



## DRUM COMMUNICATION: IMPORTANCE OF DRUM/DRUMBEATS IN THE OPU EKINE SEKIAPU DANCE OF NEMBE, BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance is a traditional art form that is deeply embedded in the cultural and social identity of the Nembe people. This dance features intricate and rhythmic drumming, which plays a vital role in the overall performance. The objective of the study is to explore the significance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The study adopted the Syncopation: Unifying Musical Theory and Perception and the embedded cognition theory. The study uses a purposive non-probability sampling technique and employs a mixed-method approach, and utilizes a survey with a questionnaire and focus group discussions as data collection instruments. The findings reveal that in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance, the drum serves primarily as a communication tool. The drumbeat plays a critical role by determining pace, dance steps, and rhythm for the dancers' movements and performances. The study thus highlights the essential role of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. It deepens our understanding of the cultural heritage and significance of this traditional dance form.*

**KEYWORDS:** Dance, Drum, Drumbeat, Ekine Sekiapu, Nembe.



## INTRODUCTION

Drumming is a vital tool and source of communication within the African media system. Drum communication involves using drum rhythms and sounds to convey messages and cultural expressions. This practice is prevalent across various cultures, especially in traditional African societies, where drums serve as a powerful means of communication, social mobilization, cultural identity, and expression. In light of the above, Oluwadarasimi et al.(2021, 2) opine that drumming communication is a global form of communication used to convey information, create engagement, and make meaning.

Drums and drumbeats are a non-verbal African traditional communication system. Agbo et al.-(2013) assert that “the traditional African media are customized communication channels which people in specific societies adopt in sharing ideas, meanings, values and information dissemination” (2).

A variety of drums exist in various forms, and they play a fundamental role in the culture of a people. They serve as a significant means of communication in different societies. Specifically, drums fall under the membranophone subcategory of the broad typology of instrumental communication. Scholars assert that:

The drum is a member of the percussion group of musical instruments, technically classified as a membranous instrument. The drum consists of at least one membrane called a drumhead or drum skin. The skin is stretched over a shell and struck either directly with the player’s hands or with a drumstick to produce sound (Grove, 2001, 26).

Viewed from the dynamic interplay of drum/drumbeats and use in society, the drum's ability to communicate is contextual and relative, depending on the situation, circumstances, and the purpose. According to Shaba et al. (2022, 23), “in traditional African society, drums are essentially significant mediums of communication, which serve as a voice of the whole community and communicate their desires and wishes”.

Undeniably, musicals, dance, and masquerade displays in a given culture demonstrate the functionality of the drum and the drummers. The drum’s tone, voice, and pattern fundamentally indicate the dance steps. The presupposition is that drums and the drummers dictate, to a large extent, how the performers, or dancers, pattern their dance steps. Kahn (n. d, para 3) asserts that “throughout many festivals in Africa, depending on the event being celebrated, drumbeats are used to dictate the type of dance to be done by the listeners”.

The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance is a male-dominated traditional performance in the Nembe culture, often showcased at important ceremonies and celebrations, as well as during the death of a King, Chief, or member. Eferebo (2023) also alluded to the above statement that “Ekine-Sekiapu is a male elite association” (31). The drumbeats used in this dance are distinctive and are passed down through generations, with each beat carrying a unique and significant meaning. They tell stories of the ancestors, convey messages of unity and strength, and even serve as a form of communication among the dancers.

In the Nembe kingdom, drums of various sizes and forms are utilized with distinct voices for different purposes at the various phases of its historical development. The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance is a traditionally unique dance held in high esteem by the Nembe people in the Nembe LGA of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. It is a traditional dance form deeply rooted in the customs and



traditions of the Nembe community. The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance is coordinated on stage by a lead (known in Nembe parlance as ONONGI), with dance steps and pace dictated and controlled by the rhythm of drumbeats, often accompanied by little singing.

The Onongi (lead dancer) plays a unique, fascinating, and guiding role during the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance/performance. Oruwari and James (2014, 14) informed us thus:

The onongi is the leader or frontliner of the masquerade and dancers. He often leaves the line and fellow dancers to answer the call from the drummer, who would then ask the Onongi some questions in the drum voice: “I nyingi pagayo tio, I dau pagayo tio? Meaning, where does your mother belong and where does your father hail from? After the Onongi has finished answering the questions, the drummer sends him away to harmonize. Onongi will then return to the troupe of dancers to harmonize with the dancers next to him, both of them raising their hands and touching their open palms... The second man who is so touched will turn round to touch the third person, and the relay of greetings is passed on from one dancer to the other till the last person. Meanwhile, anyone who is so touched starts dancing out, following the leader. (14-15)

The above emphasizes and dramatizes the ontological, axiological, and epistemological conceptualization of the importance of the Onongi and the dancers' responses to the drumbeats. Jenewari (1973, 31, cited in Eferebo, 2023, 32) notes:

The climax of Ekine-Sekiapu dance in Kalabari, as elsewhere, there are four dance-steps, each with its characteristic drum rhythm and tempo. First, there is the Aliya (Abara mie), a slow, graceful step in which the dancer sways gently side by side and gracefully moves his fan or tusk in consonance with the sway. Then comes the tuseki (ebeki), which involves lowering the head and wriggling the back while at the same time making subtle movements with the foot. The tuseki culminates in a subsidiary dance-step, pekele (tokoro koro, igbiri naga or elu), a brisk dance that entails a short jump on one foot and landing on the other foot. What follows the pekele or tiye is a kind of gesture of appreciation; each dancer lightly touches the hands of both the dancer behind him and the one in front of him. Finally comes Itaki Mangi (Igba bogo, sogotoi), which, in contrast with aliya and tuseki, involves taking the dance at a fairly quick space-something intermediate between normal walking and slow running and embellished with grace.

Drumbeats serve as the rhythmic backbone of the dance, providing a steady pulse that guides the dancers' movements. The drumbeats not only establish the dance's tempo and rhythm but also convey important cultural and historical messages.

The drumbeat is an art, a skill, learned and transmitted from generation to generation. It is considered in all ramifications and perspectives, as culture or case-specific. This presupposes that a particular rhythm of drumbeat is not practicable universally. The distillation of the above statement is that different rhythms of drumbeats are produced in different cultures, and it is borne out of human creativity and ingenuity. Apart from this, drumbeats are also associated with spirituality or have some level of spiritual undertone.

By studying the importance of the drum and drumbeat in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance, this research aims to illuminate the cultural and social significance of this traditional dance form. It will also provide insights into the roles of drums and drummers in dictating, shaping, and controlling the dance steps and pace of the dancers.



The research aims to explore the role of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance and how they contribute to the dance's cultural and social significance. The study will examine the various types of drums used in the dance, their distinct sounds, and the specific rhythms and beats that they produce. More so, the integration of drumming into the dance underscores its importance in maintaining cultural heritage and facilitating communication within the community.

### **Opu Ekine Sekiapu: Historical Brief**

Although the origin of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu is unclear and hidden by its spiritual and oral traditions, existing literature credits that the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance originated from Kalabari. This is evident in the Kalabari word "sekiapu," which means dancers. Eferebo (2023) posits that "the Ekine-Sekiapu (Dancing people) Society has its origins among the Ijo people of Kalabari". Membership of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance is open to adult males with a reputable character, with a membership fee in kind: 12 bottles of local gin, 1 crate of beer, 1 crate of soft drink, and 2 packets of biscuits. The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance exemplifies the importance of drum communication in cultural preservation and community bonding.

To further expand the discussion on the origin of Sekiapu, Tubonah (2012, April 15) informs that "the Sekiapu is a Socio/Cultural Organization which came from Kula, through 'Meinyai Orugbani' (Mein's Son Orugbani), a Prince whose mother is called Kulukuluba, hailed and lived in Kula and he went to see her". Further, Tubonah (2012, April 15) clarifies the oral tradition of the origin of Sekiapu as narrated by the Kululuba thus:

"One day, I went fishing in the creek, and I began to hear the drum beats in the swamp. I was scared; I didn't know what was going on and I tied my canoe to a mangrove tree below, went down and hid myself between a cluster of mangrove trees. The drums became stronger, and I looked around with my scared eyes and saw an altar of masquerades and a man in a kingly costume sitting on a golden throne, who is called "Owuede" ( Head of Masquerades)

"As I watched them, I saw the masquerades performing one after the other. For example, the Angalayai (like monkey) masquerade came out, performed, and at the end took off its head to Owuede at the altar and took its place. Then the Crocodile masquerade came out to perform, performed, and also took off his head and laid it on the altar before Owuede. So they all performed one after the other until the last masquerade, and all of them did the same, taking off their heads and laying them down on the altar before Owuede." Kulukuluba narrated to Orugbani - her beloved son - how scared she was, and so she continued:

"When they had performed, Owuede called my name, Kulukuluba, to come out from my hideout. I was thinking that they didn't see me. He said to me, " You think we don't see you? We are seeing you; we decided to play for you to see, so that you will take these masquerades to the world to make us popular in the world. So, Owuede gave her all the masquerades. Kulukuluba continued:

"I asked him how I would bring all the masquerades to my canoe? He then asked me to turn my face to the left, and as soon as I did, all the masquerades were already in the canoe"

By then, the entire Kula community was concerned about my safety, for I had spent a night in the creeks, as a result of which search parties were looking for me, as I was returning with joy, singing this song."



The Opusian, Chief Amadi-Teibinyo, said she was prompted to sing and continue singing the Kulukuluba song as she was coming back home after spending a day and night with Owuede and the masquerades thus:

"Kulukuluba is coming in with all the masquerades"

Obo adu-e Kula, obo adu-e obo adu-e obo adu-e-e."

(Kulukuluba is coming in with all the masquerades, come and receive her Kula, come and receive her, come and receive her, come and receive her).

So, she came and informed the King and nobles of her visit and the message to hand over the masquerades to the people, and it was Kula's turn to decorate for the handover ceremony. Kulukuluba informed her son, Orugbani.

After the ceremony, Orugbani also pleaded with the Kula King and nobles through his mother to give him the masquerades, and so he got them, and Orugbani came to Bassambiri Nembe (now known as Opu Nembe) in the 18th century when Ebifa was King. Also, he called the chiefs and nobles together and handed them over. So it started the Ekine Sekiapu in Bassambiri (now Opu Nembe). And from there, Sekiapu went to Ogbolmabiri (Nembe City), Okpoama Nembe, Agrisaba, to Opume.

The Kalabari is a prominent Ijaw ethnic group located in Rivers State, Nigeria, and shares a common boundary with the Nembe people. They are known for their fishing heritage and a vibrant culture, and are recognized for distinct luxurious traditional attire (such as Don), and lively masquerade festivals (Owu – Aru -Sun).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Drums and drumbeats are essential aspects of dance, irrespective of the type of dance. Beyond their general communication function, drums also serve specific fundamental roles in music, dance, traditional and cultural masquerade displays, and traditional institutional dances. Ihunwo (2018) observes that "Drums are wonderful instruments that produce pleasant sounds for entertainment, rhythm or music. In Africa, drums are very important in people's daily life"(2).

Drums are essential African instruments for entertainment and rhythm. The Nembe Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance is a dance in which certain beats on the drums and all the steps are direct and define its rhythm. These beats are imperative in the coordination of the dancers and the traditional, flowing nature of the dance. Practically, events are also announced by drums.

In light of the above, a gap in drum communication has been identified in its role as an independent variable in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe. Thus, the focus of this study is to investigate how the drum/drumbeats determine and control dance steps, patterns, and the pace of the Ekine Sekiapu dance. This presupposes that the drum is not just a musical instrument in this dance; it is considered a choreographic object and is treated with great respect and reverence.

Furthermore, the study examines the various types of drums used in the Ekine Sekiapu dance and their roles within the performance. It also examines the techniques and styles employed by drummers to create the distinctive rhythms and beats that accompany the dance. The paper also





discusses the role of the drummers in preserving and passing down the knowledge of the Ekine Sekiapu dance to future generations.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the use of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe.
- To determine the indispensability of the drum and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe.
- To investigate how the drums and drumbeats' rhythm dictate the dance styles, tempo, and steps of the members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance;
- To determine the importance of drums and drumbeats to the dance steps of members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Methodology**

The study adopts the quantitative and qualitative approach (mixed-method approach), employing the Survey and Focus Group Discussion as methods of data collection. A survey, according to Bronia (2009), “involves the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their response to questions” (160). According to Kumar (2011), “Focus groups are a form of strategy in qualitative research in which attitudes, opinions or perceptions towards an issue, product, service or programme are explored through a free and open discussion between members of a group and the researcher” (p. 157). The census method of sampling was adopted for the study. The focus group discussion and the questionnaire serve as the data collection tools. These methods were used to enable the researcher to gather relevant firsthand information from the members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu.

Two Focus groups were conducted: one with the senior members, while the second was with the young/youth members. The reasoning behind this was to carefully elicit comparative information and derive insights into the level of knowledge on the importance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.

The population of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance group is estimated to be 120 members, which is concurrently being reviewed; hence, a census was applied without determining the sample size. Surbhi (2016) sees the census as “a qualitative research method in which all the elements of the population are enumerated” (para. 1). The questionnaire formed the primary instrument for data collection.

### **Literature Review: Drum as a tool or means of communication**

Drums are a form of nonverbal communication, capable of conveying messages and emotions through rhythmic patterns. Drums play diverse roles in different African societies, ranging from a means of communication, a musical tool, a choreographic tool, a spiritual link, etc.



Ugobude (2020) notes that drums provide various rhythms of communication between earthlings, as well as between realms, between the intangible/spiritual worlds. They are accompanied when singing, dancing, healing, mourning, as a status symbol, entertainment, and even storytelling.

The Opu Ekine Sekiapu is an all-male masquerade dance in Nembe that plays a vital role in the cultural, religious, and artistic life of the Nembe people, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. One of the most defining elements of this performance tradition is the drum and drumbeat, which serve not only as instruments of rhythm but also as a cultural language of their own.

### **Significance of Drum and Drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe**

The significance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is multifaceted, intertwining cultural, historical, and communicative elements. Drumming serves as a vital component of this dance, enhancing its aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions while preserving the cultural heritage of the Nembe people.

The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of the Nembe people in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is deeply rooted in tradition, cultural expression, and spirituality. One of its most defining and crucial elements is the drum or drumbeats, which serve multiple functions beyond mere musical accompaniment. Ihunwo (2018, 2) asserts that apart from being spectacular instruments of music, drums provide pleasant sounds for pleasure, rhythm, or melody.

Similarly, in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe (Ogbolomabiri/ Nembe City), specific drums/ drumbeats are used to communicate and convey information to the dancers, determining the dance steps and pace. The drum and drumbeats play crucial roles in this dance, as they provide the rhythm and pace for the dancers to move and perform. Aside from their cultural significance, drumbeats also play a crucial role in the physical execution of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance. Johnson (2011, 29) informs that “the drum set the pace for dance and worship, ritual and rites. Other practical uses include signaling the start of the day, to lead celebrations and notify the people as well”. The dancers in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu synchronize their movements to the beat of the drums, creating a cohesive and mesmerizing performance. Without the drumbeats, the dance would lose its traditional essence and fluidity. This highlights the importance of drums in this dance tradition:

In the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance, the drum serves as a communicative tool. Drums signal the start and end of the performance, transitions between dance segments, and the entrance of dancers and masquerades. Specific rhythmic patterns convey messages understood by dancers and the masquerades, ensuring synchronization and coordination. The Significance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe is demonstrated through the drummers' dexterity in communication and coordination during dance.

Drumming is not random; it is a highly skilled art requiring adequate training and mastery. Only trained drummers who are familiar with the traditions and codes of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu can lead performances. Master drummers are respected members of the community and are often the custodians of cultural knowledge.

The Opu Ekine Sekiapu is unique for featuring men in a traditionally masculine role – masquerading. It is performed during festivals, rites of passage, and other ceremonial



occasions. The dance reinforces cultural identity, ancestral veneration, and gender dynamics in Nembe society. This cultural context is significant to the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance.

The drum serves as a language in Nembe society. It conveys messages understood by performers and audiences. Specific drumbeats signify the entrance and exit of the dancer as well as the masquerades. It determines changes in dance routines and signals to other drummers, dancers, or singers.

The drumbeat acts as the heartbeat of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance as a cultural communicator, guiding participants through physical movements and chants. The integration of drumming in rituals serves to invoke a spiritual connection, allowing participants to transcend the mundane and enter the extra-mundane realm.

The drumbeat guides the tempo and movement of dancers. Drumming sequences are intricately tied to body movements, costume adjustments, and transitions. Dancers often respond to subtle changes in rhythm, showcasing their skill and training. This presents the drum and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance as an instrument for coordination and choreography.

Drums are believed to be a medium of spiritual and ancestral connection. In the context of the masquerade, drumbeats summon spirits or invoke the presence of spiritual entities. The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance, which has spiritual undertones, uses drumming to honor ancestors and masquerades. Drums invoke spiritual presence and call forth the spirits represented by the masquerades. This is particularly demonstrated during the drama (Egberi) section during the dance. Certain drum patterns are believed to channel spiritual energies or masquerades. The drum thus acts as a medium between the physical and spiritual realms.

Drums generate emotional intensity, elevating the performance and engaging the audience. Rhythmic changes enhance dramatic moments, accentuate body movements, and provide aesthetic rhythm that dancers interpret through intricate footwork and gestures. The intensity and complexity of drumming elevate the dramatic quality of the performance. Audience engagement is heightened through rhythmic suspense, changes in tempo, and energetic crescendos.

The Nembe culture remains vibrant, preserved, and protected due to its strong intergenerational transmission as children learn from elders and carry forward the traditions with enthusiasm. Engaging children in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe ensures its rich heritage is preserved and passed down to future generations with vitality. Traditional drum patterns are taught orally and through apprenticeship. Drumming helps preserve oral histories, community values, and performance techniques across generations. Drumming is integral to the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance, providing rhythm and energy that drive the performance. "It acts as a medium for cultural expression, linking the community to its historical roots and collective memory" (Eferebo, 2023).

Drum communication is an age - long activity in the ancient Nembe kingdom. The name of the title holders is traditionally passed across using drums, and the drums serve various communicative, spiritual, and entertainment purposes in the Nembe analas. "The dance and its accompanying drumming are vital for transmitting historical narratives and cultural values among the Nembe people, serving as a living archive of their traditions. Festivals featuring this dance reinforce communal identity and continuity, showcasing the importance of drumming in cultural preservation" (Eferebo, 2023).



## Types of Drums Used in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance

Drums are made of different materials; however, the particular type of drum mostly used by the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe is the wooden drum. The wooden drum, according to Akpabot (1975, 15), “as the name implies, the wooden drum is made from a tree trunk. To enable it to produce mellifluous sounds, the bark is removed, and an opening is made at the top. This way, when struck with a stick, it produces sounds. The drum comes in various sizes, and it has various designations”. Most commentators on drums argue that the drums may take very diverse shapes and dimensions. These shapes are some of the conical, cylindrical, or semi-cylindrical shapes. Drums can either be flat in the centre, or they can also have a bowl-shaped head. The others are cup-shaped, bottle-shaped, or in a goblet, vase, or even an hourglass shape.” (Kahn n.d, para. 16).

### Types of Nembe Drums

1. **IGBIRIGBANA**- is the biggest and tallest drum that has a sonorous sounding voice, with three other drums strapped to it. The Igbirigbana is a drum that produces a deep, resonating sound, and it is most commonly called a bass drum.



2. **ALILI** – the smaller drums strapped to the ‘Igbirigbana’. There are three types with different voices and rhythms. One of the Alili’s is with an open back, while the others have a blunt back. This indicates and gives us an idea of the expected sound of such drums based on their makeup.



**Alili strapped to Igbirigbana.**

3. **BOBO OKUMA** – There are four Bobo Okuma with differences in length, size, and shape. One of the four has extra length or is the longest and is fondly called “**agreement**” because of its deep-sounding voice, and its function is to give volume. They all produce different sounds depending on their sizes. The smallest of them is called the Anga Gbaliyai (plural) or the Anga Gbaliwe (singular).



**Bobo Okuma**

4. **ATANGBA** is a small drum that gives a tinny-sounding voice. Atangba are also wooden drums, but are smaller than the Alili.



5. **IKIRIGO** –Wooden Cong.



6. **EKERE** – it is a type of ikirigo, far smaller and a handheld drum used in the company of the other drums.



**Ekere**

### **Lead Drummer (Akuana Alabo)**

The lead drummer (the one playing the Igbirigbana) is traditionally called “Akuana Alabo. One unique thing about the AKUANA ALABO (lead drummer) is his dexterity at controlling the drums (Igbirigbana and the strapped three Alilis) with his hands and twisting his legs on the face of the drum- applying the mechanics of syncopation.



Different rhythms signified different masquerades. The rhythm of the drum and the drumbeats that announce the appearance on stage of a masquerade are different from the rhythm of the drum and drumbeats used to announce the arrival/appearance on stage of another masquerade.

### **The Significance of Drummers (Okuma Fariongu) in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance**

The Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is deeply intertwined with the use of drum communication, which plays a crucial role in both the cultural and communicative aspects of the performance. Drumming in this context is not merely a musical



accompaniment but serves as a vital medium for conveying messages and emotions as well as enhancing the dance's expressive power.

Furthermore, the drumbeats also serve as a form of artistic expression. The drummers add their own unique styles and variations to the beats, creating a dynamic and captivating performance. This creativity and improvisation add a layer of complexity to the dance and showcase the skills and talents of the performers.

Overall, the drummers in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance are an integral part of its existence. They not only provide the necessary musical accompaniment but also hold cultural, historical, and artistic significance. Without the drummers, the dance would not be complete, and the richness of Nembe culture would not be fully represented.

An additional explanation of the nature of the masquerade and dancing rings (rounds) is necessary. The Sekiapu or the Nembe cultural dance is made up of two parts: Opu Sekiapu (Opu Ekine Sekiapu) and Kala Sekiapu. The idea of the Kala Sekiapu, inter alia, is to prepare or train the young people to move on to the Opu Ekine Sekiapu or Opu Sekiapu.

The traditional Sekiapu dance performance can be done as a routine if the Sekiapu chooses to select a masquerade to be displayed, or if the Sekiapu is asked to dance to honour a departed member. But the two are performed differently. The Sekiapu dance routine would have one or two masquerades, but a Sekiapu dance to honour a dead member would have several masquerade dances. Typically, the Sekiapu dance to honour a deceased member would start in the evening with a limping dance in three circles (rounds) around the square. This limp dance mimics the behaviour and walks of the animal (representing the masquerade), and it is the Eretigbo masquerade. The circles (rounds) of the square are referred to as Igba Bogo. Three circles (rounds) are performed for each masquerade dance display, and the fourth round is called Tiri Ikele. The Eretigbo masquerade dance is used to start the dance in a burial ceremony to honour a deceased member, and the Ingbila masquerade dance is used to end the Sekiapu dance. Various masquerades can be represented and displayed in the dance; however, the most common masquerades danced are: Ebe, Isegi, Igu, Kpasa, Agiri, Angalayai, Ofirima, and Otoba.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is pegged within the framework of two related theories, they are the Syncopation: Unifying musical theory and perception, and embodied cognition theory. These theories can be used to espouse the importance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, focusing on their rhythmic, cultural, and expressive roles. This set of theories provides a comprehensive explanation for a better analysis of drum rhythm, syncopation, and the performance of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.

### **Syncopation: Unifying musical theory and perception**

An online resource (<https://composercode.com/syncopation-in-music-the-key-to-better-rhythms/>) notes that in music, syncopation is the deviation of the standard course of rhythm, which is accomplished by emphasis on an off-beat or weak beat. This produces a more intricate beat that can be applied to bring some interest and change to a music composition. It further stated that there are many different “flavours” of syncopation, such as: **Accents:** An accent is a note that is played with more emphasis than the surrounding notes. This can be done by





playing the note louder or by holding it for a longer duration. **Off-beats:** An off-beat is a weak beat that is accented. This gives the impression that the music is “rushing” or “pressing forward.” **Suspension:** Suspension is when a note is played before the beat. This creates tension that is released when the note falls on the beat. Thinking along this line of thought (Randel, 1986, cited in Song, 2014, 37) informs us that “the classic definition of syncopation is the momentary contradiction of the prevailing meter or pulse.”

When one takes a critical look at the syncopation unifying musical theory and its definitional elements, it brings to the fore different but related perspectives:

**Rhythm and Syncopation:** This concept explores how drums establish and sustain the pulse of a dance, creating both steady and syncopated rhythms that influence movement and energy. Its application analyzes how various drum patterns (e.g., backbeats, syncopation, polyrhythms) affect the style and character of a dance. For example, it discusses how a consistent bass drumbeat like the “longest drum (BOBO OKUMA), fondly called 'Agreement', might provide a stable foundation for a dance, while a syncopated IGBRIGBANA (Tallest drum) paired with three (3) ALLILI small drums could introduce unexpected and exciting accents.

## Rhythm

According to Song (2014, 27), “Some refer to rhythm as the regular recurring patterns in time that can be structured”. According to Chase (2024), firstly, rhythm is simply any consistently recurring pattern of beats. A beat is simply one unit of time, and rhythm in music refers to the use of alternating patterns of accented beats and unaccented beats. (para. 3).

## Embodied Cognition Theories

Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1999) developed and popularized the embodied cognition theory. In this theory, our minds and our bodies are believed to be connected, and the experiences that we have in our bodies influence our cognition. The theory underlines the significance of sensory, motor, and perceptual experiences with the environment in determining the way we think and perceive the world.

Embodied cognition refers to cognition as based on perception and action, and being heavily reliant on the qualities of the physical body of the learner. It is stated that without the body being involved in sensing and acting, there would be no thoughts, and mental affairs would not possess the features and aspects as they do (Wilson & Foglia, 2017, 1). Thus, meaning does not happen to be filtered out of bodily experiences, but meaning is critically attached to bodily experiences (Anderson, 2003; Bergen, 2012). “fMRI has revealed studies that indicate that motor parts of the brain are mobilized and that is why we read, see, or hear about things, recreating the physical experience” (Bergen, 2012). Thus, the physical body is the major causal factor, or physically constitutive factor, in the cognitive processing (Wilson & Foglia, 2017).

The Opu Ekine Sikiapu Dance is a type of dance requiring a high level of mental alertness and effective stimulus response. This demonstrates an inclusive and coordinated body-mind connection approach. The dancers receive the drumbeats through their sense of hearing; this drumbeat stimulus is sent to the brain via neurons through the central nervous system and is interpreted by the brain in a split second, prompting the entire body to respond with specific dance steps, patterns, and pace in line with the drumbeat rhythm. Here lies the relevance of this theory to the study. Also, Macrine and Fugate (2020) explain that “Embodied cognition





theories are an alternative to traditional cognition theories since they put particular emphasis on the mind-body relationship” (1).

## RESULTS

Out of the 120 copies of the questionnaire administered, 92 copies were completed and returned, showing a return rate of 76.6 %; therefore, this formed the basis for the data analysis and presentation.

**Table 1: Drums and drumbeats as means of communication in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.**

| Nature of response                                                                 | Frequency | %           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Drums and drumbeats serve as a means of communication in the sekiapu dance         | 82        | 89.2 %      |
| Drums and drumbeats did not serve as a means of communication in the sekiapu dance | 3         | 3.2%        |
| They are just mere instruments of music                                            | 7         | 7.6%        |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                       | <b>92</b> | <b>100%</b> |

**Source:** *Field survey, 2025*

Table 1 shows that drums and drumbeats serve as a veritable means of communication in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.

**Table 2: Significance of the drum and drumbeats of the Opu Ekine Sekiaapu Dance of Nembe**

| Nature of response                       | Frequency | %          |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Training and Mastery                     | 17        | 18.5       |
| Communication and coordination           | 16        | 17.4       |
| Choreographic tool                       | 14        | 15.2       |
| Spiritual and Ritual Significance        | 13        | 14.1       |
| Aesthetic and emotional impact           | 15        | 16.3       |
| Preservation and Transmission of Culture | 17        | 18.5       |
| <b>Total</b>                             | <b>92</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Source:** *Field survey, 2025*

Table 2 shows that there is a close link among the factors listed as significant of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. This implies that there is no single factor determining the significance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.



**Table 3: Drums and drumbeats rhythm determine the dance style, pace, and steps of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance members**

| Nature of response                                                                                                                   | Frequency | %          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Dance commences only after the lead dancer confers with the lead drummers to start beating the different rhythms                     | 31        | 33.7       |
| Big drum (Igbirigbana), together with all other drums (Alili, Bobo Okuma, Ikirigo), gives a clue of the type of dance step and pace. | 32        | 34.8       |
| Small drums (Alili) and other drums like the Bobo Okuma indicate a different dance step                                              | 29        | 31.5       |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                                                                         | <b>92</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: *Field survey, 2025*

Data, as presented in Table 3, indicates an evenly distributed response highlighting the drums and drumbeat rhythms as determiners of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance steps and the pace of the dance.

**Table 4: The indispensability of drums and drumbeats to the quality and uniformity of dance steps by members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe.**

| Nature of response                                                     | Frequency | %          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Without drums, drummers, and drumbeats, there will be no Sekiapu dance | 89        | 96.8       |
| Sekiapu dance can take place without drums, drummers, and drumbeats    | 3         | 3.2        |
| <b>Total</b>                                                           | <b>92</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: *Field survey, 2025*

Table 4 shows clearly the indispensability of the drums, drummers, and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe. This implies that though occasional singing is experienced during the Sekiapu dance, without the drums, drummers, and the drumbeat rhythms, there is no effective dance and display by the masquerades.

### Focus Group Data Presentation

**Question:** Drums and drumbeats as means of communication in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. **Response:** Participants' view on the above issue was overwhelming, as the majority opine that drums and drumbeats no doubt serve as a communication tool, without which no dance could commence. Though drums and drumbeats serve as a communication tool, this does not limit their function as a communication tool.

**Question:** Determine the significance of the drum and drumbeats of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. **Response:** Participants of the focus group discussion were relatively in tune with what constitutes significance, but exhibited varied opinions on the specific points as to the significance of the drum and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. Some



participants, particularly the youthful members, listed cultural symbol, choreographic guide, and means of expression as the significance of the drum and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. While the Head and the elderly members listed: training and mastery, coordination, emotional and aesthetic experience, preservation, and transmission of culture, and a tool for spiritual invocation before, during, and after every performance.

**Question:** How do drums and drumbeats' rhythm determine the dance style, pace, and steps of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance members? **Response:** Participants were unanimous in their opinion on the above question that the drums and drumbeats determine the dance steps, pace, and body movement, which creates and provides the aesthetics and emotional allure to both the dancers and the audience. This aligns with (Jenewari, 1973, 31 cited in Eferebo, 2023, 32) that in "the climax of Ekine-Sekiapu dance in Kalabari as elsewhere, there are four dance-steps, each with its characteristic drum rhythm and tempo..."

**Question:** Indispensability of drums and drumbeats to the quality and uniformity of dance steps by members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe. **Response:** It was insightful to note that all participants acceded to the fact that without the drums, drummers, and drumbeats, the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance cannot be performed and would also lack proficiency.

## DISCUSSION

The first findings of the study show that the drums and drumbeats undoubtedly serve as a communication tool in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe. This is in sync with Shaba et al. (2022, 23), who posit "in traditional African society, drums are essentially significant mediums of communication." The focus group discussion on this aligns with the survey response that drums and drumbeats majorly serve as a communication tool in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.

The second finding shows that drums and drumbeats are significant in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance in their usefulness in training and mastery of the dance steps and pace, coordination of the dancing members, choreographic tool, spiritual and ritual function, aesthetics and emotional impact, preservation and transmission of culture. This aligns with focus group data and is interpreted to mean that the drums and drumbeats are far more than merely musical instruments. Rather, they are **cultural symbols, spiritual tools, choreographic guides, and a means of expression**. Understanding their roles enriches our appreciation of the Nembe cultural traditions and offers insight into the deeper meanings embedded in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance performance arts.

The third finding was that both the survey data and the focus group data were unanimous in their responses and opinions that drums and drumbeats determine the dance pattern, steps, pace, and body movement of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe.

Qualitative findings from the focus group discussion present enriched insights into the role and significance of drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe. Participants consistently highlighted the growing importance of the drum and drumbeats in cultural dances. Specifically, several scholars (Eferebo, 2023; Jenewari, 1973, 31) emphasized the necessity of drumming in dance performance. One expert noted, "Drum and drumbeats serve as tools for communication and coordination. Importantly, they symbolize heritage, guide choreography,



serve as a means of expression, facilitate spiritual invocation, and are a central element of the dance's performance structure. Its beats guide, narrate, and animate a cultural practice of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance (focus group participants, personal communication, 2025).

Further findings from both the survey response and the focus group data show that the drums, drummers, and drumbeats are imperative to the performance of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance. This suggests that the members of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance are primarily concerned with the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dynamics of the drumbeats and accompanying dance steps, patterns, and pace.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the importance of drumming in the Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. It emphasizes the cultural, social, and spiritual significance of the drum and its role in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance.

In conclusion, the research underscores the crucial role of the drum and drumbeat in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. In the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, the drum and drumbeats serve as tools for communication and coordination. Importantly, they symbolize heritage, guide choreography, serve as a means of expression, facilitate spiritual invocation, and are a central element of the dance's performance structure. Its beats guide, narrate, and animate a cultural practice of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance that remains vital to the identity and continuity of the Nembe people. Therefore, the drum and drumbeat are indispensable to the overall performance and continuity of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance. Understanding its role deepens our appreciation of Nembe cultural traditions and provides insight into the profound meanings embedded in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance arts of Nembe. The integration of drumming in the dance highlights the need for preserving traditional communication methods, which are crucial for cultural continuity and adaptation in the face of modern technological changes.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The statement of interest in this article/study states that the research on the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance of Nembe is academic, objective, and unbiased, with no professional, financial, or personal interests. It is a testament that the author does not do any outside analysis of the drumbeats and their communicative purposes, making the cultural analysis sound and robust.

It was conducted as an independent study that did not consider any other dance other than the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, on which it bases its examination of the communication of drums and its cultural importance. The research is driven by the need to have an academic and cultural record.

Generally, this research focuses on preserving, protecting, and passing down cultural heritage. Since drums and drumbeats are clearly vital forms of communication in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe, they should be conserved, preserved, and protected as our cultural heritage.



Furthermore, an appropriate and well-recorded drum or drumbeat rhythm of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance enhances the understanding, knowledge, and transmission of cultural heritage to new generations. It will serve as a tool for awareness and sensitization for the leader of the Opu Ekine Sekiapu Dance and stakeholders, ensuring that drum communication persists in cultural performances, which have the potential to boost cultural tourism, generate economic benefits, and raise awareness about the cultural heritage on a broader scale.

The motive of the study was that the Head Dancer, who leads the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance (called Onongi in the traditional language), was skilled in presenting and performing the correct dance steps and patterns in sync with the rhythm of various drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance of Nembe.

Recognize that the drums and drumbeats in the Opu Ekine Sekiapu dance are essential and cannot be removed without affecting the quality and consistency of the dance moves.

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