *ese*.

When a man with the basic achievement (worthy children) dies, there are a number of esoteric rituals performed by select functionaries to ensure effective transition of the deceased's spirit and mien, also his effective and worthy reincarnation. After these private rituals have been successfully accomplished the children of the deceased or any other relation acting on their behalf will immediately negotiate the services of an *ese* music group. The arrival of the *ese* group, *ndi ese*, and the sound of *ese* music mark the public announcement of death to the general public.

3. There are three phases of funerary ceremonies for a meritorious deceased Ngwa male 'person':

First phase — The physical burial, *Ituba ozu ala* (putting the corpse into the ground). If the deceased's offspring cannot afford *ese* music-presence the deceased gets buried uneventfully, but will still be entitled to other phases of funerary ceremonies when his children or children's children can afford to give him merited final honours, i.e. 'canonize' him into ancestry. If the deceased merits it, *ese elu ulo* will be the first music to be performed at the roof top of his house where his corpse is lying in state. The music group will perform seven rounds of this highly mystical music as prescribed by tradition, climb down from the roof, collect their fee, and depart. Thereafter the fundamental *ese* will take over, to conduct the rest of the business of 'putting the corpse into the ground'. When this is done the musicians and everybody can depart.

This is a sad phase.

Second phase — *Ikpe Okwukwu* ‘Tribunal to approve the canonization Funerary Event’. Whenever the offspring of the deceased can afford to honour him with the ‘canonization’ funerary rites that will confer ancestral status on him, they will first perform the tribunal phase which involves only representative *amala*. The *amala*, the ‘community consensus’, will constitute themselves into a tribunal to investigate and adjudicate on the manner of the deceased’s death, his worthiness to be honoured with an ancestral status, and to satisfy themselves that the would-be celebrants, the children of the deceased, are worthy and capable, financially and in character, to host such a momentous event. *Ese* music is in attendance for this second phase which, in tradition, was spaced over seven consecutive *orie*<sup>3</sup> market days, hence it is also called *ikpe orie* (*orie* inquest). In the modern setting all the proceedings can be telescoped into one or two *orie* days.

Third phase — *Okwukwu* (Canonization into Ancestry). This celebration which is both ritualistic and festive in conception, scope and content marks the final funerary ceremonies on behalf of a deceased ‘person’. The rest of our discussion will be focussed on this most vital and elaborate phase hereafter referred to as *okwukwu*.

*Okwukwu* or *Igbasu Ozu* (shooting up [into supramundane existence] of a corpse) is the assignation of an ancestral role to a distinguished deceased adult male; while the social, political and religious roles he held on earth devolve on a new incumbent, his first son, who bears the onus of hosting the ceremony. The mood is celebratory but some of the events have profound implications. It calls for categories of functionaries and principals. By traditional stipulation it should last for three days starting from an *eke ukwu* (big *eke* market) day, through *orie* day, to be concluded in the evening of the *afo ukwu* market day. The scenario of events is as follows:

First, *afo ukwu* day:- in the morning, there will be booms of the earth cannon which first announce to the community and visitors, especially those arriving for the big market, that an important event is scheduled to start. When the big market is in full session, the daughters of the deceased, supported by women well-wishers, will parade through the full market in ceremonial attire and style to advertise the event and also show off the prestige of the deceased. The cows to be killed during the ritual acts of the event will also be paraded around the market at the same time for the same purpose of advertising the importance and social eminence of the deceased and/or his children. In the evening the *ese* musicians arrive and perform the ritual respects to *Ala* deity (*Ihu Ala ivu*). They will, thereafter, play a concert session performance of *ese* music to announce to the general public, particularly the *amala*, that the ceremony is starting and that the *ese* musicians have arrived to mourn and repose the deceased on behalf of the bereaved. When the *amala*, who constitute the principal guests in the *okwukwu* ceremony (it is their deceased colleague that is being permanently sent off while concomitantly they are admitting his successor, the *opara*, ‘first son’, into their caucus) hear the *ese* music in their various homes it is a signal that *okwukwu* events are about to commence. They leave their homes and converge at the venue. Later, the same evening, when the *ese* musicians finish their concert performance, the *amala* will hold court. The business of the court is to satisfy themselves that all the customary stipulations and presentations prescribed for the ceremony have been procured. These are brought out and presented for them to assess and approve or accept. The *amala*



may raise objections about any shortcomings. When they are satisfied that the traditional stipulations have been fulfilled they will authorise the chief host, their aspiring colleague, to ask the *ese* musicians to start the performance that launches *okwukwu* activities. While the *amala* court is in session, the married daughters are equally holding a women's court in another location to ensure that the daughters of the deceased fulfil the customary stipulations expected of them for the privilege of conferring on their father an ancestral status. The *ese* musicians will continue playing with other supporting music groups present to keep vigil until the early hours of the morning.

Second, *orie ukwu*, day:- About four o'clock in the morning, *ese* music performance is resumed to wake up the community, summon the public back to the venue from their homes while, through their choice of themes, the master musician continues to mourn the deceased and query his sons. *Amala* court will hold again this morning in preparation for the most momentous event of an *okwukwu* ceremony: *Igbu aku*: 'killing of wealth'. At the conclusion of their court they move outside and converge in front of *ese* music post to officiate, supervise and bear witness to the climactic episodes of the ceremony: the ritual 'killing of wealth'. This event takes place in front of *ese* and is immediately followed by the most significant profession on *ese* oath symbol by the first son. The killing of wealth requires the first son to sever the head of a consecrated he-goat in front of *ese* with one stroke of a sharp long knife at a moment of heightened physical tension. By the act of severing the head of the goat the first son symbolically severs the deceased from all his earthly roles and obligations. The deceased, thus metaphysically liberated, is venerated thereby as being of ancestral (supernatural) reckoning, while the liberator, the first son, attains his (the deceased's) earthly roles, privileges and obligations as an *amala*. When the first and second sons finish their acts (the second son severs the head of a cow), the first daughter's act in honour of her deceased father takes place: she dances ceremonially in front of *ese* with her father's personal possessions — costume or other material objects. In the evening of the same day the mourning wives will perform their ritual act of absolution. This psychological drama which is structured to specific *ese* music items is designed for the wives to swear off any ill wills and further earthly obligations towards the deceased and thereby free themselves from further earthly obligations to him. This significant performance, if successfully executed, wins for the actor freedom to conduct her normal life, re-marry or live her independent life.

Third, *afo ukwu*, day:- In the morning the married daughters of the deceased perform their final acts of honouring their father. In this act they are sponsored by their respective husbands. They put on special adornments and are escorted by their co-virilocal wives and husband's relations. By custom every daughter of the deceased, married or unmarried (unmarried daughters are sponsored by their mothers and brothers) must come out to honour her deceased father in front of *ese* symbol. In the evening of this third day the *ese* musicians give their final performance with which they conclude the entire *okwukwu* celebrations. It is at this stage that they play a specific compartment, *Ifo*, of *ese* music which signifies the conclusion of *okwukwu* funerary celebrations.

4. *Ese* music has five compartments or movements (fig.1) each of which is distinguishable in terms of its musical characteristics: specific melorhythmic structure

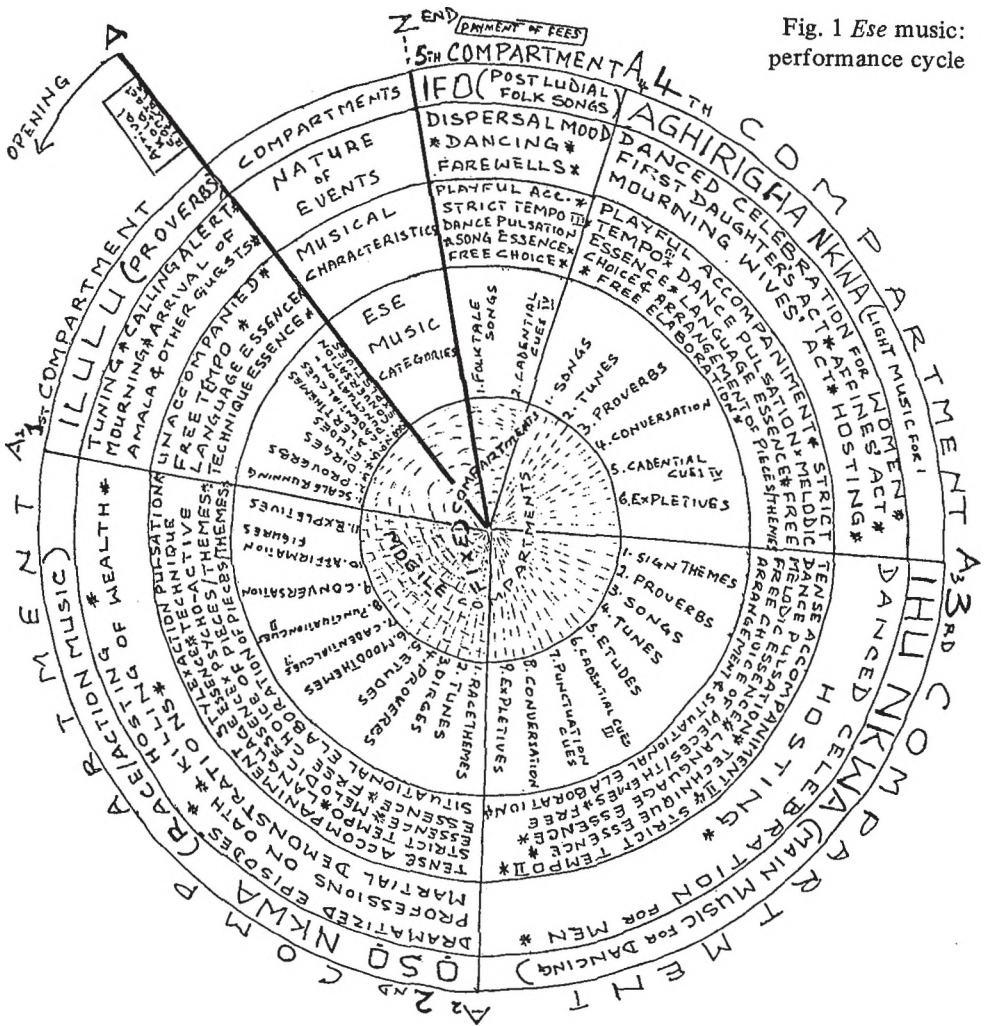


Fig. 1 Ese music: performance cycle

which is the orchestral framework on which the master musician superimposes his solo compositions. Each compartment is further distinguished in its mood recommendation, its specific repertory of pieces and themes from which a master musician can select stock materials to order a composition during a performance session, and also the specific ritual, dramatic or other contextual activities which are conceived and/or structured into its musical features. The five compartments, in order of presentation, are:-

1. *Ihulu*, 'Proverbs'
2. *Osu Nkwa*, 'Racing (martial) music'
3. *Ihu Nkwa*, 'Face (main body of)
4. *Aghirigha Nkwa*, 'Light hearted music', and
5. *Ifo*, 'Folk tale songs' (Light entertainment music)

*ILULU NKWA* is the first compartment of the *Ese* performance cycle (fig. 1). It is a prelude, in free time and tempo, played unaccompanied on the *ese* master instrument by the master musician. He earns this distinction because he is not just a master drummer, he is equally a composer-arranger, and a conductor, not only of the orchestra but also of ritual/dramatic actors who perform to his music. Moreover, he needs to be very knowledgeable about the programme (theatrical, social, ritual) of the event for which his music has been conceived and formulated. *Ihulu* is a compartment in loose form and the master musician selects and develops each theme as an independent item, and with an interpretative skill that will communicate its musical and contextual intentions most effectively. The various musical and contextual intentions implicated in the categories of *ese* music themes employed for composing in this compartment include: tuning the melody drum row, alerting the general public to the event or its scenario which is about to commence, mourning the deceased with textually derived dirges, welcoming the principal and other distinguished guests, querying the host, etc. For each of these intentions there are specific categories of themes from which the master musician can select his materials. Each thematic category has its distinguishable set of pieces or themes. A creative master musician can originate a new theme/piece which exhibits the musical-contextual distinctions and characteristics of the thematic category or compartment. This will eventually become part of the repertory. The thematic categories found in this compartment include scalar themes for checking the fine tuning of the drum row, proverbs, dirges, etudes of sheer musical-virtuosic interest, alert calls, expletives and conversational sentences encoded on the drum row.

*OSO NKWA* is the second compartment of the performance cycle. The orchestral group joins the master musician in this compartment and plays with him for the rest of the performance session. The accompaniment framework is specific to the compartment and has a definite time-span referent for the phrase-pattern assigned to each instrument. Given this fixed and reiterative accompaniment framework a performance-form for this compartment derives from the ingenuity as well as the event-inspired composition of the master musician. The form is through-composed. He uses his musical judgement, basic to the features of the scenarios which this compartment is conceived and designed to structure and conduct, to select, develop and arrange appropriate themes from categories of *ese* repertory. The resulting formal-musical details of a performance-session are variable. But there is a formal-structural model for every *Oso Nkwa* compartment composed by any master musician or by the same master-musician in various sessions. This musical model derives from the fixed accompaniment framework and the common repertoire of themes and pieces specific to this compartment, and also from the standard features of the theatrical activities structured into the compartment. This principle of a formal-structural model as a basis for situational composition is equally applicable to the other *ese* compartments. The *Oso nkwa* compartment, within its through-composed form, has two distinct sections differentiated by musical-theatrical features: *Igba Ota* (action music for martial demonstrations and ritual activities); and *Itu Aka N'ese* (mood music background for 'professing on *Ese* oath'). This compartment which is organised in common time is in a fast tempo. The mood it generates in actors and audience alike is tense. The ritual-theatrical activities scheduled to be accompanied by, or structured

to, this compartment include:

Consecrating a he-goat for the psycho-cosmic act of 'killing wealth'. This is performed by the eight jurors (four representing the ancestors and four the living *amala*) who officiated as principal jurors during the *okwukwu* tribunal. The 'killing of wealth' which follows is performed by the first son of the deceased. For him, this is a psycho-physical test implicating portentous results. He is expected to sever the head of the consecrated he-goat with one stroke of a sharp long knife. *Igbu aku*, 'Killing wealth', symbolizes a ritual severance of all the earthly roles and obligations of the deceased and the transference of same to the actor. Failure to cut through or sever completely the head of the goat has penalties as well as other deeper social-psychological interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Profession on *ese* oath immediately follows a successful accomplishment of 'killing wealth'. Martial demonstrations initiate and link sequences of profession on oath by an actor. The second son of the deceased performs the test of severing the head of a cow with a specified number of strokes of his knife (usually two) to be followed by his own profession episode. When no scheduled performances are taking place, depending on the funerary phase and scenario, other *amala*, who are entitled, can take turns professing on *ese* oath. Otherwise the compartment then serves as background mood music for the reception and hosting of guests. The master musician uses his musical-dramatic judgement in selecting, developing and arranging pieces/themes from appropriate *ese* thematic categories. His compositional skill is applied towards promoting and structuring the ritual-theatrical activities scheduled in the *Oso nkwa* compartment. His selections of *Oso nkwa*-specific materials, come from the following thematic categories of *ese* music: racing (martial) themes, tunes, dirges, proverbs, etudes, mood themes, conversational patterns and expletives etc. Selections from each thematic category implicate some specific theatrical enaction or messages relevant to the funerary context.

*IHU NKWA* is the name of the third compartment of *ese* performance-cycle. The character of the accompaniment framework played by the orchestra is specific to the compartment and quite distinct from that for *Oso Nkwa*. By its typical sound it is generally identified as *ihu nkwa* accompaniment. The formal model on which the master musician elaborates with his solo situational compositions is through-composed and he superimposes his compositions on the fixed accompaniment framework. The compositional process is similar to that of *Oso nkwa*. The choice, sequence and development of pieces/themes are at the discretionary judgement of the master musician informed by contingent factors as well as his musical-dramatic sensibility. The character of the accompaniment here is more relaxed than in the previous compartment. It is organised in compound time, in strict tempo and in regular danceable pulsation. This is a celebratory compartment danced to by men (and 'women who can dance'). When a qualified actor finishes professing on *ese* oath this compartment immediately follows. He and his supporters will dance to celebrate his performance during the preceding *Oso nkwa* compartment. When no scheduled ritual/theatrical activity is taking place, anybody who wishes to can dance when *ihu nkwa* is played. Otherwise it generates a background mood for whatever funerary businesses or hosting may be taking place. Musical themes/pieces used for developing this section are by their musical characteristics categorised as *Ihu nkwa*. For composing, the master musician can select materials specific to this compartment



from the following thematic categories of *ese* music: songs, tunes, etudes, proverbs, conversational patterns, expletives and sign themes etc.

*AGHIRIGHA NKWA* is the fourth compartment of *ese* performance-cycle. The structure of the accompaniment framework is playful and relaxed, although one of the acts it conducts and structures is a psychological cosmic drama, this time involving the wives of the deceased. There are two variants of the fundamental accompaniment framework depending on the structural characteristics of a piece introduced by the master musician. This compartment shares the same accompaniment framework with the fifth and last compartment. The overall form of the compartment is through-composed. The choice, sequence, and development are at the discretion of the master musician-soloist. This compartment is structured on a compound rhythmic organisation. It is again played in strict tempo with each accompanist maintaining, or improvising within, his given accompaniment theme. Because of the rather sober mood of this compartment, compared to the previous two, the accompanists do not indulge in tensional variations. The *Aghirigha nkwa* compartment is conceived as the women's compartment in the same way as the *Oso nkwa* is exclusively for men's acting, and the *Ihu nkwa* for men's celebratory dancing. In a concert session of the *ese* performance form the *Aghirigha nkwa* follows immediately after the *Ihu nkwa*. During event-performance the position of *Aghirigha nkwa* in the eventual performance form is variable. It will depend on the activities, scheduled or incidental, taking place on the ground. Thus, when a woman or women are scheduled to act in front of *ese*, like the dance act of the first daughter, the *Aghirigha nkwa* compartment is played. When the married daughters of the deceased perform their scheduled dances to celebrate their father's new honorary status as an ancestor, they perform to the *Aghirigha nkwa* compartment. Also, when the deceased's surviving wives perform their psychological-cosmic drama of absolution, they do so to this compartment. When this compartment is played during the ordinary course of an *ese* performance cycle without any scheduled acts, it is used for dancing by everybody. The master musician selects themes/pieces with which to structure, arrange, develop and organise this compartment from specific songs, tunes, proverbs, conversational patterns and expletives specific to this compartment. This is ordinarily used to conclude a session's performance of *ese* music. It is also used to end phases 1 & 2 of the funerary rites.

*Ifo* is the fifth and last compartment of *ese* music. Unlike the other compartments it is played only once during an *ese* event cycle, and that is during the final phase of funerary ceremonies — the canonization *okwukwu* ceremony. It is played on the final day of the celebration as the finale marking the conclusion of all celebrations for a deceased male person. Thus, in the last event-session of *ese* music performance in a funerary context the *Ifo* is played after the *Aghirigha nkwa* to sign off the activities. After its performance the musicians pack their instruments and go home. All the guests are then officially expected to depart. The hosts are thereafter acknowledged by their community as having achieved new social-political status in the society by virtue of having successfully reposed the spirit of their father in the ancestral realm. The *Ifo* compartment shares the same accompaniment framework with *Aghirigha nkwa*. Unlike the other compartments, *Ifo* is not through-composed. Rather, each piece introduced by the master musician is developed/extended and concluded with a cadential figure as a separate item before a new number is announced. The *Ifo*

compartment does not have any specific scheduled activities. But by its contextual conception (as a musical entertainment), and by the significance of its location in the performance cycle, people dance happily to its merry tunes and character. Others pay their final respects to the hosts or guests, as the case may be, before their final departure. The tempo is slow, cool and relaxed and the mood playful. The selection of numbers played in this compartment is made, not from any *ese*-specific repertory, rather popular folk songs or folktale songs of the society are adapted and extended.

From the foregoing we then find that in discussing *ese* music form there are two perspectives: the event form, and the concert form. The *ese* concert form, played for listening and/or dancing at periods when no scheduled funerary activities are conducted and structured by the music, is the model *ese* musical form with the following sequences of compartments: *Ilulu*, *Oso nkwa*, *Ihu nkwa*, *Aghirigha nkwa* (and *Ifo*). *Ese* event form implies contextually modified concert form: the overall sequence of compartments as well as the internal elaboration of each compartment derive from the activities, scheduled or incidental, which transpire during any given event-session. Thus we find musical form being determined in context by non-musical factors. These factors are, however, basic to the conception, formulation, organisation, structure, development and performance-composition of the music. In an event form the first three compartments are fixed and come in the following sequence: *Ilulu*, *Oso nkwa*, and *Ihu nkwa*. Thereafter the sequence of compartments could continue straight to *Aghirigha nkwa* (as in concert form) if no untoward occurrence reverses the order. If, however, there are justifiable contextual reasons for it, the master musician is constrained to move from *Ihu nkwa* back to *Oso nkwa*, noting of course that every performance of *Oso nkwa* must be followed immediately by *Ihu nkwa*. Thus we find *Ihu nkwa* as a pivotal compartment from which the musical form can move forward to *Aghirigha nkwa* (during a concert/uneventful session, and to conduct women's acts) or back to *Oso nkwa* (for men's acting). When an incident, like the arrival of a distinguished *amala* who is qualified to profess on *ese*, warrants an interruption of the model form, the master musician cadences an on-going *Ihu nkwa* or *Aghirigha nkwa*, as the case may be, and cues in the *Oso nkwa* with its specific cue-sign. This grants the distinguished *amala* the honour and respect of professing on *ese* oath. There are, therefore, fixed and mobile compartments in the event-conception and situational organisation of an *ese* event form. (Every performance occasion or sitting will yield its own variant form as per contextual factors which are not necessarily musical). *Ilulu*, *Oso nkwa*, *Ihu nkwa* and *Ifo* (as the finale) are the fixed compartments in the performance order. *Oso nkwa*, *Ihu nkwa* and *Aghirigha nkwa* are mobile. (It will be noted that *Aghirigha nkwa* is not to be played after *Oso nkwa*.) Every performance sitting must start with the *Ilulu* compartment. For the duration of that sitting it is not played again unless there is an unusual incident that will, perforce, warrant the temporary stoppage of a performance, like the bursting of a drum skin which will necessitate a break to repair or replace the bad drum. A resumption thereafter will call for a re-tuning of the entire drum row, and therefore must start with the *Ilulu nkwa* thus marking a fresh session. As already explained, the *Ifo* compartment, as marking the finale of *ese* music and, conjointly, of all funerary programmes, is played only once in the funerary ceremonies for a deceased male 'person'.

Because each compartment of *ese* music has its own typical structural characteristics distinguishable from that of other compartments, we find that it is not possible to transfer themes/pieces in any thematic category from a compartment for which it has been conceived and composed to another. Any such creative exercise will necessitate major re-structuring of the rhythmic, and consequently melodic, quality of the theme/piece. Thus, for example, although songs have been identified as a thematic category found in more than one compartment, song pieces which belong to the *Oso nkwa* compartment are distinguishable in terms of their musical characteristics from song pieces belonging to the *Ihu nkwa* or the *Aghirigha nkwa* compartment. What distinguishes songs belonging to the *Aghirigha nkwa* and the *Ifo* compartments is that *Ifo* songs are popular folk tale songs whereas *Aghirigha nkwa* songs are specific *ese* compositions categorizable in the society, and by folk terminology, as *ese* music. Generally, however, every *ese* piece/theme in the cultural repertory is identified by the compartment to which it belongs. The following are brief definitions of some of the thematic categories of *ese* music:

**Proverbs:** proverbs from the society's oral literature resources which are relevant and appropriate to the themes of a funerary context, or to contingent occurrences in a funerary situation. Master musicians have also made up proverbs which have become common knowledge and are de-codable by knowledgeable listeners.

**Dirges:** melodic patterns which simulate vocal expressions of lament in a death or tragic situation; also encoded texts which query the cause of death and the role played by the son in losing the father to death. Other dirgeful texts encoded on the drum row extol the virtues and status of the deceased.

**Etudes:** these are technical musical constructs which serve as warming up exercises and which help to improve skill. The more melodious examples are used in composing appropriate compartments.

**Tunes:** melodious pieces which have verbalizable textual/semantic implications but which are not text-derived. Tunes are thus melodies without words. Some are accompanied with non-textual vocables chorused by the accompaniment instrumentalists. The chorus answers the master musician's statements (on the drum row) in conformity with the Ngwa chordal principle.

**Songs:** *Ese* songs are text-based but are not sung.

**Conversational patterns:** Encoded versus spoken dialogue between the master musician (through drum-talking) and a verbalising respondent or protagonist (in profession episodes).

**Expletives:** situational comments and commendations about the occasion made by the master musician on the drum row. It should be explained here that apart from sign-themes which specifically introduce the various compartments there is no strict order for introducing or sequencing selections from the thematic categories during the progress of a performance-composition. The master musician has absolute freedom of choice and elaboration although his decision-making processes could, in some instances, be informed by non-musical factors like the nature or features of social-theatrical sequences in a dramatised scenario, especially those that call for specific musical cues/responses/accompaniment/questions. Even then the location of such incidents in the structural form of a compartment is not fixed. The common compositional approach to the development/elaboration of a compartment is to

announce a piece or pattern from any thematic category, state it in full, use repetition to establish it where desired, and then elaborate it using a choice of developmental/extension devices available in the Igbo compositional idioms. At the conclusion of this statement cum development of a theme/piece, another selection from the same or any other situationally appropriate thematic category can be introduced or laced onto the preceding piece. Otherwise, the master musician can link selections with passages of sheer percussive-rhythmic interest. Such passages are not definable in any category but are suitable and effective in a musical or dance context.

Fundamentally and conceptually the *ese* instrument is a language communication instrument. The texts, meanings or messages implicated or encoded in *ese* musical patterns or statements, and which are intended for mass/controlled/direct information or lingual communication are understood by the knowledgeable addressee. Again, as is the case in the Igbo creative tradition, the master musician has liberty within conformity to elaborate or extend the known format/model. In spontaneous conversational situations, the context, topic, as well as knowledge of the encoding style assist the speaking protagonist in understanding a communication which the master musician is encoding on the spur of the moment.

Apart from the ritual and dramatic performances which are scheduled to the *ese* musical construct, dancing is a common feature of the *Ihu nkwa*, *Aghirigha nkwa* and *Ifo* compartments when no funerary scenario is being sorted out. The general dance style is earth-bound, on the spot or with short, light, alternate or double stepping. The characteristic feature of women's dancing is alternate, gentle quaking of the buttocks with the knees slightly bent and the trunk thrown slightly forward. The men are more energetic and erect. They favour the quaking of the entire waist region of the body. These dance features are not, however, peculiar to *ese* music. Rather, they are common to Ngwa dance culture.

## 5. ESE ORCHESTRA

The *ese* is an orchestral music played by five instrumentalists: the master musician-soloist with four accompanists. The accompaniment instruments include a tenor (*nne uhie*), and an alto (*oke uhie*) wooden slit-drum played by different artists who work in complementarity to furnish the basic accompaniment framework for a compartment. Their integrated patterns give each compartment its identifying structural character. It is on this accompaniment framework that the master musician superimposes his compositional development of a compartment. These two artists have freedom within the structural and conceptual limitations of their assigned fundamental patterns to compose variations. This freedom is more in the *Oso nkwa* where their skill can help to heighten the psycho-active intensity of this compartment, particularly during drama-accompanied compartments. Another instrument in the accompaniment group is the pulse-marking instrument called *ebe elu*. This is a deep-toned, open-ended membrane drum played with one stick and one hand. (All the other instruments are played with two drum sticks.) Its ensemble role is to maintain, consistently, the pulsation pattern specified for a compartment and on which the dancers base their fundamental steps. The drummer may play occasional variations during very hot or tense passages, especially during the *Oso nkwa* dramatic acts. The last instrument of the accompaniment group is the metronomic instrument which keeps a consistent



reiterated phrasing referent for the rest of the instrumentalists. It is a tiny mortar-shelled single membrane drum called *mkpatamkpa*. It is of the same make as the component drums of the *ese* drum row.

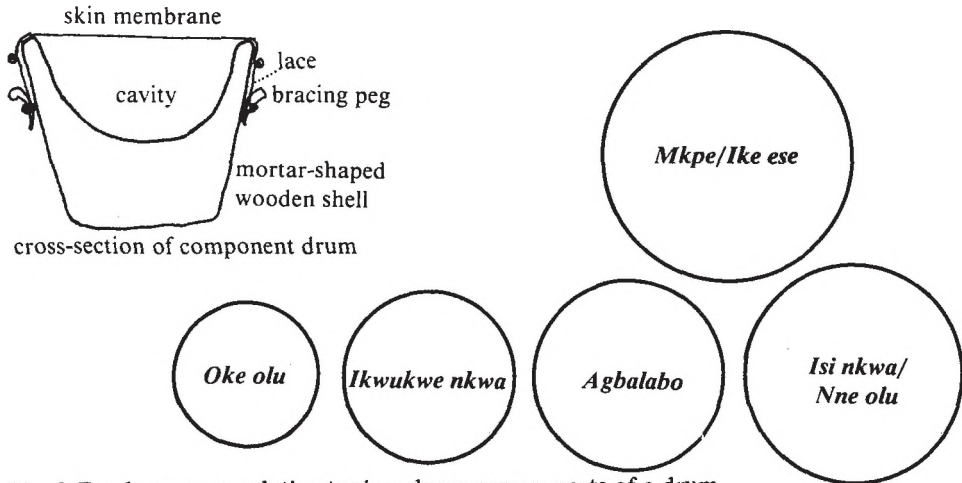


Fig. 2 *Ese* drum row: relative tuning, drum names, parts of a drum

The core instrument in the *ese* ensemble is the instrument set which takes the same name as the music. It is called the *ese* and is a five-component instrument set. Four of the components are mortar-shelled single membrane drums of graded sizes and corresponding pitches. These four drums constitute the *ese* tone row. The relative tuning of the *ese* tone row is illustrated in fig. 2. These component drums, starting from the lowest pitched which is located to the right of the player, are called:

1. *Isi nkwa* (Head drum i.e. the beginning of the tone row) or *Nne olu* (Mother voice i.e. the lowest voice of a three-part chordal concept).
2. *Agbalabo* (The voice in between i.e. a harmonic term which indicates that this drum is conceptualized as a harmonic median between the two principal [high and low] 'voice' parts) or *Nwughilide nkwa* (the focal drum for scale runs, chordal and melodic movements).
3. *Ikwukwe nkwa* (the answering drum i.e. its note complements that of the drums either side of it, harmonically and melodically).
4. *Oke olu* (Male/high voice, being the highest pitched as well as the top note in the three-part chordal concept).
5. *Ike/Mkpe ese* (Mystical focus/Mainstay drum which is of mystic essence while musically it acts as a pitchless deep tone used to punctuate or reinforce compositions on *ese* tone row. Its position behind the two largest drums of the tone row, and inclined towards the player, is for technical convenience). The *mkpe/ike ese* has other extra-musical associations. It is ritually sanctified with an attached mystical object, *mmo ese*, 'ese spirit'. This *ese* spirit is imbued with cryptic potencies through a ritual-magical process. It is on the effective potency of *ese* spirit that oaths are sworn during professions. The swearing act is comparable to swearing on a bible, to the truth of

evidence in the modern law court. Except that *ese* oath implicates a potent spirit force. It is expected that anybody who gives a false deposition or abjuration, as the case may be, on the *ese* oath symbol will die or attract other very serious mishap thereby. The men swear by placing their foot or a personal object, like a knife or walking stick, on the *ike ese* while uttering the oath statement: 'I swear by the potency of this *ike ese*'. The mourning wives of the deceased swear by other physical signs in front of *ese* without touching the drum. (It is taboo for women to touch the mystic drum, profess or declaim verbally on its oath-potency).



Fig. 3 Master musician Egbe Ikpeazy on *ese* drum row. To his left is the performer on the phrasing-referent instrument. Note the mystic drum mounted on a tripod stuck into the ground.

6. Although any other *amala* who is qualified by virtue of having 'buried' his father can profess on *ese*, the privilege for the first scheduled performance during the canonisation ceremony goes to the first son. He takes his profession act immediately after 'killing wealth' in front of *ese*. To do this a professant initiates a martial, running display from the *ese* location towards the entrance to the compound. When he gets there, he checks, turns round and races back to the *ese* post. Relations and supporters troop behind him during this demonstration called *igba ota*, 'martial display'. There are a number of specific thematic patterns any of which the master musician can play and develop for this demonstration. The professant brandishes a long knife or gun. This martial display serves to work up the professant psychologically for the boasts that will follow. On getting back to the drums the master musician cadences the martial theme and immediately queries the professant on the drum row: "What did your father (the deceased) achieve?" The ensuing profession act, *itu aka* 'boasting heroic accomplishments', is in two parts. The first part is always in honour of the deceased for whom *ese* music is being played. In answer to the master musician's query, the first son

Fig. 4 A professant, the first son of the deceased, surrounded by supporters acts in front of *ese* drum row. The master musician has his back to the camera.



boasts about the virtues and heroic accomplishments of his deceased father. The entire audience present acts as witness. They, as well as the master musician (on the drum row), will acclaim or endorse a true and worthy achievement so declared. During the profession act *ese* music plays mood themes, sotto voce. There are, however, occasional musical bursts with which the master musician intersperses the profession, or prompts, encourages, queries and answers the professant. At any appropriate stage in the course of the act which is performed as an impassioned dramatic display involving two protagonists — the professant and the master musician — the professant will round off a declaration with the oath statement “If it is not as I have said, may this *ike ese* kill me”.

The master musician regulates the dramatic intensity of this profession episode by initiating martial display compartments that will link and balance the artistic-emotional levels of the profession drama. This happens when he cadences an on-going mood music and strikes on a martial theme. When a professant concludes the panegyrics of a deceased, the master musician sends him running for yet another martial display. Thereafter he then queries the professant: “You yourself, what are your own achievements (that qualify you to profess on *ese* oath)”. Thereupon the professant can proclaim his personal achievements in the same musico-dramatic style as he used for the deceased’s. He still continues to swear on *ese* oath to the truth of his declarations. At the conclusion of his self-panegyrics, he can then request formally for the *Ihu nkwa* compartment with which to celebrate (through dancing) the conclusion of his act. He is joined in the dancing by jubilant well wishers. The profession-on-oath episode can then be seen as a dramatic duet starring a speaking human actor and the *ese* (representing the supernatural protagonists but manipulated by the master musician).



The master musician is very central to all the rites publicly performed in a funerary situation in the community. In the first instance no Ngwa citizen is adjudged to have 'buried' his father unless, and until, *ese* music has been played in honour of the deceased. On being called into the show the master musician demands some prescribed engagement fee and when that is paid he undertakes to gather his artists and report with them at the funerary scene at the agreed time. On arrival he declares his willingness to undertake the contract of mourning and 'burying' the deceased by playing a concert session of *ese* music. This concert session also serves to announce to the entire public that a 'person' of status has died (for a physical burial phase), or is being assessed for canonization into ancestry (for the pre-*okwukwu* tribunal phase), or is being conferred with an ancestral rating (for a canonization funerary celebration phase). Fee-bargaining follows before the master musician performs his ritual act of *ihu ala ivu* (paying respect to *Ala* deity). During the canonization funerary celebrations the master musician is responsible for orchestrating all the ritual/cosmic-drama episodes that take place. Through his artistry he generates the atmosphere that makes this phase of funerary ceremonies a celebration as well as a tense ritual theatre. The master musician engineers the psychological state of mind that enables the first and second sons as well as the wives of the deceased to carry through their tenuous psycho-cosmic performances. Successful performances will exonerate them from any charges of ill will or negligence against the deceased whose earthly rights, privileges, goodwill and possessions they are thereby inheriting. At the same time the successful performances credit them with new status in the community. (A deceased for whom his progeny have successfully hosted a canonization funerary celebration conducted through the agency of *ese* music qualifies, thereafter, for inclusion in the host of family/compound/communal ancestors. These ancestors are commemorated, not worshipped, during the annual ceremony of *inye nna nni* 'feeding the ancestors'. This symbolic feeding, it is believed, sustains them in their supernatural guardianship role in the community). It is believed that the deceased has a hand in the success or otherwise of these significant acts. For instance, where he has reason to be very displeased with any of the actors for unpardonable offences, he becomes a psychic force than can fault the actor. And the prescribed repercussions or penalties for failure could be severe. In these two most vital tests the master musician acts as a protagonist — the physical representative of the supernatural forces — through the psychological potency of his music. His role enjoins him to confront and query the human actors at the same time as, by his contractual obligations to them, he has responsibility to inspire them at the psycho-physical level for the tests. Even then, a faulted 'killing of wealth' may accrue the musicians some material benefit as in the case of the first son's act: (The musicians, by precept, claim the faultily killed goat while the first son produces a replacement to the *amala* to whom a successfully killed goat belongs. (The goat can, however, be redeemed by the first son on payment of satisfactory cash compensation to the musicians). As sonic sign-communication *ese* music informs everybody, present or not, about the various stages or activities reached in a funerary scenario. When pieces in the *Ifo* compartment of *ese* music performance cycle are heard everybody knows that the final phase of the funerary rites for a deceased is being concluded. In all the performances, the performance-composition (as opposed to *form-fixe* compositions of literary music), the contextual structuring, organisation and conducting of the music are the artistic



responsibility of the master musician. As a neutral agent his creativity and expertise (musical) as well as his knowledgeable ability (about the events and the conceptual role of *ese* music in context) determine to a large extent the level of success achievable in a funerary ceremony as a social-theatrical event, as a psychological ritual-drama, and as a musical entertainment presentation.

7. To a large extent the form and musicological features of *ese* music presentation derive from cultural conceptions and rationalisations which are not specific to musical celebration, but which nevertheless give origin, form, character and meaning to a traditional musical construct. However, the actual musical configuration for, and in, a given context is a musical process based on a recognisable model format adopted for the context. It is the creative genius of the master musician in a performance-composition tradition which determines the compositional content and the contextual effectiveness of a musico-dramatic presentation. No one such presentation is likely to be replicated exactly (in details of choice, arrangement and elaboration of the thematic materials) in another presentation even by the same group on the same occasion. The compositional and extra-musical configurations of the musical sound deriving from cultural-musical rationalizations and equally basic to cultural phonic preferences recommend the affect and effect of *ese* music on the audience and actors alike. These are monitorable in a psycho-physical dimension as generating or promoting heightened emotive participation, and intense behavioural responses during dramatised funerary scenarios.

In its social dimension *ese* music 'buries and mourns' the dead on behalf of the bereaved, thereby placing the burden of grief on a vicarious mourner — the master musician. In its musical dimension *ese* music demands profound creative acuity of its exponents, particularly the master musician. The social-dramatic aptness and quality of his artistic discussions, given the various factors informing his decision-making process, give *ese* music its multiple contextual roles: as a mourner, a mass communicator, a social-psychological inquisitor, a potent oath symbol, a conductor of ritual/cosmic-dramatic enactments, and an entertainment. What is most significant about *ese* is, therefore, not so much its presentational features and artistic accomplishments as a musical construct, as the understated traditional credentials informing its conception, its formal-compositional configurations, and its presentational features in context: the ancestral honours it confers on the deceased; the social-spiritual status it congruently accrues to the sponsor.

#### NOTES

1. The Igbo, pop. about 12,000,000 are located to the South Eastern part of Nigeria in the tropical rain forest zone. They are a dominantly patrilineal society, and believe in a Supreme deity, *Chineke*, worshipped through a pantheon of minor deities. The Igbo language identifies them as a people although there are dialectal variations which approach mutual unintelligibility between groups living at the extremities of the Igbo geographical area. The Igbo culture and custom have ideational homogeneity but exhibit some area differentiations in the materials and details of practice.

2. *Ese* is a term which categorizes the instrument, the music as well as their socio-cultural rationalizations.

3. The Igbo traditional 'week', *izu*, is based on a cycle of four market days: *eke, orie, afo, nkwo*. Two cycles (the second is reckoned as *eke ukwu, orie ukwu, afo ukwu, nkwo ukwu* — *ukwu* means big) give a full week of 8 days.

4. Recently there was a report about a professant, the first son of a deceased, who failed to sever the head of a consecrated he-goat with one stroke of his knife as prescribed by the ritual custom. This is usually interpreted as an indication that either he has grossly offended his deceased father who has thus

demonstrated his disapproval of the actor-son, or otherwise a manifestation of other undisclosed transgressions which disqualify him from achieving the *amala* status by that symbolic act. Before the end of the day this particular actor committed suicide. Ordinarily, if the actor tried but failed to sever, completely, the head of a goat, the *amala* to whom all 'killed wealth' belong will not take it. Rather it goes to the *ese* musicians who can be said to represent the supernatural dimension in the transaction by virtue of providing the spiritual and psychical focus for this and other funerary tests.

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