

## Dance as a Symbol of Strength and Unity among Igbo and Efik People in Nigeria

Jennifer Elizabeth Aligbe

University of Lagos

Department of Mass communication

aligbejenny@gmail.com

+2348038432019, +2347080884653

### Abstract

Nigeria is a country endowed with a lot of cultural heritages sourced from its multicultural communities. This paper is an examination of the role of dance and its influence in facilitating unity, communal love and existence in Nigeria. Conflict tends to arise when there is a lacuna in communication, be it between individuals, groups or between communities. Nigeria as a nation is not excluded from this, as she is constantly battered by the menace of inter-ethnic violence, sectarian, religious and tribal wars. The role of dance in resolving conflict cannot be over-emphasised as it has proven to be a powerful means for the unification of man in times of conflict. This study appraised the *Ekombi* and *Atilogwu* dances of the Efiks and Igbos in Cross River and Anambra States. It alluded to the fact that these dances have huge cultural values that define the socio-religious beliefs. The growth of our traditional dances; *Ekombi* and *Atilogwu* dances under review focused on the ability of the choreographers to really understand the socio-cultural and religious standpoints of these dances. Additionally it recommended that media coverage of these cultural festivals would also broadcast the nation's cultural heritages to the wider audience/world which is one of the unifying factors that draws people together, fostering spirit of oneness.

**Keywords:** Dance, *Atilogwu*, *Ekombi*, Unity, Nigeria

### Introduction

Dance appears to be a dominant art in Cross Rivers and Anambra states of Nigeria. It explores the people's culture by making use of the nuances of the environment in which it exists. This is because the songs, instruments and dance movement are true reflection of the indigenous cultural motivation. This is applicable to the dances involved in this study - *Ekombi* and *Atilogwu* dances. Important ceremonies like birth, death, marriage, war, coronation of a new leader, healing the sick, prayer for rain, sun, fertility, protection and forgiveness in the lives of the primitive men were celebrated by dancing.

Eze (2021) states that there links a tie between dance and religion that goes back in time and still unites in contemporary times, here in Africa, no matter the part of the country, rhythmic sway of the body. Dance is also embodied with aesthetic values, looking in particular at *Ekombi* and *Atilogwu* dance, which carries, making it different from one society to another and is infused in symbolism that expounds on the cultural heritage of a community, particularly being unique from one society to another.

Non-verbal movements differ in terms of meanings from one community to another. The dance designer must be very familiar with different movement vocabularies of a particular community, which his dance is set before using them in his dance enactment. For effective communication, dance has been playing various roles that are functional in all the major manifestations of human endeavours. Indeed, dance has also helped in shaping and re-shaping the history of different cultures all over the world. Thus, it is easily regarded as a universal phenomenon, just like spoken word, or language. As one of the potent instruments/tools for communication and nation building, dance has been used as a symbol of oneness which thereby culminates into aiding societal and behavioural changes. Justifying further the fact that dance could be taken as a universal language, is experienced in the primitive man. The latter, out of his daily actions and reactions to certain supernatural beings (gods, goddesses, deities and ancestors), was believed to always be in control of some of the natural occurrences via the manipulation of this unique tool (dance). This perhaps explains the more reason Enekwe (2001), cited in Abbe (2007, p. 3) opines that “dance is always serious because it is religious in a self- expressive and communicative sense and it is social because it is an integrated part of his life. The above opinion further illustrates why in African traditional festivals, participants find solace in using dances to express them better. By so doing, dance now forms a part of their existence, social interactions, co-existence and well-being.

In Africa, dance is an important mode of communication among people because different dances connote different things. Dance involves the movement of the body, which is the basic material in time and space. So, dance is an art. The regularity of the movement (times) and the design of movements (use of space and steps) combine to give it meaning. Thus in Africa, meanings are attributed to different dances whenever they are performed. In this way, a dance becomes a symbol when completed (Ogwezzy, 2008). Christianity, for instance, perceives some traditional dances and performances as fetish. Most people do not partake in these performances due to their new believe that it is ritualistic, thus encouraging the decline of these dances as an art form. Dance is a very important art form in any society. This is because it draws and explores all facets of human endeavour. Gone are those days when dance was merely seen as an improvisational art where people dance to show joy and elevate human spirits during rituals session and festivities. Dance is now a lucrative art that can be used to bring people from different community as well as society together to embrace peace in the case of conflict, thus a symbol of strength in diversity and unity. With the growing perception of dance in our society coupled with the globalisation process, choreographers in an attempt to situate dance in contemporary art derail in their motive due to lack of proper research on dance forms and practice. This study, therefore, sought to determine the relevance of traditional dance forms as a symbol of strength and unity and also as an avenue for the sustenance of culture.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic Interactionism is the way we learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through our interactions with others. It can be used as a tool or platform to restore peace

in place of anarchy, crisis or power tussles between ethnic groups or societies. Being one of the most commonly used theories, there are many scholars and theorists who contributed towards the idea of symbolic interactionism. To name a few, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley originated this theory as key people later inspired by them Herbert Blumer coined the term and put the theory forward to the world. It has to be noted that Blumer was greatly influenced by John Dewey (the leader of sociological theory). The basic idea this theory puts forward is that people behave based on the meaning they have given to things. Also, in the case of *Ekombi* dance, which has its origin from the aquatic world and the Efiks to this regard believe in mermaids, a firm belief that her happiness or anger control or shapens the society. Thus, different symbols portraying their meanings according to culture inherent. Thus, Asemah, Kente & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2021) noted that objects or materials that can express or evoke meanings in different cultures, they have over time acquired cultural meanings and are used for symbolic rather than instrumental purposes.

This further buttresses the point that dance is a universal language and gives people the freedom to express themselves denoting cultural meanings and significance from one region to the other. It was one of the first social sciences theories to address questions of how communication is involved with the way we learn culture and how culture structures our everyday lives. The symbolic interactionism interprets society by the descriptive meanings that people have given to objects, events and behaviours. The behavioural pattern of the people will be based on these descriptive meanings because people behave according to their descriptive beliefs, rather than objective truth. These descriptive beliefs and meanings are nothing, but interpretations given by the people, thus the theory suggests that society is based on the interpretations of the people.

This theory is relevant to the study as it brings to bare the expository and social nature of dance festivals or ceremonies. Both dances are symbols representing cultural identities that has roots and meanings based on culture. Additionally, interactions are subjectively interpreted by them to suit the meaning in accordance with the existing symbols. It can be said that if we need to understand the behavioural patterns of the society, we need to understand the existing symbols. This is clarified by the lyrics of songs at festivals, dance rhythm or choreography, costume and much more. These dances are part of culture which they can easily adhere to lyrics of the songs, dance steps, costume all makeup the unique traits that promotes self-identity.

### **Methodology**

The literary, historical and artistic methods was employed in the collection of data and reporting of findings. In using the literary method, investigations into different literature such as printed materials, journals, newspapers, books relating to the research topics were consulted. In using the historical method, facts were collected from archival materials and printed sources that are related to the development, beginning and history of dance. In relation to the artistic method, data were obtained from the researcher's observation on the practical performance and personal knowledge on the

artistic presentation. Out of the top ten traditional dances in Nigerian, two were purposively chosen. *Atilogwu* and *Ekombi*.

### **Nigerian Cultural Heritage**

Igbonezim (2017) resounds the successful impact in Nigeria and by extension Africa, that dance was used to mark major milestones in the life of a person; from procreation to child care and upbringing, puberty, festivals, marital union, initiation into groups, even to daily activities like moonlight storytelling. Furthermore, he pointed out that it is significant to note that museuming dance and museum dancing differ. Museum dancing is concerned with heritage and/as preservation while the latter to focuses on animating the museum space. Museum dancing can also take the form of 'choreographic installations' displayed in the empty gallery spaces as self-standing content, and thus do not animate anything.

Heritages refer to the riches of extinct and extant societies which are of historic, educational, recreational and economic importance, preserved and handed over from one generation to another. Put differently, heritages are significant endowments emanating from man and nature. (Onyima, 2016). Again, globally the importance of heritages to countries and even in developing nations like Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised. This is due to its economic, historical, tourist, aesthetic, educational and research significance. Tangban (2014) states that Nigeria is a deeply diversified state. It is made up of about 250 ethnic groups. Apart from diversity in ethnicity, the country is also divided along religious lines. The northern part is principally a Muslim area, while the southern segment is predominantly a Christian segment. However, in both segments, there are pockets of adherents of traditional religion. Nigeria is distinguished in sub-Saharan Africa because of her "rich manifestations of vast cultural heritages" of the past (Sowunmi, 2008, p.77). Most of the artifacts and collections from remarkable culture areas in Nigeria are displayed in museums and galleries all over the world. This is because they were consciously preserved. Preservation has been defined by Eluyemi, (2002, p.2) as "the promotion of cultural property whether of concrete or non-concrete nature, past or present, written or unwritten/oral. He further posits that preservation involves the identification, documentation (appropriate registration) and proper storage of cultural objects whether in private hands or in museums. The preservation of Nigerian cultural heritages is arguably threatened by human activities, natural forces, biological and chemical agents among others (Okpoko, 2011; Ogundele, 2014).

According to Kashim & Adelabu (2015), Nigeria occupies a land mass of 923,766 sq. km and possesses lots of attributes. Apart from being an emerging economy in Africa, it is endowed with natural resources. The diversity of her cultural resources can be seen from the composition of her ethnic groups which is well over 521. These diversities can be seen in the arts, music, literature, folklore, dance and architecture among others. The Nigerian users need to be associated with their traditional heritage while interacting with contemporary technologies. The human expression finds their way through varied forms of art and cultural activities which represent the vividness of Nigerian lifestyle coupled together with glorious history of

the past to rely upon. Nigerian art, culture and design symbols lie in the fact that they draw inspiration from the rural traditional folk heritage from different regions.

### **The Usage Occasion and Communication Functions of Dance**

In recent times, one can say that education and religion switch people's reasoning to other progressive aspects of life. *Ukele* dance is a show of villainy. *Ukele* dance surrenders to *Okuma* dance when the great stage is set. *Ukele* dance is a warm up to *Okuma* dance in action and sanctity. Communication is a means through which individuals exchange ideas, feelings, opinions; it is a phenomenon that can best be explained by the impact or the effect it causes (Asemah (2011; Asemah, Edegoh & Nwammuo, 2013). Thus, dance can be likened to modern mass media which have different uses and gratifications to different media audiences. Furthermore, dance as a mode of communication helps to promote and emphasise the cultural identity of a people. It is usually combined with music which dictates pace and regularity of the movement, and also directs change to another movement.

### ***Atilogwu* Dance**

There are several cultural dances in Nigeria which are closely associated with the community they stem from. Dancing is very popular means of expressing the culture and tradition of a given society. Dancing can take any form as its evolution is dependent on several factors among which are culture, trend, technology and fashion. Anambra is a cosmopolitan city bringing in millions of people from all parts of the country. The people of Anambra are hardworking and are always eager to help strangers. Anambra is home to some of the biggest industries in Nigeria but that has not stopped it from creating one of the best Dance; the *Atilogwu* dance in Anambra state.

### **Brief History of *Atilogwu* Dance**

*Atilogwu* is one of the oldest dances in Igbo land. It has been practiced by these people in their town. However *Atilogwu* would reach national fame in the early 1940s when a member of the *Aguobu Iwollo* travelled to Ebeneba in Awka to learn about the dance. Before the *Atilogwu* became popular, dances such as the *Ogwulogwu* and *Ubo Uya Kanga* were the rave of the moment. *Atilogwu* is a special kind of dance popular among the Igbo ethnic group, particularly the people from Anambra. *Atilogwu* took several dancing styles from popular Igbo dances like *Anam*, *Ogwulogwu*, *Anaku*, *Ochanja* and *Adunjanja*. It differs from all other dances in that it requires acrobatics and quick body movements to perform it; hence, making it a very difficult dance to learn. *Atilogwu* is an Igbo term meaning 'having magic.' It was called this name because the people felt one would have to take some magic portion to be able to perform the dance at such a high tempo.

Dibal (2015) notes that music and dance are very important to the African way of life. Beyond being a simple means of artistic expression, dances are sacred, holding deeply symbolic meanings and significance. In Southeastern Nigeria, the *Atilogwu* dance is seen as a strong cultural symbol. The name stems from the belief that

bewitched or magic potions had to be involved if the children of the village would have to perform so exuberantly and energetically, while making it look so effortless. The tempo of the dance matches the tempo of the music, which is dependent on the beat of the drum and “ogene,” a metal gong instrument. The *Atilogwu* dance has been elevated to a dazzling art form, particularly by the Igbo in Anambra State. *Atilogwu* is a strong dance which literally means “Is this magic”? and combines elements of gymnastics with footstomping rhythms and brilliant colours. It is performed by young men and women who undergo intense training before presenting the dance in public. Once approved, the dance is performed during important festivals and great social occasions.

In fact, *Atilogwu* has become a celebrated signature of Nigerian culture, performed around the world. During the dance festival, exotic dishes created from Nigerian recipes are served spectators who grace the occasion to savour the beauty of the dance. According to King (2018), *Atilogwu* has remained a strong cultural identity among the Igbos. It is usually performed during festivals and other big events. Its brand of dance has spread throughout Nigeria and even outside the shores of the country. Some of its important features are:

- It is performed only by youth due to the high amount of energy required to perform it.
- It can take a considerable amount of time to perfect the dance; hence it is often taught to children who then grow to master it.
- It involves a lot of body movements and the dancers are expected to be skilled in acrobatics.
- It is performed by five to six people.
- The dance movement involves high jumps, flips, twisting, climbing and falling down from a human tree.
- Dancers usually put on brightly coloured dress.

### **Atilogwu Dancers**

*Atilogwu* must have been born in Igbo communities, but that did not stop it from been performed in various places in Nigeria. It had the biggest attraction outside its place of origin in Lagos, Nigeria where it grew to international fame. Some people however have played a leading role in positioning the dance as a main stream dance in Nigeria, they include Stephen Chidom, Clement Onwumelu, John Igbokwe (pot xylophonist), Leonard Aliozo, Nkedife, Dominic Onuoha (slit drummer), Sylvanus Anidu (drummer), Ofodile Udeabo alias Amaka, Ogueji Ebuo (flautists), Sylvester Ejiofor, Godwin Ofor (otu ugo). Most of these people have gone to receive national awards and scholarship due to their dance skill and creativity.

### **Ekombi Dance**

According to Akpan & Ekong (2017), *Ekombi* dance is etymologically linked with the sea and all that is in it. The aquatic world remains the pivotal arena where movements are derived and expanded through a musical frame design. The Efiks have great respect for the mermaids and there is a strong belief that her happiness or anger modulates the

social conditions in the society. The origin of *Ekombi* is founded in the traditional religion of the Efik people of Cross River State. Moreover, most Efiks strongly trace the history of *Ekombi* dance to the marine world. An informant, Miss Elizabeth Asuquo, a staff of Cross River State Council for Arts and Culture, says that the knowledge about the origin of *Ekombi* is general among Efiks. According to her, there is a legend that there was a god who went out in search of absolute powers. Although, highly ritualistic, *Ekombi* dance serves a social function because it is being used as a source of entertainment in marriage ceremonies, coronations, naming ceremonies and others. However, it is performed by female dancers and male drummers. While the dancers concentrate on the modulation of the dance movements the musical (ensemble sing and ululate at intervals).

Akpan & Ekong (2017) accounted that the lead drummer is always a man reasoned with great knowledge of sound variations and compositions. The age of the dancers is not defined but there is always a leader who introduces the dance while the others follow suit. The big women with *Onyoryo* (gown) are regarded as the mothers guiding their siblings to glory. There is one basic *Ekombi* movement with a triple rhythm. Others are variations of the same movements.

The costume of the *Ekombi* dance is usually flamboyant because of its elegance and grandeur. They include:

- *Ikpokidcm*: It is a short blouse, a material sewn to cover the breast region of the dancer.
- *Afong Ukot Anwan*: This is a small wrapper tied on the waist, a little above the knee, to cover the nakedness of the dancer.
- *Anana Ubok*: These are long beads worn by the dancers boost the aesthetic appraisal of the dancer.
- *Mkpat Etim (Leg Gingles)*: It is a velvet material decorated with wool of different colours and embellished with tiny bells to add to the rich musical ensemble. It becomes an accessory that compliments the costume.
- *Ekpaku Ubok*: This is an armband made of velvet material and decorated with wool of different colours.
- *Mkpat Etim*: This is a smaller version of *Ekpaku Ubok*. It makes the dancer more appreciable to the audience.
- *Ekara Itong*: This is a little velvet material designed with variety of beads and in circular form with a hole at the middle for the dancer to wear on the neck. It also adds more aesthetics to the dancers costume.

The make-up is usually done with kaolin chalk to create different designs on the dancers' face, notable among them is the serpentine design. In special cases such as traditional marriages, the hair-do of the bride usually differs depending on the status of the bride in the family. For instance, though the hairstyle is basically the same, that is, a large braid in front, two large braids on each side and a long braid behind. That of the *Adiaha* (the first daughter) has a very long braid at the back to the waist level and a long cone at the centre of the head. The front view has two combs; the side braids

also have two combs each; the back view has seven combs while the cone has eight combs making it a total of twenty-one combs. In the case of the Unwa (the second daughter), the front view has two combs, on the sides two combs each, the back view has five combs and is not as long as that of Adiaha, but a little below the shoulder level, and the cone has five combs and is not also as long as that of Adiaha making it a total of sixteen combs. The third daughter (Odunwan) has one comb on the front view, one on each side, four on the back view, which is not as long as that of the second daughter and three combs on the cone, which is also very small. This makes it a total of ten combs. Previously, golden combs were used which is made from brass plates but modernization had brought about the introduction of silver combs made from silver plates. However, the combs still serve the same aesthetic purpose.

The instruments used in the Ekombi dance include Ekomo Iba (Twin Drum), Nsak (Rattle), Mkpri Ekomo (Smal Drums), Ntakrok (Woodenblock), Nkwong (Metal Gong)

### **Dance as a Symbol of Unity**

On the aspect of culture and the society, dance is the expression of the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance of a community. Before the advent of Christianity, people in the riverrine areas appeared to believe in the existence of mermaids who were responsible for endowing them with many gifts ranging from children to wealth and power. They understood the language of rowing the boat or paddling the canoe. All these aspects of culture are reflected in the people's dance egwuamala (canoe dance). The language of a particular culture is used for dance when both instrumental and vocal music are involved (Onwueke, 2006).

It is, therefore, instructive to note, as a performative art, that dancing is one of the numerous modes adopted by man, which communicate messages, tell stories, showcase culture and reveal emotions. Amaku (2019) argued that invariably, through the rhythmic and artistic movement of the head, torso and limbs, man is able to formulate meaning about the nature of the world he lives. Hence, the *Ekombi* cultural dance of the Efik people and *Atilogwu* dance of the Igbo ethnic group is no exception, because it brilliantly offers a window into the worldview of the Efiks and Igbos, as gleaned from its form, functions, features, costume and music. Kansese's (2013) view is in line with Amaku (2019) clarifying the concept of dance as an embodiment of peace, further explaining the nature of Nigerian dance as being motivated by biological experience where the Nigerian man simply expresses his natural function of movement, especially in relation and reaction to his environment. Dance at this phase, is seen as life. The attribute of dance as life is manifested in the various activities or engagements of the Nigerian man which include social, ritual, educational, occupational, recreational, ceremonial, political, and the like. These engagements, which are clearly demonstrated through dance, indicate that the nature of Nigerian dance is primarily down-to-earth as well as a symbol of peace. According to Onwueke (2006), during dancing, every aspect of the human body is exercised. This contributes in no small way

to the general good health of the dancer. As earlier pointed out, it is believed that dance can cure diseases. According to Enekwe, the traditional dance has magical and mystical values. It is used to secure an increase in fertility and good luck and to chase away evil influences and powers.

### **Conclusion**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with over two hundred languages representing the various ethnic groups that make up the country. Each of these ethnic groups have traditional dances that are peculiar to them and that identifies them. And just as football sports unites Nigerians, irrespective of whether you are Ijaw, Hausa, Yoruba or Ibo, these dances can be developed and promoted to the point national relevance. Furthermore, these dances can be developed and promoted to the level of attracting tourists and international visitors into the country during such dance festivals and celebrations, thereby bringing returns to the country. In an attempt to help solve the problem of ethnic conflicts, the government at the Local and State levels should organise dance festivals that celebrate our common values; stressing and teaching the need for tolerance, respect, love, peace and unity as well as the preservation of our shared cultural identity as a nation. A lot of dances exist that preach unity (unity dance), but these are either sponsored by organisations or paid performances. The researcher, therefore, calls on the government and traditional rulers to look in the direction of creating festivals where dance-celebrations and competitions between neighbouring communities will be encouraged with a view to improving the existing relationship among rural communities in Nigeria, especially in areas prone to communal crisis, borrowing a leaf from the Efik and Igbo tribe in Nigeria.

With the installation of dance in the museum, today's museum will be a "theatre, a memory palace, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a space of transport, fantasy, dreams. Thus, the adoption of 'performance strategies that evoke different kinds and qualities of experience' in order to exhibit heritage. For the dances in the traditional African society to attain sustainable height, dance practitioners and choreographers should properly research into the nature, form and aesthetic qualities of these dances so as to elevate their standards through dance composition and design. This will make our dances to be more acceptable by the people. Since alien cultures had continued to encroach into our society, thereby relegating some of our social attributes to the background, traditional dances (such as Ekombi and Atilogwu) should be used by the government towards enlightenment on the need of cultural preservation due to its inherent social, ethnical and religious messages. Also, media coverage of these cultural festivals would also broadcast the nation's cultural heritages to the wider audience/world. Government and other bodies should encourage the practice of periodical cultural festivals where these dance troupes can showcase their artistic gesture.

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