The Ikwerre Music and Dance of the Niger Delta, Nigeria.

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Abstract

In African culture music and dances feature prominently as a way of life. They serve as vehicles in expressing the circumstances of life ranging from birth, wedding, festivals, to even burials. In fact, music and dances reflect ritual and cultural contexts of Africans. Therefore, this paper focuses on the relevance of Ikwerre music and dances and how they are manipulated or constructed in the ritual lives of the Ikwerre of the northeastern Niger Delta. The study adopts historical methodology of focus group and complemented with extant scholarship on African ethnomusicology. The paper therefore avers that in Ikwerre music and dances play critical roles in the communicative, ceremonial and ritual praxis of their worldviews as such Ikwerre music and dance should be seen as a means of re-orientation of culture and be given more prominence in Radio Stations, tourism and should be taught in primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: Communication, Dance, Music, Ritual Practices, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Music and dance play vital roles in the life of Africans as it has endowed them with ability to communicate, and celebrate events from beginning of their existence on earth to death. On this premise, it is important that we have an understanding of the concept of music and dance.

Conceptualization of Music and Dances:

African music is a total art form closely linked to dance, gesture and dramatization. It permeates African life and has a function, a role play in society; songs are used for religious ceremonies and rituals, to teach, give guide to tell stories, to mark the stages of life as well to provide political guidance and discontent. It also serves to entertain and is used in ceremonial festivals and masquerades pageants to work up fervor from the spectators and participants alike. Singing, dancing and playing African musical instruments ensure a

dynamic event transpires (https://www.contemporary-african-art.com/african-music.html, accessed 09/09/2021.

Performances may be long and often involve the participation of the audience and much of it is associated with a particular dance. For example, the wrestling activity among the Ikwerre.

Little wonder, Ekwueme (2004), notes that music accompanies the life of a black man from the womb to the tomb, being featured at celebrations; to announce the birth of a baby, at children's games, at peer group functions, at work and leisure, in religion and death" (p.59). Similarly, Agu (2006, p.18), posits that music is one of the strongest tools for cultural uniqueness and self- identity in the life of any society and serves as a force that unifies different members of the various cultures co-existing in different community. It therefore implies that music engenders social and religious activities in which almost every one participates. It highlights African values.

On the other hand, Mackrell (2008) in Encyclopedia Britannica, defines dance as the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. He further states that dance is a powerful impulse channeled by skillful performers into something that becomes intensely expressive and that may delight spectators who feel no wish to dance themselves. The most basic motive of dance is the physical expression of inner emotion. People – and even certain higher animals – often dance as a way of releasing powerful feelings such as sudden accesses of higher spirits, joy, impatience, or anger. Dance is performed in many cultures as a form of emotional expression, social interaction, or exercise, in a spiritual or performance setting, as well as expressing narratives and ideas sometimes used to express ideas or tell a story. Dance has been described as art for which mediates between personality and control, reflecting what is, and suggesting what could be (Bakare and Mans, in Oikelome, 2019). Dagan (Oikelome, 2019) defined dance as

> …human behavior composed... of purposeful, intentionally rhythmical and culturally patterned sequence of nonverbal body movements other than ordinary motor activity… the motion having inherent and aesthetic value and symbolic potentials‟ (p. 211).

African dance is unique in the manner in which it conveys meaning to the people, the cultural behavior, determined by the values, attitudes and beliefs of a people. As it were, dance is the patterned and rhythmic body movements, usually performed to music or percussion. Dancers use symbolic gesture, masks, costumes, body painting and props to communicate. Dance is used to express emotions, whether joyful or sorrowful. However, each culture tends to have its own distinctive styles of dance and reasons for dancing. The dances convey different meanings following the cultures in which they are practiced.

African music and dance transcends music for pleasure. Beyond entertainment, dance and its music have traditionally served a most important purpose in the socializing and educating process of African people (Badejo & Banerji, 2002). It is a vital part of the social, ritual and educational life of the people. Through Music and dance, Africans celebrated religious festivals and give thanks to the gods for good harvests.

The Ikwerre

The Ikwerre inhabit present-day Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio-Akpor, and Port Harcourt Local Government Areas in Rivers State. The Ikwerre are one of the many ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Talbot (1932), notes that the Ikwerre are known among themselves as Ihura-Onhia (face or front of the country). The Ikwerre also share typical and significant common culture traits and patterns which include: wrestling, religion, music, dancing, among others. For them religion transcends all gamut's of human existence. It is found in their way of doing, being and acting. It is found in their proverbs, witty-sayings, folktales, idioms, amongst others. Like any other African indigenous society, the Ikwerre are highly religious. The peoples' religiosity according to Wotogbe-Weneka (1976) possesses a theistic view of both the visible and invisible, predicated on the world-view that there is a Supreme Being Chiokike (the Creator God), the divinities (renwu or agbara), ancestral spirits (rukani), magic and medicine (Chinda, 2015). The official gazette of the National Population Commission in 2006 census figure put the population of Ikwerre at 1,159,838 million people. However, this paper focuses on their music and dance and how they are conducted in their everyday life.

Ikwerre Music and Dance

African traditional Music and dance is for all- the chiefs, fisherman, hunter, craftsman, trader, palm wine tapper and women. They compose, sing and dance and also transmits it from one generation to another through the process of elaborate specialization.

Among the Ikwerre, as in most African societies songs serve as a vehicle expressive of situations and circumstances of life. For example, there are songs for celebrations of child

birth-(eri omunwo), marriage – (eri ogbunzi), death/funeral (eri enwu), battle/protests (eri-ogwu, nu eri nkwemnkwem), wrestling song – (eri egelege) work song – (eri enru), coronation (eri-oshi – eze), praise songs – (eri orjanma/eri otutu), songs of allusion – (eriikpe mu oka) songs for perceived enemies). There are several other songs depending on the occasion. The lyrics and moods reflect each occasion (Chinda, 2015).

An oral informant John Alikor (19/3/2013), notes songs and dance are records of times, and in most cases the composers are relatively free to include statements of social criticism. As earlier stated songs and dance could evoke feelings of sadness, elicit joy and or serve as encouragement.

For example, Funeral song (Eri nmkpe) the celebration of funerals is regarded as a duty and no pains are spared to make it a memorable event. The dead is honoured and praised in songs and dance. The mourners are also praised and reminded of other persons who had also suffered similar loss. In this case the deceased is the focal point. His/her personality and qualities are described in the song. The mourners wishes the deceased journey mercies and bids him farewell using words that evoke sorrow. It is believed that through the songs, messages are also sent to the other world. Alongside the songs, are the drumming, wailing, and speaking, crying, clapping by the audience and members of the family (Chinda, 2015). However, death is seen as a loss of social gap.

Birth songs (eri omunwo). Birth songs are mainly performed by women. There is rejoicing showing increase in the family. It depicts one coming back to life and it is expressed in the name given to the children. The songs are significant as they are intended to extol the virtues of womanhood, celebrating an accomplished woman. The circumstances surrounding the birth of the child are expressed in the songs. God (Chiokike) is extolled and thanked for safe delivery, the women are praised for the ability to bring forth and the role they play in bringing up the children. It also extends to the husbands for being able to impregnate their wives and taking care of them. This medium offers women opportunity to freely express themselves.

Age grade initiation (Otnuanya). Otnuanya serve as both initiation into manhood and secret society. Otnuanya is prevalent among the Ipo, Ozuaha and Omademe people. The young men are initiated in any of these villages. In an oral testimony Eleonu (26/19/2012) an initiate believes it's about grooming the youths on their traditions. It makes them come to terms with the period they are transiting into as full grown indigene. It gives them prestige and responsibility in the community. During the period of initiation which lasts for one month, the initiates according to Eleonu stay away from home and undergo some

strenuous physical training. They are taught songs and dance styles. On completion of the period of initiation, drums are rolled out, with songs and dances which involve everybody. They are presented to the community and are taken home by their families where they receive gifts and visitors are lavishly entertained.

Entertainment music and praise songs (Eri-ojanma) Entertainment music and praise songs are quite popular. They are used to give accolade to the brave — the great warriors, hunters, chiefs, wrestlers and great achievers. In modern times however, these songs have also been used to extol politicians in times of political campaigns.

Fattening room ceremony (Ojiji) – The "ojiji" ceremony is a rite of passage which is performed by girls who have attained the age of puberty. It is significant because the history and culture of the people, their philosophy of life, and so on is revealed in this celebration.

According to Tasie (1976), the people of Omudiogna in the pre-colonial contact, determined the period of celebration in their own traditional way by watching the fruiting of coconut tree, which from experience they have observed falls around month of August yearly. With the determination of the date for celebration, consultations are made of the oracles for the rest of the details of the festival. He also notes that the Elele, Egbeda and Omerelu also performed the festival quite copiously.

It is a period when the girls were prepared for marriage. Chastity of the girls was highly respected as anything to the contrary was regarded as a dishonor to the family and shame to the girl. Throughout the period, they were treated to delicious dishes. They did no manner of work except to grind the camwood which they rubbed on their bodies. This preparation produced a sleekness of the body, and at the same time, the copper bangles they used are being cleaned up and kept shining.

The period of confinement for the festival depended on the affluence of the parents of the girls. The mysteries and secrets of marital life are normally revealed to them at this point to prepare them for what they would face soon after. Much preparation was made before the final outing ceremony. In fact some parents who are unable to finance their daughters' participation in the final ceremony bring dishonour to their daughters and their own family (Oduma, 24/1/2013).

On the day of outing, the girls were adorned with coral beads "nkalari", on their necks, many layers of "mgbaji" – (beads on their waists) and a pair of shining coals of brass called

"echi" on their legs, their hair style "ojonjo" was beautifully plaited and designed in such a way that it could stand so pointed and could last for more than two weeks. Their bodies were also beautifully designed with "iri". The treatment they received in the period of confinement was such that it from their relations, friends, would-be-husbands and in-laws. There was enough to eat and drink at the different homes. Special songs are sang and dance steps displayed. The songs are basically aimed at reminding the girls on how to keep their chastity. These girls even as they grow older still remember and sings the songs to their children and relations. This has been imbibed in their subconscious.

The "eregbu" " erindudu", "alikrija", "amara" - dance, "eriubo" are songs and dances performed devoid of masquerade.

Traditional guitar song (eri-ubo) Obor is made from the calabash also known as the Thumb Piano or Finger Piano has a number of keys which varies from 3 to 36. When playing a thumb piano, the musician may stand, sit or move about. The Obor is used to play song on different occasions. The Obor musicians play hosts to families or communities where they are invited to perform. The rendition is usually given as the occasion demands. There are several skilled Ikwerre musicians and dancers such as Simeon Abraham (Boro) of Egbeda, Oha King Akwasa Joe of Omagwa, OluluWamadi of Ibaa, James Wizor (Jimmy Counter) of Emohua, Tufiakwa, the Garden City Band of Rebisi, among others. This has added colour and charm to the traditional cultural songs and dances of the Ikwerre.

Xylophone dance (Eregbu/Oduma/Wayinma). Xylophone is a percussion instrument consisting of a set of graduated, tuned wooden bars supported at nodal (non-vibrating) points and struck with sticks or padded mallets. It exists in forms as simple as two or three logs laid across a player's legs or as wooden slabs set across two supports such as logs; a pit dug in the earth may act as a resonating chamber. Most often the wooden bars may be set on insulating material and pinned in place along two edges of a resonator box or suspended above it with cords. The instruments are usually made of loose wood placed across banana logs. Several people simultaneously play a single xylophone. They sit on the ground while playing it. Men and women sing and dance to the beats. They also showcase their uniforms and dancing skills, while the men have the opportunity to display their creative mastery of their oral composition of songs. Eregbu dance does not involve rituals. Eregbu dance features in marriages and other occasions. Social commentaries are made. In course of the singing most of the part, the songs are also danced during the off farm season. It serves as relaxation for the dancers as well as entertain the audience. The songs mirror the society. They tend poke into social ills in the society especially those have

deviated from the norms. They also eulogise people who have contributed to development in the society.

Clay pot dance (Eri ndudu). As the name implies the instrument is made of clay. In order to produce the rhythm from the pot, soft cloth or foam is tied around a wood and used to beat the mouth of the clay pot. This dance is basically performed by women. It is feminine. It does not exert as much energy compared to the drums that exudes energy. It features mostly in women meetings and in occasion of their visits to members.

Alikirija is a dance performed by men and women and is not restrictive to children. It makes the children have a sense of belonging in the community. The lead dancer holds a rod with tiny objects of metals, such that when the carrier hits it on the ground, it produces thrilling sound. Rattles and shakers are worn by the dancers and it is shaken to make rhythmic sounds. They can be worn on the dancer's body as belts, ankle or calf bracelets and necklaces. Rattles form important rhythm in African music.

Paddle dance (Amara) featured mostly during new yam festival especially among the Uvuawhu people. Amara dance is depicted by the use of paddles. This was due to their trade relations with Kalabari (nderukwo) at Ahia eke on the Sombrero River. They observed how the Kalabari paddled hand pull their boats. Amara now features prominently in Uvuawhu songs and dance. The dance is practiced at night. For example, in Ibaa, the senior community begins the practice until it gets to the last.

Wrestling dance (Eri egelege). Egelege is a basic traditional sports and cultural activity prevalent among the Ikwerre. They attach great importance to it. Every physically fit youth engage in it and some continue to do so up to the time of marriage and beyond when their strength can no longer carry them. It is organized annually at the end of each planting season, between the months of June and October. It is an "off farm" event. A period of relaxation and time of leisure for the farmers, friends and relatives are invited to celebrate with them. Songs and dances accompany egelege. Egelege is not just an affair for men as women and children are also involved to support and cheer the male wrestlers. Men, women, children, and the wrestlers alike are colourfully dressed. The participation of women cannot be glossed over. In the event of a fall, they dance around the arena, clap their hands, remove the upper part of their wrapper and even at the spot give gifts of wrapper to the one who may happen to win. It engenders social interaction and also a moment of displaying of one's wealth.

Agwaiji ikhe/Hozuzu- New Yam festival is an important celebration of the Ikwerre. The festival symbolizes the maturity of yams and other crops. Yam enjoys a significant place in Ikwerre culture. It is regarded as the king of crops, and its good yield essentially gives farmers reason to celebrate. For those who have abundance of yam are highly honoured. The new yam festival also serves as time of reappraisal, or stock taking. For serious farmers, the New Yam harvest is also a time of serious reappraisal – reappraisal of the performance during the previous agricultural year of "Ajoku" (the yam deity), of Eli (the earth deity), of the farmer. It was also a time when in the comfort provided by relative plenty, plans are made at least mentally for the next season. The New Yam festival is celebrated in pomp and pageantry, as sumptuous meals (especially pounded yam) and palm wine are the delicacies. The celebration fostered peace and communality among Ikwerre people. This festival goes with much songs and dances.

Songs and dances offers them the opportunity to comfort themselves in times of misfortune/grief, thank and praise Chiokike- Supreme God as well as celebrate with others and participate in cultural dances. Hence it showcases their physical expression of joy and it also had a relaxing and reminiscing effect on Ikwerre people.

In addition to this is the *eri-owhe* – masquerade dance which involves several masquerades depicting different meaning. Each masquerade according to Anele (7/8/2013) is peculiar in itself. Some of these masquerades; *Owuama, Okonko, Okoroshi, Egbuekele, Ozurumba* were borrowed from their hinterland and riverine neighbours as a result of the trade and religious contacts. In order to display the dances efficiently, contacts were made with their neighbours to come and instruct them on the drumming and dancing techniques. To perform the masquerade dance sometimes took a period of between one to two years of practice at which time the performers of the masquerade dance and the dancers had become abreast with the drum lore. The outing ceremony took seven days of display performance of the different masquerades. During the display, the drummers could use the drum to talk to them to elicit their recitation to the drum lore and exquisite performance through their dance steps. Sometimes, an item could be hidden and the drummer through the drum beat will direct a particular masquerade to the place to get it. This shows that the years of practice enhanced such understanding (Chinda, 2015).

Religious songs: one important and unique aspect of African music is that it is primarily religious. There are music for the gods, deity, divinities among others which are either vocal, instrumental or both. Beyond the human participation in songs, Wotogbe-Weneka (2002:135-150) asserts that music and dances are not only a monopoly of human beings but also the business of gods. There is the belief that the spirits (gods) have songs peculiar to

them which are adopted by their human associates through their guidance. It is worthy of note that music and dance are performed with sets of drums and other percussions. An example, is the wrestling songs and dance.

Instruments of Music and Dance

Dance functions effectively with songs and musical instruments which further reinforces the movements made by dance. These instruments are very essential as they are used to perform the songs and transmit messages of various degrees. For instance, in wrestling they are used in producing musical sounds and give direction to the wrestling match. They are beaten in such rhythms to the excitement of the people (wrestlers and spectators alike). These drums are three in number. They come in small and big sizes. The sizes reflect gender, position and implication, and also the roles they play. The small size is the male drum-*okhe rukwa egelele.* It produces high pitch, while the big size is the female drum-*ite egelege* and produces a lower tune with bass. These two drums are beaten by one drummer with short drum sticks and he directs the tempo of the music inadvertently to the excitement of wrestlers and spectators. He is the head drummer.

The third drum is *esege egelege* used to compliment the bigger drums, it also produces high pitch sound and beaten with bare hands.

Ekere egelege- wooden gongs are two in number. The female gong- *okwo egelege* and male gong – *ekere egelege*. These wooden gongs are each played with two sticks to compliment the wrestling drums. There is also the *ngele-* iron gong used by singers to call out wrestlers during the wrestling.

It is only necessary to note that the use of the hands and drum sticks are prominent as they provide a basis for aesthetics in the rendition of the music of the wrestling match. It allows the drummer to mount tension and release it on the drum in order to raise or lower its pitch level to produce the required tunes. However, messages could be misunderstood if a drummer lacks the ability and dexterity to combine the handling of drum sticks. It is with the drums that drummers communicate with wrestlers. The messages could convey warning about the strength, prowess and skills of the opponent. The drum beats are used to send praises to great wrestlers (especially champions –*diotna*) as the singers chant to the excitement of the champion, his many victories, his wrestling titles and other praise names that would work him into frenzy. This sets the wrestlers on edge, and spurs them to win the contest which implies that the wrestler must be acquainted with the drum lore (Chinda, 2015).

Music and dance are organized according to age, sex and for mixed groups. Also, sometimes the place of performance is taken into cognizance with regard to the type of instruments to be used, the numerical strength of the performers and also the type of dance movements involved, most of the music is performed in open space.

Implications of Ikwerre Music and Dance

The implication of music and dance among the Ikwerre has been influenced both positively and negatively. According to Okafor and Okafor (2009), the beauty of music in any society is that there is enough of it to express any circumstance (within a given) environment – the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly" (p.1). It should be realized that music flourishes where mere speech is feared to be used. Music softens and sooths the heart no matter how hardened and strong that heart is; there are songs that will calm it and make it ponder as hopes, fears and aspirations of the Ikwerre are often expressed in their music and dance.

African music and dance Ikwerre inclusive as it is known today has being shaped by changes in the ecology of the continent, which drove people into other lands, thus producing changes in their art. This has been influenced by language, the environment, a variety of cultures, politics, and population movement, all of which are intermingled. Each African group evolved in a different area of the continent, which means that they ate different foods, faced different weather conditions, and came in contact with different groups than other societies did. Each group moved at different rates and to different places than others, and thus each was influenced by different people and circumstances. Furthermore, each society did not necessarily operate under the same government, which also significantly influenced their music styles.

Ikwerre music and dance contribute to the integration of society by expressing social organization, validating instruction, perpetuating values and promoting group solidarity. It enhances the principle of communality as opposed to individualism. There is no mode of aloneness here. Ikwerre music and dance are of necessity to interact with others, to join hands with them, indeed to be at peace with them. With this, the need for bonding becomes obvious.

The music maker and the dancer need one another; one plays and the other dances. This is crucial because a musician playing a song that is not danced to is assumed to be playing to himself. A dancer on the other hand who dances without any musical accompaniment as music is referred to as a mad person. More so, music and dances enhance social integration and serve as moral guide against misbehaviour in the community. Interestingly, the Ikwerre have not lost sight of their cultural heritage, especially through

the aegis of indigenous music and dances of various categories. It is important to note that songs and dance among the Ikwerre mark social differentiation as there are songs and dances strictly for men and women respectively. Nevertheless, these songs and dances portray the peoples' beliefs, feelings, problems, achievements and prospects and level of development so far in the Nigerian society.

Social Change and modernity

As a result of social change, Ikwerre traditional songs and dances are now common place in gospel music, highlife, pop, disco, and rap and reggae music. There are professional musicians and dancers who are well paid for their services and also liberally entertain when invited to an occasion. It also enhances their relationship with their neighbours. With advancement in technology, most of the songs are now recorded in flash drives and several gadgets.

The traditional Ikwerre society was not a literate one but derived joy from their music and dance. However, Ikwerre traditional songs and dance have come under criticism by converts of the Christian faith. The digitalized form of music will not sustain our indigenous music and dance culture rather, it whittles it down.

Conclusion

Ikwerre music and dance play important role in the Ikwerre ability to communicate, and celebrate events and important ceremonies. Ikwerre music is a social activity in which almost everyone participates and it highlights their values, with various traditions accompanied by a melody. Many events of importance are celebrated with music, whether it is a marriage, a birth, or a ceremonial rite of passage. Dance has many forms of expression, storytelling and enjoyment across the continent, and alongside traditional dances. It is impractical to separate music from dance or from bodily movement.

Ikwerre songs and dance are realistic. They act as stabilizing force in the society, maintains peace and order. They serve as caution to those who may want to indulge in acts capable of bringing them to disrepute. They are integral component of all ceremonies among the Ikwerre and its enormous potentials should be seen as the basic foundation for the retention of our culture.

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