

VOL. 1 January, 2012

NIGERIAN MUSIC JOURNAL

Published By
NIGERIAN MUSIC INITIATIVE



ISSN 1119



AMBIK PRESS

052-880527, 08074009192
ambikpress4jesus@yahoo.com

THE ORGANISATION AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF DANCE IN IGBO CULTURE: THE CASE OF 'OKACHA IGBA ENYI'

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Abstract

The universal brotherhood of man manifest in the response of the human body to the stimulus of organized sounds. Cultures are characterized by type or types of body movement, with some intercultural similarities and near disparities, and play very prominent roles in the moral, physical, psychological and aesthetic life of man. The objective of this paper is to explore the possibilities of inter-cultural exchange of Nigerian dances with those of Europe, Asia, America and the Far East through organized world festivals.

Introduction

Advances in science and technology has made the world into a global village. Infact it is the communicative tendency of man on a global scale that other is referred to as globalisation. Other factors that enable globalisation are education, and the intuitive quest for man to better his condition by manipulating his environment. After several years of strife and wars in the world, great thinkers and philosophers are to advance ideas of peaceful co-existence of peoples and nations. This eventually led to the formation of the United Nations to facilitate world peace through treaties protocols, conventions prominent among which are the right of people to independence, sovereignty, self determination and association. The right of association between nations generated such other bodies as the European community, Organisation of Africa Unity, The Commonwealth of Nations and other world bodies. Among the activities that bring nations closer are cultural, sporting, educational activities.

This paper discusses how of Nigerian dances ... can be explored to contribute toward world piece.

What Is Dance?

The New Encyclopaedia of music defines "Dance is the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself".

The English ballet master John Weaver, writing in 1921, defined dancing as 'an elegant, and regular movement harmoniously composed of beautiful attitudes, and contributed graceful postures of the body, and parts thereof'. The 19th Century French dance historian Gaston Vnillier also emphasized the qualities of grace, harmony, and beauty distinguishing spontaneous movement of the early man.

John Martin, the 20th Century dance critic, almost ignored the formal aspect of dance in emphasizing its role as a physical expression of inner emotion. In doing so, he betrayed his own sympathy towards the expressionist school of modern American dance. "At the root of all these varied manifestations of dancing... lies the common impulse to resort to movement to externalise states which we cannot externalise by rational means.

Nigerian or African dance has been defined in different ways depending on the school of thought. Some have fair understanding of African culture while do not. "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 music is very rhythmic in nature, and it is the rhythmic tendency that activates the African to dance. The tempo of a piece of music is directly related to the rate of body movement in a dance. During my field work one of my informants, Ikiliogu Aniedobe, speaking about himself noted: "My body reacts to musical sound just as it reacts when there is a sudden blast of the gun nearby or like my eyes blinks when a fly by passes". Other creative aspects of dance as externalised in variations of body movements are extensions of the basic reactions to stimuli.

According to Lo-Bamijoko (1986), The drive of dance, just like sound in music existed long before man. Percy Scholes (1959a: 174) observed that the impulse to express one's feelings or to recreate oneself in the dance is instinctive and universal.

Dance in Nigeria has remained a vital and dynamic art forms, which has suffered some remarkable little external interference in the rural areas and serve as a vehicle for solidarity and cultural continuity when people migrate to urban centres (Enekwe, 1991).

In Nigeria, dance is essentially a social event, which not only accommodates but also encourages and appreciates participation by spectators. According to Nzekwe (1991:..), "The performance is elastic enough to expand or contract in time according to the quality of the performance" Nigeria 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 a movement may be valued for the sake of communal recognition at the same time that individual improvisation is eagerly awaited and applauded. Nigerian dance also participates in the world of religion, where its inclusion in festivals, ceremonies and masquerades heightens the religious experience for both the performer and audience. One of the most important aspect of Nigerian 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. "Nigerian dances are full of rhythmic procedures and are the integral part of the African daily life and the most highly developed form of African arts".

Nigerian dances are many which include, The Atilogwu dance of Ezeagu in Enugu State (Okafor, 1998). The Mkpokiti dance of Umunze in Anambra State, each of which won trophies in the world festivals. Then the Acrobatic dance of the Hausa of Nigeria, and so on.

In Nigeria the dance has remained a vital and dynamic art form, especially in the rural area where it thrives with minimal interference or hindrance by Western influence.

In most traditional cultures, dance is functional, and like music is integral to life. A break in the rhythm of life will be the end of life itself (Lo-Bamijoko (1994). To every Ibo, life has a melodic and rhythmic orientation, and again no event happens that is not associates with music. The Ibos has an ardent personal feeling for it (Echezona, 1963:12 and 14)

The Ibo cannot do without music and one of the most important attributes of Igbo music is that it is not only to listen to, but also to learn from (Okafor, 1989a: 140)

For Hornbostel (1928:59):

In the Life of the African, music and dance have quite a different and incomparably greater significance than with us (European). They serve neither as mere partime nor recreations. They are not meant to edify the mind aesthetically, nor can they be regarded as brilliant decoration on festive occasions, or as a means of effectively staging ceremonies – music is neither reproduction (of piece of music) as an existing object); it is the life of a living spirit working within those who dance and sing.

The above quotations underscore the concept and importance of music and the dynamism of dance in Igbo culture. From evidences past and present, Nigerian dances have exceptional qualities in body movement, gestures, body configurations and a lot of meanings which make them unique and worthy of exposure in the global world of performing arts. They have achieved fame in the globe as well as the much desired

personality and identity, which we Africans aspire to achieve in other areas of life like "Art Music".

One should think of a powerful and formidable "Ezeagu Atilogwu" of the 1960s that thrilled the globe.

Even in the urban areas where traditional Nigerian culture often 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 tradition alive. Sometimes such groups are attached to ethnic 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 capital of Enugu State. It is through the instrumentation and sponsorship of this town union that an outstanding dance group called "Okocha Igba Enyi" of Nimo came into existence.

Organisation

The organisation of Igba Enyi dance is not different from the normal procedure of organising dances in African culture. A group of people or a community must resolve to have a dance of their own, most often with the object of creating a special identity and to provide entertainment at social occasions. In the same way the Etitu-Nimo Town union resident in Enugu resolved at a general meeting to learn a dance having the following as their objectives: -

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

A dance committee was constituted and mandated to scout for a suitable dance. They did this at the next general meeting of the union, the dance committee recommended three dances. Another committee was constituted to watch the three recommended dances and select the one they considered the best. This 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 the children dance in groups. The alternation of the women group with the children not only creates suspense but also provides beautiful variations of movements and counter movements in succession. At the following general meeting, the committee recommended "Igba Enyi" dance from Nibo Town, which was accepted. The same committee was mandated to contact indigenes of Nibo and get a list of their demands to teach the dance. This was done and at the next general meeting of the union, the list was presented and approved. Payment in cash and material were made. The ritual then followed, beginning with the killing of a goat. They cooked, ate and drank together to signify the intimate relationship, which must exist between two groups before teaching commenced.

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

Considering the fact of centrality, space and shelter in case of unexpected rainfall the venue for the dance rehearsals was chosen.

For seven days, the Nimo Town Union hosted the Nibo group who taught them the dance. The teaching was preceded by the enumeration for the by-laws guiding the dance rehearsals. The by-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 teaching and learning of the dance which ended on the seventh day was marked with festival. The outstanding balance of charges was paid followed by a performance of the entire dance. A life goat was presented to the teachers as a farewell gift before the last movement of the dance. Rehearsals continued. Although the teachers had gone officially, yet it was an obligation for them to visit occasionally to supervise the dance for corrections of possible errors. This continued until the officials outing of the dance.

Outing

As a typical African dance, "Igba Enyi" used 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 city. This promotes easier acceptance and harmony with the environment setting of the proscenium stage or the television studios. Sometimes the choice of the city would include men and women from many cultural backgrounds and economic groupings, enabling the artist to earn more money than would have been the case in the low-income audience of the countryside.

For the performance of "Igba Enyi" Etiti Nimo staged in Enugu on their outing day, the colours of the Nigerian flag – green – white – green 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 skirt and white blouse 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 for a possible invitation to a 'command performance' or to any other event that the government may sponsor nationally or internationally, like the world festival of arts and culture.

The outing of a dance requires elaborate arrangements and organisation. According to tradition the venue for learning the dance should be different from the venue for the outing because a bigger venue is required to accommodate the large audience made up of invitees and the general public that will attend the event. In the rural areas, this is usually the village arena while in urban areas it can be civic centre, stadium or the like. At Enugu, it is the Nnamdi Azikiwe Stadium or Okpara Square, but in this case it held in the later. Invitation cards were printed and circulated to friends and well-wishers.

In accordance with the practice in Igbo culture an affluent couple and dance enthusiast was 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 the 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 to the outing of "Igba Enyi Etiti-Nimo", the "Nna Egwu" and his wife "Nne Egwu" hosted the dance in their residence where they entertained them lavishly and presented them with a giant goat. The group realized a large sum of money which opened the way for a successful outing. Their "Nna and Nne Egwu" good friends and colleagues were invited to support them, which made the event great.

On the official outing day, both the invitees and the general public gathered at the Michael Okpara Square awaiting the dance. The occasion began with the official breaking of kolanut by the chairman. Then the dance was introduced and the group invited to perform.

The Dance:

"Okacha Igba Enyi" is a dignified traditional dance that heightens the ego and spirit 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 free-medley and stylised 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 stylised sequences that generate different body movements and variations.

Instruments of The Dance:

Sachs and Hornbostel (1933) classified African musical instruments into four. Only three out of the four feature in "Igba Enyi" – the membranophones, idiophones and an airophone.

The instrumental ensemble of "Igba Enyi" comprises three drums, a shit drum, two clapperles bells, one rattle and one flute (oja). The membrain drum "Nna Igba" plays the role to the master. The medium sized "obele Igba" plays an assistant role to the master in form of ostinato that plays a constantly repeated phrase. 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 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 oja (flute) which plays melodic phrases intermittently in support of the singer.

Segments of The Dance:

"Okacha Igba Enyi" has four segments each of which enjoys some degree of autonomy from the others.

The order is as follows: -

1. "Igba Dike" - Drum of the brave.
2. "Egwu Owuwa" - Movement dance
3. Erolola - Dance of honour (to the living and the departed members)
1. Eze Lagbo - Dance of beauty.

"Igba Dike" (drum of the brave) is the prologue of "Okacha 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 using melodic phrase. The recitative then leads to an introductory sound 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 andante, with a free medley. The "Nna Egwu" and "Nne Egwu" lead the way while the instrumentalists follow one after the other. From the right flank, the group moves round the arena in an introductory free medley style until they get to the proper point of performance where they locate facing the special guests. Suddenly the master drummer introduces a change of rhythm which leads to the first variation of the stylised dances. The women group takes the first variation that moves them in a levitation progression after which they progress deeper in the performance circle towards the back of the instrumentalists. This creates space in the performance circle into which the children group dances in a surge from the left side of the instrumentalists. After their own sequences, they dance to join the woman at the back – a type of suspense is created and holds till the master drummer stops abruptly and suddenly changes to a fast and exiting tempo. The woman 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 audience as an invitation to join in the dance. The master drummer punctuates the movement with a cadence giving the signal for the children group to take over and bring "Igba Dike" to a close.

The next segment is "Egwu Owuwa" which begins with a "bridge passage" that immediately follows the proceeding

segment with the flutist taking on an inspirational solo dancer (Onye mpete) who moves to the flutist's 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 comes a loud ovation for her courage and boldness. She does so to some other personalities under the inspiration of the flutist. The thrilled personalities shower her with cash. The flutist 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 master 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 guests in whose honour the performance is being put up thus:

| | Igbo | English |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Soloist: | Eroloba negbu ebuna-e | Eroloba that kills the ram |
| Response: | Imago Eroloba-e Eroloba | Have you known Eroloba |
| Solo: | Nimo Image Eroloba-e | Nimo have you known Eroloba |
| Response: | A-e Onwu Eroloba dike, elo mma-e | Eroloba-e onwu Yes the death of Eroloba the brave, Eroloba, death does not think well. |
| Soloist: | Ndi nwelu ego nekwu-o (living) | Those who have money talk |

| | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Response: | Oso na ijele | He is a member |
| Solo: | Okoye Nwanne Nkem-o (alive) | Okoye my brother |
| Response: | Oso na ijele | He is a member |
| Solo: | Ozodinobi nwanne nke-o (deceased) | Ozodinobi my brother |
| Response: | Oro onwu gbulu ya, | It is not death that killed him |
| Solo: | onwu elo mma | Death that does not think well |

The rhythm instruments follow the vocal call and response in succession in a moderately slow tempo. The flute "oja" cries out a melody that indicates a sad memory as soon as the name of the deceased member is mentioned. After that brief moment, the drummer introduces a lively rhythm, then the lead singer salutes in song the members who have played significant roles in the life of the community. The chorus responds in reinforcement, but as soon as the lead singer calls again the name of 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-signifying 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. It is called "Ezelagbo" – a dance of the beauties. This is a special dance with which the dancers individually bluff, wink and jiggle to the spectators to captivate them. It is a free dance in different directions to attract admiration and reward. Here every dancer displays her individual talent or skill unfettered by the demands for cohesion between movement and instruments.

The movement gets to a climax 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 owuwa. With this, they gracefully move out of the arena in an ovation from the spectators.

Performance Context

The outing of "Igba Enyi" Etitu Nimo at Okpara Square in 1992 attracted well meaning illustrious Nimo personalities and well wishers. One of them was an illustrious Nimo son based in America. The young man came with a video camera and covered the event very well. As one of the guests of the "Nna" and "Nne Egwu" on the eve of the outing, he appreciated the dance and its content so much that he resolved to make a good recording of the dance. So on the outing day, he was fully prepared for a proper recording of the entire dance at the outing venue. He dished out a lot of money to the dancers during performance.

Before the young man left for America, he engaged the group again for a special performance and the group honoured the invitation. On the performance day at his residence in Enugu, he made another busy recording of the group, this time, not only with the video camera but also with tape recorder with which he carefully recorded all the song texts. As a son of Nimo from a well-known family he was given all the assistance he needed for recording. According to Babchuck (1962:6), he was a participant observer.

Two years afterwards, I received an invitation card from the Nimo Brotherhood society N. B. S. United States of America for the outing of "Igba Enyi Nimo". Although I could not go, some prominent indigenes of Nimo went to grace the occasion. One story of interest from the people who witnessed the occasion was that an American married to a Nimo daughter was the "Nna Egwu" (father of the dance) while the wife was the "Nne Egwu" (mother of the dance). It was a beautiful display in America that made Nigerians in Diaspora proud especially in their attire that portrays the Nigerian flag.

According to Okafor, (1998), The group represented Nigeria at the 8th world youths and students festival of Arts and culture in Helsinki, capital of Finland, on the 4th August 1962. As a winner of the dancing competition, which 123 countries participated, they earned a ticket to tour 21 countries in Asia including Holland, Prague and Czechoslovakia. They were sponsored on this trip by Alhaji Fashola through the influence of Dr. Tunji Ofegbeye, former chairman of the Nigerian Youth Congress (NYC)

On their return to Nigeria, Chief Festus Okotie – Eboh took them to Kotonou, Dahomey, to perform at the signing of Tariff Agreement between Nigeria and Dahomey in the same year, 1962.

The climax of their performance was in 1964 when they performed in the U. S. A. – New York, Lincoln University and Howard University during a cooperation agreement between the Nigerian Airways Boeing 707 and the American World Airways to mark the inaugural flight to New York. There were 16 Atilogwu dancers among the 53 Nigerians in the flight which was termed "Operation Fantastic" by the leader of the delegation, Dr. K. O. Mbadiwe. This special name conceived by Dr. Mbadiwe was an expression based on the fantastic and characteristic performance of Nigerian cultural dance that thrilled the world.

Another fantastic group of Nigerians that thrilled the world with cultural dance is the Mkpokiti dance of Umunze in Anambra State. This is another dance which featured in the national and international festivals of art from where they are exposed to the entire globe – another proud achievement of music and the arts to the prestige and cultural identity of Nigeria in the global set up. There are other cultural dances in the Nigerian culture that qualify for the title "fantastic", but for want of time, let me limit myself to the above three. Some of them are yet to be featured in the national and international festivals.

Conclusion

An Ibo proverb says that "when a child watches a fight that is separated or waged, he would say that fighting is interesting". In the same way, when one sees a beautiful and charismatic dance, he may think that the effort behind it is as interesting as the dance itself.

The secret behind the success of any organised Nigerian dance is proper and meticulous organization, administration, teaching, learning and serious rehearsals. When we talk of Ezeagu Atilogwu and Mkpiti of Umueze, the same sequential approach and procedure abound as described in "Igba Enyi" of Nimo. This is in consonance with the survey of the organisation of dance in Tanzania by Nketia (1974:42)

Among the Nyasa of the Songea district of Tanzania, such associations are well organised, and music and dancing are taken seriously. According to Pamela Gulliver, every village has a dance club of some kind, either a men's club or a women's club, and musical contests are held from time to time between these clubs. Since performances are taken seriously, every club practices its art frequently, especially during the week of contest.

Okafor (1998) traced the historical and philosophical basis of Ezeagu Atilogwu as well as the sequential approach adopted in the learning and presentation of the dance.

According to the history, a youth organisation of Aguobu Iwollo had travelled to Ebenebe in Awka in 1942 to learn the Atilogwu. It was from them that this dance style became very popular and spread throughout the length and breadth of Ezeagu land". To attain perfection, in the art of performing the Atilogwu, two experts were invited from home to Lagos to teach the dance. There was a policy that all male children of Ezeagu up to the age of 14 years, living in the Lagos metropolis must take part in the weekly rehearsals. Students, wards workers, apprentices, etc,

were all conscripted into the Atilogwu. Rehearsals were held on the evenings of Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays at Surulere for about 4 hours (Okafor 1998 p. 7 & 8).

One who knows Lagos can imagine what this group put in terms of time, energy and money to acquire this dance, which later became not only the pride of Ezeagu people but that of Igbo and Nigerian in general in the globe.

As was mentioned earlier, there are many other cultural dances in Nigeria that qualify for the "fantastic". Nigeria is vast with charismatic body configurations in dance movement. This is another way we can excel in the global world like football, boxing, athletics and others. What is required to achieve this is exposure through active participation in national and international festivals.

As an area Nigeria has a degree of advantage over many nations, Nigeria can organize more festivals to be hosted by Nigeria or Nigeria can sponsor an arts festival of dances to be tagged "Nigerian Dance Festival" where dances and talented dancers are exposed. It is going to be wonderful achievement if Nigeria will one day sponsor a dance festival where a Nigerian dance type will be thrown open for some European and other cultures to compete in. In such a competition, trophies should be donated by Nigeria and efforts made to make such festivals attractive to participants.

In this direction, it is left for this body of researchers to put our heads together and come up with brilliant ideas on how to project more and better the wealth and hidden treasures of Nigerian dancers to the community of nations through the national and international festivals.

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