

Conceptualizing The Choreographic And Authorship Of Dance Composition Amongst The Tiv People Of Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Many societies and cultures in Africa believe in communal existence. This existence permeates through almost every aspect of life, which dance is not left out of this shared ingenuity. In Tiv society, like other cultures in Nigeria, almost all indigenous dances are owned by families and communities. This follows that dance activities in Nigeria are communal-oriented, participatory by all, and natural (Ojuade, 2021, 19). The Tiv people of Central Nigeria affirm this imperative in their various dance traditions. Thus, it is almost difficult for an individual to claim authorship and choreographic monopoly of a particular dance. Following this backdrop, this chapter therefore examines the making of indigenous Nigerian dances, using selected dances of the Tiv People as templates. Through the author's participatory-observation of the Tiv indigenous dances, the chapter does a chronicle of selected dances, pointing out their authorship and choreographic principles. This chapter concludes that in Tiv society, like other societies in Nigeria, the authorship, and choreographic processes of dance are collective.

Keywords: Choreography, authorship, dance, composition, Tiv, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Through a participatory-observation of the Tiv indigenous dances, the chapter does a chronicle of selected dances, pointing out their authorship and choreographic principles. The chapter observes that in Tiv society, like many societies in Nigeria, the authorship, and choreographic processes of dance are collective.

The Tiv people, who are estimated to be over seven million in number, occupy largely the Benue valley in central Nigeria. They are divided into two families; the Ichongo and Ipusu. Within the Ichongo family, there are Iharev, Masev, Ugondo, Turan, Nongov and Ikurav, while the Ipusu comprises of the Ukum, Shitire, Tongov, Jechira and Jemgba as sub-genealogies. This chapter is however not so much concerned with the genealogical problem of the Tiv people, but rather, just to

establish their worldview regarding dance composition which is usually based on collectivism. This collectivism is as a result of the social, communal, and the spiritual structures in Africa by extension and Tiv society in particular. This fact remains that, most people claim that they are the creators and owners of their history, as result they find ways of storing their history, hence dance becomes an arts form where history is stored and retrieved. Thus, this has influenced many African dancers and choreographers to create work that address social, cultural and political issues peculiar to the African within a given milieu. This follows that, in Africa, language and history are understood as deeply connected to dance practices. Traditionally, dances do not occur in isolation, but rather play a specific role in an event or a series of events organized for specific social occasions. They are valued as entertainment; however, their primary purposes are more directly linked to historical, political, sociocultural or religious purposes (Kwakwa. 2020: 285). This is to say that in Africa, dance to some extent presents a venerated technique within a given time and place, a practice through which people are able to communicate with the physical society, ancestors and spirits, and through which histories are written and rewritten.

Thus, in conceptualizing the choreographic and authorship of dance composition within the shores of any society, several factors may come into play. The sociological and anthropological factors should be considered primary. However, in considering the two concepts, dance composition and its choreographic process can be aggregated within time and place. This is because, as an artistic creation and engagement, dance has to be developed out of an event, phenomena, idea or feeling, and all these are products of a given society within time and place which arouse the stimuli for dance creation. Thus, stimuli for dance compositions can be auditory, visual, ideational, tactile or kinesthetic (Smith-Autard, 2010: 29). There is no doubt accepting these five canons in creating one or two dances because they are fundamental to the process of dance composition of any kind. This recognizes the fact that, these stimuli are the factors responsible for dance creation, composition and improvisation.

When the stimuli for dance are taken into considerations, the authorship of dance and its composition is easily arrived at, these considerations could be grouped into; economic, social, political, spiritual, instinct, natural environment, institutional, and psychological factors. This follows that dance composers and choreographers use one or two of these factors as foundations to create a dance motif. There are always intentions in the creation of dance, thus, the authorship and the choreographic insinuations in the art of dance are endless,

This generation of dancers and choreographers spawned an ideology that transformed dance from mere spectacle art to a cerebral phenomenon where the emphasis was not on physicality or style but on somatic and process driven works of art. Hence, dance was not just a visual treat, pleasant or unpleasant but it came to be recognized as a practice that could be pushed to unravel and unleash newer patterns of thinking and behaving. (Jyoti, 2015: 132).

Monyeh (2007) on the same argument posits that,

Dance is an avenue for total expression of natural and the supernatural. A masquerade in its performance communicates to the living and the underworld. In this case there is the relationship with the world of the living and the world of the spirit. The body could make the invisible concrete thus creating a completely self-contained world for dancers in which they can perform physical feats and prowess which are far beyond normal daily occurrence or normal movement.

Considering the above therefore, one easily concludes that dance as an aspect of culture, is a representation of the peoples' worldview including the physical and non-physical cultural elements. Thus, if dance is placed within the cultural space, then it should be recognized as a people's cultural creation, and those involved in the creation are definitely aware of the para-linguistics features involved in the movement vocabularies within the cultural milieu. Consequently, it is a reality that the express movement vis-à-vis non-verbal communication combined with the society's established pragmatics form the content of most dances. It is based on this premise that this chapter is locating the authorship and the inherent choreographic principles of dance composition within the Tiv society that is based on the socio-cultural, political, and economic developments. Therefore, the chapter justifies the inherent factors that necessitate emergence of dance composition and choreographic principles within cultural context of dance.

2. An Overview of African Dance

Almost every society has its cultural paralinguistic as pointers of distinctiveness and recognitions. Dance as one of the cultural elements is sometimes best understood and placed within the identifiable racial indices associated within a particular socio-cultural, and ethic milieu. For example, dance in African societies is a holistic art form that serves as a pivot around which collective community life revolves. Dance with its music as an art form has significantly become involved in the process of self-reflection and identity construction in Africa (Kuwor, 2017). Thus,

it is not an over proclamation to submit that one of the major characteristics of cultural identification is dance. It is obvious to identify when one sees a dance performance from Africa, dance can be comprehended as indigenous considering cultural aesthetic features identified. Kansese's (2013) on African dance concludes that,

The nature of Nigerian dance is first motivated by biological experience where the Nigerian man simply expresses his natural function of movement, especially in relation and reaction to his environment. Dance at this juncture is seen as life. The attribute of dance as life is manifested in the various activities or engagements of the Nigerian man which include social, ritual, educational, occupational, recreational, ceremonial, political, and the like.

This is to say that, to some extent, many indigenous dances are true reflections of the physical and spiritual architecture of the societies that produce them. In Nigeria for example, we cannot count the number of dances that we had, and the ones that are existing currently. However, with more the two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria and their different dances, it does give any complexity when it comes to identifying a particular dance with an ethnic group that produces it. For instance, every culture in Nigeria is identified with particular movement vocabularies as conveyed by particular parts of the body that transmit the dance idea. For example, while the Youruba men emphasize the shoulders and the legs, the ladies graciously take pleasure in their waists. This is because, as ethnic groups are identified by the language they speak, so also they are identified by their dances. The fact remains that dance is part of the anthropological icons of the society that produces it. It is the totality of the way of life in Africa because it encompasses pragmatics, proxemics, and other forms of non-spoken as of every language. It is part and parcel of the ideological and cultural construct of a given society.

From the sociological point of views, Curt (1997) notes, dance is at all times and in all cultures (from the magic and animism of Paleolithic man to the indigenous religions of African peoples and tribes; from the ancient civilizations of the East and the ancient societies of medieval Europe to the Western capitalist societies) tightly embedded in the life of a particular society. It was a form of communication and an integral part of the reproduction of the social system. Bourdieu (1994) argued that dance as a specific language is a socially-historical phenomenon, dependent on the space and time in which it exists and dependent on the power structures that rule in that time. Dance is a learned cultural practice; Polhemus (1993) says that societies create dances and that dance is actually a 'metaphysics of culture', because a culture of specific society is embodied in the forms

of material and physical culture, and the latter is also stylized and schematized in the form of dance. Thus, African dance, from whatever region, is unique of Africa and germane processes of putting means of critical evaluation of issues and situations in the hands of the African people. It is aimed at teaching them how to control their own affairs.

Considering the ideological and the anthropological paradigm of Africa in general, we identify the existence of a strong demystification of individualistic tendencies within the shores of Africa. The communal existence of African permeates in all aspects of endeavors including dance. In Nigeria, and Tiv society in particular, almost all cultural products belong to the entire society; no one dares to claim monopoly and ownership of any product, be it dances, rituals, festivals, and any of such. This claim is essential within the context of this paper because, viewing dance within a cultural perspective in Tiv society, it mainly concerned with the underlying values, beliefs, and traditions of the Tiv communal life. This is obvious, as the content of Tiv culture is akin to the concrete translation of the cultural context in life with its symbols and practices as ways of working, social organisation and traditional heritage. As a cultural product, indigenous dances in Tiv society are the creations of the entire society. Almost all dances in Tiv society have their origin from one cultural, social or political background. Just like it is easy to identify dances from the Tiv background, it is also easy to identify various dances and their origins from the sub-genealogies of the Tiv society.

3. Conceptualizing The Authorship Of Dance In Tiv Society

In discussing the authorship of Tiv dances, it is very pertinent to briefly look at some critical situations that crave the possibilities for dance compositions in Tiv. Almost all dances in Tiv society are monumental and symbolic; either the dance is a representation of historical events, or enactment of a social occurrences. Significantly, to enhance communal life of the Tiv people, emphasis is placed on dances that unite, and the period for these dances fall during dry seasons when granaries are filled up and there is no farm work. These events are so central to the Tiv that at these time (after harvest and during dry season), business centres like markets are turned into performance arenas. In such performances, dance is so pervasive and significant.

Several authors of Tiv dances have pointed out that in Tiv society, dance largely serving entertainment function also informs, mobilizes, educates, and bring about correlation of parts of the society. This is to say that the art of dancing is central to the life of every Tiv man. It serves as

mode of communication with the gods as well as recording and transmitting historical happenings. For Kusugh (2011), it also offers entertainments while serving as a forum for informal education to the predominantly non-literate Tiv society.

In addition, Hagher (2003) also points out that dance do not only serve the purpose of social interaction as well as a school for intellectual stimulation, they also control normative behaviour. Sometimes, they serve as a medium for social protest and even sanction deviant behaviour. This means that in Tiv society, dance is a folk culture and is usually accompanied with music and songs.

Gbilekaa (1993) also commenting on the Tiv music and dance as forms of communication posits that “music and dance in Tiv society are used to express various emotions”. This explains that there are music and dances for funeral occasions, marriage ceremonies, installations, ritual processes, and the different festivals in Tiv society. Historical events, social-cultural political and economic issues usually provide abundant materials for creative dancing. Keil (1979) reveals that one of the reasons for this is the need for historical re-enactment,

In Tiv, dance provides historical documentation as well as historical trends. For example, the kuza dance represents the forceful conscription of Tiv youth to provide cheap labour at the Tin industry in Jos. Ingyough dance is a re-enactment of epidemics that swept across Tivland and left many with several bodily distortions and maimed limbs. Dasenda is portraying police brutality of the colonial era.

Kur and Iwokwagh (2011) have in the same direction point out that,

Traditional music and dance occupy a very important place in Tiv society. As communication devices, traditional Tiv music and dance have done a great deal in the preservation and transmission of Tiv history, culture and folk love. They are extensively used in religious, social, political and economic life. Thus, they contribute immensely to the wellbeing of the Tiv people and bring about development in the Tiv society.

The above expressions have clearly pointed to the fact that dance as a traditional form of communication in Tivland is relevant and can as well be composed based on the current prevailing situation within a given part of the Tiv society. It could be within the context of religious, cultural, and political engagements. In some cases, dance in Tiv culture evolved as a result of the farming cultures which is a reflection of the Tiv in its entirety as agrarian. In consideration of all these and other silent

factors, dance in Tiv culture is best understood based on the homogeneous principles and the obvious dance aesthetics. Thus, there is a cultural context, purpose and meaning of dance in Tiv society. The dance itself, with its culturally informed movements, order and sequence of movements represents anthropology of the Tiv Nation. Iorapuu (2007) writing on Tiv dance culture holds that,

The evidence that dance (amar) is an intergral part of Tiv social order can be found in the numerous taxonomies of dances among the Tiv. Some of the popular dances are Gberchul, Takeru, Ange, Dansanda, Igough, Anchanakupa, Manyi, Ihinga, Tsough, Jiga, Kwaza, Girinya, Gbangi and Swange.... Each dance mentioned has a symbolic story behind it. Dansanda for instance is a dance that was created to mimic and lampoon the colonial police and their Nigerian allies. The Tiv had suffered all forms of injustices in the hands of the colonial police... (40).

The above clarification of what constitutes the making of Tiv dance is also a springboard for this chapter. This is because the authorship and choreographic process in almost all the dances in Tiv society are based on political, social, religious and vocational concerns of the society as a whole. Thus, the next segment will be contextualizing the authorship and choreographic details of selected dances in Tiv society.

4. The Authorship And Choreographic Model Of Selected Dances

The indigenous dance tradition is mostly acknowledged to be the first type of performative idiom to emerge in the history of the Tiv theatrical culture. This is because it is subsumed in the culture of the people; hence, the relationship is not far-fetched. It is a kind of performance where societal expression, social pattern of life, ethical values, moral essence, religion and history are mirrored and mediated in a dynamic living form. It is sometime visualized in the numerous robust indigenous religious ritual enactment, festival performances, social ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, storytelling sessions, masquerade displays, burial ceremonies, and so on. Thus, in these regards, the authorship and the choreographic process of dance depends on the conceptual and philosophical construct within a given sociopolitical period and physical environment. This is why stimulants for dance in Tiv society proliferates, and overflows within a creative impulse of the 'present'. This affirms that, the authorship and choreography of dance here is a spontaneous response to the sociopolitical indices within a given time and place. This is because, there is a philosophical assumption that, every work of art has a significant form that is, whatever is being constructed has

an aesthetic form. An aesthetic form deals with the way an object or pictorial display is put together. In such a display, the objects must be considered in relation to one another compositionally. The relationships here would refer to the elements that make the performance functional for the practicing society. These include the mode of body language, dressing (costuming), songs, rhythm, movement, pace, tempo, etc or mimetic acts within the performance. These make up the aesthetic character of the performance. How this feeling is expressed differs from one society to another.

This segment reveals the authorship and choreographic arrangements of selected dances. The first dance to be discussed is Ikyo Dance. One important historical phenomenon concerning the name of the Ikyo (Forest) dance is symbolic of the Nigerian Civil War when many Tiv youths were recruited into the Nigerian Army and were pushed to the war front in the forest of the Eastern Nigeria. From oral interviews, it is also gathered that, as many as Tiv youths were enlisted into the Nigerian Army, many were not, later, those who were not drafted into the army decided to move to the South-Western Nigerian to work on cocoa plantation in the forest (Kurmi) of Yoruba land (Kano Swende, Felix Ukpurugh, and Mbakine Iyuheigba, 6/7/2023). This migration of the Tiv youth to the Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria became a thing of social concern. Many young recruited soldiers married most of the beautiful young girls with only the show of their pictures in the Nigerian army uniforms without the bride and the bride's parents seeing the man in question. Looking at all these as regards to the Tiv philosophy, any Tiv person not living within the Tiv cultural environment is living in the bush (toho or forest). Since this migration became a fashion of the day, the composers of the Ikyo dance created the mock deforestation, a satire of the then social order in Tiv land.

This therefore establishes that *Ikyo* dance is a dance derived from the process of deforestation by the Tiv farmers in order to plant crops. It is mostly performed by the women folk with instituted hierarchical leadership regarding the composition and choreographic process. Thus, the choreographic process is communal, and not individualistic. In the composition and rehearsals, departments are created considering artistic deftness. Two special people are considered very important -there is a lead drummer (Tor Gbande) and the lead dancer (Tor Shor). The lead drummer is in charge of musical aspects of the dance. In all the movements of the dance, the lead drummer starts the drumming while the lead dancer starts the dance movement. There is a transition from the lead drumming and lead dancer to the main body of a particular dance movement which is expected to last for two to three minutes.

However, the choreographic process is done by pairing. The pairing is done because, the community wants to practice the dance needs to host an expert group of the *Ikyo* dance of another community. In doing, each intending dancer from the host community will have to take responsibility of one dancer of the hosted dance group, and as well paired as a tally (*Ikyar*) to teach the intending dancer all the *Ikyo* dance movements until all the dance movements are perfected. The second to be discussed is swange dance, a popular Tiv social music and dance performance. Tsevende (2013) provide a controversial account of *Swange* as follows,

The accounts of chronicles of the form of Tiv traditional music into what is known today as Swange music was an evolution of different genres of traditional music in stages, from *Kwagh-alom* or *kikya* songs, music and dance through *Ibyamegh* and *ange* to a dynamic and more refined hybrid stage of a special form called swange (27).

The above account is questionable because *Swange* is in no way, either through form or content, marginally related to *Kwagh-alom* (Art of storytelling) or *Kikya* (riddles). *Kwagh-alom* and *Kikya* are linked to *Kwagh-hir* about which Hagher (2003) clearly states,

The *Kwagh-hir* theatre derives from the story-telling performances of Tiv people. Both the theatre and story-telling events are interchangeable and synonymously called *Kwagh-hir*, the supernatural tales, or *Kwagh-alom*, things about the hare (12).

Hagher's statement, concerning the link between *Kwagh-alom* and *Kwagh-hir* has a universal meaning and clear understanding all over the Tiv land. One begins to wonder about the source of the Tsevende et al. statement. They have also linked *Swange* to *Ibyamegh* in the sense that the two are separate aspects of Tiv traditional theatre. While *Swange* is purely a secular Tiv music and dance, *Ibyamegh* (*Ibiamegh*) is a form of sacred Tiv theatre tradition whose secular aspect is not overtly underscored. What one may accept from the statement of Tsevende et al is the link between *Swange* and *Ange* because both performances are based on socio-political persuasions of the Tiv people.



Swange dance at its initial stage

However, *Swange* dance has gone through several choreographic modifications as it responds to changes within the Tiv socio-economic and political milieu. The choreographic transformation, transmutation, and modification of *Swange* began from *Gbangi* to *Swange*, *Swange* to *Kpingi*, *Kpingi* to *Ngigh-Ngigh*, and, recently *Baka* (*Baka* is currently featured at night clubs while *Swange* is mainly performed by the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture, Makurdi in its repertoire, and other theatre troupes. Gbilekaa (1993) postulates that,

Swange music and dance started as *Gbangi* in 1940s in Makurdi. By 1950s, it had spread to Gboko. At the time its chief exponent was Yanmoel Yashi. It was a dance band that was created by the exigencies of urban life, as a tool for protest which gave vent for the expression of frustration by Tiv youth who felt they were not fairly treated by society or fate (44).

Gbilekaa's standpoint above concerning the authorship of *Swange* stands to be questioned, especially where he ascribes the origin of *Gbangi* from Makurdi because *Gbangi* as a form of dance began as a popular rural dance far before Makurdi became settlement to reckon with. Moreover, none of the progenitors of *Swange* came from Makurdi. However, considering Gbilekaa's postulation, it is obvious that at its inception, *Swange* was popularly called *Gbangi* with

performances at local drinking joints, where *burukutuu*, a popular locally brewed alcoholic beverage was sold at a time when most places in Tiv land had not been introduced to western brewed beer or alcohol.



Swange dance performance as modernized by the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture, Makurdi

Considering the various versions of *Swange* dance movements, it is right to say that each of the versions has a particular message to pass across to the audience through body movement. Just like any other dance, *Swange* dance has various contexts that one could interrogate as an artistic genre. Considering the choreographic models, there are specific swange dance motifs for specific occasions. This is to say that by semiotic interpretation, a *Swange* dance performed at funerals will not be the same like a *Swange* performed during conjugal occasions. Even in funerals, a *Swange* performed during a young person's funeral will be strikingly at variance to that of an aged person. The performers of *Swange* are much sensitive to these sociological factors and are always responding to the social demands within the context that the dance could be performed. For example, *Swange* dance during conjugal celebrations will definitely be erotic in terms of body language and vulgar in songs and music, while funerals are solemn or glum, just like the dances during party rallies will express energy with an aim of marketing the party's ideology. Above all, the semiotic interpretation of *Swange* dance is hinged on the frontiers of community development where the economic, social, and physical dimensions of community are often considered together. Looking at *Swange* in this regard is because community development increasingly includes culture as one of these core dimensions and may also aim to advance youth development, health, recreation, human service, and other community goals and the ideological underpinnings. The body language in *Swange* dance varies from one position to another regarding the message. For instance, when dancers raise their hands above their heads,

waving graciously, they are likely at this point expressing happiness or praising a personality. This is mostly found during occasions that have to do with politics and other joyous moments.

In addition to the above dances, some dance creations in Tiv society are derived from the mimetic impulse using animal movements as models. Examples of such dances includes, *Hinga* Dance (Squirrel dance), which is an imitation of the movement of squirrel; *Gbasela* dance (Wolf dance), authored and choreographed by hunters based on impressionistic ideas; *Tswue-tsele* dance (Cat dance), and several more of these kinds of dances. Most of these dances are authored and choreographed as a group within a given society. The communal life of a Tiv person is always reflected in the creation, composition, and choreographic process of these dances. However, *Tswue-tsele* dance has distinguished itself from all these other animal dances because of its solo nature. This dance as the name goes interprets the gentle jumping of a cat, *mbusu* asin called in the Tiv language. The dance is purely an imitation of a cat movement popularly nicknamed and called *tswue-tsele*, an animal that the Tiv people considered mysterious.

However, it is therefore speculative for us to arrive at the origin of this dance. From various dancers of this dance, the origin is not straight forward. What remained factual about this dance is that, most popular dances in Tiv land exist in form of fashion within a period with serious modifications that makes it difficult to pinpoint the creators. This is obvious because the dancers who are normally the youth or middle-aged people create these forms of dance partly because they need entertainment or stress relief and are poised to imagine and create movements that are unique, be it at funerals/wake keeps, beer parlours and political rallies. This form of dance falls within the category of mimetic forms of dance in Tiv society that imitates various kinds of things within the society. The creativity and choreographic features of these kinds of dances is based on concrete ideas that abound within the historical and cultural purviews of the society, while some are purely to imitate some kinds of animals found popular in Tiv society.

5. Conclusion

This article presents the authorship and choreographic process of dance composition in Tiv society which represents the nature of dance composition in Nigeria. Therefore, it is very clear that indigenous dances in Tiv society, and by extension is not individualistic, but collective process. This is the reason why every dance is tag as a tribal dance. For example, Bata dance is tagged to the Yoruba tribe; *Bori* dance of the Hausa tribe, *Ekombi* dance of the Kalabari tribe, *Atilogwu* dance of

the Ibo tribe, and the list cannot be exhausted. This artistic tradition is at variant with the contemporary dance creation where individual artists own take credit of dance composition.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER?

Awuawuer, T. (2025). Conceptualizing The Choreographic And Authorship Of Dance Composition Amongst The Tiv People Of Central Nigeria. *International Humanities Studies*, 11(1), 11-24.

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