

## SYMBOLIC MOTIFS IN IGBO INDIGENOUS WAR DANCES: A SEMIOTIC READING OF EGWUIKE WAR DANCE

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### Abstract

Traditional African dances have symbolic signs inherent in the dances; as such, these signs form the ideas communicated through the dance and portray the cultural values of the community. This paper looks at the symbolic motifs in selected Igbo cultural dances. It also examines the communicative elements as symbols in the selected dance. This research, therefore, is anchored on semiotic theory and adopts a qualitative research design to investigate symbolic elements in the *Egwuike* war dance and their meanings within the cultural dance and to the indigenes of the community where the dance originates. The findings of this research show that symbols as used in these dances are catalysts that enable the understanding and interpretation of the underlying messages in the selected dances, thus making indigenous traditional dance a veritable tool for communication.

### Introduction

A symbol is an important tool of communication that conveys information about a person, group of people, community, or 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 to and influence the emotive senses of sight, feeling, and thought and trigger the action of an individual towards making judgment. Joseph Boggs and Dennis Petrie (2000) 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. (p. 63)

The energy that symbols 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.

Generally, symbols are the basis of cultural identification. They stand to represent certain information that characterizes a particular culture as well as differentiate it 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. Symbol means different things to different people, which is why it is impossible to predict how a specific culture will symbolize something, owing to the fact that some symbols are gained from experience while others are gained from culture. Dania Aspasia, Maria Koutsouba, and Vasiliki Tyrovola (2015) assert in their study that the basic premise for the development of symbols as important to the construction of meaning lies in the "understanding of the dual status of symbols both as signs and as communicative constructs containing information about objects and concepts" (p. 37). For example, Nicoleta Blanariu (2015, p. 4) in *Paradigms of Communication...* states that:

Dance communicates a set of traditional symbols. In this respect, we may delineate two positions. First, choreographic expression is necessarily "dramatic" meant to reflect emotions, characters, and actions organized narratively and Second, dance is purely formal, a display of technical virtuosity. In the first case, there prevails the referential function of language and/or the expressive one and in the second case the dominant function is the poetic—the focus is placed on message "for its own sake".

Consequently, the nature of symbolism is that it could be a representation of ideas outside itself; therefore, everything one does throughout their life, including dance, is based on and organized through symbolism (Lumen Cultural Anthropology Parr. 1). Furthermore, Aspasia, Koutsouba, and Tyrovola (2015) note that the use of symbols permits particular cognitive manipulations that function as external graphical representations. These representations can deliver and incorporate the fundamental structural elements of ideas, objects, actions, and skills, as well as their relationships, making comparisons and judgments easier (p. 38). Therefore, the understanding and interpretation of any event, activity, or action like dance depends on a careful evaluation of the different symbols embedded in the dance in order to decode the hidden meaning intended to be communicated to the observer.

Basically, all forms of human communication involve the use of symbols, and dance, being a rhythmic movement of the human body, is by nature symbolic and depends on nonverbal behaviors to communicate feelings, ideas, and pertinent social issues. These nonverbal behaviors are achieved through the exteriorization of the inner feelings of the dancer through physical movements of the hand, legs, waist, 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, and physical elements to communicate. Most times, the messages conveyed through the medium of dance require

a critical understanding of the various codes, cues, movements, and physical elements in order to relate to events and activities in society, while enabling the audience to interpret and make useful inferences about the dance and what it means to the dancer and society.

Basically, dance forms, in their own rights, are laden with the accompaniment of cultural elements like costume, makeup, props, and other expressive objects like musical instruments, in addition to the dancer's body movement to communicate ideas, messages, and philosophies of dance to spectators. Mellitus Wanyama and Isaac Waswa therefore affirm that in dance "symbols may be expressed through the design of costumes and their cultural and environmental colours, the colour of body paintings, and the shapes of patterns applied" (p. 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. (p.326)

The inclusion of these cultural elements serves as embellishments that enhance and give clarity to the underlying messages and motifs of any traditional dance and also 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. The motifs 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. In light of the above, Karen Bond argues that:

Bodily movement does not spring from the choreographer or dancer's intuitions — her unverballed 'direct' feel for the music, space, and time, or movement without music, but from the conceptual, poetic, and ideological horizon, in which she is found, formed, through which she developed, or which she critiques, destroys, deconstructs, or restores and appropriates anew. (13)

Hence, the in-cooperation of symbols in dance helps the dancer(s) enhance the underlying messages of the dance. The function of dance in society can therefore be argued to possess great potential in serving as a tool for social commentary, engineering, reformation, and transformation, thus becoming instrumental in communicating ideas that can be beneficial in solving challenges facing man in his immediate environment through its uniqueness and symbolic way of representation.

Africans are inalienable to their cultural roots. Most times, dance is used as a medium of contact with the cultural identity and beliefs of African men. Hence, dance in Africa as

a whole and Nigeria in particular is inspired by the people's culture, which gives a sense of direction and purpose to the respective tribes, ethnic groups, and communities. Ifure Ufford-Azorbo affirms that "African traditional dances do not deviate from what applies to the world over in terms of definition, but go a step further by being a generational part of the fabric that makes up the communities that practice them" (264). The inseparable nature of African dance from communal or traditional involvement in virtually every aspect of the people's cultural beliefs makes dance a viable and symbolic tool for communication because it speaks the language of the people. Nicholas Akas, in "The Contextualization of Indigenous..." succinctly affirms that:

Indigenous dance is one unique technique indigenes have in passing on their histories and beliefs. African dance movements hold symbolic and semiotic importance than the dance steps of other cultures, because of its key role in the practice of oral history rather than solely for social entertainment (142).

Though Akas, in his view above, places the importance of African dance on its social role in cultural and historical preservation over its entertainment function, it is imperative to state that dance, regardless of its religious, cultural, social, and therapeutic functions, achieves its relevance through its ability to titillate and arouse the audience towards creating and evaluating the underlying messages inherent in a dance. Hence, dance conveys its symbolic message through entertainment.

Obviously, the historical message and significance of any traditional dance are portrayed through the use of important and unique symbols. This is why 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. This study therefore examines some ceremonial indigenous traditional dances in Nigeria with the view of exploring their symbolic representation of the people's culture, history, and ideology and the communicative efficacy of the dances beyond entertainment and recreation.

### **Underscoring the Semiotic implications in African cultural dance**

Semioticians believe that the relationship between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary. The arbitrariness stems from the fact that a "sign is ambiguous" (Roland Barthes 26) and means so many things to so many people. Hence, the arbitrary status of a sign means that its meaning is derived not from its social referent, which is signified, but from its relation to other symbols or signifiers within a discursive code. Decoding the meaning of a particular sign relies on people, and indeed, societies, attaching meaning to such a sign or symbol. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (2000) observe that the problem with reading signs is that "a sign may have many signs, and a sign may have many signs" (p. 312). This is because signs and symbols are products of culture, and thus each cultural background determines what a sign can possibly represent or stand for.

Roland Stamper (1991), in his critique of semiotics, argues that the understanding of signs is dependent on three aspects: physical representation, something to which it refers or alludes, and somebody able to interpret this relationship (p. 2). These three aspects, as presented by Stamper, outline the chain of analysis where the interpreter draws on both the physical object and what it refers to evoke meaning. Consequently, the place of a critic or audience in the analysis and interpretation of signs in order to deduce their inherent meaning is important for a performance to communicate beyond its aesthetics. This is because "a sign consists of two entities that cannot be separated from each other. The signifier represents its "form, whereas the signified represents the idea the sign expresses" (Visual Communication, p. 4). Hence, it is the duty of the interpreter to evaluate both the signifier and the signified in order to make useful inferences based on observable events.

Semiotics is of importance to this study and in the practice of dance because "dance is born in the midst of a 'language' or an 'atmosphere of language'..." (Bond 12), and "possesses multiple semiotic resources with which a choreographer may, if s/he wishes, recreate a literary text in kinaesthetic form" (Bond 65). Bianariu affirms that "semiosis is ensured by a cultural system of conventions and given as such to the user" and that "this only occurs if the choreographic signs are strictly encoded, such as in magic, ritual or religious expressions" (Towards... 6). Hence, dance communicational abilities depend on the existence of codes which implies the "culturalization" of some physically perceptible elements (Bianariu "Paradigms of Communication..." 3).

Edgar and Sedgwick expand on the importance of codes to the semiotic reading of dance by arguing that semiotics analyzes communication. In terms of the codes or rules and conventions that determine the meaningfulness of any message, in terms of the selection and combination of meaningful elements (or signs)... which in turn, leads to an interest in texts (be these written and spoken texts, or other carriers of meaning and significance, such as clothing and social actions) and the process of producing and reading them, as well as problems of how (if at all) the sign can refer to a world that is external to the text. (p.56)

Henrique Rochelle explains that code is the structure that allows for the transcription of a message from one form of presentation to another and forms a correlation between the emissary and receiver. He further argues that code is what allows for the understanding of the message because it is an organized element commonly known by the users of this code. Hence, the place of the receiver or audience is critical to the appreciation, interpretation, and valuation of codes. Therefore, "the receiver is fundamental" because "dance cannot be studied (or presented) as a sign without consideration of the necessity of the audiences to whom the work of art is presented" (Rochelle 120). By and large, examining a dance performance using the semiotic theory offers numerous insights into the nature and characterization of the signs and symbols inherent in a dance performance, the analysis of the multiple forms of meaning that such signs and symbols exude, and the understanding of the multiple forms of communication in dance as a language.

Apart from communicating with movement phrases and music, the dancers also communicate with their makeup, costumes, and props. The application of these elements differs from one cultural location to another and, as such, communicates differently too. Ultimately, the medley of these artistic elements in dance performance defines the potency of dance as communication beyond ordinary aesthetic representation of body movements and helps to enhance the underlying message of a performance.

More so, dance has remained relevant in its role in religious and cultural discourses that affect the general milieu of the dancer. In other words, dance communicates issues happening in the religious and cultural space through the use of motif. Motif, according to Rachel Winchester, is "a repeated theme in a narrative or abstract composition that holds significance, either meaningful or conceptual; a recurring element that has symbolic significance in a story" (32). The motif of a dance is accentuated through repeated dance patterns in addition to the use of certain cultural symbols to create emphasis on any subject that the dance intends to relay. For instance:

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. (Abraye and Keneses 328)

However, dance has gone beyond its religious and cultural domain to assert its relevance to socio-political and economic issues. Uhrinová, Kožuchová, and Zentko observe that "dance is one of the tools of mutual verbal and non-verbal communication between people, in which there is confrontation with the social environment" (1). In affirmation, Helen Kringelbach and Jonathan Skinner argue that dance does not simply 'reflect' what happens in society or serve a particular 'function', but it is often central to social life. According to these scholars:

Dance movement carries aesthetic dimensions, a projection of energy and an intended communication between performers and audience that gives it a specific potential to transform human experience in multiple ways. It is in this sense that dance is a powerful form of social action; it is part of the social fabric and not simply a reflection of it. (12)

The moral decay in society often forms the thrust of every artistic expression, including dance. Therefore, most contemporary choreographers compose dances that reflect the many problems confronting contemporary society. For this reason, Igweonu maintains that dance is a tool for teaching morals. According to him:

Every artistic creation has a message that it intends to convey and as such didacticism is a major factor in African performance practice, especially where ritual and myth are concerned. The use of these two mechanisms in contemporary performances must therefore take into account socio-political realities on ground in the attempt to articulate a vision that is both pragmatic and germane to African and non-African audience alike. (7)

In business today, dance plays a crucial role in the marketing and selling of services and products, resulting in massive economic output for the dancers and business owners. Thompson observes that dance "has shifted emphasis from its former status quo as a mere lacing for para-ethnic entertainment" in its new role; he argues that it has become the pivot for socio-cultural interaction. Communicators, politicians, marketers, advertisers, etc. have rediscovered dance as a resourceful catalyst for professional enlightenment initiatives" (274). This is to say that dance has proven to speak the language of business and thus remain relevant in meeting the economic needs of both dancers and businessmen.

### **Signs and Symbols in Nigerian Dance**

Traditional dances in Nigeria are often laden with signs and symbols that represent the idea and purpose of dance as well as the community that originated the dance. The influence of unique signs and symbols in dance enables it to communicate beyond its aesthetic appeal. Gladys Udechukwu opines that symbols are "a very powerful instrument for indoctrination to maintain order in African societies" (115). On the foregoing, signs and symbols as used in Nigerian dance enhance the meaning of a dance and arouse the audience to look for underling messages that such dance conveys through the presence of significant objects or materials used in that dance. Therefore, understanding the purpose and function of any symbol used in a dance performance is very fundamental. Different signs and symbols used in a particular dance serve as embellishments to the interpretation and meaning of the dance. However, signs and symbols come in different forms and, as such, can be classified according to their form, meaning, and purpose. Bankole Oladumiye argues that "the most effective signs and symbols will be those that the consumer (audience) can easily culturally relate to since a familiarity bond has already been created" (18). Hence, in Nigeria, Udechukwu notes that some classes of symbols include "animal symbols, ritual symbols, number symbols, royal symbols, ancestral symbols, and cultural symbols" (111). These aspects of symbols are very often reflected in many Nigerian and large African dances. Hence, it could be argued that African and Nigerian dances are embodiments of symbols.

Basically, Akas observes in *The Contextualization of Indigenous...* that "some important elements of expression are required in indigenous African dance. These elements include: rhythm, time, space, dynamics, costume, props, make-up, lighting, and music" (142). He explains that these elements are highly indispensable because they guide people's perception, understanding, and interpretation while watching a dance performance. It is these elements that categorically state the essence of indigenous dance beyond aesthetics, chanting, and stylized movement as a serious communicative tool (142). Thus, the combination of these elements in dance influences our perception of the important role of dance in the re-enactment of the cosmological identity of a people.

One of the important symbols that aid dance in effectively communicating is costume. The costume of any dance gives an insight into the nature and origin of the performance. It helps the dancer realistically interpret his role and communicate the message of the dance, while also helping the audience to interpret the motif behind such a dance

performance. Emmanuel Oga notes that "costumes convey information to the audience through their texture (whether coarse or delicate), through their colour (whether dull or bright), and through their shape (whether creme de la creme, dainty, growdy, or outlandished)" (52). Consequently, the nature and design of a particular costume help to understand the story behind a dance.

Costume is therefore an integral part of dance and a very important aspect of communication. Its unique nonverbal appeal influences how the audience perceives and interprets a particular dance performance. Zhang Wei notes that "in the dance, the basic function of the dancing costumes is to reflect the characteristics of the dance role, as the actors themselves cannot directly and completely explain the roles to the audience" (70). Hence, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh confirms that "costumes aim to communicate facts and suggest meanings to an audience about the character in a performance, which otherwise may not be easily deciphered without this visual aid to performance" (10). Primarily, costume aids in situating a dancer in time and space by portraying his or her "age, gender, profession, social class, personality, and race, as well as giving information about the historical period or era, geographical location and time of day, and even the season or weather of a particular play or dance (Utoh-Ezeajugh 10). The choice of costume is important to the message a dance tends to convey. Dance costumes are selected based on the occasion, season, and reason for a particular dance. In most cases, traditional dances rely on the uniqueness of their costumes to deliver the underlying message of their performance. To this end, the material used for the design of the costume, the color, and the texture of the costume play a significant role. For instance, in the Egba festival, Eze and Akas observe the importance of color, material, and texture in the design of costumes for the dance performers as significant signs and symbols of the dance. They explain that:

The priest and priestess of Egba both wear white costume, likewise the entire community both indigenes and non-indigenes. The priestess also wears white beads and holds horse tail to show honour and dignity. The priests wear skirt (Ubuluku) and a top to match. From time immemorial, the early skirt was made out of raffia weaving but with the present modern exposure, the priests and male participants make use of white materials of different types depending on the status of the person. This white material was chosen to show the peaceful nature of the seven days of the celebration of Egba. The white colour in their culture represents the best in moral, peace seeking, and orderliness within the stipulated time. (28)

Thus, costume plays a complementary role with makeup in influencing how the audience interprets a dance. In other words, makeup intensifies the process of using a dance to communicate with the audience. In most cases, it is hardly divorced from costume. Depending on the type of dance, it is used to conceal all the exposed parts of the body that cannot be covered with costume, and "its form could be in liquid or solid form depending on its purpose and communicative potency" (Eze and Akas 23). The effect is to heighten the artistic and aesthetic emotions an audience feels when watching a dance performance, as well as to enhance communication.



Generally, Yesim Baltacioglu defines makeup as "the process of transforming an actor into a character using specially crafted materials and specific techniques in a play (dance)" (118). He further explains that:

Makeup work is carried out by applying light, shadow, lines and colours on the actor's face with specific techniques as well as affixing, where necessary, attachments to the actor's face or body, such as prosthetic parts or false beard and moustache. Considering that actors predominantly use their facial expressions in addition to their speaking and body language to convey to the audience their emotions and how their situation affects them, the theatrical makeup achieves its objective of strengthening the expression is among the determinative details of the visuality of design. (118)

The ability of some dances, especially ritual and folk dances, to communicate is hinged on the sacredness and value placed on costume and makeup. This is because they are symbols that arouse a deep sense of shared communal history and experience. For instance, Udechukwu observes that:

A close study of ritualistic symbol in African tradition will reveal that it is first rooted in an experience of an emotion and it is then used to express the experience the purity and holiness of the divine, he then uses a spotless white object, such as a white chalk, white powder or a white piece of cloth or robe to overtly symbolize or represent that divine quality he has experienced. (112)

Thus, the use of costume and makeup, inadvertently, becomes symbolic in representing the beliefs and common experiences of the people. Shannon agrees by stating that what arouses the sense of ritual and conviviality in a dance lies in the sacredness and camaraderie of symbols like costume and makeup, because these important symbols are often:

activated by certain practices releasing the energy within them for healing, insight and spiritual growth... traditional dances once served as ritual practices to facilitate this activation, and that the body of dances and related customs constitutes a mystery school which consciously transmits certain information and specific threads of ancient wisdom. (4)

Hence, costume and makeup function as vital tools that trigger the interaction between the dancer and the audience by creating a deep sense of communion with one another. Another important symbol used in traditional African dance is the mask. Masks are fundamental aspects of masquerade dances in Africa. This is because of its symbolic role as a high ritual activity aimed at establishing communication between humans and spirits. Hence, a masquerade is often seen as an intermediary in the relational triangle between the physical and metaphysical worlds. To this end, the masquerade dancer is usually laden with concrete and abstract symbols that clearly show its sacredness and general importance in the mundane interaction with the supernal.

Similarly, some traditional indigenous dances that are charged with both cultural and sacred symbols were instrumental in resisting the territorial and existential beliefs of the people. For instance, the Abiriba/Ohafia war dance is known for its fierceness and warlike displacement. The tray of human skulls is the most significant sacred symbol of the dance, which elicits fear and dread in the minds of the audience. As warrior dancers, they are known to behead their enemies and carry them on a wooden tray. Therefore, Opara believes that "some of these varied dance traditions, like the war dance of the Ohafia, Bende, and Ngwa people, troubled colonial administrators in the Igbo area, and as such, were closely studied and classified as either 'harmless' or 'harmful' in accordance with whom was doing the dancing, when, how, and for what purpose" (24). In addition, the Okorosha Masquerade dance theater played a vital role in the temporary dislodgement of colonial injustices in the Ubomiri community, thus reaffirming the importance of the symbolic nature of the dance in influencing the people's belief in their natural existence as well as arousing a sense of victory and justice. The symbolic nature of these dances and cultural elements used by the dancers recreate the African sense of past history and future development.

Furthermore, props are important symbols that play a crucial role in influencing our perception and understanding of Nigerian dance. Jarrett Koski basically defines a prop, or property, "as any object that an artist utilizes to further enhance or communicate the plot or story line" (1). The importance of props in dance is to heighten the dramatic effects of the dance narrative. Hence, they are significant for any dance to communicate effectively. Props can either be sacred or mere objects that are stylized or mimed. In whatever form it appears, the dancer relies on its symbolic function in interpreting his art. Most traditional dances in Nigeria weave their story around a particular prop because of its symbolic reference to the mythological essence of the community. For instance, the bata dance is hinged on the symbolic nature of the bata drum as both a musical instrument and the most important prop used to narrate the Sango myth of war. Hence, Oluwafemi notes that "the bata drum is dedicated entirely to Sango, the god of thunder and lightning... to show the physical strength of Sango or the religious worship attributed to Sango" (455).

The influence of signs and symbols used in Nigerian dance, be it abstract or concrete, is enormous in the interpretation and understanding of dance. Therefore, the total exploration of these symbols is fundamental to dance as a relevant tool of communication. Consequently, harnessing these symbols creates an experience for both the dancers and the audience towards the appreciation and evaluation of dance as art.

### **Historical Overview of Egbu Community**

Egbu is one of the ancient communities that existed before the advent of colonialism. According to Felix Orisakwe, "Egbu existed over a thousand years before the advent of the Europeans; his great grandfather, Ofo Aturu, had a first son called Ome. The later had many children who founded a clan called Alaenyi" (24). Egbu is the third out of the five sons of Alaenyi, which make up the present Alaenyi clan. Orisakwe, in his book, *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 of Egbu, 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). Hence, the five villages that make up Egbu Autonomous community in the present day are: Umuayalu, Mpama, Umuofo, Ofeuzo and Ishiuzo. In addition, the constant invasion of the community by the Aro slave traders led to consequent reprisals from the Egbu royal family until a memorandum of understanding was reached between the Eze Egbu and the slave traders from Aro to only take indigenes of questionable characters for slavery.

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 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 down 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 the 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, the 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, at the time, Ishiuzo village was known for the Alija dance, but due to the organizational incapability of the leaders of the dance, a few members of the Mbaonu family, namely: Emereuwa Mbonu, Goddy Mbaonu, and Bath Mbaonu, along with Ekwutosi Okwu, Chido Egbujo, and John Obichere from Ofeuzo village, employed the services of Mr. Anselm Opara from Uratta to teach them the Ohafia war dance. Okwu further notes that Anselm, who is not a native of Abiriba/Ohafia, had experienced the war dance and consequently appropriated some of the techniques to teach Ishiuzo village the Egwuike dance. Interestingly, the dance has

been sustained to date and has metamorphosed into a general dance akin to that of the Egbu people. Mr. Dada Eze 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 rigor involved. The dance is performed mainly during events that have any attachment to the Ezeship throne, the Mgbugbuzo festival, and other personal occasions by individuals who can afford them.

### **Influence of Symbols in Egwuike Dance**

The 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 a combination of clappers made from carved bamboo sticks, metal gongs, and drums to produce sound cues for the dancers. The combination of vocal chants and musical instruments is the opium that charges the dancers to perform for long durations, especially during epoch events in the Egbu community like the annual Mgbuguzo/Iriji cultural festival, the enthronement and coronation of a new king, and a funeral ceremony for a deceased king. The dance is not a religious or sacred dance but a social dance that highlights the strength, communal bond, 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 secondly, to ensure clemency and peace throughout the duration of the performance and event. Its recognition as a security watchdog in recent times symbolizes the motive and philosophy of the dance, which is hinged on ensuring security, protection, and defense for the indigenes of the community as well as their visitors during communal events.

To ensure that Egwuike dance communicates its intention, dancers make use of certain props that symbolize the dance philosophy to provide defense, security, and the protection of people around and within the venue of any communal event. Such props include machetes, axes, guns, and bells. The bell serves as a security alarm, which they use to alert people in case of any danger. The sight of these tools of war instills fear and caution in the minds of unscrupulous elements, who often grate crash public events to respect the peace and calmness that the Egbu community is known for. Naturally, the use of these props in literature gives the idea of violence, which is abhorred in the community, especially during the Mgbugbuzo cultural festival week. However, Dada Eze (one of the Egwuike dancers) explains 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 watchdogs to ensure a harmonious and violent free festival celebration for the community.



**Plate 1 Shows Egwuike dancers performing during Mgbugbuzo/iriji festival with their war tools: machetes, spear, and bell.**



**Plate 2: Some Egwuike dancers led by the lead dancer (Onyeishi) patrol the streets with their machetes during the burial ceremony of their late King, Eze Felix Orisakwe.**

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 heredity 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 Okorafaor 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 to 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.



**Plate 8 shows the traditional monarch in his First Egwuike dance after his enthronement**

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.

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 symbols like basket of green leaves, goat, and cock.



**Plate 9 Dance procession at Ogodo arena with a life goat to be presented to the Monarch as first fruit during the Mgbugbuzo/iriji festival**



**Plate 10 reveals an Egwuike dancer carrying a basket of green leaves to symbolize the traditional occupation of the community.**

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.

Costume and makeup are essential symbols used 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, affection that resonates 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, 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.

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.



**Plate 11 Body design of a human palm symbolizing the five villages that makeup Egbu community.**

Another important symbol of the dance is the popular Ishiagu cap which is known in Egbu as Okpunwaguru. This cap is originally worn by the oldest male in each kindred of the community known as "Oha". Oha is the custodian of every family "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 and this has generated a lot of controversy over the years between the elders and the youths.



**Plate 12 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 replace the tray of human skull with a simulated head of a lion as seen in below.



**Plate 13 shows the lead dancer carrying a simulated head of a lion (ishiagu) in a wooden tray**

The tray is usually flat and wrapped with a 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 back of the carrier. The carrier is usually the oldest member of the dance group and carries this tray throughout the performance without any form of aid. By so doing, he shows strength, endurance, and perseverance. Three simulated heads of a lion are placed on the tray, and each of these effigies is tied with an omu (palm frond). In Igbo cosmology, the lion's head symbolizes communal strength, power, and dominance. By implication, the simulated lion heads speak 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 the omu infers that the successes the community

has enjoyed over the years are attributed to unity, peace, and progress, which are the key aphorisms 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 is portrayed in the dance through the effective use of symbols. Thus, social, political, and religious issues are all reflected in the Egwuike dance, which has become a known symbol and celebrated identity of the Egbu people.

### **Conclusion**

Dance is unarguably one of the oldest cultural mediums of entertainment, identity, expression, and communication. Hence, dance has always been part of man at every stage of his life, serving various personal and communal functions in society. Thus, the interpretation of the underlying meaning of the dance is perceived from its ability to represent the people's need to be entertained and to showcase their cultural identity. Hence, the utilization of symbols by the dancers in communicating important messages that highlight the worldview and history of the communities is rarely explored and poorly interpreted, mostly by the audience, who see these symbols as mere paraphernalia of expression or identities of the dance. The outcome of this study shows that symbols as used in these dances are catalysts that enable the understanding and interpretation of the underlying messages in the selected dances, thus making indigenous traditional dance a veritable tool for communication for the dancers that perform these dances and for the audience who sees these performances during cultural festivals and other important ceremonial functions in society.

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

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