

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND DANCE

**Onwuekwe, Agatha Ijeoma, PhD**

Music Department,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University  
Awka

### **Abstract**

Music is as old as man himself. The origin of music can be looked for in natural phenomena like the songs of the birds, the whirl of the wind, the roll of thunder, the prattling of the rain and the crackling of fire. Through the imitation of these natural phenomena, man came about his music ages ago. Dance on the other hand is patterned and rhythmic body movements, usually performed to music or percussion. Dance is the transformation of ordinary functional and expressive movement into extraordinary movement for extraordinary purposes. Each culture tends to have its own distinctive styles of dance and reasons for dancing. As a result, dance can reveal much about a people and their way of life. This paper sets out to discuss the socio-cultural implications of African music and dance. To this end, the paper looks at African music, African dance and human culture, kinds of dance, dance and the human body, dance and the society, the interrelationship between African music and dance, the importance of dance to the society and finally summary and conclusion.

### **Introduction**

Music in Africa is a natural phenomenon. It is an essential expression of life beginning with gentle lullabies heard in infancy and continuing with the games of childhood and the songs and dances associated with adult responsibilities. Music accompanies and celebrates every rite of passage, birth, and christening, initiation into adulthood, and finally death and mourning.

*Onwuekwe, Agatha Ijeoma, PhD*

---

Dance is a very important aspect of African music as can be seen in the close relationship between body movement and music. In the dance arena it is natural for performers and listeners to move rhythmically. Drummers may move among dancers on the dance ground, and in general, musical performance draws all people present into a unified atmosphere of action.

Writing on dance, Okafor (5) submits:

The dance is an ubiquitous medium of communication or expression in African cultures. By its nature, a Nigerian dance or music engages all the senses in performer and spectator/listener alike. It is the patterning of the human body in time and space in order to give expression to ideas and emotions.

### **African Music**

African music is that music indigenous to Africa. The music involves the language, the customs and values of the society. African languages are characteristically tonal and so the music adheres to the tonal inflection of the words. Writing on the characteristics of African music Ferris (338) observes:

While there is considerable variety in music experience among African tribal cultures, most African music is sung, by solo or chorus, alone or accompanied by musical instruments or by simple clapping and other rhythmic body gestures. Singing is usually loud and enthusiastic, often with a strident quality of voice.

In his write up on the importance of music in Nigerian society, Okafor (vii) says:

Music is integrated with every facet of Nigerian traditional life – from birth to death. Hence in almost

every Nigerian society, musicians are held in very high esteem.

Writing on African music, Microsoft Encarta Premium Suite 2003 explains that:

African music is the music of Black Africans living south of the Sahara, as distinct from the Arab music of North Africa. A rich musical tradition has developed in this vast region of more than 40 nations, each with its own history and unique mixture of cultures and languages.

However, the above does not portray in full what African music really is because we are aware of the fact that not all Africans are black. It would be incomplete to exclude music of Africans who are not black from African music. Although diverse, African music has several traits that are specific to its musical style, one such feature is the use of repetition as an organising principle. A typical example is seen in Mbira music of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Here a repeated pattern is established by the interaction of the hand and the player develops improvisation out of the core pattern. In his views on traditional music as organ of social cohesion, Agu (60) maintains that

Because traditional music is directly associated with traditional religious and political systems and preserved by culture, it generates social experiences which go deep and serves as link which binds each ethnic society; giving each individual that sense of belonging. On the tonal inflection of the words, Onwuekwe, (9) posits:

A word may have one meaning if uttered at a relatively high pitch, and another meaning if uttered at a relatively low pitch, with a third and possibly a fourth meaning if uttered with either a downward or upward inflection.

She goes on to explain that among the Igbo of Nigeria the word "akwa" has different meanings depending on the tone markings of the syllable of the word, thus we have:

ákwà	=	cloth
àkwá	=	egg
àkwà	=	bed
áwká	=	cry

Thus a composer may wish to set to music the following words: *Nwa na-akwa ákwà* (the baby is crying.)

N-wa na - kwa 'kwa, o na - kwa 'kwa.

She now turns out to say *nwa na- akwa ákwà* (the baby is sewing a cloth).

N-wa na - 'kwa 'kwa o na - 'kwa 'kwa

Numerous examples can be given to reflect the above problem. The above musical examples emphasise why tonal inflection in any African language is indispensable in the music when it is recognised that most monosyllabic and disyllabic words have several meanings according to their tonal accents.

### African Dance

African dance has been described by Badejo & Banerji (2002) as "indigenous dance forms practiced by the peoples of the countries of the (sub-Saharan) African continent in social or

religious contexts, for entertainment or as a choreographed art form.”

### **Varieties of Dance within Africa**

The varieties of dance styles and traditions throughout the sub-Saharan continent of Africa are as numerous as the social groups, both urban and rural, of African countries. However, some common aspects may be observed such as the important role of dance as a medium of social and spiritual expression or communication. In Africa the dancer is more than a performer—the dancer is also a teacher, a historian, a social commentator, a celebrant, a spiritual medium, a healer, and a storyteller.

Dances range from the very ancient forms which relate to, for example, fertility, hunting, rites of passage, and the growing and harvesting of crops, to more modern forms which have evolved in response to modern conditions such as the South African *Gum Boot dance*, devised by black mineworkers who, on being forbidden to play music under the apartheid system, used their gum boots as instruments while dancing simultaneously. Other modern styles have evolved in urban society alongside new African musical styles such as Hi-life and Hip up.

As part of a spiritual ritual, dance may be a symbolic form of communication with natural powers, or a trance-inducing movement enabling the dancer to communicate directly with the spirits. In some masked dances, the dancer assumes the temporary identity of a god or a powerful ancestral spirit. In many traditional rural societies, group dances mark rites of passage such as coming of age in which young men or women compete against each other in dance as part of their initiation into adulthood.

African dance often has a strong narrative role, which may have evolved from the practice of hunters relating stories of the day's hunting to the rest of the community. Narrative dance may relate creation myths, tell morality tales, or simply entertain and

amuse. However, dance is also practiced as a purely aesthetic activity. Many African universities have Performing Arts Departments which, as well as ensuring the maintenance of traditional forms, foster the development of choreographed dance forms which are staged and performed both within Africa and all over the world.

### **African Dance in the Diaspora**

According to Badejo & Banerji (2002), African dance spread to the Americas through the slave trade; there it was often influenced by the dances of Europeans and other migrants to the region. Such dances include quadrilles and cotillions, which were adapted from European ballroom dances. In the Caribbean and South America, dance and music (which are inseparable in this context) were a powerful means of maintaining cultural identity for the enslaved Africans. For this reason slave owners often attempted to suppress it, but this was impossible, since anything can be used as a percussive instrument—even without instruments, rhythm can be clapped or stamped with the hands and feet—and the sound of rhythm would lead irresistibly to dance.

Dancing took place to celebrate weddings, funerals, Christmas, and other holidays. Some dance styles were associated with spiritual practices rooted in African religions such as *Shango* worship, *Obeah*, and *Voodoo*. As in the original African dances, the dances had a trance-inducing function in such circumstances—worshippers would become possessed by the spirit of *Shango* or other gods or ancestors through the frenzy of the dance. Even in areas where these religions were suppressed and blacks were persuaded into the Protestant Church, the same ring dances inducing possession, but this time by the Christian Holy Spirit, persisted. These were known as Ring-Shout dances. The John Canoe was a processional dance performed at Christmas time with huge masks and sometimes on stilts, which may have had its origins in the *Jonkunnu* dance.

### **African Dance and Human Culture**

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, power etc. They understood the language of rowing the boat or paddling the canoe. All these aspects of culture are reflected in the people's dance *egwu amala* (canoe dance).

The language of a particular culture is used for dance when both instrumental and vocal music are involved. It is not therefore natural for an indigenous Igbo dance for instance to use the Hausa language or any other language alien to it. The language must be that of the people, because they swim in it, live and die in their language. Writing on the importance of African dance and human culture, Onwuekwe, (91) makes this observation concerning Ebenebe town in Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra State:

The inhabitants are predominantly farmers. Their occupation is highly expressed in their dance... in the dance, their farming implements, which are improvised, are the machetes, and hoes.

She goes on to explain that at the early stage of the dance, the women who mimic the clearing of land for farming take the improvised machetes. The next dance step takes them to the use of the hoe when they mimic the tilling of the ground for planting. The planting of cassava stems in the ground follows this. An observer does not need to be told what is happening as every aspect of the dance is self-explanatory.

Writing on dance and human culture Microsoft (R) Encarta (R) 2006 explains:

Dance can be art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the merely functional movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable, exciting, or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotions, moods, or ideas, tell a story, or serve religious, political, economic, or social needs.

Another important aspect of culture expressed in dance is costume. The costume of any culture is used in their dance. When two or more groups of dancers are gathered in an arena without necessarily dancing, they can be easily identified. The reason being that Nigerian or African dancers put on their indigenous costumes while dancing. They also make use of their indigenous musical instruments, even though musical instruments can be exchanged among the various communities living in close-knit areas. In line with the above view, Eze (2) reiterates:

Dance movement is derived from the everyday movement of the people either at work or in other circumstances for instance, in the dance of hunters, scene from the hunt are depicted and in the case of farmers, movements originated from common place farming activities such as cutting, hoeing and sowing may be illustrated. So also in '*otu egwu*' Njikoka, they employ in their dances working movements, such as carrying of toy guns to demonstrate that their music is story of war and its effects.

Writing on music in Igbo culture, Okafor (26) makes this observation:

The whole point about music in Igbo culture is that it is integral with life and closely related with the other art forms. Under these circumstances, music plays a double role as a medium of cultural

transmission and as music itself. It is a lifelong as well as comprehensive activity. Every Igbo person is expected to make music or perform at a dance at certain points in life.

### **Kinds of Dance**

Writing on kinds of dance, Meisner, (2006) explains that two main kinds of dance exist: dances for participation, which do not need spectators; and dances for presentation, which are designed for an audience. Dances for participation include work dance, some forms of religious dance and recreational dances such as folk dances and popular, or social dances. Because these dances are for everyone in a community, they often consist of repetitive step patterns that are easy to learn.

Presentational dances are performed in any space where an audience can watch. Dancers entertain royalty such as Obas, Emirs, Obongs and many other traditional rulers in their palaces. In African context, presentational dance is usually shown in outdoor arenas and open-air public spaces.

### **Dance and the Human Body**

During dancing, the body can move in many ways, for example, it can rotate, bend, stretch, jump, and turn. By varying these actions and using different dynamics, human beings can devise an infinite number of movements. Within this limitless reserve, each culture emphasises certain aspects in its dance styles. Writing on dance and the human body Meisner (2) opines:

The ordinary potential of the body can be expanded in dance usually through long periods of specialized training. In ballet for example, the dancer practices in order to rotate, or turn out, the legs at the hips producing greater stability and making it possible

to lift the legs higher. In India some dancers learn to undulate their necks and move their eyebrows and eyes as part of the set routine.

He also explains that in dancing, the body makes use of four basic elements:

- Space - floor patterns and the shapes of the moving body;
- Time - tempo, the length of a dance, and rhythmic variations, from taking one's time to making quick stops and starts;
- Gravity - defying gravity with light, graceful movements that give the illusion of weightlessness, surrendering to gravity with heavy or limp movements, or overcoming gravity with explosive, confrontation effort and
- Dynamics - a quality of energy that is tense, restrained or freely flowing.

### **Dance and the Society**

Every society has her own characteristic dancing culture. The physical and psychological effects of dance enable it to serve many functions. Dance often occurs at rites of passage when an individual passes from one role to another. Thus, birth, initiation, graduation, marriage, succession to political office, and death may be marked by dancing in gatherings, festivals or ceremonies. Dance may also be a form of worship, a means of honouring ancestors, a way of propitiating the gods, or a method to effect magic.

The curative properties of music and dance are emphasised by Glennon (2) when he reiterates: "Pythagoras firmly believed in music's power to relieve depression. Galen, the Greek physician (c. 130 - c 200 BC) prescribed music as a cure for snakebite." Nevertheless, Galen's theory had something in common with the fiction associated with the tarantella, an Italian fast dance in <sup>6</sup>/<sub>8</sub> time.

During the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a disease known as tarantism prevailed in southern Italy. The

inhabitants of Taranto, in the old province of Apulia believed that by dancing the tarantella at an increasing speed until they dropped through sheer exhaustion, they would rid the body of the poisonous effect of a bite from a tarantula. Although there was no medical evidence to suggest that the kind of spider found in that part of Italy was dangerously poisonous, the superstition persisted for a long time.

### **The Interrelationship between African Music and Dance**

Music and dance are conceived as interwoven. This is evidenced by the use of one word in some African cultures for music and dance. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the word “*egwu*” means many things such as song, music, dance, play etc. For example *O na-aku egwu* means he or she is playing music or a musical instrument. *O na-agba egwu* means he or she is dancing. *O na-akuzi egwu* means he/she is teaching dance or music. *O na-agu egwu* means he/she is singing a song. Further, the following Nigerian words have been noted as representing both music and dance.

1. Ráwá = Hausa
2. Fate = Kanuri
3. Raye = Berom (Plateau State)
4. Egwo = Igala

Writing on the interrelationship between music and dance, Ezegbe (1983) explained that among the Ewe of Southern Ghana, Volta Region, singing and dancing are joined by a conjunction as in some African cultures such as the Ewe ethnic group who would say “*Hajiji kple Yedudu*” (Singing and Dancing) in which *Hajiji* stands for singing *kple* stands for and, while *Yedudu* stands for dance.

The Efiks of southern Nigeria would say “*Ikwo ye unek*”, meaning singing and dancing.

### **The Importance of Dance to the Society**

The importance of dance in any society cannot be overemphasised. In the first place dance can be seen as an agent of bringing people together. Once a group of dancers are performing, naturally people gather to watch. In line with the above view, Enekwe (11) states:

Dance serves a vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of communion with each other. As a result, people are liberated from the bonds of individuality... societies whose traditional values are still intact tend to value the cohesive or unifying effects of the dance.

Dance helps to preserve the people’s culture in the sense that the language of the people is used in their dance where vocal music is involved. The dancers also make use of local costumes for dance performances. The beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of the people are expressed in their dance the musical instruments of the people are used for dancing. Therefore it is not possible for an indigenous African dance to use trumpet or saxophone or any western musical instrument as this may bring disharmony.

Dance helps in no small way in the physical well being of an individual. 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 has earlier been pointed out, it is believed that dance can cure diseases.

According to Enekwe (12)

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.

Dance is very important in masking, because it has hypnotic effect according to Enekwe. Dance leads to autohypnosis and ecstasy, thus, liberating participants from the day-to-day experiences of mind and body.

Dance permeates the social life of Nigerians. Not only does it offer young men and women opportunity to show off themselves, thus encouraging courtship, it provides training for work and combat. A good example of dance that is related to courtship is the "Nkwa Umu Agbogho" of Afikpo in Imo State. This particular performance which is performed by young girls, used to be a traditional dance in honour of a hero in wrestling contest. History has it that the Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe met one of his wives - Uche when she was dancing to the titillating dance rhythm of the "Nkwa Umu Agbogho" of Afikpo.

### **Conclusion**

The paper looked at the socio-cultural implications of African music and dance. African music is the indigenous music of Africa handed down from one generation to the other. The composers of some of these African music are not known since there are no documentations. Music and dance permeate every facet of human endeavour in Nigeria so much so that It is difficult to witness a social gathering that is devoid of music and the accompanying dance. A lot of benefits accrue from music. It is an indispensable organ of cultural transmission and social control. At any time of the day or night, music is heard in different forms and in different places. There is no traditional art that is as widely practiced as music and dance. No wonder then that Okafor and Emeka (105) declared:

Music is unquestionably, the most widely practiced of the traditional arts in Nigeria. At any time of night or day, somewhere in the land, some music is being made.

### **Works Cited**

- Agu, D.C.C. "Music in Nigerian Cultures: Types and Practices". *Nigerian Peoples and Culture*. Eds. G.C.Unachukwu, N. Ojiakor, and G. Okafor. Enugu: John Jacob's Classic Publishers, 2003: 57-69.
- Badejo, P. and S. Banerji. African Dance. Microsoft (R) Encarta (R) Encyclopedia (c) 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation USA, 2002.
- Enekwe, O.O. *Theories of Dance in Nigeria*. Nsukka: Afa Press, 1991.
- Eze, C. O. Music and Dance and Social Commitment in Nigeria: A case study of Egwu Njikoka Cultural Dance. Paper Presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Musicological Society of Nigeria (MSN). Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, 2006 .
- Ezegbe, C. C. Lecture Memeograph on African music, Anambra State College of Education Awka, 1983.
- Ferris, J. *Music: The Art of Listening*. London: Brown & Benchmark, 1995.
- Glennon, J. *Understanding Music*. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- Meisner, N. Dance. Microsoft (R) Encarta (R) [DVD] Microsoft Coporation USA, 2006.
- Microsoft (R) Encarta (R) Dance. Premium Suite (2003) : Microsoft Coporation USA.
- Okafor, R. C. and L. N. Emeka. "Cultural Expressions in Nigeria. *Nigerian Peoples and Culture*. Eds. R. C. Okafor, L. N. Emeka, and E. Akumah. Enugu: G. S. Unit, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, 1994: 104 - 123.
- Okafor, R.C. *Ezeagu Atilogwu: The legendary Igbo Troupe*. Enugu: New Generation Books, 1998.
- Okafor, R. C. *Music in Nigerian Society*. Enugu: New Generation Books, 2005.
- Onwuekwe, A. I. African Music Composition and Tonal Inflection of the Indigenous Words: The case of Igbo language. *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*. Nnamdi Azikiwe University,

Awka: The Society for the Development of African Philosophy, Science and Technology (SODAPSAT), 2005.

Onwuekwe, A. I. Music and Cultural Expression in Nigeria: Historical and Contemporary Trends. In N. Ojiakor & I. Ojih (Eds.) *Readings in Nigerian Peoples and Culture*. 80 – 98. Enugu: NGIB Publishers, 2006.