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Nourishing The Spirit Manifest Tradition Of *Opu-Nembe* In Bayelsa State Nigeria For Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT
The exploration of tradition, particularly cultural experiences and traditional stories as well as the knowledge of a people's worldview, enables us to navigate the cultural meaning of music and dance in a given culture. Spirit Manifest is the rational foundations, emotional limits and mystical modes that describe African masking concepts and drama. In *Opu-Nembe* of Bayelsa State in South-South Nigeria, Spirit Manifest music and dance is a major activity that brings Bayelsans and their friends together from different parts of the world. According to local oral accounts, the ontology of the musical arts may have originated by human's discovery, attraction and enjoyment in a patterned sound of happenings in *Opu-Nembe* and its neighboring communities at the time. However, this important cultural practice is almost in a state of decadence. The younger generation regard Spirit Manifest as an ancient practice without any benefits. Also, modern trends and the insurgency by the Niger Delta militants had negatively affected the continuous existence of Spirit Manifest music and dance in *Opu-Nembe*. This study discusses the emergence of Spirit Manifest music and dance, in the *Opu- Nembe* National day celebration in December 2022, with the aim of nourishing them from their present state. I discuss pertinent ways in which the community under the guidance of *Opu-Nembe* custodians of culture and tradition can work together to reinstate these music and dance to greater heights. Such restorations will attract tourist and create an open market in and for the community thus boosting sustainable developments. The study adopted the observational and survey method, also known as "ex-post facto research design", where data were collected from Chiefs in *Opu-Nembe* and guardians of traditions/culture, through oral interviews and library research.
Keywords: Cultural Experiences, Spirit Manifest, Ontology, African, Dance and Tradition

INTRODUCTION

Recalling my early days as a young boy growing in Lagos Nigeria, I always anticipated our yearly family trip to *Opu-Nembe* in a wooden big covered outboard engine boat, that made several connecting stop overs at fishing settlements to either drop or carry other excited travellers and traders taking a leisure holiday journey to the ancient town, *Opu-Nembe*. This journey took several hours to get to our destination. People chose and preferred to travel by night so that they could arrive *Opu-Nembe* early in the morning. Then, there was no fear of sea pirates, kidnapers, militants, or even gun boat escorts. The

journey constitutes home-coming for all indigenes of *Opu-Nembe* within Nigeria and the diaspora to enjoy the rich culture, aquatic life and ambiance of the serene environment in the once peaceful Niger Delta region in Nigeria.

Wooden Covered Outboard Engine Boat (credit: Dr. E. J. Amaegbe)

When we arrived, one could sense an atmosphere of preparation for a great music and dance event about to happen on the streets of *Opu-Nembe* as children played makeshift drums with their counterparts imitating drum patterns and dance steps of different dance groups prepared for that year. You will also notice the arrival of people from the creeks with sea foods such as periwinkles, crabs, fish and fire wood. Today, there is a motor-able road to *Opu-Nembe* that makes travelling easier and faster but there is little or nothing that attract people within Nigeria and the diaspora back home. Most of the dance groups no longer have viable patronage. Many former members of such groups see their activities as idol worship because of their new belief system, some others had fled the town to the city for greener pastures due to incessant youth unrest and clashes by rival youth groups. Indigenes only go home frequently to pay last respects to their dead relatives and perform burial rites. Sadly, during these burial rites electronic music is used neglecting the old practice of drumming, singing and dancing that engage the youths positively due to the loss of interest for indigenous music and the crave to embrace modern life style. Consequently, most vibrant youths that are domiciled in *Opu-Nembe* engage in different negative vices.

They enjoy patronage from some selfish politicians who use them as political tugs to hold on to power at all cost to the detriment of developing the rich cultural heritage of *Opu-Nembe*. Thus neglecting age long practices that are capable of stimulating sustainable development as Ajayi, (2005) opines:

> Perhaps one of the reasons why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day to day life is that we have so little consciousness of a time perspective. We act and react as if there is only today; no yesterday, no enduring heroes and we respect no precedents. Not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of a future we are building for our children and children's children. We lack statement with any sense of history. Politics of the moment dominates our life,

> leaving no room for evaluating achievement or appreciating merit. We therefore, recognize no permanent values or yardstick of achievement to hold up as models for our youths (p. 3).

Other concerns have been raised regarding issues of leadership and the development of youths with potentials as Alagoa and Okorobia (2011) wrote:

> Most *Nembe* and indeed Niger Deltans, have come to develop an inferiority complex in their relationship with persons from the ethnic majors, particularly in the murky waters of Nigerian politics. Many *Nembe* politicians think they may never excel in their political career, except perhaps with the 'anointing' of some political godfathers from the 'North, 'East' or 'West'. This has led the unfortunate over-dependence and underdevelopment of much of the *Nembe* potentials (p. 4).

By these submissions, it is important to note that there is a leadership defect in terms of transferring knowledge on *Opu-Nembe* culture and traditions from one generation to another especially in the area of music and dance. This concern had been raised and argued by different music specialists concerning the extreme proliferation of Western culture and musical customs in Africa especially in schools (Agawu 1984:53, Nzewi, 1988:8, Nzewi, 1999:72, Okafor, 1992:8-9 and Herbst, 2005:6). Advocating for a standard in our knowledge transfer system, Masoga in Onyeji, (2019) sited that "it is wise to start with knowledge about the local area which students are familiar with, and then gradually move to the knowledge about regional, national and global environments" (p. 3). Idolor (2005) also submitted that "at the tertiary level, the music curriculum should be established on African music theory and practice, however, with an inclusion of music contents of other cultures of the world" (p. 87). Perhaps the fact that the origin of *Opu-Nembe* can be traced back to about a thousand years, would have contributed to the lacuna in the transition of tradition from one generation to the other as Alagoa (2018) opine:

> For the rest, the major factors for its development came from inside, in relations with its immediate neighbors in these early days going back to at least a thousand years according to the limited archaeological evidence and up to three thousand years by the palynological evidence. These long years of genesis must partly account for the loss of information concerning such remote times in the oral traditions (p. 60).

Nonetheless, following the norm of learning in Africa, the activities (Dance steps and Songs) of dance groups were copied and transmitted from one generation to another to sustain indigenous rich cultural heritage as Nzewi (2006) sited;

> Some villagers have been observing the performance from a discreet distance. They have made mental notes of the quality of these future leaders of their community. The spirit team is not aware that it has been observed or assessed. The performers march out of the arena, proud of themselves, and in high spirits. They chant on their way back to their base (p. 30).

If this is practiced in *Opu-Nembe*, it will inculcate first hand understanding of the culture, traditions and belief system to the youths. It is on this backdrop that this paper discuss the emergence of Spirit Manifest music and dance, in the *Opu- Nembe* National day celebration in December 2022, with a view to nourishing Spirit Manifest Music and Dance in *Opu-Nembe* and adopting their music and dance style for learning and performance as operatic works in theatre for sustainable development.

Spirit Manifest

Africans had been misled to use the term "masquerade" to describe the manifestations of earthly and supernatural beings designed by inspiration. Merriam Webster dictionary define masquerade as "a way of appearing or behaving that is not true or real". This definition is an indictment to the culture and traditions of Africans especially the people of *Opu-Nembe*. During data collection of this study, all the chiefs and members of the dance groups I interviewed kept using the term "masquerade" but were describing deep supernatural occurrence. Each time I correct them, they use the indigenous name "*Owu*" (meaning spirit) Nzewi, (2007) wrote:

> The term "masquerade", defines for the modern European-American cultural imagination and intention, everything from "false show" to "appearing in disguises" Thus such a masked figure represents a human actor using at least a facial disguise to portray an anthropomorphic/zoomorphic character in a show. But in some other non-western cultural intentions most of what are presently classified as "masquerade" as per the above implication, are not rationalised as false shows or mere disguises. They are, to all intents, conceptualizations and objectives, practised as tangible manifestations of extra-terrestrial and supernatural beings – real and practical SPIRIT MANIFESTATIONS (p. 121).

There are mysterious stories surrounding the origin of Spirit Manifest in different communities in Niger Delta Nigeria. Most times, these stories are regarded as myths by other members of the community. One of such stories as narrated by Chief *Iworiso* from *Opu-Nembe,* talks about a fisherman whose net caught what he thought was a very big fish that turned out to be a huge golden image. He pulled the net into his boat to take a closer look at the thing he caught but unfortunately, he was hypnotized and led to the bush where he was held captive for several days. The entire community searched for him to no avail and concluded that he had drowned or was eaten up by something. Seven days later he appeared from the bush with this strange golden image which turned out to be the symbol of the spirit he had an encounter with. He narrated his involvement with the spirit, where he learnt the music and dance steps of *Agiri* in *Okpoma*. Eventually he gathered some people and taught them the music and dance steps of the spirit "*Agiri*". Riverine communities share similar tales as regards the origin of "Spirit Manifest" dance groups. It is important to note that "*Agiri*" is the *Ama-temeso* of the Bille people in Rivers State. According to an oral account by Dr. A. G. Alfred, *Agiri* is a mermaid spirit from the water in human form who was resting at the river bank but was mistaken to be unconscious and brought into *Bille* because of its glowing features. The spirit was pleased with the love and care and eventually became their *Ama-temeso* (meaning the diety of the land). This same water spirit is the one that manifested at Okpoma in Brass local Government area of Bayelsa State. This assertion was made because they possess similar features.

Prince Chief Orafre Amaegbe-Iworiso, Chief A. J. Azaka and Chief C. Temple-Oko (Photo credit: Dr. E. J. Amaegbe)

The activities of these Spirit beings in their natural habitat characterize the concept of the dance group as Nzewi (2007) opine;

> An African indigenous musician/dramatist is an ombudsperson, and functions as the collective conscience of his/her human community. What he/she sings or performs in musical arts theatre is by divine inspiration, which often generates a transformation of the normal personality of the artiste. As an ombudsperson then, the artistes of the performance arts, by indigenous political-religious convention, are immune from censorship or persecution (p. 141).

Opu-Nembe National Day

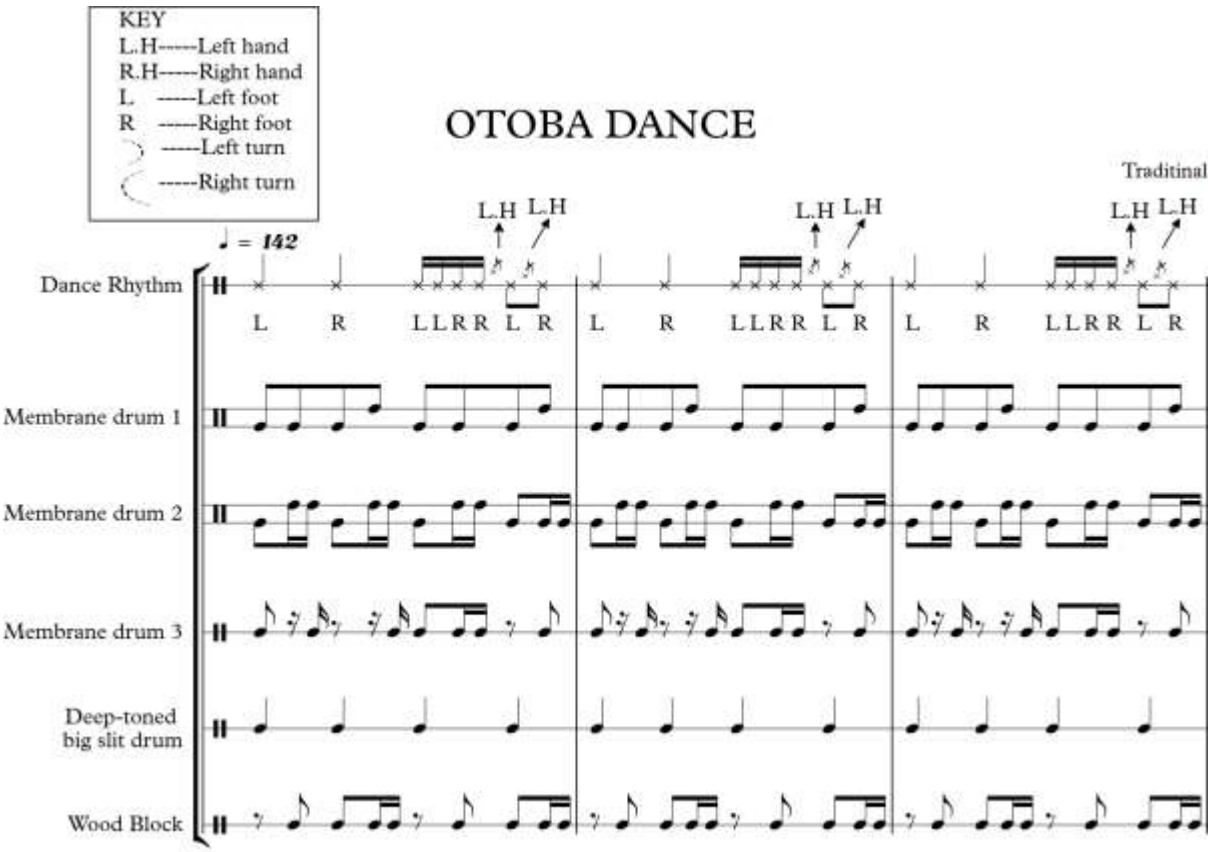
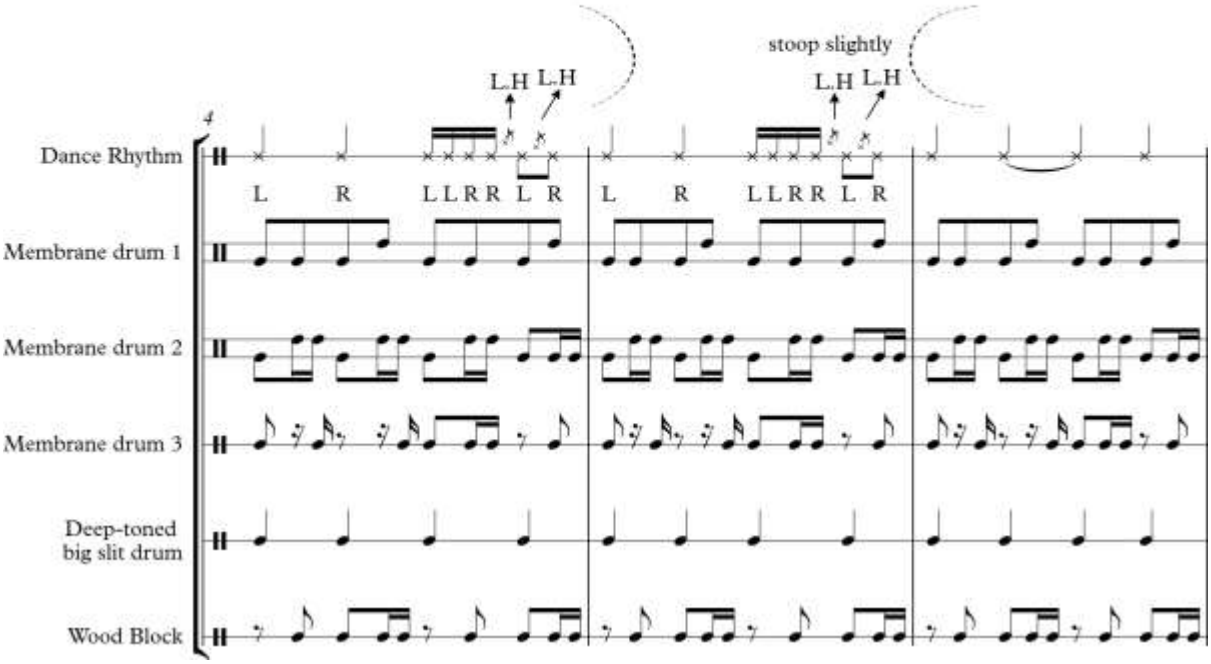
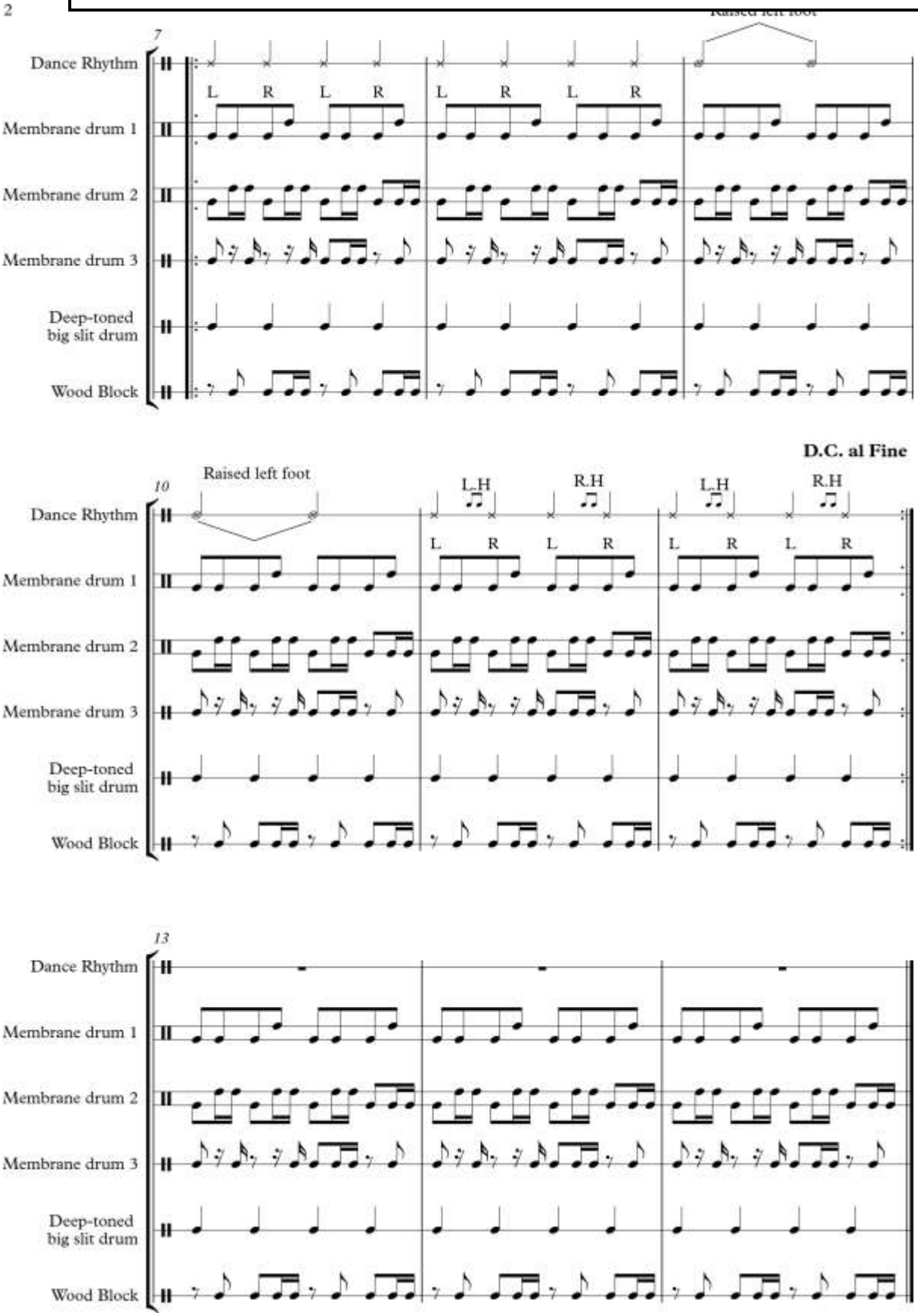
The *Amayanabo* and *Opu-Nembe* council of chiefs set up a committee to organize a programme to show case the rich cultural values and inculcate ancient traditional life style to bring about the transmission of tradition to the younger generation. On December 26, to January 1, 2022 the first *Opu-Nembe* National day was celebrated. It was the first of its kind celebration of the rich cultural values of the ancient town *Opu-Nembe*. The activities for the weeklong event include three Spirit Manifest dance performance, women dance group performance, reinventing of long standing practices also known as *Ama-mie-mie ye*, *Nembe* traditional unveiling of cooking recipes, lecture on the historical might/values and a thanks service.

The three spirit manifest dance (*Owu)* that performed during the *Opu-Nembe* national day, according to an oral account, are domiciled in the *Opu-Sekiapu* (Dancing people) group whose origin is traced to Kalabari kingdom where it is known as *Ekine sekiapu* then spread to *Kula* kingdom where it finally entered *Opu-Nembe* and the *Obiri-Pele Ogbo*, a group of *Ijaw* spirit manifest in *Opu-Nembe*. Yekorogha (2022) asserts;

> The historical origin of *Nembe Sekiapu* society is similar to that of *Kalabari*. Legends says it can be traced to a man known as *Kperighada*, who was fishing in the Cameroons and he wasn't seen for seven days. His people searched all around for him, but couldn't find him. When he reappeared days later, he told the people who had been looking for him that he was abducted by water spirits who taught him to dance (p. 3).

Otoba was the first Spirit manifest to perform by the *Opu-Sekiapu* during the national day celebration. It is a spiritual manifestation (Dance) of the Hippopotamus life style on the high sea, originated from Bonny Island in Rivers State. The dance exhibits the strength of *Otoba* in its natural habitat. A human is dressed with well-designed wrappers also known as *ingiri* on a plan white long sleeves top and fitted trouser. The head of *Otoba* is caved and dressed as specified by the curator. At the end of the dressing, it will look half human, half *Otoba* see photo below:

Pictures of *Otoba* Display courtesy Dr. E. J. Amaegbe


KEY
L.H-----Left hand
R.H-----Right hand
L -----Left foot
R -----Right foot
-----Left turn
-----Right turn
OTOBA DANCE
Traditinal
♩ = 142
Dance Rhythm
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Membrane drum 3
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block
L.H L.H
L R L L R R L R

stoop slightly
4
Dance Rhythm
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Membrane drum 3
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block
L.H L.H
L R L L R R L R

7
Dance Rhythm
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Membrane drum 3
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block
L R L R L R L R
Raised left foot
D.C. al Fine
10
Raised left foot
L.H R.H L.H R.H
L R L R L R L R
13

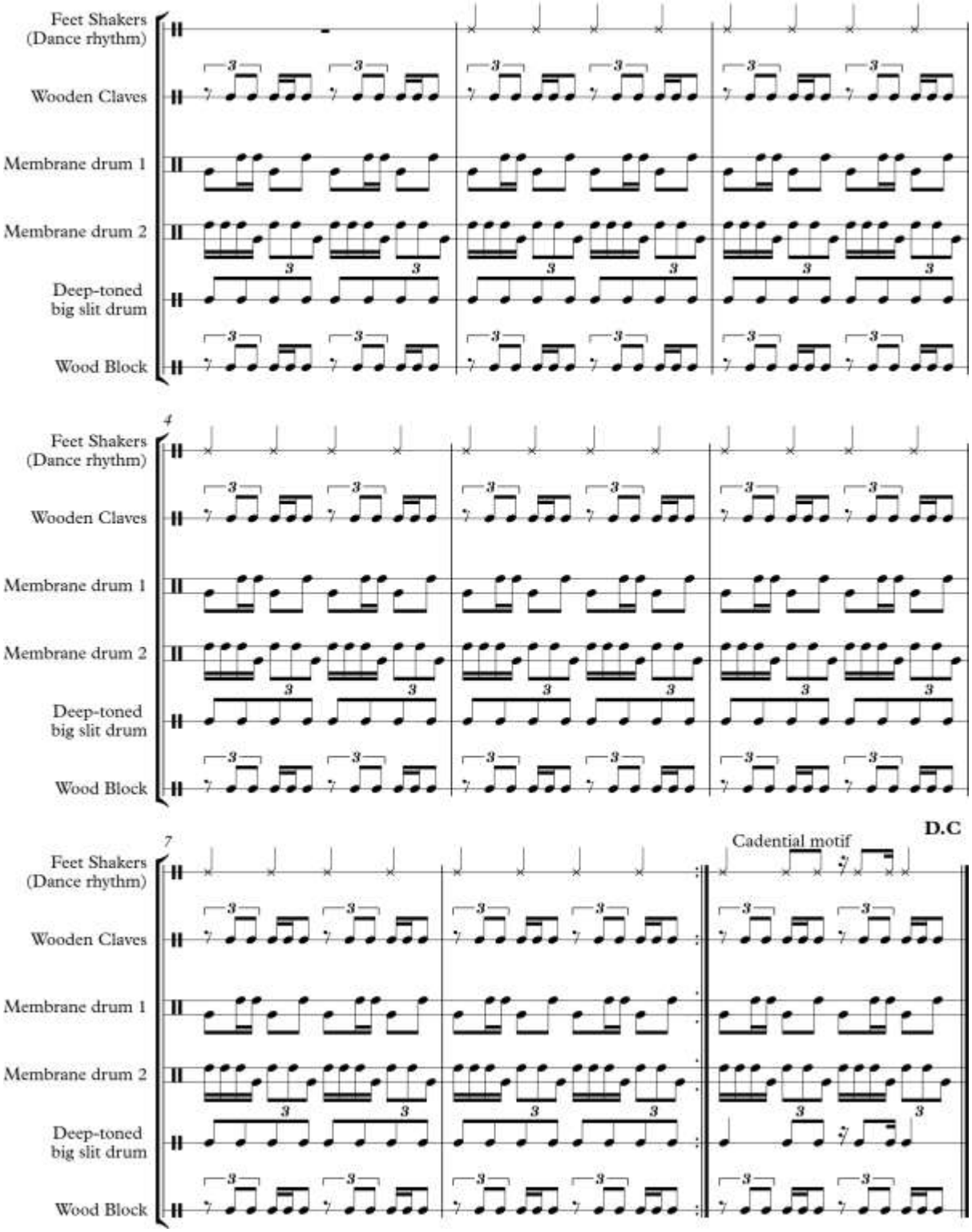
Analysis

The *Otoba* spirit-manifest is originally from the high sea of Bonny Island adopted by the Opu-Nembe sekiapu group. It is an energetic water spirit that prides himself in agility and strength. The spirit is harmless and relates with humans as seen in its manifestation with inhabitants of Opu-Nembe sekiapu. His presence thus brings people who admires him together. It is then clear that the Otoba spirit manifest brings a spirit of cohesion and harmony, uniting both the old and the young.

The movement of their legs as they danced (as seen in the score above signifies the grand march of the hippopotamus in the great waters.) To the inhabitants of the land, the hippopotamus is a great 'monarch' of the waters that appears invincible and fearless. It makes its march in the water in majesty and pomp. It has been an object of awe and wonder to the people of Opu-Nembe, hence, the Otoba spirit idolizes it in the Otoba spirit manifest display.

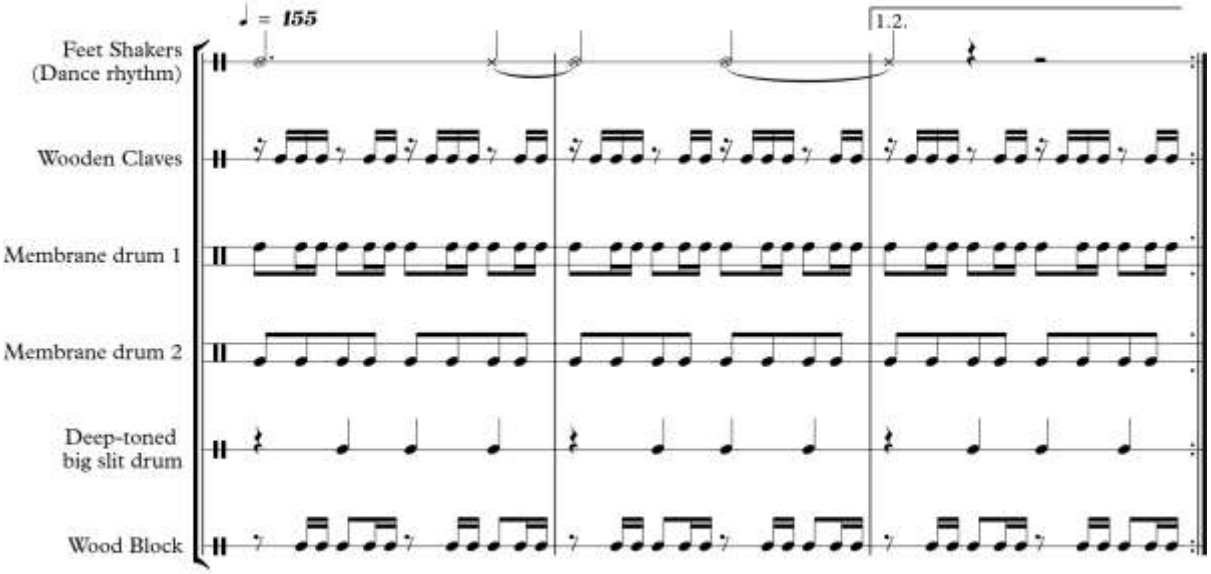
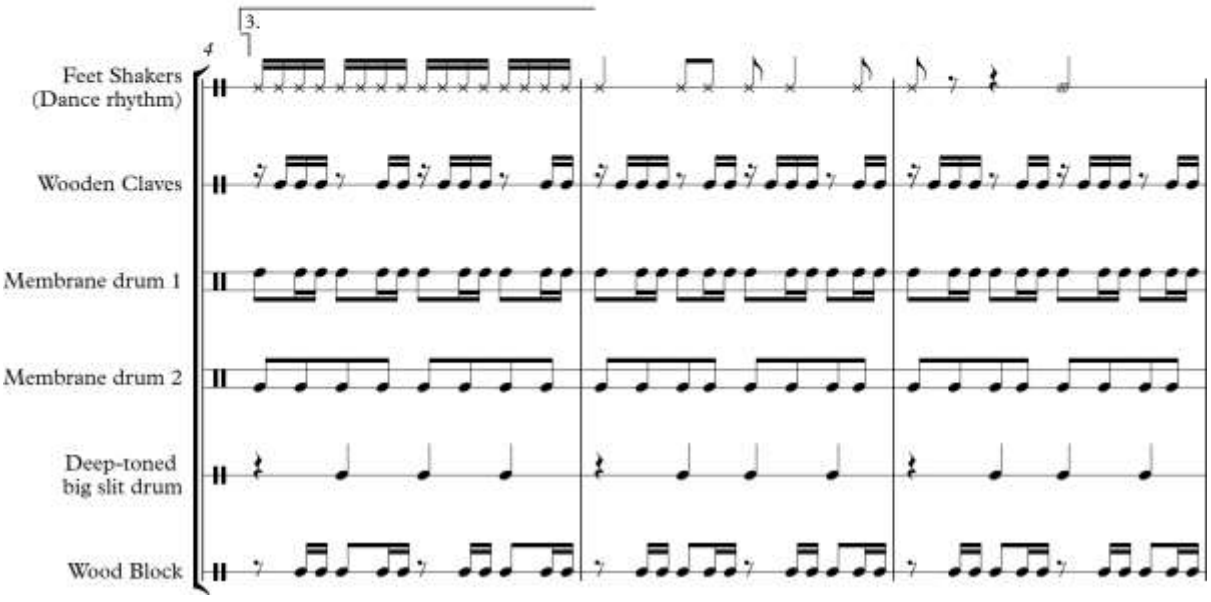
The movement of the dance involves the legs, hands and waist basically. For some parts (the areas of faster rhythm), the dancers are expressing admiration and joy while the area where the dance-rhythm is slower, they are simulating the movement of the animal while in water. A characteristic feature of its motion is in its ability to make turns. This is also simulated in the eft and right turns shown in the score. Viewing the nature of the dance rhythm amidst the general instrumental accompaniment, one could see how unperturbed the hippopotamus could be amidst the various wave currents of the great rivers around Opu-Nembe.

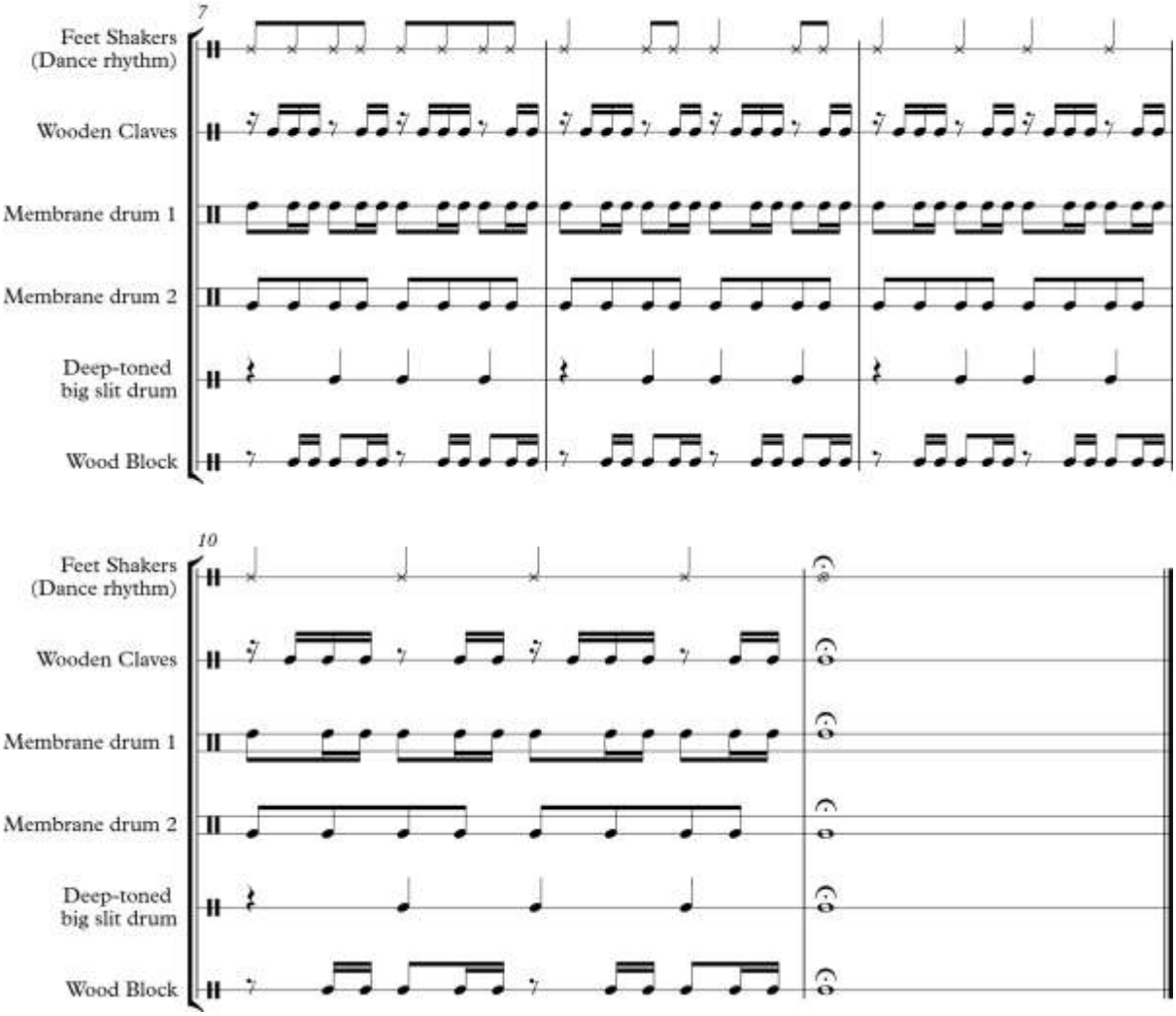
Pictures of *Alagba* Display courtesy Dr. E. J. Amaegbe

ALAGBA MASQUERADE SPIRIT MANIFEST ENTRANCE

Analysis

The colourful *Alagba* spirit manifest is believed to be a soul cleansing spirit that eradicate all forms of evil speel from witches. The carriers of the spirit dance in synchrony with the basic pulse of the composite instrumental music. It displays elegance and celebration as though he was happy to be recognized after some years of cultural neglect. He gracefully dances rhythmically to the left and to the right. It appears that in a left and right motion, the left direction goes first. The dance concludes in a rhythmic cycle that is punctuated by a cadential motif (as indicated in the score at bar 9). This cadential figure marks the end of a dance cycle and a resumption of a new one. The figure is gestured two times before a new cycle is born. The deep-toned big slit drum plays the cadential motif together with the rhythm of dance for emphasis sake. In the cadential motif.

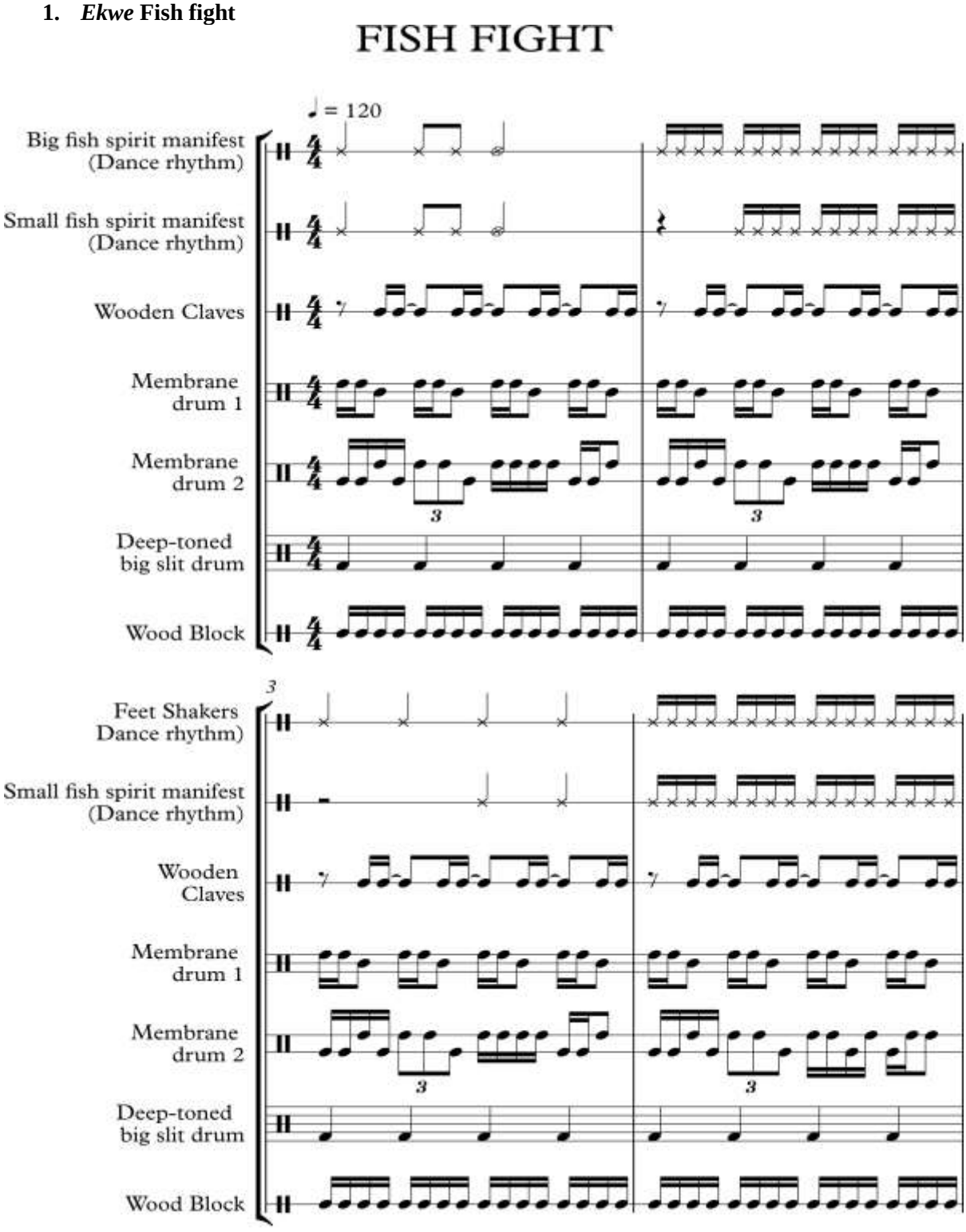
***Ekwe* the Fish Spirit manifest dance**

FISH DANCE

♩ = 155
1.2.
Feet Shakers (Dance rhythm)
Wooden Claves
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block

3.
4
Feet Shakers (Dance rhythm)
Wooden Claves
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block

2

Analysis

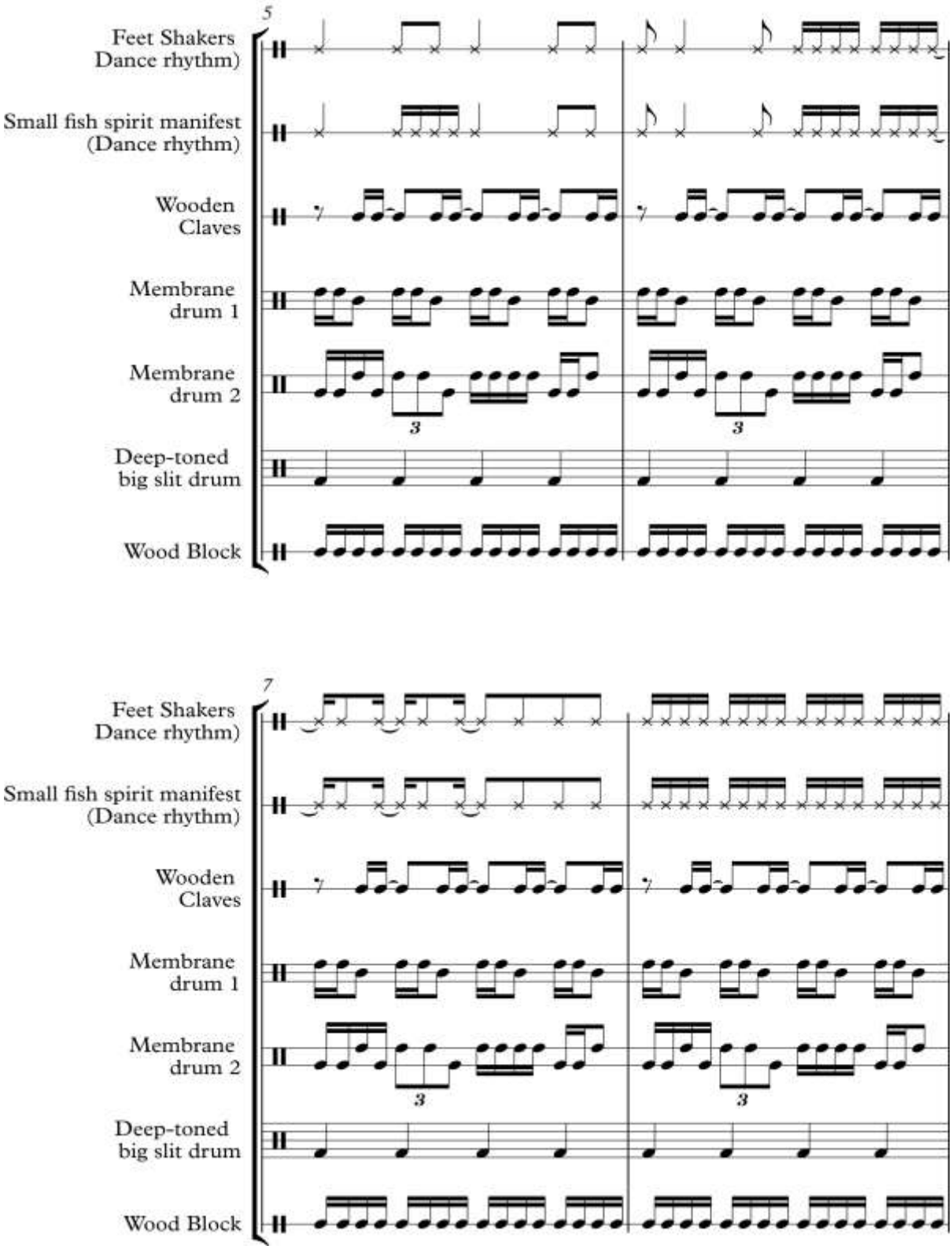
The fish spirit manifest *"Ekwe"* surrogating the fish spirit storms the stage with the introductory rhythm that infers the way a fish in an ecstatic mood leap out and inside the water. This occurs in just the same manner as a fish swims regardless of the calm and steady current of the water body. Thus the fish spirit manifest leaps outside the pulsating confines of the instrumental part as indicated by the tie in bar one and two. This rhythmic celebration is made even more conspicuous by the shaker-anklet idiophone attached to their feet. Thereafter, it reconciles with the entire rhythm again long enough before another rhythmic celebration.

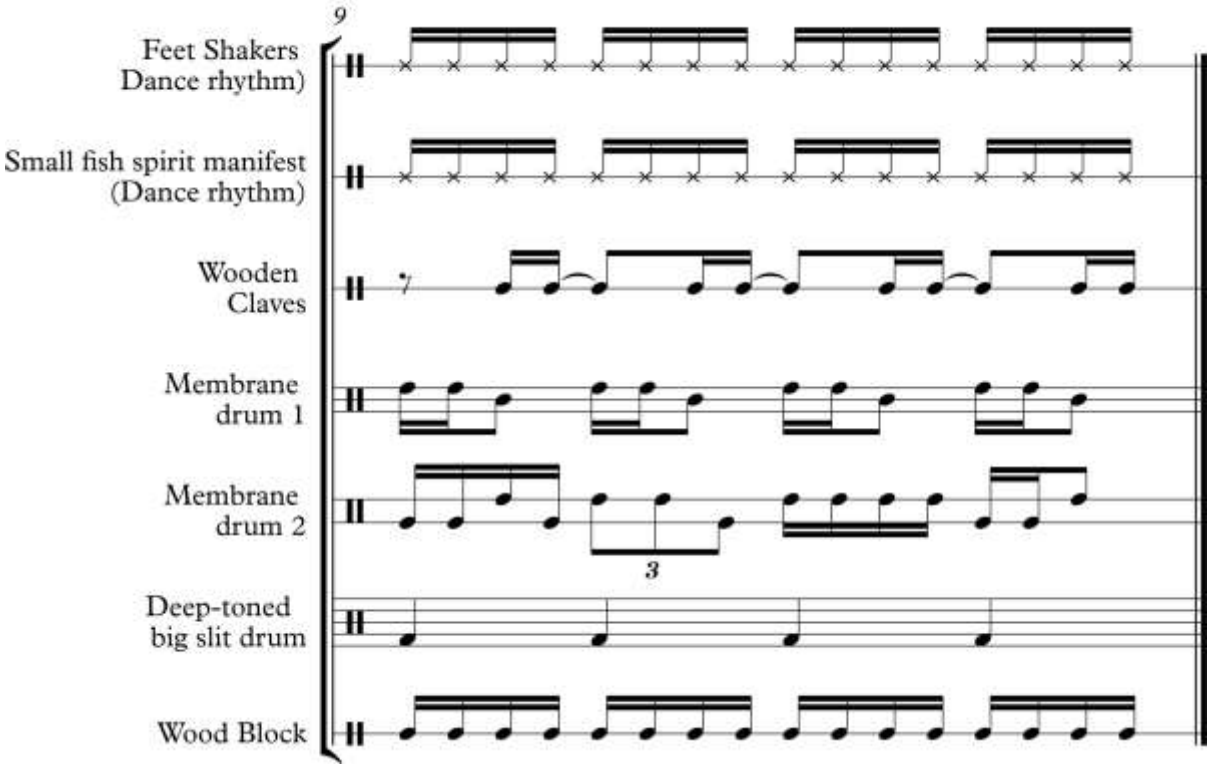
1. *Ekwe* Fish fight



Copyright ©

2


5
Feet Shakers Dance rhythm)
Small fish spirit manifest (Dance rhythm)
Wooden Claves
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block
3
3
7
Feet Shakers Dance rhythm)
Small fish spirit manifest (Dance rhythm)
Wooden Claves
Membrane drum 1
Membrane drum 2
Deep-toned big slit drum
Wood Block
3
3



Analysis

The fish spirit manifests, a big one "*Ekwe*" and other small ones like the female *Ekwe, Ofo, Idege* and *Okoroba* engages in a combat. This simulates the dominance of bigger fish over the smaller ones. The increase in rhythmic frequency as shown in the use of shorter notes in the rhythm of the feet notated for the big and small fish spirit manifests shows a period when one is being chased by the other. While this serves as entertainment for the audience, it is an artistic reminder to them that as riverine people, two worlds constantly face them—that of land and that of water. Spiritually this simulates that the power of the big fish spirit of the river supersedes that of smaller fishes.

CONCLUSION

I discuss pertinent issues, scored and analyzed the music/dance movement in staff notation of three spirit manifest groups, in which the community under the guidance of *Opu-Nembe* custodians of culture and tradition can work together to preserve. This can be achieved by continuous performance as Nketia (2016) assert that "competence in Indigenous music could only be gained through the enculturation process of oral tradition, apprenticeship and participation in musical events in the traditional community". Such effort will nourish and revive "Spirit Manifest" dance. It will also attract tourist and create an open market for the inhabitants who will be busy planning to host their guest from every part of the world to enjoy the rich culture, aquatic life and ambiance of the serene environment in *Opu-Nembe* thus boosting sustainable developments.

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