Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



DANCE THEORIES AND MMONWU PERFORMANCE TRADITION OF THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

Oluyinka Smart Babalola and Samson Akapo
Department of Theatre Arts University of Ibadan Nigeria
Email:*yinkasmart1@gmail.com / akaposamson44@gmail.com*

Keywords*: Masquerade dance, African performance, Festival theatre, African dance.*

Abstract: *Dance is a universal phenomenon that is as old as man and his desire to express himself, to communicate his joys and sorrows, to celebrate and to mourn with the most immediate instrument: his body. Nigerian dances like most African dances have been variously subjected to critical evaluation. However, most of the earlier critics have erroneously appreciated these dances from western dance experience and ideals. This has resulted in a problem of unholy generalization in theory and criticism of dance. Using the thematic analysis method, this study interrogates Spenser's five theories of dance using Mmonwu Tradition of the Igbo. This is in order to enhance and enrich critical understanding and place of dance in African society. The study found that dance plays a major role in the functional, artistic and communal expression of the Mmonwu tradition among the Igbos of Nigeria. It is also recommended that scholars and writers should subject individual performance and tradition to critical analysis based on the nuances and particularities of that performance and tradition in order to avoid unwarranted generalizations in performance/culture appreciation and interpretation.*

1. INTRODUTION

Dance, the multi-sensory and highly specialized art is an important element of the masquerade performance (Mmonwu) tradition of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Dance is a controlled emotional outlet whose form reflects cosmology, and a replacement for speech and gestures that adds further levels of meaning to formal occasions. Dance is also a communal response to crisis that re-creates order out of confusion and a sequence of transformations that periodically resolves inherent social dilemma (Spenser, 1985). Apart from being a socio-cultural phenomenon, dance is importantly an artistic vehicle for aesthetic gratification. Dance in the traditional African society serves as a means of spiritual fulfillment, ritualistic expression and psychological purgation. Dance also creates

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



embodied spaces, drawing attention to the radical nature of dance with its ability to cut across all genders and race (Akapo, 2024)

Dance is a universal phenomenon that is as old as man and his desire to express himself, to communicate his joys and sorrows, to celebrate and to mourn with the most immediate instrument: his body. The origin of dance can therefore be traced to emotional impulse, the need to release psychic tension and magic (Akapo 2024:2). This assertion holds true for the Nigerian society where dance is an essentially social event which not only accommodates, but encourages and appreciates participation of the whole community in its dynamic and highly "elastic" form. Nigerian dances like most African dances have been variously subjected to critical evaluation. Unfortunately, however, most of the earlier critics have erroneously appreciated these dances from Western dance experience and ideals (Harper 1987; Sorell 1989, etc.). There is a problem of unholy generalization in theory and criticism of African dance. Although, Enekwe responded to some of these critics and scholars and their evolutionist theory of dance as the only basis for appreciating African dance. He rightly saw these critics as suffering from lack of proper understanding and training in the African cosmology, philosophy and perception (Enekwe, 1991:7-22).

Various scholars and schools of thought in response to this unholy generalization, have come to an understanding of what should be the basis of approach and mode of appreciation of dance in general. The theories of dance elaborated by the anthropologist Paul Spencer (1985) which itemises five major dance theories is one of such effort. These theories would analyse in this paper in order to enhance and enrich our understanding and place of dance in African society. Mmonwu Tradition of the Igbo, where dance plays a major role in the highly functional artistic expression of the community will be used to interrogate the theories. An understanding therefore, of all the facts and inferences that would be drawn from this paper will inadvertently stem from an understanding of the dance theories as propounded by several scholars in dance aesthetics, sociology, anthropology and social anthropology.

2. ANALYSIS OF DANCE THEORIES

The Cathartic Theory of Dance

This theory of dance as a safety value for releasing emotional steam is a product of Herbert Spencer's writings (1862), where he viewed emotion as a form of nervous energy that became stronger when denied its natural outlet, and had to be let off in some other ways. This theory celebrates the therapeutic value of dance in cases where one is under the condition stress and is suddenly released through dance. For examples, Evans-Pritchhard (2010) has suggested that Azande beer dance served among other things "to canalize the forces of sex into socially harmless channels." Margeret Mead (1969) has similarly suggested that the informal

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



dances of Samoan children provided a release from their rigorous repression and subordination by adults in other areas. Expressions of this theory could also be found amongst the voodoo dances of Haiti, the Sango dances of Oyo, Bori dance of Northern Nigeria and Ekine dance of the Kalabari.

The Functionalist Theory of Dance

This theory of dance as an organ of social control is expressed in two different ways: the educational role of dance and transmission of sentiments; and the interactional role of dance and the maintenance of sentiments. In the former, various scholars and researchers have tried to see dancing over the ages and in different parts of the world as not just for entertainment, but rather one of the "finest schools of courtesy and department ever invented" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe (Spencer), and an institution (Domba) in which girls learnt the laws (Uguda Milayo) of childbirth, of certain rituals, marriage and motherhood (John Blacking, 1973) among the Venda of Southern Africa.

Because dance is basically a socio-cultural phenomenon, everybody in the society at one time or the other passes through some form of dancing at a certain stage in life which enhances his or her education in the cultural aesthetics, values and norms, of such society. Hence, Margaret Mead's interpretation of the informal children's dance in Samoa as a device that separated adept from inept children, preparing them respectively for success or failure in later life (1969). This claims, albeit, ambitious and overloaded, holds true in the educational role of dance as an avenue where children are tended towards adulthood imbibing the sense of what is right and wrong. But it will not certainly determine how successful or otherwise they turn out in life unless other forms of institutions of learning are disregarded.

The other side of the functionalist theory which is the sustenance or maintenance of the basic conditions for an orderly social existence depending on the transmission of culturally desirable sentiments through dance is echoed in Radcliffe-Brown's views on the functionalists' theory. He opined that orderly social life is a factor of maintaining those prime sentiments of equanimity, and by impregnating the youths with such sentiments, revitalizing it through dance. Here, Radcliffe-Brown (1962). takes society as living organism with the dance, through its rhythm, acting like public opinion to bring back into the fold any individual who was, so to speak, out of tune – through control over his body, his thoughts and sentiments too were brought under control. Functionalist theory therefore, holds the view that dance generate a whole-hearted communion of unity and a sustained co-ordination of the whole physical being which other communal activities lack. The Ekine dance of Kalabari and Tshikoma dance of the Venda are examples of this theory.

Self-Regeneration Theory

The theory of self-regeneration in dance as espoused by Radcliffe-Brown contends that "as the dancer loses himself in the dance, as he

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



becomes absorbed in the unified community, he reaches a state of elation in which he feels himself filled with energy or force immediately beyond his ordinary state, and so finds himself "able to perform prodigies of exertion" (1962). This could be applied to dances used to generate excitement of great emotion before a fight or war or a decision. The ecstatic climax of dance in a social occasion is an expression of mounting sense of excitement, and a transformation in the atmosphere, as dancers, musicians and onlookers respond to stimulations.

For instance, the Bori cult dance characterized by spirit possession is a product of the society gathering at a local market place, while the drummers beat out the peculiar rhythms, tempting the spirits to possess the dancer. The climax of such dances, which is the possession stage, dictates the success of the dance and most importantly, the gathering. And as Spencer declares, in dance as in any performance, nothing succeeds quite like success. Notable examples of these theories are the coronation dance of Alafin of Oyo, the Melpa exchange cycle of Papua New Guinea as well as the Orisa Ibeji dance in Yoruba cosmology (1985).

Boundary Display Theory

This theory celebrates the element of competition in dance. There are a lot of dances all over the world that may be viewed as confrontations where mounting competition indicating clear intentions and strength in order to intimidate opponent is voiced through display in dancing. According to Spencer, where the idiom of confrontation is competitive dancing, it is aimed at attracting attention while the scope for display and innovation within the cultural tradition is limitless. Beni-Ngoma dance in East Africa rooted in intense competition. Clamor for positions in Swahili society has a concern for reputation and success predating Colonialism. Its idiom was one of display and competition between rival dance associations and as it spreads inland, it retained these competitive idioms, while adapting to the divisions and aspirations of each locality.

In the theory of boundary display, dances serve to provide organizational base for the mobilization of political awareness and the notion of warrior-hood. The heated arguments between rivals interested during preparations were a secondary issue although as in Notting Hill Carnival of West Indian community in London, normally the competition remains within the limits of convention, it can dissolve into a fight anytime. Women in some societies in Africa, band together in a united protest against male domination through dance. Through dance and songs, they take to lampooning, defending the boundary of their own domain. An example of this is the Lelemama dance associations of Mombasa.

Communitas and Antistructure Theory

The last and relatively new theory of dance is that, that regards dance as ritual drama. Victor Turner who recognizes this concept (not as a

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



theory), relates to the paradox present in any society where social inequalities, rivalries, and property interests divide people according to some prevailing structural premises, yet there exist a genetic human bond, a communitas, that unites them in defiance of differences in status, This paradox leads Turner to suggest two complimentary modes of social interaction. The structured aspect of life dominates day-to-day existence; while, as we have seen in other theories, this is laid bare in times of disruption of normal routine, periods of anxiety or ceremonies marking change in status and boundary shift. The other concept of communitas rises to the surface in these periods. Spencer asserted that; "Neither structure nor communitas is complete in itself; together they give shape and meaning to human existence" (1991:81).

The Bori cult dance stood outside the formal Islamic structure of Hausa Society; its secular attributes unacknowledged. And through their close association with the spirits, "the members of this cult were in a unique position to express the popular feelings against the contrived move"- from an old market town to new untested grounds (New Giwa) (Spencer; 1985). Also, Robin Horton, contributing to this theory, analysed the ritual cycle of masquerade dance among the Kalabari, which is also associated with spirit possession in Nigeria. This perhaps is the strongest elaboration of this theory as it clearly examines the forms and ideals of the Ekine Men's society which according to Spencer, could be regarded as a "highly engaging and popular symbolic representation of the competitive ethos of Kalabari society, giving the society, the stamp of approval and serving to reinforce the communal values" (2014).

3. MMONWU TRADITION OF THE IGBO

Mmonwu, which is a fusion of all art forms - music, dance, song, design, textile, mime, poetry, speech and sculpture, is the most popular form of artistic expression among the Igbo. It is so popular to the extent that a lot of common features can be identified in its various performances in most Igbo communities. Hence, a few generalizations can be attempted on the concept and practice. In the Igbo popular parlance, the term Mmonwu is replete with varied interpretations and definitions. Essentially, however, it has only one meaning, "Mmuo ndi nwu 'anwu'". Mmonwu refers to the spirit of the dead. According to Nwankwo, "among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, masquerades (*Mmonwu*) were conceived as ancestral spirits whose interest in the affairs of their living descendants compel them to visit the community during festivals, funerals and when things are not normal in the community. Masquerade performance is communal in nature with "every member of the community" participating (Oboshi, 2024:7). Since the traditional setting till contemporary times, such masquerades discharge very important social roles which are governance and social control in

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



character among others" (2015:1). While this term may be used to describe the type of masking which is performed by children, devoid of the elevated social and religious essence, it more appropriately refers to the manifested spirits of dead ancestors which are personalized in the living (Okoye 2013). as tangible masquerades. Mmonwu, which is also referred to as Manyi, is a compound of Mmuo (spirits) and Onwu (death) and illustrates the reverence and cultural attitude and ideation of Igbo masquerade. According to Okoye, an understanding of the esteemed status of Igbo ancestors would lead to the understanding of the cultural attitude that manifests them physically in the society - ndi uwuru anwu - and conversely see them as "manifestations of the essential or quintessential dead - mma onwu" (Okoye1992).

The above might lead us to the examination of the Igbo cosmology where greater light would be thrown into our understanding of concept mmonwu. The question who are the Igbo and what is their belief in spirit? - will then be pertinent at this juncture. The origin and meaning of the word 'Igbo' is full of series of ambiguities and inconsistencies. Many scholars have espoused theoretical ambiguities such as; slaves or "people from whom slaves were obtained;" "Forest dwellers;" "people who lived in the hinterland". But like M.A. Onwuejeogwu, one is convinced that the word Igbo means a "community of people" (Okoye, 1986:1-6). The people's origin is no less ambiguous as there are two major camps, namely: traditions of migration from foreign peoples; and a tradition which claims no migration at all. For purpose of understanding, one might take a look at these schools of thought. The latter is of the view that the Igbo did not originate or migrate from anywhere outside Igboland but were created somewhere in the Igbo heartland. The opposing school hold two views. These are the oriental - Egyptian and Hebrew origins; and those who claim origin from one or other areas in Nigeria like Bini and Igala Kingdoms. Of all these claims and schools of origin, the most plausible are the autochthony theory and the tradition of origin from neighbouring states like Igala and Edo Kingdoms. This is because of series of archaeological and historical evidences support to these claims. The most important factor however, is that, without avouching for any of these claims, there exists a people that can be identified as Igbo with age long cultural traditions and beliefs which manifests in their day-to-day life. This would of course lead us to presuppose the existence of an Igbo culture, language and philosophy.

In the Igbo cosmology, like most African communities, there is a general believe in the existence of the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe and everything therein - organic and inorganic - including all other 'forces' that inhabit the whole of Igbo world. The Igbo Universe is divided into three: the heavens; the earth surface; and the underworld. Man is in the

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



middle of the universe, influenced "regularly by the other 'forces' that inhabit the other spheres" (Okoye, 2013; Amadi and Agena, 2015). These forces above and below frequent the earth at will or on invitation. Again, after the Supreme Being – Chukwu – the Igbo believes in the presence of several other divinities, who are intermediaries between the earth and the Supreme Being on one hand and between the earth and other forces in the universe on the other hand. Hence, divinities like Ala (the earth goddess). Anyanwu (God of light) and Elu or Igwe ('Sky' Forces) are revered throughout Igboland and "are called upon to intercede in human affairs" from time to time. Closer to the human beings are the ancestral spirits which consist of all dead persons. This can be divided into two; namely: the venerated spirits of illustrious ancestors, and the restless spirits of wicked and irresponsible ancestors who are vagrant spirits refused entry into the ancestral world. The illustrious ancestors are believed to visit the living in various forms at certain times in their life cycle (Oboshi 2024).

The Igbo "believe in reincarnation" (Oboshi, 2024:32). This cycle of coming as living being by the ancestors makes the Igbo man accountable to his ancestors in all his undertakings as they (ancestors) are honoured invisible members of the clan. "The ancestors overcome by an incomprehensible nostalgia and yearning for the company of man, manifest as masquerades to commune with the living". In such cases, these masquerades exhibit the characteristics of specific ancestors and can as the occasion demands, "foretell the future and perform other ritual functions" (Asigbo, 2012). Therefore, people consult their dead ancestors with problems and also rebuke them for being nonchalant in the face of misfortune. They are constantly addressed as if they are still living. Finally, the Igbo generally arrogate the existence of soul to almost everything, both organic and inorganic. The spirit is the motivating factor in everything, hence a lack of spirit, renders an object or being useless. In human beings, the demise of spirit or soul is interpreted as death. There is a further believe that this spirit can be offended or desecrated. Thus, the Igbo have strong respect for all living and non-living things, especially those that play prominent roles in human life and can be called upon for the benefit of human lives by those who know how to invoke them. This believes in animism, as Okoye (1986) rightly observed, and the concept of 'living' ancestors, form the basis of Mmonwu tradition of the Igbo.

Mmonwu characters are not seen as the spirit of any particular ancestors but rather a 'faceless' guest from the highly honoured world of the dead. They are guest of the living who call on them to perform certain functions at festivals and ceremonies. This concept is entrenched in the society in spite of the apparent fact that the masquerade is an individual who has put on a mask and costume. Here lies the transformational power of costume and mask,

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



because when donned, all traces of the wearer vanish to allow for the ethereal character/personality to take over. The costume helps propel the wearer into another world full of cosmic forces which needs the "Kinetic" body of the actor to become physically manifest. When this happens, the Mmonwu character becomes a visitor from the ancestral world. The wearer loses identity, although, some parts of the body like the wrists and feet might remain visible, the audience dogmatically maintain that the individual actor has nothing to do with the character. This simple process of suspense of disbelieve is necessary in Igboland for the Mmonwu tradition to be as functional, utilitarian and as highly revered in the community as it is generally practiced.

Mmonwu is undoubtedly the most public and frequent of art among the Igbo people. This is due to its dynamism and reference. As an art form, it has a direct appeal as it incorporates all other popular arts of design, dance music, sculpture, song and mimesis into a total unique package (Okoye, 1992, 112). Mmonwu characters, like the arts, are so varied in number, physical features, roles and an occasion of outing that it is absolutely difficult to attempt a definitive typology. Some appear at night while some do at day-time, there are benignant as well as malignant; females and males; sacred and profane; old and young; beautiful and ugly, monumental and minimal, and so on. Scholars, however, in their varied attempts at categorizing Mmonwu, have discussed one or more of the above categories in consonance with their individual bias and taste, perception and abilities. However, Okoye has noted that the best taxonomy must be one that most elicits the correct cultural ideation. Okoye conveniently categorise Mmonwu into "Day" and "Night" masquerades. He rightly observed that this "ensures that the tradition of public and exclusive spectatorship is maintained". Also, this clears the ambiguity of a particular Mmonwu belonging to more than one category (1992:117). Based on the above, the broad categories of Mmonwu is essentially Night Masquerades - such as Ajikwu and Ayaka - and Day Masquerade such as Ijele and Agbogbomuo.

The masquerades that perform at Night in Igbo communities belong to a very special category of beings too dangerous to be beheld by weaklings such as women and children. The Mmanwu Abani is seen as more dangerous, mysterious and supernatural than the day masquerade. Only the strong and mature men dare venture out during the nights as the Masquerades perform in times when evil spirits and wraiths abound in the atmosphere. Okoye (1992) also believes that the night performance could have been an influence of the functional need to uphold the secrecy behind the identities of the cult members since the masquerades are in all ramifications, very destructive. This assertion, albeit, plausible is too simplistic as identities cannot be truly hidden, but their powers could be harmful if everybody

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



comes into contact with them. Ayaka, like other night Masquerades such as Ogbagu, Okunanne, Onu-ka-mma. Ajikwu and Onyekulufa, does not necessarily disguise in costume and masque. Speaking, chanting and singing in a disguised Ududo (Spider) voice, is enough disguise for the terrible masquerade that terrorise women and children. Ayaka Lampoons, in satirical songs, socially unsanctioned acts and their perpetrators within the community. Most other night masquerade performs in the same tradition safe Ogbagu that lays emphasis on music and dance as opposed to songs and gossips. Ogbagu concentrates on singing and dancing while playing its own backing music produced from sealed calabashes held and performed with both hands (Okoye, 1992: 118).

Mmonwu Efifie or Day Masquerade is more numerous than Mmowu abani. Here the masquerade's spectator is non-exclusive. Everybody in the society is free to watch and partake in the activities. As it is a performance for viewing audience, the emphasis is more on the visual action during the day. They are more colourful in their use of costume and visual spectacle. Again, these masquerades are varied and numerous in their social and religious statuses. Performance time differ from masquerade to masquerade. While some perform early in the mornings and the afternoons, others perform in the evenings when the intensity of the sun is at bay. Most of these masquerades are performed by uninitiated boys and initiated young and virile men/boys hence, some are physically violent and exhibit a lot of masculine strength. The evening performances, feature those masquerades considered more important and less forceful or physically violent. They are more artistically entertaining to the community than the morning performers. While the masquerades of the uninitiated boys are simply dismissed as nwikpo Mmanwu (small/dwarfish masquerades) that are harmless, the ones performed by the young initiates are more physically forceful and more numerous. They are not considered harmful from the point of view of metaphysical power as they do not wreak supernatural damages. Examples of these masquerades abound in all Igbo communities. Masquerades like Ekpe, Akataka Udo displays masculine strength in their heavy deliberate jerking strides and exaggerated hops and leaps; climbing palm trees with bare hands, destroying them by kicking the branches and the bunch of fruits down in absolute defiance of the sharp thorns on them, and coming down without obvious injury. (Okoye, 1992:124). Some of these feats however, show “magical and destructive powers as some can make trees burn or wither simply by pointing or staring at them”. A lot of them dance and entertain the audience with occasional bursts of vigorous dancing to very fast music produced with sharp-sounding, idiophones like Ogene (metal groups). Another masquerade in this category includes - Agabaidu, Odogwu-anya-mme, Odumodu, Mgbedike, Okwomma. Aya-agba-agu-mgba and Atu (125).

The last category of the day masquerade is those that have gentle disposition and function basically in entertainment. These masquerades are contrived according to the Igbo aesthetics of beauty, grace and opulence. Many of these

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



masquerades exhibit dexterous footwork and acrobatics, or present overwhelming dignified movements. While some are skimpy and dainty, others are monumental structures that render people speechless in their beauty, dexterity of craftsmanship, and the ease with which dances and bodily movements are executed. Examples of these masquerade Includes agbogbommuo, ugo (Eagle) and Ijele. The agbogbommuo feature dances and mimesis core in its performance. There is always an orchestra that produces fast tempo musical accompaniment to the dances. The Nne Mmuo music is, however, exceptionally slow and dignifying as befits a 'woman' of her age and social status. The music is produced from a variety of musical instruments including Ogene and Ekwe, pot drums and animal skin drums (Udu and Igba), a flute (oya), rattles and other idiophones. Ugo masquerade which is the epitome of artistry and splendour, according to Clementina Abone, walks into the arena very majestically dancing to the rhythm of Igba-eze music. As it paves to the center of the arena from its enclosure, “it is greeted with thundering ovation from excited crowd which has now had a fulfilment in witnessing one of the finest works of art in the community”. Enthused by the thundering ovation, Ugo now quickens its steps and the dancers are frenzied into action. (1988).

Ijele masquerade which is an extravagant display of the pride, dignity, wealth, social and political achievement as well as artistic sophistication of its producing community is the most popular of all Igbo masquerades. The ostentatious dome-shaped structure elicits awe and aesthetic pleasure on its audience. Royal and dignifying music is supplied by an orchestra while the accompanying masquerades and dancers entertain the audience. Occasionally this enormous structure rhythmically spins round and round causing the various tassels and panels of cloth to fly and sway round in a very visually overwhelming rhythm. An Ijele performance is typified by an alternating air of fast and slow motion, suspense, tension and release (Okoye, 1992:137).

In the various Igbo communities, functional characteristics differs and are as varied as there are Mmonwu forms. While Enekwe Categories the functions or significance of masking in Igboland into the psychological and aesthetics; the social and political; the religious and socio-biological (Enukwe, 1987:56-72). Okoye itemizes six categories vis-à-vis the religious perspective; the economic perspective; the aesthetic perspective; the political and judicial dimensions; the psychological dimension; and the sociological implications (Okoye, 1992:142-170). However, it should be noted that masquerade in Igboland as elsewhere, are produced or sanctioned by the entire community. The individual performer's identity is shrouded in mystery and the illusion of supernatural is created and sustained. Apart from these artistic and aesthetic as well as ritual

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



dimensions, masquerade functions well in all spheres of human endeavour in the Igbo Community. The highlight of these performance is that the audience and the performers share common experiences. In a unique manner, these masquerades also share the performance spaces with the audience in a blend of real and imagined spaces of existence. Audience participation is constant, not by an act of instant reaction but a reflective mirroring of oneself and current predicaments, even with an insight into the future (Akapo, 2024).

4. FINDINGS – MMONWU TRADITION AND DANCE THEORIES

Mmonwu is the sum total of all creative activities like chanting, dancing, acrobatic display, story-telling, chasing and spell-binding. These activities are designed to thrill the audience through fear and spectacle - a resolution of tension aimed at developing their moral fortitude and loyalty towards collective authority (Ugonna, 1983:94). This sums up the relationship Mmonwu dance has in consonance and otherwise to the dance theories as previously elaborated upon. Mmonwu dance presentation in a typical performance fulfils a lot of the basic principles of most dance theories. In a given Obom (playing area) the performances that occur at a given time could be examined and the result would undoubtedly be in consonance with most of the ideas that have been espoused in the various dance theories.

The day masquerades in some context and all-night masquerade fulfils the Carthartic theory of dance in their myriad display of mysterious and supernatural powers. Most of these masquerades performs dancing feats that are extraordinarily brilliant and awesome. They hold their audience spell-bound and terrified in performance so much so that at the end of the performance, the audience is purged of emotion and therefore tension is released. Masquerades like Ijele and Ugo on one hand fills the audience with awe and fulfilment in entertainment while masquerades like Ajikwu, onu-ka-mma and Okunnanne terrorises the weaklings and unleash fear through the use of metaphysical powers in their performances. The effect of all these performances is therapeutic as all forms of nervous energies are purged.

Mmonwu tradition is a very strong area in the study of the functionalist theory of dance. This is due to the fact that the basic essence of Mmonwu performance serves a utilitarian purpose in the society. Mmonwu expresses the socio-political as well as religious configuration of the society. There are different types of masquerades with varied age grades and groups involved. Of course, as Okoye (1992) observed, Igbo mask is a potent institution for imparting education and values in the society. It is also an instrument of socio-political control as well functioning well in religious interpretations of moral and spiritual values. Since dance is the main vehicle through which these performances came into being, it is

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



meet to regard the Mmonwu dance as a functional art capable of elevating the society to the level of equilibrium even in times of chaos. Mmonwu to the functionalist theory finds expression in the fact that it is a product of the whole society. There is no way of escaping it, therefore the whole society is privy to the values and mores derivable from the tradition. An encounter with masquerades like Ijele, Agboghommuo, Ugo, Egemmwo and so on will inexorably leads to an understanding of the place of the functionality of these masquerades to the society.

The self-regeneration theory of dance could aptly be described by the feats performed by the masquerades of the Igbo origin. Several masquerades enter into the ethereal character and playing the ancestor, the masked character loses himself to the effect and power of the mask. Through this, several masquerades in Igboland are able to perform supernatural feats both in dance and spectacle. It has been argued, however that the dexterity and artistic excellence of these masquerades are borne out of long period of training but the researchers believe that not all performances are mere theatrics. Some are absolutely aided by metaphysical powers. According to Enekwe (1982), in most African societies, masking creates a distinction between males and females. Masking or masquerade is a product of age grade as well as a male dominated cult. Outside a few aged women and praise singers that follow masquerades like Ijele, women are never admitted into the Mmonwu cult. This is an expression of boundary display theory as women too have various cult in which men are disallowed to join. Again, masquerades in Igboland enter into competition in dances, acrobatic display and use of supernatural powers. This often degenerates into serious fight where policeman had to be involved in the yearly festival. The basic element here is that of protection of the boundary, the domain of their powers against abuse by non-initiates and other masquerades alike. For example, Agaba or Odogwu-anya-mme masquerade when in performance is supported by eight others and do not allow for the audience to come close but viewed from a respectable distance (1992). Also, all masquerades festival in Igboland is a form of ritual performance that involves the whole community no matter the status and wealth. This assertion lends credence to the fact that Mmonwu dance performance is in agreement with the last theory of dance, which is communitas and antistructure. Despite the presence of social inequality, rivalry and interest that divide people, there exists Mmonwu tradition that serves as a genetic human bond, a communitas that brings people together. Finally, Okoye (2010) rightly observes that masquerade performance functions within the tradition if modernity "appropriating and re-contextualising cultural elements from within and without" to enrich the expression of the tradition.

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



5. CONCLUSION

Mmonwu festivals in Igboland is so popular and unique that it attracts people to come back home from far and near to witness an exceptional medium of expressing popular feelings to societal existence. This well-organized and well-attended yearly dance performances play a major role in the functional, artistic and communal expression of the Mmonwu tradition among the Igbos of Nigeria. The various dance theories are all applicable to this special artistic expression because the masquerade tradition itself is varied and multi-dimensional. It is trite to try to apply only the evolutionist theory or any other singular theory in understanding this phenomenon. Mmonwu is widely practiced across Igboland and there are uncountable variants of the different masks, but they all hold special place in the various communities and they all play significant roles in the communal equanimity and continued existence of these communities. All the analysed dance theories therefore, find expression in this extraordinary masquerade tradition that is as old as man and thus, a single theory cannot be applied to this tradition in order to explain, interpret or appreciate it.

It is therefore recommended that scholars and writers, in trying to apply theories and western canons on African dances and other performances, to subject individual performance and tradition to critical analysis based on the nuances and particularities of that performance and tradition. This will help them to avoid unnecessary and unjustifiable generalizations in performance/culture appreciation and interpretation for each cultural dance and performance has its own uniqueness and requisite fundamentals that cannot be easily replicated in another performance tradition.

REFRENCES

Abone, C. (1988). Mmonwu: The Igbo Masquerade Theatre and its social functions in Awka Areas of Anambra State (B.A. Thesis). University of Ibadan.

Akapo, S. S. (2024). Street dance performance as protest: Seun Awobajo's untitled in focus. The Quint Journal, 16(2). University College of the North. https://www.ucn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Quint-.v16.2.pdf

Amadi, L., & Agena, J. E. (2015). Globalisation, culture mutation and new identity: Implication for the Igbo cultural heritage. Africa Journal of History and Culture, 7(1), 16-27. https://www.academicjournals.org/AJHC/

Asigbo, A. C. (2012). Transmutations in Masquerade Costumes and Performances: An examination of Abuja Carnival 2010. UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities, 13(1).

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



Blacking, J. (1985). Movement, dance, music, and the Venda girls' initiation cycle. In P. Spencer (Ed.), Society and the Dance (pp. 123-145). Cambridge University Press.

Enekwe, O. O. (1982). Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing).

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (2010). Introduction. The Dance. Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement. https://jashm.press.uillinois.edu/15.2/pritchard.html

Harper, P. (1987). African dance. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/contributor/Peggy-Harper/1238

Horton, R. (2014). The gods as guests in drama and theatre in Nigeria. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Nigerian Theatre: A Critical Source Book (pp. 22-37). Tanus Books Limited.

Mead, M. (1969). Coming of age in Samoa: Exploring adolescent culture and social norms in Samoa. Pelican Books.

Nwankwo, I. U. (2015). Governance and associated social roles of masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria in an era of globalization: A critical appraisal. Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies, 4, 50-67.

Nzewi, M. (1971). The rhythm of dance in Igbo music. The Conch, 2(3), 104.

Oboshi, E. C. (2024). Tradition and change in the Igbo Masquerade Theatre in Anambra State, Nigeria (2016-2023) (Unpublished thesis). Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan.

Okoye, C. (1986). Costume in traditional Igbo masquerade drama (M.A. Thesis). University of Ibadan.

Okoye, C. (1992). Form and process in Igbo masquerade art (Ph.D. dissertation). University of Ibadan.

Okoye, C. (2010). Cannibalization as popular tradition in Igbo masquerade performance. Research in African Literature, 42(2), 85-101. Indiana University Press.

Okoye, C. (2013). The body of my friend: Liminal presence in Igbo masquerade performance. AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies, 8(1), 45-58.

Olomu, O. (2017). [Details unavailable].

Advance Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Adv. J. Arts. Hum. & Soc Sci.
Volume: 8; Issue: 02
March-April, 2025
ISSN 6300-5290
E-ISSN 4226-6348
Impact Factor: 6.79
Advance Scholars Publication
Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development
https://aspjournals.org/ajahss/index.php/ajahss/index



Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (1952). Essays and addresses. The Free Press.

Schechner, R. (2013). Performance studies: An introduction (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Sorell, W. (1985). The dance through the ages. Grosset & Dunlap.

Spencer, P. (1985). Society and the dance: The social anthropology of process and performances. Cambridge University Press.

Turner, V. W. (1991). The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure (Rev. ed.). Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1969)

Ugonna, N. (1984). Mmonwu: A dramatic tradition of the Igbo. Lagos University Press, 1-21.