

## Dance Aesthetics and Cultural Implications: A Case Study of Ekombi Dance and Asian Uboikpa Dance

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### Abstract

Dance is an active tool in the society because it not only expresses the feelings and aspirations of the people but it also showcases the cultural values that are entrenched in the people's culture. Interestingly, our traditional dances possess all these qualities thereby making these dances an instrument of communicating social values. This study attempts to appraise the Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa dances of the Efiks and Ibibios in Cross River and Akwa Ibom States. It also tries to situate that these dances have huge cultural values that define the socio-religious beliefs of these localities. This study states that the growth of our traditional dances, especially the Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa dances under review will rely on the ability of the choreographers to really understand the socio-cultural and religious standpoints of these dances.

**Keywords:** Dance aesthetics; Traditional Dances; Ekombi; Asian Uboikpa; Dance Education

### 1. Introduction

Dance appears to be a dominant art in Cross Rivers and Akwa Ibom states of Nigeria. It explores the people's culture by making use of the nuances of the environment in which it exists. This is because the songs, instruments and dance movement are true reflection of the indigenous cultural motivation. This is applicable to the dances involved in this study -Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa dances.

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 animal's in order to attract the animals to himself 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 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 (3).*

It is from this perceptive motif that man creates dance patterns to relate to his society. His basic creation of communication through movement led to the development of dance as an art form.

Hawkins further states that: "Dance as a work of art may be described as the expression of man's inner feelings transformed by imagination and given form through the medium of movement". Simply put; dance is a symbolic artistic expression, which reveals the inner vision of its creator and is presented to the audience performance medium as an art form. Dance shares information with the audience. A dancer transmits his or her message to the audience through the universality of such movements, which enables the audience to share in the experience. Non-verbal movements differ in terms of meanings from one community to another. The dance designer must be very familiar with different movement vocabularies of a particular community, which his dance is set before using them in his dance enactment.

Hence, the aesthetic elements and implications in dance are decoded based on cultural provisions. The enactment has great impact on artistic creations. In an art such as dance, the environment has so much influence on the dance steps, instruments, songs, costumes and make-up. For these aesthetic potentials in dance to unveil themselves in any dance composition the choreographer must have the desire to research intensively on the related culture behind the dance he composes or produces.

The dances for the riverine areas are characterized with steps, which stimulate the water waves. Such dances include Ekombi and Ubom dance. Dance plays a major role in bringing out the aesthetics of traditional African performances. It is a composition of beliefs, myths and legend of the people, and is essential and integral to the people's way of life.

Religion continues to remain one of the major militating factors against the growth of some traditional practices. Christianity, for instance, perceives some traditional dances and performances as fetish. Most people do not partake in these performances due to their new believe that it is ritualistic, thus encouraging the decline of these dances as an art form. However, traditional dance forms, movements, costumes, make-up and accessories come together not only to give aesthetic pleasure, but also to express the social beliefs (is ; of the people though dance movements. Dance is a very important art form in any society. This is because it draws and explores all facets of human endeavour. Gone are those days when dance was merely seen as an improvisational art where people dance to show joy and elevate human spirits during rituals session and festivities. Dance is now a lucrative art where moments are constructively made and synthesize with great dexterity and aesthetic presence. With the growing perception of dance in our society coupled with the globalization process, choreographers in an attempt to situate dance in contemporary art derail in their motive due to lack of proper research on dance forms and practice. In their attempt to add patterns, and movement to make these cultural dances universal, they pollute the cultural world of such dances, hence, they no longer carry the perception and image of the people. The cultural implications of these dances are dashed in the bid to impress by all means. Another major problem is that lack of research into cultural dances has made dance designers to have bleak knowledge on dances, and they derail in their purpose of design for the society.

This study therefore sought to determine the relevance of traditional dance forms as an art and means to the provision of aesthetic pleasure, and also as an avenue for the sustenance of culture. The study also sought to determine that communicative nature of dance through gestures and movements.

## 2. An Overview of Dance Theories and Practices

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 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, (1)*

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 transition and ephemeral.

According to Erick Hawkins, "Dance exists only in the now" and no place else, therefore the momentary nature of dance is one of its most precious gift (20). 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"*  
(20)

Bakare defines dance as "the rhythmic movement of the body in time and space to make statements (6)". Hawking also sees dance as a work of art that has inherent communicate powers, because the material dance, which is the human movement, is the essence of life as it grows out of life (4). These movements can only be seen in the artistic light when there are elaborated from their everyday occurrences and given an artistic transformation. In all these conceptions of dance, much emphasis is laid on movement. According to Jacqueline

Smith, dance is "an exposition of movements" (30). Dance obviously depends on movement, which are non-verbal skills. The movement of the body is indispensable in dance. This is because the central character is man, and man moves in order to satisfy a need. He uses movement to aim at what he values. Movement reveals many things. It can characterize the momentary mood or the personality of the moving person, or even the surrounding of the movements.

Martha Graham sees dance as the externalization of expressive movements which re-enact human experiences. To her,

*Dance is another way of putting things. It isn't a literal or literary thing, but everything that a dancer does, even it's the most lyrical thing, he 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 (184).*

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 to 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.

We see therefore, that non-literal dance has a much broader range of subject and sources than the literal. It also employs a systematic treatment of theatrical devices like costume, properties and lighting effects in the actualization of its form. These devices cannot substitute for movement or conveyors of meaning in themselves, but are used as extensions of movement and notion. The product of non-literal dance performance therefore communicates directly to the senses of the spectators. The dancers achieve this by transcending their physical limits in the exploration of a new realm of communication, which serves as an empathy theory. The choreographer extracts from his experiences, the appropriate creative response without the imposition of intellectually predetermined concepts.

In dance, different schools of thought maintain that "dance is in form of self-expression of emotion" (2). The expressive function of dance is not simply something which is marked out by style or intent but that which is to be discovered within its form as an inherent property of movement. It is the belief of the expressionists that the identity of dance as an art must be bound with the expressive power and significant of dance movements.

According to Susan Foster, dance is an externalization of universal truth. To her,

*... dance as the externalization the inner, subjective but universal truth, defines an expressionism which embraces the work of modern dancers from Duncan through to Graham and a subsequent third and fourth generation of choreographers. (73).*

Foster posits that the continuity of modern dance lies in the very process of rejection and reinvention of movement vocabularies. She further observes that the three most influential theories of dance composition formulated by the ethnologist Curt Sachs, the critic John Martin and the philosopher Suzanne Langer, all located the origin of dance in the early human gestures as a mean of communication. As a result of this theory of dance,

Foster notes that:

*They oppose these prima yearnings to express human feelings to the subsequent artificiality of civilized movement, and they took to dance as a medium that can return thus to a vital energy and an un-alienated sense of wholeness. (73).*

The Formalistic School of Thought argues that dance is not a representational practice as is suggested in the literal concept of dance where dance could be wrongly used as substitute or representation of ideas, which in effect will make dance nothing more than the translation of pre-existing verbal origin (34).

Andre Levison proposed the formalist theory by postulating that dance is an aesthetic form, which is not representational. To him, it seems as though everyone had piled upon this art mistaken burdens is his effort to redeem - even if only in a small way - the actual movement of dance. He urges that dance should be aesthetically appraised as an independent art form, which exists for itself. Thus he emphasizes the specificity of dance.

The Modernist School of Thought proposes that modern dance is progressively purifying itself from outmoded and irrelevant representational practices. Here, dance is seen as a projection towards an essence of dance as a medium, which "promises to reveal the absolute dance, that pure essence of dance which contains no element of anything else" (86). Dance movements communicate more than just referential information. So, seeing dance as purely representational reduces dance to a translation of things and situation which were originally verbal in nature. The body will therefore be marginalized and denied the opportunity to assail in self-expression, which makes dance autonomous.

Maxine Sheet, in her phenomenological theory of dance, sees it "as an abstraction from daily life" (41). This suggests that dance as an art form has its foundation in nature. Langer further explains this notion, as she makes an analogous distinction asserting that:

*The work of art is never something the artist finds or to which the spectator gives identity by the act of looking, but is something that has been made and which asserts its own identity as an art (117).*

It follows that dance is never simply movements, but is always movements that has been transformed, imagined, re-made and made articulate. Martin observes that: "... art and nature are irreconcilable opposites. For this reason, natural movements and natural rhythms are impossible materials for the art dance. (86)"

Dance is therefore seen as an abstract pure form, which is capable of expressing itself. The proper subject of dance is dancing. It celebrates its form through the beauty and technique of movements as an end in itself period of connotations.

The Experimental School of Thought rejects technique, content and form as necessary structures and essentials for dance, believing that art and life are one and the same. They employ play acting in their dance enactment, dissolve the distance between audience and performers, create things for the moment with no thought of a performance, and have no requirements of a beginning or end in dances. To them, dance exists for the purpose of testing art value. These experiments also test traditional beliefs and have led to new forms of movement expression.

The nature of signs and symbols is that they could be representational of ideas outside themselves. They suggest literary connotations. This is different in dance because they come as body movements, exhibited purely on aesthetics groups and should thus be appreciated. They send out signals, which are part of the basic components in the system of communication. The meaning of dance so derived from the motion as it happens through the human body, sending meaningful signals through the senses of the spectator. Possibly this is why Kaye opines that: "... the concept of art itself is meaningful as wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts... what lies between the arts is theatre (28)". So dance movements, the non-verbal signals in dance are therefore "concerned with those aspects of dance that owe least to words" (275). As such, movements in dance cannot be interpreted literary because "not all movements that appear in choreographic works are conventional and labelled movements" (277). Dance does not interpret what is verbally said or written down but expresses itself through movements.

According to Langer, theorists as Merle Armitage and Rudolph Von Laban, and scholars like Court Sach accept the naturalistic doctrines that dances are "a force discharge either of surplus energy or of emotional excitement

(177). This takes dance closer to nature in its freedom, but Brady sees the beauty of dance in its unique free movements. She quotes Eugene Zamiatin to have asked and answered thus:

*Why is dance beautiful? Answer: Because it is an unfree movement, because the deep meaning of the dance is contained in its absolute ecstatic submission in the ideal of non-freedom (9).*

This is so because dance as an art employs the use of movements, which differ from natural everyday movements. The remaking of natural movements from their free state to an artistic movement takes a lot of training. To train from natural movements to dance, the dancer has to go through uneasy techniques that are removed from daily routine. Barba states that unease is:

*... a means of control, a kind of internal radar "which permit Performers to observe themselves while in action. Not with their eyes but by the means of a series of physical conceptions which confirm that extra-daily non-habitual tensions are at work in the body. (13)*

As such, the principal talent of a dancer is the capability for resistance and endurance because the movements, which are more into dance, seen to be much more complex than the daily movements.

In Africa, dance as an integral part of the culture of the people, could be used to create peace, maintain order, organization and governance of the society. This is why Kwakwa opines that:

*... Traditional African dances do not occur in isolation. They often have a specific role within an event or a complex of events organized for a specific occasion. (285).*

Rudolph Laban supports this view by asserting that, "dances of all times have had a profound connection with the working habits of the periods in which with they were created" (3). Dance thus serves that functions in human society by achieving social cohesion or togetherness and a deep sense of communion with one another. Traditional African dances often possess religious magical, mystical and secular values. According to Meki Nzewi, "...what distinguishes dance cultures is the semiotic resources of dance gestures and styles which affect the choreographic vision" (439). Dance is therefore culture bound and so expresses the time and place of its creation.

### 3. Dance and Society

Dance has been and still is an intricate part of the collective zeal of any African society. Right from the ancient periods, it was instrumental in instructing both the young and the old on moral and human dignity. Ossie Enekwe notes that:

*Dancing serves a vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion and togetherness, causing them to a deep sense of communion with each other. As a result, people are liberated from the bounds of individuality. (31)*

In his own terms, dance serves as a rallying force integrating the social motifs to the stratified as that make up the community. Enekwe further pronounce on the viability of dance in the African society as he submits.

*The individual has the right to express himself. Everyone dance, whether one was an accomplished dancer or not, in fact, dancing was afield in which an able bodied individual wanted to acquaint himself creditably since one just had to dance. (51.)*

Enekwe tried to show the intimacy that is created through dance. Through dance, the African secured the freedom to express his feelings in an inhibited form of self- satisfaction. While appraising the role of dance in African society, Ufford says,

*Dance expands on the cultural values and norms of a community, their religion, their clothing, their occupation, their context and desire. Without culture, there is no*

*dance. Dance is the expression of the inner desires of man to celebrate or to transform his society, using his body as a tool in communicating with the vocabularies of the society to put across his philosophy through a performance milieu. Dance is the language of the soil (10).*

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 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).

There are non-illusionist, real and true, without falsehood. However, the Ekombi dance of the Efiks, Ekpe or Igba Egwurugwu dance of the Igbos, Bata dance of the Yorubas, and a couple of other dances are related to the edification and sanctification of the lands and the gods and beyond.

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.

Dance in itself is advocative, leading 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.

Native African dances illustrate most of the purposes of dance that is of a ritualistic or ceremonial nature; the war dance expressing prayer for success and thanksgiving for victory; the dance of exorcism or healing, performed by shamans to drive out evil spirits; the dance of invocation, calling on gods for help in farming, hunting, the fertility of human beings and animals and other tribal concerns; initiation dances for secret societies mimetic dances, illustrating events on tribal history, legend and mythology; dances representing cosmic processes; and more rarely; dance of courtship, an innovation for success in live. The dance of religious ecstasy, in which hypnotic or trancelike states are induced, was equally represented in Africa. Dancing has its place in all societies, yet many have oddly rejected the phenomenon of dance. It can be presented as a controlled emotional outlet whose form reflects. Cosmology as a creative experience that draws adolescent girls into the adult world; as an extension of speech and gesture that adds further levels of meaning to formal occasions; as a strategy for orchestrating the climax of a successful exchange; as a challenge to the power of elders that generates an alternative reality; as a communal response to crisis that recreates order out of confusion; and as a sequence of transformations that periodically resolves an inherent social dilemma, and so on. In other words, dance serves a vital function in achieving social cohesion or togetherness, causing members of the communities to feel a deep sense of communion with one another. Primarily, it entertains, informs and educates the society.

#### **4. General Conceptions in Aesthetics**

Aesthetics has become a controversial concept since the field is relatively wide in scope. It goes beyond the physical perception of beauty as both the mundane and extra-mundane attributes are used to determine "the beautiful" and "the ugly". A person may not be beautiful in facial appearance but may have good character. His goodness in character will be aesthetically appealing.

According to Akpan

*... an aesthetic experience is the feeling or sensation that we have when we experience something that evokes a certain feeling of enjoyment, something which make our nerves tingle whether from seeing or hearing or touching the thing in question (3).*

While considering the etymology of aesthetics goes on to say that aesthetics comes from the word "aesthetics" which means "perception" which is formed the adjective "aesthetics" means "sense perception" (Akpan, 2). Though aesthetics was formerly based only on philosophical concept that dealt solely with understanding and appraising beauty in works of art, Gyovbukerhi, a study of the concept of sweetness or goodness" as determined by the sense of man. He opines that

*...the manner in which this taste (aesthetics) is demonstrated seems to vary from one of culture to other both in terms of values and aesthetic concepts evolved to explain their meaning and use ... (29)*

The above view implies that aesthetics is culture bound since the experience that determines the beautiful is found and interpreted within the community or cultural ambience that "the beautiful" exists. Though Zettl, one of the foremost exponents of the aesthetic theory defines aesthetics as

*...a study of certain sense perception and having these perceptions can be most effectively clarified intensified and interpreted through a medium ... for a specific recipient. (21).*

To further add to Zettl's view, John Ladd argues that:

*Aesthetics has to be open textured, so that it can be used for a number of different things, which however may resemble one another in various important ways. (117).*

While contributing to the concept of aesthetics, Wolf defines aesthetics as "theories about the nature of art as well as about the criteria of aesthetic Judgment" (38).

Aesthetics among the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State is also seen as a clarification of sensory perceptions like in their music, dances and so on. There could be beauty seen or perceived in the songs, dances or costumes of the Ibibio people. In a nutshell, deep appreciation of beauty stimulates fascination. Aesthetics has to do with the appreciation of the beautiful and is used to describe that branch of arts whose only function is the appeal it makes to man's senses of beauty and the higher emotions.

Aesthetics can best be understood in traditional societies if the nuance of the environment is taken into consideration. The element of aesthetics could be better appraised if there are linked with the cultural background of the cultures concerned such aesthetic elements include time, colour, space and so on. Aesthetics is further seen as the study of what is involved in the creation, appreciation and criticism of art in the relation of arts to other human activities and interest and in the changing role of art in his Phaedrus and Symposium that any beautiful thing suggests the realm of eternal values. Furthermore,

*Plato believes that beauty is objective or an inherent quality of certain objects. He tells that such objects reflect pure and ideal forms of beauty which exist independently of man. (Black: 112)*

Plato's disciple, Aristotle disagrees with the aspect of the existence of the forms of beauty independent of man. He contends that "man creates and enjoys beauty"... (Black: 122) but for St. Thomas Aquinas "Beauty reveals the mind of God. Beautiful objects reflect spiritual radiance, wholeness and harmony" (Black: 12). Immanuel Kant has been another strong exponent of the concept of aesthetics. For him; "the experience of beauty merely reflects the imagination of man rather than any absolute truth or knowledge. (Black: 12)"

Hegel has a contrasting view on the above postulation of Kant. He states that "art is a physical representation of the truth of philosophy and religion" (Black: 113) Chive Bell, another exponent of aesthetics held that;

*... art need not be beautiful in the conventional sense of offering a pretty imitation of reality ... Form and design are the only important factors in a 'work of art. (Black: 113).*

Dickie echoes another postulation of Plato who maintained that:

*...objects are beautiful to the degree that they exemplify the timeless and non-spatial form of beauty. In the "symposium" he maintains that a person comes to know the form of beautiful things, progressing from objects of physical beauty to beautiful institutions and the passing on to the contemplation of beauty itself. (Dickie: 236)*

Plato probably thought of beauty as a thing that has to be directly experienced and as such is not analysable and cannot be defined. For St. Thomas Aquinas, aesthetics is:

*The experience of the beautiful...is a matter of recognizing the form in an individual thing. Something is beautiful if it is an unimpaired example of its forms or specific, is proportional or harmonious and is bright or clear. (Dickie: 236)*

For Roma (102)

*"The chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry and definiteness. This in effect means that a beautiful thing must have orderly arrangement and size, which is proper to it".*

According to Sircello (131) "Theorists of beauty had generally admitted that the perception of beauty always gives pleasure to the perceiver" This means that aesthetics is communicative and the flow of communication is between the senders and receivers and not just a one-way flow of feelings. Aesthetics is the experience of enjoyment that the perceiver derives from beautiful things.

Ikpe sees aesthetics as:

*An expressive behaviour from both the sender and the receiver during a communicative process. As an expressive behaviour, it involves the human senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. (35)*

The American Society for Aesthetics sees aesthetics as embracing all studies of arts and related types of experience from a philosophic, scientific or other theoretical standpoint including those of psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural history, art criticisms and education. (Ames: 181)

Aesthetics reveal the beauty imbedded in dance. Aesthetics being a radiance of beauty is seen in a conjugation of dance elements such as, movement, music, props, costume and make-up to evoke empathy and response in the audience during a dance presentation.

Langer sees the art of dancing as "wider than any particular conception that may govern a tradition, a style, a sacred or secular use..." (195) This suggests that dance excels across tradition and establishes a new realm. In African dance therefore, a whole lot of attributes are involved as a result of the environmental and socio-cultural factor. Dance portrays the ideal beauty in its form and movement an identity of a particular culture. Dance theories are limitless as can be seen from the different perspectives on dance. Thus Langer concedes that recognition of the virtual realm of dance offers a solution to common confusions in both dance criticisms and practice over what is and is not truly appropriate to the medium.

The recognition of time artistic illusion, a realm of "powers" ... lift the concept of dance out of all its theoretical entanglements with music serious drama and let one ask what belongs to dancing and what does not" (184).

Be that as it may, the researcher sees dance as a concept in life that promotes the imaginative and creative potential of man as he structures his expressions using his primary tool which is the body, to make statements capable of informing and entertaining the audience within a defined music flow.

## **5. A Survey of Asian Uboikpa and Ekombi Dances**

### *5.1 Asian Uboikpa Dance*

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 Uboikpa 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 "Uboikpa" means "young girls". Asian Uboikpa dance then connotes a dance presentation by proud maidens who are the pride of the 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 (Mbopo) process, she will be crowned with the title of "Asian Uboikpa Ikpaisong Ibibio" and was also allowed to register in the Asian Uboikpa Institution. They also dance around the community to showcase their beauty and the Asian Uboikpa dance.

According to an informant, Mma Moses Akpan a Women Leader in Anua Offot Uyo, she said that Asian Uboikpa dance was the highest performance of young girls who are already in their puberty. The need to protect these young girls from being seduced by the 'sex hungry' men brought about a forum such as this, why young girls were taught why they should be patient for their time.

Another informant Mma Enewan, the wife of the Clan Head of Ibesikpo, who was part of these institutions during her youthful age, traced the genesis of this dance from a ritual standpoint. She is of the opinion that the more the land is defiled, the more famine and destruction befall the land making the purity as an expression of the gods. None virgins were called "Uwok" and were not allowed to dance Asian Uboikpa. They were regarded as a bad omen to the land hence they were always banished with their parents for defiling the land. Consequently, mothers of these young girls who remained virgins were exalted alongside with their daughters and it was believed that the more virgins, the more fertility and abundance to the community. This is because virgins were only the right channels through which the priests used to mediate man with the gods. So to encourage this, an institution called Asian Uboikpa was created. The entire community would participate in the Mbopo ceremony where maidens were chosen. The community ushers gifts, dance and make merriment as a lesson for others. The pride of a woman is to lose her virginity in her husband's house that is why a white bed sheet was always placed on the bed when they first meet together. Their bloodstain justifies the purity of the woman and is consequently greeted with great celebration and joy. She is then believed to have brought good luck to the husband and bring forth siblings that are not defiled by contaminated blood. These dancers are seen as models for the upcoming female generations.

## 5.2 *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 Efiks have great respect for the mermaids and 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. 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, Eme-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

telling her that she will never come back to the world because she had found her lover and that the only way her sister can see is if she will muster courage and go into the river and pick the Ika. Eme-Eme finally summons courage and goes into the water and picked up the Ika and looked into It She sees the underworld and Ekanem adorned with the complete Efik attire; hair braided and decorated with a brass comb, admiring herself. All sorts of marine creatures worshipping her surrounded her. Eme-Eme reacting to what she saw starts to imitate the movements of Ekanem and all the marine creatures that surrounded her. People that had gathered around her while she cried for her sister saw what she was doing, what she wore and even describe it in the song and also imitated her and that is how Ekombi dance came into existence. That is also the reason why in every Ekombi dance performance there must be a lead dancer. Since the dance is a reflection of the world of the sea, it is believed that it could be possessive at some points. Ekombi dance is one of the most revered dances of the Efik people of Cross River State.

## 6. Implications and Aesthetics of Asian Uboikpa and Ekombi

### 6.1 Asian Uboikpa Dance

Maidens and male drummers perform it. Previously, only virgins are qualified but nowadays, evidence shows that non-virgins also undertake in this dance. Then, it was a moonlight performance but now, it is being used as a form of entertainment during marriage ceremonies, child naming ceremonies and others.

#### 6.1.1 Dance composition

With the aid of a drum, the lead dancer runs in and obeys the instructions of talking drum, for instance, squats, jumps, turns to the right and left and so on. Then, she goes back and comes in with the rest of the dancers and they engage in a vigorous dancing session. All these steps are taken in order to attract the attention of the men to the dancers. Aside from their physical beauty, the domestic responsibilities of a young girl into womanhood such as planting activities, sweeping, washing of clothes, taking care of babies, loyalty and others are all stimulated through the dance movements. This makes the dance a waist based and also expressive in nature.

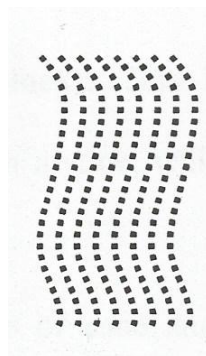
#### 6.1.2 Costume

Previously, the dancer's torso was bare in order to showcase their innocence and beauty but nowadays, their costume include:

- *Umen Eba (Bra Top)*: It is used to cover the breast region of the dancers body.
- *Mkpin*: This is a wrapper folder with a rope in between and tied around the waist to look like a skirt with gathers. It also exposes the beauty of the waist since most of the dance movements are waist based.
- *Nyoho Isin*: These are beads and raffia ornaments worn on the waist for emphasis and beauty.
- *Nyoho Ukot*: This is a costume accessory worn on the legs but made of dried seeds which beautifies the dancers as well as produces sounds to enhance the rhythm of the drums.
- *Mkwa Itong*: These are beads worn on the neck for adornments.
- *Okpotto Ubok*: These are bigger beads worn on the dancers' hands for beautification.

#### 6.1.3 Make-Up

The make-up is predominantly kaolin chalk based. The kaolin chalk is mixed with water and applied all over the legs, hand and face. The legs and arms are designed with the use of four fingers closely knitted to give a serpentine effect while the face is designed with a stick, which has a sharp and in a serpentine dotted spots.



#### 6.1.4 Instruments

The instruments, which are used in the Asian Uboikpa dance, include:

- *Obodm (wooden block)*: This is a heavy wooden instrument which serves as a communication instrument from the drummers to the dancers.
- *Ntakrok (small wooden block)*: This is a small wooden instrument accompanied with a stick, which produces sounds that are as small as hollow.
- *Nsak (rattle)*: This is made of cane and plaited like small basket having a figure of a cone with handle. When shaken, the ting stones or dried seeds inside help to produce a light sound. This adds rhythm and beauty to the entire dance ensemble.
- *Eka Ibid (talking drum)*: This is the master drum because it is the leading drum. It provides bass rhythm and also sends message across to the dancers.
- *Akankang (Small Gong)*: This produces different tones because it is a small-sided cone-like iron gong, which has a large opening. When bit with stick, it produces a strong sound, which is released through the opening.

#### 6.1.5 Songs

The songs are didactic in nature because it is not only exposing the lapses of the men; it also provides a platform for a better attitude. It includes:

### IBIBIO

Chant	Eno, Eno
Chorus	lyo oo (two times)
Chant	Eno nkedi diongo edu mfo
Chant	Utu ke ndo akparawa ndo iwat
Chorus	lyo oo (two times)
Chant	Iwat ediongo edu ukama owo
Chorus	lyo oo (two times)
Chant	Akparawa unam etuk anye usio unyong
Chorus	lyo oo

### ENGLISH

Chant	Eno, Eno
Chorus	lyo oo (two times)
Chant	Eno, I have come to know your character
Chorus	lyo oo
Chant	Instead of marrying a youth, I will go for the matured
Chorus	lyo oo (two times)
Chant	The mature men are more responsible
Chorus	lyooo
Chant	A youth beats at will
Chorus	lyo oo

The above song is used by maidens to ridicule young men telling them how they (maiden) prefer the matured men because they know how to pamper and love better than the young men.

IBIBIO

Chant Nkesine ke Idim nyed afong ebemi - o

Chorus Ndoho mbad ebe

Chant Mbad ataha afong ayawod ebemi-o

Chorus Ndoho mbad ebe

Two times

#### ENGLISH

Chant I was washing my husband's clothes in the stream

Chorus I can't marry dirty husband

Chant Dirty rags will kill my husband

Chorus I can't marry dirty husband

Two times

The women sing this song to show how much they care for their husband and wash their clothes and also mock others that are not responsible or yield to their duties.

#### IBIBIO

Chant: Yak itamma nte enang ukwak iduk anwa mi o,

Chorus: Afum ben.

#### ENGLISH

Chant: We will jump like bicycle into this arena

Chorus: Wind blow

This is an entry song - as the dancers come into the arena to perform, they use it as their welcome song to the audience.

#### IBIBIO

General: Unek Anbung isin (two times)

General: Ay a di mbung edem, Nya nyong

#### ENGLISH

General: Dancing has broken my waist (two times)

General: It will break my back, Am going.

This song is rendered at the close of the dance session; when the dancers are tired and want to leave.

#### IBIBIO

General: Edinyongo ade de

Nkom ubok (two times)

#### ENGLISH

General: It is time to go (two times)

Shake my hand

This song is used as an exit song, when the dancers are leaving the arena.

### 6.2 *Ekombi Dance*

Although highly ritualistic, Ekombi dance serves a social function because it is being used as a source of entertainment in marriage ceremonies, coronations, naming ceremonies and others. However, it is performed by female dancers and male drummers. While the dancers concentrate on the modulation of the dance movements the musical (ensemble sing and ululate at intervals).

### 6.2.1 Dance composition

The lead drummer is always a man reared with great knowledge of sound variations and compositions. The age of the dancers is not defined but there is always a leader who introduces the dance while the others follow suit. The big women with Onyoryo (gown) are regarded as the mothers guiding their siblings to glory.

There is one basic Ekombi movement with a triple rhythm. Others are variations of the same movements. The body, hands and legs interweave to produce a wavelike movement akin to the waves of the ocean. In some cases, individual dancers are allowed to showcase their skills alone in the ensemble, thereby, making the dance package strong and exciting. In group dances, varieties of movements such as linear, circle and zig-zag positions are produced to achieve aesthetic dance design.

### 6.2.2 Costume

The costume of the Ekombi dance is usually flamboyant because of its elegance and grandeur. They include:

- *Ikpokidcm*: It is a short blouse, a material sewn to cover the breast region of the dancer.
- *Afong Ukot Anwan*: This is a small wrapper tied on the waist, a little above the knee, to cover the nakedness of the dancer.
- *Anana Ubok*: These are long beads worn by the dancers boost the aesthetic appraisal of the dancer.
- *Mkpat Etim (Leg Gingles)*: It is a velvet material decorated with wool of different colours and embellished with tiny bells to add to the rich musical ensemble. It becomes an accessory that compliments the costume.
- *Ekpaku Ubok*: This is an armlet made of velvet material and decorated with wool of different colours.
- *Mkpat Etim*: This is a smaller version of Ekpaku Ubok. It makes the dancer more appreciable to the audience.
- *Ekara Itong*: This is a little velvet material designed with variety of beads and in circular form with a hole at the middle for the dancer to wear on the neck. It also adds more aesthetics to the dancers costume.

### 6.2.3 Make-Up

The make-up is usually done with kaolin chalk to create different designs on the dancers face, notable among them is the serpentine design. In special cases such as traditional marriages, the hair-do of the bride usually differs depending on the status of the bride in the family. For instance, though the hairstyle is basically the same, that is, a large braid in front, two large braids on each side and a long braid behind.

That of the Adiaha (the first daughter) has a very long braid at the back to the waist level and a long cone at the centre of the head. The front view has two combs; the side braids also have two combs each; the back view has seven combs while the cone has eight combs making it a total of twenty-one combs.

In the case of the Unwa (the second daughter), the front view has two combs, on the sides two combs each, the back view has five combs and is not as long as that of Adiaha but a little below the shoulder level, and the cone has five combs and is not also as long as that of Adiaha making it a total of sixteen combs.

The third daughter (Odunwan) has one comb on the front view, one on each side, four on the back view, which is not as long as that of the second daughter, and three combs on the cone, which is also very small. This makes it a total of ten combs.

Previously, golden combs were used which is made from brass plates but modernization had brought about the introduction of silver combs made from silver plates. However, the combs still serve the same aesthetic purpose.

### 6.2.4 Instruments

The instruments used in the Ekombi dance include;

- *Ekomo Iba (Twin Drum)*: It is the primary instrument that controls the ensemble. It is used to manipulate and improvise sounds capable of ascertaining the tempo of entire dance composition.
- *Nsak (Rattle)*: This is used to create and sustain the rhythm of the twin drum.
- *Mkpri Ekomo (Small Drums)*: These are two small drums used to add to the rhythm of the dance.
- *Ntakrok (Woodenblock)*: It is not used always in the dance composition. However, it serves as a timing instrument.
- *Nkwong (Metal Gong)*: It is not only used as a timer but also sets the pace for the dance and songs.

### 6.2.5 Songs

The songs are oftentimes metaphorical. They also express the beauty of being pure and loyal to the societal standards. It also determines the pace and tempo of the dance movements. Some of the songs include:

#### EFIK

Ekpri eyen asanga ye eka

(Two times )

Itong kodong mi mkpeyenede eyen

#### ENGLISH

A small child is walking with her mother

(Two times)

I am desirous of having mine

This song is a prayer, always sang by barren women who seeks the aid of Anansa (water goddess) as their last result to having a child. The story of Sidibe by Edinyang Ekpri Essien, adapted into a play by Arit Essien is based on the help Anansa gives to barren women. Anansa (Appeal to the goddess - my mother).

#### EFIK

Chorus: Ikpo eto iba ada ke akai

Ekpenyongabasi ye Ekanem (two times)

#### ENGLISH

Chorus: There are two big trees in the forest

Ekpenyongabasi and Ekanem.

This is an example of a metaphorical song. The two big trees represent Ekpenyongabasi and Ekanem. The songs say the two deities who used to live in the water have come to earth and live among men.

#### IBIBIO

Isang eyen Obong o ... (three times) Werede werede werede

#### ENGLISH

The steps of the prince or princes Move majestically

This song is being rendered during marriage especially Traditional Marriage when the bride or the groom is meeting the audience.

#### IBIBIO

Ko koi mmong di (two times)

Ko koi mmong di yed eyen o o

Ada aman eyen o

Ko koi mmong di

Ka ko ke mben inyang o

Ko koi edisana mmong uwem o

Di yed eyen.

#### ENGLISH

Go and fetch water o

Go, fetch water and bath the new born baby o o

The barren has put to birth.  
Go and fetch water  
At the riverside  
You will see a holy and living water  
Fetch to bath the baby.  
This song is rendered when a barren woman finally give birth.

#### IBIBIO

Etighi mben inyang eka mi okoto, Eted etighi ted nanga do (two times)

#### ENGLISH

The okro at the riverside was planted by my mother The harvester should stop plugging it (two times).  
This shows the greediness of people who are not contented with what they have.

### 7. Conclusion

Traditional dances present the totality and richness of a culture. The aesthetic contents of Asian Uboikpa and Ekombi dances are geared towards adequate knowledge of its spectacle and the functionality of the dance movements these dances help to showcase the people's state of health, religions and social ethics amongst others.

Oko-Offoboche accepted this fact when she asserts thus, "like all cut forms, dance cannot be created in a vacuum, it must paint mannerisms, styles, attitudes, codes (visual), other values and behaviour of the society in which it is produced" (7).

To sustain the dances patterns that are imminent in Asian Uboikpa and Ekombi dances, choreographers and dance teachers should incorporate the believe of Bamidele (20) that the

*... alliance between art and society is so close that during festivals or seasonal rituals a unique and constant identification between the (art and society) is noticed. But as society changes, new roles and new attitudes are assigned to the artist and to art. Artists become mere sensitive of their roles depending on the nature of society in which they operate.*

### 8. Recommendations

For the dances in the traditional African society to attain its sustainable height, dance practitioners and choreographers should properly research into the nature, form and aesthetic qualities of these dances so as to elevate its standards through dance composition and design. This will make our dances to be more acceptable by the people.

Since alien cultures had continued to encroach into our society thereby, relegating some of our social attributes to the background, traditional dances (such as Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa) should be used by the government towards enlightenment on the need of cultural preservation due to its inherent social, ethnical and religious messages.

Government should also tailor their step towards the grassroots by the usage of Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa dances to educate the grassroots on the need of proper conduct.

Government and other bodies should encourage the practice of periodical cultural festivals where these dance troupes can showcase their artistic gesture. So as to preserve and promote these feligenous dances.

Governments, through its State Council for Arts and Culture, should organize periodic seminars and workshops to update the participants knowledge, technique and approach in dance composition. This will aid our choreographers to tackle the challenges of dance design in our contemporary society.

Dance designers should allow Ekombi and Asian Uboikpa dances to carry the dominant motifs that create uniqueness, identify and meaning in its performance. This will aid to explore the diverse aesthetic elements in these dances.

Therefore, a choreographer should engage in good research on the implications of movements, costumes, make-up and others to enhance the aesthetic presence in dance composition paying adequate attention to the place of

the dance in the community.

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