

## **SYMBOLS AS VECTORS OF MEANING IN DANCE COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF EGWUIKE DANCE**

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### **Abstract**

Symbols are natural vectors that instigate meaning and enhance communication in Dance. Hence, Dance passes on information, ideas and feelings through the effective use of both the verbal and nonverbal symbols. However, this study looks at the problem of misinterpretation of symbols inherent in indigenous dance in Nigeria especially by non-dance scholars as mere enhancing tool used only during performance. Consequently, this study aims at examining *Egwuike* war dance of Ishiuzo Egbu in Owerri North to underline the influence of symbols as vectors of meaning. The key objectives are to explore the different symbols of communication implored by the choreographers of this dance to communicate relevant cultural issues in the community and to underscore the importance of symbols used in the dance as purveyors of meaning and value to the dancers and the society. The study uses a qualitative research method to address the case study, and relevant data were interpreted and discussed using Content Analysis. More so, the study is based on George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism. Consequently, the study reveals that *Egwuike* war dance communicates relevant information through the use of unique cultural symbols. Therefore, the study concludes that interpreting these unique cultural symbols helps to unearth and understand the underlying meanings inherent in the dance. Finally, the study strongly recommends that dance scholar should give detailed analysis more in the area of cultural symbols used in traditional dances because they significant vectors and carriers of cultural identity.

### **Introduction**

A symbol is an important tool of communication that conveys information about a person, group of persons, community and race. Symbols play a key role in directing and repositioning the mind of an individual towards understanding basic facts that are not verbally expressed. Consequently, symbols serve as vectors that appeal and influence the emotive senses of sight, feeling and thought and trigger the action of an individual towards making judgement. Joseph Boggs and Dennis Petrie explain that:

A symbol is something (a particular object, image, person, sound, event, or place) that stands for, suggests, or triggers a complex of ideas, attitudes, or feelings and thus acquires significance beyond itself. A symbol is a special kind of energized communication unit that functions somewhat like a storage battery. Once a symbol is charged with a set of associations (ideas, attitudes, or feelings), it is capable of storing those associations and communicate them any time it is used. (63)

The energy which symbol infuse in the mind of an observer makes it indispensable in human communication especially in conveying important information that cannot be achieved through verbal means alone.

Meanwhile, symbols can be overt or covert, natural or universal, concrete or abstract. Symbols are overt when they require less cognitive involvement in order to decipher the meaning of an object of signification, while some symbols are covert when they require in-depth study and interpretation in order to relate the messages to the cultural and social realities of the observer. Relatively, natural symbols have innate qualities that trigger people's perception of such symbols. Boggs and Petrie posit that "natural symbols possess "inherent qualities that make them particularly well suited to be symbols"

(63). For instance, an owl or vulture is a symbol of death in African cosmology. Boggs and Petrie further argue that universal symbols “are charged with their meanings externally through past associations with people, events, places, or ideas rather than through their inherent characteristics” (63). Furthermore, symbols are concrete when they are physical and tangible and are capable of enforcing meaning through their involvement in the process of communication, while they are abstract when they evoke meaning beyond the object of representation. Hence, Jude Obichere affirms that symbols in whatever form or nature “assume their meanings in their relationship to other symbols within a broader context of a system (13). The system of communication allows for an interaction between human and objects in order to understand the realities and relevance of events in human social and cultural environment.

Generally, Symbols are the basis of culture identification. They stand to represent certain information that characterize a particular culture as well as differentiate them from other cultures. Culture being the generality of the people’s existence is manifested in shared peculiarities that give credence to the structures of every society. According to Obichere:

The fundamental element or building block of culture is the cultural trait. Traits assume many forms varying from material artefacts; tools house structures, art works- to behavioural regularities- family interrelationships, economic exchanges and legal sanctions- to abstract concepts and beliefs. All of these diverse and complex manifestations share one feature in common; they are symbols and as such express meaning. (12)

The sum of these material and nonmaterial composition of culture establishes the fact that all cultural elements (including dance) exhibit symbolic character which in turn has obvious meanings that are intentionally created to represent the identity of the people.

Basically, all forms of human communication involve the use of symbols, and dance by nature is symbolic and depends on nonverbal behaviours to communicate feelings, ideas and pertinent social issues. These nonverbal behaviours are achieved through the exteriorization of inner feelings of the dancer through physical movements of the hand, legs, waist and torso, and indeed the entire human body. In addition, dance as a medium of communication can be understood as a symbol of expression because of its reliance on nonverbal codes, cues, movements and physical elements to communicate. Most times, the messages conveyed through the medium of dance requires critical understanding of the various codes, cues, movement and physical elements in order to relate with events and activities in society, while enabling the observer to interpret and make useful inference about the dance and what it means to the dancer and the society.

Pertinently, the symbolic nature of dance communication is enhanced through cultural elements that serve as vectors in accompanying the dancer’s body movement during dance performance which consequently helps the audience to connect with the overriding essence of the performance. According to Patrice Pavis, vectors are “methodological and dramaturgical means of linking network of signs” (17). The implication is that dance makes meaning to the audience when there is an obvious interaction between the various symbols used in a particular dance. Therefore, the interaction of the different cultural elements in dance serves to explicate the motive and message of the dance. Interestingly, every dance makes use of both the abstract and concrete, natural and universal symbols to communicate “specific and valuable meaning... which is subtle, precise and sophisticated” (Shannon 1) to the audience. Basically, dance forms in their own rights are laden with the accompaniment of costume, makeup, props and other expressive modes to communicate ideas, messages and philosophies of the dances to spectators. Hence, Mellitus Wanyama and Isaac Waswa add that in dance “symbols may be expressed through the design of costume, and their cultural/environmental colours, colour of body paintings and shapes of patterns applied” (228). Writing on the cultural trends of Indigenous Nigerian dances, Sunday Abraye and Rudolph Kansese note that:

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. (326)

The inclusion of these cultural elements serves as embellishments that enhance and give clarity to the underlying messages and motif of any traditional dance, and as well enable the audience to look beyond the aesthetic of the dance to search for meaning.

Dance is usually encapsulated in motifs that are quite significant to the overall intention of a dance. Motif of a dance could be highlighted to make critical socio-political statements concerning growing issues in the community, offer solutions to existing problems, modify existing knowledge of the people, and document histories that generally define a people. Hence, traditional dance reflects and sustains the cultural identity of a people, and serves as means of passing on important historical facts across generations. Thus, Dominika Byczkowska-Owczarek affirms that:

Dance allows for the incorporation of meanings that cannot be verbalized. It had an important role in the preservation of human history. Together with legends and mythologies, it was a carrier of social norms, philosophy, and culture before the invention and popularisation of writing. The stories were present in the movements of the dancers and the messages were passed to following generations. (72)

Obviously, the meaning of any dance can be seen in the use of important and unique symbols of expression. To this end, it is important for dancers to consider their own cultural background when searching for symbols for their dance, because symbols are similar in appearance across cultures even though diverse interpretations are possible due to diverse cultural orientations and significance. Hence, symbols can best be understood or interpreted through the eyes of the culture that they pertain to; otherwise they may lose their unique significance.

Undoubtedly, the understanding and meaning of certain indigenous traditional dances are couched in certain symbols used by dancers when performing their art. But because of the appealing nature of body movements most of these unique symbols are hardly ever recognized and studied in order to unearth their role in the overall composition and meaning of the dance. Hence, the potentials of these dance symbols in aiding the dancers construct meaning and communicate effectively to people on issues that affect society has not been fully explored. Therefore, the problem of this study is the misinterpretation of symbols inherent in indigenous dance in Nigeria as mere aesthetic or enhancing props for dancers, which is myopic and must be redressed through this study. It is against this backdrop, that this study examines *Egwuike* dance of Ishiuzo Egbu Autonomous community in Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo-State to interrogate the influence of symbols as vectors of meaning in dance communication.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This Study is hinged on George Herbert Mead's Symbolic interactionism theory. The theory focuses on the relationship between individuals in society and the understanding of their social and cultural environment through symbols. Mead propounded the theory in the early Twentieth Century but could not publish it before his death in 1931. However, Herbert Blumer who was one of his students developed and shot the theory to limelight in the middle of the Twentieth Century, by outlining the basic assumptions of the theory.

The foundation of Symbolic Interactionism is laid on three basic premises as captured in Blumer's seminal essay titled *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. These key principles are that:

Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them ... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things that he encounters (3).

Dionysios Dionysiou, explains that in the first premise, "material objects and social objects like rules, norms or values acquire meaning from human beings within a specific context of action" (9). Hence, objects do not have meaning by themselves, nor do they determine human behaviour, rather meaning is attached to them by people based on the context of their specific situation or experience. Dionysiou further explains that, "the second and third premises suggest that meanings are not "intrinsic to the

objective makeup” (9) but based on the subjective interpretation and shared experiences people have over an event, activity, idea or object. In addition, Byczkowska-Owczarek succinctly affirms that the third premise is punctuated on the basis that:

People employ meanings and modify them through interpretation. Therefore, the meanings of objects are never explicitly determined, but always recognized and subjected to modifications during the interpretation process. That is why the most fundamental and only “real” phenomenon observable for the researcher is the activity of an individual. (“Body and Social...” 166)

Byczkowska-Owczarek observation points to the subjective ability of an observer towards decoding the hidden messages of symbols. For instance, Byczkowska-Owczarek notes that in dance, the human body, especially gestures and facial expressions, has a crucial meaning for the course of an interaction (168). However, all nonverbal features of dance interact to evoke meaning in dance, and how people perceive the meaning is largely dependent of the subjective intention of the person. Therefore, Byczkowska-Owczarek asserts that “as a result of the processes of interactions, the dancer internalizes two coexisting ways of perceiving their (and others’) bodies. They act differently towards the same object depending on the definition of the situation” (“Body and Social...” 172). The two ways Byczkowska-Owczarek proposes that we should conceive dance is firstly, to see dance as a tool and secondly as a material used for developing and constructing the identity of the dancer and what his/her dance stands to represent.

Therefore, people live both in the natural and the symbolic environment. Hence, Symbolic Interactionism is a process that ensures that people produce meaning and values as a result of their experiences and interaction with a particular object or symbol. These experiences are not random or unrelated but are relevant in influence people’s perceptions about events, art and relationships.

### **History of Egbu Community**

Egbu is one of the ancient communities that existed a thousand years before the advent of colonialism. Egbu is the third out of the five sons of Alaenyi, which make up the present Alaenyi clan. Felix Orisakwe, in his book titled, *Ezeship in Igbo Land: 100 Years of Egbukole Dynasty*, notes that "Egbu is an autonomous community in Alaenyi clan of Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo State Nigeria. Alaenyi in order of seniority is made up of Ihitta Ogada, Awaka, Egbu, Owerri and Naze" (1). However, Egbu being a successful farmer had three sons- Okochi, Uba Eze and Uba. The first son Okochi, was the father of Ayalu and Okweke; the latter had a son called Ofeuzo. The second son Uba Eze, was the father of Mpama and Ofomeje (Umuofo). However, the third son, Uba, had only one son called Ishiuzo (24). *In the Context of Alaenyi Clan* Orisakwe further notes that, “Egbu and his large family lived peacefully at “Apu Otu Obo” for a long time, but later moved apart following sporadic misunderstandings and quarrels” (24) that threatened the existential unity of the people. The implication of the migration was the thinning down of the population of Egbu from eight to five (Orisakwe 24). Presently, the five villages that make up Egbu Autonomous community are: Umuayalu, Mpama, Umuofo, Ofeuzo and Ishiuzo.

Before the advent of colonialism, Egbu had a formalized system of government that reposed the authority to lead the community on the family of Okoroafor Egbukole, hence instituting a hereditary system of government that has seen the Egbukole family produce kings in succession till date. The reason for the choice is because of the unusual strength and wisdom found in Egbukole-Orisakwe family. It is worthy to note that when the white missionaries eventually came to the Eastern region in 1906, Egbu became the second community to receive Christianity, the first being Onitsha. Because of the warm reception the white missionaries led by Archdeacon Dennis Thomas received from Egbu, the British government gave approval for the translation of the English Bible to Igbo language to be done in the community. This peaceful infiltration and divine relationship with the early missionary shaped her cultural institution and belief till date. Egbu is also home to the popular *Otamiri* River, which has remained the main source of drinking water in Owerri and its environs.

### **History of *Egwuike* Dance of Ishiuzo Egbu**

*Egwuike* is one of the dances performed in Egbu Autonomous community. It started in 1984 in Ishiuzo village. According to Mr. Sunny Okwu who was one of the pioneer instrumentalists of the dance group, the evolution of the dance was made possible during the funeral preparation of the then traditional ruler, Late Eze George Nlemadim Orisakwe. The Eze-in-council mandated the five villages in Egbu to present a unique dance for the final transition of the King. Okwu notes that as at the time, Ishiuzo village were known for the *Alija* dance, but due to organizational incapability of the leaders of the dance, few members of Mbaonu family, namely: Emereuwa Mbonu, Goddy Mbaonu, Bath Mbaonu, with Ekwutosi Okwu, Chido Egbujo and John Obichere from Ofeuzo village, employed the service of Mr. Anselm Opara from Uratta to teach them the Ohafia war dance. Okwu further notes that Anselm who is not a native of Abriba Ohafia had experienced the Abiriba/Ohafia war dance, and consequently appropriated some of the techniques to teach Ishiuzo village the *Egwuike* dance. Interestingly, the dance has been sustained till date and has metamorphosed to a general dance akin to Egbu people. Mr. Dada Eze in an interview notes that the dance is a borrowed dance and has transcended beyond Ishiuzo village to incorporate other villages. Interestingly, women are not part of the dance because of the strength and rigours involved. The dance is performed mainly during events that have any attachment to the Ezeship throne, Mgbuguzo festival and other personal occasions by individuals who can afford them.

### **Influence of Symbols as Vectors of Meaning in *Egwuike* Dance**

*Egwuike* dance is known for its vigorous, fast paced, forward warlike march pattern that is accompanied by vociferous chants of war songs by the dance vocalists. These chants are given rhythm by the instrumentalists who use the combination of clappers made from carved bamboo sticks, metal gongs and drums to produce sound cues for the dancers. The combination of the vocal chants and musical instruments are the opium that charge the dancers to perform for long durations especially during epoch events in Egbu community like the annual Mgbuguzo/iriji cultural festival, enthronement and coronation of a new king and during a funeral ceremony of a deceased king. The dance is not a religious or sacred dance but a social dance that highlights the strength, communal bond and perseverance, solidarity and brevity that are characteristics of the community. Fundamentally, the dance performance is not restricted to a particular performance venue. This allows the dancers to navigate within the parameters of the community, firstly, to create awareness and become a barometer of instilling calmness, fear and organization within the community so as to ward off any form of violence and external aggression from unscrupulous elements who may tend to disrupt communal activities, and also to ensure clemency and peace throughout the duration of the performance and event. Its recognition as a security watchdog in recent time symbolizes the motive and philosophy of the dance which is hinged on ensuring security, protection and defence for the indigenes of the community as well as their visitors during any communal event.

To ensure that *Egwuike* dance communicates its intension, dancers make use of certain props that serve as vectors of meaning to the dancers, audience and the entire community. The interactions of these symbols in consonance with the dancers' body movement symbolize the philosophy of providing defence, security and protection people around and within the venue of an event. Such props include machetes, axes, guns and bell. The sight of these tools of war and alarm instils fear and caution in the minds of the people to respect the peace and calmness which Egbu community is known for. Naturally, the use these props literary gives the idea of violence which is abhorred in the community, especially during the Mgbuguzo cultural festival week. However, Dada Eze (one of the *Egwuike* dancers) explained that "the idea of using these live props during the dance performance is aimed at representing the willingness of the dancers to fight against any form of invasion within the performance arena and other threats to the peaceful existence of the community during and after the festival" (interview). Inadvertently, these dancers serve as community watchdog to ensure a harmonious and violent free festival celebration for the community.



Pix. 1 Shows *Egwuike* dancers performing during *Mgbugbuzoliriji* festival with their war tools: machetes, spear, and bell.



Pix. 2 Some *Egwuike* dancers led by the lead dancer (Onyeishi) patrol the streets with their machetes during the burial ceremony of the late King.

*Egwuike* dance is a symbolic representation of the communal unflinching support in the emergence and continuous reign of the royal family in Egbu leadership. Hence, the dance performance plays a significant role in re-enacting some historical moments of bravado and wisdom with which the royal family fought and ensured that the community remained indivisible, united and protected from external invasion, inter communal aggression and consequent threat to the royal stool by aggrieved members of the community in the past, who questioned the hereditary system of government in the community. Historically, Egbu practices a hereditary system of governance that reposes the authority to lead on the royal family of Egbukole-Orisakwa since 1896 to date. However, events leading to the selection and conferment of the pioneer monarch Eze Egbukole Okoroafor were that of rancour, internecine wars, kidnapping of indigenes for slave trading and general uprisings within the community and its environs. Hence, the communities search for a man to put an end to such hostilities that threatened the existence of the community was found in Eze Egbukole Okoroafor, whose wisdom and bravery led to the restoration of peace in the community, between neighbouring communities as well as having a memorandum of understanding between Aro slave merchants who passed through the community via the iconic Otamiri River to Port Harcourt for slave trading. Orisakwe in *Ezeship in Egbu...* notes that the friendly relationship Egbu established with Aro slave merchants ensured that Egbu indigenes were unmolested and safe during the period of slave trading (20). The understanding between these two communities fostered over the years and inadvertently inspired the appropriation of the Ohafia/Arochukwua war dance as one of the prominent dances in Alaenyi clan. *Egwuike* thus, symbolizes the royal power and sovereignty of the Egbukole Orisakwe dynasty to lead and guide her people till date. Therefore, *Egwuike* dance plays a major role in events that pertain to the royal family, ranging from coronation, enthronement, funeral of a traditional ruler and courtesy visits of the traditional ruler to other communities. In the event of coronation, the traditional monarch is expected to perform the *Egwuike* dance before the full glare of the audience. The essence is to test his mettle in taking charge of the affairs of the community, especially in ensuring that conflicts are resolved, peace is sustained, and fundamentally, that life and property of his subjects are totally secured under his watch.



Pix. 3 Shows the traditional monarch in his First *Egwuike* dance after his enthronement.

Despite that the *Egwuike* dance appears to be confrontational in approach and content, it further symbolizes the traditional occupation of the Egbu people before urbanization and white collar jobs eventually crept in to almost erode the agrarian identity of the people. Egbu like every other Igbo community is known for her prowess in livestock and crop farming evident in the Mgbugbuzo cultural festival, an annual festival in veneration to God for a successful farming season. Consequently, *Egwuike* dancers showcase this important identity through the use of props like basket of green leaves, goat, and cock. The choice of these items is to fully represent the various aspects of agriculture they people are known to engage in and further highlight the idea of dignity in labour, strength, fertility of the land occasioned by the adequate supply of water from the Otamiri River to the various farm locations in the community, and the show of gratitude to God, which is a characteristic of every Egbu indigene.



Pix. 4 Dance procession at *Ogodo* arena with a life goat to be presented to the Monarch as first fruit during the *Mgbugbuzo/iriji* festival.



Pix. 5 *Egwuike* dancer carrying a basket that symbolizes the traditional occupation of the community.

Costume and makeup are essential in conveying the message of the dance to the audience. Hence, *Egwuike* costumes are carefully selected to reflect the motif of the dance. Generally, the dance group often go for george wrappers of different designs depending on the event. The choice of george is symbolic, depicting royalty and class. The colour of the costume usually has a touch of red which signifies love and affection that resonate the popular Egbu concept of “ojumuyo” which Felix Orisakwe translates to mean “peaceful co-existence and social and economic development”. According to one of the dancers Dada Okwu in an interview, “the choice of red does not necessarily mean danger but the strength and resolve to keep the community in peace, united by blood ties and respect for ancient laws

and tradition that differentiate Egbu from other communities in the state” (interview). Similarly, the dance does not require an elaborate makeup. White kaolin is used to paste a palm of human hand on scattering parts of the body, like the chest, stomach and back of the dancers and a smear of circle line drawn on the right eye. However, the human palm as used in this dance represents the five villages that make up Egbu community and the use of white represents the early cultural exchange between the community and the white missionaries that brought Christianity to the Egbu, which consequently led to the translation of the English Bible to Igbo language at *Ogodo*, an arena where the *Mgbugbuzo/iriji* cultural festival is held annually.

Another important symbol of the dance is the popular *Ishiagu* cap which is known in Egbu as *Okpunwaguru*. This cap was originally worn by the oldest male in each kindred of the community known as “Oha”. *Oha* is the custodian of the “*ofo*” (symbol of authority in igboland) and serves as a representative of his kindred in the enlarged *Oha* council of elders. Ancient tradition and law of the land accords that only “Ndi Oha” wear this cap as symbol of authority, age, and tradition. Thus, it is one of the taboos in Egbu for a younger person to wear it about. This has generated a lot of controversy over the years between the elders and the youths.



Pix. 6 Okpunwaguru/  
Ishiagu. Symbol of  
authority, age and tradition  
in Egbu

However, Eze clarifies the controversy surrounding the wearing of the *Okpunwaguru* (ishiagu cap) by the youths by stating that “the *Okpunwaguru* worn by *Ndi Oha* defers from the one worn by *Egwuike* dancers and that the difference lies in the choice of colour design on the tail of the cap” (interview). He further argues that “the *Okpunwaguru* worn by *Ndi Oha* has a white design although the tail of the cap while *Egwuike* dancers use the one that has the red colour tail” (interview). Therefore, *okpunwaguru* is an important symbol of authority for the dancers which triggers the feeling of acceptance aimed at service to the community.

Furthermore, *Egwuike* dance like the Ohafia *ikpirikpeogu* war dance is generally identified by the expressive use of the “tray of human skulls” which is the insignia of the dance and the symbol of conquest, strength, valour and dominance expected of a warrior. However, Egbu in general has always adopted the diplomatic and peaceful approach in safeguarding its territorial borders; hence the issue of using violence which leads to bloodbath in settlement of disputes is a nondescript feature in the history of the community. Thus, the dancers replaced the tray of human skull with a simulated head of a lion as seen in below.



Pix. 7 The lead dancer carrying a  
simulated head of a lion (ishiagu) in a  
wooden tray.

The tray is usually flat, wrapped with used sack or plain wrapper to aid balance and comfort for the carrier. The rear of the tray is covered with the same costume the dancers wear for a particular performance. The implication is that it conceals the behind of the carrier. The carrier is usually the oldest member of the dance group; he carries this tray although the performance without any form of aid or support. By so doing, he shows strength, endurance and perseverance. Three simulated head of a lion are placed on the tray and each of these effigies is tied with *omu* (palm frond). In Igbo cosmology,



the lion's head symbolizes communal strength, power, and dominance. By implication, the simulated lion heads speaks to the social, political, religious and cultural dominance of the community in the Alaenyi clan. Furthermore, the intrinsic meaning of the *omu* is unique and symbolic because of its sacredness and ritual essence and hence, the binding of the three heads of a simulated lion with *omu* infers that the successes the community has enjoyed over the years is attributed to unity, peace and progress which are the key aphorism of the town union.

The enormous meanings inherent in the dance cover the key areas that define the culture, legend and socio-religious identity of the Egbu people. Hence, beyond the ordinary aesthetics of the dance, important information about the community and her people are portrayed in the dance through the effective use of symbols which serve as vectors of meaning. Thus, social, political and religious issues are all reflected in *Egwuike* dance which have become a known symbol and celebrated identity of Egbu people.

### Conclusion

The use of symbols in dance helps to understand the inherent cultural and sociological meanings of any traditional dance. Consequently, the study of these symbols forms the basis of foregrounding the interrelatedness of the underlying motifs of a dance with the realities of the community that own the dance. While most traditional dances in Nigeria are mainly perceived from the context of festival and social interaction, it is imperative to note that the influence of the respective symbols used in these indigenous dances helps to unearth the hidden messages and meanings of the dances beyond their aesthetic presentation. Hence, symbols are used as vectors to highlight the various aspects of the people's existence which ordinarily cannot be seen and understood through body movement. Therefore, the use of symbols plays a major role in the interpretation, understanding and appreciation of traditional dance as vital tool for communication in contemporary society.

The analysis of *Egwuike* war dance shows that it is one of the symbolic cultural identities that have helped in sustaining the Egbu belief in their history and socio-culture existence. *Egwuike* is a borrowed dance from the Ohafia/Aro war dance variations and has metamorphosed over the years to reflect the several aspects of life that are instructive to the growth and development of the Egbu community especially in the era of global insecurity, instability in governance and widespread hunger and poverty that are the bane of contemporary Nigerian society. *Egwuike* dance explores the issues of royalty, security and agriculture which are the cardinal aspects of human existence. These thematic views of the dance are explored using specific symbols like machetes, axes and spear as tools to fight against insecurity, goat, basket of green leaves which depict the need for food security, *ishiagu* cap which symbolizes authority and acceptance of the dance as one of the important social activities in the community as well as the iconic tray with three simulated head of a lion which stand for strength and endurance. Hence, the dance remains relevant within the social, cultural, religious and political realities and understanding of the community.

Finally, the expressive use of symbols in traditional dance is one of the ways meaning is made and certain information about a particular individual and people are revealed. Hence, among other aspects of dance that are studied, this study recommends that dance scholars should examine the various symbols and cultural elements used in traditional dance in Nigeria in order to underscore the implicit and referential meanings of such symbols because of their obvious role in reflecting the identity of the people who own the dance. By so doing, dance becomes a veritable tool for cultural reengineering and social change.

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