Music as A Custodian of Socio-Political and Moral Order in Itsekiri Cultural Music

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Music plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity, transmitting moral values, and reinforcing socio-political order within African societies. Among the Itsekiri people of the Niger Delta, Nigeria, music functions not only as a vehicle of communal expression but also as an active instrument of societal regulation. This study critically examines both traditional and contemporary Itsekiri musical practices as custodians of socio-political structure and moral order, with particular emphasis on their capacity to encode historical narratives, reinforce ethical values, and articulate social commentary. The study adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological methodology grounded in an interpretative and interdisciplinary framework. Primary data were derived through the purposive selection of authentic Itsekiri song texts, including the widely recognised *"Ene Dokpe"*, alongside other religious and secular musical repertoires. These materials were subjected to thematic and contextual analysis to identify recurring motifs such as spirituality, communal unity, resistance, and

moral instruction. In addition, historical documentation and relevant scholarly literature were systematically reviewed to provide contextual depth and support analytical interpretation. The integration of lyrical analysis with historical and cultural inquiry enabled a holistic understanding of the functional roles of music within Itsekiri society. Findings reveal that Itsekiri music remains a dynamic and adaptive cultural medium, serving as a repository of collective memory and a mechanism for socio-political engagement and moral education. It continues to bridge traditional practices with contemporary realities, thereby sustaining its relevance across generations. The study further underscores the enduring significance of music as a tool for fostering societal cohesion and ethical consciousness. In light of these findings, the paper advocates for comprehensive documentation and preservation of Itsekiri musical traditions through collaborative efforts among scholars, cultural institutions, and government agencies, ensuring the safeguarding of song texts, performance practices, and indigenous instruments. It also recommends the integration of Itsekiri music into both formal and informal educational frameworks to enhance cultural awareness, identity formation, and moral instruction. Furthermore, the study highlights the need to promote music as a platform for socio-political engagement, encouraging contemporary practitioners to address themes such as governance, environmental responsibility, and youth empowerment. Finally, it emphasises the importance of digital dissemination and sustainable innovation, advocating for the use of modern technologies to expand the reach of Itsekiri music while maintaining a balance between tradition and creative evolution.

Keywords: Itsekiri music, socio-political order, moral values, ethnomusicology, Niger Delta, cultural identity

Introduction

Music is far more than a medium of aesthetic expression or entertainment; it constitutes a complex social practice that both reflects and actively shapes the values, norms, and political structures of the communities in which it is embedded (Merriam, 1964; Agawu, 2003). Across societies, music functions not only as a source of pleasure but also as a mechanism for maintaining social order, transmitting cultural knowledge, and reinforcing communal identities. Within the

Itsekiri society of the Niger Delta, these functions are particularly pronounced. Music permeates everyday life and ceremonial occasions alike, operating as a multidimensional force that facilitates social cohesion, reinforces moral and ethical codes, and codifies socio-political hierarchies (Adebayo, 2018; Akinwumi, 2017). Its presence is palpable in royal court ceremonies in the Warri Kingdom, religious and spiritual observances, seasonal festivals, and contemporary urban performances, illustrating its enduring role as a vital instrument for both cultural continuity and political articulation.

The Itsekiri musical tradition is deeply embedded in historical consciousness. Songs serve as repositories of collective memory, commemorating ancestral achievements, chronicling political events, and articulating ethical frameworks that guide behaviour across generations. Through a combination of lyrical content, rhythmic patterns, and performative elements, Itsekiri music encodes complex socio-political and moral systems, establishing a multilayered communication network that is intelligible to both performers and audiences (Blouin, 2016; Ekwueme & Udeh, 2018). In this way, music functions simultaneously as a reflective medium, capturing the historical and political trajectories of the community, and as a regulatory instrument, reinforcing societal norms and ethical conduct. The performative and participatory nature of Itsekiri music ensures that these messages are internalised, allowing music to operate as a subtle yet effective instrument of social governance and communal education.

At the same time, Itsekiri music demonstrates remarkable adaptability in the face of cultural transformation and globalization. While retaining the structural and symbolic core of traditional practices, contemporary Itsekiri musicians increasingly integrate global musical idioms such as hip-hop, R&B, Afrobeat, and other popular genres, producing hybrid forms that resonate with younger audiences (Ikuomola, 2019; Onabajo, 2022). This dynamic fusion illustrates the dual function of music as both a custodian of cultural identity and an agent of innovation, bridging the historical and contemporary, the local and the global. By maintaining its role in moral education and socio-political expression while embracing new forms, Itsekiri music exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of African musical traditions in the modern era.

This study seeks to investigate the dual roles of Itsekiri music as a preserver of socio-political order and a transmitter of ethical and moral values across traditional and contemporary contexts. Through rigorous analysis of authentic song lyrics, historical records, ethnographic observations, and contemporary performances, the research illuminates how music continues to function as a medium of cultural resilience, social cohesion, and communal identity. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discourses in ethnomusicology and African studies, demonstrating that music is not merely a vehicle for entertainment or artistic expression but an essential mechanism through which communities negotiate history, morality, and political power. Ultimately, this research underscores the enduring significance of music as a social institution that actively shapes the moral, cultural, and political life of the Itsekiri people, even amidst rapid socio-political change and globalising influences.

Music and Social Functions in African Society

Ethnomusicologists have long recognised music as a fundamental and functional element of African societies, serving not merely as a form of aesthetic expression, but as a mechanism that mediates social, moral, and political life (Chernoff, 1979; Kubik, 2010). Music operates as a social instrument that both reflects and shapes communal values, codifies behavioural norms, and reinforces hierarchical structures within society. Merriam (1964) advanced a theoretical framework for analysing music as a social phenomenon, identifying its multifaceted roles in emotional expression, social integration, and socialisation. From this perspective, musical practices are inseparable from the broader cultural, political, and moral fabrics of society, performing both expressive and regulatory functions. Building on this, Nketia (1974) emphasised that, in West African communities, music serves as a medium for the transmission of ethical norms and historical narratives, illustrating how performances are interwoven with political authority, ritual governance, and collective memory.

In the Niger Delta region, these theoretical insights find concrete expression. Musical practices are deeply implicated in communicating social hierarchies, assigning community responsibilities, and regulating interpersonal conduct (Arom, 1991). Music accompanies an array of social events, including rites of passage, royal coronations, funerals, and communal festivals. Within these

contexts, music simultaneously legitimises hierarchical authority and fosters solidarity among participants (Blacking, 1973; Tracey, 1970). This duality, serving authority while promoting communal cohesion, forms a central principle for understanding the socio-political significance of Itsekiri music. It demonstrates how music operates not only as a medium of cultural enjoyment but also as a tool for social governance and moral reinforcement.

Music and Moral Transmission

Extending beyond ceremonial and social functions, music plays a vital educational role, transmitting cultural knowledge, ethical principles, and moral guidance across generations (Ekwueme & Udeh, 2018; Nzewi, 1997). Through songs, oral narratives, and performative storytelling, communities communicate ideals such as honesty, respect, accountability, and social responsibility. In Itsekiri society, folk songs, hymns, and praise songs are intentionally designed to embed moral lessons, ensuring that children and adults alike internalise and enact societal expectations (Akinwumi, 2017; Ikuomola, 2019).

Moreover, religious and secular musical genres complement each other in moral instruction. Religious hymns emphasise spiritual virtue and communal obedience, whereas secular festival songs celebrate historical achievements, highlight exemplary leadership, and critique social misconduct (Blouin, 2016). Through this interplay, music functions as a mirror of social reality, providing communities with both guidance and critical commentary. The moral dimension of music therefore reinforces socialisation, ethical education, and the continuity of cultural values.

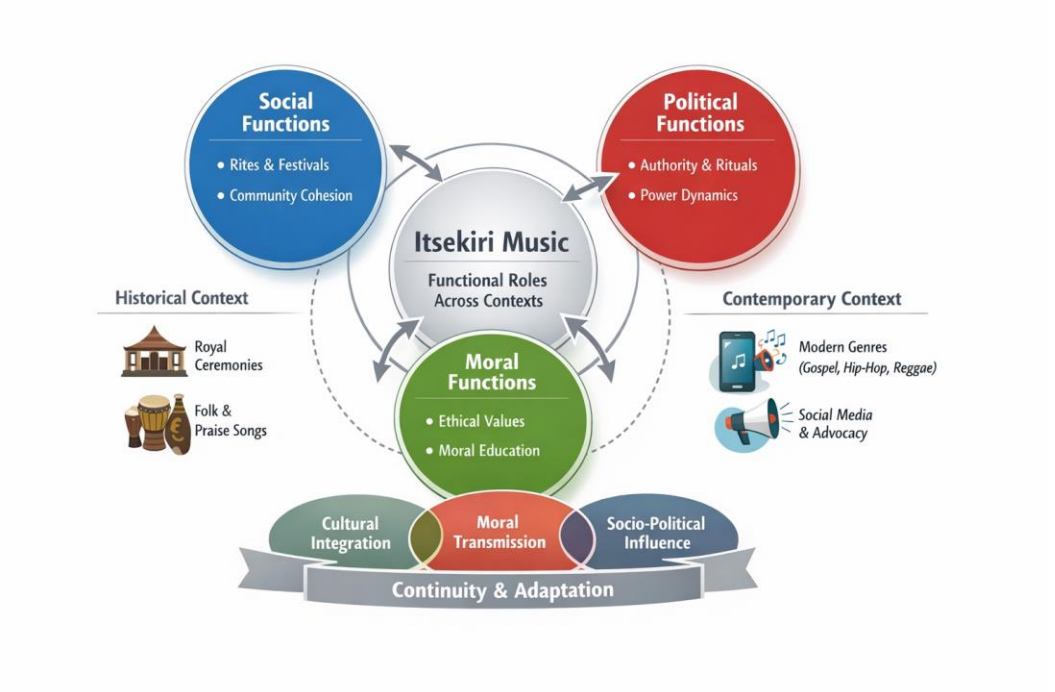
Historical and Cultural Context of Itsekiri Music

The integration of social, moral, and political functions is evident in the historical and cultural practices of the Itsekiri people. Occupying the western Niger Delta, the Itsekiri have cultivated a musical tradition that reflects a rich fusion of indigenous practices and external influences, stemming from interactions with the Bini, Urhobo, and Ilaje, as well as early engagements with Portuguese traders (Adebayo, 2018). Within the Warri Kingdom, music was central to the royal court, accompanying coronations, funerals, palace festivities, and other public

ceremonies. In these settings, music reinforced political authority, legitimised rulers, and sustained socio-political hierarchies (Adedeji & Orukotan, 2020).

In addition to affirming authority, Itsekiri music mediates power relations through subtle social commentary. Praise songs celebrate rulers' virtues, fostering loyalty and admiration, while folk and interregnum songs provide avenues for expressing dissent, critiquing social inequities, and negotiating communal tensions (Blouin, 2016). This dual functionality underscores the adaptability, resilience, and enduring relevance of Itsekiri musical traditions, which have successfully maintained their socio-political and educational roles across generations.

The functional continuity of Itsekiri music extends into the contemporary era, where globalisation and modern media have shaped its evolution. Traditional Itsekiri music has fused with contemporary genres such as gospel, hip-hop, and reggae, thereby maintaining its traditional communicative and moral functions while engaging new and younger audiences (Onabajo, 2022; Oritsejafor, 2021). The proliferation of digital platforms, social media, and streaming services has further amplified the reach and impact of Itsekiri music, enabling it to serve as a medium for advocacy, youth empowerment, and social commentary. These contemporary adaptations illustrate the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, demonstrating that Itsekiri music remains a vital instrument of cultural education, moral transmission, and socio-political engagement.



Itsekiri People of the Niger Delta

The Itsekiri are a distinct ethnic minority residing in the western Niger Delta, primarily occupying the coastal communities of the Warri Kingdom. Their society is traditionally hierarchical, centred on a monarchy that exercises both spiritual and political authority. Complementing this monarchical structure are well-established community-based governance systems, which enable local decision-making and the regulation of social conduct. Within this social framework, music plays a crucial and multifaceted role. It not only provides entertainment but also functions as a vital instrument for mediating social relationships, reinforcing communal identity, and expressing the cultural values of the Itsekiri people (Akinwumi, 2017).

Music permeates various aspects of daily life and ceremonial practice, performing both overt and subtle socio-political functions. During royal coronations, for example, praise songs performed in the Aghofen Palace celebrate and legitimise the authority of the Oba. These songs are typically accompanied by a combination of drums, such as the Igbide (talking drum) and Ogele (shallow double-headed

drum), as well as percussion instruments like shakers and gong bells. The rhythmic patterns and melodic intonations of these instruments enhance the majesty of the occasion and communicate respect for the monarchy.

In community festivals, dance songs with call-and-response structures are central to fostering social cohesion. Performances often feature elaborate dances accompanied by ensembles of drums, flutes, and gongs, where the lead singer engages the community and invites collective participation. These interactive performances strengthen bonds within the community and transmit cultural knowledge in an accessible and enjoyable manner.

Folk songs also serve as vehicles for historical transmission. Many recount wars, migrations, and notable deeds of past leaders. These narratives are often performed in storytelling sessions, accompanied by instruments such as the Ekwe (slit drum) and Udu (clay pot drum), which punctuate key moments in the story and maintain audience engagement.

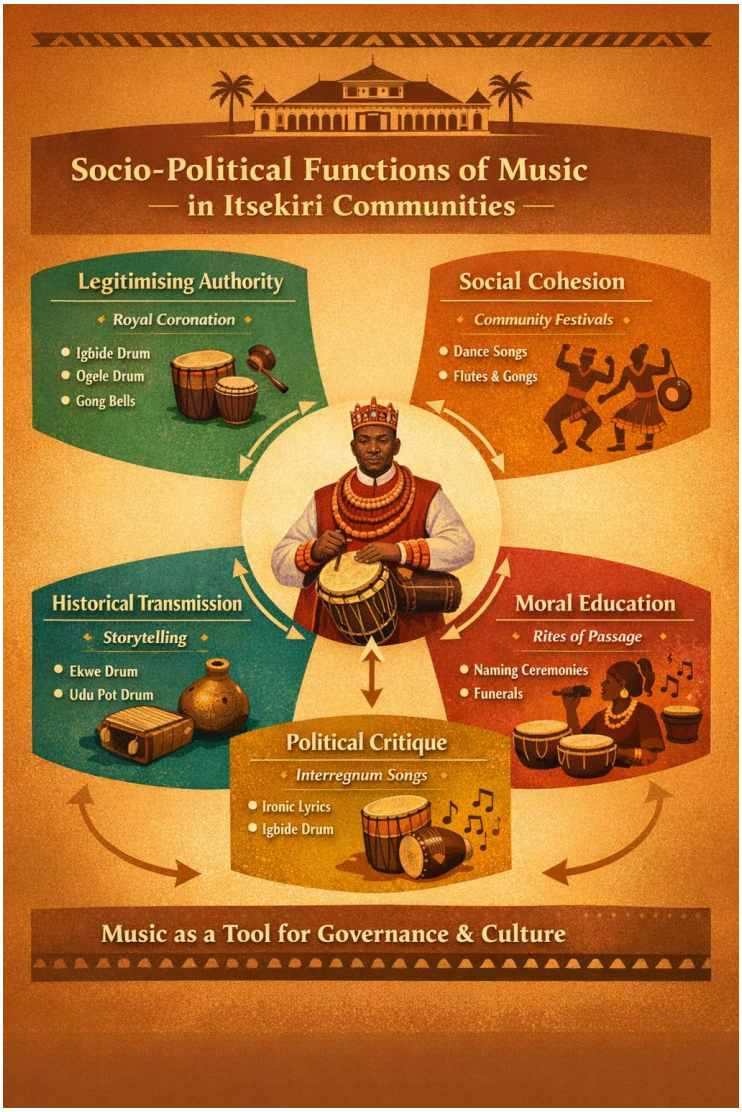
Rites of passage, including naming ceremonies and funerals, integrate music to reinforce moral education and social values. For instance, at funerals, dirges performed by female vocal ensembles are accompanied by low-pitched drums and flutes, creating a solemn atmosphere that guides the community in reflecting on ethics, respect, and collective memory.

Music also provides a platform for political critique. Interregnum songs, performed during periods of transition or dispute, articulate public opinion or opposition to perceived excesses of royal authority. These performances often employ ironic lyrics and dynamic rhythms played on drums such as the Igbide, allowing performers to subtly challenge or comment on social and political matters without directly confronting authority.

Table 1 below summarises these socio-political functions of music within Itsekiri communities:

Function	Context	Example	Instruments/Performance Style
Legitimising authority	Royal coronation	Praise songs in Aghofen Palace	Igbide (talking drum), Ogele (shallow drum), shakers, gong bells
Social cohesion	Community festivals	Dance songs, call-and-response	Drums, gongs, flutes, communal dancing
Historical transmission	Storytelling	Folk songs recounting wars or migrations	Ekwe (slit drum), Udu (clay pot drum), narrative singing
Moral education	Rites of passage	Naming ceremonies, funerals	Low-pitched drums, flutes, female vocal ensembles
Political critique	Interregnum songs	Songs opposing royal excess	Igbide (talking drum), ironic lyrics, dynamic rhythms

Through these practices, music emerges not merely as an art form but as a dynamic social tool, deeply embedded in governance, history, and the cultural ethos of the Itsekiri people. The integration of specific instruments and performance styles reflects how musical expression in Itsekiri society is inseparable from social structure, ceremonial importance, and the moral and political life of the community.



Nature and Structure of Traditional Itsekiri Music

Traditional Itsekiri music forms an essential part of the cultural and social fabric of the Itsekiri people, encapsulating communal values, historical narratives, and ritualistic practices. Its structure is multi-layered, combining a diverse array of indigenous instruments, distinctive rhythmic patterns, and melodic modes that define its unique sound.

Among the primary instruments are the agba, a large drum employed in communal dances, royal ceremonies, and important social gatherings; the iyogume, an hourglass-shaped drum used for signal calls, storytelling, and ceremonial announcements; okiri gongs, which are central in ritual performances and praise songs; oma bells, which maintain time and ensure cohesion within musical ensembles; and oji rattles, often used to enhance rhythmic texture in dances and processions (Arom, 1991; Nzewi, 1997). Each instrument serves not only a musical function but also a communicative role, conveying social messages and coordinating group participation.

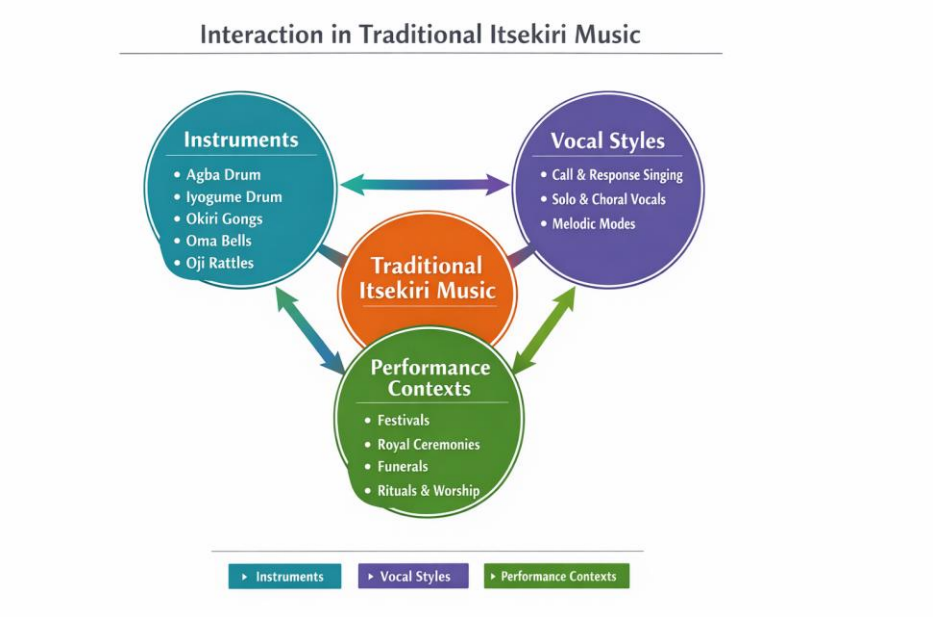
Musically, traditional Itsekiri compositions are characterised by call-and-response patterns, wherein a lead performer initiates a melodic or rhythmic phrase that is answered by the group. This structure encourages communal participation and fosters a sense of collective identity. Additionally, polyrhythms, the simultaneous use of multiple contrasting rhythms, are a hallmark of Itsekiri music, creating intricate layers of sound that engage both performers and listeners. These rhythmic patterns are often closely tied to dance, with bodily movement and percussion mutually reinforcing one another.

Melodic structure in Itsekiri music is typically pentatonic, though variations occur depending on the context. Songs may employ repetitive motifs that serve as mnemonic devices for storytelling or as markers of ceremonial progression. Vocal performance is equally central, ranging from solo narration during storytelling to choral singing in ritual contexts. The tonal quality of the voice, including pitch inflections and ornamentations, is carefully adapted to the social and ceremonial function of each piece, highlighting the interplay between music and language.

Performance contexts are diverse, reflecting the integral role of music in Itsekiri society. Festivals, royal celebrations, funerals, and religious ceremonies all involve specific musical repertoires, instruments, and performance styles. In each case, music is more than entertainment, it acts as a medium for reinforcing moral codes, commemorating historical events, and facilitating social cohesion. Thus, the nature and structure of traditional Itsekiri music illustrate a sophisticated musical system that is inseparable from the community's social, political, and spiritual life (Arom, 1991; Nzewi, 1997).

Table 2. Traditional Itsekiri Instruments

Instrument	Type	Function
Agba	Drum	Communal dance, royal ceremonies
Iyogume	Hourglass drum	Signal calls, storytelling
Okiri	Gong	Rituals, praise songs
Oma	Bell	Timekeeping, ensemble cohesion
Oji	Rattle	Accompaniment in dances



Music as a Custodian of Socio-Political Order

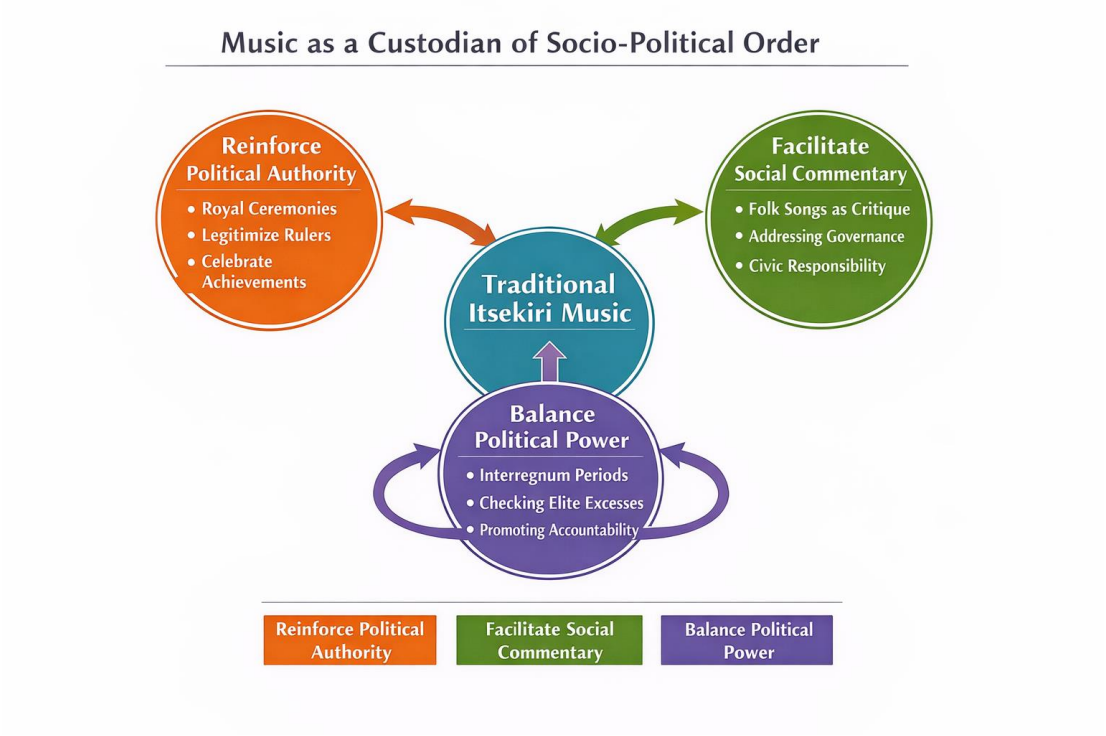
Among the Itsekiri people, music functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a vital instrument for maintaining socio-political order. Its role in reinforcing authority and structuring social relationships is evident across both historical and contemporary contexts. Within royal and state ceremonies, musical performances are deliberately employed to legitimise political authority, celebrate the achievements of rulers, and reaffirm established social hierarchies. Drums,

gongs, and ensemble singing often accompany these events, creating an atmosphere of reverence and communal recognition that underscores the ruler's status and societal role (Blouin, 2016).

Music also provides a platform for social commentary and public discourse. Folk songs, in particular, serve as vehicles through which ordinary citizens can articulate dissent, critique governance, and comment on political affairs. These compositions encode nuanced messages about leadership, accountability, and civic responsibility, allowing music to function as a subtle yet effective mechanism for political engagement (Ekwueme & Udeh, 2018).

During periods of interregnum or political transition, songs historically played a crucial role in checking the excesses of the ruling elite, demonstrating music's capacity to act as a balancing force within governance structures. Performances in such times often contained pointed moral messages and social admonitions, reinforcing communal values and discouraging abuses of power (Adedeji & Orukotan, 2020).

In the contemporary era, this tradition continues to influence modern Itsekiri musicians, who frequently incorporate socio-political themes into their compositions. Issues such as youth disenfranchisement, environmental degradation, governance challenges, and social justice feature prominently, reflecting the enduring role of music as a medium for civic consciousness and advocacy. Through these practices, Itsekiri music maintains its dual function as both a cultural art form and a custodian of socio-political order, bridging past and present while sustaining communal engagement with governance and societal norms (Oritsejafor, 2021).



Music as a Messenger of Moral Order

Among the Itsekiri, music functions as a vital instrument for moral instruction, shaping the ethical consciousness of the community. Through performances at key social and cultural events, such as naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and religious gatherings, songs are employed to convey important messages about integrity, respect, accountability, and social responsibility (Akinwumi, 2017; Ikuomola, 2019). These musical expressions do not merely serve an aesthetic or entertainment purpose; they actively engage listeners in a process of ethical reflection and communal learning.

For instance, during naming ceremonies, the songs performed often include verses that teach children the importance of honesty, obedience, and respect for elders. In wedding celebrations, musical performances frequently highlight the values of loyalty, mutual respect, and cooperation within the marital relationship. Funerary music, meanwhile, is imbued with reflections on the consequences of one's actions,

the importance of community solidarity, and the ethical responsibilities of the living towards the deceased and society at large. Similarly, in religious settings, hymns and devotional songs provide guidance on moral conduct, encouraging compassion, humility, and accountability before God (Blouin, 2016).

Both secular and sacred compositions thus serve as instruments of moral education. For example, the folk song *Oluwatoyosi*, often performed at communal gatherings, recounts stories of generosity and honesty, illustrating how moral behaviour is rewarded within the society. Likewise, the sacred *Oriki* chants, sung in praise of ancestors or deities, embed ethical lessons that remind the community of their duties and the consequences of moral transgressions. Through such performances, music becomes a medium for reinforcing ethical norms and shaping communal behaviour, ensuring that values are transmitted across generations while simultaneously entertaining and uniting the community.

In this way, the Itsekiri use music not only to celebrate, mourn, or worship but also as a constant guide to living a morally responsible life, thereby sustaining social order and communal harmony.

Table 3: Itsekiri Music and Moral Instruction Across Social Events

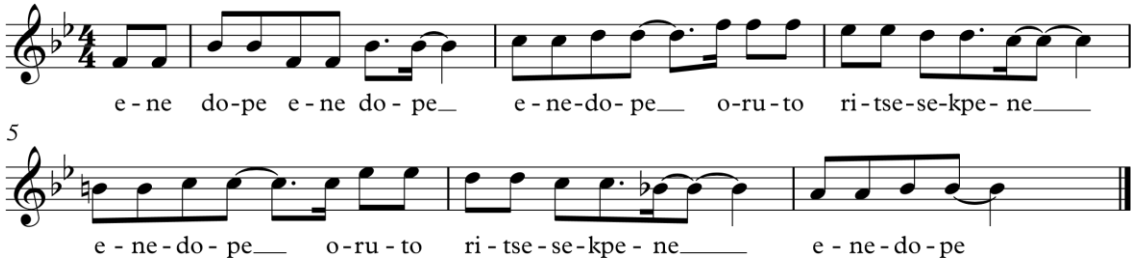
Event	Type of Music	Purpose / Moral Lesson	Examples of Songs or Chants
Naming Ceremony	Folk songs, Praise songs (*Oriki*)	Teach children honesty, respect for elders, obedience, and communal responsibility	Songs recounting lineage virtues, *Oriki* praising ancestors' integrity
Weddings	Celebration songs, Dance music	Promote loyalty, mutual respect, cooperation, and family unity	Songs highlighting marital virtues, traditional love songs
Funerals	Lamentations, Dirges, Ritual chants	Reflect on consequences of one's actions, promote solidarity,	Mourning songs emphasising moral responsibility, *Oriki* of departed elders

		respect for the deceased	
Religious Gatherings	Hymns, Devotional songs, Sacred chants	Encourage compassion, humility, accountability, and ethical conduct	Christian hymns with moral messages, ancestral chants reminding of duty to community
Communal Festivals	Folk songs, Drumming performances, Dance music	Reinforce generosity, honesty, courage, and collective ethics	Folk narratives in songs like *Oluwatoyosi*, moral storytelling through music

Anthentic Itsekiri Song Lyrics Analysis

Religious Song: ***Ene Dokpe***

Line	Itsekiri Lyrics	English Translation	Theme/Function
1	Ene dokpe, Ene dokpe	We are thankful, we are thankful	Gratitude
2	Yiri Jisos, Yiri Jisos, Olugbe Olitse	Praise to Jesus our Redeemer	Spiritual reverence
3	Yiri bérin gboýo sen wun	Praise Him in joyful songs	Worship participation
4	Urun t'Óritse tsegbe'ne	For what God has done for us	Divine providence
5	Aye t'Óritse tsegbene	For God's gift	Ethical reflection, communal gratitude



Analysis: This hymn demonstrates the intertwining of spirituality and moral instruction. Participants are guided to express gratitude, unity, and respect for divine authority, fulfilling both religious and socio-moral functions (Adebayo, 2018).

Secular Song: ***Wari Ejo***

Line	Translation	Theme/Function
"Oluwa wa gbodo se"	The leader must act justly	Political accountability
"Oton oba ka jo ba"	Royals must respect laws	Socio-political order
"Agbaerenbo tsoku waja"	Citizens speak through song	Civic participation

Analysis: Secular songs like *Wari Ejo* demonstrate music as a medium for **social critique, political engagement, and community dialogue**. They empower citizens to articulate grievances while reinforcing collective identity (Blouin, 2016; Onabajo, 2022).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Music in Itsekiri Society

Music
↓
Social Cohesion ←→ Cultural Identity
↓
Moral Education ←→ Socio-Political Commentary

Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary times, Itsekiri music continues to evolve in ways that both honour tradition and respond to pressing social realities. Prominent musicians such as Sola Oritsejafor and Tope Alabi blend traditional Itsekiri rhythms and melodic patterns with contemporary musical styles, including hip-hop, R&B, and gospel, to create soundscapes that resonate with younger generations and wider audiences. This fusion allows them to articulate concerns about youth aspirations, community well-being, environmental stewardship, and broader themes of social justice, ensuring that age-old cultural expressions speak meaningfully to today's world (Oritsejafor, 2021; Tope Alabi & Cultural Heritage, 2020).

Beyond these established figures, a range of Itsekiri and Itsekiri-influenced artists create works that combine indigenous language and musical traditions with modern production. For example, playlists on streaming platforms like SoundCloud feature songs such as "Olisuru," "Tsefere-Momakumareyemi," "Sammy Lata – Oye," "Oritse Oba," and other Itsekiri tracks that blend traditional rhythms with contemporary styles and reach both local and diaspora listeners online. These tracks illustrate how roots music can be preserved while engaging with current tastes and digital distribution channels.

In the hip-hop and rap sphere, artists such as Carterson release singles like *"Itsekiri,"* a trap/hip-hop song celebrating Itsekiri identity that has circulated digitally and garnered attention for its energetic portrayal of heritage through a modern urban sound.
Contemporary Itsekiri artists also release music on major platforms such as Apple Music, where tracks like "Urowoli" and "Omiwere" by Roli Thompson blend Afro-fusion, highlife-inspired beats, and lyrics rooted in Itsekiri language and experience, connecting traditional cultural elements with global musical trends.

Additionally, the rise of social media and streaming services has dramatically expanded the reach of this music. Where once Itsekiri songs might have been heard primarily at cultural festivals, community gatherings, or local radio, artists now upload music, videos, and live performances that are accessible worldwide. This broad dissemination enables audiences across continents to engage with Itsekiri cultural expressions, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, reinforcing cultural identity, and enhancing the global relevance of Itsekiri heritage in the digital age. Consequently, music serves not just as entertainment but as a living, evolving vehicle for cultural education, intercultural connection, and contemporary relevance (World Music Network, 2020).

Table 4. Modern Adaptations of Itsekiri Music

Artist	Genre Fusion	Socio-Moral Theme	Platform
Sola Oritsejafor	Gospel + Traditional	Youth empowerment	YouTube, Spotify
Tope Alabi	Yoruba + Itsekiri	Spiritual resilience	Radio, streaming
Ogono for Jesus	Gospel	Moral education	Church performance
Sammy Lata	Contemporary folk	Social justice	Festivals

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological research design, drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from Ethnomusicology, Anthropology of Music, and African cultural studies. The methodological framework is grounded in the theoretical propositions of Alan P. Merriam (1964), who conceptualises music as a cultural system encompassing sound, behaviour, and ideas, as well as John Blacking (1973), who emphasises music as humanly organised sound embedded within social life.

The research employs a descriptive and interpretive design, focusing on both traditional and contemporary Itsekiri musical practices. It integrates textual, contextual, and performance-based analyses to examine how music functions as a custodian of socio-political and moral order. The study combines historical inquiry with ethnographic sensitivity, allowing for a holistic understanding of musical meaning within its cultural environment.

Data for this study were obtained through multiple sources to ensure triangulation and validity: Authentic Itsekiri song lyrics, including *Ene Dokpe* and *Wari Ejo*, were purposively selected for analysis, Audio-visual recordings of performances from festivals, religious gatherings, and contemporary media platforms were examined, Observational insights were drawn from documented performance practices within the Warri Kingdom and surrounding Itsekiri communities, Scholarly works on African music, Itsekiri culture, and socio-political functions of music were reviewed, Historical documents, ethnographic reports, and prior

musicological studies provided contextual grounding, a non-participant observational approach was adopted to examine performance settings such as coronations, funerals, festivals, and church services, and Attention was given to musical structure, instrumentation, performer–audience interaction, and symbolic meaning.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select representative musical examples that reflect both sacred and secular dimensions of Itsekiri music. Songs were chosen based on their thematic relevance to socio-political commentary, moral instruction, and cultural identity.

Analytical Framework

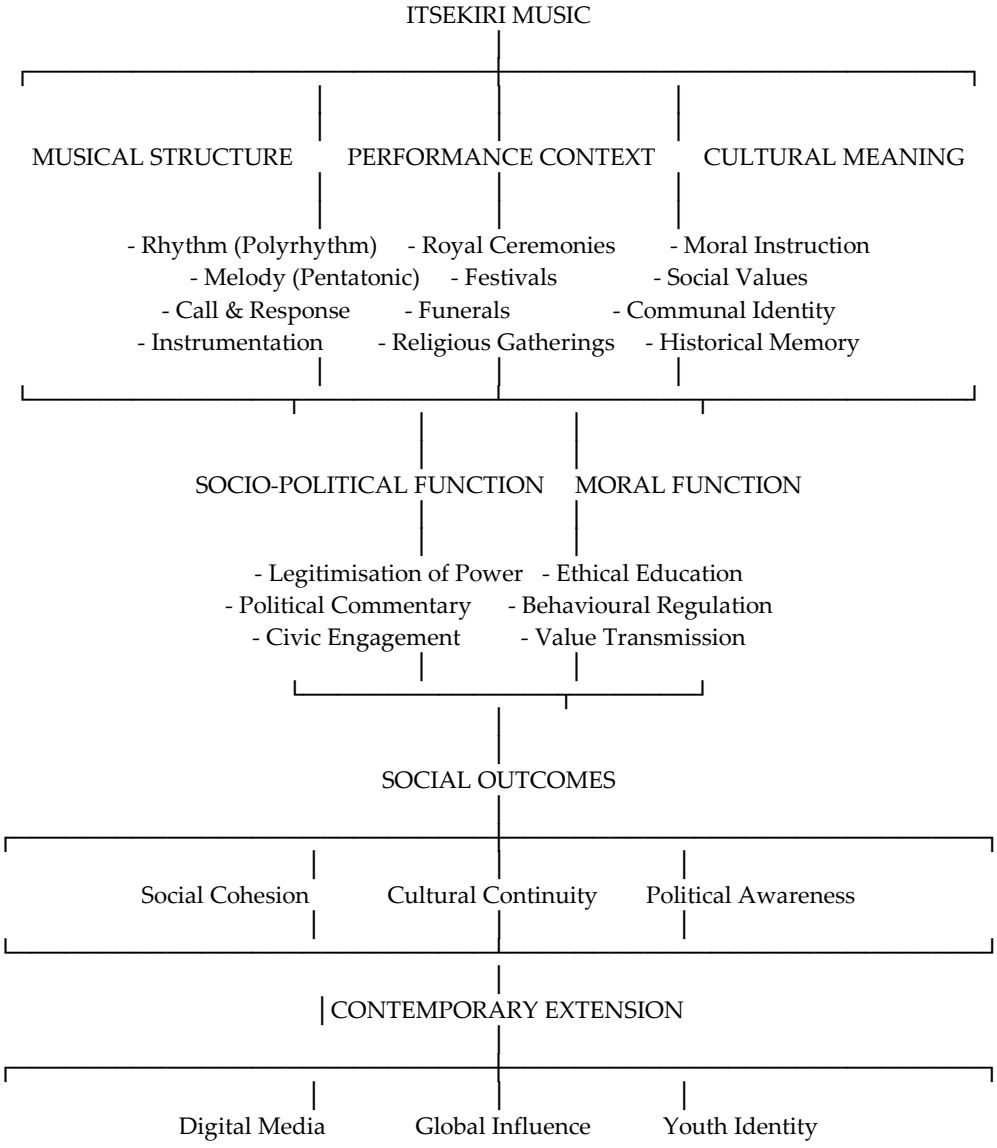
The study utilises a multi-layered analytical approach:

- **Textual Analysis:** Examination of song lyrics to identify themes such as morality, governance, spirituality, and communal values.
- **Musical Analysis:** Investigation of rhythmic structures, melodic patterns, instrumentation, and performance techniques.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Interpretation of music within its socio-cultural and political environment.
- **Functional Analysis:** Application of Merriam's tripartite model (concept, behaviour, sound) to understand music's societal roles.

Ethical Considerations

The research respects cultural integrity and intellectual ownership of Itsekiri musical traditions. Sources were appropriately acknowledged, and interpretations were made with cultural sensitivity to avoid misrepresentation.

Ethnomusicological Analysis



The ethnomusicological analysis of Itsekiri music reveals a complex interaction between musical structure, cultural meaning, and social function. Drawing on frameworks established by J. H. Kwabena Nketia and Gerhard Kubik, this section

examines how sound, performance, and context collectively sustain socio-political and moral order.

Music as a Socio-Political Discourse System

Itsekiri music operates as a communicative system through which political authority and civic responsibility are negotiated. In royal contexts, praise songs reinforce legitimacy and hierarchy, particularly within the Warri Kingdom. The use of talking drums (e.g., *Igbide*) enables encoded messages that symbolically affirm leadership and continuity.

Conversely, secular songs such as *Wari Ejo* function as instruments of political critique. Through metaphor, irony, and proverbial language, these songs articulate expectations of justice, accountability, and ethical governance. This duality aligns with the concept of music as both a legitimising and regulatory force within African societies.

Moral Encoding and Ethical Pedagogy

From an ethnomusicological perspective, Itsekiri music serves as a form of informal education, transmitting ethical values across generations. Songs performed during rites of passage embed moral codes within memorable melodic and rhythmic structures.

For example, the religious song *Ene Dokpe* demonstrates:

- **Repetition** as a mnemonic device reinforcing gratitude and spiritual awareness
- **Call-and-response structure** promoting communal participation and unity
- **Simple melodic contour** enabling accessibility across age groups

These features ensure that moral teachings are internalised through performance rather than formal instruction. This aligns with Oral Tradition as a central mechanism of African knowledge systems.

Musical Structure and Social Function

The structural elements of Itsekiri music are inseparable from their social purposes:

- **Polyrhythm:** Reflects communal interdependence, where multiple rhythmic layers symbolise collective participation.
- **Call-and-response:** Reinforces democratic interaction and inclusivity in performance.
- **Instrumentation:** Drums, gongs, and rattles function as both musical and communicative tools, often imitating speech patterns.

These features support Polyrhythm as not merely a musical technique but a representation of social organisation.

Performance Context and Meaning

Meaning in Itsekiri music is context-dependent. The same musical elements may convey different messages depending on the setting:

- **Royal ceremonies:** Emphasise hierarchy, authority, and continuity
- **Festivals:** Promote unity, identity, and collective memory
- **Funerals:** Encourage reflection, morality, and communal solidarity
- **Religious gatherings:** Reinforce spirituality and ethical conduct

This contextual variability reflects the ethnomusicological principle that music cannot be understood in isolation from its performance environment.

Music as Cultural Memory and Identity

Itsekiri songs function as repositories of history, preserving narratives of migration, conflict, leadership, and communal achievements. Through repetition and performance, these narratives are continually reinterpreted, ensuring cultural continuity.

The integration of traditional elements with contemporary genres such as Afrobeat and gospel illustrates what Cultural Hybridity describes as the blending of indigenous and global influences. This adaptability ensures that music remains relevant while maintaining its core socio-cultural functions.

Contemporary Ethnomusicological Dynamics

Modern Itsekiri music demonstrates an expansion of traditional roles into digital and global spaces. Through recording technologies and social media platforms, music now functions as:

- A tool for **youth identity formation**
- A medium for **political activism and advocacy**
- A channel for **diasporic cultural connection**

Despite these transformations, the foundational functions of moral instruction and socio-political commentary remain intact, illustrating continuity within change.

Synthesis

The ethnomusicological analysis demonstrates that Itsekiri music operates as an integrated system of sound, meaning, and social function. It simultaneously:

- Reinforces political structures
- Transmits moral values
- Preserves historical memory
- Facilitates communal participation

Thus, within the framework of Ethnomusicology, Itsekiri music exemplifies how musical practices serve as dynamic instruments of governance, education, and cultural continuity.

This study has examined Itsekiri music as a dynamic cultural institution that functions as a custodian of socio-political order and a transmitter of moral values within the Itsekiri society of the Niger Delta. Drawing on theoretical insights from Ethnomusicology, the research demonstrates that music in Itsekiri culture extends far beyond entertainment, serving as a structured medium for social regulation, ethical instruction, and political engagement.

Through a qualitative methodological approach involving textual, musical, and contextual analyses, the study explored both traditional and contemporary musical forms. The findings reveal that Itsekiri music encodes historical narratives, reinforces communal identity, and sustains cultural continuity through performance practices rooted in Oral Tradition. Songs such as *Ene Dokpe* and *Wari*

Ejo illustrate how religious and secular music function complementarily, one promoting spiritual consciousness and moral reflection, and the other enabling socio-political critique and civic participation.

The ethnomusicological analysis further highlights that structural elements such as call-and-response patterns, indigenous instrumentation, and Polyrhythm are not merely aesthetic features but are deeply embedded in social meaning. These elements foster participation, symbolise communal interdependence, and enhance the communicative power of music.

Importantly, the study establishes that Itsekiri music plays a dual role in governance and morality. On the one hand, it legitimises authority and reinforces hierarchical structures during royal and ceremonial events. On the other hand, it provides a subtle yet powerful platform for social commentary, allowing communities to critique leadership, advocate justice, and negotiate power relations.

In contemporary contexts, the research shows that Itsekiri music continues to evolve through the integration of global musical styles such as Afrobeat, gospel, and hip-hop. This process reflects Cultural Hybridity, ensuring that the music remains relevant to younger generations while retaining its traditional functions. Digital media and streaming platforms have further expanded its reach, transforming it into a global medium for cultural expression, identity formation, and socio-political discourse.

Overall, the study concludes that Itsekiri music remains a resilient and adaptive cultural system that bridges the past and present, functioning as an essential mechanism for moral education, socio-political organisation, and cultural preservation.

Conclusion

Itsekiri music is more than an artistic expression; it serves as a vital custodian of socio-political order and a conveyor of moral values, connecting historical traditions with contemporary life. Religious and secular songs express ethical norms, reinforce social and political hierarchies, and provide avenues for civic

engagement and community reflection. Through song lyrics, traditional instruments, and illustrative examples, it is clear that Itsekiri music continues to strengthen cultural identity, nurture moral consciousness, and promote social cohesion.

Contemporary developments demonstrate the adaptability of this heritage. Modern musicians integrate traditional rhythms with genres such as gospel, hip-hop, and R&B, producing works that resonate with younger generations and address social concerns, including youth identity, social justice, and environmental awareness. Social media and digital platforms have further expanded its reach, allowing Itsekiri music to remain relevant in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Preservation, careful documentation, and thoughtful adaptation are essential to sustain this musical heritage. By balancing tradition with innovation, Itsekiri music can continue to guide social behaviour, reinforce communal values, and inspire future generations. Its enduring vitality illustrates the power of music not only to entertain but also to preserve cultural memory, strengthen community bonds, and foster pride and continuity for generations to come.

Recommendations

Comprehensive Documentation and Preservation

There is a critical need for systematic documentation of Itsekiri musical traditions, including song texts, performance practices, and indigenous instruments. Scholars, cultural institutions, and government agencies should collaborate to develop archives and repositories that will safeguard this heritage. Such efforts will strengthen the preservation goals of Cultural Heritage Studies and ensure continuity across generations.

Integration into Formal and Informal Education

Itsekiri music should be incorporated into educational curricula at various levels, particularly within music and cultural studies. This will promote moral instruction, cultural awareness, and identity formation among young people. Additionally, community-based learning through festivals and apprenticeship systems should be encouraged, reinforcing the principles of Oral Tradition.

Promotion of Music for Socio-Political Engagement

Contemporary musicians and cultural practitioners should be supported in using music as a platform for civic engagement and social commentary. Encouraging themes such as good governance, environmental responsibility, and youth empowerment will sustain music's role as a medium for public discourse within the framework of Ethnomusicology.

Digital Dissemination and Sustainable Innovation

The use of digital technologies and global platforms should be expanded to promote Itsekiri music beyond local boundaries. At the same time, artists should maintain a balance between innovation and tradition, ensuring that core musical elements are preserved while engaging modern audiences. This aligns with the concept of Cultural Hybridity, enabling the music to remain both authentic and relevant.

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