

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS AFRICAN DANCE: A PARADIGMATIC APPRAISAL OF NKPOKITI OF UMUNZE.

*Ofobuike Nwafor*

### **Abstract**

*A typical African society is characterized by indigenous performances that embody the cultural attributes of the people. These performances are often structured in the form of dance and are used to mark significant events in the community. Dance being a performing art has the tendency and potency to evolve and take a new form inline with the socio-cultural changes of the society, and this evolution has come to be known as dance development. Dance development is the different stages of evolution a dance has undergone to get to its present stage. It is those changes that occurred in a dance, and are often caused by some factors. In this study the focus will be to reveal those factors that necessitate these changes and how they have contributed in structuring the indigenous dances of today, and also to discover what a dance stand to gain by yielding to those agents of change and the resultant consequence of remaining adamant.*

### **Introduction**

Dance is an art form that generally refers to movement of the body, usually rhythmic and used as a form of expression, social interaction and presented in a performance setting. Dance is innate to Africans. It is not what they do or practice, but the life they live. Dances have a place in almost all ritual and social activities in Nigeria. They play a vital role in the life

of Africans from cradle to grave (Iyeh 20). A dancer is a communicator. He communicates with the audience through his body. The amount of appreciation accrued to a dancer depends on his level of communication during performance. The human body speaks a number of languages varying from what we do with the body to how we employ the space and native elements around us. The body provides good source of unscripted message outside speech (Anne 94).

Dance is also believed to be the outward rhythmic expression of emotion. These emotion are expressed to the delight and understanding of the people. Nwaozuzu believes that dance is more than a mere aesthetic diversion but a therapeutic ritual and the expression of life's emotion (23). Traditional dances are highly spiritual extension of human experiences and express realities (Udoka 228). Unlike that of conservative Europeans, Africans dances especially that of Nigerians are highly expressive in nature. The expressive behaviour of Africans can also be seen in their audience as well - Africans believe in on the spot assessment - during performance. Emotions are not bottled up or put to check by Africans, they are expressed as they come and dance is one of the ways these emotions are expressed. Margaret H' Doubler explained that the necessity of some form of creative art (dance inclusive) expression is good for healthy mental life. She went on to declare that mental science is revealing more clearly the nature of those deeper emotional tensions that arise when powerful feelings are checked within the mind with no opportunity for expression (162).

Dance is said to be the celebration of life. This is because

in Africa there is nothing like dance for dance sake. Every dance has a purpose. The various dance movements, represent some very important occasion in their lives as individual and society in general. This can be observed in ceremonies such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death, planting and harvesting, hunting, war and feast, the change of the moon, celebration of chieftaincy and so on. ( Akas 50). The dance performed during tragic events such as burials and cleansing, may vary in movement, rhythm and tempo, from the ones preformed during marriage, naming ceremony and coronation because the emotion which they express differ. In all they are celebrating life though for deferent purpose. The human body is vital in relation to dance. It is the major instrument which the dancer relies upon during performance. The body movement in dance assumes a symbol stance with meaning which ordinary words can hardly relay. Unlike plastic art dance those not exist in a particular permanent form. Its performance can never be the exact same when repeated. Dance is operational and exists in time and space. It vanishes with the same speed with which it comes. The real dance exist is in the mind. Dance has no solid shape, it is an ephemeral art. In other words dance is a dynamic art form that exists in time and space. It is an external art form because it makes use of the human body. Therefore, man created the art of dance on his body. The dance movement is captured in the mind and is transformed into dance through the body. After performance the dance dwells in the mind of the audience for as long as possible, thus the aftermath analytical discussion.

Dance is the backbone of African festivals and not just

one of its characteristics. "Dance as it is in Africa is not a separate art" (Iyeh 20). It is the dominant and one of the oldest of all the arts in Africa and is believe to be as old as man. Dance might have come into being as a religious practice in the shrine. Observing the happenings around him - heavy downpour, whirlwind, erosion, drought, famine and earthquake - the primitive African sought for a way to appease the 'unknown god'. Arguably, the pioneer dancers were the chief priests. To communicate with the gods, they dance around the shrine chanting incantations. The history of dance may be long as the history of mankind. We can only guess how dance looked like in epochs due to its ever changing form. Though African dance is highly artistic and well entertaining, it is deeply rooted in ritual. In traditional African societies, examples abound of dance movement whose utilitarian dispositions include exorcising illness and other form of misfortune (Nwaozuzu 1). To understand the development of dance it is paramount to look at it from three perspectives. Firstly; the origin of the dance – what inspired its creation and how was it created? Secondly; the evolution processes it has undergone – what made it to evolve and how did the evolution affect the dance? And thirdly; the form it has taken at present – what element did it shed and which ones were acquired. Indigenous dance in Nigeria and Africa at large is a complete institution, which is based on societal facts and values. "In Africa, indigenous dance had its origin and identity before the pre-colonial and Islamic era" (Omojola 16). For better understanding of dance development in Africa as stated in this paper, Nkpokiti dance will serve as the subject of inquiry and the perspective is from the Igbo speaking tribe of Nigeria.

### **The Challenges of Dance Development in Africa**

Development has to do with growth and increase. It can also mean expansion. Dance development means the various stages or evolutionary processes a dance had gone through from its origin to present. Most indigenous African dance seems not to have done much in the area of development. Their instrument, costume, style of presentation, movement, and rhythm seems not to have gone beyond what it uses to be from the beginning. The cause of the problem based on Omofolabi's account can be traced back to the early days of urbanization, when members of same community found themselves stocked and somehow lost in the big cities. All clamoured for their voices to be heard. Members of same communities in the cities gather themselves under the umbrella of progressive or development unions. Then the mindset was "showmanship of cultural heritage". Dances from these communities were either transported to the cities to perform during important occasions by the unions or members of the unions learnt the dances themselves from the performers back home in the community and perform whenever the need arises (7). The first public performances of these dances were marked as a big occasion. It was known as "Ibuputa egwu" (dance lunching). This was the birth of cultural dances.

The arrival of cultural dances came with its prospects and challenges. Now new dancers are acknowledged based on their ability to dance like those that thought them. One is said not to have learnt well if he or she tries to add or contribute its own creative process. These dances thereby were handed

down from generation to generation without any serious effort by the recipients to infuse some new elements into it. And this attributed greatly to the reason for the stunted growth of indigenous African dances. For example, the Atiliogwu dance of today is the same with the Atiliogwu of old. It is believed that dance can be an effective tool for the preservation of culture, and the loss of indigenous culture of a people will be disastrous to the cultural identity and future well-being of the society (Mbaki 67). But the quest to protect a people's culture from extinction should not be blinded from the fact that when culture refuses to yield to the demands of the present age, it stands the risk of being abandoned and eroded by time. The attempt for dance to serve as a tool to sustain the "culture of old" led to its stunted growth in Nigeria and Africa at large. "Culture of old" implies those attitudinal behaviours and socially accepted pattern of life for which a people is known and govern, that were in existence when these dances were created and tend to reflect. If such dance is to be presented today without any conscious effort to infuse some new elements into it by way of adaptation and updating its content for cultural relevance and aesthetics, such performance will not have concretized its significance to anything contemporaneous as a way of consolidating its relevance. Culture is the way of life of a people. What this means is that culture is in the present and not in the past. Since dance is a reflection of its society, it means that the cultural dances of today are not reflecting today's society because they have refused to develop, evolve or transcend into a contemporaneous form.

Indigenous dances also suffer a huge setback in the hands of the colonizers of Africa. The missionaries in their zealousness to prove the superiority of their religion branded everything culturally indigenous to Africans as fetish and barbaric, and dance was not an exception. Nwoko reported that “for a long time, the missions fought against the African's desire to dance” (462). Ojo-Ade explained that after the conquering of Africa the Europeans transformed into “conquistador conscientism”. By this Ojo-Ade was making reference to what we have come to know today as civilization - a perspective which brands everything that is of African origin to being absolutely bad, and this was as a result of the fact that Europeans have some edge over Africa in terms of development. “As such every indigenous traditional bequest is seen in the light of being barbaric, savage, beastly and uncivilized” without any attempt to study and relate to the circumstances that gave rise to them (57).

The early African converts were made to understand by aliens (Europeans) that the life they live has nothing good to offer. Most elite Africans rejected their way of life (culture) as a result of inferiority complex. The impact of colonization continued to relegate dance even after independence in the 1960s. Omofolabi informed that,

African nationalist treated their own heritage of dance in a prejudicial fashion relegating it to a quasi-informal national cultural policy. Some independent African nations gave dance no serious attention. They saw dance as an unserious business which should occupy the bottom shelf in terms of scale of preference (5).

However a life line was given to indigenous African dances especially in Nigeria by the hosting of Festival of Arts and Black Cultures in 1977 (FESTAC '77). Indigenous dances were brought from remote villages to the cities for competition at the state and nationally organized dance festivals. This development mark the dawn of a new and positive attitude towards indigenous culture particularly dance because the;

...catchy slogan of the revival of our national heritage, formulated by Nigeria, the hosting country for FESTAC '77, catapulted dance into national preeminence and almost to the forefront of the country's policy on the arts. Dance virtually became the symbol of the frenetic preparation for the event (Omofolabi 5).

With the kind of exposure given to indigenous African dance during FESTAC '77, one expected that dance will not only be at the forefront of social activities but will also be one of Africa's greatest exports. Surprisingly dance took a nosedive after the razzmatazz of FESTAC '77. Indigenous African dances could not go beyond FESTAC'77 because the dances were lifted out of their covens without any form of adjustment or adaptation for a modern stage. As a result the creativity and aesthetic impact of the dances were seriously affected. Moreover the dances had been taken out of their actual performance contexts with no attempt to give them new ones and tie their significance to something concrete and relevant for viewers in a changing culture perspective. The cultural aspects of these dances were lost and the resultant effect was a “show piece of movement without substance or meaning”. Thus these dances

had no elongated life span. Their relevance did not embrace anything concrete for the contemporary Africans to relate on steady bases (Omofolabi 6).

Since FESTAC'77 several efforts have been geared towards reigniting the dance passion, and notable among them was a national symposium held on dance at the University of Ibadan in 1987, but the effort yielded no positive result. This is because dance is a reflection of its host community. The relationship between dance and its society is symbiotic. Dance gives back to the community what it got from it, because it is the activities of the society that shapes the dance. Peggy Harper was of the opinion that dance movement,

is a practical demonstration of the physical circumstances that exists in the society such as their occupation, belief and custom. Dance design, which involves a specific relationship between performers and their audience, depends on some organization and attitude in a community as raw materials for it production (1).

Indigenous African dances reflected the societies of those that developed it. The dances of today should also reflect today's society for it to be accepted. The history of dance is a narration of those changes in attitude and behavioural pattern of a people in a given time. These fluctuations are what gives rise to the concepts of art a given period its own distinctive qualities (Primus 6).

### **History of Nkpokiti Dance**

The origin of Nkpokiti dance can be traced back to the year

1947, when a primary school teacher by name Festus Nwankwo organized a group of pupils at St. Joseph Primary School Umunze and began to teach them the rudiments of traditional Igbo dance. The exercise was aborted when Mr. Festus Nwankwo gained admission into St. Anthony's Teachers Training College Agulu. Nwankwo completed his training in 1959 and returned to St. Joseph's Primary school to start all over gain. He immediately began to assemble a new group which he trained with in the evenings and during physical training sessions. During a sports event marking the feast of St. Patrick on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of March 1960, they performed to the delight of the spectators and this marked its first public performance. The dance suffered a setback when Mr. Festus Nwankwo was admitted to St. Charles Training College Onitsha for further training in 1962. After training Nwankwo was posted to another school and all his effort to starts a new dance group there yielded no positive result.

Fortunately for Umunze community, Mr. Nwankwo was transferred back to St. Joseph's Catholic School Umunze where he had organized his first group. This time he achieves his objective of combining dance and acrobatics in an aesthetically satisfying form. The dance was initially called "Egwu-Umuakwukwo" (Students dance) but was unanimously renamed Nkpokiti dance by the spectators at Ajali, a neighboring town to Umunze, during a performance in an event marking Nigeria independence from Britain. Nkpokiti was the nickname of Festus Nwankwo, a name he acquired when he challenged and beat up a well known village bully who was twice his size.

### The Development of Nkpokiti Dance

Nkpokiti dance is a combination of various indigenous dances namely, the “egwu ogbagu” (ogbagu dance), “Atilogwu”, “Ihediegwu”, “Igba dance” “Ijele dance” and some other dances. These dances existed on their own individual capacity even before the arrival of the colonizers of Africa. They were performed by different groups in various communities. The ogbagu dance movement was borrowed from a night masquerade called “Ogbagu”. As a dreaded night masquerade “Ogbagu” performs before initiated members only. Nwankwo was the best dancer among the ogbagu crew during his days. The “Atilogwu” dance is a well known among the Igbo speaking tribe of Nigeria. It exists virtually in all the communities. The “Ihediegwu” dance is originally from Umunze town. It is the traditional dance of Umunze people. “Igba dance” is a chieftaincy dance. It is usually performed during festivals and burial of a hero. The Ijele dance is from the King masquerade known as Ijele.

Nwankwo downplayed or rather shed the ritual aspect of these dances and stressed their artistic qualities to suite the modern African environment brought by colonization. He brought different indigenous dances together and adapts them into one aesthetic and artistic form. Basically Nwankwo pulled these dances from out from their natural coven, devoid them of their sacred essence while retaining its artistic and aesthetic form. Nkpokiti is a compartmentalized dance that is cemented together by acrobatic punctuation. After the performance at Ajali, the group was invited to perform at the premises of NTA Enugu by a staff of the station that witnessed

the performance. During the Enugu tour Nwankwo saw the prospects ahead and the need for Nkpokiti dance to upgrade their general image to fit into the new level of exposure they have achieved. Traditional cap with eagle feather and singlet were introduced in their costume. Acrobatics were added to the already existing kinesthetic. The music was supported with more instruments and players. It was also during this period that the group went professional.

Nkpokiti dance made its first national impact in 1970 when it represented the East Central State of Nigeria and took the first position and won the first ever highly coveted golden gong, at the National Festival of Arts. A position he maintained in 1971 and 1972. Nkpokiti came to world recognition when it thrilled the world at the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977. But before the group went for the competition some adjustments were made to enhance their overall impact. Their costume was improved from singlet and pants to a more complex one. They had a head gear in the form of a cap woven with 'Ngara" (a kind of palm tree with thorns on the palm leaves.) and their pants were stream-lined on the edge. Around the legs were some metal rattles which help to give vibrations with the movement of the legs. Songs were added to their music to enhance communication during the performance. Able bodied adults were added to the group to assist particularly in the area of acrobatics. Their duties consist mainly to carry the bulk of the weight during high-rise acrobatic stunts.

Henceforth, Nkpokiti has performed in various parts of the world such as; United States of America, Jamaica, West

Germany, Cuba, Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad, Venezuela, Korea, Ethiopia and still counting. Nkpokiti has won a lot of trophies, among which is the 1984 United Nations Gold Medal. It currently features in Nigerian five Naira currency note. Trilled by their performance Jegede opined that the factor responsible for the achievements of Nkpokiti dance is that they danced effortlessly with an amount of confidence that is far above their young age. He went further to say that every movement of the dancers during performance is embellished in a demeanor and graciousness that cannot but command respect (Enekwe, 8). Nkpokiti dance is a marriage between complex indigenous movements and acrobatic stunts that are characterized by suspension in the air with an impression of total disobedience to the law of gravity. Jegede went further to describe Nkpokiti as "An endless whirl of motions and pattern in the air", an orchestra of spirits navigating the abyss to celebrate with the living (Enekwe 10). Nkpokiti dance never cease to develop. As they travel they keep developing themselves by picking up new things and dropping some old irrelevant ones. Nkpokiti' have some foreign acrobatic borrowed from some performing troupe they met in countries such as China, Ethiopia and Bulgaria. The acrobatics are named after the country from where they were borrowed. Bakare confirmed the evolution characteristics of Nkpokiti when he said that the unprecedented achievement recorded by troupe is as a result of the high level of exposure and interaction they have acquired. Nwankwo accepted the above view when he said during an interview that they have not gone to any

competition and came back the same. Nkpokiti dance was able to achieve all this because Nwankwo understands the importance of dance development and its relevance to a performance troupe.

Traditional performances, particularly dance need to develop with the ever changing culture of the society to meet what Obiechina called "the practical pressure of the present age" and according to Nzewi "serve audiences that are strangers to the latent nuances and symbolisms of Igbo (indigenous) rituals" (Enekwe 150). This is because at present, most Africans are no longer informed about their rituals. If the indigenous performances should remain useful to Africans of today, they should transcend to a new form and tie their significance to something concrete. The cultural dance of today should reflect the current African culture. For any Nigerian traditional dance to survive therefore, it has to be on the developmental terrain, with its pace corresponding with the changes that abound in the society occasioned by contacts with other parts of the world. Other wise it risks abandonment and consequently death (Bakare 12).

### **Conclusion**

Change is constant and continuous. It is not a substance that can be touched, but can be felt in every facet of human life. To appreciate indigenous dances today, they must acknowledge the changes that have occurred with time in the society. Some indigenous African dances failed to evolve with the society which it claimed to reflect. The implication of this is that dance is an art of the past. FESTAC '77 gave indigenous

dances the entire necessary platform to excel, but the opportunity was not utilized. Based on Ajayi's report, these dances were recorded on celluloid during FESTAC 77, and have been viewed over and over again. The people have seen it all. Since there was nothing new to offer after FESTAC '77 the razzmatazz died naturally (6). At present time seems to have eroded cultural dances. The desire to visit a performance venue to watch dance performance has died. Today these dances are nothing more than mere "cultural monuments", befitting only for burials and other rural matters.

Suffice to say that dance has always existed in all human societies. It has been a part and parcel of man as it has always been a portrayal and manifestation of man and his activities and the ever occurring changes in his life. Dance development lies in its ability to evolve with the changes of the time in its society. Indigenous dances reached an unprecedented height in the 1970s because the mindset then was "cultural revival". In this era of globalization the objective is no longer in the "revival" but in the acquisition of strategies to evolve and bring about the synthesis of old ideas and skills with new ones (Nnamani 73). African dance should transcend and reflect these cultures for it to survive relegation. As a flexible art, dance should be on the upward course of development. Dance practitioners have to borrow a leaf from Festus Nwankwo on what he did with Nkpokiti dance, i.e. adapting the old indigenous dances into a new form so that the contemporary Africans and the world at large can relate to it on continuing bases. "The old must flow into the new... not blind itself or stand foolishly apart" (Soyinka 54).

### **Recommendation**

The way a people live today is the culture they have. African dancers should do away with the sentimental emotional attachment to their past culture and embrace the new "Afro-culture" that was born the moment their part crossed with that of their colonizers. Afro-culture was born by colonization, developed by modernism and strengthened by globalization. It is a refined way of life by the contemporary Africans. Refine in the sense that it has shed most of its complexities. Science and technology should be given a place in this call for development. The local musical instruments should give way for modern factory produced ones, which should be lighter in weight, smaller in size, and durable. Performances can be done with recorded music if necessary because this will reduce the cost of production and encourage patronage.

Like drama and music, dance should have its own full fledged department in institutions of higher learning, with option in indigenous African dance. Nollywood and its contemporaries in Africa should do what their Asian counterpart did with their marshal art. Before the advancement of technology marshal art was unknown to the world. But through films, marshal art was projected into the international arena. Africans should infuse dance into their productions. Stories with dance as its main theme should be produced as movies. Finally, the society - Organizations and individuals - should learn to appreciate dancers. Their welfare package should always be paramount. Nwankwo complained bitterly during interview about the ill treatment that was meted out on Nkpokiti dancers by Government officials during one of the

tours. Top among others complaints was the embezzlement of fund that was meant for Nkpokiti dancers. Issues like this can be discouraging.

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