

Isosolo as a Space for Aesthetics and Cultural Identity in Ayapo Village Papua

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Abstract

Traditional Papuan music is not merely a form of entertainment but serves as a medium of cultural expression, spirituality, and collective identity. One tradition that embodies this complexity is *Isosolo* in Ayapo Village, Jayapura, a practice of singing and dancing on decorated boats that reflects the deep interconnection between humans, nature, and spirituality in a unique aesthetic form. This study employs a qualitative approach within the framework of ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology, drawing on performance documentation, interviews with local cultural figures, and relevant literature. The findings reveal that the aesthetic values of Isosolo manifest in three main dimensions: audial, visual, and kinesthetic. The sound of the tifa drum, conch shell, and collective singing construct an acoustic landscape that is not only sonically beautiful but also reinforces social solidarity, cultural identity, and ecological awareness. The decorated boat as a floating stage, combined with communal dance movements, affirms the Sentani people's close relationship with the lake as their living space. Isosolo's audial aesthetics emerge as a holistic experience that is communal, relational, and contextual, where music transcends sound to function as a medium of transmitting values, symbols, and spirituality. The uniqueness of this study lies in its focus on the audial and collective dimensions of Isosolo, which have rarely been examined in depth, while its novelty lies in the integration of classical, pragmatic, and contemporary aesthetic theories to interpret Isosolo as an epistemological space connecting humans, culture, and nature. Thus, this study enriches the global discourse on non-Western musical aesthetics and reaffirms Isosolo as a living cultural heritage to be preserved and passed on across generations.



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INTRODUCTION

Papuan traditional music is not merely a means of entertainment, but a vessel for cultural expression, spirituality, and collective identity. Music serves as a reflection of cultural identity and social values, while also being a force that shapes them. Each musical tradition carries the historical, spiritual, and social narrative of its community, and strengthens social cohesion through shared experiences such as singing, dancing, and playing music (Fabryka-Protoska et al., 2024; Kashina & Tagiltseva, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). One tradition that showcases this complexity is Isosolo, a practice of singing and dancing on decorated boats that developed in Ayapo Village, Sentani District, Jayapura Regency. This tradition reflects the deep connection between humans, nature and spirituality, woven together in a unique aesthetic form.

Previous research in Putali Village found that Isosolo music does not use musical instruments such as tifa or triton, but rather rhythmic sounds from spears, arrows, and wood struck against the floor of the boat. This simplicity actually reveals an authentic aesthetic: the sounds of nature, the body, and surrounding objects are used as sources of harmony (Peradantha et al., 2023). Isosolo aesthetics reflect the relationship between humans and nature. Music born from nature (water, wood, leaves) becomes a form of celebration and respect for the environment. The aesthetics of Isolo music are not merely about the beauty of sound, but also spiritual values, conservation, and social solidarity (Peradantha et al., 2023). Thus, Isosolo not only presents music, but also symbolic rituals rich in meaning. Boats decorated with natural ornaments serve as floating stages, while collective singing and dancing depict the harmonious relationship between the Ayapo community and their environment. This traditional performance is usually presented in traditional ceremonies to honour ancestors,

as well as in cultural celebrations such as the Lake Sentani Festival. This uniqueness shows that Isosolo is a multidimensional art form that encompasses visual, auditory and kinesthetic, as well as spiritual values.

Within an academic framework, traditions such as Isosolo can be understood through the study of musical aesthetics. Aesthetics is the science of meaningful sensory experiences. The aesthetic experience of music involves sensory, perceptual, affective (emotional) and cognitive aspects. This process is usually perceived as a pleasant and valuable experience, involving several areas of the brain, and can be influenced by an individual's background, expertise, and preferences (Brattico et al., 2013; Istók et al., 2009; Nieminen et al., 2011). The aesthetic experience in Isosolo is not only conveyed through the sound of the tifa or vocal harmonies, but also through the symbolism of the performance space above the water. This multisensory dimension shows that Isosolo presents beauty that touches various layers of human perception, both sensory and symbolic.

Artistic experience arises from active interaction between humans and their environment (Dewey, 1934). The process of creating and appreciating art involves subjective transformation, whereby aesthetic experiences trigger internal changes and deepen our understanding of the environment (Schino et al., 2025). This perspective is relevant to understanding Isosolo, because this tradition makes the lake not only the backdrop for the performance, but an integral part of the artistic experience. The aesthetics of Isosolo are not merely about the beauty of sound or movement, but also the interconnectedness of the social, spiritual and ecological ecosystems of the Ayapo community. Art is a form of dialogue between humans and nature.

Aesthetic coverage highlighting how aesthetic experiences are formed through social interaction, symbols, and cultural practices (Williams, 2018; Williams, 1974). In this approach, aesthetics is not only related to high art, but also to everyday cultural expressions, such as music, language, and rituals (Williams-Jones, 1975). This opens up space for a more inclusive and contextual aesthetic analysis.

Traditional aesthetics often emphasise universal subjectivity, but new approaches highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping aesthetic values. Variations in artistic styles and aesthetic preferences are greatly influenced by geographical background and cultural history (Currie, 2011; Terrosi, 2023; Williamson, 2024). In the context of Isosolo, aesthetic value is inherent in its function as a means of solidarity, identity, and a medium for cultural transmission between generations. Thus, understanding the aesthetics of Isosolo must be placed within a framework that emphasises the connection between art and society.

Although Isosolo is rich in aesthetic value, academic studies of this tradition remain limited. Research on Papuan culture generally focuses more on anthropological, linguistic, or religious ritual aspects. The aesthetic dimension – particularly that which encompasses visual, auditory, and kinesthetic integration – has not been explored in depth. This situation has resulted in an incomplete academic understanding of Isosolo, especially within the broader framework of musical aesthetics.

At the global level, discourse on the aesthetics of traditional music is more often dominated by studies of Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia (Nettl, 2005). Papua, with its extraordinary musical and cultural wealth, remains relatively marginalised in the international research landscape. This indicates a gap in the academic literature regarding Papua's contribution to the aesthetic diversity of world music. Isosolo has the potential to fill this void through more focused and in-depth studies.

The main issue that arises is the lack of aesthetic analysis of Isosolo as a multidimensional art practice that integrates aspects of sound, movement, space, and symbols. Without adequate aesthetic understanding, this tradition risks being reduced to mere entertainment at cultural festivals, losing its philosophical and spiritual meaning. The fundamental question that arises is: how is the aesthetics of Isosolo understood within the framework of classical and contemporary aesthetic theory, and how does it reflect the cultural identity of the Ayapo people?

This study aims to analyse the aesthetics of Isosolo through the approach of music aesthetic theory. The analysis will refer to the perspectives of Baumgarten, Dewey, and Williams to reveal the sensory, ecological, and socio-cultural dimensions inherent in this tradition. Another objective is to connect this aesthetic understanding with the identity of the Ayapo community, so that we can see how art functions as a means of preserving and strengthening culture.

This research is expected to contribute on two levels. At the local level, this study can strengthen efforts to preserve Isosolo as a cultural heritage of the Ayapo community that is rich in aesthetic value. At the global level, the results of this study can enrich the international discourse on the aesthetics of non-Western traditional music. Thus, this study not only presents an academic analysis but also plays a role in building collective awareness of the importance of preserving the beauty and meaning of the Isosolo tradition.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach within the framework of ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology. This approach was chosen because Isosolo is not merely a musical phenomenon, but also a cultural practice rich in social, symbolic, and ritual dimensions. This study seeks to uncover the aesthetic meaning of Isosolo through a combination of musical analysis and cultural interpretation, thereby illustrating the connection between art, identity, and the living space of the Ayapo community.

The research location focused on Ayapo Village, Sentani District, Jayapura Regency, which is known as one of the centres of Isosolo practice in the context of traditional ceremonies and the Sentani Lake Festival. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of performance documentation, visual-auditory analysis, and interviews with traditional leaders, dancers, and tifa players. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from ethnographic literature, Baumgarten, Dewey, Kant, and Williams theories of musical aesthetics, and cultural identity (Liliweri, 2003), as well as cultural transmission theory (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981). The sampling technique was carried out purposively by selecting performances and informants who were considered representative and had cultural authority.

Data collection was conducted through indirect participatory observation of Isosolo performance videos, documentation in the form of photo archives and festival notes, as well as literature discussions and online interviews with local art practitioners. Data analysis used a model Miles dan Huberman (1992), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Aesthetic elements are analysed in three main dimensions: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, then interpreted using a framework of aesthetic theory and cultural identity. Through this strategy, the research not only describes Isosolo as an art performance, but also reveals the aesthetic and symbolic values that strengthen the identity of the Ayapo community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Isosolo: Sound and Identity

Auditory aesthetics in the Isosolo tradition occupy a fundamental position because this music is not merely sound, but rather a representation of the identity, solidarity, and spirituality of the Ayapo people. The most dominant element is the tifa, a traditional Papuan drum, which serves as both a tempo determiner and a driver of collective emotion. Its repetitive and dynamic rhythm creates a binding axis between communal singing, body movements, and environmental resonance. In addition, the 'blown shell' is a sacred transitional instrument that connects the musical dimension with ritual, signalling the transition between segments of the performance and evoking a spiritual atmosphere.

The aesthetics of sound in Isosolo are not merely understood as the beauty of sound, but as a social force that reinforces cultural structures. Music plays a role in building group identity, strengthening social networks, and serving as a means of communicating cultural values, norms, and symbols (Clayton, 2016; Crossley, 2019; Lull, 1985; MacDonald, 2021). Isosolo also demonstrates how sound shapes the landscape of cultural knowledge. Collective singing, combined with the beating of tifa drums and the sound of water, forms 'acoustemology' (Feld, 1984), which is a way of understanding the world through auditory experiences. The sound of water reflecting off the lake not only provides a natural backdrop, but also becomes part of a composition that brings ecological awareness.

This dimension shows how the Ayapo people interpret sound as cultural epistemology—a way of learning about harmony, order, and connection with nature. Aesthetic analysis of music according to Hanslick, (1902) the form of the sound is also relevant, as the repetitive rhythm of the tifa creates a sense of regularity. However, unlike Hanslick's universal aesthetic, Isosolo asserts that the beauty of sound is always tied to culture. Rhythms that are simple to the outside ear contain narratives of identity and spirituality for the Ayapo people.



Figure 1. Isosolo dance at the Sentani Lake Festival

Furthermore, Isosolo's auditory aesthetics showcase communal and participatory qualities. Sound achieves its full beauty not in an individualistic concert hall, but through social interaction on the lake. This is in line with the idea Dewey, (1934) that aesthetic experiences arise from human interaction with their environment, as well as the framework of 'participatory performance' in which the main value of music lies in the active involvement of all parties. In Isosolo, there is no rigid separation between performers and audience: tifa players, singers, dancers, and spectators around the lake all become part of the soundscape. The aesthetic is 'holistic, relational, and contextual', encompassing technical beauty, symbolic meaning, and social function.

Isosolo is not merely a performing art, but an affirmation of who the Sentani people are. In festivals or cultural contexts, when the community performs Isosolo, they are 'introducing themselves' as a water community that lives in harmony with Lake Sentani. The songs, sounds and movements of Isosolo represent their collective identity as a simple, solid community rooted in their ancestors (Peradantha et al., 2023).

The uniqueness of this research lies in its focus on the 'aural aesthetics of Isosolo', a dimension that is rarely touched upon in studies of Papuan music, which generally focus solely on anthropological or ritual aspects. The novelty of this research is the integration of classical aesthetic theory (Baumgarten, Hanslick), pragmatic aesthetics (Dewey), and contemporary theories such as acoustemology (Feld) and participatory performance (Turino) in interpreting the sounds of Isosolo. With this approach, Isosolo is understood not only as a performing art, but as an 'epistemological space' that represents the relationship between humans, nature, and culture. This research thus enriches the international discourse on non-Western musical aesthetics while reinforcing Isosolo's position as a living cultural heritage of the Papuan people.

The Beauty of Tifa Rhythm as a Structure Binding Song and Movement

The rhythm of the tifa in Isosolo is a fundamental element that regulates both the singing patterns and the dancer movements. The sound of the tifa not only functions as an accompanying instrument, but also determines the musical and performative structure. The repetitive pattern of beats creates a sense of regularity, while the variation in rhythm provides space for improvisational expression. According to the theory of tonally moving forms Hanslick, (1902) The beauty of music lies in the movement of sound. In the context of Isosolo, this beauty is evident in the combination of dynamic tifa rhythms with flowing dance movements on boats. Furthermore, from a musical anthropology perspective, these rhythms serve as a social glue, coordinating collective participation (Merriam & Merriam, 1964), so that the tifa can be understood as a sonic centre that unites the community in a shared aesthetic experience.

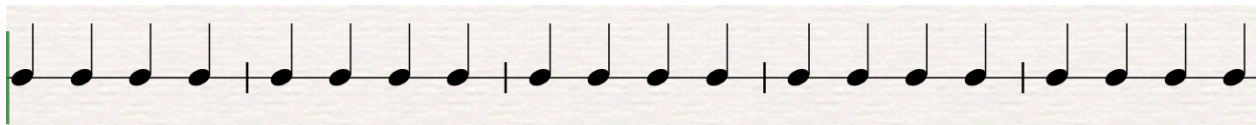


Figure 2. Sound Patterns of Shells in Isosolo

Research findings show that, in the Isosolo tradition, the rhythmic patterns played are not merely a sequence of sounds, but also represent the values of togetherness and kinship that are central to community life. The conch shell in the Isosolo tradition serves as a symbolic communication tool that marks important moments in the performance. Its deep and shrill resonance evokes a sacred atmosphere, as if opening a door to a spiritual dimension.

From a semiotic perspective, shell music can be interpreted as a signifier representing transition: from one part of a piece of music to another, or from the profane world to the sacred world (Nattiez, 1990). The presence of this instrument emphasises that sound aesthetics are not only viewed from an auditory perspective, but also from a symbolic and ritualistic function. The sound of the conch shell is a symbol that links musical aesthetics and the belief system of the Ayapo people, demonstrating that music here is a medium of communication with the divine.

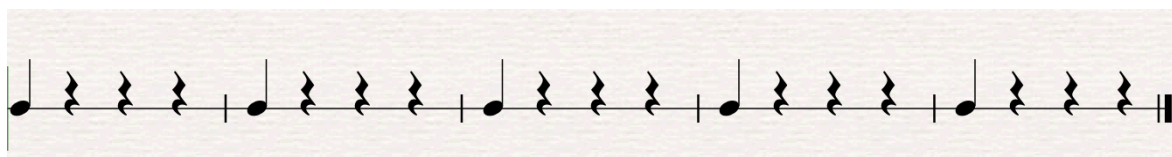


Figure 3. Tifa Sound Patterns in Isosolo

The Isosolo performance takes place on a boat floating on the water, so the sounds produced are never completely separated from the environment. The reflection of the tifa drum on the surface of the lake, the splashing of water caused by the movement of the boat, and the echo of singing reflected by nature all create a unique soundscape. This is in line with the idea of acoustemology (Feld, 1984), which states that humans understand and experience the world through sound. In this context, Isosolo aesthetics lie in the unity between human sounds (tifa, singing, shells) and natural sounds (water, wind, echoes). This acoustic landscape makes nature not just a backdrop for the performance, but an active instrument that contributes to the aesthetic experience. The performance space becomes an integral part of the music itself, revealing the close connection between culture and ecology.

Collective Singing as a Strengtheners of Social Solidarity

Collective singing in the Isosolo tradition is an aesthetic auditory manifestation that affirms the value of community among the Ayapo people. There are no clear boundaries between performers, dancers and audience, as everyone can immerse themselves in the collective vocal melodies. This situation is in line with the concept of 'participatory performance' as proposed by (Turino, 2008), where aesthetic value lies not in technical perfection, but in active collective involvement. Through this musical participation, collective singing creates a shared experience that builds emotional solidarity while strengthening social bonds.

Furthermore, Isosolo collective singing can be understood as a form of cultural identity affirmation. According to Liliweri, (2003) cultural identity is a sense of belonging that arises from shared experiences in traditions, symbols and values. In this context, Isosolo collective singing serves not only as entertainment, but also as a statement that the Ayapo community is part of an ancestral heritage that continues to be preserved. This collective identity strengthens a sense of belonging and pride, while also serving as a cultural bulwark against the rapid influx of outside cultural influences.

From the perspective of cultural transmission theory, collective singing plays an important role as a medium for transmitting values. Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman (1981) emphasises that traditions can be preserved through intergenerational transmission mechanisms, both vertically from parents to children and horizontally among peer groups. In Isosolo, collective singing becomes a medium for the younger generation to absorb the values of solidarity, spirituality and harmony with nature. Thus, this practice is not only musical aesthetics, but also a pedagogical instrument that preserves cultural sustainability.

When compared to Western musical traditions, which tend to emphasise form, internal harmony, and formal beauty (Hanslick, 1902), Isosolo demonstrates that musical aesthetics can arise from broader relationships. The beauty of sound is not only present in musical structures, but also in its resonance with nature, its symbolic meaning in rituals, and the collective involvement of the community. Within this framework, Isosolo's aesthetics prove that art cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context that gave birth to it, and that it has a different perspective on the beauty of sound.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its focus on the dimension of "collective singing" as a reinforcement of social solidarity and cultural identity, which has rarely been studied in depth in Papuan music research. Most studies tend to highlight anthropological, linguistic, or ritual aspects, while the aesthetic function of collective singing in building an inclusive social space is relatively neglected. Therefore, this study highlights how sound plays a role not only in the aesthetic realm, but also in maintaining the sustainability of the social and cultural systems of the Ayapo community.

The novelty of this research is the integration of the theory of "participatory performance" (Turino, 2008), cultural identity theory (Liliweri, 2003), and cultural transmission theory (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981) to read the Isosolo phenomenon. This approach yields a new understanding that Isosolo collective singing is not only an artistic expression, but also an epistemological space that teaches the values of togetherness, identity, and cultural sustainability. This research contributes to the discourse on global musical aesthetics by showing how non-Western traditions, particularly those from Papua, offer a holistic perspective on the function of sound in human life.

CONCLUSION

Berdasarkan penelitian yang telah dilakukan, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan lagu The aesthetic dimension of Isosolo music in Kampung Ayapo shows that sound is not only understood as an artistic element, but also as a means of shaping the identity, solidarity, and spirituality of the community. Tifa, conch shells, and collective singing are at the center of the auditory aesthetics that bind dance movements, performance spaces, and relationships with nature. Repetitive rhythms and the resonance of sound above the

water create a distinctive acoustic landscape, while also emphasizing humanity's connection to the lake as a living space. Isosolo aesthetics serve a dual purpose: presenting the beauty of sound and reinforcing cultural, social, and religious values that have been passed down across generations.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its focus on the auditory and collective dimensions, which have rarely been touched upon in studies of Papuan music. Meanwhile, the novelty of this research comes from the integration of various aesthetic approaches with perspectives on identity and cultural transmission, resulting in a new understanding of Isosolo as an epistemological space. Isosolo is not only an art performance, but also a statement of the Ayapo community's identity as a water community that lives in harmony with nature and their ancestors. By offering a holistic perspective on the function of sound, this research enriches the international discourse on non-Western musical aesthetics while reinforcing Isosolo's position as a living cultural heritage that is relevant to the present and the future.

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