

Exploring the intersections of Efik music and traditional embroidery practices in Calabar

Elizabeth Bebuo Anthony, Ph.D

Department of Music Education
University of Education and Entrepreneurship
Akamkpa, Nigeria

Abstract

This study investigates the intersection between Efik music and traditional embroidery practices among artisans in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Drawing from both ethnographic fieldwork and interpretive procedures, the study explores the ways that rhythmic patterns, musical paraphernalia, practices, expressions, and artistic components inherent in Efik music influence visual and tactile expressions in embroidery. The enduring cultural logic that binds music and textile arts within Efik society, especially among selected artisans within the Calabar metropolis, is highlighted, and the continuation of these age-old traditions in contemporary creative spaces is examined. The findings show that Efik music not only serve aesthetic functions but also act as cultural codes and templates for visual design, thereby reinforcing identity, continuity, and innovation. The paper concludes by situating this relationship within the broader discourse of African indigenous knowledge systems and their relevance in modern artistic expressions. Recommendations were made towards the sustainability of the interwoven art forms involving Efik music and traditional embroidery practices among contemporary artisans within Efik communities.

Keywords: Intersections, Efik Musical Rhythms, Traditional Embroidery Practices.

Introduction

Efik culture, rooted in the southeastern coastal region of Nigeria, is known for its rich artistic heritage, expressed through music, textile design, masquerade, and dance. Among these, music and embroidery hold prominent places not just as aesthetic expressions, but also as carriers of history, and community values. While extensive research has been conducted on Efik music as an oral and performative tradition, little attention has been paid to how the structures, expressions, and components within this musical heritage intersect with textile traditions, especially stitching and embroidery.

The gap is sought to be bridged through an exploration of how Efik music is shown to influence, inspire, or correspond with the patterns, flow, and structure of traditional embroidery. The manner in which this intersection is retained, interpreted, or transformed in modern contexts where technology, urban aesthetics, and global influences contribute to the shaping of traditional crafts is also examined. By a focus on both auditory and visual dimensions of Efik artistry, a contribution is made to the growing scholarship on indigenous knowledge systems and their application across multiple sensory domains.

Theoretical frameworks: Embodied Cognition Theory

This study is grounded in the framework of Embodied Cognition, which posits that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with its environment (Gallagher, 2020; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Within the context of Efik embroidery, artisans do not simply process rhythm and replicate it visually; they embody the rhythm through physical motion, tactile response, and visual execution. The repetition of stitching in synchrony with musical rhythms and the adaptation of the musical expressions and codes exemplifies how perception, memory, and motor skills operate as a unified whole.

Gallagher (2020) emphasises that the body plays a crucial role in shaping thought, especially in artistic practices. The artisans' tendency to align needle movement with musical sounds is an enactment of cognitive engagement through bodily action. This theory also accommodates the cultural aspect of the practice: artisans' knowledge is stored not just intellectually but as embodied habits, making embroidery a performative act, akin to music-making itself. Thus, Embodied Cognition helps explain the seamless connection between Efik music and embroidery as parallel, embodied cultural practices.

Music as a cognitive and emotional guide in craftwork

Research has demonstrated that music enhances cognitive performance in manual tasks by improving focus, reducing fatigue, and fostering creativity (Gallagher, 2020). In embroidery, rhythmic musical cues help artisans sustain stitching accuracy and maintain even fabric tension. Johnson (2023) observes that cultural artisans who work with traditional music report increased emotional satisfaction and a deeper connection to their heritage. This emphasizes the role of music not only as a

technical aid but also as a therapeutic and identity affirming tool within creative practices.

Embroidery, stitching, and other textile arts are encompassed within needlework. A form of creative expression is represented by it, deeply rooted in cultural traditions. The social, spiritual, and economic dimensions of the communities in which it is practiced are reflected through the craft (Lee & Kumar, 2021). However, increasing threats are posed to the craft by the rise of mass production and by the inadequate evaluation of traditional handmade products. The importance of needlework in fostering cross-generational knowledge transfer and in promoting cultural identity is highlighted in recent research (Hawkes & Martinez, 2019).

Needlework



Fig.: 1&2: Thread-needle fixing technique

Getty images <https://www.gettyimages.com>needlethreading>, 2025.

Relationship between the embroidery and musical rhythms

Stitching patterns such as cross-stitch, chain stitch, or satin stitch, often follow repetitive motions, akin to rhythmic beats in music. For instance, a steady four-four (4/4) time signature in music can guide artisans in maintaining consistent stitch lengths and alignments (Smith & Alvarez, 2022).

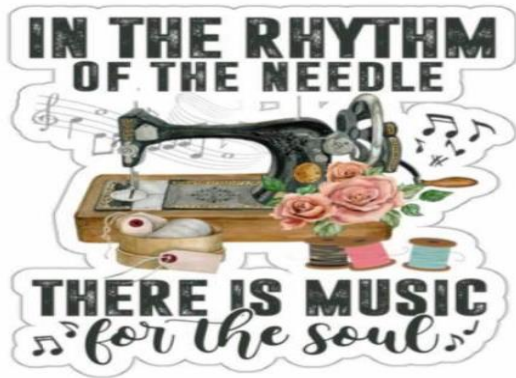


Fig. 3&4: Needle movement

Getty images <https://www.gettyimages.com>needlethreading>, 2025.

The tailoring concepts are explained subsequently to highlight the intersection of music and stitching related activities.

Threading

The act of threading a needle can reflect a preparatory phase, similar to a musical prelude. Slow and deliberate rhythm in background music can help artisans focus during this complex process, creating a calm and steady pace (Gallagher, 2020).

Fabric tension

Maintaining consistent fabric tension, such as velvet, mirrors the dynamic control in musical tempo. For example, a slow tempo may help artisans adjust and secure the fabric, while a faster rhythm might align with quicker stitching movements (Lee & Kumar, 2021).

Needle movements

The up-and-down motion of the needle resembles percussion beats. Syncing these movements with music rhythms, such as drumbeats or clapping, can enhance precision and reduce fatigue by creating a natural flow in the work (Johnson, 2023). Connected to this view are the Efik music traditions such as *ekombi* and *abang*, which are rich with polyrhythmic drumming and chants used in festivals, rituals, and

craft production. Eyo (2018) notes that drumming rhythms often serve as a timing guide for handcrafts like embroidery.

Knotting and finishing

Completing needlework with knots or decorative edges can align with the closing notes of a musical piece. A decrescendo in music, for example, mirrors a slowing pace as artisans finalise their designs (Hawkes & Martinez, 2019).

Embroidery design flow

The progression of a design reflects the flow of a musical composition. Just as music alternates between high energy crescendos and soft interludes, needlework alternates between detailed, intensive stitching and broader flowing designs. These parallels highlight how rhythm in music can enhance not only the physical act of needlework but also an artisan's emotional engagement and creative expression. In Efik kingdom, the traditional embroidery often uses *nsibidi* inspired motifs which symbolizes lineage, spirituality, and social status (Enem, 2019). Ekpenyong (2021) observes that artisans synchronise their stitches with live music during festivals, making each stitch both artistic and symbolic. Anthony (2025), and Iheagwam, et al (2021) report that artisans in Calabar and Obudu who trained with rhythmic music improved productivity by 40%, and retained cultural identity more effectively.

Efik musical rhythm and cultural identity

Music within the Efik tradition is not only an art form but also a central medium of cultural communication, identity construction, and social cohesion. Efik music, often performed during festivals, rites of passage, and communal gatherings, is characterized by polyrhythmic drumming, timeline call-and-response singing, and melodic patterns that reflect the community's oral history. Traditional genres like *ekombi* and *abang* are more than performance arts, they embody rhythmic patterns that mirror the communal lifestyle of the Efik people. These rhythms also provide a framework for coordinating manual tasks, such as cooking, fishing, and needlework, transforming them into culturally immersive activities. Thus, Efik musical rhythm functions as a mnemonic device, preserving cultural memory while guiding artisans through complex manual tasks like embroidery.



Figure 5, 6 &7: Ekomo (drum).Nkong (twin gong).Nsak (rattles).
Source: <https://www.picasaphotoviewer.com>, (2025).

Efik Traditional Embroidery as Cultural Expression



Fig. 8&9:Efik Embroidery work
Esu Eko phone camera (2025) and Pinteret.com online retrieved (2025)

Efik embroidery (*nsibidi*), influences stitching and appliqué techniques; it holds profound cultural significance, often serving as a visual narrative of Efik cosmology, status, and identity. Traditionally, embroidery in Efik society was not merely decorative but carried symbolic meanings tied to lineage, spirituality, and social hierarchy. The costumes worn during *ekombi* dance performances, for instance, are embellished with elaborate stitched motifs that visually complement the rhythm and storytelling of the accompanying music. These embroidery practices also reflect gendered knowledge systems, as women historically led the craft of needlework while men contributed through musical accompaniment. Hawkes and Martinez (2019) emphasize that such gendered collaborations in traditional crafts strengthen cultural continuity and communal bonds.



Fig.10&11: Embroidery designs for occasions
Esu Eko phone camera (2025)

Stitching patterns and modern adaptations

Stitching patterns in Efik embroidery traditionally follow rhythmic sequences that echo musical beats, with each stitch functioning like a note in a musical composition. Patterns such as the chain stitch, satin stitch, and cross-stitch often align with the tempo and phrasing of traditional songs, enabling artisans to maintain flow and precision. In the modern era, these patterns have evolved to accommodate contemporary fashion trends while retaining their cultural essence. Designers incorporate traditional motifs into haute couture, festival attire, and export crafts, blending heritage with global aesthetics.



Fig. 12, 13 &14: Samples of Efik embroidery crafts
Esu Eko phone camera (2025)

Efik embroidery and modern adaptations

Efik embroidery	Modern adaptations
Traditional artisans in Efik often incorporate the aesthetics of cultural motifs in their embroidery and needlework. The rhythm of the needle mirrors traditional dance patterns and songs such as those used in <i>ekombi</i> or <i>abang</i> , where each stitch flows with musical precision and communal purpose such as drumming, chants and artisan humming	The modern artisans in Efik often incorporate the aesthetics of cultural motifs in their embroidery and needlework when the rhythm of the needle aligns with the machine pace or digital beats in fashion studios
Stitching technique flows with cultural bonding by hand guided and rhythmic paced stitches (chain, satin, cross)	Stitching technique flows with machine embroidery, often detached from musical flows
The cultural symbolism is encoded using <i>nsibidi</i> symbols and storytelling motifs. The rhythm of the needle becomes a symbol of continuity in Efik identity, especially on how embroidery has evolved alongside music and dance within festivals and rites of passage	The cultural symbolism simplified motifs for mass appeal where music accompanies the weaving of identity and memory. The rhythm of the needle is part of storytelling, representing transitions, protection, and collective identity
Setting of communal workshops and apprentice learning for communal use and the aim is majorly for cultural preservation, ritual use and heritage garments.	Setting of individual studio training and for commercial production. Apart from its sustenance, fashion is retail with new innovations, carnival costumes are produced, and crafts are exported for commercialization.



Fig. 15&16: Traditional and modern embroidery
Praise Gladson & Jedy Agba's photos. Instagram retrieved, 2025

Discussion of findings

The findings from this study affirm that Efik music and traditional embroidery practices in Calabar are not isolated creative expressions but are deeply interconnected, forming a dynamic relationship rooted in cultural performance and identity. One of the most striking revelations is how rhythmic structures inherent in Efik musical traditions, particularly in genres like *ekombi* and *abang* serve as temporal frameworks that guide the stitching sequences and pacing in embroidery. This corroborates earlier studies such as Smith and Alvarez (2022), who notes that rhythm in music enhances artisan precision and efficiency, particularly in repetitive tasks like needlework.

In practical terms, artisans interviewed during the fieldwork acknowledged the use of background drumming, humming, and chants to sustain focus and inspire design choices. The up-and-down motion of the needle, for instance, mirrors percussive beats, a finding also supported by Johnson (2023), who demonstrated the cognitive impact of rhythmic music on task endurance and flow. Furthermore, this rhythmic alignment was not limited to the act of stitching alone but extended to broader design choices, as artisans described matching embroidery patterns with musical phrasing, a creative decision rooted in cultural memory.

Another important observation from the study is the symbolic correlation between musical motifs and embroidery designs. Motifs in Efik embroidery often echo the tonalities and emotional contours of songs, especially in ceremonial clothing. This connection is also captured by Ekpenyong (2021), who asserts that visual motifs serve as narrative devices when paired with performance music. By synchronising the visual (embroidery) with the auditory (music), artisans achieve a layered expression of identity, spirituality, and social belonging.

Further, the findings highlight how traditional stitching practices (once transmitted solely through communal apprenticeships), are adapting to modern contexts. Yet, even when machine embroidery is employed, some artisans consciously align their work tempo with rhythmic audio playback, thus preserving an embodied memory of

tradition. As Lee and Kumar (2021) explain, modern artisans may alter methods, but their work often retains the cultural signatures of earlier generations. This resilience underscores the adaptability of indigenous knowledge systems.

In conclusion, the data suggest that Efik music functions not just as background accompaniment, but as an active and inspiring force in embroidery craftsmanship. It supports cognitive engagement, sustains cultural continuity, and provides aesthetic logic. This inter-sensory relationship validates the argument that music and embroidery are co-constructors of Efik identity and heritage.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Efik music and embroidery are intertwined modes of cultural articulation. The influence of music has been noted in a number of ways. These include: music sound serves as creative inspirations and mnemonic devices in the embroidery process; music rhythms serve as structural guides for the exemplification of ordered embroidery patterns; and musical codes and nuanced expressions are creatively expressed as patterns. In addition, musical events provide veritable opportunities for the use and display of embroidery materials that have been dutifully made by artisans within the Efik communities in Calabar.

Despite modernisation, the interconnectedness of Efik music and traditional embroidery and practices continues to thrive, thus proving the adaptability and resilience of Efik artistic traditions. Contemporary artisans continue to infuse their work with rhythmic inspirations, even when working with machines or synthetic materials. While the aesthetic may appear modern, the underlying logic remains grounded in the historical traditions of the Efik. This suggests a resilient cultural continuity where tradition finds expression in evolving forms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the paper makes the following recommendations.

- i. Festivals, workshops, and exhibitions should feature the interaction between Efik music and embroidery.
- ii. Relevant agencies should develop archives for documenting Efik embroidery techniques and their accompanying musical traditions as a means of digital preservation.
- iii. Governments at the various levels should partner with cultural agencies and NGOs to fund initiatives that promote music-integrated embroidery as part of cultural heritage programmes.

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