INTRODUCTION

This research started on the 30th of August, 2015 at the instance of the Association of Esan Professionals’ commission to document certain aspects of Esan mores and culture. The author had the privilege of serving in one of the sub-committees that investigated Esan cultural heritage. A team of three experts headed by Professor Matthew Omo-Ojugo, the Author and the third member being Mr. Patrick Ube conducted this research. In the course of field investigation, this Author stumbled into something germane to his specialty whose originality needed to be explored and presented in contemporary parlance.

Globally when issues relating to the exact origin of music are mentioned, one is faced with uncertainties in addressing the matter to exactitude. The major challenge in this search is that one is faced with the dilemma of talking about an art that one’s progenitors never experienced. An art that may be associated with prehistoric man and which predates record keeping. While archaeological finds have led quite a lot of researchers to ideas of musical instruments used in certain epochs and showed the collective nature of music-making, one does not expect to find the documentation of the corpus of songs used in that era or the events that necessitated such musical experiences. As one would probably observe in the preceding segments in this presentation, music’s origin is commonly believed to be God’s handiwork. However, not all musical genres are of indeterminate origin and Asonogun which is the primary concern is one. It is in this connection that this study asks: What is Asonogun? How did it originate? Has Asonogun musical instruments changed since its evolution? Has its performance style changed between then and now? Who are the proponents of the Asonogun gene?
The Esan
In the geographic sense, Esan is bounded by Owan East, Etsako West and Etsako Central in the North, Owan West in the Northwest, Orhionmwon in the South and River Niger by the East. Aluede and Aluede opine that Esan people occupy the North Eastern part of Edo State Nigeria and are believed to be of Benin origin, hence they are often referred to as Edoid extraction.¹ It has a Landmass of about 1,162 square miles. Owing to its historical origin, the social-political organization of the people relies greatly on that of Benin.² From the Esan sensed historical reconstruction, the people who occupy the region marked out in the map below are believed to have migrated from the Benin empire at different periods and the first batch of such migrations which happened in 1025BC actually met some inhabitants at Egibelle in Uromi.³

Fig. 1, Map of the study area

Origin of Music
The origin of music is unknown because it occurred prior to recorded history. Some suggest that the origin of music likely stems from naturally occurring sounds and rhythms. Writers from different backgrounds have interrogated the origin of music irrespective of their epochs and climes. For example, Boyden believes that the origin of music is not clearly known but a study of the music of the orients and Africans could give the music scholar a glimpse of music’s evolution.⁴ Boyden’s pronouncements on the music of the Orients and Africans as if they are still in their evolutionary stages are not tenable. This is so in that culture is dynamic and so is musical culture, this view is strengthened by the theory of progressive traditionalism.⁵ Emielu’s article challenged the notion of rigidity and fixity by showing in his study of Edo people how specific dance bands are redefining traditional music through innovations.⁶ This therefore means

¹ Esther Omone Aluede & Charles Onomudo. Aluede, ‘(Re) Investigating Gender Stereotypes and Musicality in Esan, Edo State, Nigeria’. In Music, Musicology and the Gospel in Nigeria: A Festschrift in Honour of Samuel Olufemi Adedeji. edited by Femi Abiodun Ife: Association of Nigerian Musicologists (2018) 455-465.
² Alexander Okpoko & Kokunre Agbontaen, Edo Traditions of Origin’. In Some Nigerian Peoples, edited by Bassey Wai:Andah& Alexander Ikechukwu Ibadan: Rex Charles Publishers (1993) 213-224
³ Aregbeyeguale Patrick Ojiefoh, Uromi Chronicles 1025- 2002 (Uromi: Aregbeyeguale Publishers,2002).
⁴ David Dodge Boyden., An Introduction to Music (London: Faber and Faber 1971)
⁵ Austin Emielu, ‘Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria: Toward a Theory of Progressive Traditionalism’ Ethnomusicology 62 no 2 (2018) 206-229.
⁶ Emielu, ‘Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria.’
that musical practices can never be static.

Still on the origin of music, McClellan posits that it is doubtful that it would never be known when or under what circumstances the first musical utterance was made, yet every culture developed some form of musical tradition and many of them possessed legends that pertain to the origin of music. Almost all of these legends attribute a divine origin to music, in no case was music said to be invented by humans. In the world’s mythologies, music was either discovered or was bestowed on mankind by supernatural beings. The duo, Aluede & Aluede observe that in the Vedic culture, music is viewed as the prerogative of the gods and that it was later made known to men so that they too could share its features. In all the submissions above, one pertinent fact is that music is closely knitted with religion and it resides in the dwelling place of God. While talking about music’s origin early in time, Edwards opined that “God is its author and not man. He laid the keynote of all harmonies; He planned all perfect combinations, and he made us so that we could hear and understand”. From the opinions above, nowhere is music’s origin attributed to humans but God. This view is further enhanced by the volumes of folk and fairy tales which ascribe the origin of a lot of musical genres to the supernatural.

The Asonogun Genre and the Theory of Its Origin

Aluede lists Asonogun as one of Esan's musical genres. Asonogun is sometimes called Abayon. Just as very beautiful songs have been parodied, great works of art corrupted, the Esan Asonogun which is the primary concern of this article has also suffered a similar fate. Asonogun is also known as Abayon-a derogatory term which means the father of drinks. This genre is so called because where ever it is performed, drinks are served and consumed by its performers. According to Emielu, Asonogun is a social recreation dance among Esan people. It is performed by both men and women, old and young. Emielu cites Paulina Ogenete (an Asonogun dancer and the daughter of a great Asonogun exponent, Ogenete Ukpetena) as saying that her father popularized the genre. She opined further that Asonogun was first played on empty bottles. Considering the danger in playing with bottles, Ogbidi Okojie I (1857-1944) the then Onojie of Uromi went to Igun quarters in Benin City- a quarter known for bronze casting and metal works to buy three gongs to replace the bottles as Asonogun's principal instruments. Later, Samba and gourd rattles were added.¹¹

Very brief attention is intended to be given to the issues raised above to save the soul of this presentation. As it is often common in oral tradition, two contestable issues have evolved and they are that: Ogenete Ukpeten a popularised Asonogun in Esanland; Uromi is the home of Asonogun and that King Ogbidi Okojie was more or less the patron of the genre hence he went to Benin to buy bells to replace bottles which were previously used as its musical instruments. And so bottles were the precursors of Asonogun musical instruments. This obviously cannot be the case as early in time, Aluede and Ekewenu discussed the use of non-musical instruments in the accompaniment of songs for a notorious thief and women infidels. The non-musical instruments so referred to are bottles, pans and old pots. These are derogatorily used to spite the person for whom the music is made and to serve as a deterrent for whoever would have been tempted to indulge in such infamous activities.¹²

Secondly, the testimony of Ogenete’s daughter recognizing her father as the one who popularised the genre in Esan is not surprising. To this Author, this tendency is either borne out of the quest to write her father’s name in the annals of history or egoistically create a niche for the family. The reason for this assertion is that Esanland which is made up of about thirty-five independent kingdoms has always lived independently with limited means of communication in the past and to determine who made a genre popular may be difficult. This position is further strengthened when from available records, it has been discovered that Kesii Ejioanon of Ugboha was the first in Esan to wax a debut of Asonogun genre, Ogenete of Uromi also followed closely and that is of course why it may not be wrong to say that these two Asonogun exponents were contemporaries. Without contradiction, Ugboha in Esan South East Local Government Area of Edo State is the home of Asonogun exponents and it has a greater collection of impressive Asonogun ensembles within Esan towns. Some of the Asonogun exponents then were J. O. Akhogba, O. Aghaska, Ipecco, Abejaa, Akuete, Amiebaho and women such as Esther, Felicia Adesua Masade, Elizabeth Akhimien and Paulina Ogenete. While discussing the origin of this genre, Ibhaze and Ebosele opined that Asonogun literally means Asonin Ogun meaning ‘we are hailing Ogun’ (Ogun was the popular god of iron among the Esan people). This dance therefore was a kind of dedication to the god of iron.¹³

¹ Randall McClellan, The Healing Forces of Music (New York: Excel Publishers 2000)
² Esther Omone Aluede& Charles Onomudu Aluede, The Ujie Music and Dance of the Esan, Edo State, Nigeria. (Berlin, Germany: Lambert Publishers 2012)
³ John Harrington Edwards, God and Music. (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co. 1904).
⁴ Charles Onomudu Aluede, ‘Esan Contemporary Musical Genres’. UNE Journal of the Music of, 3 no 2 (1997):18 –26.
⁵ Emielu, ‘Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria.,
⁶ Charles Onomodu Aluede & Bruno Dafe Ekewenu, ‘Social Control and The Performance of Traditional African Music: A Study of Ikojhe Music of the Esan’ Castalia 13 no 1 (2003) 1 – 10.
⁷ Kelvin Ibhaze, & Augustine Ebosele, ‘The Nature of Esan Afro-Centric Music and Dance’ Esan People: Our Culture and Faith. In Matthew Ihensekhien (Ed.) Ekpona: Seminary of All Saints. 1 (2012) 41-51.
The views of the duo, Ihazee and Eboselde do not appear to be tenable. This view may not be too exact because in Esan societies, music for worship in traditional religious societies does not yield to forces of modernity so easily. The use of such music is regulated socially. For example, in Esan, there is Ikhiẹ̀bo or Ikhiẹ̀bo- this means music for native doctors. This musical type has its own songs and musical instruments which have not found their way into any social entertainment musical forms. Similarly, Ikhien Ebo which is music and dance for river deity also has its prescribed musical instruments. These instruments are peculiar to the various religious societies. To some scholars, this postulation may have no theoretical foundation. In this modern and global world, one may doubt if there is any musical instrument anywhere specifically reserved for any deity, society or cult that cannot be bought from the market and used for social entertainment as any group deems fit. To these queries, the answer is yes, there are. For example, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the cowry beaded Sekere, some Ifa and Ogboni drums are not in the public domain. In other parables, there are instruments which when bought from the market are consecrated for sole use in specific societies. And once consecrated for use in such a shrine, it is not used for mundane activities. To regulate the use of such instruments and ensure that they are not abused, some caste members venture into the production of such instruments and are consequently sold among members of the caste. Aside from these are the fact that in Africa, some musical instruments have anthropomorphic attributes and as such, they are treated as deities or humans and so they are rather handed down from generation to generation than simply being purchased from the market.

In Esan, there is no Ikhien Idigun as such and to date whenever sacrifices and libation are to be poured for the god of iron, the devotee simply starts his prayers by hitting a hammer or a similar item against an anvil amidst incantations. Without a doubt, music in these religious societies is normally in praise of their god and for the aesthetic enjoyment of its members. Secularizing the sacred or making mundane the sacred does not come easily. This is perhaps why not all traditional religious musical instruments can be admitted into the musical ensembles of parish choirs to praise God. In a further search for the origin of Asonogun, at Ugboha during a group discussion, this apt account was discovered about this genre’s origin and it is considered worth sharing here. In a particular Esan community lived Ogun who was a blacksmith. As a blacksmith, he specialized in the production of hoes, cutlasses and pans. He was married for decades to a beautiful lady without any child. Much later they eventually had one. The news of the birth of a child to the family of Ogun drew friends, families and well-wishers to Ogun’s house. In their joyous state, they picked hoes, short cutlasses and pans and converted them to musical instruments to accompany their songs. The noise oozing from the home of Ogun became too loud that people started wondering what was happening in Ogun’s house and it was reported that: Asonogun-the people are shouting for Ogun. Put differently or aptly, people are hailing Ogun. To date, this name has remained with the dance. Although it cannot be pinpointed exactly, the town where Asonogun originated from in Esan, there are however, some constants which cannot be disputed about Asonogun’s theory of origin. It is these constants that are explored in the preceding segment.

Ogun among the Yoruba of Nigeria is the god of iron. Idigun in Esan is the god of iron and Ofogun is a blacksmith. In certain circumstances in Esan, the caste system is still intact. Just as there are the families, lineages and villages of native doctors and healers, so also are the families of blacksmiths, traditional morbid anatomists, weavers and carvers to mention a few. The story of Ogun being a blacksmith is first of all very informative in that in Esan, names given could lead one to the caste or lineage of its bearer. For example, Oko-Ogun means child of Ogun just as Oko-Idigun means child of Idigun and Oko-Ebor means child of Ebor. Summarily Asonogun first started from the family of the blacksmiths and this is further corroborated by the instrumental resources of the ensemble.

Theories of how music may have evolved are not somewhat sacrosanct or rigid but rather divergent. This study is based on two major theories. First amongst them is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DIT) and second is Emielu’s theory of Progressive Traditionalism (PT). The diffusion of innovation theory explains how innovations are taken up in a community. According to Rogers, the theory has a radical approach to change, instead of focusing or persuading individuals to change. It sees change as being primarily about the evolution or “reinvention” of products and behaviours so they become better fits for the needs of individuals and groups; adding that five qualities which determine the success of innovation are relative advantage, compatibility with existing laws and practices, simplicity and ease of use, “trialability”, and observable result. This is so in that culture is dynamic and so is musical culture, this view is strengthened by the theory of progressive traditionalism. Emielu challenged the notion of rigidity and fixity by

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14 Charles Onomadu Aluede ‘The Anthropomorphic Attributes of African Musical Instruments: History and Use in Esan, Nigeria’. The Anthropologist 8 no.2, (2005) 156 – 160.
15 Ogwa in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State has families and lineages of traditional bone setters and in Irrua and Ekpoma in Esan Central and West Local Government area are Idumu-Ebo which are the quarters of native doctors.
16 Emielu, ‘Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria’.
17 Everett Rogers, Diffusion of Innovation. (New York: Free Press, 2003).
18 Austin Emielu, ‘Tradition, Innovations and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria: Toward a Theory of Progressive Traditionalism’ Ethnomusicology 62 no 2 (2018) 206-229.
showing in his study of Edo people how specific dance bands are redefining traditional music through innovations. As with the case of dance bands, so is Asonogun. No doubt, musical practices can never be static thus as we yet discuss Asonogun, the author has discovered a new tendency that tilts towards the evolution of Igbaboasono.

**Asonogun Then and Now in Esan Soundscape**

According to Titon, every human society has music. Although music is universal, it’s meaning is not. Just as landscape refers to land, soundscape refers to sound: the characteristic sound of a particular place, both human and nonhuman. The examples so far present today’s soundscapes, but what about the soundscapes of the past?

By this question and enquiry, there is a need to look at this genre as it was performed in the past and in the present. Asonogun whether in the past or present has always been a social and recreational dance with graceful steps and this makes it possible for children, young adults, adults and the aged irrespective of their sexes to perform it. Up to about four decades ago, this genre was still a communal property. By this, it alludes that these ensembles were owned by villages. When it was communally owned, the onus was on their parents to bring in their young children and wards to rehearse and perform the dance. This mechanism engendered not only continuity in the practice but ensured that the art was practised at the grassroots in line with its original tenets and performance practice. The genre then was primarily servicing the musical taste of the communities within the province. With Asonogun now in the hands of connoisseurs and impresarios, there is a palpable struggle between keeping the original musical tradition and expanding its performance horizon to capture the attention of spectators of different cultural backgrounds. This is reasonably so because these groups now perform in many Nigerian cities. To be able to competitively perform with many other troupes, Asonogun has borrowed much of the Igbabonelimin dance steps to enrich and complement theirs. Today, it is no longer strange to see an Asonogun performer taking flights, doing forward and backward roll, somersaulting and going into quasi tumbling. This has led to a preliminary postulation on the evolution of Igbaboasono- a mixture of Igbabonelimin and Asonogun, a tendency that is trending as we examine Asonogun right now.

**Musical Ensemble Membership and Training in Esan**

Membership of musical ensembles in Esan is optional. It starts with the trainee going with gift items like Kola nuts and gin to symbolize interest and membership after which, the candidate is accepted after auditioning. This initial move is usually done with the consent of the candidate’s parents or wards. While talking specifically of the rehearsals and training procedures involved in Ijieleghe, Aluede observed that:

Rehearsals are held twice a week, each lasting for at least three hours and this continues for three years before the trainee is allowed to perform at a public gathering. The manner in which the skills are imparted is very formal. Each leader is assigned to group of trainees, since these leaders are experts in different techniques, after three months, a group graduates from one leaders class to another. Each leader picks and teaches a particular dance style on weekly basis, he may however, extend the duration if the trainees are slow in mastering the technique.

Ijieleghe is an acrobatic dance of the female folk. Being so, it takes much time to master. However, this is not the case with Asonogun trainees. As a social and recreational genre, almost everyone in Esan traditional setting knows the songs and with little efforts are able to dance to its music. The home of the Asonogun ensemble leader is usually the rehearsal venue. Their rehearsals are usually in the late afternoons of the Esan traditional Sabbath day (Edowo or Edeze). Their rehearsals are usually held for a maximum of two hours. During training, there are usually ground rules laid out which are religiously observed. Elsewhere Aluede maintained that some of the rules governing rehearsals are that a poor dancer should be encouraged and not laughed at, members should not miss a rehearsal, whatever happens during rehearsals should not be in the public domain etc. Within six to twelve months, the new entrants who have been regular with rehearsals are taken along and presented for public performances. Having said the above, it is considered important to know that not all Esan musical genres are rehearsed. Studies have shown that Ikoghe and Ujie music are danced never rehearsed.

**Costumes of Selected Esan Musical Ensembles**

Aluede opined that:

In all Esan dance ensembles, whether those for males alone, females alone or mixed, costume is very significant. While dancers involved in dances with majestic or graceful body movement wear heavy costumes like hand woven cloth (Georges, real wax) along with coral beads which are worn around the necks, those who perform flighty dances wear geometrical patterns. To give an example, Asonogun costume refers to land, soundscape refers to sound: the characteristic sound of a particular place, both human and nonhuman. The examples so far present today’s soundscapes, but what about the soundscapes of the past?

19 Jeff Todd Titon, *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to The Music of the World’s Peoples*. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer 2005).

20 Titon, *Worlds of Music*. 1.

21 Charles Onomudo Aluede, ‘Promoting African Indigenous Dances: A Case Study of Ijieleghe’. *The Crab-Journal of Theatre Arts*. Port Harcourt 2 (2007).19-30.

22 Aluede, ‘Promoting African Indigenous Dances: A Case Study of Ijieleghe’.

23 Aluede and Ekewenu, ‘Social Control and The Performance of Traditional African Music.'
simple less expensive and short costumes.24

While male Asonogun dancers wear T or sport shirts on top of shorts as underlay clad with wrapper, the females wear blouses, T or sport shirts on top of two wrappers which are tied around the waists.

Fig. 2, a photograph of a male Asonogun dancer, photograph taken by this Author during field investigation.

Fig. 3, a photograph of a female Asonogun dancer, photograph taken by this Author during field investigation.

Performance Context and Practice in Asonogun
To talk of the context of a musical performance refers to the avenue in which a particular musical genre is performed. As a genre that has no link with anything fetish both in its tradition of the origin and contemporary stance, Asonogun is

24 Aluede, "Promoting African Indigenous Dances19-30.
performed on a very wide variety of occasions. From marriage, child dedication, house warming, age-grade initiation, new yam festival, election victory and court cases to burial of the aged in the community, this brand of music is profusely performed. Most Asonogun ensembles start performances with singing songs in an unaccompanied form and as time goes by hand-clapping is introduced before it slides into a full performance involving all other instruments. As with many other Esan musical performances, that period of first singing without accompaniment to gradual accompaniment with hand clapping is called heating the spirit.\(^{25}\)

**The musical instruments in use in Asonogun performance**

As already mentioned above, when the birth of the long-awaited child was announced, the available implements converted for use as musical instruments were hoes, cutlasses and pans. This tendency has an overriding effect on the ensemble to date. Asonogun groups have three bells, one samba—a small membranophone and in recent times, gourd rattles are sometimes found in the group for want of rich and varied tonal quality. Below are two scored Asonogun songs.

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**10. UKI HENLEN**

Text in Esan

| Call | Uki hen len 'gho la                      | Translation | The moon has risen, the star |
|------|-----------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Res  | Feo 'khun ghe                            |             | check the sky               |

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**18. UZO NE GHENE HA GBE**

Text in Esan

| Call | Uzo ne ghene ha gbe                     | Translation | The moon has risen, the star |
|------|-----------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Res  | Feo 'khun gbe                           |             | check the sky               |
UZO NE GHENE HA GBE

| Text in Esan        | Translation                      |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Uzo ne ghene ha gbe| The antelope the youth ought to kill |
| omanlin gbo le      | the elderly has killed it         |
| oya ghe ne hi vie o | the youth is sorrowing            |
| oya ghe ne hi vie o | the youth is sorrowing            |
| Omanlin gbu zo      | that the elderly has killed it    |

Fig.4. A photograph of an ensemble with three Agogo and one Samba in a performance, the photograph was taken by this Author during field investigation.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this work, the theory surrounding the origin of Asonogun genre of the Esan people of Edo State of Nigeria has been examined. Before dwelling on the main study, the Author tried to situate the study by first of all describing the historical origin and location of the Esan people whose musical practice was being studied. In the course of conducting this investigation, it was revealed that:

1. *Asonogun* is simply a recreational type of music and dance performed by both male and female participants in the region. Its origin has nothing to do with the worship of the god of iron as claimed by earlier researchers.

2. *Asonogun* genre evolved in the home Ogun the blacksmiths as simply a social and recreational dance.

3. Asonogun musical instruments have undergone some expansion. What started with irons in the blacksmith’s workshops now has bells, samba and a whistle as their instrumental resource.

4. Just as the case with its musical instruments, its performance style has had some transformation and as we speak, the dance is gradually turning acrobatic, hence we talked of Igbaboasono.

5. Currently, the proponents of this genre are Ipecco, Abejaa, Akute, Amiebaho and women such as Esther, Felicia Adesua Masade, Elizabeth Akhimien and Paulina Ogenete. No doubt, there are always reasons to research an already searched matter. This is necessary if there were methodological defects in the previous study which could bring forth implausible result if the area covered was too small yet a generalized result has been provided if the researchers do not have enough training or craftsmanship to distil the facts in their research and if the previous work lacks originality or is beset with speculative postulations among many others.

The study arrived at key conclusions that in this current era of globalisation, it is paramount that in-depth research is conducted before making public any finding because christening a social/ recreational musical genre fetish could generate apathy for the genre. This in turn could restrict audience participation that may lead to the annihilation of the one-time treasured musical practice.
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