The Social Significance of Nkwa Umuagbogho Maiden Dance of Afikpo: A Theoretical Discourse

Prisca Ifeoma Okeke[1], Kelechi Uzoma Agoha[2] & Nicholas Chielotam Akas[3]

[1] ACAP University College, Melbourne, Australia

[2] National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), Jikowyi, Abuja, Nigeria

[3] Center for Ballet and the Arts, New York, USA

Correspondence: Kelechi Uzoma Agoha, National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), Jikowyi, Abuja, Nigeria. Tel: 234-706-191-4462. E-mail: agohakelechi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Although traditional dances remain one of the underdeveloped performance arts that have received less attention in the contemporary era, they remain fundamental to traditional communities that leverage their symbolic qualities and social functions to uphold cultural values that are integral to them. The study aimed to examine the social significance of the Nkwa Umuagbogho maiden dance of Afikpo people in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The objective was to interrogate the relevance of the dance using four theories; dance movement therapy, cultural feminism, social identity theory, and genderlect theory. The outcome of the study revealed that the dance encompasses different theoretical dimensions that underpin its relevance to the host community. From a therapeutic construct, the study found that the dance serves as a means of improving human health and mental wellbeing. It also found that the dance explores the feminine cultural attributes of Afikpo maidens to foster identity, integration, and association in society, as well as blurs the gender gap that exist between men and women in Igbo culture through active engagement and communication between women and men in the performance process. Therefore, the study recommended that it is important for scholars and critics to advance theoretical inquiries on traditional dances to unearth their significance in society, especially toward a cultural renaissance.

Keywords: dance, nkwa umuagbogho, Afikpo, maiden, theory

1. Introduction

Traditional dances remain one of the underdeveloped media of cultural promotion in the 21st century in Nigeria. However, they are essential cultural heritages that provide a source of communal engagement, participation, and wellbeing. There social importance make them a unique tool for entertainment, communication of ideas, information gathering and sharing, and most importantly the education of society on important issues that are germane to communities where they are incarnated.

Traditional dances bear specific meanings depending on the social setting in which they appear (Marusa, 2010, p.5). In traditional Greek society, dance was a cultural activity aimed at veneration, education, recreation as well as body therapy (Michail 2). In Asian cultures, the art of dancing was predominantly for religious and educational purposes, especially to illustrate the meaning of spoken word (Gordon and Gordon, 1965, p.1). However, like every other continent in the world, African dances are an integral part of cultural societies in the continent. They represent the people's existence and worldviews (Akas and Egenti 215), serving as a spectrum through which indigenous beliefs and values are celebrated.

Through traditional dances, people are made aware of the unique cultural practices of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Notable dances like Bata and Gese in the western region, Sharo, and Koroso in the north region, Ekombi, and Irie in the south-south region, Ikpirikpe-Ogu and Egwu Ogene in the eastern region are some examples of Nigerian traditional dances that are celebrated for their cultural significance and social importance within and beyond their cultural environments. Most of these dances have evolved beyond regional significance to become national symbols of culture in Nigeria because of the issues they address.

Although many dances exist with various artistic and aesthetic functions, the focus of this study is on the social significance of the Nkwa Umuagboho maiden dance of the Afikpo people in Ebonyi State. The objective of the study is to interrogate the relevance of the dance using four theories; dance movement therapy, cultural feminism,

social identity theory, and genderlect theory. The study argues that beyond the primary function of the dance in the culture it originates from, Nkwa Umuagboho can be used to address critical issues in society.

2. Literature Review

Dance is one of the traditional means of human expression that is invaluable in societies. It "occupies an important place in the social structure of all human cultures throughout history" (Marusa, 2010, p.5). Unarguably, it plays a significant role in forming cultural identity and serves religious, political, cultural, therapeutic, and social functions across different cultural climes. Pertinently, dance is a human activity done to express feelings, thoughts, and actions. According to Madukasi (2020), it is done "through the instrumentality of the body in many genres and many cultures" (p.20). It reveals the mood and status of the dancer(s), acts as a means of exercising piety, and embodies a therapeutic significance that impacts positively on the overall health of the dancer(s).

Most essentially, dance serves as a source of self-awareness, consciousness, and identity. In this regard, Georgios (2018) believes that dance is probably the best way to come face to face with one's self and get more familiar with the body and body use in terms of space, time, and dynamics (p.106). Implicitly, dance is one of man's non-verbal means of engagement and communication that supports the verbal explication of thought and action toward human character development.

In a cultural context, dance is one of the important elements used to represent some aspects of culture that are germane to the existential reality of a people. It plays a vital role in upholding certain cultural values and helps in shaping the identity of a people as well as revealing "the ideas and perspectives of a people" (Kerri-Noelle, 2018, p.3). Generally, "dance bears elements of our cultural tradition and heritage and passes them down from generation to generation. Therefore, it contributes substantially to the reinforcement of our cultural identity and plays a crucial role in the "cultural development" of our society" (Georgios, 2018, p.105). In situations where cultural ideals are lost due to global changes in the world, Kerri-Noelle (2018) avers that "dance can be used to reclaim heritage and racial identity" and thus "is a positive vehicle to re-introduce lost cultural content" (p.29), especially to the younger generation that is gradually losing touch with their culture.

Dance is involved in virtually all the collective social experiences of a cultural group, and in most cases, serves as a means of preserving those experiences. In the view of Akpan and Ekong (2017), dance "is an active tool in society because it not only expresses the feelings and aspirations of the people but it also showcases the values that are entrenched in the people's culture (p.111). In this regard, dance is a cultural symbol that validates the communal sense of nature and being. In African culture, dance is symbolic in many ways. Akpan and Ekong (2017) note that:

> African dances illustrate most of the purposes of dance that are of a ritualistic or ceremonial nature; the war dance expressing prayer for success and thanksgiving for victory; the dance of exorcism or healing, performed by shamans to drive out evil spirits; the dance of invocation, calling on gods for help in farming, hunting, the fertility of human beings and animals and other tribal concerns; initiation dances for secret societies mimetic dances, illustrating events on tribal history, legend and mythology; dances representing cosmic processes; and more rarely; dance of courtship, an innovation for success in life. The dance of religious ecstasy, in which hypnotic or trancelike states are induced, was equally represented in Africa. (p.116)

Akpan and Ekong's assertion above clearly underlines the spiritual and mundane values of African dance in shaping the cultural experiences of the people.

Moreover, one of the social relevance of dance is that it creates an avenue for many creative possibilities and opportunities, especially in engendering cordial human relationships between dancers and the audience. Through dance, ideas are exchanged during the creative process, and bonds are strengthened during the actual performances between the dancers and the audience. Thus, dance plays a critical role in fostering the integration and participation of people in social gatherings across communities and also enables problem-solving. Hence, it is apt to say that dance is a tool for social engineering and renaissance and a moral compass that helps to direct and enforce social harmony and engender positive change.

3. Methodology

The study uses a case study approach in evaluating the social significance of Nkwa Umuagbogho dance in Afikpo community using four theories. The case study was purposively selected while theories were applied to specifically discuss the critical themes that the dance embodies. Relevant data about the dance were collected through participant observation and interviews with a community historian. Other secondary sources like literary texts and video recordings of the dance were also used to deepen the analysis of the dance.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Theory as applied in the study of dance enables the interpretation and analysis of dance to deepen understanding of the significance of dance for valid judgment. For this study, four theories are selected to interrogate the social relevance of Nkwa Umuagbogo maiden dance of Afikpo. These theories are Dance movement therapy, Cultural feminism, Social Identity theory, and Genderlect theory.

3.1.1 Dance Movement Therapy

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is a therapeutic theory of dance that was popularized by Marian Chace in the early 1940s when she introduced the use of dance movements in the recuperative process of psycho-traumatic patients and those living with physical disabilities. According to Uji and Awuawuer (2014), the theory is based on the fact that "dance as a performative genre can be a powerful tool for stress management and the prevention of physical and mental health problems" (p.257).

In a definitive term, the theory centers on the use of dance therapy or dance movement therapy (DMT) for psychotherapeutic conditions like emotional, cognitive, social, behavioral, and physical conditions (Uji and Awuawuer, 2014, p.256). According to Chace as quoted by Shingala (2016), "the contagious nature of rhythm can mobilize the most withdrawn patient, providing a safe and simple way to engage and organize otherwise chaotic and confusing emotions" (Parr.8). Uji and Awuawuer (2014) note that "most DMT sessions are configured around four main stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and evaluation" (p.256). These stages require the acute use of imagination, fantasy, enactment with visualization, verbalization, and body action to enchant the viewer for corresponding actions. Therefore, this theory makes the dancer a therapist, and dance, a specialized form of medical treatment.

3.1.2 Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism was made popular in the 1970s through the work of Alice Echols. As a departure from radical feminism, the theory of cultural feminism examines the female nature and essence in cultural societies. Mohajan (2022) notes that the "female essence includes a greater emphasis on cooperation, relationships, and peace; also referred to as an ethic of care" (p.19). Cultural feminism theory thus explores the ways women see their world in a patriarchal society (Hopkins and Serva, 2023, para. 2).

Ajayi (2014) in his evaluation of Buchi Emecheta's variant of cultural feminism notes that the theory affirms a non-confrontational but dialogic approach to conflict resolution, and ultimately celebrates women and womanhood (p.370). Part of the contributions of this theory is that it advocates for "the creation of safe spaces for women that consequently help give women a location dedicated to their needs" (Hopkins and Serva, 2023, para. 9). The women-centeredness of cultural feminism, especially in its approach towards social harmony through cooperation and peace makes it relevant in evaluating Nkwa Umuagbogho maiden dance.

3.1.3 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

SIT was proposed by social psychologists, Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. The core of the theory is that people's sense of who they are depends on the groups they belong. In the view of Amolo and Ihuagwu (2013), SIT "draws attention to the group in the individual" (p.137) and reflects the true essence of culture in shaping people's identity and behavior.

SIT presents three phases that help with identity formation. These phases are social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorization compartmentalizes people to understand and identify them. By knowing what categories we belong to, we can understand things about ourselves, and we can define appropriate behavior according to the groups that we and others belong to.

On the other hand, social identification defines the group that we belong to and informs the ways that we perceive members of that group. As a consequence, one develops emotional significance to that identification. Finally, social comparison facilitates comparison between one's group (the in-group) with another group (the out-group).

3.1.4 Genderlect Theory

Genderlect theory is one of the theories of communication that emphasizes the role of culture in constructing the discourse of both men and women (Khan, Rubab, and Ali, 2020, p.1). Propounded by Deborah Tannen in 1990, the theory is premised on the fact that gender is the most significant issue in determining the quality of relationships between men and women (Erkaya, 2018, p.3). Therefore, the theory "demonstrates how people communicate with each other, and how they create mutual meaning and understandings. It also examines the best way to achieve a high-quality dialogue between people in their social and corporate lives (Erkaya, 2018, p.2).

On important argument raised by Tannen in this theory is that the dialect of women and men is entirely different from each other due to gender differences (Erkaya 2018, p.3). Rathmayr (2014) notes that the coexisting and conflicting human needs for involvement and independence remain the two basic dynamics that motivate daily communication. While the need for involvement prevails in the female idea of communication, men focus on the need for independence (p.13). The outcome of the theory, as Erkaya (2018) further posits, is that women generally focus on meaningful connections that lead to more connections and exchange of emotions during a conversation, while men focus on gaining status and exchanging information (p.3).

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Evolution of Nkwa Umuagboho Maiden Dance

Nkwa Umuagbogho is a popular dance in South-Eastern Nigeria with its origin in Mgbom community in Afikpo Local Government Area of Ebonyi state. It evolved from the Afikpo biannual communal wrestling contest, where maidens from the age of five danced to titillate wrestlers and spectators at the event. However, in 1960, Sergeant Major Lawrence Azikiwe and Mr. Nnachi Enwe remodeled and presented the dance as one of the performances for Nigeria's Independence celebration in 1960. The popularity of the dance resulted in its gradual separation from the wrestling contest. The outbreak of the Civil War in 1969 truncated its development, but shortly after the War in 1970, Sir Vincent Omere Nwachi, who is considered to be the father of modern-day Nkwa Umuagbogho revived the dance.

4.2 Therapeutic Perspective

Nkwa Umuagbogho is a sensuous dance that is known for its alluring spectacle and enchanting aura. From a therapeutic perspective, the dance is significant for its entertainment function in assuaging pathos, inciting and titillating traditional male wrestlers in their contests. Its therapeutic nature makes it a sine qua non for the biannual wrestling contest, especially during intermittent breaks to enable wrestlers to recuperate and regain lost energy. The dancers are thus regarded as dance therapists who use graceful body movements to revive dispirited athletes, motivate leading athletes, and encourage the spirit of sportsmanship. Even beyond its primordial therapeutic function during traditional wrestling contests, Okoh (2023) in an interview affirms that the dance is still efficacious in reviving emotional and psycho-traumatic conditions in contemporary society.

4.3 Cultural Feminist Perspective

From a cultural feminist perspective, Nkwa Umuagbogho explores the contributions of Afikpo women in the Igbo culture. The Igbo culture favors a patriarchal system. However, Afikpo people operate a matrilineal structure of inheritance that allows women to contribute to the family formation, relationship, and cultural development in the community. Nkwa Umuagbogho thus celebrates women and womanhood in Afikpo traditional society. The essence of womanhood in the view of cultural feminists is to effectuate cooperation, relationships, and peace in society.

Etymologically, the dance was introduced by women to ensure cooperation with the men in creating entertainment during wrestling contests, foster deeper relationships between women and men in the community, as well as advocate for peace and harmony during and after wrestling games. Okoh (2023) in an interview further notes that although the dance is performed by women only, men are not precluded from the creative process, especially in beating the drums to create the dance rhythm. The dance, according to Okoh, has "seven rhythms out of which the maidens perform three while the boys perform four". In most cases the choreographers are men. This reveals the coeternity and symbiotic relationship that exist between Afikpo men and women regardless of gender difference.

The symbolism of the engagement between women and men in the performance process is to highlight the importance of cooperation, cohesion, and integration. The dance thus creates a haven for women to advocate for those principles that are fundamental to the well-being and stability of their community through dance, as well as their need for recognition, participation, and equal representation in communal engagements.

4.4 Social Identity Theory Perspective

Nkwa Umuagbogho remains a symbol of the cultural identity of Afikpo people in particular and Ebonyi state in general. It is significant in revealing the value placed on women and their feminine importance in Afikpo. The dance, as a cultural symbol, evokes a sense of affinity and identity for the dancers and the community they represent, and any attempt to change the identity is met with stiff rejection.

Okoh (2023) affirms this when he recalls the deliberate attempt to disrupt the identity of the dance through the change of costume by one of the leaders of the dance group. In his words "when the daughter of Sir Vincent Omere Nwachi took over as the leader of the dance, she introduced the use of white singlet against the use of pieces of

wrapper to cover the female dancers' breasts. Her view was contested. We told her that this is our dance; this is our identity, the identity of Ebonyi state in that once we dress with that feather, jigida (waist beads), and accessories, anyone who sees us will say oh, Nkwa Umuagbogho Afikpo is here" (Interview).

The push to retain the originality of Nkwa Umuagbogho costume is in line with social identity theory. The Nkwa Umuagbogho costume serves as means of categorization, identification, and source of comparison between the dance group and other maiden dances across the eastern states of Nigeria. The Nkwa Umuagbogho costume consists of a half-cut skirt with bead designs, waist beads (jigida), a half-cut top or wrapper strapped over the breasts, multi-colored feathers, and head beads.

The costume is an intricate part of the dance and very important in actualizing of the dance movements. The movement of the dance is dependent on the ability of the tummy and jigida to wriggle to the fast rhythms of the drums. To this end, the dance costume and dance movement, which are the two important elements of the dance cannot be separated from each other, thus forming a unique identity for the dancers. An example of a dislocation in the use of both elements in a performance happened in Anambra, where the Nkwa Umuagbogho costume was used to perform another dance. The outcome of this disruption was that the indigenes of Afikpo at the event could not recognize the performers as Nkwa Umuagbogho dancers. This was because while the dancers wore Nkwa Umuagbogho costume, the dance movement and rhythm communicated differently (Okoh 2023).

Figure 1. Nkwa Umuagbogho maiden dancers in their costume and makeup

The example above thus validates the SIT insistence on understanding a social group through social comparison between one's group (the in-group) with another group (out-group) to maintain the self-esteem of one's in-group.

Another aspect of SIT that supports the dance as a veritable means of establishing differences between in-groups and out-groups lies in the nature of the dance. Nkwa Umuagbogho dance is strictly for maidens (in-group) within marriageable age in Afikpo. By this, married women and men (out-group) do not dance, though the men play an active role in the choreography, creation of rhythm, packaging, and promotion of the dance. The reason for the exclusion of men in the actual performance is that "Afikpo culture forbids men to dress like women" (Okoh, interview). The costume of this dance is fundamental in delineating gender differences through the social comparison that naturally exists between men and women in Afikpo.

4.5 Genderlect Perspective of The Dance

Like the theory of cultural feminism discussed earlier, genderlect theory also offers a framework through which Nkwa Umuagbogho can be employed to examine the gender relationships that exist between men and women in Igbo culture. The origin of NkwaUmuagbogho dance already outlines the gender difference between men and women in Afikpo, where men are seen as stronger and more confrontational beings than women, who are perceived as emotional and remote. These differences are represented through wrestling and dance.

However, the intersection between the male and female gender is blurred through the dance medium, allowing women to seek more involvement and closure in communal activities. In other words, while the communal wrestling contest represents the value Afikpo men place in achieving status and independence, the women employ the tool of dance as a means of achieving high-quality communication that leads to an emotional connection

between them and the men. Oftentimes during the performance, the dancers invite male spectators to join them in the dance, allowing the men to have close communication with the dancers by displaying the various Nkwa Umuagbogho notations. By this, the thin line between the male and female genders is tautened to engender tolerance and collaboration. Hence, Nkwa Umuagbogho provides maidens the opportunity to seek closure and be part of important communal activities and social issues that are germane to the stability and advancement of Afikpo society.

Genderlect theorists believe that women are drawn to meaningful connections that lead to more connections and exchange of emotions during a conversation. Therefore, the Nkwa Umuagbogho dance serves as a means for maidens to meet their potential life partners both during and after performances. A notable illustration is the encounter between the first indigenous president of Nigeria, the Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who, captivated by the Nkwa Umuagbogho performance, proposed to and subsequently married one of the pioneer dancers, Prof. Uche Azikiwe. In essence, the dance facilitates positive communication strategies between genders, nurturing the fulfillment of mutual needs.

5. Conclusion

Every dance plays a functional role and enables society to appreciate cultural values that are particular to it. This study has attempted to examine the social significance of Nkwa Umuagbogho maiden dance of Afikpo using four theories. The focus was to understand the multifaceted dimensions of the dance as it relates to its functions in Afikpo and beyond. Analysis of the dance thus reveals that Nkwa Umuagbogho maiden dance fosters stability and harmony, and encourages collaboration between women and men in advancing cultural identity, unity, and integration in Ebonyi state.

The dance also has a therapeutic element that is involved in recuperating stress and emotional-related issues though there has not been any study to validate the use of the dance in managing patients with psycho-traumatic disorder. This therefore creates a gap for further research on the significance of traditional African dance on human health.

Undoubtedly, the significance of traditional dance as a vehicle for comprehending society cannot be denied. Traditional dances not only address important social issues but also offer remedies to some of the contemporary challenges afflicting society. In addition to the themes explored in this study, traditional Nigerian dances have the potential to address issues of insecurity, social exclusion and underrepresentation of women in society. Hence, it is important for scholars and critics of dance to advance inquiries in these areas to unveil the capacity of indigenous traditional dances in addressing fundamental national and regional problems for sustainable development.

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