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The Cultural Significance of the Ekeleke Dance Troupe of Ofekata People in Imo State

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Abstract

The Ekeleke dance, a traditional cultural expression of the Ofekata people in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, holds significant socio-cultural and symbolic value. This research examines the cultural significance of the Ekeleke dance troupe, concentrating on its role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Utilizing qualitative ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semiotic analysis, this study examines the dance's ritualistic functions, social cohesion elements, and symbolic meanings embedded in its gestures and performances. The study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how the Ekeleke dance contributes to cultural sustainability among the people of Ofekata Autonomous community. Additionally, the research situates the Ekeleke dance within the broader framework of African traditional dances, highlighting its importance as a cultural artefact in contemporary Nigeria. By addressing gaps in the literature concerning traditional Nigerian dances, this study also offers insights into the enduring relevance of indigenous performance arts in maintaining communal identity and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Ekeleke Dance, Cultural significance, Traditional African dance, & Semiotics

Introduction

In African societies, dance serves a complex diversity of social purposes. Dancing helps people express their emotions, desires, and ideas. Many people love dancing because it satisfies an emotional or spiritual need and gives them a sense of inner fulfilment. Dance is used to communicate ideas, information, beliefs, thoughts and emotions. It can transcend language and culture because it uses a universal tool, which is the human body. The use of valuable and meaningful gestures in dance makes it a symbolic language tool for communication. The level of symbolic language exhibited in dance transcends barriers of language and culture, making it a universal tool for communication, regardless of tribe, religion, tradition, or profession. The more significant the concept expressed in a dance, the greater its appreciation by the audience and the more insistent their demands for a skilled performance and movements that fit its purpose. Although dance is appreciated as a social

occasion, it is simultaneously enjoyed as an activity in its own right, which entertains and also gives pleasure as an expression of communal life.

Indigenous dance to an African is a way of life, a true representation of a people's existence expressed through movement. Indigenous dance is also an integral part of African culture because movements play vital roles in communication. Indigenous dance is seen by Akas (2016) as an expressionistic tool utilized to capture, express, embody and formulate any given representation of our transitional indigenous culture. It is used in its form, accompanied by a semiotic song and music, to entertain and educate the indigenes. Within an indigenous dance tradition, the performances express or reflect the communal values and social relationships of the people. The indigenous dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people where it exists. It assists indigenes to praise, criticize, and work with each other. According to Alphonse T (2002), Indigenous dance in Africa is used as a functional tool for ritualistic purposes, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity cum sustainability. Indigenous dance is not a natural object but something made or transformed by man for his cultural sustainability, mobilization and sensitization. Thus, Indigenous dance is an essential communicative social event that not only accommodates but also encourages and appreciates participation by spectators. The cultural influence on the indigenous dance defines its technique and style of expression, thereby strengthening the relationship between cultural expression and dance movement as a tool for positive propaganda.

There are always varieties of indigenous dance styles; each of the dance styles portrays the socio-communicative essence of the situation of the dance being performed at that particular moment. The cultural significance of indigenous dance has greatly aided indigenes from the same community and those living in the diaspora in coming together to perform their traditional dances annually, thereby upholding and sustaining their cultural heritage. Indigenous dance in traditional African societies expresses the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. Thus, most communities in Africa, especially Igboland, do not dance just for the sake of dancing. It goes beyond the mere 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, ideas, tell a story or portray the political and social needs of a community. It symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people where it exists and is used to praise, criticize and sensitize indigenous people. The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form dates as far back as the emergence of man and the organized society.

In Africa, each indigenous dance has a unique context and a story within the performance. It is the context that gives meaning to any indigenous dance, whether it is a ritual dance or a ceremonial dance. In the social and spiritual life of many African communities, dance plays a crucial role in expressing cultural identity (Ezeodili, 2021). The values, beliefs, and histories of different ethnic groups are reflected in Nigerian traditional dance styles, which serve as an important medium for identity construction and cultural preservation, especially during festive celebrations (Onyima, 2016, p. 34). Indigenous dances like Ekeleke dance have both aesthetic and communicative elements. Hence, these performances have the potential to project the norms and values of the community. To this, Afam Emeka affirms that, "Indigenous dance as an art is interwoven around the fabrics of indigenous cultural activities which the different communities embrace especially in their socio-political, economic and religious experience".

These cultural activities contain the germs of rich poetry and prose, excellent music and lively drama. They are usually performed on various occasions, such as festivals, weddings, naming ceremonies, etc. Among the Igbos of Nigeria, a wealth of cultural heritage is manifested in ceremonies and festivals, where social phenomena such as marriage, birth, farming, harvest, victory, and many other social institutions are celebrated. Cultural festivals abound to emphasize and showcase the rich cultural heritage of the people. These cultural festivals are found in all the geo-political zones of the country and they have become international events attracting tourists from all over the world. Obviously, festivals are veritable instruments for national integration and peaceful co-existence.

Dance festivals are, therefore, cultural dances performed in consonance with the strong beats played by a group of people from a similar culture. There are various reasons for celebrating dance festivals, amongst which is to promote the people's culture by showcasing their way of life through their dance steps, movements and costumes. Festival periods in general are times of peace (Marthias, 2012). It is a time when quarrels and other differences are settled. The period of festivals, as Kayode emphasized, is a period when all conflicts and disputes must be abandoned for the sake of ceremonial co-operation. Additionally, Enekwe (1991) noted that festivals foster friendship, which is often expressed through communal eating and drinking. It is a time for exchanging gifts and settling disputes. Festivals give people the opportunity to establish extended relationships, which bear the reciprocal bonds of social interaction. It provides occasions for peace-making, renewal of friendships and covenant relationships, get-togethers and merry-making. Festivals occupy a position of great importance in traditional African societies, as culture moulds the interests, tastes, and values of the individual.

Problem Statement

This research seeks to address the underrepresentation of the Ekeleke dance in academic discourse and its potential decline due to modern influences. Specifically, the research will focus on the following questions:

- i. What are the historical origins and cultural narratives associated with the Ekeleke dance troupe in Imo State?
- ii. How does the Ekeleke dance reflect and transmit cultural values, societal norms, and religious beliefs within the Igbo community of Imo State?
- iii. In what ways has the role of the Ekeleke dance troupe evolved in response to socio-cultural changes, such as urbanization and globalization?
- iv. What is the current relevance of the Ekeleke dance in contemporary Igbo society, and what measures can be taken to ensure its preservation?

The goal is to advance knowledge of indigenous African performing arts and their significance for maintaining cultural identity. It also seeks to provide solutions for preserving intangible cultural heritage against contemporary threats. Thus, the cultural relevance of the Ekeleke dance group will be examined in this study, with an emphasis on how it has shaped Imo State residents' identities. Despite being widely recognized, the Ekeleke dance has not received much attention from academics. Little is known about its history, the lessons it teaches, and how it is used to pass down cultural traditions from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the preservation of this traditional dance form is facing challenges because of globalization, urbanization, and industrialization. By providing a comprehensive examination of the Ekeleke dance troupe's contributions to social

cohesion, cultural heritage preservation, and contemporary relevance in Imo State, this study aims to bridge this gap.

Methodology

To better understand the cultural relevance of the Ekeleke dance group, this study will apply a qualitative methodology that combines archival research and ethnographic fieldwork (Tenny et al, 2017). The research will be carried out in the dancing troupe's home state of Imo State, Nigeria. Participant observation will be undertaken in order to give the researcher direct knowledge of the dance's choreography, structure, and meaning, in addition to its social significance. Key stakeholders, such as the Ekeleke dance troupe, elders, cultural guardians, and community leaders, will be the subjects of my semi-structured interviews. These conversations will delve into the cultural connotations, historical background, and changing social significance of dance.

The Ekeleke Dance Festival

Performing majorly during the annual festival, the Ekeleke dance, which is rooted in African culture and music, showcases the diversity and evolution of African dance styles, from traditional rhythms to contemporary moves. Beyond entertainment, the dance promotes cultural exchange, unity and enlightenment, highlighting the power of dance as a universal language. In the area of Imo State, Nigeria, the Ekeleke dance reinforces the collective ideals and origin stories. As a prominent cultural act, the Ekeleke dance festival is a festival that has been in existence for so long a time that no one knows when it actually started. The dance traditions are passed on from generation to generation and they take place close to the middle of the year. It is performed by the people of Ofekata in Mbaitoli Local Government by embodying their cultural identity and sacred heritage through semiotic gestures, which means that its gestures and motions are symbolic and convey cultural messages, making it more than just a form of entertainment (Akas & Egenti, 2016). The aesthetic essence of the dance, both in its style, form, costumes, performing space, dancers and drummers has succeeded in drawing more and more people to the performance venue every year.

The Ekeleke dance which is performed by some members of Umuomezume kindred in Ofekata Orodó on every Eke market day starting from April to first week of June every year can be found amongst the people of Mbaitoli local Government area in Imo State Nigeria which has 9 autonomous communities namely; Ifakala, Mbieri, Ubomiri, Ogbaku, Eziaman-Obiato, Umunoha, Orodó, Afara and Ogwa. There are two main festivals in Ofekata Orodó community. The first is the "Ekeleke" while the other is the Owu festival. The Ekeleke festival comes first and it originated from the forefathers and so it was from them that the dance was adopted. Accordingly, the dance did not and still does not have any fetishistic inclination, nor did it originate from any form of ritual; instead, it served as a form of rejoicing during the planting season (Nicholas, 2014).

The Ekeleke dance festival starts in the period when farmers start planting their yams and it lasts till the first week of June. The first phase of the dance lasts for the period of seven days, and on the eighth day, it is danced at night, that is, it is an all-night affair, which is used to dance to all the relations of the dancers so as to collect money from them in support of the festival. During the period of the dance, married women in the community bring food called "Ukwa" or "Bread fruit" for the dancers to eat while the men provide the wine, like palm-wine, for the dancers to drink. One lady called "Ada Ekeleke" presents, as part of her traditional rites, both wine and food to the dancers because she is regarded as the first daughter of the "Ekeleke".



The Ekeleke Dancers

Speaking about the festival, the Leader of the Ekeleke dance troupe, Mr. Boyocha Ekwebelem, noted that during the event, a “Lion” is said to be killed metaphorically during this period, and the killing starts from the afternoon to the 8th day. The dancers who do the killing are grouped into three. The first one is the “Mbu-uzo”, i.e., the first; the other one is “Osomekiti”, that is, the middle one, while the last one is “Nkpeazu”, i.e., the last. It is the three groups that are commissioned to perform the killing of the Lion known as “Igbu-Agu”. Apart from these groups, there are other groups commissioned for different specific functions, among them the “Onye-Ibu Ekeleke”, who is tasked with inviting the Lion to come out of its hideout.

Also, there is the “Ugbula”, which comes out to entertain and keep people happy because it is very beautiful. Another one is “Nwa mpere”, which comes out as a messenger and drives away all the people blocking or hindering the easy passing of the dancers on the road. The day that the Lion will be killed, the dancers will dance from morning till 10 o’clock at night, and at the sound of a gunshot, everyone starts rejoicing that the lion has finally been killed. After the killing and rejoicing, one of the villages in the Orodo community, called “Odumara”, will announce the commencement of another festival, known as the “Owu” festival. This festival kicks off immediately, and from then on, there will be no more “Ekeleke” festival for that year.

On the day of the main festival, the Ekeleke dancers are covered in multiple wrappers from the waist down with sticks protruding underneath the wrappers. Their faces are covered with a white piece of cloth, well-ventilated for easy breathing and the faces are not visible to the public. They have masks attached to the top of their heads. The dancers, who are all men, perform their routine standing on 2-3 foot-long, pointed wooden sticks attached to their feet with a thin piece of cloth. There are three (3) wooden drums played during the Ekeleke dance, and the drummers play the drums to introduce the required tune while the singers sing along according to the tune, thereby setting the tone for the entire ceremony. Members usually sing the songs of the troupe in their native dialect and anyone who knows the song can actually join in the singing, especially the women and children (Akas & Egenti, 2016).



The Ekeleke Dance Costume

The Ekeleke dance is a vibrant and energetic dance that involves the dancer moving their whole body to showcase their agility and acrobatic movements. To this end, Mr. Ekwebelem disclosed that the dance, which can also be seen as a therapeutic dance that helps the members to keep fit, is not a harmful dance even though it is energetic. To him, the dancers undergo constant dance practices which get their bodies acclimatized to the various vibrant and acrobatic steps and as such, the dance has become part of their system. The Ekeleke dance also showcases the dancers' skills and bravery as they maintain balance on the stilts while engaging in many choreographies.

The dancer rushes into the arena through the entrance, accompanied by songs and drumming. He dances, hopping on one foot with his arms spread out and his shoulders moving from side to side. He dances according to the rhythm of the drum while switching from one foot to the other periodically before dancing with both feet. He dances around the arena, moving close to the drummers and dancing in front of them to the beat of the drums before stepping back to dance around the arena and then giving way for the next dancer to take over. The dancers come in one at a time, as there can only be one dancer at a time in the arena. After the dancer performs his routine, he exits the arena and proceeds towards their station, where the next dancer is already approaching. The exiting dancer shakes hands in greeting with the next dancer and then heads to their station, while the next dancer enters the arena and performs his own routine dance (Nicholas, 2014).

The highlight of the dance is the appearance of the tallest dancer who stands on a much-pointed wooden stick that is about 6-8 feet long. He is usually the last dancer to come on and takes giant strides across the onlookers while shaking his feet to make loud noise with the ornaments tied around his legs. He performs a little longer than other dancers and his performance usually indicates the end of the ceremony.



Lead Ekeleke dancers



Usually, the costuming for the “Ekeleke” festival requires the dancers to walk on carved wood and also carry carved wood on the head, which is covered with a wrapper or cloth. The dancers wear white polo shirts with shorts and a wrapper tied around their waist. The drummers will also be required to wear a white singlet or polo with a wrapper tied on the waist. They wear their cap, which people use to recognise them as part of the festival. There is a person who sings or chants the songs to be danced by the Ekeleke dancers during the festival, and since the dance is for both male and female entertainment, the female members chorus to whatever the chanter sings or solos.

The beautiful nature of the dancer’s costume while performing the dance reveals more about the dancer’s state of mind, emotions, and mood on stage. In line with this, considerable emphasis is placed on each dancer’s costume, makeup, props, and carriage while performing on stage. This is why the dance is called Ekeleke, meaning ‘Dressing’. This is why the dancers on their part place more emphasis on beautifying themselves in all forms and manners in order to achieve the required pictorial aesthetics and de-emphasize the potency of the dance movement and till date, the Ekeleke dance stands as a highly recognized dance in the Ofekata community both in style, form and context. The dance costume in Ekeleke is very symbolic. It is symbolic in the sense that it portrays the individual state of mind during the festival. Throughout the dance performance, based on the communicative potency of the colour white, the dancers are meant to uphold the truth and nothing but the truth.

The drummers of this great dance performance are merely men between the ages of 40-55 years. The reason for using men between this age limit as drummers is because they are seen as custodians in drumming the beat of this great dance performance. Their drumming style is beyond mere drumming of art for art’s sake; rather, it communicates the various moods and situations of things at the point the Ekeleke dancers are on stage. The essential instruments required for performance are three Ekwe, which vary in size but are highly communicative and significant in nature. They are: Ekwe Okpo Oku, Ekwe Nkwado and Ekwe Omume.

Ekwe Okpo Oku: This particular type of Ekwe is very symbolic in the dance performance. It is symbolic in the sense that it is seen as an instrument that summons the Ekeleke dancers to get ready for the performance. This is not just an ordinary summon, but significantly, it reminds the dancers that they are about to perform before a live audience and their unseen ancestral fathers. Hence, they should give their best as dancers and forget about anything that will disturb them or prevent them from performing well. The drummer in charge of

Ekwe Okpo Oku beats the Ekwe continuously, but on a very slow beat. This continuous, slow beating of Ekwe Okpo Oku helps the dancers get ready for the actual dance.

Ekwe Nkwado: It motivates both the dancers and the audience, by putting them in the right frame of mind, both psychologically, socially and emotionally during the performance. The use of this instrument helps the dancers at this point to free-style their dance movements in various communicative forms. The communicative message in dance is fully interpreted or portrayed in the dancers' various semiotic body movements while responding to the sound of Ekwe Nkwado. The audience, on their part, shows how happy they are watching the Ekeleke dance performance. They can express such feelings by responding to the beat of Ekwe Nkwado, by dancing to the rhythm of the instrument.

Ekwe Omume: This instrument aids the dancers in displaying their individual abilities in Ekeleke dance movement. It is at this point that individual dancers show how skilled they are in performing the dance. The rhythmic sound of the instrument is always fast. The fastness of the beat is to showcase the climax of the dance. The dancer at this point dances to entertain the audience and to show skilled ability to dance comfortably on top of a well-carved stick. This ability of the individual to dance on top of the carved stick at a very high speed without falling from it makes him a master of the art. The high level of professionalism amongst the dancers while performing the dance movement is determined at this point. Thus, to date, Ekwe as an instrument in Ekeleke, remains an indispensable tool in aiding the dancers during their performance (Akas & Egenti, 2016).



Performances

The audience is allowed to watch the performance irrespective of where they are from, as their presence motivates the dancers to perform more vigorously. During the performance, many people attend the festival to watch and appreciate the craftsmanship of the dancers, who dance on carved sticks comfortably without falling. It is the interpretative aesthetics in the dance movement that attracts people from far and wide to return home and watch the performance such that whenever Ekeleke dance is narrated to a person who was absent during the performance, it simply means he/she has really missed the sweetness of the dance and what he/she is hearing is a second-hand story (Dorotheum, 2016).

The audience is an essential element that makes the Ekeleke dance thick, hence they are not restricted from seeing the performance. The presence of the audience is a big plus to the

Ekeleke performance as their shouts of joy act as a boost to the dancers. The native indigenes and non-natives who constitute the audience consciously or unconsciously make a theatre-in-the-round while watching the performance. Their circular movements during the performance serve as the wall of the theatre, while centre of the arena serves as the performing stage for the Ekeleke dancers. Although only men are allowed to be Ekeleke dancers, the women and children still actively participate in the dance ceremony.



The Ekeleke Audience



The economic implication of the dance rests on the fact that during the period of the dance, many tourists come from far and near, as so many of them attend the festival to watch and appreciate the craftsmanship in the dancers dancing on carved sticks comfortably without falling. Also, the interpretative aesthetics in the dance movement attracts people from far and wide to return since the festival allows visitors who want to document the dance or carry out further research on it to do so without any hindrance. The influx of tourists helps to generate a lot of income for members of the community, which also serves as a development strategy. In all, we see that the Ekeleke indigenous dance of Ofekata people stands out as a tourist attraction because it has both aesthetic and communicative elements for any tourist industry. Hence, the performances can be seen to have potential for projecting the norms and values of the community. It is also regarded as an art that is interwoven around the fabrics of indigenous communities, especially their socio-political, economic and religious experience.

Conclusion

In all African cultures, dance, music, and festivals help define the roles of the individual and the group within the community. They function to teach physical control and help stress accepted standards of conduct. Thus, dance plays a cathartic role during the key transition from one social state to another. The Ekeleka dance festival is an outstanding social and traditional event which provides an avenue for both indigenes and guests of the community to participate in the tradition. With all the enumerated theatrical forms in Ofekata community, we see that theatre is traditionally served in the best mediums for a conscious, healthy populace, where the minds of the people are educated and indoctrinated, for even the cultural officers of the people's traditional society here have always known and explored the fact that man learns best when he is at play.

Hence, the process of socialization, which is the teaching of morals, of communal history, etc, was very clearly manipulated through dramatic folklores and tales. The dance also avails the dancers the opportunity to tour around the country and even outside the country because some of the lovers of the Ekeleke dance invite the troupe to perform during any of their special occasions in order to spice up the occasion and make it colourful. So, the morality of art thus becomes the immediate mirror of the accepted values of our society, with theatrical practices becoming even more relevant to the historical process as it makes real the drama of the future through fruitful interaction, intermixture and integration with culture (Krama, 2013).

This study aims to advance knowledge of African performing arts by examining the social and cultural significance of the Imo State, Nigeria-based Ekeleke dance ensemble. The objectives are to catalogue this intangible cultural asset and provide suggestions for maintaining it in the face of modernization's obstacles. In essence, the knowledge gathered from this study will benefit current initiatives to conserve and revive native African customs, as well as the scholarly conversation on African cultural expressions.

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