

The Communicativeness of Okobo Traditional Dance Performances

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Abstract

Dance can be said to be a universal practice all over the world, but what may not readily be agreed upon is whether dance communicates the same meaning universally. Every society has her dance pattern, rhythm and even movements. These define the nature of indigenous dance in African society. The study attempts to give symbolism and forms to the traditional dance among the Okobo people of Akwa Ibom State. Using a library research method, the study brings out the following findings that dance can communicate the following: Spirituality, Vocation, Identity, uniqueness, and Social Cohesion

Key words: *Dance, Communication, Symbolism and Forms*

Introduction

Indigenous dance as an art generates impulse and signal that are creatively channeled to the audience through the manipulation of the human body. Indigenous dance is dynamic because its kinetic code varies based on quality and design of body movements.

Dance is seen as the oldest art form, which reflects man's age-long need to communicate emotion by using the most immediate instrument at his disposal. He started by imitating the movements of animals in order to attract the animals to himself in order to aid in his hunting exploits. Important ceremonies like birth, death, marriage, war, coronation of a new leader, healing the sick, prayer for rain, sun, fertility, protection and forgiveness in the lives of the primitive men were celebrated by dancing. Hawkins (1988) explains that;

Dance is one of man's oldest and most basic means of expression. Through the body, man speaks senses and perceives the tensions and rhythm of the universe around him, and using the body as the instrument, he expresses his feelings and responses to the universe

Dance to an African, is a way of life, a true representation of a people's existence expressed through movement. Indigenous dance is also an integral part of African culture because movements play vital roles in communication within African context. Chalmers (1973) states that; Indigenous dance is an expressionistic tool utilized to capture, express, embody and formulate any given representation of our transitional indigenous culture. It is used in its form, accompanied by a semiotic song and music, to entertain and educate the indigenes.

The indigenous dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people where it exists. It assists indigenes to praise, criticize as well as work with each other. Tierous-Doople (2004) opines that; Indigenous dance in Africa is used as a functional tool for expression and for a variety of reasons. It is used in ritualistic purposes, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity cum sustainability.

Dance is an essential communicative social event, which not only accommodates, but encourages and appreciates participation by spectators, and is elastic enough to expand or contract in time according to the quality of the performance and the interest of the audience. The cultural influence on the indigenous dance defines its technique and style of expression, thereby strengthening the relationship between cultural expression and dance movement as a tool for positive propaganda.

It is safe to say that dance reflects society – its beliefs, values, struggles, and experiences. Hence, the different dances of the Okobo people which is the fulcrum of this study is no exception because it brilliantly offers a window into the worldview of the Okobo people of the Oro nation, as gleaned from its form, functions, music, techniques and poetry. This study therefore, intends to show the communicative value of the different dances of the

Okobo people with a view to pointing out the communicative significances of each dance performances.

Statement of the Problem

The Encyclopedia Americana vol. 8 states that: "Primitive man danced to celebrate birth, heal the sick, mourn death and pray for good hunting, rain or victory in battle ...". This claim deals extensively on the different areas that dance penetrate in the society. Because of the strong empathy and pulsating feelings that comes with dance performance, man is capable of loosening himself from the torments of life that are prone to weigh him down. Dance penetrates the spirit realm as it is used as link between the mortals and immortals, the natural and supernatural. It is broadly believed that African dances are ancestral and that when there are performed, the spirit of the ancestors mingle with the people, beginning with the performers. These dances are presentational in nature (especially in dance of transition).

The problematic questions in this study are as follows: Are dances in Okobo land more than just expression and rhythmic movement of the body? What is the interpretative and communicative essence of the use of dance performances in Okobo?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. to attempt to appraise the taxonomy of dance performances in Okobo.
2. to define the interpretative and communicative essence of dance performances in Okobo

Profile of Okobo People

Okobo is located in the south south of Nigeria and is a Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The local government area was created in 1989 by the government of President Ibrahim Babangida. The local government area is bounded by Uruan, Oron, Urue-Offong/Oruko and Nsit Atai local government areas. The Council is located within the south of Uruan LGA, east of Nsit Atai LGA, west of Oron and north of Urue Ofong Oruko and Esit Eket. Okopedi is the capital of the Local Government Area (LGA). The area has seven districts: Eta, Odu, Atabong, Ukwong, Ebughu, Okiuso and Ibighi. Okobo people are in the first three districts - Odu, Eta and Atabong while the Atak Oro people (a defunct LGA) reside in the remaining four districts. To the North is Esuk Inwang (4° 56' 0" North, 8° 6' 0" East) and to the South is Nda (4° 47' 55" North, 8° 7' 34" East). The Coordinates of Nung Atai Eta are 4°51'0" N and 8°7'60" E and those of Odobo are 4° 49' 32 North and 8° 6' 38" East.

In Odu, there are several villages- Akiba Obo, Anua Ekeya, Ebighi Edu, Ebighi Okobo, Ekpene Ekim, Esuk Inwang, Idibenin, Nda, Nung Ukana, Obot Inwang, Ube, Ufok Esuk. In Eta district are Afaha Nsung, Akananwana, Amamong, Anua Okopedi, Ape Amamong, Atai Amamong, Ata Atai Otope, Atipa Odobo, Ebighi Eta, Ekpene Ekim Eta, Ibawa, Mbieduo, Nsating, Nung Atai Eta, Nung Atai Odobo, Nung Udom Odobo and Obufi.

An Overview of Dance

Dance is as old as man and has been conceptualized in several ways. It is performative in nature, and ranks among the first forms of the arts. It is a form of body language, which expresses emotions, aspirations and goals of a people. Due to its nature, it has been conceptualized in different forms. Nasel (2019) explains that: Dance is not a substance that can be felt, lifted or weighed. It is something that occurs 'when a human entity moves in directed patterns, consciously performing specific movements while humans view this phenomenon.

Dance is thus essentially addressed to the sense of sight. Its major instrument is the human body, so the spectator sees the dancers' pain or pleasure not through a symbolic intellectual transaction, but through direct sympathetic muscular activity. Movements done by the dancer readily appeals to the spectator who perceives the movement through his own body. The spectator empathizes and identifies with what happens to the dancer's body because he too has a body. Dance is a transition and ephemeral.

Hawkins (1998) "Dance exists only in the now" and no place else, therefore the momentary nature of dance is one of its most precious gift. In his philosophy, immediacy holds a strong position where dance is concerned. He says it means:

"The complete presence of mind and body in movement - to - movement relationship simultaneously here, now; the mind must be empty enough to let the body inhabit it — moving body that envelop of space, time and gravity"

Graham (2017) sees dance as the externalization of expressive movements which re-enact human experiences. To her, dance is not a literal or literary thing, but everything that a dancer does, even if it's the most lyrical thing, and it has a definite and prescribed meaning. If it could be said in words, outside of paintings, outside of sculpture, inside of body, so an interior landscape, which is revealed in movements.

This leads us to the concept of literal and non-literal dance. Dance, which is descriptive and pantomimic in nature, is literal. It carries a specific message and possibly narrates a story. A performance could be termed as dance or drama depending on its mode of presentation. Dance can sustain itself without depending on dramatic resources. The intellect is put to task in the interpretation of the content and meaning involved in dance performance.

Therefore, literal connotations in a dance performance defeat the aim of dance, as it ties the movement down to what could pass for words and actions which overshadow movement for movement sake. Movement is therefore, a language, which is empathetically understood, and perceived through the vision of the human body in motion. Non-literal dance reflects the kinetic sensibilities as well as abilities of the choreographer, and his dynamic imagination for movement and motion, while at the same time, giving all the elements of the theatre an integral or dynamic part in the presentation.

The material for dance speaks for itself, establishing the anonymous nature of dance as an art form. The materials which makeup the non-literal dance form includes: Body relationships, designs, images, feelings, movements, shapes, structural forms, space and time. These materials, in the different varieties make up the dancer's vocabulary. Here the choreographer is not limited to or bound by any existing laws of dance creation, but is at full liberty to delve into the world of movement and other materials in order to make a composition.

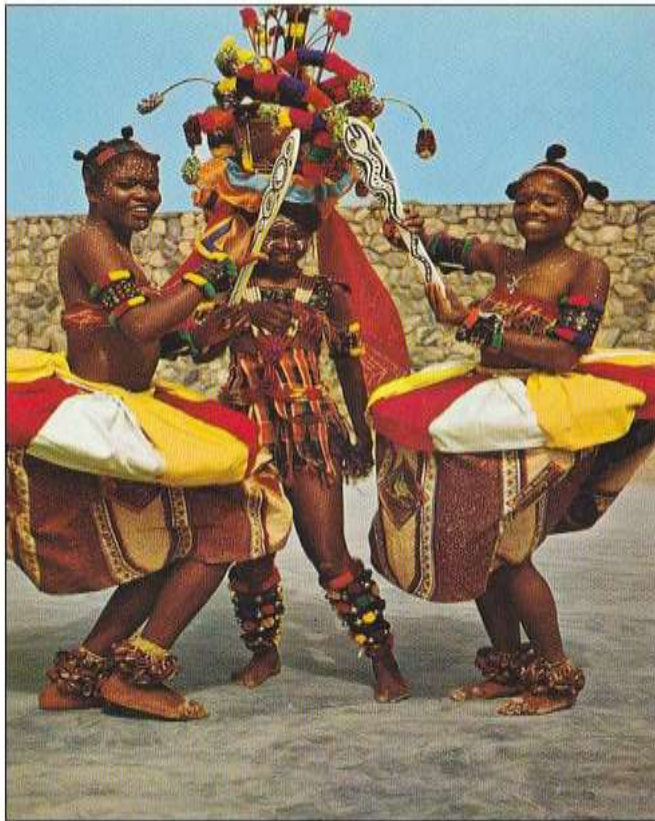
Taxonomy of Okobo Dance Performances

Historically, dance is one of the highly developed forms of expression found in Nigeria's many cultures. It played and still plays an important role in religious, political and social occasions. Sometimes, dance criticizes the society in an amusing way that makes them look ridiculous. Some dances are used to showcase the vocation of the community; example is the Akata dance of the Ibibios and Efiks of Nigeria. However each society evolves and perfects its dance and shapes it to deliver as much as it desires. Among the Okobo people of Oro, the following dance patterns have been identified namely: **Abang, Ekombi, Asian Nka-iferi, Ubom Isong, Uneke Nyok , Oko, Nkerebe, Asian Mbire Iban, The Ndok Ufok Ebe and Ebre.**

Abang Dance

Abang (pot) dance is performed during the ceremonial outing of the maiden from the fattening room (*ufok Nkwoho*), where she has been confined for months. While in this seclusion, she is fed with all the traditional delicacies that would make her plump as a pot (*abang*), from which the name of the dance is. There are other maiden dances, which are performed on moonlit nights to welcome the new moon as well as for communal entertainment and relaxation. Notable among them is *Abinsi* dance.

Ene (2019) assert that Abang was an artistic means to communicate with the goddess. Although, as with any oral performance, the maidens added colour and glamour to their ritualistic performance by experimenting with whatever household item(s) they could place on their head. Items such as baskets, gourds, lanterns, pitchers, calabashes, trays, and mortars were lavishly ornamented and used to express delight and celebrate their goddess. However, over time, the damsels settled for the water pot (*abang*) and the tray (*nai - nai*). And only skilled performers were allowed to carry the Abang and the *nai- nai* whilst others danced around them in a circle. For this reason, the Abang dance performance is otherwise known as “*Abang ye nai-nai*” or “*Ekomo Iba.*” Which translates as “waterpot and tray” or “two vats” respectively. Hence, Abang became a quasi-trado-religious dance for the womenfolk and popular *Ekombi* songs like “*Nta nta eyen nmi*”, “*Otop eyop mkpe esa,*” “*Idem mi eye ye*” were all coopted for its performance



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Pix 1 showing Abang Dancers

Ekombi Dance

Ekombi dance is etymologically linked with the sea and all that is in it. The aquatic world remains the pivotal arena where movements are derived and expanded through a musical frame design. The Okobo people have a strong linkage with the Efiks and the Efiks have great respect for the mermaids. There is a strong belief that her happiness or anger modulates the social conditions in the society.

The origin of Ekombi is founded in the traditional religion of the Efik people of Cross River State. Moreover, most Efiks strongly trace the history of Ekombi dance to the marine world. An informant, Miss Elizabeth Asuquo, a staff of Cross River State Council for Arts and Culture, says that the knowledge about the origin of Ekombi is general among Efiks.



Pix 2 Showing Ekombi Dancers

According to her, there is a legend that there was a god who went out in search of absolute powers. The god had searched for many years to acquire the greatest power above every other god. Dissatisfied on his unyielding search, at a point the god went under a rock to perform some ritual ceremonies. At the same time, two lovers: Ekanem and Ekpenyong (two most important mermaid names in Efik land) had come out from the marine world to relax. They sat on this rock and in the course of their amorous affairs, they shifted some stones and one of the stones fell on the god. This angered the god and in return, he released fire and thunder at Ekpenyong but Ekanem jumped in to intercede and the thunder and fire got into her. The god then placed a curse on Ekpenyong turning him into a serpent and casts him into an Iroko tree. Similarly, he sent Ekanem back to the marine kingdom.

Ekanem was a peaceful goddess but on getting back to the kingdom, loneliness and longing for her lover alongside the thunder and fire burning within her added up to make her cause trouble and destruction in the marine kingdom, and this led her to be cast out into a small stream. There, she met a friend and they became very close, as sisters. Her name was Eme-Eme and Ekanem also changed her name to Eme-Idem.

The two lovers having searched for each other for a long time to no avail decided to go into the world of humans in search for a new lover. As human beings, now, Eme-Idem (Ekanem) met a man who fell in love with her and proposes marriage. Ekpenyong on the other hand, resides in Iroko tree, and bathes in the stream often. On this fateful day, Erne-Idem (Ekanem) accompanied by her sister, Eme-Eme to meet her groom passed through the very water where Ekpenyong went to relax. Something touched Eme-Idem (Ekanem) and she disappeared into the

water to meet Ekpenyong, her long lost lover, Eme-Eme started to cry and render songs to water begging her sister to come back.

As she cries and sings, an Ika (secret pathfinder) floats on the water and she heard her sister's voice.



Pix 3 showing Ekombi Dancers

Ubom Isong

Ubom-Isong (land canoe), is a dance-music performed by girls, reflective of a people whose occupation is fishing. It is a miniature portrayal of the supplication to the sea goddess to fill the fishing nets with seafood. Each of the dancers wears a hoop on the waist all of which are strung together to form a boat. They sing as they engage in mock paddling:

Nkà m̀ì éwàt údèng (My mates paddle canoe)
Àmì nwàt íkpók étò (I paddle bark of wood)
Àyà---ó (Aya---o)



Pix 4 showing Ubom Isong Dancers

Asian Nka Iferi

Asian Nka Iferi/ Uboikpa mean the pride of the maiden. This dance is performed by maidens between the age of 18 and 25 who have successfully gone through the Nkwoho institution. Nkwoho being the period a girl is confined, fattened and drilled on all aspects of home management in preparation for marriage. It is common in almost all the hinterland of the State and is performed by maidens at their prime. Asian Nka Iferi or Uboikpa, therefore, in its visual appeal celebrates and affirm the youthful innocence and purity in their beauty, while showcasing the popular admonition among the Akwa Ibom people that chastity once lost is lost forever.

The lyrics in Asian Nka Iferi primarily reiterate what these girls were taught during Nkwoho (fattening confinement) such as Esang Garri Ewara Ubok (home management), Ukama Eyen Ikake Eka (childcare) among other home theme songs. Asian Nka Iferi is usually performed during the outing ceremony of Nkwoho when the girls celebrate with their mates who have successfully gone through the rigours of fattening room drills. Here the girls display beauty, elegance and grace to the admiration of the spectators whose relations are perhaps potential suitors anxious to choose a wife.

The origin of this dance is speculative as there are no documented materials to ascertain when it came to being. But through oral interview with some women who were part of the Asian Nka Iferi Institution in their youthful days, the researcher has got some fact that could aid the course of this study. First of all, the word "Asian connotes "beauty" while "Nka Iferi "means "young girls"

Asian Nka Iferi dance then connotes a dance presentation by proud maidens who are the pride of the Efik/ Ibibio cultural heritage. To be acclaimed beautiful was for one to be clean and upright, respectful and loyal to the customary routines of the community. In the pre-colonial Ibibio, the Ibibio girl had to remain a virgin and must go through a fattening process in which a body mark was raised on her skin. She also had to undergo an operation of clitoridectomy. When a maiden had successfully gone through the fattening (Nkwoho) process, she will be crowned with the title of "Asian Nka Iferi/ Efik Ebrutu" and was also allowed to register in the Nka Iferi Institution. They also dance around the community to showcase their beauty and the Asian Uboikpa dance.



Pix 5: showing Asian Nka Iferi/ Ubo ikpa Dancers

Okò

Okò is the male dance which is likened to the war dance because of its ferocious displays. The climax of this dance starts when the dancers slashing at one another with razor sharp machetes and firing at themselves with live bullets from Dane guns. But mysteriously, not a drop of blood is shed as the machetes cannot penetrate the skin of the dancers, or the bullets hurt any of the members of what is obviously a secret society.

Asian Mbre Iban

Asian Mbre Iban are dances performed by maidens who wish to inform unmarried men of the community how beautiful and eligible they are. Other women dances include Akan, Asamba and Uwok which is performed in the villages occasionally.

The Ndok Ufok Ebe (means maltreatment in the hands of a husband) is another women dance to express their grievances over maltreatment of women by their husbands. The dance is performed once a year. It is accompanied by songs telling the community about their plight. Often, it involves going topless to the market place, (*Ndok ufok ebe*) directed against their members. They rebuke and warn male members of the community against disrespect for their women folk. As they do not tolerate any indiscriminate utterance and blackmail of women by men, any man charged for such offense is given a fair trial by the clan's council and penalized if found guilty. Subsequent involvement in the same offense is regarded as deliberate, and the society must seek redress. This they do by visiting him nude at night in his room, with singing and dancing.

Ebre Dance

Ebre dance is performed during the period of harvesting of new yams. Taken its name from a bulbous root of yam variety, women were allocated this yam to plant in their farms and took part in the celebration. Each woman was expected to go to the farm and harvest this yam and present it to her husband in a symbolic way as a mark of respect. Members of this association are women with high level of morality. Virgins only were allowed to join as members. No thief or adulterer was allowed to join the group. They were also concerned about indignities of women by men.



Pix 6 showing Ebre Dancers

Theoretical Framework

Karl Weick, the “father of sensemaking,” suggests that the term means simply “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). It is the process of “structuring the unknown” Waterman, (1990) by “placing stimuli into some kind of framework” that enables us “to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict” (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51).

Sensemaking is the activity that enables us to turn the ongoing complexity of the world into a “situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into

action” (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Thus sensemaking involves—and indeed requires—an articulation of the unknown, because, sometimes trying to explain the unknown is the only way to know how much you understand it. Finally, sensemaking calls for courage, because while there is a deep human need to understand and know what is going on in a changing world, illuminating the change is often a lonely and unpopular task. The leader who demonstrates that an organization’s strategy has not been successful, for example, may clash with those who want to keep the image of achievement alive.

Looking at the Sensemaking theory and how it helps us situate these dances within the context of the theory is that traditional dances communicate meanings and makes sense through the leg movement, and even the costumes give communicative and symbolic idea about dance through Sense. The dancers, either in the Abang or Ubom Isong, use their various leg movements to interpret the social problems of the time. The dancers are seen as the communicating link between the ruling class and the ruled. The dance movements when interpreted semiotically can portray or pass across messages that are reflective of the societal ills, the dominant culture or even the cultural practices that have been passed on from generations to generations.

Communicative Significance of Okobo Dance

Traditional dance in Okobo like other African society does more than just providing entertainment as it is in today’s modern society. Dance speaks, dance talks, dance mirrors the society and even judges it when issues arises. The Communicative significance of dance in Okobo can be said to be a potent force, coupled with its pervasive nature, its integral role in everyday life and the totality of traditional artistic experience could best be discussed under the following contextual categories:

- (a) Spirituality
- (b) Vocation
- (c) Identity and uniqueness
- (d) Values and Social Cohesion

Spirituality

The Encyclopaedia Americana vol. 8 states that: "Primitive man danced to celebrate birth, heal the sick, mourn death and pray for good hunting, rain or victory in battle ... (522)". This claim deals extensively on the different areas that dance penetrate in the society. Because of the strong empathy and pulsating feelings that come with dance performance, man is capable of loosening himself from the torments of life that are prone to weigh him down. Dance penetrates the spirit realm as it is used as a link between the mortals and immortals, the natural and supernatural. It is broadly believed that Okobo dances, like other traditional dances, are ancestral and that when there are performed, the spirit of the ancestors mingle with the people, beginning with the performers.

Okafor (1994) submits:

As part of a spiritual ritual, dance may be a symbolic form of communication with natural powers, or a trance-inducing movement enabling the dancer to communicate directly with the spirits. In some masked dances, the dancer assumes the temporary identity of a god or a powerful ancestral spirit. In many traditional rural societies, group dances mark rites of passage such as coming of age in which young men or women compete against each other in dance as part of their initiation into adulthood.

Vocation

Okobo dances are used to showcase the vocation of the community; example is the Ubom Isong and the Abang dances which is connotative of the peoples fishing culture and their dependence on the river goddess for fishing successes. Also the Ebre dance which showcases the new yam festival is also done to communicate an essentially aggregarian society. .

In African societies, indigenous dance serves as a complex diversity of social purposes. Within an indigenous dance tradition, each performance usually has a principal as well as a number of subsidiary purposes which may express or reflect the communal values and social relationships of the people.

In order to distinguish the communicative potency of indigenous dance styles, it is necessary to establish the purpose for which each indigenous dance is performed culturally. For instance, at important occasions such as festivals, funerals and harvest time, there are always varieties of indigenous dance styles; each of these dance styles portrays the socio communicative essence of the situation of the dance being performed at that particular moment.

Identity and Uniqueness

Dance in itself is advocative, leasing to an experience of desired changes for the collective growth of a given society. Basically, dance is, and always has been an integral part of different cultures and societies. Dance is an expression of people and its study reveals the experiences of people within the context of their cultures and societies. Dance both mirrors and influences individuals, societies and cultures, which can be seen by the trends we see over the years, as dances become popular and then die out. Historical events, the environment and fashion trends all influence the dances of any era. Dances play a large role in some societies and actually help to shape those societies. People or groups of people have influenced the development of different types of dance.

Dance is the expression of the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values, of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance of a community. Before the advent of Christianity, people in the riverine areas appeared to believe in the existence of mermaids who were responsible for endowing them with many gifts ranging from children to wealth, power etc. They understood the language of rowing the boat or paddling the canoe. All these aspects of culture are reflected in the people's dance *Ubom Isong* (canoe dance). The

language of a particular culture is used for dance when both instrumental and vocal music are involved.

Values and Social Cohesion

The indigenous dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people where it exists. It assists indigenes to praise, criticize as well as work with each other. Alphonse Tierous- (2004, p.) opines that;

Indigenous dance in Africa is used as a functional tool for expression and has and is used for a variety of reasons. It is used in ritualistic purposes, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity cum sustainability.

The history and traditions of indigenous dance and movement focus on communication. Indigenous dance is not a natural object but something made or transformed by man for his cultural sustainability, mobilization and sensitization. Dance can be art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the merely functional movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable, exciting, or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotions, moods, or ideas, tell a story, or serve religious, political, economic, or social needs.

Conclusion

This paper, therefore, has emanated from the desire to re-discover through sober and scholarly reflections some aspects of Okobo traditional dances and the need to deepen the communicativeness of these dances as it affects the future generations. There is need for continuous search for cultural rebirth, identity and development, through the promotion, refinement or modernization and selective integration of valuable aspects of Okobo culture. There is also the underlying assumption that, in a relatively developing ethnic community as the Okobo people, a culture or a way of life is in an emergent state of re-discovery, modernization and selective integration, which could eventually result in the much needed cultural identity of the people.

Dance is organized as part of the process of living together and also, formal structure and contexts of use often interact. This is the reason we have dance and music for the burial of kings, royal procession, battle, marriage, puberty rites, and even social and cultural problems .etc. The arts of Africa are fast undergoing social and cultural transformations in recent times, and these have given rise to new forms of music, dance, drama, literature and art that have taken their place alongside historic traditions that antedate the colonial period. Contemporary arts, unlike the traditional arts that are closely integrated because of their community orientation, are evolving separately in a milieu of change in which the focus is on individual creativity that takes the arts beyond the historic forms and modes of expression established in the traditional arts.

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