

DANCE AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION: THE OWIGIRI DANCE EXPERIENCE**Dr. Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye****Rudolph Kansese****ABSTRACT**

Dance, as one of the performing arts is mostly used for entertainment. In this case, the art form is largely seen as an aesthetic enterprise with little or no utilitarian value. However, some dances, in spite of their being aesthetic are influenced by utilitarian components or movements. This is the situation with the owigiri dance which was initiated as an aesthetic work of art is driven by other traditional dances. These traditional dances such as penge, abo, agene, owu, konkonba, osundu and feletei have cultural annotations and interpretations. The appreciation of the owigiri performance therefore as an aesthetic art, especially at social gatherings should always be done with cultural interpretations of movements and materials used in the dance. This is the legitimate way the owigiri dance can be appreciated wholly as a means of communication.

INTRODUCTION

Dance is usually seen as a medium through which information, messages and ideas are communicated by the dancer's body to onlookers. The dancer engages in movement patterns which are often symbolic and sometimes reflect some true life situations. According to Bakare (1994: 2), dance "...is used to communicate; put across a message; express a thought". This introduces us to the human factor of dance. It is in this vein that Hanna (1980: 3) sees dance as "human behaviour".

Such behaviour mostly is reflective of the cultural norms of the dancer. Hanna explains further that "dance is cultural behaviour" of a people, it communicates their values, attitudes, and beliefs (Hanna 1980: 3). Such cultural behaviour of dance highlights different world views of the performer which Harper declares as religious, ritual or ceremonial; social organisation; political organisation; economic or occupational; history or mythology; educational; recreational and entertainment (Harper 1968: 6). All these factors inhabit the body of the dancer; they determine

the manner of his or her movement. Any traditional Nigerian dance may exhibit some or all of these mannerism; these mannerism are always communicated as the dance is performed.

The cultural behaviour of Nigerian dance does not rely on the movement of the body alone. There is display of various expressive modes of culture; these are usually incorporated into the dance. As a matter of fact, most Nigerian dances cannot survive on the dancers' movement alone. These cultural modes are appurtenances to dance movement, and together, dance is able to communicate ideas to the comprehension of the audience. These expressive modes are captured by different scholars, for instance, Monyeh (2007:111) observe them as of mime, costume, makeup, music and song. For Ogene (2007: 196) they are sculpturing, painting, ceramics, graphics, and textiles. Anigala (2005: 29) sees Nigerian dance as expressing characters, mime, mask and music. Graft (1976: 9) mentions mime and music in dance while Osanyin (1988: 154) observes the incorporation of music, dance, poetry, masking and topicality. Adedeji (2000: 139) notes the inclusion of mimetic masks, chants, song, gesture, costume, myths, legends, folktales, sculptures and other artistic manifestations. Nzewi (1981: 433) also observe the expression of mime, gymnastics and acrobatics and Monyeh (2007: 111) notices the expression of movement, mime, costume, makeup, music and song in Nigerian dance performance. All these modes are subsumed into Nigerian traditional dance performance where they become living arts (Osanyin: 1988: 155).

The *owigiri* dance of Bayelsa State as a social performance is mainly used for entertainment. It is composed of other Izon dance patterns such as *abo*, *agene*, *penge*, *owu*, *konkonba*, *osundu* and *feletei*. These dances are full-fledged dance forms in their own rights and are laden with symbolic gestures. These symbolic gestures with the accompaniment of costume, makeup, props and other expressive modes are used to communicate ideas, messages and philosophies of the dances to spectators. The paper examines the expressive modes of *owigiri* dance as a unit as well as the expressive patterns of the dance styles that make-up the *owigiri* dance form.

OWIGIRI DANCE AND ITS EXPRESSIVE MODES

The *owigiri dance* originated in 1985 through a particular music composed by a foremost Izon musician in Bayelsa State in Nigeria called I. K. Belemu. Although, I. K. Belemu did not invent

the *owigiri dance* style, his song, which was responsible for the creation was more of call to dance. The lyrics of I. K. Belemu in the Izon dialect go as thus:

Lyric in Izon Language

Owigiri sei mo bo emi yo

Owigiri sei mo bo emi yo

E ba tie ke tie ma?

I. K. Ebi gban ogele dig ban ne sera

Binyen waibo fada ke ton

English Translation*Owigiri dance has come**Owigiri dance has come**Why are you still standing?**Watch closely the dance steps of I. K. B**Just shake your waist and you are done*

Dancers, especially partygoers began to react to the music with individual dance expressions. At first, there was no significant attempt to achieve synchronism of movement or dance pattern until a man popularly called Afruruku who hails from Aleibiri town in Ekeremor Local Government Area in Bayelsa State started to make significant inroads as a dancer. He began to dance to the melody in a particular captivating dance pattern which was repeated severally at different occasions, especially at parties. This dance style became so inspiring to other dancers that they started to adopt the same pattern. This is how the dance became popular among the Izon people.

The dance was initially created from the *penge* dance movement. Of course the *penge* dance is a traditional dance of the Izon people. So at this initial stage the *owigiri* was essentially done in the *penge* style. Later on, other Izon traditional dance styles such as *agene*, *abo*, *owu*, *konkonba* and *osundu* began to influence the dance as well. From the origin of the dance to the present, the dance has been subjected to series of refinements. One of such refinements is the addition of a new dance style called *feletei* to the *owigiri* dance genus. But despite the refinements the original content of the dance remains the same.

In *penge* dance the dancer thrust his or her buttocks out by bending forward. He or she then vibrates as well as rotates the waist region. A skilful dancer accomplishes these movements with so much ease as if the waist and buttocks are moving on their own accord without the dancer's effort. While these movements are going on, other parts of the anatomy like the shoulders, hands, head, face are seen executing other contrasting movements. For the *abo* dance,

the dancer goes to a near squatting position and knees move inward and outward. The *agene* dance is similar to the *penge* dance as the dancer takes his position by thrusting his or her buttocks out and bending forward to dance. However, the dancer's movement here is ponderous. The dancer pounds on the ground with the feet in quick succession and occasionally leaping into the air. The *osundu* dance was originally choreographed by a traditional musician in the late 1960s. The rhythm of the dance is quite slow with the dancer moving swaying from side to side with the legs shuffling either forward, backward, sideways or on the spot. The *kokonba* does not require the dancer to cover much space except for when he or she takes a few steps forward or backward. The main theme of the movement is executed with the dancer moving his or her torso from side to side with a lot of concentration. In another movement, the dancer vibrates the body and bends close to the ground. As soon as the dancer is satisfied with this position he or she gradually rises up slowly like a cautious hunter about to catch a prey. The *feletei* dance movement is graceful as if the dancer's body from the waist upward is falling to the right and to the left. The hands are positioned like the wings of a bird flying in the sky. The wrists and hands of the dancer are active and the fingers spread out as if clearing dirt from the surface of water.

Owigiri dance is often used to communicate different ideas to the spectators. The supposed temperament of the dancer is often revealed in his or her dance expressions. The *osundu* dance step for instance communicates a state of sadness; this is equally clear in the movement which is slow or leisurely executed. The *penge* or *agene* dance step on the other hand is fast and energetic and convey a mood of bliss or happiness. According to a traditionalist in Izonland, Emeka Odogu, the *owigiri* dance captures the lifestyle and mood of the Izon man in his daily activities. He states further that:

The *owigiri* dance is a way the Izon man expresses his feelings at a particular time. The dance has a variety of dance steps that will suit any music, so the dancer can pick any dance step that can indicate his state of mind at any point in time. if he is happy there is the bright and energetic "agene" dance step to indicate this and if he is unhappy he can dance the slow and smooth "abalande" dance movement to match his mood...

Originally, *penge* is an entertainment dance done by maidens usually at the end of festivals. The dance is laden with dramatic sketches which portray different social issues such as marital problems, family disputes, polygamy, heroism, strength, happiness and sadness. Legendary stories and myths are also re-enacted during these sessions. The dance is composed of two segments: free flow dance and dance-drama. *Penge* dance is also called *ogun-sei* because the musical accompaniment to the dance is mainly provided by clay pots. The clay pots are called *ogun*, and *ogun-sei* means “clay pot dance”. This means that the dance derived its name from clay pot. The clay pots, about six in number are half filled with water and are played by the lead-musician. Other musicians play skin drums to accompany music produced by striking the clay pots.

Penge is the only dance where makeup, props, costume, mime and dialogue are freely used without reservation. These materials are employed to freely demonstrate the people’s ways of living and their occupation. Those living by the river side usually display their fishing nets, paddles, cutlasses and spears. Dancers who display tapping knives, iron poles, cutlasses, clay pots indicate that the people are professional palm wine tappers. Performers who make use of raffia palms for costumes demonstrate that their profession is connected to the manufacturing of local objects such as baskets, mats, fishing traps, hats, bamboo seats, masks and talisman. These materials are often used during the dance to convey different ideas. With the employment of these materials, dramatic sketches are freely acted out. In a case where a particular material cannot be displayed, the performers make sure that such item is either mimed or mentioned in the course of the dance.

The *owigiri dance* is also used to tell the marital status of a man or a woman. While executing the dance in a public gathering, women that are not yet married simply (if they so desire) raise both hands by pointing upwards their index fingers. This is a nonverbal communication where women openly declare their status of being single and in search of the opposite sex. The message is always clear to men; those who are willing to answer such open invitation approach the women and dance with them. This is usually a way of getting opposite sexes together to start a relationship or simply have fun while the dance last. Since the communication is expected to be shared by unmarried men and women, it is presumed that those

married would not be involved in this part of the dance which is by respecting the sanctity of their matrimony. However, this is not always the case as some married women, pretending to be unmarried also raise their hands to attract men in order to woo them.

As a medium of expression, the dance can be used to make various societal statements. For instance, through the dance the social status of the dancer can be identified. In the case of elites or highly placed personalities, dance styles such as *agene* and *abo* are avoided. The reason is that these dances are extremely engaging and energetic. They usually prefer to express themselves with the *kokonba* and *feletei* dance movements because of their (these dances) graceful nature. As for the common people, they freely engage in any dance styles in accordance with their desires.

Apart from communicating with movement phrases, the dancers also communicate with their makeup, costume and props. The application of makeup differs according to the location of the Izon people. Dancers, especially the females who live and perform by the sea shores tend to wear heavier makeup because of the windy atmosphere. The reason for such thick makeup is to make it last longer on the face and preventing the wind from completely clearing the cosmetics from the dancers' faces. Applying heavy cosmetics is a common experience even with the inhabitants residing around the seashore. Those in the hinterland do not wear their makeup as heavy as their seashore neighbours but tend to wear them more frequently. The reason for this is that the cosmetics due to the heat of the sun often melts and merge with sweat thereby smearing their faces. By so doing, they have to frequently wear their makeup.

Costume is another medium through which dancers communicate ideas. The costumes used by performers at the sea shore of Izon communities like Ogulagha, Sokobolo, Bonny, Brass and Aghoro are thick and heavy because of the windy nature of the weather, while the costumes used by people in the hinterland are light because of the heat experienced in these areas. Apart from using costume to communicate the geographical location of the people, it is also used to classify social status. For instance, a woman who wears a single wrapper and a blouse or wears a skirt or trousers is usually seen as single. This nonverbal communication status of the woman is what attracts men to her during dance and probably woo her. A woman who has on two wrappers and a blouse is communicating her status as a married woman. Men are simply expected to keep their distance and not to close in with an ulterior motive.

Props are also used to communicate in the *owigiri dance* especially when the dance is done during wake-keeps. The eldest daughter of a deceased is usually seen with a hand fan with which she drives away flies from the corpse. The significance of this is that this action of the daughter, helps the deceased to have a peaceful passage to the world beyond without disturbance. She is seen more like an escort from the physical world to the nonphysical. This is a special responsibility carried out by the eldest daughter of the deceased. A departed one without a daughter is therefore called *amonmonduwobufa* which means the deceased has no offspring to keep away flies from his or her body.

The dance is also used to express various occupations as well as the people's communal lifestyle. In *penge* dance for instance, the slightly bending forward of the dancer evolved from the fishing occupation. Fishing as a major occupation of the Izon people is done on the sea or river in canoes. The fisherman or woman after throwing the net into water begins to pull it gradually into the canoe to ascertain the number of fish caught. In the process of pulling the torso bends slightly forward as the hands pull the net into the canoe. Although the legs are well planted in the canoe, yet they continue to move under the current of the water. This keeps the body rocking and swaying from side to side in response to the beat of the waves. This is the characteristic of the *penge* dance movement. The action of this dance centres in the waist region. On the other hand, the *abo* dance which is similar in movement to *penge* dance takes the dance closer to the ground. This signifies the body position of those who use traps such as "okoh" and "egein" to catch fish. These fishermen and women bend closely to the water to get fish. On a general note, the *penge* dance is preferred by inhabitants around the sea whose main source of livelihood is fishing. The undulating nature of the sea is a continual influence to the execution of the dance.

Some of these dances which make up the *owigiri* dance form have ritual content. *Owu-sei* also known as masquerade dance falls in this category. The dance originated from a marine masquerade a long time ago. Legend has it that a certain woman went to the farm on a day it was forbidden for anyone to go to the farm. This was the day a marine masquerade came out from the river to dance on the sand bank. The woman on seeing the strange creature hid herself and secretly observed the dance steps of the masquerade. After the performance the masquerade returned to the river. The woman, being excited about what she had observed went back home

and reported her experience to the elders. She was able to reproduce the dance steps and a representation of the mask she saw.

Many communities in Izonland have adopted the *owu-sei* or masquerade dance as a ritual means of cleansing the land from every evil and negative spirits as well as unpleasant happenings. The cleansing rite is often carried out at the beginning of every year. A masker representing the river deity performs especially at the village playground to the delight of the spectators. An orchestra of musicians provide the required melody for the masquerade to dance. The lead drummer called the “Akuwaowe” guides the masquerade through the performance by giving different drum signals. Such drum signals instruct the masquerades to sit down, stand up or any other command which the masquerade obeys without questions. For instance, when a masquerade is coming too close to the musicians, the lead drummer simply plays an instructional rhythm called “zin zin tugben” which means “retreat”. In another example, the lead drummer can communicate to the masker to become more aggressive by playing a particular rhythm called “papa kitua”.

“Benikurukuru”, “Angalapele”, “Osuopele”, “Ogoberi” are some of the masquerades created by the people to represent the original water deities. The people believe that these masquerades have special healing powers to cure children of different ailments. Parents often bring their sick children to the masquerades. These children are laid on the ground with the expectation of getting cured by the masquerades. Healing is actually provided with the actions of the masquerades when they cut the air severally with sharp machetes. Cutting of the air indicates the cutting up of the sickness into shreds in order to annihilate it. The masquerades’ costumes are created to depict particular fish types or water deities and dance gestures are used to reveal the background of these masquerades.

Dancers in a social setting employ the *owu* dance style in the manner it is described above simply for entertainment. These symbolic movements provide the *owigiri* dance with its stylistic character. However, the rituals of the masquerade as well as the mask is avoided. In the same manner the accompanying traditional musicians are not employed; rather, music is usually generated from electrical musical instruments produced and played by traditional or modern musical artists. Here, the dancer reacts to the music by expressing in detail the message of the

musician.

The *agene* dance style is another dance used to complement the *owigiri* dance. In its original format *agene* dance is a ritual dance performed in the shrines of some of the water gods. Deities such as “Agbulele” and “Alutabubo as powerful sea gods in the Izon land have *agene* dance as the official dance frequently done in their shrines. The *agene* dance performance is accompanied with traditional juju drum beats. The lead drum which is a talking drum frequently signals rises and falls of rhythm. The drum is also used to praise the god in question. The *agene* dance is equally used by the chief priest and other devotees to achieve trance; this is the stage they get possessed by a particular deity.

The dance is also believed to re-direct human destiny from ill to goodness when sincerely adopted. A victim who may have been bedevilled by ill-luck or whose destiny has been spiritually investigated to be bad can simply request for the intercession of any of the deities to reverse his or her destiny. The chief priest who directly consults with the deity conducts the cleansing ritual by attaching a small basket to the top of a long bamboo pole. The chief priest hands the pole over to the victim. He then points the pole to the rising sun and he gazes at the sun. The victim remains in this position amidst drumming and dancing. The drumming and dancing continue until the victim becomes possessed and dances away with the pole. The victim, still dancing with the pole moves on until he or she locates a place where the pole is pinned. The chief priest then conducts sacrifice at the spot. It is believed that those who were born and destined to be barren will then give birth to children and ill luck is equally averted. All these are seen as relevant symbols which are replicated at will in *owigiri dance* performance especially at parties.

In summation, the creation of the *owigiri* dance was inspired by the music of I. K. Belemu. Originally the dance was conceived as a social dance mainly for partygoers. The *penge* movement was solely adopted to demonstrate the dance at the initial stage of its conception. However, with time, other existing dances such as *agene*, *abo*, *penge*, *owu*, *konkonba* and *osundu* were later embraced and influenced the performance of the dance as a form. The success or performance of *owigiri* dance is entirely dependent on these component dance patterns; these dances makeup the structures of the *owigiri* dance form.

Incidentally, owing to the popularity of the dance, a number of Izon musicians like King

Robert Ebizimor, Grand Master Pereama Freetown, Barrister S. Smooth, Alfred Ezonebi, Abraham Young, Intelligence Emeka Odogu and a host of other emerging musicians have been composing and producing their music under the influence of the *owigiri* concept.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that the several traditional dances which could be experienced mostly at festivals are now freely done in the *owigiri* dance. All ritual and cultural connotations embedded or associated with these dances can now be communicated through the *owigiri* dance.

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