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Indigenous Music Practices in Ogoni Communities: Its Impact on the Rivers Culture

EZEBUBE, AUGUSTINA CHIZOBA, Ph.D [1]

Abstract

Indigenous music serves as a cultural expression rooted in the traditions, values, and identity of local communities. This paper examines the impact of urbanization on the Bari Bii music group, a long-standing indigenous music ensemble from the Ogoni communities in Khana Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria. Historically, all communities within Khana participated in this musical tradition. However, increased migration particularly of youth and elderly men to urban centers due to economic pressures and religious influences (notably Christianity) has led to a decline in local participation. As a response, a coalition of communities such as Beri, Knog, Kor, Bianu, Bua, Dubulo, Kaani I and Kaani II and Babee formed a centralized Bari Bii group to preserve this heritage. The study employed oral interviews with migrated members and reviewed relevant literature, including journals, magazines, and conference papers. Findings reveal that urban migration is primarily driven by economic hardship and religious shifts. The study recommends strategic rural development and cultural preservation policies to reduce migration and safeguard indigenous musical traditions.

Keywords: Indigenous, Music Practices, Communities, Impact, Rivers Culture.

[1] *DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC*
IGNATIUS AJURU UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION
RUMUOLUMENI, PORT HARCOURT
Email: tinaezebube1969@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Bari Bii is a cherished indigenous musical tradition of the Ogoni people, performed and revered across all Ogoni communities. It serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural medium through which the Ogoni people present and express their heritage to neighboring communities. As Udoh [1] explains, "Traditional music is a communal property with spiritual qualities that are shared and experienced by all". In line with this, Bari Bii is a communal musical expression experienced by all members of the community. It functions as a vehicle for the transmission, reinforcement, and preservation of cultural norms and values. Among the Ogoni, traditional music and culture are inseparable. Music accompanies the people through all stages of life from birth to death and is considered a vital element in the life cycle. It plays a central role in indigenous cultural practices, encompassing songs, dances, and traditional worship.

Remarkably, Bari Bii has withstood the transformative forces of Western civilization, acculturation, and urbanization. Despite the widespread influence of Christianity and the migration of many Ogoni from rural to urban centers, the music remains a strong cultural anchor. The communities continue to embrace Bari Bii as an integral part of their identity. It is still celebrated in a manner consistent with ancestral customs and traditions.

Nketia, in Ouwasayi [2], observes:

The musical heritage of contemporary Africa is the music associated with traditional Africa institutions of the pre-colonial era. It is much which has survived the impact of the forces of western forms of acculturation and is therefore quite distinct in idiom and orientation from contemporary popular and art music.

The *Bari Bii* music group of the Ogoni people plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of their communities. To safeguard this tradition, it is essential to promote awareness and educate younger generations about its significance. *Bari Bii* music serves as a living archive of Ogoni history, contributes to moral guidance, reinforces communal laws and norms, and publicly condemns deviant behavior. It also functions as a platform to celebrate heroes who have positively impacted the community and elevated its status.

Widely regarded as the most celebrated and accepted musical form among the Ogoni people, *Bari Bii* stands as a unifying force. Nzewi [3] emphasizes that "Music makes human; it supervises, explains, and illuminates the human society" (p. viii). In alignment with this view, *Bari Bii* music supervises, explains, and illuminates Ogoni communal life. It fosters unity, love, and moral accountability, acting as a mechanism for social cohesion and peace within the community.

Through their songs, the *Bari Bii* musicians educate the public on the importance of community vigilance and maintaining order. This underscores that *Bari Bii* is not merely a form of entertainment but a core element of Ogoni cultural identity. As Nwankpa [4] asserts, "Music is an important aspect of human way of life". Similarly, Onyeji [5] posits that "The degree to which a composer in a particular African society is respected and admired depends on the extent to which his/her music reflects and resonates with traditional values and patterns embedded in the collective psyche of the people" [6].

The performances of *Bari Bii* deeply move the audience emotionally. Their songs, dances, and instrumental play inspire active participation, often culminating in competitive displays among performers in singing, dancing, and musicianship. The audience is not merely passive but becomes an integral part of the performance experience, which serves as a channel for collective emotional expression and cultural affirmation. Agu [7] supports this view, noting that

Music induces an overwhelming emotion on people in several ways, the neurobiological effects of music cannot be overemphasized. Among Africans, some groups of performers experience state of ecstasy and rapture during performance of certain type of Music by giving themselves totally to the music, so much the reaction becomes excess and gets to a stage of possession especially in initiation ceremonies.

The performances of the *Bari Bii* music group have a profound impact on the psychological well-being of the Ogoni people. During celebrations and initiation ceremonies, the music often elevates participants to states of ecstasy and emotional rapture, creating a shared transcendental experience. However, the

continuity and vibrancy of *Bari Bii* performances have been challenged by the forces of urbanization. As both performers and audiences migrate from rural communities to urban centers in search of better opportunities, traditional performance practices have diminished, leading to a decline in communal participation and cultural transmission.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative ethnomusicological research design to explore the practice of culture and indigenous music today as practiced by selected Ogoni Indigenous Cultural Practitioners at the Bari Bii music group in Rivers State, Nigeria. It placed the research through an interpretative lens and aimed to understand the social, cultural and musical importance of Bari Bii within its context as a practise which originated from natives. Data were collected using field-based oral interviews with current and past members of the Bari Bii music group, community elders, cultural guardians, and migrated Bari Bii members residing in urban centers. I used purposive sampling in this study to recruit participants who had extensive knowledge about the history, performance practices, instrumentation, dance traditions, song texts and cultural functions of Bari Bii music. Data sources which provides the primary data was complemented with the review of literature in secondary areas, making use of books/articles/papers/conference proceedings/dissertations and archival material on media (in general) across indigenous music from Africa, Ogoni cultural practices/cultural tradition, urbanisation patterns and culture/media preservation. In addition, participant observation was conducted at selected performances and gatherings to record musical activities, instrument handling, movement involved in dance, costume use and audience engagement. Data collection and description were supplemented with systematic field notes, audio-recordings, and photographic documentation. Data were analyzed using the thematic content method of analysis whereby formal coding was employed to identify emergent themes in interview transcripts, records from observational studies and documentary sources and those aspects related to cultural preservation; music education; social functions of music; urban migration, religious influences and challenges to continuity. Data triangulation (interview responses, observational findings and documentary evidence) safeguarded the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. This methodology gave us an overall perspective on the function of Bari Bii music in promoting Ogoni cultural identity and elucidated the pressures imposed upon it by urbanization and socio-cultural change.

Result and Discussion

Music education, Training on instrumentation, songs, dance and costume

Members of the *Bari Bii* music group receive both formal and informal musical training in instrumentation, vocal performance, and dance. The group comprises men and women of proven integrity; however, women are generally less relied upon as permanent members. This is largely due to cultural expectations, once married, women often leave the group to focus on their domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, during farming seasons, women typically prioritize agricultural work and are therefore unavailable for musical performances.

Prior to any public performance, members undergo an intensive six-month training period held in the *fattening room* at the *Bari Bii* compound. During this training, each member is required to master all aspects of the tradition, including singing, dancing, and playing the ensemble's seven musical instruments. The group maintains a policy of rotational proficiency, each member must be capable of simultaneously singing, dancing, and playing instruments. Consequently, once the group reaches a membership of seven, it can honor performance invitations independently, as all members are fully versatile. New recruits are integrated through an immersive process of observation, imitation, and active participation. Once they demonstrate adequate mastery, they are included in performances. This model ensures that the absence of any individual member does not affect the group's performance quality, as roles are easily interchangeable.

As Chukwu [8] explains, "From the kind of musical instruments they use, a researcher can be able to decipher the genre of music and the class of instruments they employ in accompanying their songs and dances, if both are combined". A unique feature of the *Bari Bii* music group is its exclusive use of seven

traditional musical instruments, which are preserved in a sacred shrine known as *Amakiri*. This shrine also serves as the dwelling place of the group's spiritual father. Before any performance, the instruments are ceremonially retrieved from the shrine following a libation ritual performed by the spiritual father. This ritual is conducted to seek spiritual protection and ensure that malevolent forces do not interfere with the group's activities.

The *Bari Bii* musical instruments serve multiple purposes: they function as tools of communication, provide entertainment, and are used in religious and ritual practices to appease the gods, and offer economic benefits by serving as a source of livelihood for the performers. Onyekwele [9] affirms that:

In a social situation the player of a musical instrument masters and displays his art so well that an admirer can dish out all the amount of money in his pocket to spray on the artist, people will say, it is magic.

The *Bari Bii* music group is both a cultural and social institution that has existed within the Ogoni community for generations. Its presence is deeply embedded in communal life, and its performances are highly anticipated. The distinct sound of the group's traditional musical instruments draws immediate attention and signals the commencement of a performance. Upon hearing the music, community members gather at the scene to participate actively in the singing and dancing. During performances, audiences often express their appreciation, love, and emotional connection by spraying money on the performers. This act not only reflects admiration for the group's artistic skill but also acknowledges their mastery in dance, vocal performance, and instrumental dexterity. Such gestures serve as public validation of the performers' technical proficiency and cultural significance, as Nketia [10] affirms.

While some instruments are designed for use as solo instruments, others are intended for use in ensembles within such group, certain instruments functions as lead or principal instruments, while others play subordinate roles as accompanying or Ostinato instruments.

The seven musical instruments used by the *Bari Bii* music group serve multiple and diverse functions within the ensemble. These instruments fulfill roles as rhythmic, timing, and melo-rhythmic components, contributing to the structural and expressive framework of each performance. Their interplay creates a complex, layered texture that defines the unique sonic identity of *Bari Bii* music. In terms of organology, the instruments are classified under two major families: idiophones and membranophones. This classification reflects their method of sound production; idiophones generate sound through the vibration of the material itself (e.g., rattles, bells), while membranophones produce sound via the vibration of a stretched membrane (e.g., drums).

The musical instruments, their folk names, English names functions and classification

S/n	Folk Name	English Name	Functions	Classification
1	Kere	Membrane drum	Melo-Rhythmic function	Membranophone
2	Kana	Musical pot	Timing function	Idiophone
3	Akiri	Slit wooden drum	Lead instrument	Idiophone
4	Akiri	Slit wooden drum	Play supportive role	Idiophone
5	Koo	Big wooden drum	Melo-Rhythmic function	Idiophone
6	Gira	Small metal gong	Timing function	Idiophone
7	Gira	Big metal gong	Rhythmic function	Idiophone

The Seven Musical Instruments of the *Bari Bii* Music Group

Since its reconstitution in 1989, the current *Bari Bii* music group has not acquired new instruments. However, the group has replaced the *akira* (small slit wooden drum) and the *kere* (membrane drum) after they were damaged during performances. The *kere* drum is particularly notable for its aesthetic craftsmanship, it is beautifully adorned with small mirrors encircling its neck, enhancing its visual appeal during performances. To preserve and protect the *kere* from damage caused by rodents and ants, it is traditionally stored by suspending it near a fire in the shrine of the spiritual father (*Amakiri*). This practice not only ensures its physical longevity but also explains the drum's distinctive dark coloration, caused by prolonged exposure to smoke and heat. The act of hanging the drum is also symbolic, representing spiritual preservation and readiness for ritual use.

During performances, the lead singer who also serves as the primary instrumentalist initiates the musical sequence by playing the first *akira* (a small slit wooden drum), which functions as the timekeeper. Other instruments rely on its rhythmic foundation. The second *akira* enters next, supporting the lead rhythm. Subsequently, the *kana* (musical pot), *koo* (large slit wooden drum), and *kere* (membrane drum) join in succession. The final instruments to be introduced are the two *gira* (metal gongs—one large, one small), which serve communicative and expressive functions within the ensemble. Among the seven instruments, the *kere* (membrane drum) and the *koo* (large slit drum) are considered the lead instruments. They drive the ensemble, while the remaining instruments provide rhythmic and tonal support, collectively producing a cohesive and dynamic performance.

Dance Performance of Bari Bii Music Group

Dance is an integral component of the *Bari Bii* music group's performance. It is through dance that the performers visually express the rhythm and emotion embedded in their music. The skill and artistry displayed in their dancing are directly influenced by the instrumentation, which generates rhythms that naturally invite movement. As Onwuka [11] observes, "Dancing is therefore a functional art. It is the expressive medium of the body, an outward interpretation of musical rhythms and movements that is seriously carried out by the human affective domain" (p. 4). The rhythms produced by the *Bari Bii* instruments stimulate bodily movement, engaging the affective domain through gesture, spatial awareness, timing, and energy. Performers invest significant effort both physical and emotional into their dance, which is characterized by the dynamic use of space, temporal precision, and expressive energy.

The group incorporates two primary dance styles into their performances: the formalized dance style and the free-medley dance style. The formalized style involves choreographed, uniform movements rehearsed

and performed collectively by all dancers, ensuring cohesion and visual symmetry. In contrast, the free-medley style is spontaneous and individualized, allowing dancers the freedom to interpret the music in their own way. This improvisational style is marked by rapid footwork, sudden bending of the body, and occasional leaps into the air, showcasing personal creativity and rhythmic interpretation. The rhythm of *Bari Bii* music alternates between fast and slow tempos, and dancers respond by swaying side-to-side, with their legs shuffling forward, backward, sideways, or on the spot. These intricate movements reflect both the emotional intensity and technical sophistication of the performance, as Abraje and Kansese [12] affirm

The main theme of the Kokonba dance is executed with the dancer moving his or her torso from side to side with a lot of concentration, in another movement, the dancer vibrates the body and bends close to the ground. As soon as the dancer is satisfied with this position he or she gradually rises up slowly like a cautious hunter about to catch a prey.

During *Bari Bii* dance performances, dancers respond to the music through individualized expressions of movement. The choreography does not typically require expansive use of space; instead, dancers remain largely stationary, only occasionally taking a few steps forward or backward as part of their interpretive response to the rhythm.

Song Text of the Bari Bii Music Group

The song texts of the *Bari Bii* music group reflect a broad spectrum of emotional and social experiences. While rooted in physical performance, the songs also engage the intellectual domain, encouraging reflection, learning, and the application of knowledge to new and evolving contexts. The lyrics are thoughtfully crafted, containing meaningful melodies that help listeners analyze and respond to societal situations. *Bari Bii* music is performed in a variety of settings, including political rallies, entertainment events, and even protest gatherings, where it serves as a powerful tool for expressing dissent, confronting rival political factions, and addressing social vices and illicit behaviors. In social ceremonies, whether consciously or unconsciously, the emotional weight of the songs deeply affects the minds of both performers and audience members.

As Agu [13] observes.

Music not only has communicative power which largely lies in the language and culture and thus make it more comprehensible to the culture inherent of its place of creation, but can produce deep and profound emotions, intentions and meanings shared through music by dwellers in a community

In Ogoni communities, the death of an individual is not mourned in isolation. Rather, the loss is collectively felt by brothers, sisters, neighbors, and friends, who come together to spend time in sober reflection with the bereaved family. During such occasions, the performance or even the sound of *Bari Bii* music evokes deep emotional responses, enabling the community to share in the grief and find communal solace. As Chukwu [14] affirms, “The pains of death of an individual in a community, in the traditional African life are communally shared through traditional music and dance, being an activity that cannot be divorced in the discussion of music in Africa” (p. 9).

Songs performed by the *Bari Bii* music group play a critical role in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. They serve as conduits of knowledge, particularly for the younger generation, through the mentorship of elder community members. Music provides a vital communicative medium that fosters interaction among community members, reinforcing moral and civic values. For songs to serve these functions effectively, their texts must be clear, articulate, and meaningful, enabling effective participation and engagement. These song texts are orally transmitted and learned within the community and serve as the foundation for informal musical education. Young people observe and participate in performances, internalizing both musical skill and cultural values. This process forms part of their early civic and moral education, imparted through song and communal interaction. As Okafor [15] notes, “Norms and values of the community are learned through music that ranges from simple folk tunes to highly specialized ritual music, including chants, incantations, and minstrelsy”.

Musical functions organized by groups such as *Bari Bii* provide opportunities not only for entertainment

but also for learning. Through observation and participation, musically inclined youth often develop remarkable dexterity in performance. These music groups also boast a rich repertoire of songs that contribute to their cultural and social influence within the community.

Some Bari Bii Songs and their forms

S/N	Title of song	Form
1	Adam O	Call and response form
2	Nebuchadnezzar	Mixed structural form
3	Bere A Baara	Solo chorused refrain (Sharp)
4	So I Bira Bri Bii	Call and response
5	Nyo Kpari	Mixed structural form
6	Feefeelo	Solo chorused refrain pattern
7	Nwi Piori	Mixed structural form
8	Naa Mue Dam	Solo Chorused refrain pattern
9	Ogoru Kingdom	Call and response form
10	Bari Adora	Call and response form

Bari Bii Music Group Costume

In traditional settings, musical and dance performances are typically accompanied by traditional costumes that visually reinforce cultural identity and context. The *Bari Bii* music group maintains this custom by appearing in traditional attire during their performances, thereby reinforcing the authenticity of the occasion. Their choice of costume depends on the nature of the event whether social or cultural as the group accepts invitations to both types of gatherings. Among the various costumes used by the group, the most prominent and widely recognized ensemble consists of a plain *George* wrapper paired with a customized orange-red T-shirt. This attire has become emblematic of the group's identity and presence in public performances. As Agu notes, "Today, emphasis is on bright and well-designed colours that do not portray the mood of the performance. Costumes are simply modernized to suit urban and contemporary tastes".

In line with this observation, the *Bari Bii* music group integrates bright, well-designed costumes into their performances, not necessarily to reflect the emotional tone of the event, but to enhance visual appeal and audience engagement. The bright orange T-shirts not only contribute to the group's visual identity but also add to the vibrancy and success of the performance. This visual presentation draws audience attention, encourages active participation, and allows for imitation and deeper engagement with the performance.

The Impact of Urbanization On The Bari Bii Music Group

The *Bari Bii* music group has long served as a cultural hub for the people of Rivers State, and particularly the Ogoni communities. The group is known for honoring both social and cultural invitations across the region. However, its survival is increasingly threatened by several sociocultural forces, including formal education, organized religion, globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of Western musical forms. A significant factor contributing to the decline in *Bari Bii*'s prominence is the migration of its members to urban areas in search of economic opportunities. Onuorah-Oguno suppors that

Today, there is a shift of people to the cities, those that still reside in the rural areas no more engage in the moonlight activities as are suit of what we term civilization, television and cable networks have taken over.

This movement has resulted in reduced participation in rehearsals and performances, leading to a gradual erosion of traditional musical practice and appreciation. Ezebube notes that "Christians are barred from pouring libation to the gods of the land, and this acceptance of Christianity gradually reduced the number

of members in the group".

The rise of Christianity has had a profound effect on the group's composition and continuity. Many members have withdrawn from participation, believing that involvement in *Bari Bii* which includes rituals such as libation pouring and activities tied to the *Amachree* shrine is incompatible with Christian doctrines. The *Amachree* shrine, where the group's seven sacred instruments are stored and spiritually prepared before and after performances, is viewed by some as incompatible with their religious convictions. To combat the threat of extinction, various Ogoni communities have collaborated to form a central *Bari Bii* music group. These communities include Beri, Knog, Kor, Bianu, Bua, Dubulo, Yeghe, Kaani I, Kaani II, and Babee spanning the four Local Government Areas that make up Ogoni: Tai, Eleme, Khana, and Gokana.

Urbanization has not only affected participation but also the quality of musical performance. Many members residing in urban areas are unable to attend performances due to time constraints or professional obligations. Mr. Nelson Gbarador, the group's leader and principal *akira* (small slit wooden drum) player, and others resides in the city, and this urban displacement has disrupted regular rehearsals, collective performance, and the sense of unity within the group. Moreover, irregular practice has negatively impacted the group's musical cohesion. Members who miss rehearsals often forget how to play certain instruments, leading to a disruption of rhythmic integrity widely considered the heartbeat of *Bari Bii* performance. The growing perception among educated and religiously converted members is that traditional music is outdated or incompatible with modern values. As formal education incorporates Western cultural paradigms, some members internalize the belief that participation in traditional music is uncivilized or "fetish." While new members continue to register, urbanization has led to a significant loss of older, more experienced performers. Those who migrate to urban centers are exposed to different cultures and sometimes become more conscious of the controversial or confrontational nature of some *Bari Bii* song texts. These texts are often bold and unrestricted, sometimes directly addressing or critiquing authority figures, including kings, elders, and pastors. As a result, urbanized members have grown more cautious in their lyrical choices, balancing tradition with sensitivity to contemporary values. Nevertheless, the group continues to use song as a medium for praising or insulting community members who have contributed positively or negatively to the development and upliftment of Ogoni society.

Nebuchadnezzar

Folk song	**Literal English Translation**
Anh –oo-ee-oo-ba-a-ko	Anh-oo-ee-oo- how would they
Dowa ea	Say it oh
Ba-ga ko bue aa gbi ma aba	While the community is looking for
Doo maa dee oh go yor oo – oo	Water, they shared deede's water
Le'a le'a le'a le'a loo loo – loo	
Lea lea lea lea oo loo loo – loo	
Nebucha-ne-zar	Nebuchadnezzar
Weesi ue fonu so a yri kue	Went to plant when he got to the
Fonu a naa dap fonu wee	Forest he should not plant
Wee wee	Well well well
Nebuchanezza bee le kee te	Nebuchadnezzar was under the tree
Bari wee wee wee	Of God well well well
Wee wee wee	Well well well
Zar wee wee wee	Zar well well well
Wee wee wee	Well well well
Lee boro Nebuchanez-zar	Leave ne-bu-chanez-zar

Mene Ne-bu-cha-nez-zar	King Nebuchadnezzar
Wee wee wee wee	Well well well
Wee wee wee	Well well well.

One of the songs for the kings

Conclusion

Bari Bii is an age-old traditional musical form that holds deep cultural significance within the Ogoni communities and must be preserved for future generations. However, the migration of its members from rural areas to urban centers has had a detrimental effect on the continuity and vitality of the group. Some members remain disconnected from their home communities for extended periods sometimes months or even years due to economic challenges and the pursuit of livelihoods. This disconnection has led to a significant decline in regular rehearsals and performances. Certain members hold key organizational roles within the group and are essential for its administration, coordination, and continuity. Their prolonged absence often affects not only the logistics of performance but also the emotional cohesion and morale of the group. The absence of leadership figures due to urbanization weakens the internal structure and collective identity of the ensemble.

The lyrical content and instrumentation of *Bari Bii* serve vital social functions, acting as a moral compass within the community. Their songs help regulate behavior by critiquing societal vices and reinforcing communal values. Through this music, the norms, customs, and ethical frameworks of Ogoni society are passed down and internalized. As modernity and globalization continue to reshape traditional practices, it is imperative to adopt strategic measures aimed at promoting the appreciation, sustainability, and preservation of indigenous musical traditions like *Bari Bii*. Without proactive intervention, such rich cultural heritage risks fading into obscurity.

Recommendations

1. The movement of members to urban areas should not stop them from attending rehearsals and honouring invitations.
2. Government agencies should collaborate with the music group to assist them with employment and sustainability of the music group to prevent the music group members from living the community.
3. Stakeholders in the community should intervene in the continuity and preservation of Bari Bii music group not to go into extinction due to urbanization.
4. Their song text should continue to inform the people and also select the one's who have made community proud.

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