

**CULTURAL DANCE AS COMMUNICATIVE TOOL AND TOURIST ATTRACTION:
A STUDY OF IKELE OJI EGO DANCE OF AKWAEZE COMMUNITY
IN ANAMBRA STATE**

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Abstract

Dance is a unifying act in Africa and beyond as the case may be. It has always given people a sense of belonging and source of cultural identification, but indigenous dance in its unique status, style and form, is still being regarded by some as a mere festive dance or communal performance only, which such assumption has ironically degraded the value, respect, preservation, and projection of indigenous African dance, thereby restricting the outside world in appreciating the tourist potency in the performances beyond mere festivals. This research aims seriously to x-ray those elements in indigenous dance understudy that will help as a tourist tool for development. Objectively, through the tourist potency, the indigenous dance would be seen as a communicative tool for cultural sustainability, as a tool for inter-cultural development for tourism, and presenting indigenous dance as a marketable commodity that requires serious packaging. The research adopted qualitative method which involved content analysis and face to face interview, while theoretical framework used was the Cultural Identity Theory. It would aid in interpreting the cultural norms in the dance (Ikele Oji Ego), towards understanding its socio- communicative essence towards tourism. From Findings, beyond the festive celebrations, there is a sociological essence in any indigenous dance and that is what this paper sets to project. In conclusion, indigenous dance should henceforth be taken beyond the comfort zone of its originators, rather let it be an interconnecting tool between the originators and the outside world for tourism development.

Keywords: dance, culture, communicative tool, tourism, Akwaeze

Introduction

The essence of dance in Africa is a unique art form on its own, especially on the use of cultural norms. Its uniqueness has made it ceremonial, communicative and a tool for cultural sustainability. Every dance performance in Africa aims to actualize both objective and subjective interpretations. The objective interpretation based mostly on the socio-cultural implications surrounding the dance, either to lampoon, entertain, or serve as a corrective major. At this point, dance is to serve as a tool for social propaganda towards effective communication, cum organization of things wherever it exists. Ufford Azorbo, Ifure stated that:

African dance forms are strong, idealized and vital with a feeling of dynamic thrust and resistance. They are exceedingly controlled having the power to project the gentle wind or the raging storm... Africa dance has urgency. The dancer has direction and purpose. The purpose is to communicate. This is why he can assume the proportions of an ant or a giant. For him and his people, his dance is life (5).

The subjective interpretation of dance goes beyond the choreographer's innermost impression into opening doors for innovations that will attract tourism and development. This is where the existence of any dance goes beyond the mere festive performance, into a serious inter-connecting link between owners of the performance, and the outside world for tourism projection.

Akas, Nicholas observed that:

Dance helps to transform the visual appreciative eyes of the audience into critical interpretative eyes of seeing performances as a tool for identifying problems, analyzing the problems and accept the outcome as the positive way forward for tourism sustainability (24)

Dance is and remains an indispensable tool that attracts tourists and tourism in Africa. This is so because the various mythological beliefs in Africa made dances very unique and arouses tourist anxiousness to know more. So, the ability to dissect the sociological essence of any dance especially native performance gives room to the followings:

1. To always appreciate dance as a unique art that must be mastered.
2. To always value the cultural norms in dances as a corrective tool, cultural sustainability tool, and a means of interfacing with the international community through tourism.
3. To understand that every dance has its source, it is through the originality that one community can be differentiated from another.

Akas maintained that

“What differentiates our traditional performance from western dance are content, form, and style, which automatically shows that people’s dance is a total reflection of who they are and not whom they would want to be” (34).

Cultural Norms and Tourism

The cultural norms embedded in our dances make them very attractive and marketable. This is because what makes our dance what it is today is different from the international community. According to Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen; Cultural norms refer to identification with or sense of belonging to a particular group based on their various cultural categories including dance, ethnicity, race, gender, feeding and religious (22).

The essence of cultural norms especially when it is marketable is to project who we are, our mutual belief system, and demystify the wrong assumptions on indigenous dance culture. Our dance culture has been wrongly tagged fetish, barbaric, mundane and not to be associated with, because of lack of understanding of the use of cultural norms in the dances. The paper, therefore, sets to make a thesis statement that indigenous dances should not be analyzed from afar as a mere dance rather a closer look on it through tourism, will unmask the hidden truth in the dances. Though the use of cultural norms is indispensable, it should be the key tourist attractions packaged well. It is through tourism that communities begin to appreciate each other and arrive at a common ideology which is effective actualization of community development through tourism. The tourist/ researchers must always lookout for the following:

1. To understand the sociological value of cultural norms whether it is meant for public consumption or strictly personal. This will help tourists or indigenes to be very careful while documenting some important issues.
2. Given that tourism is very important in development, tourists should be very careful not to trespass where they will be a victim of unseen circumstances.
3. Documentation should always be from the unknown to the known, this will help the tourist to understand the particular community more, while those ageless (beliefs) that have gone into extinction will be reawakened again.

Tourism Policy

For anything to be generally accepted it must have been passed into bill before it becomes a working policy. This value of policy is to show that such an act is widely accepted by all, mostly within and outside the shores of the country. Tourism policy in Nigeria was not left out; rather it is contributing seriously in boosting the economy of the country, though at times the government no longer believes it can be used for such.

Maria Velasco opined that tourism policy is an international course of action in any country, which goes beyond the level of theoretical reflection and political intention rather than materialized into real action

(45). The target of any government be it state or federal is to have a working policy and aim towards utilizing it. If achieved, the tourism policy will create room for the following.

1. It will open doors for more development and investment
2. It will help to increase exchange among entrepreneurs.
3. It will increase the inflow of money, which will be used to develop the state or country.
4. It will increase employment, thereby putting an end to the unnecessary social vices.

In other to achieve the above mentioned, Velasco stated the ideal policy instrument used by the government at all levels in achieving their goals. These instruments are::

1. **Organization:** This is where different organizations be it church, school, family and traditional rulers, work towards queuing in the already stated rules of government on tourism development. At this stage, all organizations work towards projecting what they have.
2. **Authority:** This involves uniformed men, women and paramilitary agencies, who work tirelessly in protecting tourist sites from robbery and from being vandalized.
3. **Museum:** This is where tourist attractions are being documented and it is important to state that people without a traceable form of origin are incomplete, so the government does everything possible to gather and document artifacts, pictures, dances, props, and others, strictly for historic and reference purpose.

If all hands are on deck, it will go a long way in making tourist policy valid.

Cultural Identity Theory

Culture has remained an indispensable part of man's existence. Many cannot survive on the earth without having a means of identification which can either be dance, dressing, food, folklore, and ritual. So, the cultural identity theory by Roy Shuker is to remind people of their source of communal belief. Roy Shuker in his cultural identity theory as cited by Alyssa Santos said that "Each individual understands reality and attributes meaning to the world in a unique way through experiences with their culture" (6).

The culture of people always differs, both in style, form, and ideology, but what makes it a binding tool is its cosmological belief system. The cosmological belief system guides the indigenous on what to do at every given time, while on the side of tourism, tourist is given guidance to prevent them from stepping beyond their boundaries. Santos opines that: "Culture when understood and respected, it serves as a force that unifies human beings on earth at various communal bases" (7).

Cultural identity theory by Roy Shuker aims at unifying the people irrespective of their religion, social and economic ideologies. He further stated that "Tourism should be encouraged through cultural identity; because no culture exists in isolation rather one needs each other for cultural promotion" (8). He further affirmed his claims by saying that "It is cultural dump pit for any culture to exist within its environs only, without having international recognition. Such culture automatically dies a natural death or suffers cultural inferiority" (7). Myron Lustig Concurred by saying that "Cultural identities are guiding principles to meaningful symbols and to lifestyles that individuals share with others" (135). It is based on the various submissions on cultural identity theory that all the analysis to be carried out will be based on this theory.

History of Ikele Oji Ego Dance of Akwaeze Community

This is a very symbolic dance in the Akwaeze community. Its symbolic nature can be seen during analysis in dance technicality, form, style, and content. The dance Ikele Oji Ego historically is from the Akwaeze community in Anambra state and was believed to have started in 1940 by two women symbolically who represent the Akwaeze community and their neighbouring community Nneni. The two women that started the dance according Mrs Nkiru Eze (interviewed) said "The two women truthfully reported their husbands and children to the then village head for going against the custom and tradition of the community, so then village head was very impressed with their action for covering the truth, rather than exposed it. So, in other to show them appreciation, a dance called Ikele Oji Ego was constituted just to celebrate them: Mrs. Ifeoma Okeke (interviewed) maintained that "not just celebrating them, but to be a member of the prestigious dance group, the initiate must always be ready

to say the painful truth'. She further explained that "the painful truth as one of the basic attributes before joining Ikele OjiEgo troupe simply means (always ready to say the truth even at the point of death or threatening). Mrs. Ifeoma Okeke (interviewed) stated further that "Ikele Oji Ego dance of truth, totally meant for Akwaeze women, can be compared with Ozo title taking in Igbo land, where to become a member requires the following initiates;

- To be an indigene
- To be of good character and behaviour.
- To always be ready to say the truth at all times.
- To be ready to help people at their point of need and willing to defend the weak.
- Dance is a must join for any matured women in the community even those who were married into the community, because it is a means of testing their abilities to say the truth.

NB: The Lead singer through her songs serves as the tourist guide especially for tourist who might not understand the cultural implication embedded in the dance and use of props.

Analysis of Cultural Norms in Ikele Oji Ego Dance

The communicative and tourist value of the dance lie in some important selected sections of the dance. It is those selected sections in dance when interpreted, exposes the tourist potentials in dance towards enchainning effective tourism. Those tourist attractions analyzed are as follow;

- The chair
- Igba (staff)
- Hat-style
- Costume
- Songs
- Movements
- Instrument

The chair

This is a very symbolic prop in the dance. The use of the chair in dance goes beyond the normal use of relaxation. This chair is called "Ezi Ije" which is an indispensable tool in the life of any Ikele Oji Ego initiate. Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (interviewed) explained that "The chair is called Ezi ije because it shows that carrier has been tested both spiritually and physically as core agents of truth, humility, and trustworthy. So, it is an abomination for any member to lie while sitting on this chair". She further said that this chair called 'Ezi Ije' has its own rules and regulations. Its rules and regulations are as follow;

- None-members are not allowed to sit on it expect the daughter of the initiate.
- The color of the chair is usually yellow and black. The yellow color according to Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (as interviewed) signifies that "they are an agent of truth and as far as they say the truth their lives will always be prolonged, but whenever they stop saying the truth death visits the person immediately (that is what the black color signifies)
- When any member lies, the chair automatically turns upside down. So, for the initiate to accept ownership again it must be purified with palm front, a knife, and a hoe.

The palm front is a sign for purification, the knife symbolizes a tool used in killing the spirit of lying permanently in each member and while the hoe is used to bury the act of lying finally.

- The chair must be kept clean, Mrs. Nkem Uzo (interviewed) said that "The reason for keeping it clean is to alert and invite their chi to the performance arena.
- The chair only comes out while settling difficult issues in the community, which shows any decision taken on the seat, is final.
- based on cultural identity theory, used as the framework the use of the chair has made Ikele Oji Ego Dance performances of the Akwaeze community to always stand out whenever it is being performed.

Igba (The Staff)

This is a unique symbol of the truth that differentiates Ikele Oji Ego dancers in two ways:

- It presents them as old and wise people. Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu explained that "The initiation age into the dance is between 60 – 80 years. The age bracket is very symbolic because, at this

point, the initiates are believed to have seen it all to an extent throughout their existence, so there no need for them to lie again or not being good ambassadors. So they are expected at any level to be very articulate in their dealings with people and very careful with their choice of words. Also, the women at this age bracket, their breasts are fondly called ozo nwere olianya meaning “The road of hope”. Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (interviewed) said why their breast is addressed as the “The road of hope” is because (a) their children sucked it for survival, (b) They can use that same breast either to bless or cause whenever they are angry and (c) The breast has fallen, no need for physical beauty rather beauty of truth.

- It serves as the staff of the office. Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (interviewed) said that The Igba (staff) is a unique staff of office for any Ikele Oji Ego member. It simply signifies they always stand for truth, good ambassador and agent of hope. Whenever the Igba (staff) is been held straight by the member is simply shows their decisions are acceptable to all and cannot be changed. Black is the color of Igba (the staff) which shows that “death awaits anybody who counters their authority”

This has made Igba (the staff) a tool that cannot be used anyhow unless during serious situations that require the attention of Ikele Oji Ego dancers.



Plate 1: Ikele Oji Ego women in a meeting to settle dispute in the land

Hairstyle

The type of hairstyle required for initiates during their performance is natural hair made with threads only. Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (Interviewed) explained that “it is a taboo for an Ikele Oji Ego initiate to style her hair outside the generalized style. Why it is a taboo, is because as an agent of truth material things should not attract them. it is of belief among the initiates that making expensive hairstyles blocks any member's ability to always say the truth and also means she can be bribed at any given time. But in any situation whereby an initiate makes the hairstyle with thread only, it shows (a) they are nothing before God (b) they are called to serve (c) they must always see themselves as an agent of truth. (d) That man is nothing so death can come anytime. So, to date, the hairstyle has been purely natural.



Plate 2: The hair style of Ikele Oji Ego during performance

Costume

The type of costume used while performing to date is George material (Red). According to Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepu (interviewed) opined that “the essence of George material (red) is very symbolic and communicative value” she went further to explain that “George is an expensive material, which implies that Ikele Oji Ego initiates are comfortable people material-wise, so they cannot be bribed at tall, while red color the communicatively means it is only very important occasion that they were well duly invited with their fee of ten thousand naira only, if not anybody can attend on personal relationship. She went further to add that beads also signify royalty and full initiates. The beads are so cherished by the members that they don’t mess it up with any other of their pieces of jewelry. This is just to maintain sacredness in the beads as a symbol of authority. She also affirmed that why they go bare body, “is to show the nothingness in man’s body which will decay immediately he/she dies”.



Plate 3: Ikele Oji Ego Performers in their royalty costume

Dance Movement

The dance movement here is communicative because its style when interpreted means the following:

1. The movement is always circular. This circular movement simply shows united they stand and divided they fall. It is of believing that before decisions are taken by Ikele Oji Ego dancers, it is done collectively and not individually. This is why whenever they take stand on a decision, it cannot be altered at all, but if altered death awaits the person.
2. They count three before changing to a slower movement. This simply means as an agent of truth, they are not in a hurry to take decisions whenever important matters are being present before them. They always take their time to avoid been accused of injustices. So counting of three before changing to another step shows how many times they can deliberate on any issue before passing the final judgment.
3. Their movement is forbidden from raising specks of dust while performing. The reason being that in taking crucial decisions, outsiders should not hear it except the members only. So this movement shows that they are trained to keep and uphold secret at any given time



Plate 4: This is Ikele Oji Ego dancer in their circular movement.

Songs

The songs are didactic. It is so because every rhythm in the song has a message to pass across to the community. The message can be in various forms when interpreted such as:

- The song serves as a watchdog in checkmating people's daily activities in the community. The good ones are praised in the songs and encouraged to continue doing good, while the bad ones especially those who do not help others are seriously lampooned and advised to turn a new life.
- The song also portrays Ikele Oji Ego performers as rich people, as royalty and must be treated with all sense of respect.
- The song serves as a tool for oral tradition, where the singer narrates all the happenings in the community while singing.
- The song is used to encourage initiates to keep saying the truth, against all odds.

The use of the songs here conforms to Akas claims that: "In all performative arts be it singing, dancing, poetry, and fine art, what is paramount is the interpretative value, when relating to the present situation of things in the society or community" (24). So the songs of Ikele Oji Ego dance performance remain didactic to date and still stand the test of time as a tool for tourist attraction. The Lead singer through

the songs serves as the tourist guide especially for tourist who might understand the cultural implication embedded in the dance and use of props.



Plate 5: The Lead Orchestra Performing

Instrument

Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepe (interviewed) said that “the only two major instruments for the performance are Igba (the staff) and Uko (the wooden stick). She added that “the wooden stick cannot be played while holding the Igba (the staff) at the same time. This is because both of them of different functions, so cosmologically they will never be happy when used together. The Uko (the wooden stick) is been made from a special tree in the forest with the help of the men and while a woman will be there to supervise its making. The reason why a woman supervises the making according to Mrs. Lettica Uju Ezepe “is just to be sure is well produced in the form and style they want it.’ The Igba (staff) still remains the staff of the office. It is only while trying to beat Uko (the wooden stick) that Ikele Oji Ego dancers can drop their Igba (staff) on the floor. This is just to give respect to the two instruments based on their functions and the ideological belief attached to them. Immediately they are done beating the Uko (the wooden stick), they will pick Igba (staff) and place it on their shoulders, which shows the issue at hand has been settled and everybody can go home rejoicing



Plate 6: Ikele Oji Ego Performers dropping their Igba (the Staff) to pick up Uko (the wooden stick)



Plate 7: Ikele Oji Ego Performers Playing the Iconic Uko (the wooden stick)



Plate 8: Ikele Oji Ego Performers placing the Igba (the staff) on their shoulders which symbolically means the matter before them has been settled;so people can now go home and rejoice

Conclusion

The best way to give our indigenous dance a wide range of acceptability beyond its comfort zone is through tourism. The core essence of tourism is to appreciate every culture starting from its unknown to the known. With this, different cultural norms embedded in our dance will be documented and researched for further purposes. Dances in Igbo communities like the one under study (Ikele Oji Ego) have and still remain a good tool for tourism; all it requires is proper projection, interpretation, and documentation respectively.

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