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Harmonizing the Tide: A Critical Examination of Music and Artistic Synthetics in the Bonny Boat Regatta Festival

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Abstract

This paper examines the socio-cultural significance of music within the Boat Regatta Festival of the Bonny Kingdom in Rivers State, Nigeria. Utilizing Richard Wagner's theory of **Artistic Synthetics** (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) as a theoretical framework, the research investigates the convergence of music, drama, and visual arts as a unified expression of Ijaw cultural identity. Employing a qualitative methodology—comprising semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival analysis—the paper explores how musical performance functions as a primary driver of communal harmony and ritual continuity. Thematic analysis reveals that traditional music in the Bonny Regatta transcends mere entertainment; it serves as a living repository of historical narratives, ancestral memory, and indigenous values. The findings demonstrate that while the festival has integrated modern influences—including digital instrumentation and contemporary rhythmic variations—it maintains a resilient core of ritual significance. This study argues that music acts as a critical mechanism for intergenerational knowledge transfer and social cohesion. By analyzing the tension between tradition and globalization, the paper offers strategic insights for cultural policymakers and stakeholders. It concludes that the intentional preservation and modernization of these sonic traditions are essential for sustaining cultural pride, fostering community unity, and enhancing the regional creative economy through cultural tourism.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, Boat Regatta, Artistic Synthetics, Cultural Sustainability, Social Cohesion, Bonny Kingdom.



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Introduction

A festival is a celebration of a day or period of religious or cultural significance that recurs at regular intervals. It represents a time when people engage in activities outside their routine, abstain from regular practices, and often express behaviors that are usually regulated by social norms. Festivals embody moments of collective joy, respect, and reverence, featuring carefully planned programs that may include performances, rituals, and ceremonies. They are established by custom or organized by cultural associations, religious bodies, or communities to express shared beliefs and values. In Rivers State, Nigeria, festivals play an integral role in affirming cultural identity and heritage. They often celebrate fertility, the renewal of life, agricultural abundance, and the unity of people, fields, and rivers. As Basden observed, festivals are characterized by dancing, music, feasting, and joyful manifestations of pleasure, reflecting both gratitude for the past and optimism for the future.

Among the many cultural elements of festivals, music stands out as one of the most significant. In Bonny Local Government Area, music has long been a vital and functional part of community life. It serves not only as a source of recreation but also as a vehicle for communication, education, and social cohesion. Music is deeply embedded in the cultural framework of the people, accompanying every major life event—from birth to death. There is music for work, children's play, lullabies, marriages, naming ceremonies, circumcision, festivals, and burials. It is therefore rightly regarded as an integral part of culture, reflecting the people's way of life. Across the world, humans have recognized music as a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, evoking deep emotions and fostering unity.

Okafor, as cited in Sotimirin, emphasizes that music is ancient and primeval, predating other forms of artistic expression. In every culture, humanity has used music as a tool for creation, communication, and preservation. Traditional music, particularly in African societies, is collectively owned and orally transmitted. It belongs to the community rather than the individual, and participation in musical activities is a shared social responsibility. Hickok remarks that nowhere in the world is music more integrated into the process of daily living than in Africa, where nearly all communal activities are accompanied by singing, dancing, and drumming—three elements that are inseparable and interdependent.

Similarly, Nzewi reiterates that in indigenous African societies, music is deeply intertwined with political, religious, economic, health, educational, and social systems. Every individual grows up acquiring musical knowledge through active participation in community performances from childhood. Exceptional talent in music is recognized early and nurtured within the collective. Traditional music is thus a communal art that accompanies every activity in indigenous life, whether vocal, instrumental, or a combination of both. Performances are typically supported by indigenous instruments, clapping, and dance, reinforcing the communal essence of African music-making.

Traditional music functions as a bonding force that strengthens social relationships, supports religious expression, and promotes cultural continuity. It serves as a medium for learning local languages, proverbs, and moral values, transmitting the collective wisdom of a people through songs and oral traditions. As Udoh observes, traditional music is a communal property endowed with spiritual qualities that are shared and experienced collectively. It is therefore a cherished cultural heritage that communities safeguard, develop, and celebrate to preserve their identity and worldview.

The Boat Regatta Festival in Bonny Local Government Area is one of the most prominent cultural events in Rivers State. It is characterized by vibrant displays of traditional music, drumming, chants, and dances that symbolize the unity and history of the Bonny people. Despite the centrality of music in the festival, there remains a gap in scholarly understanding regarding the specific roles and meanings of music within this cultural context. Questions persist about the types of traditional music performed, their symbolic significance, and how they contribute to the social and cultural fabric of the festival.

Music has been observed to play a unifying role during the Boat Regatta Festival, bringing community members together and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. However, the specific mechanisms through which music fosters cohesion, transmits heritage, and adapts to modern influences have not been fully explored. This study therefore seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the cultural significance of music in the Boat Regatta Festival, its contribution to community cohesion, and its potential for economic and cultural development.

Research Objectives

This study examines the types of traditional music performed during the Boat Regatta Festival, assesses the cultural significance of music in the festival and its role in preserving Bonny's cultural heritage, explores the impact of music on community cohesion and social interaction during the festival and analyzes the evolution of music in the Boat Regatta Festival over time, particularly in relation to modern influences.

By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to the broader understanding of traditional music as a dynamic cultural force. It highlights how music in the Boat Regatta Festival functions as both a repository of cultural memory and a living, adaptive art form. The study's findings will be valuable to cultural policymakers, festival organizers, and community leaders seeking to enhance cultural preservation, promote unity, and leverage traditional festivals for sustainable local development. Moreover, understanding the lyrics, rhythms, and performances of the festival's music provides insight into the values, history, and linguistic richness of the Bonny people. In doing so, this study underscores the indispensable role of music in preserving cultural heritage while embracing the inevitable currents of change that accompany modernity.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Richard Wagner's Theory of Artistic Synthesis (1849) as its theoretical foundation. The theory was proposed by the nineteenth-century German composer, dramatist, and theatre theorist Richard Wagner, who believed that a truly complete work of art could only be achieved through the integration of various artistic forms. According to Wagner, the perfect artistic creation is one in which music, poetry, and visual art coexist harmoniously, each contributing equally to the overall aesthetic experience.

In Wagner's conception, the lyrics and the music in an operatic or dramatic work must be created simultaneously and with mutual dependence. He argued that when either element is treated as secondary, the resulting performance loses expressive depth and unity. He disapproved of composing a play or libretto and subsequently adding music as an afterthought, emphasizing that neither words nor music should dominate the other. Wagner believed that only by linking the two could art achieve what he called "expressive wholeness," restoring the unity of feeling and meaning that modern artistic practices had fragmented.

In his major work *Opera and Drama*, Wagner provided a vivid analogy to illustrate his theory. He wrote that:

Harmony and rhythm are the blood, flesh, nerves, and bones, with all the entrails, and like these, when we look upon the finished, living man, stay closed against the gazing eye; melody, on the other hand, is this finished man himself. (Peront 11).

In this analogy, harmony and rhythm represent the structural framework that supports the living organism of melody, much like the essential physical components that sustain human life. This comparison underscores Wagner's understanding of the inseparable relationship between the foundational and expressive elements of music and drama. For Wagner, pure or "absolute" music—that is, music that exists independently of words or dramatic context—is limited because it lacks relational meaning. His objective was to dissolve the boundaries between the arts, creating what he termed *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a "total work of art" that unites sound, movement, and visual expression in a single artistic experience.

This theoretical lens provides a valuable framework for understanding the Boat Regatta Festival in Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State. In the festival, music, dance, and visual performances do not exist as separate entities but as interwoven components of a collective cultural expression. The theory helps explain how the lyrics, rhythmic patterns, drumming traditions, and movements of participants merge to communicate shared meanings and reinforce communal identity. Just as Wagner envisioned the fusion of music and drama to achieve expressive unity, the Boat Regatta Festival demonstrates a synthesis of artistic elements in which sound, motion, and ritual converge to create a holistic cultural experience.

Through this lens, music within the festival is not merely an accompaniment to dance or ceremony but an essential component that drives emotional engagement, narrates communal history, and reinforces cultural values. The rhythms of the drums, the harmonic chants, and the melodic lines of the songs are foundational to the performance, structuring its sequence and guiding the collective movement of both performers and audience. In this way, the festival exemplifies Wagner's ideal of artistic synthesis, where music and performance function together to produce unity, meaning, and emotional resonance.

Furthermore, Wagner's concept underscores the transformative power of integrated art forms. The Boat Regatta Festival, like Wagner's envisioned opera, transcends mere entertainment; it becomes a living embodiment of the community's spirit and history. The fusion of music, movement, and visual display generates a form of cultural wholeness that reflects the Bonny people's worldview, social organization, and collective memory. Thus, the theory of Artistic Synthesis is particularly relevant in analyzing how traditional festivals like the Boat Regatta use music to evoke communal participation, convey symbolic messages, and strengthen shared heritage.

Conceptual Review: Music and Traditional Festivals

Music is one of the most profound expressions of human creativity and cultural identity. It is defined by Olaniyan as an art form characteristic of a particular people, culture, or tradition, comprising a sequence of sounds perceived as pleasing or harmonious by society (154). This definition highlights the intrinsic connection between music and cultural identity, presenting it as a reflection of the collective consciousness of a people. Similarly, Odunuga describes music as the harmonious combination of sounds that are pleasing to the ear (1), emphasizing its aesthetic and emotional appeal.

Ekwueme, as cited in Olujemilayo, extends this view by defining music as a phenomenon involving the use of sound, organized and manipulated to convey socially accepted ideas, feelings, and events (12). This perspective positions music as a communicative art form capable of transmitting values and emotions that are central to human experience. Likewise, Blacking defines music as "sound organized by humans" (qtd. in Okafor 5), underscoring the deliberate and creative agency of human beings in shaping sound into meaningful structures. Collectively, these definitions reinforce the idea that music is both an artistic and social construct—an embodiment of the community's identity, emotions, and worldview.

Chuma-Udeh captures this sentiment aptly, stating that "music is the universal language of the soul, and the music of oral literature flows from the essence of a people's existence" (15). This statement implies that music is not only a cultural artifact but also a mode of existence, serving as a vital tool for expression, social harmony, and the transmission of collective values.

In indigenous societies, the origin of traditional or folk songs is often unknown, as these songs are products of communal creativity rather than individual authorship. They evolve through oral transmission and become embedded in the cultural consciousness of the people. Folk songs typically emerge from the community's lived experiences—celebrating love, work, birth, death, war, and religious devotion. The lyrics often reflect social norms, historical events, and shared emotions, functioning as both artistic and documentary expressions.

Nketia asserts that the treatment of song as a form of speech arises from the recognition of music as a verbal and communicative medium, reflecting both personal and social experiences (189). Hence, indigenous songs serve as avenues for verbal creativity and social commentary, making them indispensable in understanding the worldview of a community.

Menon argues that words preceded music in human evolution, suggesting that music emerged from humankind's attempts to communicate emotions and experiences through sound. According to him, early humans used cries, grunts, laughter, and gestures to express themselves, and these gradually developed into recognizable speech sounds and, later, musical expressions (1). This argument underscores the linguistic and communicative foundation of music, suggesting that both are intertwined as forms of human expression.

Agu further stresses that all musical creations serve specific purposes, and performances are carefully chosen to suit particular social or ritual functions. He observes that ceremonies such as birth rites, marriages, initiation ceremonies, religious worship, and funeral rites have specially designed songs and dances that enrich and glorify them (79). Music, therefore, is not a random or decorative addition to cultural life; it performs vital social, religious, and moral functions.

Moreover, Agu contends that music in traditional societies serves as a medium for education and moral instruction. Through songs, individuals learn about their history, language, proverbs, and customs. Songs often teach virtues such as honesty, obedience, and communal responsibility. They also provide instructions on family life, social behavior, and community expectations. In this way, music becomes a repository of knowledge and a tool for socialization.

In African contexts, music functions as a living archive of the people's history, beliefs, and aspirations. It binds the community together, creating a shared sense of identity and purpose. In traditional festivals such as the Boat Regatta, music is central to performance, communication, and celebration. It provides rhythm and structure to the event, reinforces communal unity, and expresses the collective emotions of the people. As such, music within festivals transcends the aesthetic realm to become a powerful force for cultural preservation, education, and social cohesion.

Traditional Music as a Medium of Mass Communication

In traditional music performances, members of a community organize their musical activities to suit specific occasions and enhance communication effectiveness. Information is transmitted and received through song texts, dances, and instrumental displays, serving as channels for both direct and indirect communication. Nzewi observes that:

In traditional strategy for mass communication, the various musical processes used can be categorized as direct when the intention of musical sounds of mass communication is exclusive and direct, when music-making and presentations are intended as the entertainment base for a mass communication objective” (Nzewi 32).

Direct communication in traditional music performances often occurs during festivals and communal gatherings, where audiences freely express opinions, offer praise, and even expose social misconduct through songs. When festivals are organized as public performances, they serve as mass media platforms intended to inform the community about policies, social events, or local happenings. These messages are usually conveyed through verbal means—songs, chants, and instrumentations—although, for sensitive matters, metaphors and allusions are often employed to protect identities or maintain decorum.

A major determinant of communication effectiveness in traditional societies is language. Since traditional music functions primarily as a form of verbal and instrumental communication, understanding the language of performance is crucial for meaning-making within the community.

Walter, cited in Okwilagwe, notes that “vocal music has been an important accompaniment to worship, work, recreation, and a broad spectrum of other activities” (105). This underscores the multifaceted nature of traditional music, which serves not only to entertain but also to communicate, educate, and motivate. Similar to modern mass media, traditional music plays an integral role in community life by informing, inspiring, and engaging participants. Every social or occupational activity is accompanied by songs designed to entertain, relieve boredom, and encourage communal participation.

Echezona asserts that “songs act as a stimulant to cooperative work; any type of work, whether it can be performed in a rhythmic manner or not, is accompanied by singing” (45). This implies that traditional music, like modern media, fosters cooperation and enhances productivity by synchronizing the rhythm of collective labour. The power of music lies not only in its melody but in the words of its songs, which act as stimulants, carrying emotional and motivational weight.

Echezona further explains that songs aid in remembering historical events, especially when recounting tales that involve chronological sequences. For instance, a storyteller who forgets an important name may pause to sing a song, which helps recall the missing detail before resuming the narrative (45). This illustrates how traditional music functions as a mnemonic and archival tool—preserving history and transmitting cultural knowledge, much like modern mass media preserves information through news and documentaries.

Thus, traditional music parallels modern mass media in its functions: it entertains, informs, educates, and preserves cultural memory. However, with the rise of modern digital media, traditional storytelling and folk music are increasingly declining. Many children now spend more time engaging with un-educational television programmes, leading to a gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge systems. Despite this decline, traditional music remains a crucial medium of mass communication, safeguarding the oral heritage and collective identity of communities.

Song Texts as a Means of Communication

An indigenous song is one traditionally sung by the people of a specific community, forming part of their cultural and artistic heritage. Such songs represent the collective creativity, beliefs, and values of a people. They serve as expressive tools for conveying emotional states, communal philosophies, and social commentaries through speech and language.

Music-making during social events—such as marriages, chieftaincy ceremonies, political rallies, and festivals—serves not only for entertainment but also for the communication of important messages. Music, therefore, functions as an essential medium of verbal communication.

Communication is fundamental to societal progress and cohesion. Uyenga defines it as “the process of conveying or transmitting messages, information, or ideas from one person to another in a manner that both parties understand the message succinctly” (108). Through effective communication, societies ensure interaction, understanding, and cooperation among their members.

Songs, therefore, go beyond entertainment; they convey messages either directly or indirectly and often serve as corrective or admonitory tools. Ibekwe emphasizes that “song texts communicate direct information to those who understand their language and idioms” (40). This highlights the significance of cultural and linguistic familiarity in interpreting songs. Because traditional songs are usually performed in the native dialect, their meanings are best understood by those embedded within the culture. The language, idioms, and proverbs embedded in songs enable them to communicate messages deeply rooted in communal experience.

In the Boat Regatta Festival of Bonny Local Government Area, song texts act as vital communicative tools within the community. They are used to celebrate achievements, recall historical events, and sometimes ridicule rival communities. Depending on context, songs may be explicit in meaning or encoded with symbolic references understood only by insiders.

As cultural indicators, song texts preserve historical knowledge and serve as verbal archives of the community’s origins, rulers, successes, and challenges. Ibekwe notes that African songs are “rich in meaning, idioms, and proverbs,” addressing social deficiencies, offering criticism, and delivering satire (36). These songs articulate societal values and provide moral instruction that may be difficult to express through direct speech. Akpabot supports this by observing that song texts incorporate proverbs, which function as cultural indicators reflecting the community’s worldview (97).

Thus, music serves as a repository of collective wisdom. Proverbs and metaphors within songs transmit moral teachings and reinforce societal norms. As Nketia explains, “the treatment of the song as a form of speech utterance arises not only from stylistic considerations but also from the importance of the song as an avenue of verbal communication and creative verbal expression reflecting personal and social experiences” (189).

He further observes that the themes of folk songs “tend to centre around events and matters of common interest and concern to members of a community” (189). Folk songs, therefore, address social realities, individual experiences, and communal events, serving both educational and recreational purposes.

Songs are believed to have originated from humanity’s innate need to express emotion, devotion, joy, and sorrow. They communicate the full spectrum of human experience—from birth to death—through universally comprehensible emotional language. Folk songs thus represent the physical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of human life. They are categorized into occupational, war, love, burial, and celebratory songs, among others, each reflecting the cultural and social conditions of its performance.

Menon argues that words preceded music, suggesting that human beings first expressed emotions through speech before developing musical rhythm and melody. Avorgbedor adds that song lyrics often provide polite ways of expressing impolite thoughts, allowing performers to articulate sensitive or uncomfortable truths without fear of reprisal (210). This function is particularly evident in satirical songs performed during festivals or communal events, where performers indirectly critique societal issues.

Merriam also emphasizes that songs of social control act as direct warnings to individuals and indirectly define acceptable behavior within society (224). The clarity and resonance of song texts are crucial for their acceptance and effectiveness in influencing behavior. As Agu asserts, “all musical creations serve specific purposes and all performances are carefully chosen to suit specific functions and activities appropriately,” including ceremonies such as marriages, birth rites, and funerals (79).

Music, therefore, is more than aesthetic performance—it is a structured communication system that fosters social interaction and cultural continuity. Okunna observes that communication should involve “a two-way process where the recipient of the original message responds or reacts to the message” (1). This is evident in traditional performances, where audience responses—through dancing, clapping, or verbal replies—affirm understanding and engagement with the song’s message.

Through such reciprocal participation, traditional music maintains its communicative power, ensuring that cultural messages are transmitted, received, and internalized across generations.

Methodology

The study will employ purposive sampling to select participants with a deep understanding of the Boat Regatta festival and its musical dimensions. Participants will include festival organizers, musicians, cultural experts, and community members who actively participate in the event. Approximately 20 to 30 participants will be selected based on their expertise, experience, and involvement in the festival’s musical practices.

Interview transcripts, observational notes, and document analysis findings will undergo thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to the role of music in the festival. The data analysis will follow the constant comparative method; whereby new data are continuously compared with previously gathered information to refine and develop emerging themes and concepts.

Investigation of Types of Traditional Music Performed During the Boat Regatta Festival

The Regatta festival, particularly in Bonny, stands as one of the most colorful and vibrant cultural celebrations in the Niger Delta region. Unlike other festivals specific to individual communities within the region, such as the Iria among the Ibani and Okrika, the Regatta in Bonny is celebrated with remarkable uniformity and enthusiasm. Although there may be slight variations in how the festival is observed across different parts of Bonny, the core traditions and objectives remain consistent.

A regatta, according to Alagoa (1974), transcends a mere aquatic display; it is a deeply symbolic cultural performance intricately linked to the natural environment. The success of the event depends on natural elements such as tides, weather, and water volume. Central to this aquatic spectacle are the paddlers in ceremonial gigs (Alali-Aru), who maintain synchronized rhythm and style as they row, accompanied by traditional music. This coordination between the paddlers and the music exemplifies the essential role of music in the regatta, as rhythm serves both a functional and aesthetic purpose.

Traditional music performed during the Bonny Regatta festival features a fusion of drumming and vocal performances. Drummers play a crucial role in establishing the tempo and rhythm for the paddlers, ensuring that the movement of the boats aligns harmoniously with the beat of the drums. In certain instances, the musical display is further enriched by masquerades and other performers, adding layers of visual spectacle and cultural depth to the event.

An examination of the various forms of traditional music used during the Boat Regatta festival in Bonny reveals that music serves not only as an accompaniment to the aquatic displays but also as a vital element of cultural expression. It functions as a bridge between the physical performance and the spiritual and communal essence of the festival.

Overview of Traditional Music Genres

The Bonny Boat Regatta festival showcases a wide variety of traditional music genres, each associated with distinct boat assemblages and performances. According to Tagowa (2005), Nigerian regatta boat assemblages and exhibitions possess symbolic variations that may be classified into categories such as war, ritual, wrestling, masquerade, and other social canoes. In their modernized versions, these assemblages are commonly grouped into three main types: war canoes, ordinance boats, and gigs.

Songs performed during the regatta are usually composed by individuals whose creative expressions serve both entertainment and communication purposes. The lyrical content of these songs often carries historical, moral, or social messages. Each folk song consists of words that convey meaning and reflect the intention of the performers. Depending on the context, the message of a song may be direct or metaphorical.

Songs performed for ritual or religious purposes are often restricted to specific groups, and their lyrics may only be understood by designated performers or cultural custodians. These restrictions serve to protect the sanctity of the music and preserve its historical and religious significance. Traditional music, regardless of its specific use, functions as a vehicle for expressing and preserving the cultural heritage of the community.

Each genre of music performed during the regatta corresponds with the specific type of boat it accompanies, and every musical form carries its own social and symbolic weight. For instance, war boats are traditionally accompanied by Ogbomasirima music, a genre marked by powerful drumming and rhythmic chants that evoke courage and valor. The beats of the drums synchronize with the paddling motions of the war boats, symbolizing unity, strength, and the collective spirit of the warriors. This music genre not only energizes the participants but also honors the valor of Bonny's ancestors, who defended their homeland with bravery.

A distinctive feature of regatta songs is their call-and-response structure, which promotes communal participation and interaction. In this format, the lead singer initiates a verse while the chorus, made up of other participants, responds in unison. This responsive structure strengthens the sense of unity among the performers and enhances the rhythmic flow of the music.

The regatta performance customarily begins with an opening song, which signals the commencement of the festivities and serves as a unifying call to all participants. The lead vocalist sets the tone by raising this introductory song, drawing attention to the start of the event. Onboard the regatta boat, the lead singer begins with the following call:

Song 1:

Aru eh

Aru eh

Aru mingi la te (Researcher's Field Survey, 2024)

As the song begins, it triggers the drummers to strike their instruments, producing melodies that merge seamlessly with the singers' voices. The combination of drumming and singing naturally transitions into dancing, marking the official start of the love boat performance. As the rhythm intensifies, the excitement among the performers and spectators heightens.

When the regatta boats approach the host community, the performers begin to chant praises to notable figures in the audience, calling their appellations in rhythmic salutation. These musical gestures heighten the emotional intensity of the event, transforming the performers from mere participants into cultural vessels, deeply immersed in the spirit and rhythm of the celebration.



War Boat (Bonny)

The rising tempo of the performance often triggers a change in songs, which is sometimes influenced by the reactions of spectators who cheer the boat on as it enters each community. This dynamic interaction between the performers and the audience introduces a layer of spontaneity and communal participation, ensuring that every regatta performance is a distinct and memorable experience.

The music performed in the war boat regatta of Bonny is both captivating and spiritually profound. It carries a deep religious significance and occupies a special place within the festival's rituals and ceremonies. The songs performed during the war boat procession transcend entertainment; they are imbued with spirituality and function as an integral part of the regatta's ceremonial expressions.

The call-and-response pattern of these songs manifests in multiple variations. In most cases, a soloist performs melodic lines rich in improvisation and extemporization, while the chorus maintains a consistent response throughout the performance. Occasionally, the soloist cues the chorus either through textual prompts within the song or by vocal exclamations that signal transitions or emphasis. This structure fosters musical dialogue and enhances the communal energy of the performance.

African vocal music, generally, is tonal. Therefore, melodies in traditional African songs often follow the natural speech tone patterns of the language to ensure intelligibility and effective communication with listeners. Every word or phrase sung in performance is expected to convey meaning, evoke emotion, or provide entertainment. As Agu (1990) explains, "the important features which give musical tradition its intrinsic character are the broad principles of tonality and the relationship of people's music to other aspects of their cultural and social life" (p. 1).

The songs performed on the war boats are essentially war songs, reflecting the gravity and intensity of combat. They are both symbolic and functional, serving as chants of courage and as spiritual invocations for protection and victory. One such song is presented below:

Song 2:

Woso woso mo, woso woso mo opuoru,

Woso woso mo, (x2)

A wotibi sein, a wotibi seinghanba kimi ba siegha, (x2)

Ogbosu fun peli bo oteri o mul, (x2)

Translation:

Bushy, bushy, the big masquerade with the bushy hair, (x2)

Let us shave his hair, for if we do not, no one will go to the bush. (x2)

Ogbosu, pluck leaves to cover me completely. (x2)

This song serves as a powerful invocation of Ogbosu, the war deity of Bonny. The lyrics petition Ogbosu to pluck leaves to cover and protect his children in battle, symbolizing divine protection, strength, and favor during conflict. The song's significance is profound, as it traditionally marks the commencement of war-related activities. It functions as the "call song" that signals the war boat to set sail or depart from the waterfront.

Typically, it is the Chief Priest of the war deity within the community or clan who raises this song. His voice serves as both a spiritual summons and a command, signaling the warriors to launch their boats. Thus, the music operates simultaneously as a sacred invocation and a practical cue, merging spirituality with functionality. This fusion of musical artistry, ritual practice, and communal identity reflects the cultural depth of the regatta festival in Bonny. Through such performances, the community not only honors its ancestors and deities but also preserves its collective memory and heritage.

Song 3:

Owu eh bode ye eh

Ama Ibelema yama

Owu eh bode eh Ama Ibelema yama



This song continues the invocation of spiritual strength and unity. It is performed as the boats move in formation, reinforcing solidarity among the paddlers and invoking divine favor for safe passage and success. The rhythm of the drums, the cadence of the paddlers, and the resonance of the voices create a sacred harmony that symbolizes the inseparable bond between the people of Bonny, their environment, and their ancestral traditions.

Plate 2: Bonny Boat Regatta (Green House)

In ritual songs, the text reflects a deep belief in the supernatural. Through these songs, the gods and goddesses are praised and invoked in acts of worship. The lyrics acknowledge the existence and power of the deities, as well as their influence over human affairs. Consequently, ritual songs function as praise songs, songs of worship, and songs of supplication or appeasement. Some of these songs are recited, such as "Owu eh bode ye eh! Ama Ibelema yama!", while others are sung melodically. Many of them are improvised, especially those rich in recitations, proverbs, and allusions. Individuals gifted in poetic expression, song composition, and proverbial speech are usually sought after to perform these pieces, whether for ritual or social occasions. During regatta celebrations, professional and talented singers are often invited to join the performing groups. The popularity of songs within the community is not determined solely by their melodic beauty but also by the depth of their textual meaning and the emotional or spiritual effect they have on the audience.

Agu aligns with Blacking's assertion that "the chief function of music is to involve people in shared experiences within the framework of their cultural environment" (p. 10). This observation suggests that the collective experiences created through cultural performances such as music are grounded in shared ideas, knowledge, and interests. These shared foundations form what can be described as a "common language" that fosters communication and understanding among members of the community. This "common language" extends beyond spoken dialects to include musical language, encompassing aesthetics, performance styles, songs, dances, and instrumental accompaniments.

This concept is vividly demonstrated in the Boat Regatta Festival of Bonny Kingdom. The regatta, with its long-standing musical traditions, exemplifies how music functions as a unifying language that binds the community together. The songs, rhythms, and performances associated with the regatta have remained largely consistent over time, maintaining their authenticity while embodying the community's collective heritage. These musical elements create shared experiences for both performers and spectators, reinforcing a sense of belonging that transcends generations. In this way, the regatta not only celebrates Bonny's cultural endurance but also illustrates the enduring role of music in uniting the people through shared cultural expressions.

Through its various music genres, the regatta festival becomes a powerful expression of Bonny's cultural identity, with each type of boat and its corresponding music highlighting different facets of the community's social, spiritual, and historical life.

Performance Practices

The Bonny community's musical tradition is deeply rooted in its history, spirituality, and social practices. Although Bonny has a distinctive musical heritage, interviews and personal observations reveal that its people share several musical characteristics with neighboring Ijaw communities. This similarity is expected, given Bonny's geographical proximity and historical ties to the Ijaw, which have encouraged a blending of musical influences over time.

However, Bonny's traditional music distinguishes itself through its central role in the Boat Regatta Festival, where music transcends entertainment to embody cultural identity, communication, and spiritual connection. A core element of this tradition is drumming. The drummers play an essential role in both the aquatic displays and the accompanying performances of the boat riders. When the riders are in motion, the *Akuwa-oz*i—a set of four drums arranged before a small fire—functions as the “talking drum.” These drums do not merely produce rhythm; they communicate, speaking through coded patterns that carry messages and meanings understood by the people. The *Akuwa-oz*i drums engage both performers and spectators, establishing a dialogue that heightens emotional connection and synchronizes movement, rhythm, and meaning.

When the riders are not actively performing, communication through drum language is sustained by the *Opu-oz*i, a single large drum. Its deep, resonant tones maintain the rhythmic and cultural continuity of the festival, ensuring that the musical experience remains unbroken. The *Opu-oz*i anchors the performance with its powerful vibrations, embodying stability and spiritual resonance even during moments of visual stillness. Together, the *Akuwa-oz*i and *Opu-oz*i drums form the rhythmic backbone of the regatta festival. They symbolize the intersection between music, communication, and cultural expression. Beyond their musical function, these instruments serve as repositories of oral history, transmitting the stories, values, and identity of the Bonny people through rhythm and resonance.

Cultural Significance of Music in the Festival

The music performed during the Boat Regatta Festival possesses profound cultural significance. It is not merely an art form for entertainment but a living vessel of the community's history, spirituality, and social identity. Each song, rhythm, and melody carries cultural meaning, linking the present generation with the ancestral past and reinforcing collective memory.

Music serves as a medium for cultural transmission. Through its lyrics, melodies, and performance contexts, it conveys myths, historical events, rituals, and moral values. The call-and-response structure, common in Bonny traditional music, fosters participation and reflects the communal mode of African communication. Songs often recount heroic deeds, narrate historical events, and invoke spiritual entities, keeping the people's heritage alive.

Moreover, the festival's music strengthens unity by creating shared emotional experiences. Its rhythms and melodies transcend social barriers, inviting men, women, and children to participate in a single act of cultural expression. Through song and dance, the community celebrates its shared identity, renews social bonds, and affirms its spiritual and historical continuity.

Supporting this view, Mr. Tamuno Boma, a chief and regatta organizer, remarked during an interview:

“The Boat Regatta is called *Omu-ar*u, meaning war boat, and it is the main display during the festival. It is our culture, and we are proud of it. The music performed here brings us together.”
(Researcher's field survey, 2024)

This statement captures the essence of the regatta's music as both a cultural emblem and a unifying force. The performance of these songs preserves Bonny's rich heritage while nurturing collective pride and solidarity among its people.

Impact of Music on Community Cohesion and Social Interactions

Music during the Boat Regatta Festival significantly enhances community cohesion and social interaction. It acts as a unifying force that fosters participation, inclusivity, and shared emotional experience. The call-and-response style invites communal involvement, while the rhythms and melodies evoke collective memory and identity.

Through participation in musical performance, people of different ages, genders, and social classes interact, creating a sense of equality and belonging. This inclusivity breaks down social barriers and promotes harmony within the community. Moreover, songs that recount ancestral achievements or historical milestones serve as tools of education, helping younger generations learn about their heritage and community values.

The song texts, therefore, act as oral archives, preserving the memory of past events and honoring the legacies of notable families and individuals. They often celebrate the achievements of ancestors and the contributions of host families to the community's success. In social gatherings, these performances become moments of collective remembrance and reaffirmation of social unity.

Evolution of Music in the Boat Regatta Festival Over Time: Historical Development of Music Genres

The Kingdom of Bonny, a historic coastal state in Rivers State, Nigeria, dates back to around 1000 AD. According to Tasié, Bonny rose to prominence in the fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese, becoming an important hub in the transatlantic slave trade. The name “Bonny” is believed to be a distortion of its original name, Okoloma, meaning “Curlew Town,” after the birds that inhabited the island.

Bonny's origins trace to settlers from the Ebebi-toru area, particularly the Isedani lineage of Kolokuma in present-day Bayelsa State. These founders—Opuamakuba, Alagbariye, and Asimini—established the kingdom's political and cultural structures, including the titles of Amanyanabo (King) and Amadapu (subordinate traditional rulers) (Cookey, 117). Music during this era was closely tied to religion and social life, encompassing both ritual and recreational forms. Recreational music included children's games, lullabies, and folktale songs, all of which served social and educational purposes.

Dic-Duvwarovwo (p. 101) explains that recreational music was inclusive and participatory, providing a platform for leisure, self-expression, and creativity. Ikorok (p. 56) traces the word “recreation” to the Latin *recreare*, meaning “to create anew” or “to refresh,” reflecting the rejuvenating role of music in communal life. Game songs among children, for instance, were primarily designed for amusement and social bonding. Though the lyrics often contained nonsensical syllables or improvised phrases, they encouraged creativity, dramatization, and informal learning. Through such activities, children discovered and shared talents as singers, composers, instrumentalists, and dancers.

In the nineteenth century, British colonial influence reshaped Bonny's political and cultural life. The 1886 protectorate treaty formally brought the kingdom under British control. With the spread of Christianity and Western education, indigenous music began to blend with European hymns and tonalities. Despite these changes, one tradition remained remarkably resilient—the music of the Boat Regatta Festival. While Western influences introduced new sounds and instruments, the regatta music retained its traditional essence. The songs, rhythms, and instruments used during the festival remain authentic to Bonny's ancestral heritage. Thus, the Boat Regatta continues to embody Bonny's cultural resilience, standing as a living testament to the community's ability to preserve its traditions amid historical transformation.

Changes in Performance Styles and Practices

Over time, the performance styles and practices associated with the Boat Regatta festival in Bonny have undergone significant transformation, mirroring the broader social, economic, and cultural evolution of the community. One of the most striking changes is the shift from informal, spontaneous performances to highly organized and structured presentations that now characterize the modern regatta.



Historically, the festival’s performances were deeply communal, fluid, and participatory, driven primarily by cultural pride, spiritual devotion, and social celebration rather than competition. Music, dance, and drumming were largely improvised, with performers expressing their emotions and creativity freely, allowing the entire community to partake in the cultural experience without rigid organization or judging criteria.

In contrast, the contemporary Boat Regatta festival has embraced a more formalized and competitive framework. The most recent event, held at Bonny Coal Beach, featured six War Canoe Houses, each representing a distinct lineage, tradition, and artistic identity within the Bonny Kingdom. Participants are now required to obtain official entry forms for their groups, marking a transition from spontaneous participation to a structured registration process. The introduction of competition and prize categories has further institutionalized the festival, with performances evaluated based on precision, creativity, and presentation. This development has not only elevated the quality of the performances but also shifted the motivation behind participation—from purely communal celebration to recognition, prestige, and the pursuit of excellence.



Consequently, musical performances have become more refined and choreographed. Traditional songs and drum patterns are now rehearsed meticulously, often blended with modern instrumentation and stylistic innovations that appeal to contemporary audiences. This fusion of traditional and modern musical elements has resulted in a hybridized form of regatta performance that both preserves cultural heritage and accommodates modern artistic sensibilities. For instance, younger performers have introduced new rhythms and harmonic arrangements while maintaining the cultural integrity of traditional Bonny songs and chants. This adaptation reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of the community’s artistic expression.

Furthermore, the physical setting of the festival has transformed. The relocation of the regatta to larger and more organized venues such as Bonny Coal Beach—illustrated in Plate 5—represents both the festival’s growth and its adaptation to changing times. These modern venues accommodate larger audiences, facilitate better stage management, and provide opportunities for more elaborate visual and musical displays. Performers now make use of wider performance spaces, coordinated choreography, and synchronized drumming patterns designed to captivate spectators and enhance the spectacle of the event.

Despite these developments, the foundational purpose of the Boat Regatta festival remains unchanged. Music continues to serve as a vital medium for expressing communal identity, honoring ancestral traditions, and reinforcing cultural pride. The evolution of performance styles and practices therefore reflects not a loss of authenticity but rather a conscious adaptation to contemporary realities. By blending traditional elements with modern innovation, the Boat Regatta festival in Bonny sustains its cultural relevance, ensuring that it remains a living, breathing testament to the resilience and creativity of the Bonny people.

Chief Dublin Green Ebie House Ready for the Competition (2023)

The venues for regatta performances have also evolved over time. The relocation to spaces such as Bonny Coal Beach, as reflected in Plate 5, demonstrates the festival’s increasing scale and organization. These modern venues can accommodate larger audiences and offer a more controlled environment for the performers.

This shift has influenced performance styles significantly, as groups now design more elaborate displays that take advantage of the expansive stage and heightened visibility. Despite these physical and organizational transformations, the essence of regatta music—its role as a unifying force and a vessel of communal identity—remains undiminished. The evolution of performance styles and practices underscores the adaptability of the Bonny people, who continue to honor their traditions while embracing contemporary demands. This blending of heritage and modernity ensures that the Boat Regatta festival remains a vibrant, relevant, and deeply symbolic cultural event in Bonny.



Bonny Boat Regatta King Fubara Blue House (2023)

Contemporary Influences

The Boat Regatta festival in Bonny has not remained static. It has evolved under the influence of numerous contemporary forces that have reshaped its performance styles, practices, and overall presentation. These influences, while diverse, share a common thread: they introduce modern sensibilities that coexist with, and sometimes challenge, traditional elements.

Modernization of Performance Techniques

One of the most visible transformations in the regatta is the modernization of performance techniques and the integration of technology. Traditional drums and indigenous instruments, once the exclusive sources of sound, are now often accompanied by modern sound systems, microphones, and amplifiers. These technological enhancements have improved the clarity, reach, and impact of the music, allowing performers to engage larger audiences effectively. The use of lighting systems, stage decorations, and coordinated sound design has added new layers of artistic sophistication to the festival. However, this modernization also requires careful adaptation of traditional performance styles to accommodate new technologies without diluting the authenticity of the music or its ritual significance.

Competition and Professionalism

The transition from informal community gatherings to formalized competitions has introduced a heightened sense of professionalism and discipline into the festival. The adoption of registration forms, structured guidelines, and prize categories has transformed the regatta into a well-organized event that values creativity, precision, and presentation. This competitive framework encourages participants to refine their artistic skills, experiment with innovative musical ideas, and deliver performances that combine technical excellence with cultural depth. The spirit of competition has also inspired meticulous rehearsals and choreography, fostering collaboration among singers, drummers, and dancers. While this new professionalism has elevated the festival's quality, it also marks a shift from collective spontaneity to performative excellence—a transformation that mirrors broader societal changes in how culture is produced and consumed.

Cultural Fusion and Innovation



Another significant contemporary influence is the infusion of modern musical genres into the regatta's traditional repertoire. Influences from global and popular music trends have introduced fresh rhythms, melodic variations, and diverse instrumentation into the performances. These hybrid expressions often serve as side attractions that engage younger audiences familiar with contemporary styles. This cultural fusion revitalizes the festival, broadening its appeal and ensuring generational continuity.

However, it also provokes dialogue within the community regarding cultural preservation and authenticity. The challenge lies in striking a balance between innovation and tradition—maintaining the spiritual and historical essence of the regatta while allowing room for creative evolution.

Social Media and Digital Platforms

In recent years, social media and digital platforms have revolutionized the visibility and dissemination of the regatta festival. Performances are now streamed online, shared across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, reaching audiences far beyond Bonny's geographical boundaries. This digital exposure enhances cultural exchange, attracts tourism, and promotes global awareness of the Bonny Kingdom's traditions. Yet, it also introduces the risk of commercialization and misrepresentation, as online portrayals may emphasize spectacle over substance. Balancing digital visibility with cultural integrity remains a pressing concern for festival organizers and cultural custodians.

Economic and Tourism Factors

The Boat Regatta festival has become not only a cultural celebration but also an important economic and tourism event. The influx of visitors stimulates local commerce and hospitality industries, providing economic benefits to the community. This financial dimension has motivated improvements in infrastructure, logistics, and event management. However, as tourism interests grow, there is increasing pressure to modify aspects of the festival to suit external expectations, sometimes at the expense of traditional authenticity. Hence, organizers face the challenge of preserving the festival's cultural soul while leveraging its tourism potential for community development.

Community Engagement and Education

A noteworthy outcome of contemporary influence is the renewed emphasis on community engagement and cultural education. Workshops, seminars, and school-based programs now accompany the regatta season, providing platforms to educate the younger generation about the festival's historical significance, music, and rituals. These initiatives ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge and foster pride in Bonny's cultural heritage. They also serve as spaces for intergenerational dialogue, where elders mentor youths in the art of drumming, singing, and performance preparation. This educational approach not only safeguards the continuity of the regatta tradition but also reinforces its relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the Boat Regatta Festival in the Bonny Kingdom, particularly the traditional music played during the event. The study looked at the types of music performed, how they are played, their cultural importance, and how they bring the community together. The Boat Regatta Festival is a lively and important celebration in Bonny, featuring colorful boat displays and traditional music that is deeply connected to the history and beliefs of the Bonny people. The music is a key part of the festival, with different styles linked to various types of boats, such as war canoes, each with its own cultural meaning. Findings reveal that specific types of traditional music, like Ogbomasirima, are played on war boats with intense drumming and rhythmic chants that inspire courage. The research also highlighted the communal nature of the music, where call-and-response patterns encourage participation and strengthen community bonds.

The use of drums like the Akwa-ozu and Opu-ozu was also explored, showing how these instruments communicate important messages through their rhythms. Furthermore, civilization has taken over the cultural practices of these communities, and gradually, the cultural practices are being replaced by new elements that are a combination of more Western and less African or indigenous traditions. The fact still remains that traditional music is dynamic and cannot be erased, but the changes have affected not only the cultural practices and musical traditions of these communities; they have also been replaced by other interests outside their cultural boundaries, thereby making the present generation lose interest in their cultural practices. Although most communities share common boundaries and have been in constant contact with one another, there are certain musical performances that exist among them that are solely based on the community's cultural beliefs and practices.

Despite the constant existence of acculturation and enculturation among our societies, these musical genres are still guarded from outside influences. Although traditional activities continue in these communities, there is a noticeable shift in how community members engage with indigenous practices, which were once vibrant communal activities. The traditional music of the Boat Regatta Festival, however, remains more than mere entertainment—it is a vessel for preserving the community’s heritage, reinforcing social cohesion, and maintaining a shared identity. The music has evolved, adapting to changes while retaining its cultural significance, proving its vital role in uniting the community and safeguarding its traditions for future generations. Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

Cultural Preservation Initiatives: There is a need for dedicated efforts to preserve the traditional music and cultural practices of the Bonny Kingdom. This can be achieved through the establishment of cultural preservation programs that document, teach, and promote traditional music, ensuring that future generations remain connected to their heritage. **Incorporation into Education:** Integrating the study of traditional music and cultural practices into the educational curriculum in the Bonny Kingdom could foster a deeper understanding and appreciation among the younger generation. Schools and community centres should offer courses and workshops that focus on the history, significance, and performance of traditional music. **Community Engagement and Participation:** To combat the waning interest in traditional practices, it is essential to actively engage the community, especially the youth, in cultural activities.

Organizing community events, competitions, and festivals that emphasize traditional music and its role in the Boat Regatta Festival could help rekindle interest and participation. **Government and Institutional Support:** It is crucial for the government and cultural institutions to provide financial and logistical support for initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting traditional music. This could include funding for cultural festivals, grants for musicians and scholars, and the creation of cultural centres dedicated to the preservation of Bonny’s musical heritage. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launching public awareness campaigns that highlight the importance of traditional music and its role in cultural identity can help raise awareness among the broader public. These campaigns can utilize media platforms, including social media, to reach a wider audience and encourage collective efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of the Bonny Kingdom.

Finally, this article has shed light on the profound cultural significance of the traditional music associated with the Boat Regatta Festival in the Bonny Kingdom. The study reveals that this music is more than just an auditory experience; it is a vital component of the community’s identity, history, and social cohesion. The findings demonstrate that traditional music plays an essential role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Bonny people. It is deeply intertwined with their historical narratives, beliefs, and communal practices, particularly during significant events like the Boat Regatta Festival. The specific types of music, such as the Ogbomasirima, are not only performances but also expressions of courage, unity, and resilience passed down through generations. However, the research also highlights the challenges posed by modernization and the gradual erosion of these cultural practices.

As external influences encroach upon traditional customs, there is a noticeable shift in the community’s engagement with their heritage. The younger generation, in particular, shows declining interest in traditional music, which threatens the continuity of these practices. Despite these challenges, the resilience of traditional music in the Bonny Kingdom is evident. While it has adapted to changing times, its core cultural significance remains intact. The communal nature of the music, characterized by participation and shared experiences, continues to strengthen social bonds and reinforce a collective identity. The traditional music of the Boat Regatta Festival is a cornerstone of the Bonny Kingdom’s cultural heritage. To ensure its preservation, it is imperative to address the challenges of modernization through education, community engagement, and institutional support. By doing so, the Bonny people can safeguard their rich musical traditions, ensuring that they remain a vibrant and integral part of their cultural identity for generations to come.

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