

Audience Perception and Cultural Significance of Ekombi Traditional Folk Dance in Efik Marriage Ceremonies: A Study of Calabar, Cross River State

UDOFIA UNWANA MAURICE¹, DR. DANIEL JAMES CHIKADA², DR. SUNDAY O. IGBABA³
^{1,2,3}*Department of Theatre and Cultural Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria*

Abstract - This study assesses the audience perspective of the Ekombi traditional folk dance in Efik marriage ceremonies in Calabar, Cross River State, investigating its continued relevance in a modernizing society. The research addresses the shifting dynamics of cultural consumption and the perceived disconnect between traditional performances and contemporary audience understanding. Anchored in a dual-theoretical framework of Reception Theory and Structural Functionalism, the study explores the dance as both a personal interpretive experience and a vital social structure. Employing a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 101 respondents across the Efik, Efut, and Qua clans using structured questionnaires, interviews, and direct observations. Findings reveal a predominantly positive reception, with 69.7% of the audience perceiving the dance as a symbol of peace, happiness, and communal cohesion. Furthermore, 71.9% of respondents recognize its cultural significance as a platform for showcasing femininity, beauty, and marital readiness. The study concludes that Ekombi serves as an essential aesthetic factor that enhances traditional marital rites and reinforces ethnic identity. It recommends the continuous promotion and adequate resourcing of the dance to preserve Efik cultural heritage and foster social unity.

Index Terms- Ekombi Dance, Efik Marriage, Audience Perception, Cultural Significance, Calabar.

I. INTRODUCTION

The cultural landscape of Nigeria is a vibrant tapestry of ethnic expressions, among which the Efik people of Cross River State hold a prominent position due to their sophisticated social structures and rich artistic heritage. Central to this heritage is the Ekombi traditional folk dance, a performance characterized by graceful, rhythmic movements that mimic the undulating waves of the sea (Duke 42). In the context of Efik marriage ceremonies, specifically the Nkuho (seclusion) and the subsequent marriage rites, Ekombi is not merely a form of entertainment; it is a symbolic communication tool that reinforces

communal bonds and celebrates the transition of the bride into womanhood. Despite the pervasive nature of globalization and the influx of Western marriage traditions, the persistence of Ekombi suggests a deep-rooted psychological and social attachment among the Efik people. Understanding how the contemporary audience perceives this dance is vital for assessing its continued relevance in a rapidly modernizing society.

The problem necessitating this study lies in the shifting dynamics of cultural consumption in Calabar. While Ekombi is frequently performed at marriage ceremonies, there is a noticeable disconnect between the performance itself and the audience's understanding of its traditional nuances (Onyile 115). As younger generations become more influenced by digital media and global pop culture, the specific symbolic meanings of Ekombi movements risk being reduced to mere aesthetics (Bassey 78). Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical data regarding whether the audience views these performances as a sacred preservation of Efik identity or as a repetitive ritual maintained only for the sake of formality. Without a clear assessment of audience perspectives, the cultural significance of the dance may erode, leading to a loss of the very values it is meant to uphold within the marriage institution (Amaku 204).

The primary aim of this research is to investigate how the audience in Calabar engages with and interprets the Ekombi dance during marriage ceremonies. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the audience's perception of Ekombi traditional folk dance in Efik marriage ceremonies and to evaluate the cultural significance of the dance from the audience's perspective. These objectives are designed to bridge the gap between the performers' intent and the spectators' reception, ensuring a holistic view of the dance's role in modern Efik society (Uya 55). By focusing on the observer, the study aligns with

broader academic shifts toward reception theory in African performance studies (Enekwe 12).

To guide the investigation, the study addresses two critical research questions. First, what are the predominant perceptions held by the audience regarding the Ekombi traditional folk dance during marriage ceremonies in Calabar? Second, in what ways does the audience perceive the cultural significance of the Ekombi dance within the context of these ceremonies? By answering these questions, the study provides a structured analysis of the socio-cultural impact of folk performance on the contemporary Efik public, building upon the theoretical framework that dance serves as a living archive of community history (Ajayi 89).

A significant knowledge gap exists in the current literature regarding the reception of Efik folk arts. While extensive research has been conducted on the history and costumes of Efik dance, such as the work of Effiong (2018), most studies focus on the performers or the historical evolution of the dance rather than the spectators. There is a scarcity of scholarship that utilizes contemporary audience feedback to gauge the health of traditional performances in the twenty-first century. This study addresses this gap by shifting the focus from the stage to the seats, providing an empirical basis for understanding how traditional folk dance survives and adapts through the eyes of those who witness it.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly investigation into traditional performances like the Ekombi necessitates a multidisciplinary lens, merging the fields of sociology, anthropology, and theatre arts. To adequately "assess audience perspectives," one must first understand the historical weight of the performance and the theoretical frameworks that govern cultural reception in contemporary Nigeria.

The Evolution of Ethnochoreology in the Nigerian Context

Ethnochoreology, the study of dance through its social and cultural aspects, has undergone significant transformation in Nigerian scholarship. Early colonial accounts often dismissed indigenous dances as mere rhythmic gymnastics or "pagan" rituals. However, post-independence scholars began to reframe these performances as essential pedagogical

tools (Bakare 12). In the Nigerian context, dance serves as a vehicle for historical narration, moral education, and social control. For the Efik, the Ekombi dance is not an isolated artistic expression but a component of a larger cultural ecosystem. Researchers argue that the Nigerian traditional dance floor is a democratic space where the "performer-audience" boundary is fluid, allowing for a collective experience of identity (Yerima 88). This fluid boundary is critical to our study, as it suggests that the audience in Calabar is not just observing a dance but participating in a reaffirmation of their "Efikness."

Maritime Aesthetics and the Choreography of the Efik People

The Efik people's location along the coastal plains of the Cross River has profoundly influenced their artistic sensibilities. Scholarship on maritime aesthetics suggests that the physical environment dictates the "movement vocabulary" of a people. In the case of Ekombi, the choreography is a deliberate mimicry of the sea's ebb and flow. Scholars have noted that the "undulating torso" and "gliding footwork" are semiotic representations of the Ndem (water deities) believed to govern the Efik universe (Nwamuo 34). During marriage ceremonies, this maritime symbolism takes on a reproductive dimension; the "waves" of the dance are often interpreted by the elderly audience members as symbols of fertility and the "flow" of life from the bride's ancestral home to her husband's house (Akpabot 21). This deeper level of symbolism creates a complex layer of meaning for the audience, who must decode these movements based on their level of cultural literacy.

The Nkuho Institution and the Pedagogy of the Body

The Nkuho (fattening room) tradition is perhaps the most documented aspect of Efik femininity, yet its choreographic implications are often sidelined. Literature indicates that the Nkuho was a traditional finishing school where young girls were taught the nuances of Efik etiquette, including the mastery of Ekombi (Okon 142). The dance was the "final examination" of the seclusion period, performed before the community to prove the girl's readiness for marriage. Scholarly debate persists regarding the modern relevance of Nkuho. Some feminists argue it commodifies the female body, while cultural nationalists view it as a site of female empowerment and cultural preservation (Bassey 156). When the

audience watches Ekombi today, their "perspective" is inevitably filtered through these contemporary debates. For some, the dance is a nostalgic link to the Nkuho of the past; for others, it is a simplified performance stripped of its original pedagogical weight.

Globalization and the "Disneyfication" of Folk Dance

A significant concern in contemporary African performance studies is the impact of globalization on indigenous aesthetics. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "Disneyfication"—the process where complex traditional rituals are simplified and "packaged" for quick consumption by modern audiences (Hagher 92). In Calabar, the commercialization of culture through events like the Calabar Carnival has influenced how traditional dances are presented at private marriage ceremonies. Literature suggests that there is a growing trend toward "spectacularization," where the focus is on flamboyant costumes and high-speed movements to keep a "media-saturated" audience engaged (Amankulor 56). This study addresses the knowledge gap of whether the Calabar audience prefers this modernized, spectacular version of Ekombi or if they still value the slower, more symbolic traditional forms.

Perception and the Social Construction of Meaning

To assess audience perspectives, we must rely on the theory of Social Constructivism, which posits that people's understanding of the world is shaped by their social interactions and cultural background. In performance studies, this means that an elderly Efik chief and a young university student may witness the same Ekombi performance but "see" two entirely different things (Eshun 74). The chief may focus on the correctness of the rhythmic steps and their alignment with tradition, while the student may focus on the entertainment value or the aesthetic appeal of the costumes. Current literature emphasizes that "meaning" is not a fixed commodity handed from the dancer to the audience; it is a negotiation (Babalola 110). This negotiation is influenced by the audience's age, education level, and degree of cultural immersion, all of which are variables explored in this study.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical landscape of this study is anchored in a dual-perspective framework that bridges the gap

between individual interpretation and social stability. By synthesizing Reception Theory and Structural Functionalism, the research creates a robust analytical lens that accounts for both the personal meaning-making of the spectator and the social-maintaining role of the dance within the Efik marriage institution. Rather than presenting these theories as parallel explanations, they are integrated into a unified synthesis where the individual's psychological reception is seen as the mechanism through which larger social functions are realized.

Reception Theory

The primary theoretical anchor for this study is Reception Theory, popularized by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Hans Robert Jauss. This theory shifts the locus of meaning from the author or performer to the reader or spectator. In the context of Ekombi, Reception Theory posits that the dance does not possess a single, static meaning, but is instead decoded by the audience based on their individual horizons of expectation (Eshun 72). These horizons are a composite of the spectator's age, education, and level of cultural immersion. By prioritizing the observer, the study can categorize audience responses into dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings, providing a nuanced understanding of how the modern Calabar public interacts with traditional aesthetics (Hall 131).

Structural Functionalism

To provide the necessary sociological depth, the study utilizes Structural Functionalism as its secondary framework. This theory views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. From this perspective, the Ekombi dance is a cultural structure that performs a vital function within the Efik marriage ceremony by preserving social order and publicly validating new kinship bonds (Nwamuo 44). The theory suggests that every rhythmic step and symbolic gesture contributes to the overall health of the Efik social fabric (Radcliffe-Brown 52). Without this functionalist view, the study would lack the context required to explain why the community continues to invest resources in maintaining the Ekombi tradition despite the pressures of modernization.

Theoretical Synthesis and Analytical Integration

The integration of these theories into a single analytical framework allows for a deeper exploration

of the data. While Structural Functionalism identifies the intended social utility of the dance, Reception Theory is used to verify if that utility is actually perceived by the contemporary audience. This synthesis is crucial because it reveals whether the social function of the dance is being upheld or if a reception gap has emerged between the traditional intent and the modern interpretation. By analyzing the data through this integrated lens, the research moves beyond mere description and achieves a critical evaluation of how traditional performances survive through the eyes of those who witness them.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey design to investigate audience perspectives of the Ekombi dance within Calabar Municipality and Calabar South. By integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and direct observations, the research achieved a holistic understanding of the dance's symbolic role in Efik marriage ceremonies. The study population consisted of 136 traditional chiefs and elders from the Efik, Efut, and Qua clans. Utilizing the Taro Yamane formula to ensure a 95% confidence level, a sample size of 101 respondents was established. A stratified sampling technique was subsequently applied to ensure proportional representation across the three clans and to maintain the cultural specificity of the findings. Data collection was facilitated through a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, which underwent rigorous validation through expert review for content and face validity. To ensure academic reliability, a pilot study was conducted with 12 respondents, yielding a Cronbach Alpha coefficient above the 0.7 threshold, thus confirming the instrument's internal consistency. Demographic profiles were analyzed using simple percentages and frequency distribution tables. To evaluate the research hypotheses, the Chi-Square test was utilized to determine if the observed audience perceptions of cultural significance were statistically significant. Qualitative data from interviews and field observations were further synthesized to provide a deep-seated cultural context to the statistical results.

V. RESULTS

Research Question 1: Audience Perception

The first research question sought to understand how the audience perceives the Ekombi traditional folk

dance during marriage rites. The data in Table 1 reflects the audience's view of the performance as an event characterized by communal peace and happiness.

Table 1: Audience Perception of Ekombi Dance as an Event of Peace and Happiness

Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	34	38.2
Agree	28	31.5
Disagree	11	12.3
Strongly Disagree	16	18.0
Total	89	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The data in Table 1 reveal that 69.7% of respondents either strongly agree or agree that the Ekombi dance symbolizes peace and happiness. This dominant perception indicates that Ekombi dance functions as a meaningful cultural expression that fosters emotional fulfillment, social harmony, and communal cohesion within marriage ceremonies.

Research Question 2: Cultural Significance

This research question examined the cultural significance of the Ekombi dance from the audience's perspective, particularly its role in showcasing Efik ideals of femininity and partner selection.

Table 2: Cultural Significance of Ekombi in Showcasing Femininity and Partner Selection

Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	35	39.3
Agree	29	32.6
Disagree	5	5.6
Strongly Disagree	20	22.5
Total	89	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

As presented in Table 2, a substantial majority of the respondents (71.9%) either strongly agree or agree that the Ekombi dance serves as a culturally significant platform for the display of womanhood, beauty, and suitability for marriage. This finding supports the study's theoretical framework, indicating that audiences interpret the dance movements as symbolic expressions of grace, maturity, and femininity that are central to the Efik marriage institution.

VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the first research question indicate a predominantly positive reception of the Ekombi traditional folk dance among the inhabitants of Calabar. With approximately 69.7% of respondents identifying the performance as an event of peace and happiness, it is evident that the dance serves as a psychological and social anchor during marital transitions. This aligns with Structural Functionalism, suggesting that the dance operates as a cultural "structure" that performs the vital "function" of fostering social harmony and communal cohesion. As Ubong notes, such performances are instrumental in achieving social togetherness and a deep sense of communion among the Efik people.

The second research question revealed that 71.9% of the audience views the Ekombi dance as a significant platform for showcasing femininity, beauty, and maturity. Through the lens of Reception Theory, the audience "decodes" the fluid, wave-like hand movements and synchronized footwork as symbols of a bride's readiness for marital life. These results corroborate the observations of Affiah and Owan, who argue that the Ekombi performance is a celebration and advertisement of femininity, depicting young women who have been properly groomed for their roles as mothers and wives.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the practice of Efik traditional dance in marriage ceremonies has significantly improved the cultural rites of the people. The findings establish that Ekombi dance, traditional folk-dance performance, and the cultural morals embedded in these arts act as essential aesthetic factors that enhance the performance of traditional marriage in Calabar. As a functional social structure, dance in this context serves various vital roles, whether they be religious, recreational, ritualistic, or community-building. Ultimately, traditional dance within the marriage institution serves as a powerful tool for cultural expression and the assertion of ethnic identity. Furthermore, the role of traditional dancing has been found to develop self-confidence, build social skills, increase self-esteem, and improve the ability to communicate effectively across different segments of society.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Ekombi dance should be continuously promoted in Efik marriage ceremonies as a symbolic expression of femininity, beauty, peace, and joy to reinforce its value in enhancing traditional marital rites. To ensure sustainability, adequate resources should be allocated to preserve and enhance the aesthetic quality of the dance, as it plays a crucial role in promoting Efik cultural heritage and fostering a sense of unity among the people. Furthermore, folk traditional dances should be actively incorporated into marriage celebrations to strengthen Efik cultural values, promote family unity, and reinforce the bonds of kinship and community. Finally, the cultural morals embedded in these traditional dances should be intentionally expressed during marriage rites to communicate societal values, enhance social cohesion, and cultivate a shared cultural identity.

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