

# Audience comprehension of messages in cultural troupe performances: Evidence from Benin City, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Cultural Troupe Performance (CTP) serves as a dynamic medium of cultural transmission, blending verbal and nonverbal expressions to engage audiences. In Benin City, cultural troupes (CTs) draw upon the community's rich cultural resources not only to entertain but also to communicate and propagate the people's heritage. This study examines the verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed through CTP in Benin City, analyzes how audiences interpret and comprehend these messages, and identifies the sociolinguistic, cultural, and contextual factors that shape message reception. The problem addressed in this study is the ongoing decline in people's knowledge of their language and culture. Using a qualitative methodological approach, data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), key respondents (KRs), and observations conducted during fieldwork. Data were analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach. Findings reveal that audience understanding of the messages communicated varies and is influenced by several factors. The significance of the study lies in drawing attention to the persistent threats of cultural erosion and language loss, thereby underscoring the need for sustained cultural and language education, as well as broader preservation initiatives. This paper contributes to the limited body of existing literature and expands access to knowledge in the field.

**Keywords:** *indigenous communication, cultural transmission, nonverbal communication, sociolinguistics, cultural preservation, performative communication, heritage studies*

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural troupe performance (CTP) in Benin City serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission and propagation. Cultural troupes (CTs) communicate through costumes, dance, music, chants, and proverbs using the Edo language, which is the most significant form of communication and serves as a defining characteristic and identity of the people. CTs in Benin City use verbal language in songs, chants, and rhetorical expressions to communicate, and comprehension of these messages depends on the audience's linguistic knowledge, while dance and costumes evoke audience responses to the cultural aesthetics of the community. Due to the overwhelming influence of Western culture, especially the widespread use of English and Pidgin in the community, audience communication through CTP is becoming less effective.

The audience's role is important in the context of message reception and interpretation, as audiences interpret and derive meaning from the messages conveyed in CTP; however, their perception of these messages is subject to numerous factors. The notion of audience comprehension of messages in CTP in Benin City is grounded in the concept of Audience Reception (AR) Theory, which posits that the audience plays a crucial role in giving meaning and relevance to messages transmitted by communicators or the media (Hall, 1993).

This study aims to examine audience comprehension of messages communicated through CTP in Benin City, Nigeria, with particular attention to the verbal and nonverbal communicative elements used in the performances and the factors influencing audience interpretation and understanding. Specifically, it aims to identify and examine the messages conveyed through songs, dance, costumes, drums, gongs, praise chants, and proverbs in CTP. It also analyses how audiences interpret and comprehend messages communicated by investigating the linguistic, sociocultural, and contextual factors influencing audience comprehension of messages in CTP.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Culture and Cultural Performance*

Culture refers to the collective patterns of living, thinking, and behaving that define a community of people within a specific geographical setting. It functions as a set of shared norms that guide and unify members of the community (Katrini, 2018). Culture encompasses

both tangible and intangible elements such as language, music, dance, costume, cuisine, rituals, architecture, etiquette, and behavioural patterns. Some of these elements can be integrated to produce various forms of activities known as cultural performances (CPs).

Culture and performance emanated from early humans' attempts to adapt to and represent their world (Turner & Schechner, 1988). Dissanayake (2015) posits that artistic behaviour, considered a universal human trait, is inherent in all individuals. This instinctive tendency accounts for the prevalence of multimodal cultural and artistic expressions that humans deploy to entertain themselves, communicate with supernatural forces, or convey messages to members of society. Artistic practices created and performed by people also serve as tools for educating the community (Maras et al., 2025; Kim, 2015; Paat et al., 2025).

Given the evolution of CTP from CP, the audience's continued significance in contemporary African traditional performance becomes crucial (Folajimi, 2016). This active audience participation aligns with the concept of "total theatre" (Samuel & Oluwagbemiga, 2021). Total theatre is a performance approach that integrates multiple forms of expression, such as dance, music, costume, and makeup, with the audience serving as an essential component of the theatrical experience (Anigala, 2006). The audience's position within the total theatre matrix is central to the objective of this study, as audiences serve both as receivers of messages and as channels for cultural transmission and social continuity. This comprehensive approach to theatre underscores the role of the audience as the ultimate recipient of communication within the context of CP and CTP.

## ***2.2. Cultural Troupes Performance***

The CTP is a form of traditional performance organized by members of a given community through the deployment of the community's cultural, historical, and performative resources to entertain and educate the people. These performative resources include dance, songs, musical instruments, and costumes, which are categorized as verbal and nonverbal resources. Songs serve as a key verbal mode of communication in CTP in Benin City, which uses Benin or Edo language to articulate and transmit messages. CTs draw on age-old songs that address significant issues within the community and also compose new ones. The ability of the audience to comprehend the messages conveyed in these songs depends on their knowledge of Edo culture and language.

In her pioneering study on CTP in Benin City, Abbe (2017) compares the community's core traditional troupes with modern ones and concludes that the traditional troupes are more resilient to change, while the modern ones often embrace change. *Ẹdọbayọkhaẹ* and the *Ẹdo Cultural Group (ECG) International* are among the oldest privately run CTs in the community and are less popular and patronized because of their limited adaptation to contemporary performance trends. Their continued reliance on conventional traditional costumes and hairstyles, persistent use of ancient songs, and performance of the original *Ugho* dance may not be socially appealing in the modern context. However, their communicative significance remains substantial, which aligns with the objective of this study. The dancers are predominantly elderly women whose movements are less dynamic and vibrant compared to those of dancers in modern CTs. On the other hand, Omoruan and Usadolo (2025) examine the practice from the perspective of its communicative elements and classify them as verbal and nonverbal elements. The verbal elements include songs, proverbs, and chants, while the nonverbal elements include dance, costume, drums, and gongs. These elements serve as channels through which messages are conveyed to audiences (Cazenave, 2004).

Scholars contend that CTs were instrumental in the struggle for independence and have continued to promote national unity and cohesion by consistently educating audiences (Adams, 2011). In Benin City, Nigeria, *Amazevbuomwan Tawiri*, a CT formed by *Ikpomwosa Osemwengie* (Iyekeoetin, n.d.), served as an important tool for promoting Benin culture and encouraging people to reject Western ideologies and ways of life. The troupe crafted songs that openly criticized colonial domination while simultaneously urging people to value and uphold their indigenous cultural practices rather than replace them with foreign traditions.

In the Horn of Africa, encompassing Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, CTs played a pivotal role in promoting cultural hegemony and resisting European imperialism (DeLancey, 2019). The *Waaberi (Sunrise)* troupe of Ethiopia, formerly known as the *National Folklore Troupe*, used music, drama, and poetry to promote nationalist culture and messages of resistance through the deployment of the community's traditional resources. The strategic use of CTs to disseminate messages of resistance in Ethiopia played a significant role in mobilizing the population against Italian imperial ambitions, contributing to Ethiopia's unique position as the only African country that successfully resisted long-term colonial occupation.

South Africa provides another example of CTs as agents of social change through their significant contribution to the anti-apartheid movement (Martin, 2013). The *Amandla Cultural*

Ensemble, formed by the African National Congress (ANC) in exile, embarked on international tours, performing revolutionary songs that heightened public awareness and mobilized support for Nelson Mandela's release from prison. Calls for Nelson Mandela's release became a widely expressed theme among CTs in the region, aligning with the focus of this study.

This study aligns with earlier scholarly approaches in terms of thematic focus; however, it distinguishes itself by addressing a critical gap in the literature. It offers a more detailed account of the factors that shape audience comprehension of messages conveyed in CTP. In doing so, it contributes fresh insights into the communicative challenges facing this medium and supports initiatives aimed at enhancing cultural awareness and transmission through CTP.

### ***2.3. Artistic Communication and Audience Reception***

Artistic communication (AC) is a method of conveying messages artistically to audiences, and CTP is an aspect of AC. AC conveys messages through songs, dance, language, and gestures (Brockett & Ball, 2011). Feshchenko (2023) views AC as a form of human communication peculiar to the arts discipline, encompassing prose, poetry, drama, songs, and digital expressions such as designs, photographs, and carvings transmitted through electronic signals. AC is therefore expressed through both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication to inform, entertain, and educate audiences.

Audience reception (AR) addresses both the foundational and complex processes through which audiences in a performance context interpret and react to communicated messages, ultimately shaping social cohesion, communal continuity, and collective growth (Ademolu, 2023). The comprehension of messages in CTP is influenced by how messages are disseminated, the condition of the environment, and audience members' knowledge of the language used. According to Balme (2008, p. 42), "*Apart from individual dispositions such as age, level of education and even attention spans, collective experiences determined by gender, class and ethnicity but also locale are also brought to bear on the way spectators make sense of the performance.*" When audiences lack an understanding of the language and cultural background, communication becomes constrained, reducing the performance to mere entertainment. Audiences in Benin City consist of both youths and adults who may or may not understand the language and culture of the people. This, together with environmental and sociological factors, influences audience comprehension of messages communicated in CTP.

#### ***2.4. Gaps in Existing Scholarship***

Research on CTP in Benin City remains relatively recent and limited, thereby creating a significant gap in the literature. Despite earlier studies comparing traditional and contemporary forms of CTP in the area, as well as research on the communicative elements within CTP, including the present study, a wide range of issues remains unexplored. Drawing from insights gained during fieldwork, the author identifies several additional areas that warrant further scholarly attention. These include frontliners in CTP in Benin City, contemporary traditional dances within CTP, CTPs in Benin City and the diaspora, the influence of the Internet on contemporary CTs, the significance of costumes and beads in CTP, and artistic freedom in contemporary CTP in Benin City, among others. This paper represents an effort to address and begin filling some of these gaps.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Research design refers to a systematic framework that outlines the structure of a research study (Tobi & Kampen, 2018). A qualitative research design applies appropriate methods to gather data relevant to the research questions, analyze the data, and generate insights for interpreting social phenomena such as CTP. According to Dannels (2018), research design can be described as the plan that organizes and connects all parts of a study to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, unbiased, and applicable to a wider population. A research design includes methods such as interviews, literature reviews, and observation.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is appropriate for exploring and interpreting social phenomena (Alase, 2017). As Korstjens and Moser (2018) suggest, a qualitative design encompasses various elements, including literature reviews, observations, video analysis, ethical considerations, clearly defined objectives and research questions, data gathering methods, and strategies for ensuring reliability and validity in data analysis. This research utilizes both primary and secondary data (Hox & Boeijs, 2005). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) conducted with focus groups (FGs) and university lecturers (ULs), as well as through

purposive sampling of respondents at CTP events, using a pre-prepared interview guide whose questions addressed the study's objectives.

The research questions explored the communicative worldview of CTP in Benin City, focusing on communicative elements, transmitted messages, and audience reception. The questions also examined the sociolinguistic and cultural contexts of the performances, as well as the personal factors that shape or hinder audience understanding of the messages conveyed. Secondary data were gathered through a review of relevant literature addressing global and African performance trends.

### ***3.2. Population of the Study***

The population of a study refers to individuals who possess relevant knowledge about a phenomenon and are selected to provide information on a research topic (Eldredge et al., 2014). The population for this study consists of relevant institutions and residents of Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. This includes CT practitioners, referred to as focus groups (FGs), who have actively engaged in the practice for at least twenty years. Only three CTs in the community met the criteria required for this study, such as malleability to change, a minimum of twenty years of practice, and social relevance or demand. Another category of respondents includes lecturers who traditionally teach dance courses at a university within the community and have published related scholarly works. The final group consists of audience members purposively selected at CTP events, representing different age groups and genders. All participants were chosen based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, which determined their eligibility to contribute meaningfully to the study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018).

### ***3.3. Sample Size and Recruitment***

The sample size for this study is categorized into different strata. The first category of participants included three different focus groups (FGs), with 12, 10, and 7 respondents, respectively. The second category comprised two university lecturers/researchers (ULs) considered appropriate for the study based on their knowledge and expertise. The final category consisted of 19 respondents (Rs) purposively selected from different CTP events. Table 1 presents the breakdown of the sample distribution.

**Table 1***Distribution of participants*

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Sample size</b>	<b>Description</b>
Focus group 1	12	Cultural troupe members
Focus group 2	10	Cultural troupe members
Focus group 3	7	Cultural troupe members
University respondents	2	University lecturers
Other respondents	19	Cultural dance audience
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	

The age distribution of FG1 comprised three participants between 30 and 35 years old, four participants between 39 and 51 years old, and five participants between 52 and 65 years old. The group included nine males and three females. FG2 comprised four participants between 26 and 35 years old, four participants between 38 and 50 years old, and two participants between 50 and 56 years old. The group included six males and four females. FG3 comprised seven participants, with four members between 32 and 38 years old and three members between 52 and 58 years old. The group included five males and two females. Among the lecturers, the male participant was seventy years old, while the female participant was fifty-two years old.

### ***3.4. Data Collection***

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with research participants using pre-prepared questions developed in accordance with the objectives of the study. The interview method was employed because this study adopts a qualitative research design, and such methods are well suited for generating rich, in-depth data through the use of open-ended questions. Another primary data collection method used was observation, which allowed the researcher to directly examine real-world behaviour and the context surrounding the study.

Data collection employed semi-structured interviews using an interview guide, which aligns with the approach outlined by Naz et al. (2022). The research was conducted interchangeably in English, Pidgin, and Edo. Interviews with audience members lasted between 10 and 15 minutes, while interviews with the FGs and lecturers lasted between 45 and

60 minutes, covering a comprehensive range of study-related issues. A mobile handset was used to record the interviews for playback purposes as suggested by Nordstrom (2015).

### ***3.5. Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed in this study to identify, code, categorize, and analyze the data collected (Terry et al., 2017). Data analysis was conducted inductively from an interpretivist perspective and categorized into themes and sub-themes (Perera, 2023). The inductive method ensured that the views of the research participants were adequately reflected and that the findings aligned with the objectives and research questions of the study.

Data analysis commenced with a review of the recorded interviews to ensure thorough familiarization with participant responses. During this review, notes were taken to identify key ideas and organize them into patterns directly relevant to the study's research questions and objectives, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. According to Ahmed et al. (2025), Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis framework provides a structured approach for qualitative data analysis.

*Generating initial codes.* This stage involved the systematic identification and generation of codes for segments of data (Joffe, 2011). The process was conducted manually using code markers (Elliott, 2018), such as capital letters (A, B, C, etc.), to group related codes into broader patterns of meaning. These code markers facilitated the identification and organization of codes into smaller, more manageable subsets.

*Creating themes.* The subsets of meaning identified during the coding stage were used to develop sub-themes and overarching themes (Robinson, 2022). For instance, the codes "songs," "praise chants," and "proverbs" were grouped under the sub-theme "verbal communication," while "dance," "costume," and "drums" were categorized under "nonverbal communication." These two sub-themes collectively formed the overarching theme of "communication elements in the performance."

### ***3.6. Ethical Consideration***

In this study, ethical considerations were important given the need to respect local traditions and safeguard personal narratives from being misconstrued or misrepresented. Ethical considerations play a vital role in safeguarding the well-being and upholding the dignity of participants throughout and beyond the research process (Khan, 2024). To ensure

confidentiality and anonymity, participants were represented using codes. The ethical procedures followed the guidelines stipulated by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), under ethical clearance number 175/23. Ethical requirements included obtaining informed consent from gatekeepers and participants, as well as ensuring confidentiality.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The study identified verbal and nonverbal elements as essential communication components in FGs 1, 2, and 3. Verbal elements include traditional songs, praise chants, and proverbs. However, FG2 and FG3 also incorporate gospel songs in other Nigerian languages, such as Urhobo, Ijaw, Igbo, and Yoruba, while FG1 adopts an entirely Edo musical orientation. Nonverbal elements, such as dance and costumes, are effectively represented across all the FGs.

The findings indicate that representations of Benin City's royalty constitute a central theme in the messages conveyed through songs, dance, and costumes. This prominence is rooted in the monarchy's foundational role in establishing and sustaining major traditional dances and costumes, as well as its position as the custodian of the kingdom's cultural heritage. Because the Benin or Edo-speaking people of Nigeria regard the monarchy as the nucleus of their collective identity, they commemorate significant royal events through songs and praise chants.

Findings further confirmed that CTP songs promote cultural values and, more recently, project social and family virtues. These songs, often infused with chants and proverbs in Edo, serve to educate the people. This aligns with broader findings that African artists use their art to address various societal issues, which correlates with the objectives of this study. Messages conveyed through CTP address a range of societal issues, including morality, ethics, values, politics, identity, tradition, culture, religion, and spirituality. However, contemporary social problems such as corruption, kidnapping, and prostitution are notably absent from the messages communicated, thereby raising questions about the contemporaneity and social relevance of these messages in modern society.

The findings also reveal that the commercial motives of CTs have encouraged innovation in the creation of new dances and costumes. Consequently, CTs perform both traditional and contemporary dances, including dances originating from other communities.

#### ***4.1. Verbal Messages in CTP***

Songs are the most expressive form of verbal communication in CTP in Benin City. They are used to convey a wide range of messages relating to royalty, heroism, colonialism, history, family relationships, religion, gratitude, morality, and praise, among others. The performances by FG1 observed during the study incorporated historical songs that highlighted socio-political issues, including one about Oba Ovonramwen N'Ogbaisi, who was deposed by the British in 1897 following the conquest of the Benin Kingdom. The excerpt reflects the mood and message of the song:

Edokpa ke ghi re

**Once upon a time**

Ivbi dogbo ke riędo

**Foreigners invaded Edo**

Wọn guọba sinmwin n'ogię

**They deposed king**

Wọn guọba sinmwin n'ogię

**They deposed the king**

No vbiovonramwen n'ọdịọn ke do mue gbe kalaba

**And the king's first son departed for Kalabar**

Ugben vbo so do ni, ọna siebo khia koko

**When he got there, he told the white people**

Eti do rinmwui wa, nu wa rie ekue ramwen me ni ya re vbo eędo

**I have come to ask for the release of the corpse of my father for burial in**

**Edo**

Praise chants are another form of verbal expression commonly used in CTP in Benin City. They consist of flowery words or phrases employed to extol the qualities and achievements of individuals. The king, chiefs, and other important personalities in the kingdom are often honoured through praise chants. Nwizu (2017) argues that praise chants express heartfelt admiration for a person or object, using vivid language and imagery to convey deep emotions.

Praise chants constitute an important cultural practice in traditional communities such as Benin City and are typically directed toward royalty, elders, and distinguished individuals.

These chants commonly celebrate extraordinary accomplishments, personal sacrifice, and acts of generosity. The messages conveyed through praise chants in CTP in Benin City align directly with the objectives of this study. An extract from a chant praising the former king, Oba Erediauwa, who ruled the kingdom from 1979 to 2016, is presented:

Itue diawa mwẹn' ogiẹdo

**I greet Erediawa the king of Benin City**

Uku akpololor

**Member of the great inheritance**

Ogie mwan'oyan umogun

**The owner of the great oracle**

Ogie nọ hiu tete, nọ ghughe sọmwan

**The king who sits on the throne yet sees into the distance**

**Ughatọ vba vba**

We greet king

**Ututọ vban zaka**

You will live in sprawling glory

Besides praise chants, another verbal form of communication used in CTP is proverbs. Proverbs are intelligently crafted expressions used to convey messages indirectly to people. They are sometimes incorporated into songs or delivered in speech form. Mieder (2008) argues that proverbs “speak louder than voice” and represent folk wisdom expressed through art, culture, folklore, history, literature, and mass media. Common proverbs used by CTs in Benin City include:

Ahianvben ghi mudia kham' ọvbehe gh' ugbe de

**A bird does not wait to tell the other that a stone is on its way**

Ọmọ nọma gi yẹ vbiẹ ghi-vbiẹ

**A child that prevents his mother from sleeping won't sleep**

Ọmọ nọ ri yeke' maren gho de re

**A child carried on its mother's back remains unaware of how long the journey truly is.**

#### ***4.2. Nonverbal Messages in CTP***

***Dance.*** CTs in Benin City transmit nonverbal messages through dance, costume, drums, and gongs. Dance is a physical activity through which humans express themselves and transmit information. It is used to express various moods, ranging from sadness to euphoria. Dance primarily employs time-configured gestures to convey messages from the soul (Rounds, 2016). Dance is an interactive activity in which performers and audiences jointly create meaning. It is therefore a structured language central to how messages are conveyed in CTP in Benin City, in line with the objective of this study.

Ugho is a traditional female dance of the Benin people, performed with its own distinctive music. The dance exemplifies how the wives of the Oba communicate their desires to him. The rhythm and tone of the music used in the dance inform the Oba of his wives' desire for his attention. Dance communicates stories, moods, emotions, and ideas in much the same way that prose and poetry do (Hanna, 2001), but as a nonverbal medium structured through movement, rhythm, costume, and facial expression. Dance operates as a narrative mode, using the body as its text and movement as its language to articulate culturally situated meanings. CTs in Benin City make use of Ugho and Esakpaide, traditional dances employed to communicate themes such as royalty, loyalty, opulence, peace, and conviviality. These CTs also perform contemporary dances, although such dances often reflect the stylistic qualities of Ugho and Esakpaide.

***Costume.*** Traditionally, Benin costumes leave the shoulders bare for both males and females. The costume primarily consists of a wrapper (the local term for a large piece of clothing material) tied around the waist by men and across the chest by women, although both men and women may also wear a traditional top known as buba. In addition, women wear beads on their wrists and necks, as well as beaded headgear. According to R4, "*Edo costume is not complete without beads,*" and dancers adorn themselves with large quantities of elaborate beads around their necks and wrists. Male costumes are similarly complemented with wrist and neck beads. Costume has, however, undergone significant evolutionary changes.

Although their origins can be traced to royalty, contemporary CTs have creatively transformed traditional attire into aesthetically appealing ensembles. From the simple white and coloured cotton fabrics of the 1950s and 1960s, costumes evolved in the 1970s to include vibrantly designed and decorated cotton materials, followed by luxurious velvet materials known as ugbegbe in the 1980s, and later damask and other expensive fabrics from the 1990s

onward. This evolution has been driven by commercial interests and the desire among troupes to outshine one another. FG1M7 observed that “*costume promotes Edo people’s identity.*” Highlighting the role of costume in traditional performance, Bakare (2006, p. 127) states: “*The colour of the dance is in the costume worn by the dancers. Each dance has its own specific costumes. These costumes add to the symbolic images of the dances. They adorn the dancer and add to the character of the dancer. They place the character within the milieu of the dance.*”

Costumes have experienced profound changes and improvements; however, their main characteristics, such as colour, the use of beads, and the fashionable female headgear known as *okuku*, have remained constant. According to Omoruan and Usadolo (2025, p. 169): “*Dancers wear distinctive headgear known as okuku but they are counterfeits of the original ones worn by the wives of the Oba. The okukus signify royalty. The use of the okuku by CTs performers aims to uphold the tradition of women covering their hair in the public.*”

#### Figure 1

*Female dances dressed in traditional costume*



**Source:** Taken by the researcher in 2024.

As shown in Figure 1, female dancers from the Edo State Council for Arts and Culture (EDSAC) are dressed in traditional costume. This aligns with FG2M2’s view that costumes used in CTPs draw inspiration from the traditions of ancient queens and princesses of the Benin

Kingdom. According to Shukla (2015), costumes reflect social and environmental aesthetics, as well as cultural identities.

***Drum and gong.*** Drums and gongs fall under the classification of percussion instruments, and they are used to facilitate communication within the troupe. Drums used in CTP in Benin City typically consist of three sets, which include *iyema*, *ovbiema* and *emugho*.

**Figure 2**

*Traditional drums in Benin City*



**Source:** Taken by the researcher in 2024.

Figure 2 shows a set of Benin City's traditional drums (*iyema*, *ovbiema*, and *emugho*). According to one of the drummers in FG2, “we use the *iyema* (big drum) to cue the dancers to change from one dance movement to another.” Noting the language equivalence of nonverbal elements such as drums within the framework of artistic communication (AC), Bokor (2014, pp. 165–194) states: “Drums are a primal symbol—a speech surrogate form qualified as drum language used for rhetorical purposes to influence social behaviour, to generate awareness, and to prompt responses for the realisation of personhood and the formation of group identity.”

Drums are used to generate awareness and prompt responses, thereby contributing to the realization of group identity. In many African performance traditions, drumming functions as a powerful communicative medium that calls individuals into social consciousness. The rhythms signal when to move and when to stop, thereby enabling holistic coherence. This sonic unity fosters a collective identity. In this way, drumming becomes more than mere musical

accompaniment; it serves as a mechanism through which CTs in Benin City fulfill their communicative and social responsibilities.

On the other hand, the gong is a conical metal instrument that produces a sharp, raspy, and loud sound. Bingyu and Choi (2021), recognizing the role of the gong in ancient Chinese music, note that it possesses a range of tones and serves as a key element in the five-tone scale of traditional Chinese music. To produce a clear tone, the player's hand must avoid contact with the body of the gong. In CTP, the gong is used to establish and sustain rhythm. A keen sense of timing is therefore crucial for the gong player to prevent distortion of the beat. Its communicative relevance lies primarily in its ability to attract attention.

### ***4.3. Audience Comprehension of Verbal Messages in CTP***

**Songs.** Comprehending the messages expressed in songs depends on audience members' proficiency in the language in which the songs are sung. The stylistic features of Edo songs, such as language use, irregular clause and phrase structures, onomatopoeia, rhythm, figurative expressions, and neologisms, are factors that can affect audience comprehension of the messages conveyed in a song.

Songs in Edo often explore themes that may be communicated through specific phrases, even when listeners do not fully understand the entire lyrics. Historical songs such as Ovonramwen n'Ogbaisi or Idia n'Iesigie frequently reference notable historical figures like Oba Ovonramwen and Queen Idia, whose names evoke memories of past valour and tragedy in the kingdom. Although a listener may not understand the specific details of a song, they may still grasp its central message through its theme, context, mood, or the performer's body language. According to Sandström (2010): "*Artistic performance relies on the idea that there is a deeper meaning conveyed through the communicative exchange, even if not every word or detail is explicitly understood. It creates an interpretive framework that allows audiences to understand the underlying messages, contrasting with literal interpretations.*" People interpret messages in diverse ways. A single message may generate multiple meanings among different individuals depending on prevailing circumstances such as emotional state, age, social context, and cultural background.

**Praise chants.** Praise chants are used to describe the qualities of the Oba, and common praise chants include Ugboriri, Osiame osioni, ekeṅekeṅe, and iyeke' ologbo ghi'ran vboto, among others. Praise chants are sometimes difficult to comprehend because of their extensive

use of idiomatic expressions and symbolism. This aligns with Kant's notion of the flaw in artistic communication (Kemal, 1986), whereby artistic messages may become obscured through artistic exuberance.

Despite potential semantic challenges, certain chants and praises remain widely recognizable within specific cultural contexts, particularly among individuals who not only understand the language but are also deeply immersed in the cultural traditions that shape their meanings. This familiarity enables audiences to connect with the performance on a deeper level. Owing to their vocal stylistic features and frequent use of abstruse expressions, some respondents acknowledged the role of praise chanting in CTP in Benin City but noted that its meaning was often difficult to comprehend.

#### ***4.4. Audience Comprehension of Nonverbal Messages***

To understand how audiences comprehend messages conveyed through nonverbal cues, the researcher examined the responses of selected participants. R14 noted that people who are familiar with dances in CTP in Benin City can decode the messages conveyed through them. Esakpaide is a popular male dance in the Benin Kingdom, often performed by chiefs to pay homage to the Oba. This dance is also the primary performance dance of male members of CTs during various engagements. Due to its frequent performance, audiences who are familiar with the dance are able to understand its context. This is corroborated by FG2M7, who stated that "*as the dance movements in Ugho and Esakpaide are simple, distinct, and often repeated, members of the audience who are conversant with them can interpret their meanings.*" Similarly, HR1 observed that "*dance has its own language, and those who understand the language will understand the meaning.*" HR1's view suggests that understanding the messages encoded in dance depends on individual knowledge and experience, which often vary (Bless & Forgas, 2013).

R6 observed that "*Edo dances are unique, and Ugho is a popular dance in the community.*" This view suggests that the meanings associated with popular community dances are more easily understood by audiences. For example, Isotoṅ is a dance performed by the Edo people during the burial ceremonies of elderly persons; thus, it is readily understood as a rite-of-passage dance. Furthermore, R12 stated that "*we bring in seductive gestures such as body movement, turns, quick pace, and smiles into Ugho to make the dance attractive to viewers.*" Hanna (2010) notes that the beauty of dancers can be attractive and captivating to the opposite

sex, while Gerger et al. (2014) assert that beauty, like art, can be appreciated aesthetically, emotionally, or contextually. Beauty and attraction are therefore hallmarks of dance in CTP in Benin City, and audiences derive meaning through aesthetic responses often emphasized by the costumes and body carriage of the dancers.

R3, who was an Esakpaide dancer, noted that “*the sagacious movement of Esakpaide showcases power and well-being.*” He further observed that “*the regular touching of the chest and bowing of the head during the dance are traditional ways of expressing respect and honour to the Oba.*” Nwabuoku (2007) highlights how Esakpaide dancers use the gesture of “touch” to adore the Oba, while Barasa and Agwuele (2021) note that many African communities recognize bowing the head before a superior as a mark of submission and respect. Audiences, therefore, as interested and knowledgeable observers, connect with the messages communicated in the dances through their interpretation of socially recognizable gestures.

## 5. Recommendation

The preservation of a people’s culture is imperative for safeguarding their identity and heritage from extinction. The cultures of many African communities, including Benin City, face ongoing threats from various factors such as foreign influence, demographic change, social transformation, and language shift. These factors contribute to cultural erosion and the potential loss of valuable traditions. Their effects can, however, be mitigated through the proper implementation of social policies and by addressing personal attitudes that contribute to cultural decline.

Given that songs in Benin City’s CTP convey essential information about the history and identity of the people and considering the declining use of the language among younger generations, measures should be taken to encourage the teaching of the language both at home and in schools. Such an approach would strengthen the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and enhance audiences’ ability to interpret chants and proverbs specific to their community.

Dance also plays a crucial role in cultural communication. However, many traditional dances have undergone transformation and, in the process, lost aspects of their original messages. When re-choreographing dances, it is vital to ensure that the core meanings are not obscured in the pursuit of spectacle or commercial gain. The use of symbols and gestures in

dance should therefore be carefully implemented to ensure that dances communicate effectively and appropriately.

The communicative power of costume in contemporary society is equally undeniable, given the significant creativity invested in costume design. This creative approach should be sustained and further developed to ensure that costumes continue to portray cultural meaning and relevance. Furthermore, in attempts to captivate audiences, performers sometimes resort to excessive showmanship and exuberant displays, producing overwhelming noise, thrills, and excitement that may obscure the intended messages. To mitigate this, performances should be carefully moderated and regulated. In some cases, musical equipment is not properly tuned, resulting in harsh and discordant sounds, as observed in one of the troupe performances. To address this issue, skilled technicians with expertise in sound management should be employed to set up and regulate the equipment to ensure the transmission of clear sound signals. This balanced approach would allow performances to remain both entertaining and culturally educative.

## **6. Conclusion**

The analysis of audience comprehension in CTP in Benin City reveals a complex relationship among language, embodiment, cultural knowledge, and performance context. While CTs communicate rich messages through songs, dance, drumming, and costumes, audience understanding is shaped by varying levels of linguistic proficiency, familiarity with cultural history, and engagement with the symbolic gestures embedded in the performances. Many respondents recognized key themes such as royalty, moral instruction, and communal identity, yet were unable to articulate the deeper narratives embedded in idioms and praise chants. This gap underscores the importance of cultural literacy, as individuals who are more deeply rooted in the traditions of the community demonstrated greater interpretive competence.

At the same time, the multimodal nature of performance, its rhythms, movements, and visual cues, ensures that meaning is still communicated even when verbal comprehension is limited. Audiences continue to derive meaning through emotional tone, social cues, and the communal significance conveyed through embodied expression. Drumming, dancing, and costumes function as powerful semiotic resources that reinforce group identity and enable audiences to interpret and connect with the performance.

The findings suggest that audience comprehension in CTP in Benin City is both enabled and constrained by linguistic, cultural, and environmental factors. Strengthening cultural education, promoting language preservation, and creating interpretive bridges for younger generations could enhance the transmission of meaning in these performances. Ultimately, CTs remain vital communicative institutions that sustain heritage and shape collective identity through expressive forms that continue to resonate across generations.

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