



Thematic and Structural Analysis of Selected Annang Women's Songs

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explored the themes, textual meanings, and structural elements of traditional Annang women's songs to uncover their cultural messages and sociocultural relevance. Five songs from different Annang women's groups in Akwa Ibom State were collected, transcribed, translated, and analysed using thematic and musical analysis. The analysis revealed that the songs function as expressions of identity, social commentary, love, and commitment, and thereby offer insight into women's experiences and cultural values. Whilst these songs remain vital to the cultural heritage of Akwa Ibom and Nigeria, limited scholarly attention has been given to their messages, significance, and influence on societal norms. Contemporary changes within Annang society have further led to the decline or modification of songs, and the younger generations are increasingly unfamiliar with them. The study therefore concludes that the documentation and preservation of these songs are essential for cultural continuity and for revitalising interest among future generations.

Keywords: Annang, Analysis, Themes, Women's songs, Identity, Culture, Structures

Introduction

A song combines melody and lyrical themes to explore concepts such as social commentary, loss, politics, identity, love, desire, and belief. Scheffler (2015) defines a theme as "the central idea or focus underlying a literary text", expressing a particular thought about a character, society, and the world. In Annang women's songs performed in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, these themes are conveyed through lyrics,



melody, and performance, and they record communal thoughts on life, society, and human experience. Euba (1986) describes folksongs as “a pivotal tool that connects the past to the present, giving a clear opportunity to understand the past in the present”.

Notwithstanding their cultural significance in reflecting societal values and constructing ethnic identity (Udok, 2019), Annang women’s songs remain under-documented in scholarly literature. This gap is situated within broader debates in African oral literature, ethnomusicology, and gendered performance traditions, which foreground the role of women’s songs as repositories of knowledge and social practice. Modern influences and changing performance contexts have further altered their inherent characteristics, thereby threatening intergenerational transmission. Although existing studies have examined Annang cultural practices, few have systematically analysed the thematic and structural dimensions of songs performed exclusively by women.

This study aimed to examine selected Annang women’s songs. Specifically, it sought to identify dominant lyrical themes, analyse melodic and structural features, and ascertain young Annang women’s perspectives on these songs in contemporary Nigeria. Data were collected through fieldwork, transcription, translation, and musical analysis. The study contributes to ethnomusicological scholarship on Nigerian women’s musical practices and provides material to support the preservation of Annang intangible cultural heritage for the Annang community and cultural policymakers.

Literature Review

Finnegan (1970) provides the theoretical basis for African oral tradition, showing that repetition, parallelism and call-and-response serve cultural transmission and social expression. Akpabot (1998) outlines the structural features of Annang/Ibibio songs, namely call-and-response and cyclic forms. However, his analysis is limited to musicological classification and does not address how structure contributes to preservation and documentation. Studies published between 2015 and 2026 reveal two recurring patterns: women as custodians of intangible cultural heritage and song as a medium of social expression. However, these studies primarily adopt interview-based and ethnographic approaches, with limited emphasis on detailed structural analysis of song. Studies on Annang music remain descriptive. Udok (2022) identifies satirical, social control, protest, abusive and philosophical themes in Annang women’s songs and describes them as a mechanism for regulating community behaviour. Udoh (2023) notes the centrality of Annang music to history and identity, but reports pressure from globalisation. Neither study examines lyrical or melodic structure. Gap: While Akpabot (1998) addresses structure, and Udoh (2020; 2023) addresses theme and function, no study undertakes a detailed thematic and structural analysis of Annang women’s songs for preservation and documentation. This study addresses the gap through a thematic and structural analysis of selected Annang women’s songs.



Conceptual Framework and Theory

This study is grounded in an integrated conceptual framework comprising three interlocking theoretical perspectives: Feminist Ethnomusicology, Oral Literature Theory, and Performance Studies. Feminist Ethnomusicology served as the primary lens to examine how Annang women negotiate identity, gender roles, and social commentary through song, in line with Koskoff's (2014) work on women and music. Oral Literature Theory was applied to frame the five songs as authored and generative texts transmitted across generations, following Finnegan's (1970) scholarship on African oral literature. Performance Studies was employed to situate the songs as embodied practice, as articulated by Turner's (1988) concept of social drama. These perspectives were read alongside Akpabot's (1975) African musicological principles on tonal movement and call-and-response to ensure the analysis remains grounded in indigenous musical thought. Together, the framework moves from gendered meaning to textual transmission to embodied enactment. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was adopted because it allows for researcher reflexivity when interpreting metaphor, tonal shifts, and performance meaning in oral song data. This multi-theoretical framework ensures that the thematic-structural analysis shows how lyrical content, musical form, and performance context function together to sustain the cultural functions of the songs. Therefore, this study examines the five Annang women's songs as gendered, transmitted, and performed texts within their cultural context.

Methodology

This study employed an ethnographic, qualitative approach. Five traditional Annang women's songs were purposively selected from women's groups in Akwa Ibom State. The groups were chosen for their involvement in traditional music, including Abang and Asian Uboikpa performed by young women, Asian Akanwan performed by married women, Mbokpo associated with the fattening rite, and Abre performed during the new yam festival. Selection was based on thematic content, structural features, and the groups' recognised role in preserving cultural heritage. The five songs were therefore selected to ensure variation across theme and musical structure. Primary data comprised song texts, audio recordings, and oral interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six female custodians of the songs, aged 60–80 years, with a minimum of 15 years' performance experience. The interviews elicited information on context, performance practice, and meaning.

The researcher had the lyrical data analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in line with Braun and Clarke (2022). This six-phase approach was adopted because it allows systematic coding while recognising researcher subjectivity in interpreting oral data. The process began with familiarisation through repeated listening and verbatim transcription of the songs from Annang into English. Initial codes were generated inductively, with attention to language, and repetition. These codes were collated into candidate themes relating to identity, gender, and social life, then reviewed for coherence. Reflexivity was



maintained through analytical memos, and final themes were defined to answer the research questions directly.

Musical structures were analysed using African musicological perspectives, particularly Akpabot's work on Ibibio music (1975). The five songs were transcribed and notated in Sibelius software for analysis of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements. Melodic organisation was read through Akpabot's principles of tonal movement and call-and-response structure. Rhythmic and harmonic elements were examined with attention to pentatonic and heptatonic contours and vocal interplay. The researcher had the findings validated through member checking with two participants and an audit trail of all coding decisions. Song meanings, musical structures, and interview data were triangulated to explain the cultural importance of the five songs within the Annang community.

Women's Songs in Annang Land

Annang is the second-largest tribe in Akwa Ibom State, located in the northwest part of the state. The residents comprise men and women who contribute to the rich cultural heritage of Annang land. These women live in eight of the thirty-one local government areas in Akwa Ibom State, which include Essien Udim, Ikot Ekpene, Abak, Etim Ekpo, Oruk Anam, Ukanafun, and Obot Akara. These women are known for their significant societal roles and strong cultural identity. Research revealed that Annang women have many musical groups, which include *Abang*, *Asian Akanawan*, *Asian Uboikpa*, *Mbopo*, and *Abre* traditional music groups

Abang Music is performed by young women (maidens) in Annang society during ceremonies. The word '*Abang*' means a pot, a shaped clay with an opening on top and a wide base, symbolising a woman's shape, particularly the buttocks. It's used for storing water in a cool place. According to Michael (2010), the water pot symbolises peace due to its content and placement. The Annang people consider the water pot and women analogous, both representing peace in traditional society. Abang music expresses the women's peaceful nature, promoting peace and showcasing women identity. Michael (2010) notes that Abang music spurs women to action, emphasises unity and identity, and serves as a corrective instrument. It is used in social and ceremonial roles, encouraging positive change in women. Today, the focus has shifted to dance steps and costumes, neglecting lyrics and messages. The opposite of Abang is Ekong music, practiced by masked young men in Annang society.

Asian Akanawan Music: Music performed by swaggering married women in Annang during festive periods. According to Michael (2019), the phrase Asian Akananwan means a swaggering old woman or the old woman's pride. It is one of the traditional musical genres in Anaang society, performed by the married women (28). Oral interview with one of the elders reveals that in ancient Annang society, men's extra-marital relationships, driven by desires for prestige, children, and polygamy, led to strife and broken marriages, caused by insatiability, quest for a child, desire for large family size, and polygamous homes



as a symbol of prestige. These societal pressures prompted the evolution of Asian Akanawan music, performed by swaggering married women, as a powerful response to these challenges, used to protect marriages, advise women on navigating relationships, and express their feelings – serving as a platform for women to voice their thoughts and strengthen their roles.

Asian Uboikpa: This is a traditional musical genre performed by maidens who were at the age of puberty in the olden days; it was mainly performed by virgins who were ripe for marriage. Today, the narrative has changed; any young woman interested in the group can join. It is the young women's version of Asian Akananwan music. They use this platform to attract suitors and to tell society they are ready for marriage. Udok (2019) supported this idea when talking about the dance performance of Asian Uboikpa music as an avenue where girls display beauty, elegance, and graceful moves to attract potential suitors, showing they are ready for marriage.

Mbopo Song: Music is a traditional music in Annang performed by young women mostly during ceremonies, rites of passage, or community gatherings. It is a heartfelt genre with rich harmonies and storytelling rhythms. The word Mbopo generally refers to the curvy physique of a healthy young woman who is at the age of puberty. It is pertinent to note that the shape of Mbopo, especially the buttocks, is also a resemblance of 'Abang'. Moreover, Akpakpan stated that "the word "Mbopo" means "maiden" or, in other words, fattening, and refers to the initiation of young girls into womanhood, which is the greatest ceremony in a girl's life". It is a symbol of beauty and fertility. Akpabot (1975) also described Mbopo as "the initiation of young girls into womanhood. It is closely related or associated with marriage, which is the institution that shapes the forms and actions or activities of the association as the family". The period of staying in the fattening room institution, with seclusion and preparation, is often known as marriage, referred to as 'Ukuho Mbopo'(7).

Abre Music: Music performed by women during New Yam Festivals is called Abre music is a key part of the annual New Yam Festival, celebrated by the Annang people. It is also known as Ebre in Ibibio language. During this festival, women take center stage, asserting their importance in the community. According to Udoh (2002), they are allocated a special yam species, which they are expected to present to their husbands as a symbol of respect. They are given a chance to showcase their industry, and in return, receive gifts from their husbands. The Abre music, played by respected women of the Abre society, accompanies the celebration. Notably, membership is highly selective; no women known to be thieves or involved in prostitution are admitted into the group. The present generation is largely unfamiliar with Abre songs, as the practice has become less common, leading to many traditional songs being lost over time.

Thematic and Structural Analysis of Annang Women's Songs

According to Ahmed et al. (2025), thematic analysis is a widely used, flexible qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within data. It's a flexible



and systematic approach that uncovers meaningful insights from rich, narrative data. Themes aren't just waiting to be found; researchers create them through analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) note that researchers must be mindful of their own subjectivity and perspectives, emphasising reflexivity in the ongoing critical examination of how the researcher's background shapes the analysis. They term their approach "Reflexive Thematic Analysis," stating that "Themes do not passively 'emerge' from data but are actively produced by the researcher" (p. 8).

In Africa, qualitative research on women's songs reveals themes centered on empowerment, social control, political commentary, cultural heritage, love, relationships, and daily life. Analysis of Annang women's songs shows they typically revolve around love, marriage, family, and community life, expressing themselves, sharing experiences, and passing down values. Annang women's song texts contain literary elements, with many expressions being cryptic. Udondata (2002) notes that the Annang language is a cluster of idioms. Annang women's songs are generally accompanied by many instruments but the focus for this work is on the songs, and here is the submission of thematic and structural analysis of the six selected songs.

Song No.1 (an example of *Abang* song)

Leader: <i>DiahaMmesi</i>	Mmesi's first daughter
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: Etok idem <i>ama usong</i>	When you are a bit healthy
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Agwo bere k'esa</i>	You will go and lean outside
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Ajem akatie asak</i>	Looking for work to mock
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Asak nnan asak alok</i>	Mocking at the blind and the mumps
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Asak akuwa aketa</i>	Mocking at the grief –stricken person
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Asak akebe akekpa</i>	Mocking at the widows
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Ate ke imi-ma uwa</i>	Thinking that you cannot be grief-stricken
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Ufiok kumaha uwa</i>	Without knowing that you are not free from grief
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader <i>Nagha ake gwoho esop unam ima</i>	When you were seriously in love
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	
Leader: <i>Ediye ofum o uwoiya o</i>	– oh nice air (An exclamation syllable)
Chorus: <i>Mmesi</i>	



For example, (5)

Leader: Ebe mbokpo tama mbod urua inyang dok ekpat

(Mbopo's husband, jump Urua Inyang hill and climb the log)

Chorus: Ebe mbokpo tama mbod urua inyang dok ekpat)

(Mbopo's husband, jump Urua Inyang hill and climb the log)

Theme: Pride

The theme of pride in this song is deeply intertwined with Annang cultural values, which emphasize humility and respect for others. The song reflects the cultural ethos, warning that pride can lead to downfall, as mocking or looking down on others disrupts social harmony. In Annang culture, vulnerability often evokes sympathy and support, and the song's portrayal of mocking these groups highlights the severity of pride, suggesting it contradicts Annang values of empathy and communal care. Ultimately, the song reinforces social norms, urging listeners to cultivate humility.

Diaha Mmesi

Mme-si Mme-si Mme-si Mme-si

Diaha Mmesi is in a call-and-response pattern. The tones are selected from the pentatonic mode with no tonal shift. It consists of short phrases that are repeated partially and systematically. The melody



starts on a skip in the middle tone before descending stepwise, with more conjunct than disjunct motion and no leaping. The range is narrow, covering a perfect 5th from D to A. The rhythmic construction features simple quadruple (4₄) time with short durational notes. Melodic construction has short and balanced phrases except on the penultimate bar. The harmonic structure is monophonic, with moments of unison singing and an overlapping harmony at the penultimate bar.

Song No. 2(an example *Asian Akanawan* song)

Leader:	<i>Ebe kpeke mkpodia</i>	My husband eats
	<i>Ke nyatem ikot</i>	I will clear the bush
Chorus:	<i>Ebe kpeke mkpodia</i>	My husband eats
	<i>Ke nyatem ikot</i>	I will clear the bush

Theme: Marital Devotion

The phrase "my husband eats, I will clear the bush" (Asian Akanawan) reflects a woman's commitment to cultivating her marital space, symbolising her sacrificial dedication to intimacy, partnership, and household responsibilities.

Originating from traditional land-clearing practices, it highlights societal expectations of women's roles in marriage, showcasing their navigation of norms while expressing experiences and responsibilities.

NYATEM IKOT

E-be kpe-kem'-kpo dia ken' ya tem i-kot

kam kpe-kem'-kpo dia ken' ya tem i-kot

kam kpe-kem'-kpo dia ken' ya tem i-kot

The song follows a call and refrain pattern, utilising pentatonic scale modes. The phrases are balanced, with a melody that begins with a leap and descends stepwise. The range is narrow, spanning a perfect 5th from D to A, covering the entire song. Common time (4₄) prevails, with notes of short durational values. Melodic phrases are short and balanced, typically two bars in length. The harmony is based on two parts, with harmonic movement at the last three notes of the last bar in thirds. The song exhibits both contrapuntal and homophonic characteristics.



Song No. 3(an example of *Asian Uboikpa* song)

Leader: *Sin ukot k'idim, mmbem-bem*

Chorus: *Sin ukot k'idim, mmbem-bem*

Leader: *tiedo mbet o ikpong baby k'na du do -*

Chorus: *Sin ukot k'idim mmbem-bem*

Leader: *jak nka nkenam utom bakara*

Ke nya du do mbe

k'idim, mmbem-bem

Step into the river, on your mark

Step into the river, on your mark

wait for me breve baby I will come and
marry you

Step into the river, on your mark

let me go and the white-collar job

I will come and marry you mbe (babe) Chorus: *Sin ukot*

Step into the river, on your mark

Love and Commitment

In this context, love is a promise of marriage, while commitment is the waiting and pursuit of success, stability, and a better life, as captured in the lyrics of song no.4, "*Tiedo mbet, yak nkanke nam utom mbara ke nya du do*". In Annang society, there's a strong emphasis on commitment from men who claim to love. The culture values action over words, making this song fit perfectly with the emphasis on commitment and responsibility in relationships. According to Ekanem (2012), love and commitment are core values in marriages, highlighting loyal dedication and long-term investment. The song's aspirational, encouraging people to chase their dreams with love as the reward.

SIN UKOT K' IDIM (SONG NO. 4)

Sin u - kot k' dim' m - bem - bem sin u - kot k' dim' m - bem - bem

Sin u - kot k' dim' m - bem - bem sin u - kot k' dim' m - bem - bem

Sin u - kot k' dim' m - bem - bem sin u - kot k' dim' m - be

The song follows a call and refrain pattern, utilising pentatonic scale modes. The phrases are balanced, with a melody that begins with a leap and descends stepwise. The range is narrow, spanning a perfect 5th from D to A, and this ambit covers the entire song. Compound duple



Song No. 4(an example of *Mbopo* song)

Leader: *Ebe mbokpo tama mbod urua inyang dok ekpat*

(Mbopo's husband, jump Urua Inyang hill and climb the log)

Chorus: *Ebe mbokpo tama mbod urua inyang dok ekpat*

(Mbopo's husband, jump Urua Inyang hill and climb the log)

Theme: Social commentary

The example 5 "*Mbopo tama mbod urua inyang dok ekpat*" emphasises cultural values, social expectations, and norms in Annang society. It highlights the traditional notion that men are expected to be brave, as seen in the lyrics "*tama mbod*" (jump over a hill) and "*dok ekpat*" (climb a log), symbolising overcoming challenges and demonstrating strength. Interestingly, the song is a playful subversion or redefinition of these expectations of masculinity, with women narrating and commenting on the gender roles of men as leaders in society. By celebrating these traits, the women may be reinforcing or perhaps lightheartedly critiquing the societal pressures on men to embody these qualities.

EBE MBOPO

The song follows a call and refrain pattern, based on a tritonic pattern, a subset of pentatonic modes. Phrases are short and balanced. The melody starts with a skip on the middle tone, then descends stepwise, with mostly conjunct movement and no leaping. The range is very narrow, hovering around the tonal center with a 3rd ambit (C-E). Compound duple time (6₈) prevails, with short note values. Melodic phrases are short and balanced, typically two bars long. The harmony features two parts singing in parallel 3rds and 4ths, with a homophonic texture.



Song No. 5(an example of *Abre* song)

Ebe Ino

The husband of a thief

Leader: *Ebe ino abub ekpo akud abre*

(It is only the husband of a thief who wears a mask during the Abre festival)

Chorus: *Ebe ino abub ekpo akud abre*

Leader: It is only the husband of a thief who wears a mask during the Abre festival

Theme: Consequences of actions

The song text "*Ebe ino abub ekpo akud abre*" highlights the themes of guilt, shame, and the complexities of relationships, family ties, and social stigma in Annang culture. Communal harmony and reputation are vital in this society, and the song reveals how one's actions can bring shame and social stigma not just to themselves, but to their entire family. This promotes awareness about the repercussions of individual actions on the community's standing, emphasising the importance of considering the impact of one's behavior on others. It showcases the interconnectedness of individuals, families, and the community in Annang culture.

Ebe Ino



The song follows a call and refrain pattern, based on pentatonic modes. Phrases are short and balanced. The melody starts with a skip on the middle tone, returns, moves a step repeatedly, and drops a leap, featuring more repeated notes than conjunct or disjunct motion. The range is narrow, spanning a major 6th from D to B, covering the entire song. Compound duple time (6₈). prevails, with short note



values. Melodic phrases are short and balanced, typically two bars long. The harmony features two parts singing in parallel 3rds and 4ths, with a homophonic texture.

All the Selected Annang Women's Songs

Generally, a thorough study of the preceding examples has revealed the following about the musical structure of Annangwomen's songs:

Form: A greater number of songs are in call and refrain patterns where the women repeat exactly as their leader sings them as seen in example 2, 3, 4, and 5 while few are call and response pattern (where the women response to the leader's call with different text and rhythmic materials that are repeated all through like example) as seen in example 1.

Scale/ Tonality: Agu (1999) observes that African songs exhibit organized tonal conception. This is evident in the present study, where the selected songs reveal diverse scalar structures. The notes are selected from a pentatonic scale consisting of five tones, as seen in examples 1, 2, 3, and 5. While example 4 which consists of seven tones (heptatonic). However, some of the melodies hover around the tonal centre, as Akpabot (1998) observed on African music.

Melodic Construction: Annang women's songs have short, repeated phrases; only a few consist of long phrases. They are mostly in two bars, which are extended by extended call and response into four bars. The melodies do not go beyond an octave; the ranges are narrow. They sing around the tonal centre, and the melodic movements are influenced by the tonal inflection of the words, as Johnson (2019) observed on Annang/Ibibio speech tones.

Rhythmic Construction: In Annang women's songs, the metres that manifest throughout are simple quadruple time (4₄) and compound duple time (6₈). Each of the songs comprises of short notes.

Harmonic Construction: Annang women's songs are mostly harmonised in two parts, where some women respond in 2nd, 3rd or 4th to their leader's call while some still maintain the melody in unison. There is also an overlap in the penultimate bar of example 1. On the other hand, some of the songs are not harmonised. They are both contrapuntal and homophonic in nature.

The analysis shows that while thematic content varied from marital relations to moral instruction, all five songs relied on call-and-response structure and embodied performance to reinforce cultural knowledge. Pentatonic frameworks dominated songs performed in traditional gatherings, while heptatonic or mixed-meter adaptations were observed in songs that have undergone stylistic changes by younger performers or in church contexts. This pattern suggests that lyrical content, musical form, and performance context function together as a single system: the theme is carried by the musical structure, and the structure is



sustained through specific performance spaces. Thus, the cultural function of the songs is not located in text alone, but in the interaction of all three elements.

Implications of the Study

The documentation of these six Annang women's songs has preserved them in written form, ensuring they will not get lost over time. This way, future generations of Annang children will still enjoy these songs, which tell our stories, teach us values, and remind us of our heritage. This documented work has brought about several benefits. For one, it has helped to revive Annang culture by making these songs accessible to a wider audience. This has encouraged intergenerational sharing and learning, providing a common reference point for cultural discussions and reflections. Through this study, I've gained a deeper understanding of Annang culture and Nigerian heritage, and I believe others who read this will too. It highlights how traditional music can promote peace and unity, and how knowing our roots helps us appreciate who we are. Getting the community involved in preserving traditional music and practices is key to keeping our culture alive. This documentation can also inspire musicians and composers to create new music that blends traditional and modern styles, creating something fresh and unique.

Conclusion

This study sets out to document, analyse, and interpret Annang women's songs within their cultural context. Through thematic analysis of the lyrics and structural analysis of motif, contour, rhythm, and harmony across the five songs, the researcher demonstrated how these songs function as repositories of identity, gender roles, social commentary, and communal values. The specific scholarly contribution lies in the dual analysis. The thematic coding reveals the meanings Annang women encode in language, while the musical notation and analysis show how melodic and rhythmic structures reinforce those meanings in performance. Together, these approaches advance understanding of Annang women's musical traditions beyond description by explaining how form and content work together to sustain cultural functions such as rites, festivals, and intergenerational transmission.

The findings have clear implications. For scholarship, this work provides a documented corpus and an analytical model that future researchers can build on. For policy and community practice, it underscores the need for structured, community-based preservation initiatives that keep Annang women's voices central to cultural heritage work. By securing these songs in both text and score, the study ensures that Annang women's musical traditions remain accessible, relevant, and vibrant for generations to come.

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