

COMPARATIVE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF *UDJE* AND *IGORU*: RHYTHM, SCALE AND SOCIAL FUNCTION IN URHOBOS MUSICOLOGY

Temabor Peace ONYENYE (Ph.D.)

Department of Music, University of Delta Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

peace.onyenye@unidel.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9649-8981>

Enoh Justina OKAFOR (Ph.D.)

Department of Music, University of Delta Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

justina.okafor@unidel.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3025-2180>

Abstract

This paper provides a comparative analysis of *Udje* and *Igoru*, two foundational performance genres among the Urhobo and Okpe peoples of Nigeria's Niger Delta. While ethnomusicological scholarship has long attended to the poetic, political, and thematic richness of Urhobo oral traditions, the formal structural distinctions between these genres have received comparatively little systematic attention. Drawing on a dual framework of linguistic tonal mapping and organological classification, this study interrogates the structural architecture underpinning both genres. The analysis reveals that *Udje* is characterised by a dense, terrestrial, polyrhythmic framework designed for adversarial social commentary, moral censure, and inter-community rivalry. *Igoru*, by contrast, exhibits a more fluid, mid-tempo, syncopated structure that facilitates reflective storytelling, praise singing, and the promotion of collective social cohesion. Through a detailed examination of scalar systems, metric organisation, vocal production, instrumental timelines, and kinesthetic expression, the paper develops a comparative model for understanding Urhobo and Okpe musical thought. This structural approach contributes to broader debates in sub-Saharan ethnomusicology and offers practical strategies for documenting, teaching, and revitalising Urhobo sonic heritage in the face of rapid cultural change.

Keywords: *Udje*, *Igoru*, Urhobo Musicology, Structural Analysis, Polyrhythm, Organology, Tonal Language

Introduction

In sub-Saharan African musical practice, performance genres seldom function as isolated aesthetic objects. They operate as complex, adaptive systems that encode communal ethics, historical memory, cosmology, and linguistic structure (Agawu, 2016; Nketia, 1974). African traditional music, as Abugu (2020) argues, transcends entertainment and occupies a central role in the regulation of social life, the transmission of knowledge, and the negotiation of identity. Musical sound is not arbitrary. As Sloboda (1997, cited in Abugu, 2020) observes, what people in different cultures hear and how they organise sound tends to reflect their philosophy, beliefs, and perception of the cosmos.

Among the Edoid speaking peoples of Southern Nigeria, the Urhobo have cultivated an extensive repertoire of oral and musical forms that mediate between the physical realm of lived experience, *akpo*, and the metaphysical realm of ancestral and spiritual forces, *erivwin*. Two of the most formally developed and socially potent of these traditions are *Udje* and *Igoru*.

Udje is an indigenous, highly competitive performance genre of the western Urhobo in Delta State. It integrates poetic singing, layered percussion, and stylised dance into a formalised arena for social critique and community arbitration. Far from being casual recreation, *Udje* is a deliberate battle of wits in which rival quarters or clans compose and perform songs that satirise one another's shortcomings. The aim is to correct deviance, shame antisocial behaviour, and reassert communal norms through public ridicule and poetic excellence. The genre's theatricality, verbal aggression, and rhythmic intensity make it a powerful instrument of traditional justice.

Igoru, associated primarily with the Okpe, a subgroup closely related to the Urhobo, presents a different social logic. It is a complex vocal and percussive tradition built around compound meters, polyphonic singing, and a sophisticated use of proverbs and allegory. Rather than instigating conflict between groups, *Igoru* is oriented towards social integration. It eulogises individuals who have brought honour to the community, narrates communal histories, and offers moral instruction grounded in everyday reality. Historically, *Igoru* groups functioned as cultural embassies. In the 1920s, for instance, Okpe migrants in Lagos employed *Igoru* ensembles to assert their identity, defend their interests, and maintain solidarity in a diasporic setting (Idolor, 2001).

Both *Udje* and *Igoru* engage with topical issues, but their modes of engagement diverge. As Darah (cited in Orhero, 2017) notes, *Udje* themes are often anchored in current events but are framed through allusions to Urhobo history, myth, and legendary figures. The result is a performance that feels both immediate and archetypal. *Igoru*, while equally concerned with contemporary life, privileges realism, direct didacticism, and the celebration of personal virtue over inter group rivalry.

Scholarly attention to these genres has been uneven. The literary sophistication of *Udje* has been extensively documented by Clark (1965) and Darah (2005), who highlight its metaphorical density, satirical force, and institutional role in Urhobo society. Yet, as Idolor (2002) reminds us, the social efficacy of any musical form is inseparable from its structural components. Tempo, meter, scale, instrumental configuration, and choreographic vocabulary give textual content its bodily presence and affective weight. By focusing predominantly on lyrics, earlier studies have underplayed the musicological architectures that make *Udje* and *Igoru* work as sound.

This paper addresses that gap. It moves beyond textual exegesis to compare *Udje* and *Igoru* as organised sound systems. The goal is to show how structural choices in rhythm, melody, timbre, and movement produce distinct forms of social action: confrontation in *Udje*, cohesion in *Igoru*. Such a comparison not only deepens our understanding of Urhobo and Okpe aesthetics but also contributes a replicable model for analysing other African performance traditions where music, language, and dance are co constitutive.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The analysis is guided by two complementary frameworks drawn from African ethnomusicology.

a. Linguistic Tonal Mapping

Building on Elugbe's (1989) comparative work on Edoid phonology and Idamoyibo's (2005) studies of speech song relationships in Urhobo, this framework treats language as a structural determinant of melody. Urhobo is a register tone language with three contrastive levels: High, Mid, and Low. In vocal music, these lexical tones constrain and shape melodic contour, a phenomenon Idamoyibo terms *erhie*. The degree to which a genre adheres to or deviates from speech tone for musical purposes is itself a structural and aesthetic decision.

b. Organological Taxonomy

Following Nketia (1974) and Idolor (2002), this framework examines the instrumental resources, their material construction, playing techniques, and hierarchical roles, as well as the resultant rhythmic and metric structures. Central to this is the concept of the timeline, the recurring rhythmic pattern that serves as a temporal anchor for the ensemble. In African music, the timeline often carries the structural DNA of a genre.

Methodologically, this study is based on comparative structural description. Data were drawn from published transcriptions, field recordings, and musicological analyses of *Udje* and *Igoru* documented in Nigerian scholarship, including Abugu (2020), Darah (2005), Idamoyibo (2005; 2008), and Idolor (2001; 2002). Where sources differ on specific details, such as scalar designation, the analysis notes the divergence and interprets it in light of performance practice. The aim is not to produce new transcriptions but to synthesise existing structural knowledge into a coherent comparative framework.

Udje Performance Construct: Structural Aggression and Terrestrial Rhythm

a. Rhythmic Matrix and Timeline Instruments

Udje is defined by its high energy, conflict driven ethos, and this is encoded directly in its rhythm. The genre favours asymmetric polyrhythms that create a sense of urgency and instability, mirroring the social tension the performance seeks to generate (Darah, 2005). The rhythmic foundation is carried by iron idiophones, most notably the *agogo*, a clapperless bell or set of bells struck with a metal rod. The *agogo* produces a piercing, fast, and insistent timeline that cuts through the texture and propels the ensemble forward. It is the sonic equivalent of a verbal jab: sharp, metallic, and impossible to ignore.

Complementing the *agogo* is the *upe*, a side blown horn or whistle. The *upe* does not carry melody in the Western sense. Instead, it punctuates the texture with short, explosive bursts that cue transitions, signal climactic moments, and heighten dramatic tension. Its timbre is nasal and penetrating, adding a layer of urgency to the already dense rhythmic field.

A deliberate structural choice in *Udje* is the minimisation of membranophones during the delivery of poetic texts. While drums are not absent from Urhobo music generally, *Udje* composers often strip them back at key moments so that the satirical lyrics remain intelligible. Rhythmic density is then maintained through other means: rapid interlocking handclaps from the chorus, and the percussive impact of dancers' feet against the ground. The earth itself becomes a drum. This decision reflects a clear hierarchy in *Udje* aesthetics: text and rhythm are primary; harmonic elaboration is secondary.

b. Vocal Texture and Scale Configuration

The vocal architecture of *Udje* is declamatory and combative. The *Osuole*, or song leader, initiates phrases with a forceful, projected tone that approximates heightened speech. The *Oruere*, the responding chorus, answers almost immediately in a practice called *suo ophiyen*, literally 'to sing and throw back.' The effect is one of verbal bombardment. Lines overlap, interlock, and drive forward with minimal pause, creating a wall of sound that reinforces the genre's adversarial intent.

Scalar organisation in *Udje* is predominantly hexatonic, though pentatonic and heptatonic passages also occur (Abugu, 2020). The hexatonic framework provides six stable pitches that allow for angular melodic movement without the gravitational pull of a strong tonal centre. Melodies are typically terraced and descending, tracing the natural fall of emphatic Urhobo speech when issuing commands, accusations, or warnings (Idamoyibo,

2005). Ornamentation is sparse. The aesthetic value lies not in melisma but in rhythmic precision, dynamic power, and the clarity of enunciation. A syllable lost is a satirical point dulled.

Harmonically, *Udje* moves between monophony, where the chorus doubles the leader in unison, and heterophony, where individual singers introduce slight variations in timing or pitch. True polyphony is rare. The texture is designed to sound like one amplified communal voice rather than a collection of independent lines.

c. Kinesthetic Synchronisation

Dance in *Udje*, known as *igbe*, is inseparable from its sonic aggression. The principal movement vocabulary is *kporo*, a vigorous, grounded stomp that sends vibrations through the performance arena. Dancers strike the earth flat footed, producing a low frequency thud that functions as a bass counter rhythm to the high *agogo*. The *torso* is inclined forward, the shoulders hunched, and the facial expression set in a scowl or sneer. This posture is not incidental. As Clark (1965) observed, it externalises the psychological stance of defiance and challenge that defines *Udje*. The body becomes an instrument of confrontation. The choreography is synchronised with the timeline, so that footfalls land on key offbeats, adding to the polyrhythmic complexity and visual intensity. In *Udje*, to dance is to argue with your feet.

Igoru Performance Construct: Lyrical Fluidity and Syncopated Metrics

a. Rhythmic Matrix and Timeline Instruments

If *Udje* is a sonic spear, *Igoru* is a woven cloth. The genre prioritises social flow over social friction, and its rhythmic design reflects that. *Igoru* is anchored in a consistent, mid tempo, syncopated framework that invites participation rather than confrontation (Idolor, 2001). The signature timeline instrument is the *uke*, a large calabash rattle covered in a net of beads or seeds. When shaken, the *uke* produces a continuous, shimmering, broadband sound. It does not mark time with sharp attacks like the *agogo*. Instead, it creates a temporal atmosphere, a gentle wash of sound within which other rhythms can breathe.

This choice of timeline has structural consequences. Because the *uke* provides a stable but unobtrusive pulse, drummers and singers have more room to explore micro timing, subtle delays, and anticipations. The result is a groove that feels relaxed and inclusive. The ensemble typically operates in compound quadruple meter, often transcribed as 12/8, which gives the music a rolling, cyclical quality. Phrases do not feel like they are driving towards a clash. They feel like they are circling back to a point of communal agreement.

Lyrical, *Igoru* is allusive. Singers rarely state things plainly. They employ riddles, proverbs, and extended metaphors that require the audience to interpret and decode. This intellectual engagement is part of the genre's social function. It turns performance into a shared act of reasoning.

b. Vocal Texture and Scale Configuration

The vocal ideal in *Igoru* is smooth, ornamented, and conversational. Singers employ two part polyphony with a high degree of independence between the parts. Parallel thirds, fourths, and fifths are common, but the parts also cross and diverge, creating a rich, interwoven texture. A distinctive feature is the treatment of cadences. Whereas many musical traditions resolve phrases by descending to a point of rest, *Igoru* cadences often rise. This upward resolution leaves phrases sounding open ended, expectant, and lyrical. It contributes to the genre's sense of ongoing dialogue.

Scalar analysis of *Igoru* is complex. The underlying system is hexatonic, but performance practice often emphasises five tones, giving an audible pentatonic flavour (Idamoyibo, 2008). This selective emphasis creates circular melodic patterns that mirror the cyclical nature of the timeline. The vocal line is highly ornamented with slides, turns, and subtle vibrato that imitate the inflections of intimate speech.

A key performance practice is the flexibility of the tonal centre. The *Obo-ile*, the master musician, may modulate the key mid performance to suit the range of a featured singer or to lift the energy of the gathering. This adaptability underscores *Igoru's* communal ethos. The music serves the people, not the other way round.

c. Kinesthetic Synchronisation

The movement vocabulary of *Igoru* is called *iken*. It is characterised by a lateral, wave like motion that travels through the hips, torso, and arms. Unlike the vertical, percussive *kporo* of *Udje*, *iken* keeps the feet in light, gliding contact with the ground. Dancers seem to float rather than stomp. The movement is continuous and fluid, matching the unbroken shimmer of the *uke* and the rolling 12/8 meter.

This kinesthetic choice is deeply social. *Iken* is easy to learn and can be performed by people of all ages. It invites the audience to join in, blurring the line between performer and spectator. Where *Udje's* dance projects defiance, *Igoru's* dance projects welcome. The body in *Igoru* signals openness, joy, and collective belonging (Idolor, 2002).

Comparative Analysis of *Udje* and *Igoru*

Udje and *Igoru* are both sophisticated oral musical systems, but they are engineered for different social work. *Udje* is a technology of conflict. Its three part poetic structure, *Umuoho* (introduction), *Okparo* (main argument), and *Ifuen* (conclusion), mirrors the structure of a legal brief or a formal debate (Darah, cited in Orhero,

2017). The goal is to prosecute a case against a rival community, using evidence, exaggeration, and humour. The music is the vehicle, but the trial is the point.

Igoru is a technology of cohesion. Its structure is less rigidly tripartite and more episodic, built around recurring opening and closing formulas that frame a series of proverbs, praises, and narratives. The aim is not to defeat an opponent but to edify the community, to remind it of its values, and to celebrate those who embody them.

This functional difference explains their structural differences. *Udje* needs to be sharp, loud, and rhythmically aggressive because it is designed to wound. *Igoru* needs to be smooth, inclusive, and rhythmically supple because it is designed to heal and unite.

Both genres remain relevant. *Udje* aesthetics have been consciously adopted by contemporary Urhobo poets such as Tanure Ojaide, who translate its satirical energy into written verse (Orhero, 2017). *Igoru* has found new life in civic contexts. The official anthem of the Okpe Nation, for example, was composed using *Igoru*'s structural principles of polyphony, compound meter, and proverbial text, demonstrating the genre's adaptability to modern institutional needs.

Tables 1 and 2 below summarise the key structural and functional contrasts between *Udje* and *Igoru*:

Table 1. Structural Parameter

Structural Parameter	<i>Udje</i> Construct	<i>Igoru</i> Construct
Primary Scalar System	Hexatonic (Six-Tone)	Pentatonic (Five-Tone)
Metric Organisation	Fast, asymmetric, polyrhythmic	Mid-tempo, symmetric, syncopated
Dominant Timeline Instrument	<i>Agogo</i> (Iron Clapper Bell) & <i>Upe</i> (Horn)	<i>Uke</i> (Beaded Gourd Rattle)
Vocal Production & Tone	Declamatory, urgent, aggressive	Melodic, ornamented, reflective
Key Choral Element	Dense call-and-response	High-pitched female ululation
Kinesthetic Expression	Terrestrial, forceful foot stamping	Fluid, lateral torso/hip swaying
Performance Dynamics	Exclusively competitive, adversarial	Collaborative, inclusive, celebratory

Table 2. Feature

Feature	<i>Udje</i> Music	<i>Igoru</i> Music
Primary Theme	Satire, mockery, and witty insults directed at rival towns	Praise, societal commentary, and moral instruction
Main Objective	Social control/correction by "wounding" vices and taboos to uphold positive norms	Encouraging good deeds and commending deserving community members
Composition	Rooted in fierce, competitive "warfare." Rival quarters compose songs about each other's exaggerated flaws on appointed days	Realistic and topical. Focuses on sharing life experiences and foretelling future events.
Artistic Tone	Exaggerated humor, sarcasm, and highly poetic metaphors.	Direct, realistic, and didactic (teaching moral lessons).

Thematic Focus & Social Function

Known as the "dance of the people," *Udje* functions primarily as a mechanism of social correction. Because traditional society lacked prisons, major vices (like greed, arrogance, or laziness) were punished by singing satirical, exaggerated songs about the offenders. It serves as psychological warfare between competing clans while *Igoru* places a heavier emphasis on realism and communal harmony. Rather than attacking rivals, it acts as a mirror for society. It is utilised to praise members who have brought honor to the community, encouraging others to emulate good behavior while cautioning against societal missteps.

Composition & Performance Structure

Udje operates on rigid competition. Rival quarters (or towns) perform songs composed about each other on appointed days. The performance is theatrical and highly competitive, as each side attempts to outdo the other in poetic creativity and vocal execution. Conversely, *Igoru* relies strongly on "speech elements" and clear communication to get its moral messages across. It is often performed during important societal events or ceremonies and heavily utilises polyrhythmic and multi-metre textures alongside traditional African musical instruments.

Artistic Tone:

The hallmark of *Udje* is "biting satire" and humor. Singers do not hold back; they may even blatantly lampoon natural deformities or severe misbehaviors to uphold the community's positive norms. *Igoru's* tone tends to be much more didactic and realistic. The composers focus on sharing life experiences ("*Akpò ghin' igbunu*," life is a mystery) and drawing lessons from them rather than resorting to deliberate insults.

Linguistic Tone Melody Interplay in Comparative Context

Because Urhobo and Okpe are tone languages, the relationship between speech tone and melody is a critical structural parameter (Elugbe, 1989). In *Udje*, fidelity to lexical tone is non-negotiable. The genre's power depends on its semantic clarity. If a singer's melodic line distorts the tone of a name, a place, or an accusation, the satirical impact is lost and the singer may be ridiculed for incompetence (Darah, 2005). Consequently, *Udje* melodies are jagged and angular. They follow the rising and falling contours of emphatic speech, resulting in wide intervals and abrupt changes of direction. The melody is subservient to the text (Idamoyibo, 2005).

Igoru operates under a different contract with language. Because its themes are broader and its mood more reflective, composers are permitted greater melodic licence (Idolor, 2001). A singer may elongate a syllable, stretch a low tone into a high melodic peak, or smooth over a tonal transition for the sake of musical beauty. The audience understands that this is an aesthetic choice, not a linguistic error. This flexibility gives *Igoru* its characteristic lyrical grace. The text serves the melody as much as the melody serves the text.

Thus, tone melody interplay becomes a marker of genre. Strict adherence signals *Udje* and its combative intent. Creative flexibility signals *Igoru* and its convivial intent. This shows how deeply linguistic structure is woven into musical function in Urhobo and Okpe traditions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Udje and *Igoru* represent two distinct but complementary strategies within Urhobo and Okpe musicology. *Udje* mobilises hexatonic scales, metallic timelines, declamatory vocals, and percussive dance to enact social discipline through public confrontation. *Igoru* deploys hexatonic systems with pentatonic phrasing, shimmering rattles, polyphonic ornamentation, and flowing dance to enact social solidarity through shared reflection and praise. Neither is superior. Each is structurally optimised for its social purpose.

The survival of these genres is not guaranteed. Urbanisation, digital media, and shifting youth preferences place pressure on traditional performance contexts (Idolor, 2001). To ensure continuity, several steps are recommended.

First, ethnomusicologists and cultural institutions should prioritise high quality audio visual documentation of master performers, with detailed transcription of timelines, dance steps, and tone melody relationships. Such archives must be accessible to communities, not locked away in academic libraries.

Second, music departments in Nigerian universities and colleges of education should introduce practical modules on *Udje* and *Igoru* performance. Students should learn to play the *agogo* and *uke*, to execute *kporo* and *iken*, and to compose within the tonal and metric constraints of each genre. Theory must be paired with embodied practice.

Third, contemporary Nigerian musicians, producers, and composers should be encouraged to engage with these structural templates. The polyrhythmic drive of *Udje* could reinvigorate Afrobeat and hip-hop. The polyphonic lyricism of *Igoru* could enrich highlife, gospel, and art music. Innovation rooted in indigenous structure is more sustainable than imitation of foreign forms.

By understanding *Udje* and *Igoru* as structural systems rather than just repertoires of songs, we equip ourselves to preserve, teach, and evolve them. The goal is not to freeze these traditions in time but to ensure that their underlying grammars remain alive, so that new generations can speak fluently in these powerful musical languages.

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