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## AFRICAN ORGANIZED DANCE FORMATION: A STUDY OF IGBA ENYI, NIMO

Joe Onyekwelu

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### ABSTRACT

In traditional as well as contemporary African societies, music is a viable and powerful instrument of group solidarity. One of these aspects of music is dance. It is inherent in African cultures for communities to organize dances as a way of keeping themselves together for the purpose of identity while performing the musical functions that face them from time to time. Despite the forces of acculturation arising from urbanization, African societies still maintain this tendency to a reasonable extent. However, globalization as a powerful force appears to exert some negative effects on this aspect of African life. The purpose, which the dance genre serves, the morality that the text teaches, and the discipline, which the organization imposes on the people are food for thought which the present African societies should not toy with. The researcher decides to choose this title 'African Organised Dance Formation' using *Igba Enyi, Nimo* as a case study, to highlight the social, moral, economic and aesthetic aspects of life as contained in the structure of the dance with a view to protecting and improving on them.

### INTRODUCTION

The English ballets master John Weaver argued that dancing is an elegant, and regular movement harmoniously composed of beautiful attitude, and contributed graceful postures of the body, and parts thereof. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French dance historian Gaston Vniller (1800) also emphasized the qualities of grace, harmony and beauty distinguishing spontaneous movement of the early man.

My personal experience in the world of music making has offered me some good ideas to share as part of my own definition of dance. I am confident that by virtue of my birth, upbringing, environment and active participation in the village cultural activities for a major period of my life, I am in the position to share my views.

African dance has been defined or described in different ways depending on, the school of thought. Some have good conception of African culture while some have not. It is like the Igbo proverbial six blind men who described the elephant based on their individual conceptions. As an active participant in cultural music thus: *Dance is a response of the physical body to the stimulus of musical sound.* In other words, dance appears to be a reflex action in a sense. African dance music is very rhythmic in nature, and it is the rhythmic tendency (carrying the vibration) through the tympanum of the ear that sensitizes the central nervous system setting the African body vibrating in motion to the rhythm. The rate of sound vibration and the density of instrumentation vary inversely with body articulation. This has been my experience all these years. When I had an exchange of ideas with some other talented dancers in culture - one of them Ikiliogu Aniedobe, he has this to say, *My body reacts to musical sound just as it reacts when there is a sudden blast of the gun nearby, or like my eye blinks when a fly by-passes.* I am convinced that other creative aspects of dance as externalized in variations of body movements are extension of the basic sensitive reactions. According to Lo-Bamijoko (1994); the drive of dance, just like sound in music existed long before man. Scholes (1959:274) tells us that 'the impulse to express ones feeling or to recreate oneself in the dance is instinctive and universal'.

Enekwe (1991) noted that:

Dance in Nigeria has remained a vital and dynamic art form, which has suffered some remarkable little external interference in the rural areas and serves as a vehicle for solidarity and cultural continuity when people are displaced to urban centers (p. 12).

## STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN DANCE

In Africa, dance is an essentially social event, which not only accommodates, but also encourages and appreciates participation by spectators. The performance is elastic enough to expand or contract in time according to the quality of the performance. African dance exhibits a high degree of professionalism, born of long hours of patient rehearsals, despite the fact that performers are often amateurs. More over in a single dance, repetition of movements may be valued for the sake of communal recognition at the same time that individual improvisation is eagerly awaited and applauded. African dance also participates in the world of religion, where its inclusion in festivals, ceremonies and masquerade heightens the religious experience for both the performer and audience. One of the most important aspects of African dance is that it is a form of communication between dancers and musicians, between performers and audience, and ultimately between the community and the

supernatural beings upon whom human welfare and indeed their very survival depends. African dances are full of rhythmic procedures and are the integral part of the African daily life and of the most highly developed form of African arts. African dances are as numerous as the African communities are. There are the *Etilogwu* dance of Ezeagu in Enugu State of Nigeria (Okafor, 1998), the *Nkpokiti* dance of Umunze in Anambra State of Nigeria, the striding dances of the Sotho, the get stuck dance of Northern Uganda, the *Mpango* dance of Western Uganda, the acrobatic dance of the Hausa of Nigeria etc. All these are special stylized dances for different communities in Africa. The physical exercises as well as the acrobatic displays include the explosive bodily movement. The flinging of the limbs up and down, the centrifugal, kicking, and large broad movements and often times the subtle gestures, looseness of joint, a few apparently relaxed articulations of limbs creates an impression of naturalness and elasticity or flexibility in an expanded dance circle.

Not all African dances contain leaps and jumps. There is a fair mixture of curtailed movements often expressed as an almost stationary shuffle. Acrobatic techniques are common in certain areas and occasions. Summersaults, backward leap and turns, arching of the spine to form a bridge, dancing on stilts are some of the special acrobatic movements of West Africa. The bridge arch also appears in some communities. Nearly all-important ceremonies contain some dancing - secret society, initiation, puberty, circumcision, exorcism and healing, birth, marriage, death, planting, reaping and hunting. The dance in African has remained a vital and dynamic art form, because it has been allowed to thrive in a predominantly rural environment. Fortunately, the greater majority of Africans practice their dances with minimal interference or hindrance by Western influence.

Even in the urban areas where traditional African culture clash with those of Europe, interest in dancing remains high outside their traditional communities, people, especially women form themselves into dancing groups that keep their local traditions alive. Sometimes such groups are attached to unions from where they drew their support and encouragement. An example of such a group is the Nimo Brotherhood Society (N.B.S), Enugu Branch, a town union of Nimo indigenes resident in Enugu - the capital of former Eastern Nigeria. It is through the instrumentation and sponsorship of this town union that an outstanding dance group called *Igba Enyi* of Nimo came into existence in Enugu. *Igba Enyi* is a dignified dance music that is blessed with almost all the structural qualities of African dance formation. It is an embodiment of form, movement and variations creating room free medley and stylized dances at different sections of the dance. Its popularity arises from the suitability of the music and its relevance to almost every occasion in Igbo culture.

Although every dance has a special occasion and seasons for its performance, the *Igba Enyi*, has this special character and significance that makes it unique as a suitable music for every occasion. Although different communities can add a special slogan to qualify their own *Igba Enyi* as being superior like the Nimo Town Union, yet the basic principle, concept, rhythm and movement remain the same.

*Igba Enyi*, simply means, *drum of the elephant*. It means that the dance is as majestic and impressive as the elephant, the dance generally is dignified. The instrumental ensemble is heavy with very high density and the movement majestic. The song text is rich with many philosophical expressions embodied in the call and refrain. The Igbo acknowledges the effect of *Igba Enyi* on the motor muscles by saying that either one springs up to dance or at least one nodes one's head, or that *Igba Enyi* is one of such dances that make a paralytic plead to be lifted up so that he could tread some measures. This is a dance, which, in structure and content, is full of the Free Medley Dance in one section, and the *Stylized Dance* in another. It has four sections of segments with their different titles, which we shall discuss later.

## ORGANIZATION

The organization of *Igba Enyi* dance is not different from the normal procedure of organization of dances in the African culture. A group of people or a community must come together and resolve to have a dance of their own, most often with the objective of having a special identity or, in addition, to add life and excitement to occasions that warrant some entertainment. In the same way, the Etili Nimo Town Union resident in Enugu resolved at a general meeting to learn a dance having the following as their objectives:

- To raise fund for community development at home
- To present a new dance during their general return at home
- To entertain whenever they have any occasion that requires entertainment.
- To perform at the wake keeping and burial of a diseased member.
- To entertain when they are invited by other people

A committee was constituted and mandated to scout for a suitable dance. At the next general meeting of the union, three dances were presented to the general house. Eventually a fresh committee was constituted to go and watch the three dances and come up with the one they considered best. At the next general meeting, the committee presented to the house a good *Igba Enyi* from Nibo. The same committee was mandated to go to the people of Nibo and get a list of their demands to teach the dance. All these were done and at the next general meeting, the list was presented and approved.

The particular *Igba Enyi* was considered most suitable for Nimo Town Union because the dance embraces men, women and children participating in the actual performance. The men play the musical instruments, while the women and children do the dancing in groups. The alternation of the women group with the children not only creates suspense but provides beautiful variations of movements and counter movements in succession. This is the observation of the committee that made the dance most suitable for Nimo Town Union in which the entire family set-up participates in a dance.

## DANCE REHEARSALS

The venue for the dance rehearsals was carefully chosen putting many things into consideration:

- The centrality of the venue for the convenience of members
- How spacious the venue was for accommodating everybody.
- Shelter for the members in case of unexpected rainfall.

The teaching of the dance began after the necessary payments in cash and materials were made. The ritual then follows: beginning with the killing of a goat presented by the hosting community. They cooked, ate and drank together to signify the intimate relationship which must exist between the two groups before the teaching commenced. For seven days, the Nimo Town Union hosted the Nibo Town Union who taught them the dance.

At the rehearsal venue, the teaching was preceded by the enumeration of the byelaw guiding the dance rehearsals. This was done by the group leader. The bye-laws cover a range of dos and don'ts meant to guard against lateness, disobedience, quarrelling and other offences that are considered unhealthy to the smooth learning of the dance.

The men, women and children who were selected to learn the dance were therefore assembled. For the musical instruments, two men were assigned to one instrument. The big drum, which is the principal instrument that dictates the tempo and movement, required a special talent or one who is naturally gifted in the technique of drum playing. Such talents are rare, but nature made it that in every African community, such talents are always available. The teachers began their teaching by demonstrating the basic rhythms while the learners watched and repeated after them. Gradually, they began to catch up with the music. The women and the children, on the other hand, were lined up in their own groups. In each, the teacher would do the dance steps and make the learners do the same. Gradually, they began to catch up with the dance steps. The trainee lead singer had to memorize the songs texts as

directed by the teacher while the chorus men had to do the same. The instrumentalists, singers and dancers all had leaders who were faster than others in their learning. Occasionally, the learning groups were made to play and dance on their own, while the teachers watched out for possible errors or mistakes. The process of teaching and learning continued for seven days at the end of which a lot of progress had been made. In fact, the learners were able to play and dance to the music to a conclusive end, although it still required a lot of practice to perfect.

The official teaching and learning of the dance ended on the seventh day. This was marked with another ritual of eating and drinking together. On that day, whatever was outstanding in the agreed payment was completed. Finally, another demonstration of the entire dance was made. A live-goat was presented to them as a farewell gift before the last movement of the dance. Taking the goat along, the group danced home without stopping till they left the venue. They instructed that no one should say good-bye or wave farewell to them. This goes with the superstitious belief that if anyone says good-bye, the dance will go back with the teachers. The result is that the learners would never master the dance. Frequent rehearsals continued with the Nimo people. Although the teachers had gone officially, yet it was an obligation for them to visit occasionally to supervise the dance for possible errors and corrections. This continued until the official outing of the dance.

## OUTING

The outing of a dance requires elaborate arrangements and organization. The venue for learning the dance should be different from the venue for the outing. This is because the venue, this time, requires a place large enough for the invites and the public to watch the show. In the rural areas, it is usually the village arena. In urban towns like Enugu, it is the Nnamdi Azikiwe Stadium or Okpara Square. The venue is booked in advance. Invitation cards are printed and circulated to friends and well-wishers. A wealthy couple is chosen to be the *Nna* and *Nne Egwu* (Father and mother of the dance). This is an honorary recognition, which the recipients must give their confirmation of acceptance before the outing is planned. The choice of *Nna Egwu* and *Nne Egwu* is carefully made since it requires a personality who is wealthy and influential enough to support the group financially and attract other personalities that would dish out money to the group on their outing day.

On the eve of the outing of *Igba Enyi Etili - Nimo*, the *Nna Egwu* and his wife *Nne Egwu* hosted the dance in their residence where they fed them lavishly and presented them with a live goat. The group realized large sums of money, which opened the way for a successful outing. Their *Nna and Nne Egwu* good friends and well wishers were invited to support them which made the event great.

On the official outing day, both the invitees and the public gathered at the Michael Okpara square waiting for the dance. It was a bright day with Clement Weather. The group was already warming up as the spectators arrived in groups. Many people trouped into the square anxious to watch another dance of the season. The occasion began with the official breaking of kola nut by the Chairman. Then the dance was introduced for the group to perform.

## THE DANCE

*Igba Enyi* is a dignified traditional dance that heightens the ego of an Igbo man, making him to move majestically to the high-density rhythm of the music. It is a dance, which invites both the dancers and spectators to perform within and outside the performance arena. It is so because the music has the characteristics of both the stylized and the free medley dances. The music begins with free medley passages, which enables performers to move freely, and with no definite rhythm over the performance arena. This is followed by stylized sequences that generate different body movements and variations.

## INSTRUMENTS OF THE DANCE

The instrumental ensemble comprises three membrane drums, a slit drum, two bells, one rattle and one flute (*aja*). The membrane drum, *nne igba* plays the role of the master. The medium sized *obele igba* plays an assistant role to the master drum, playing a constantly repeated statement that adds to the density of percussion. Then, there is the single membrane long cylindrical drum *ogwe*, which plays the basic rhythm that maintains the time line of the music. The rattle *oyo* plays a very short and tight rhythm that heightens the density of the music. The slit wooden drum *okpokoro*, the medium sized iron bell, which plays in the lower register, and the small sized bell, which supports it, complete the percussion section. The only melodic instrument in the ensemble is the *aja* (flute), which dishes out melodic phases intermittently in support of the singer.

## SEGMENTS OF THE DANCE

*Igba Enyi* has four segments each of which enjoys some degree of autonomy from the others. The order is as follows:

- *Igba Dike* - Drum of the brave
- *Egwu Owuwa* - Movement dance
- *Eroloba* - Dance of honour (to the living and the deceased members)
- *Ezelagbo* - dance of the beauties.



*Igba Dike* (drum of the brave) is the prologue of *Igba Enyi* performance. In an opening recitative, the lead singer salutes the honoured and the brave in the community, among them cherished patrons of the group. The flautist complements the lead singer by saluting the worthy and the patrons in melodic phrases. The recitative, then leads to an introductory song inviting the audience and spectators to watch and participate in *Igba Enyi* dance. The chorus responds in salutation. Then enters *Nne Igba*, the master drum, followed by the long drum *ogwe* that keeps the time line. The medium sized drum *obele igba* comes in followed by others in succession at the appropriate entry points.

The movement begins at a walking pace, which is free medley. The *Nna Egwu* (father of the dance) followed by *Nne Egwu* (mother of the dance) lead the way, while the instrumentalists follow. The women and children groups follow one after the other. From the right flank, the groups move round the arena in an introductory free medley style until they get to the proper point of performance where they face the special guests. Suddenly the master drummer introduces a change of rhythm, which leads to the first variation of the stylized dances. The women's group takes the first variation that moves them in a levitational progression after which they progress deeper in the performance circle towards the back of the instrumentalists. This creates more space in the performance circle into which the children's group dances in a surge from the left side of the instrumentalists. The spectators are usually taken by surprise. After their own sequences, they dance to join the women at the back - a type of suspense is created and holds until the master drummer stops abruptly and suddenly changes to a fast and exciting tempo. The women group in another line - up dances in leaps descending with their arms stretched to the audience and their eyes widely focused on an important person in the audiences as an invitation to join in the dance. The master drummer punctuates the movement with a cadence giving the signal for the children's groups to take over and bring *Igba dike* to a close.

The next segment of *Igba Enyi* is *Egwu Owuwa*, which begins with a *bridge passage* that immediately follows the preceding segment. Without wasting time, the flautist takes on the inspirational solo dancer (*Onye mpete*) who moves to the flautist calls by her titled names as she demonstrates her qualities of beauty and agility. She targets on one of the personalities, moves towards him, and then stops abruptly to bluff and do a little inspirational dance. She looks and falls on the laps of that personality of her choice. There is a loud ovation for her courage and boldness. She does so to some other personalities under the inspiration of the flautist. The thrilled personalities shower her with rains of money. The flautist then calls her to retire for the next dance.

The soloist intones the next movement, which begins in the reverse order with the children coming and performing before the women who clap their hands. This is to enable the women muster enough energy for the next sequence. On special occasions or when the dance is performed on invitation, it is possible to create an intermission at the end of *Egwu Owuwa* to raise fund, make special presentations or introduce the guest in whose honour the performance is being put on.

The next segment is *Eroloba* (dance of honour for the living and departed members) with which the group remembers and honours their members alive or dead. Here, the song text is central. The lead singer chants and the chorus response follow thus:

- |          |   |  |
|----------|---|--|
| Solo     | - | <i>Eroloba n'egbu ebuna -e</i><br>Eroloba that kills the ram   |
| Response | - | <i>Imago Eroloba - e</i><br>Have you know Eroloba  |
| Solo     | - | Nimo, <i>Imago Eroloba</i><br>Nimo, have you known Eroloba   |
| Response | - | <i>A - e onwu Eroloba dike, Eroloba - e!</i><br><i>Onwu elo mma - e</i><br>A - e. The death of Eroloba the brave, Eroloba-e<br>Death does not think well of anyone |
| Solo     | - | <i>Ndi nwelu ego na ekwu - o</i><br>Those who have money talk  |
| Response | - | <i>Oso na ijele</i><br>He is a member  |
| Solo     | - | <i>Okoye nwanne nke m - o (alive)</i><br>Okoye my own brother  |
| Response | - | <i>Oso na ijele</i><br>He is a member  |
| Solo     | - | <i>Ozodinobi nwanne nke m - o (dead)</i><br>Ozodinobi my own brother   |
| Response | - | <i>Oro onwu gbulu ya, onwu elo mma - e</i><br>Is it not death that killed him?<br>Death that does not think well.  |

The rhythm instruments follow the vocal call and response in succession in a moderately slow tempo. The flute cries out a melody that indicates a sad memory as soon as the name of a deceased member is mentioned. After that brief moment, the drummer introduces a lively rhythm, and then the lead singer salutes in song the

members who have played significant roles in the life of the community. The chorus responds in re-enforcement but as soon as the singer calls again the name of a deceased member, the music suddenly drops to a slow tempo and the chorus gives a sad response showing that he is no more. At the end, the music comes up to a lively tempo - a return to the world of the living. This segment ends with a lively dance.

The last segment is a typical example of a *free medley* dance. Agu (2001) intimates that: the *free medley* dance is the type of dance that offers greater scope for individual freedom in composition and body movement. Each dancer creates his or her movement in keeping with convenience. An observer can see that the steps and body configurations differ from each other, yet all are accommodated within the rhythm of the music". This observation indicates therefore that the number of performers determines the structural density and content of the performance. Another very visible observation in a *free medley* dance is that the technique appears to be highly individualistic and incorporates movements that are divided among several seemingly independent body areas. This offers the dancers more freedom to show off their different dance styles of their own creation. This freedom of individual aesthetic creation of body movement is among the most important factor that account for observable differences between the *free medley* and the *stylized dances*.

This *free medley* dance is called *Ezelagbo* - (dance of the beauty). This is a special dance with which the dancers individually bluff, wink and jiggle to captivate the spectators. The master drummer improvises drum phases while the women display romantic movements as they divert towards different directions to attract some targeted spectators in a free dance. Here every dancer displays her individual talent, quality and skill unfettered by the demand for cohesion between movement and instruments.

The movement gets to a close and the master drummer calls their attention using the normal drum code to retire back to their positions. As soon as they are re-assembled, the music reverts to the normal dance rhythm of *Egwu onwuwa*. With this, they gracefully move out of the arena in an atmosphere of ovation.

## COSTUMES

As a typical African dance, *Igba Enyi* has local attires and costumes that reflect the culture and gives special effects to movements. Nevertheless, it is not immune to the various acculturative agencies at work in the modern world. Therefore,, the city has had its influence on the original costumes of *Igba Enyi*. This promotes easier acceptance and harmony with the environment when the performance is to be staged

in the neo-traditional setting of the proscenium stage or the television studios. Sometimes, the choice of the city as the performance venue is economic, as the audience of the city would include men and women from many cultural background and economic groupings, enabling the artistes to earn more money than would have been the case in the close low-income audience of the countryside.

For a performance of the *Egba Enyi* Etiti Nimo staged in Enugu on their outing day, the colours of the Nigerian flag - green and white - were dominant. The men had as their costumes, white top with a green sack over green trousers. They also wore white caps with green designs. The women wore white blouses with green designs and yellow wrappers with green designs. The children on their own part wore green skirts and with green combinations. The musical instruments were painted green and white to match. Looking at the group, generally, the entire atmosphere portrayed the Nigerian flag. The decision to choose this colour and design was also economic. The group was offering itself to a possible invitation to a command performance, or to any other events that the government may sponsor nationally or internationally like the world festival of arts and culture.

## CONCLUSION

In many cultures of the world but in Africa and Igbo culture especially, the dances is regarded as one of the greatest of the arts, combining. As it does a skill in manipulation of instruments and of the human body, extensive use of the decorative arts as well as the mental or phonic arts, gestures and progressions, surprise and familiarity and the manipulation of the environment to desired effect. *Igba Enyi* fits into these patterns and though the four segments are well known, each performance is new as the dancers improvise, extemporize and create at the same time.

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*Joe Onyekwelu was an active participant in cultural activities – music, dance and drama in his rural environment of Nimo town before his university education in the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he studied music. He did his youth service with the Nigerian Air Force as conductor of the Air Force band and finished in 1979. He was employed in November 1979 by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Enugu as Music producer where he combined musical productions with drama productions and acting. His sixteen years of service made him a television star artist in Nigeria and rose to the rank of controller programmes. He joined the Department of Music, University of Nigeria Nsukka, as lecturer in 1996 – a position he holds until date and PhD in view at the Delta State University, Abraka. He presented good number of papers at various conferences in his special area as well as articles in various journals. He is a well-known conductor of choirs while many musical compositions are to his credit, both secular and sacred. [E-mail:bolajonyekwelu@yahoo.com].*

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**Rex Charles & Patrick Ltd. Nimo**  
Booksmith House, Harmony Place P.O. Box 575  
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