

Dance beyond Movement: A Semiotic Metaphor of Iduu Akpo Indigenous Dance Performance

AKAS NICHOLAS CHIELOTAM

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Indigenous dance is a window to the life of a people. But it has been misinterpreted as a mere annual festival, or according to some people, it is just their village dance. As a result of these misinterpretations, the enjoyment of various indigenous dances is based on aesthetics, pattern and style without considering their communicative potency. In order to understand the communicative potency of dance movements, this paper will be scoped on semiotic-interpretative analysis of Iduu-Akpo dance performance, thereby helping the natives to see, appreciate and understand the social, religious and economic status imbedded in the dance at the point of the performance. The methodology used in this paper is content analysis. This is to understand the Iduu-Akpo dance performance's communicative purpose based on the community that owns its. In recommendation, government and wealthy people of the community should cease from regarding the indigenous dance as something mundane; rather they should re-appreciate it as an interconnecting rod between the community and the world at large. In conclusion, through semiotic-interpretation on indigenous dance, indigenes are helped to see their native dance as a communicative tool, a watchdog on their daily activities in the community, and a sustaining tool for upholding communal moral beliefs.

Introduction

One major concern of indigenous dance is to acknowledge the changes that have occurred with time. Therefore it requires the explanation of events, which have necessitated changes by understanding the history that gave sense to identity and continuity in our indigenous communities. To understand the potency of indigenous dance in our indigenous community, it becomes imperative to trace it to the three sources of origin: emotion, impulse and improvisation, the need by man to release psychic tension by means of semiotic rhythmic movement and also through ecstasy or magic. Ossie Enekwe is of the opinion that

In early man's attempt to control and communicate with the forces around him, he developed symbolic gestures and movements that expressed the way he felt to his supreme creator. This makes ritual one of the major sources of dance. (24)

The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form that has its roots in the numerous indigenous festivals across the country has made our indigenous dance a total performance. Ogbonna Kelechi is of the opinion that 'our indigenous dance movements both in styles and form are not done haphazardly but rather geared towards conveying the meaning and message of the festival'. (132)

In line with this, indigenous dance like any other African art form is not for aesthetic use only; rather, it commits individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community. Akas Nicholas states that

Indigenous dance as an art interwove with the fabrics of our indigenous communities especially based on their socio-political, economic and religious experience. (34)

Indigenous dance in traditional African societies is the expression of beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance movement of a community. Onwuekwe Agatha opines that

Indigenous dance can be an art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the merely functional movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleurably exciting or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotion, mood, ideas, tell a story or portrays political or social needs. (178)

Indigenous dance in core African setting is appreciated based on its communicative potency. It is the communicative ability of dance as a unique act in our indigenous community that gives the dance of any community a traceable origin both in its form, style and content. Akas opines that

In choreographing contemporary indigenous dance styles, the choreographer does not evolve dance steps from empty space or mere imagination; rather those choreographed dance movements both in name, form and style are embodiments of socio-environmental problems raised through body movement to be answered while being entertained. (1)

Indigenous dance also represents a physical instrument or symbol for feeling and thoughts that can serve as a

more effective media than verbal language in revealing one's needs and desires. John Kuper maintains that
Movements in dance become standardized and patterned symbols, where the members of a society may understand that these symbols are intended to represent experience and give meaning to an individual's external and psychic world. (238)

Indigenous dance has remained an indispensable tool towards communicative and effective cultural identification.

The sociological perception of indigenous dance forms

Indigenous dance depicts lives, rhythms, cycles, labours, values, aspirations, history, economic condition and realities. Akas affirms that

The traditional African dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people from where it emerged. Dance steps in traditional African dances sometimes praise, criticize and even work as a tool for social mobilization. (186)

Each dance type and style is distinctly different from the other, because of cultural differences in melody and movement. Most of African dance forms exhibit the social pattern prevalent among native owners and those dance forms can be classified based on the following communicative sub themes:

a. The Spiritual representation

Dance in Africa within the traditional context is used as a way of elevating oneself from the human realm to that of the spiritual universe. This type of indigenous dance engages the mind, body and spirit in order to truly release the conscious, thereby allowing the individual to experience the power of self-expression.

b. Importance of the community

Africans mainly dance with and for the community. In indigenous dance performance, solo performances were supported and affirmed by the group through symbolic songs, hand clapping and shouted encouragement. The pattern of dance style here is the circle which portrays unity and completeness in the community.

c. The relationship of the rhythm

Rhythm is fundamental to the existence of African dance culture. It acts as the thread bonding the very fabric of African culture together with its communicative melodic expression.

An Overview on Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs by which humans communicate. This means that words, images, behaviour or an idea is relayed by a corresponding manifestation we can perceive. Augustine Ufua Enahoro states that

Semiotics is the science of the production of meaning in the society, is concerned with the processes involved in the generation and exchange of meaning or of signification and communication. (37)

The study of signs and their meaning has been as important as any movement in the 20th century culture theory, thereby informing developments in all areas of theoretical endeavours. Semiotics is a system of knowledge that studies signs and offers explanations about how signs are used to communicate meanings. Enahoro asserts that

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts. The word text refers to a recorded message that is physically independent of its sender or receiver. Text exists in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal or both. It is an assembly of signs, gestures, sound, and image, constructed or deconstructed with reference to the conversion associated with a particular medium of communication. (28)

Signs are organized into codes and systems governed by rules which are consented to by members of the community. This means that codes and signs operate within a culture which in turn depends upon the use of these codes and signs for its existence. Daniella Aguia maintains that: "A sign can be 'anything', any entity or process that works as a sign, that is, anything that is able to act semiotically representing something for someone, an organism, a creature or simply any interpretative system". (146)

Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, image, sounds, gestures and objects. Ferdinand Saussure states that

A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. (39)

Saussure further confirms that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (126). Semiotics is thus useful

for both verbal and non-verbal communication. A sign suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition or quality immediately evident, so long as it is used to convey meaning.

The use of Signs

In sign, language and behaviour, four main uses of signs are discussed. They are seen as the informative, valuative, and systemic uses of signs. Signs may be used to inform someone of the properties of objects or situation or to induce in someone preferential behaviour towards some objects or situations or to incite a specific course of action or to organize the dispositions to behavior produced by other signs. Charles Morris states that

There is no necessary selection of such uses in terms of the kinds of signification which signs have. But in general designative signs are used informatively, appraisive signs are used valuatively, prescriptive signs are used incisively, and formative signs are used systematically. (188)

Semiotics has for its goal a general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations, whether in animals or men, whether normal or pathological, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, whether personal or social. Semiotics is thus an interdisciplinary enterprise.

Types of Signs

There are four major types of signs that can be classified under semiotics. These signs are

- a. Icon
- b. Index
- c. Symbol
- d. Name

Icon

An icon is a sign which refers to the object it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own and which it possesses. It is also a sign that resembles its object in some way it looks or sounds like it. Mahfouz Adedimeji opines that “visual signs are good examples of icons such as photograph, map, diagram and onomatopoeic words”. (64)

Index

An index is a sign that is directly connected in some way (existentially or casually) to its object. It has some connection or association with its referent. The function of index is to showcase cause to an action; it is the cause to an action that gives a traceable origin to what prompts the action. For instance, if thieves attack a bank demand a particular amount of money and do not just want to steal the available money it is an example of index sign. The index in this situation is about who informed the thieves on the availability of that certain amount of money in the bank. Gowon Ama Doki maintains that “the greatest strength of the indexical sign is or its properties to be able to denotatively explain the signified”. (37)

Symbol

Symbol is the sign in which the relationship between it and its object is arbitrary. Doki affirms that “a symbol is thus a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas” (38). In summary, what qualifies a symbol as a sign is that which it signifies.

The name

This is an identifier sign assigned to the member of specie in various ways.

The Essence of Codes in Performance

The essence of codes in performance is to aid in effective understanding of the communicative code infused in the performance. It is the communicative potency of the codes in the performance that guides its essence beyond mere aesthetics and literary understanding, and transforms movements or actions into a serious analytical interpretative tool. The use of meaningful specified codes in the performance motivates the spectators towards understanding what give rise to the emergence of such codes and how they have enabled their cultural sustainability. Jon White More affirms that

Codes are culturally derived signs that have been assigned meanings that are understood by the inhabitants of a given society. The level of understanding of codes comes through the spectator’s background education, environment, ethnicity, political and socio-economic association. (9)

The effective essence of codes in performance has really succeeded in taking the performance closer to its

natives irrespective of their location, profession and religious beliefs for easy understanding and appreciation. More is of the view that

Cultural codes are rules or guidelines that govern the operation of a society and its culture based on its language, dress, manners, the arts, social strata and level of education. (9)

The meaningful essence of code in our performance has made codes in our performance indispensable signifier/signified components in the performance thereby aiding effective understanding, interpretation and appreciation of the performance.

Semiotic Analysis of IduuAkpo Dance Performance in Aguata Anambra State

The semiotic analysis of indigenous dance performance, especially Iduu Akpo dance, makes the meaning of the dance bare before the people that own it and also the foreigners that come to watch the dance as an annual event. The interpretative understanding of the semiotics used in the dance-Iduu Akpo makes it more communicative than a mere tool for cultural sustainability cum traceability. At this point people will understand and appreciate what give rise to the emergence of such a dance. Iduu Akpo dance performance is highly semiotic in its performance; the high level of the use of communicative semiotic symbol distinguishes the dance from other neighbouring dances in Aguata. The use of well interpreted semiotic symbol in Iduu Akpo dance performance has really presented the uniqueness of the dance both in its aesthetics, communication and cultural sustainability.

History Of Iduu Akpo Dance Performance in Aguata, Anambra State

This dance according to the history of Aguata people started as far back as 1918. This Iduu dance according to Chief S.O. Agu in an interview, was believed to have been performed by the strongest man in Akpo village in Aguata. This man was declared the strongest because he was a strong wrestler, a good farmer and a fearless man. On several occasions, it was said that he fought with the spirits unconsciously and defeated them. In order to sustain the masculinity and bravery in the dance, the present young men of Akpo community still perform the dance both in its style, form and ideology to conform to its original movement. According to Chief S.C. Ama (retired school principal) in an interview, 'Iduu Akpo dance performance is an annual performance from primordial era till the present day Akpo community. It is performed by strong men during festive periods like new yam festival, chieftaincy title of acclaimed brave men and during the burial of a notable man in Akpo community'. Once the dance is performed during planting season and after harvest period, it simply shows that their "chi" will bless them with good harvest. Also the appearance of Iduu dance performance during the burial of a notable man, according to their history, simply shows he did not die a shameful death; rather he died as a brave man. According to Chief Ama in an interview, 'this dance is not performed during rainy season because rainy season is a period of farming and serious labour, while the dry season which is the period when the dance is being performed serves as a period of enjoyment and relaxation after harvesting the farm produce. During the annual performance of this festival, it is opened to everybody both natives and foreigners who might want to carry out a research on the dance or see it as a means of tourism development. The styles in this dance are not just aesthetically combined steps, as the communicative potency of Iduu Akpo dance movements portrays what gave rise to the emergence of the dance movements.

Ritual dance

Ritual dance is very symbolic in nature. It serves as a connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is a dance in the forest performed by the chief priest who is the lead dancer, fully costumed in red, carrying a red pot, holding a fowl, palm fronds and a mini-load behind him. According to Chief Ama in an interview, 'before the priest embarks on the journey into the forest for the ritual dance, he will be purified by another oldest chief priest who encourages him to move on. The reason why the chief priest who is the lead dancer in the ritual dance needs fortification from another chief priest is to enhance his charms, get moral support and also be guided by the rules and regulations surrounding the sacred forest'. The oldest chief priest is believed to understand the language of the spirits more. Therefore, for this fortification to be strong, valued and respected, it must be done in the shrine of the oldest chief priest. It is in this shrine (according to Chief Ama) that the chief priest is costumed by the oldest priest, who hands over a staff to him. The staff serves as a symbol of authority and functions as a supporting tool to the chief priest especially when he is tired. It is also believed that the road that leads to the sacred forest is not a smooth one. Based on this, the chief priest needs the staff. All these items used by the chief priest during the performance are very communicative in nature.



Plate 1: *The Chief priest of Iduu in a Dance Performance before the ritual*

The photograph above shows the Chief-priest dancing to the shrine in trance-like movements. The red costume worn by the chief priest as a garment for purification portrays pains, problems and worries of Akpo community. It is also believed that the red garment shows that the native people are not happy and therefore need serious help from their ancestral fathers. In order to portray how disturbed and hopeless the natives are in their present conditions, the chief priest wears a symbolic padded cloth at his back. This heavy padded cloth and the red costumes show the gods that the people are seriously depending on them for divine invention. In order to awake their conscious mind in accepting to assist them, some little sacrifices will be made to them with the blood of a fowl while water from a pot is used for purification. According to Chief Agu in an interview; ‘during the sacrifices, the chief priest does a symbolic dance movement. This dance is always in a slow movement while he carries the red pot on his head. The dance movement is very slow while the chief priest staggers during the dance movement as if he is in a serious trance’. The staggering dance movement of the chief priest trance portrays that he is still interceding on behalf of his people before their ancestral fathers, pleading for them to assist in reducing the heavy burden of the natives of Akpo community. The staggering trance movement is sustained for hours until he seats on the ground shaking his head in the same slow movement. The slow head movement at this point by the chief priest portrays the gods wanting to communicate to him whether they are intervening or not. Their acceptance to intervene and help their natives is portrayed with seven gun shots and a loud shout from the chief priest to declare the gods acceptance in solving the problems at hand in Akpo community. Immediately this is made known to the drummers drumming for the chief priest while he is in the bush, the drum beat will go high and the chief priest’s dance style will be faster and full of jubilation. The dance movement at this point is free styled simply gearing towards jubilation. At a point, the chief priest will do the fast freelance movement and stop. Once he stops, the drummers will stop too. Five minutes later, they will continue the fast beats again. No human is expected to be on the dance arena, because it is believed that the ancestral fathers will perform their own dance movement on a very high pitch and the drummers at this point are in a trance while beating the drums. After the performance of the gods, which is always on a very sharp movement with heavy wind to portray their departure, this simply means that the land is blessed again and the performance Iduu has been declared open by the gods.

Initiation into Iduu Dance

The initiation ceremony is very symbolic and done in front of a shrine called “Eze Iduu”. According to Mike Igwe (a retired civil servant) in an interview, it is believed that this is the shrine where their great grand ancestral fathers in 1918 were initiated into the dance performance. During the initiation into the dance, the shrine is allowed to be bare for some minutes before the initiates will start coming in. The reason for allowing the shrine bare is that at this point, before the initiation, their great ancestral fathers are fully welcomed for the initiation. Once they are fully welcomed, the eldest in Iduu dance performance presents a kolanut to them to show appreciation to them for accepting to be in their midst. After the presentation of kolanut, the eldest man in Iduu dance performance will kneel to tell the gods the reason for summoning them and after which initiates are

presented to them for the full initiation.



Plate 2: A cross-section of Initiates into Iduu dance performance

The above is a photograph of a cross-section of initiates getting ready for the dance performance. At the shrine of the initiation, the drummers are expected to be there, but are not expected to drum anything until after the initiation. After the initiation, the initiates can now costume themselves and dance out of the Eze Iduu shrine. At this point the drummers can now start drumming in jubilantly because they are fully initiated.

The Masquerades in Iduu Dance Performance: The masquerades are also part of the performance. According to Mike Igwe in an interview, there are two types of masquerades in this performance; *Iduuanyaike* and *Iduu police*. The *Iduuanyaike* is believed to appear during initiation ceremony. This masquerade is believed to be the mouth piece of the gods during initiation. It is through the masquerade that the gods communicate their intentions to the initiates, while the red cap on the masquerade's head symbolizes supreme authority to the gods in upholding their culture, maintaining peace and being ambassadors of truth till death. This masquerade appears only in dry season just to portray its sacredness. The Iduu police serve as peace makers during the performance. They dance with the dancers to make sure that the dancers are well organized while performing to make sure that none of the initiates comes close to the arena during the performance and also to reassure the dancers that they are safe and well protected throughout the performance.



Plate 3: This is a special masquerade that is always present during initiation ceremony by name Anyaike



Plate 4: This is Iduu police masquerade

The flutist

The flutist in the dance gives the cues and motivates the dancers while dancing on stage. It is the flutist that accompanies the chief priest into the forest for the ritual dance. The flutist leads the dancers into the arena for the performance and also reminds them of cues from one movement to another. The flutist body is designed with white 'nzu' (native chalk) to present him as the chief priest servant, well-fortified for the great task ahead before, during and after the Iduu dance performance.



Plate 5: The flutist on duty during performance

The Drummers

According to Mike Igwe in an interview, 'the drummers in this festival are young men who are well trained in the act of drumming for the performance. The reason for the training is that the natives of Akpo community believe that once the drummers can drum it will now motivate their ancestral father to bless them more than expected'. The creativity cum perfection amongst the drummers motivate their ancestral fathers to bless their natives, dancers and the drummers themselves. The perfect modulations in the drumming during Iduu dance performance make the drumming very interesting.



Plate 5 : The drummers of Iduu dance performance

The Audience

Everybody is allowed to partake in this dance both natives and foreigners, but women are not allowed to partake in the dance or even watch the performance. The reason for not allowing women to partake in the dance is that it is believed that once they watch the dance they will no longer see their menstrual cycle and any pregnant woman that watches the dance will give birth to a monkey. Also if a woman mistakenly meets them on the road, she must pass through their left hand side in order to avoid disarming their charms. Aside from women being banned from partaking, every other person is allowed to dance with the dancers and take pictures especially in the case of foreigners carrying out any research on the dance.

The Costume

According to Chief Agu in an interview 'the costume of the dancers portrays them as warriors who are always ready for battle. The costume of the dance is gotten from Asha nkwo, Ede leave and Palm fronds. All these are gotten in their original bright colour, but are later re-designed as costumes. They are placed beside fire just to darken the colour. The reason for darkening the colour of the costume is to present the dancers as real warriors, not to be easily identified and also for the non-initiates to fear them whenever they behold the sight of the costume. The sacredness of this costume is always sealed with the blood of a goat, during sacrifices, right from the days of their forefathers till date. The sealing of costume with the blood of a goat transforms the costume automatically into a high ritualistic costume for Iduu dance performance. At this point, it takes only a well-fortified dancer to wear the costume.



Plate 6: Cross-section of Iduu dance costume

Props

Some props are highly indispensable in the dance. These props are

- a. Hand Fan
- b. Palm leaves
- c. Igba Ndu Iduu
- d. Gun

The hand fan is believed to be used by the dancers during the dance to wave away bad-luck and welcome good-luck. The use of palm leaves prevents them from talking unnecessarily in order to protect and sustain the potency of their charm. The *IgbanduIduu* is always in the form of a pot. Once it is placed at the middle of the performance arena, it automatically fortifies the arena against any evil attack. The sound of the gun shot seven times alerts the dancers to be ready for performance and also reminds them of always giving in their best. All these props sustain Iduu dance performance till date.

Dance style

The type of dance style here is always fast, in circular form and also in a straight line. All these forms in the dance style are symbolic and communicative in nature. The dance style is meant for young men of Akpo community between the ages of 25-35 years. Mike Igwe in an interview explains: 'it is believed that at this age, the young are still energetic and can use their strength to defend their community in a case of any unforeseen circumstances. They always dance to portray themselves as warriors, great farmers and hunters who are always ready to provide and defend their family and the entire community at large'. During the dance itself, the dancers exhibit different skills to portray themselves beyond mere mortals to human demi-gods who have fortified themselves through their ancestral fathers before the real performance. The fast movement during the dance performance simply portrays that the young men of Akpo community are smart and ready to withstand any obstacle. As great warriors and hunters, the dancers show their strength by climbing trees without ropes.



Plate 7: Iduu dancers performing

The circular dance movement exemplifies the saying 'united we stand; divided we fall'. One standing ageless rule which this circular dance style portrays among the Iduu dancers is that, for one to be a member, he must have a clean mind towards his fellow brother and he must be ready to be his brother's keeper as well as be ready to share whatever he has no matter how little especially when he discovers that his brother is in need and needs help. Whoever is not ready to obey this and decides to dance the great Iduu dance will die while performing the dance. So whenever this circular dance movement or style is being performed during the performance, it reminds the dancers what they believed in right from the days of their forefathers till date. The straight line movement in the dance presents the dancers as warriors who are ready to defend their community. The bravery of each dancer is fully portrayed in their individualized style of dancing. Here, the Iduu dancers are expected to display their various individual skills that qualify them as warriors and always ready to defend their community. It is believed that from the various individualized dance movements, the strength and skill of the dancers as warriors are determined.

Conclusion

The interpretative essence of semiotics in indigenous dance has contributed to communicative understanding of our indigenous dance movements. The various dance movements in indigenous dance especially that of Iduu dance performance did not just emerge; rather it came into existence to give the community a traceable origin, sustain their culture and expose the socio-environmental factors that lead to the creation of dance movement. It is at this point that Akpo community in Aguata will appreciate their Iduu dance as a culture that communicates

through its dance movements and not as a mere annual festival that they long to witness as a form of relaxation and entertainment. In conclusion, the interpretative analysis on Iduu dance performance based on its form, style and content has really taken the dance beyond mere aesthetic appreciation into a serious tool for community sensation cum awareness creation

Works Cited

- Aguiar, Daniella. *A Semiotic of Dance*. Michigan: University of Michigan press, 1999
- Akas Nicholas. *The Sociological Potency of Indigenous Dance: The Widows Dance of Umuigwe Community in Anambra State as a Paradigm*. American Open Sociology Journal, Vol. 1 (10) 01-07, 2013.
- UfuaEnahoro, Augustine. *Semiotics of an African cinema: Yala as a Paradigm*. Lagos: Cinemarts Communications International, 2009
- Morris, Charles. *Conception of Semiotic Implications of Rhetorical*. California: University of California Press, 2003
- Chief Agu. Personal Interview, IduuNkwo Market Akpo. (2nd May, 2014)
- Doki, Ama G. *Traditional Theatre in Perspective: signs and Signification in Igbe, Girinya and Kwagh-hir*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2006.
- DeSaussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistic*. (ed). Richard and George. New York: Anchor Book, 1972
- John Kuper. *Theory/Theatre. An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002
- More, Jonwhite. *Directing Postmodern Theatre*. USA: The University of Michigan Press, 2012
- Ogbonna, Kelechi. *Weapon of Mass Instruction: HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaign in Cauldron of Death and Had I Known*. (ed) Charles E. Nwadiuwe. Enugwu: Academic printing press, 2011
- Adedimeji, Mahfouz. *Semiotics and Film in Nollywood* (An Unpublished Ph.D Thesis), 2005.
- Igwe, Mike. Personal Interview (3rd June, 2014)
- Onwuekwe, Agatha. *The Socio-Cultural Implication of African Music and Dance. The Creative Artist*. A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies, Vol. 3 (1) 171-185, (ed) Alex Asigbo, Tracie ChimaUtoh – Ezeajugh and Clementina Abone. 2009
- Eneke, Ossie. *Theories of Dance Nigeria*. Enugu: Afa Press, 1991