

Critical Perspectives
on
Dance in Nigeria



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Published by

Kraft Books Limited

6A Polytechnic Road, Sango, Ibadan
Box 22084, University of Ibadan Post Office
Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

© 234(2) 7523177, 0803 348 2474, 0804 210 8712

E-mail: kraftbooks@yahoo.com

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First published 2006

ISBN 978-039-169-X

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First printing, August 2006

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Nigerian Traditional Dancers: History and Practice

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Introduction: Old Traditional Dancer

If 'Culture' is defined as the "way of life of a people,"¹ then dance, which is a central part of culture, is also a way of life of any given people. This is because both culture and dance are intertwined. The major difficulty in attempting a discourse of Nigerian dances and dancers is that the dances in Nigeria are as diversified as the cultures and peoples of Nigeria. This has been one great obstacle to this study, because in the course of my research, I found that for every one kilometre in Nigeria, villages have different languages, dance forms, music, history and concepts of patterns and shapes for each dance. I shall therefore examine the topic of this chapter from a more general historical point of view, or I will need twenty volumes of books and tons of chapters, to write on each dance form and the dancers of such forms of the different ethnic groupings in Nigeria.

Nigerian traditional dances can be loosely classified into two major categories—ritual and social dances. The origins of the dances are soaked in legends, which are in turn preserved by folklore, where the description of the myths or folklores formed the context contained in the music content of the performances. This is why it is difficult to differentiate the music from the dances of Nigerian cultural performances. Both music and dance are regarded in most communities as gifts from the gods, which allow man to survive and to enjoy the mystery of life. Ritual dances are deeply rooted in the religious sphere, and in most cases, the dancers are involved in authentic spirit possession or initiated into esoteric religious

societies or cults to become members and dancers of the cults. This way the dancers were part of the religious worship or ceremony to evoke or worship the gods who were the guiding fathers or mothers of such cults within any given society. Ritual dances were serious — they had specific steps, rhythm and pattern to the dances. Also their occasions for performances were serious — usually the dates for the performances were fixed by the chief priest of the gods after due consultations, and the reasons for the ritual dances were also serious — usually it was for the burial of the dead, the evocation of the favour of the gods, the ancestral deification of the dead to the world of the spirits, or the cleansing of the society of the ills of the year before. Some of the ritual dances were accompanied by ritual sacrifices and songs. A good example of ritual dance is the description of the *Ofosi* burial dance among the Owe people of Nigeria.

During an *Ofosi* dance at Kabba, a silent interlude came as a complete surprise. The troupe stood motionless, while two chosen women separated themselves, and gradually assuming crouching attitudes, moved around as if eyeing each other, until the desired position was attained. What follows may have been the complicated movements of “hand-steps” as opposed to dance-steps, or else (as seems to me to be more probable) *Ofosi* songs translated into language of the hands. The women moved their fingers, wrists and palms, now this way, now that; swaying slightly, sometimes palm uppermost, then downwards, the fingers almost touching the ground; but always together, exactly in time, each woman doing precisely the same thing. Instinct seemed to guide them, for once they embarked upon the hand-movements, neither woman looked at the other, and in dead silence the gentle complicated rhythm continued for about five minutes, until the leader with the clattering rattle broke into song once more and rallied her chorus into further concerted song and dance.²

It can thus be concluded that the dancers highlight the differences between ritual dance and social dance. In ritual dances,

symbols, metaphors, music and sometimes, silence were used to highlight the essence of worship and reverence for the presence of gods.

Social dances on the other hand, were less serious in content and form. Although they also had specific occasions on which they were performed, some of these social dances were purely celebrative in nature, such as: naming ceremony, celebration of elevation of status within a community, marriage or basically, aspects of culture that had happiness and joy as inspirational feelings. These dances were free in style and rhythm. The dancer was free to add or subtract from the known steps and to the unknown, but steps had to be creatively and aesthetically beholding.

For the purpose of this study, Nigerian dances shall be seen as dances shaped exclusively by their performative realities—movements and gestures to particular rhythms within a particular environment and culture. Dance is an ephemeral art. It is an art that takes shape at the moment of performance. And thus, as the most direct of major forms, such as singing, acting, dance affords its observers an immediacy of perception unlike any of the other art forms. Because Nigerian dances are so many, most studies have addressed Nigerian dances within their immediate social, political and cultural realities. The realities are dictates of isolated realities — this means that each dance exists within its own ritual origins, social milieu, and its performative functions and objectives within a given location. And since culture is organic and never static, these realities are constantly in a motion of change, basically, because of the way the dances have been passed on from one generation to another and secondly, because the dances themselves are subjected to influences, fusion, intercultural and intra-cultural influences.

Thus they continue to affect the wholeness of such dances from their original forms to evolve new forms. The steps of such dances are however not static. And also as dances change, the steps also become modified, sometimes combining patterns and shapes while still referring to the old traditional steps which remain as immutable and eternal to the new dance forms. We must also note here that whatever changes occur to a particular dance, the

same changes occur to the dancer. Because dance is a form, and the dancer is the person who interprets the symbols of the form of dance, he thus becomes the object and the rhythm of dance, and also becomes the image of the movement of the dance. In simple terms, the dancer is a man or woman, or even a child who dances whether professionally or otherwise. The growth of the person of the dancer is my preoccupation in this chapter.

Dance is as old as the Nigerian man or indeed, the African man, or better still man himself white or black. Dance starts with the notion of crawling as a child, or of walking as a man. For both activities, 'rhythm' is the keyword here. Stephen Muecke describes the simple act of walking, its importance to man and his environment, and its relationship to dance when he says:

Your feet have to *skim* the surface — no more than a couple of millimeters above the ground. And you have to incline your whole frame a little in advance and as it were to *fall* slightly forward. Let your body begin to fall (I hold her, we laugh) and then your first foot swings forward on that falling momentum then the next. So you are not *bringing* your feet nor marching. Marching is a little like the opposite of walking, or its 'fascist' equivalent. With walking your footfalls are light. Your arms hang from relaxed shoulders, you let them swing with whatever movement the rest of your body induces. You don't need your arms to walk you need your legs and the automatic rhythm that legs and trunk induce.³

At a glance, one would feel that Muecke was describing a dance and not just the act of walking or movement. But then again, dance is movement. In fact all African dances fit in with Muecke's description. In most cases, it is the pace of the rhythm, or which part of the body is to be highlighted that varies from one dance to another. This means that man was dancing long before he knew the word to use to describe the movement.

Dance is also language — a form of expression. If sound, gesture and movement are part of man's language, then dance can also be seen as a form of language. It has indeed remained a form of language to express joy, sadness and serious ritual belief such as

evocation, praise and worship. A dancer is therefore that instrument used in physical terms for expression of dance movements. He becomes the 'tongue' for speaking the dance language. The 'brush' for painting the physical images is observed during a dance performance. It thus suggests that a simple definition would be that 'dance' is the *art, the performance* of physical movement to a rhythmic pattern of movement. Here 'dancing' is the *act* and the 'dancer' is the person who *performs, or acts out the art* in the context of dance.

In Nigeria, each dance has a context, a story within the performance. The 'context' which I refer to here is the meaning of a particular dance. Whether it is a ritual dance or ceremonial dance, the context of the dance is most important because it guides the dancer on the tempo, the mood and even the images and metaphors the dance must reflect in the process of performance. Malborg Kim states that: "When it is stated that the meaning of a dance should be interpreted in its "context", that context denotes not only historical, social or cultural contexts which are extrinsic but also an intrinsic context that exists as intention on the part of the dancer."⁴

The 'context' here, means the ability of the dancer to internalise, to feel and almost become possessed by the dance in order to become one with the spirit or meaning of the dance. The dancer in traditional dance becomes one in the dance that is affected by the belief in the dance as magic of evocation, himself or herself being a convert in the case of ritual dance to the extent that it becomes difficult to separate the dancer from the role of the chief priests. The dancer on stage becomes a medium, an instrument of communication from the physical world of man, to the spirit world.

The training of the early dancer was done with the primary intention to endow him with what we now call, 'a crude notion of art which even then provided him with the sense of unity and integrity of sacral images'. The dancer either in ritual or social dance was a symbol of interpretation — first, there was the attempt to interpret the essence of the performance — tell the story of the context of the play— while playing out the significant role which either added to the sacred essence of the dance or the social or enjoyment essence of the dance. The idea of the aesthetics in traditional dance therefore, is expressed by what appears as a

rhythm of multiplication of parts of the body into one agile whole, expressing a unified movement to a particular rhythm and pattern.

Since the dances emerged from the traditional consciousness of the society, the training also passed through four basic informal and traditional schools of dance. These 'traditional schools' are common with most Nigerian dances. They have become standard ways of teaching dances in most traditional communities;

- a. Guilds — most communities were organised in forms of professional guilds. The hunters had their guild, and so did the fishermen, the bronzesmiths and goldsmiths. Each guild had its way of controlling its members and ensuring that there was equity among them, thus there was the worship or the selection of a patron god. The king, where the practice existed, was a member of every guild. That way, he represented the gods physically in each guild. It was also his job to fix the day of the celebration of the guilds into the festival (whether serious or ceremonial). Most ritual ceremonies of some guilds like the Yoruba hunters' guilds started at the shrine of Ogun, their patron god. The chief priest of Ogun was usually in attendance, so was the king, other priests and hunters who served as the dancers. They had as in most guild dances, a special name for the dance. It is called *Ijala* dance which also has songs and chants in the total package. The form of knowledge transfer of the dance steps, chants and songs were done at an early age, so that by the time the dancer is fully grown he becomes an expert in the dance steps and chants as he undergoes the period of pupillage, until he too becomes the master or elder. The *Ijala* performance can be done in honour of Ogun, the god of hunters as part of the Ogun festival, or it can be specially arranged for performance at the death of a hunter or the elevation of a hunter within the guild. In an interview, an *Ijala* dancer recalls how he was trained:

Lati kekere ni won ti bere si ko mi ni ijo ijala

I was taught the *Ijala* dance at an early stage

Awon egbon mi lokoko ko mi ni ijo ati oriki idile wa

My brothers taught me the dance and chant songs of

my family

Igba ti mo wa dagba die, won wa ko mi ni ijinle ijo ati oriki Ijala gan

When I grew up, I was taught the original dance and chants proper

Awon ijo yen ti wa nile tipe, awon orin na ti wa nile na,

The dances have always existed and so have the songs
Awon agbagba ayan ati awon baba wa lo ma nko wa ni ijo ati oriki na gan

The head drummers and our leaders teach us the dances and the songs.

Ta ba ni nkan se, awon na lo ma so nkan ta ma se nibe
If we have performances, it is this same leaders who select the performance pieces.

Sugbon nigba mi ijo wa nwo wa lara, a o si jo bi Ogun se fe

Sometimes, the dance takes over our bodies and we dance as the god Ogun inspires us.⁵

- b. Family — collaboration was a major way of training the traditional dancers. Some families were custodians of certain gods in the communities, while some members of particular families were star dancers in their youth, and felt the need to retain such reputation by training the young members of the family. In some communities where young maidens or boys were chosen as the ‘carriers’ of the symbolic problems of the communities, such selected boys or girls were taught the specific dance steps required of the carriers of the gifts of the community to the gods. And sometimes, if parents loved particular dances, they sent their children, or paid for the services of the old teachers to teach their children. This way the knowledge of traditional dance was transferred from one dancer to another. An interview of a young maiden dancer on how she learnt the dance confirms this form of pupillage:

Na my Aunty teach me. My Mama no fit dance, but when my Aunty young, na she dance am pass for the whole seven clans for our village. She get the glory,

everybody know am, for our family. So when they born me, she say I resemble am so she begin teach me small, until I know am like this. But many people say, he remain small make I reach am.⁶

- c. Peer group — again because of the way the traditional communities were structured, peer group influence was very possible especially in the process in which knowledge was transferred from one child to another. In fact most communities organised themselves so well that children born in the same month or year belong to the same age group. Therefore, their initiation into so many growing up tasks and groups was usually uniformly done. They were circumcised the same day, initiated into the manhood age grade the same day, and sometimes, in some communities, they got married the same day. For each of these growing up tasks, there were specific dance steps, and each again uniformly dressed in costumes as dictated by the community, had to know the dance steps by the day of the ceremony. In most cases, the palace through the king organised these growing up tasks through a chief who was appointed as a patron for each age group. The chief ensured through other elders, that the correct songs and dance steps were taught the initiates. Rehearsals were done in secret places, and if need be, new dance steps were taught in some communities where each age group had to have its own dance steps. The star dancers were given prominent roles to play especially on the day when the king was to pronounce the name and recognition of the new age group. Young maidens also did this in very free form. Friends taught each other the dance steps and sometimes solicited the help of older sisters or mothers of friends who were old and good dancers to assist in the training. Young maidens have been known to find husbands during the performances of these ceremonies, so the learning periods, though relaxed, were taken very seriously.
- d. Palace or Shrines — as earlier mentioned, the palace and shrines were centres of the cultural activities in traditional communities. The king as the father of the community was

patron to each guild, and a priest of each shrine. He was usually initiated during the usual three months of preparing him for the role of a king in his community. He was taught first the history, the songs of each god, and the dance steps. The highlight of each festival was when the king, the representative of the gods on earth stood up to dance. It was symbolic, as it showed that even the gods through their representative, had approved of the festival, and supplications have also been answered. The palace also had a standing group of musicians and sometimes, as the Gbedu drums of the Oba of Lagos, only the Oba, his chiefs and a few initiates, were allowed to dance to the music on special occasions. But traditional dances grew in both the palaces and the shrines. Each shrine also had its musicians and dancers. The dancers set spread between the other lesser priests and the worshippers. Even in cases of frenzy and possession, the onlookers became more active in the spirit of the god and, dance moved them. Dance as evocation is the keyword here.

The content of the dances also played a major part in the training process. Again deliberate attention was paid to the culture of the people, as the dances were supposed to emerge from the culture of the people. This process gave the dances and dancers, the cultural identity they needed to differentiate them from dances from another ethnic group. The process also allowed the traditional dancer to give meaning to movement, gesture, and shape of the body, because ironically, the body itself is shaped by the cultural environment of people. The body as earlier stated was an instrument of expression for the gestures of and the setting of the mood required for the dance performance or to be derived from the dance performance. The dancers were taught to use their bodies in the following ways:

- i. The body was used to tell the story. I have earlier stated that all Nigerian dances whether social or ritual, were either part of a story, or were the story. The dancers were taught to be part of a bigger picture. They were part of the worship. The chief priest was the star dancer, the other dancers danced in

unison to form part of the total evocation or add to the persuasive power of the dance.

- ii. The body was used to create shapes by reacting to either the deliberate attempt to create cultural symbols or dance in rhythm to the music. In this case, the traditional dancer was taught how to listen not only with the ears, but also with the body. The body became the silent musical instrument which was used to form the wider rhythm or picture of the images which the dance was supposed to create. The feet were like pencils drawing the calligraphic lines on the earth, making symbols, re-enacting the folklore, retelling the myths, inspiring the person or onlooker from the culture to join in the dance, or forcing the foreign onlooker to a fascination of the magic and mystery of the images and patterns drawn by the dancers.
- iii. The first thing the traditional dancer is taught is how to create mood. Some dances have a fast tempo and some are slow. The agility of the dancer to react to the beat of the music, the beat of the songs and the pumping sound of the drums that often dictate the tempo of the dance is very important here.
- iv. Since the traditional dances were taught in the form of signals and symbols, the dancer was taught how to arrange these symbols in an order that it will make meaning to the original owners of the dance, since it was emerging from their cultural consciousness, and also be an aesthetic whole when danced. These processes of arrangement of symbols allowed the dancer to tell the complete story of a particular dance. So when an Ekpe Masquerade turns and dances round, in circles or in spins, these symbols form a wider complete story to the initiates, as he re-emphasises its domain as the officer or god of the passage of life and death. But the non-initiates only see a scary masquerade moving in symbols, with majestic gestures and signs which he translates to the *atheistic* awry nature of Ekpe's significance among its people.

So whether the traditional dancer was taught to dance the Bata dance of the Yoruba people, the Atilogwu of the Igbo people

or the Bori or Korotso dances of the Hausas, he was taught the primary use of the body, process of highlighting the specific aspects of the body in order to speak the language of the culture of the particular ethnic group, and also the ability to speak and interpret the language of the music and symbols of the gestures of a particular ethnic group.

Discourse: Colonialism and the Traditional Dancer

By the time the colonial masters came to Nigeria, Nigerian dances had evolved into a major part of the Nigerian culture. The dancers and their dances had become well developed as serious cultural practice. Two reasons had led to a major development of these early dance forms by the time the white man arrived with his culture.

- a. attention had been paid adequately by all the communities to the myths, folklore, stories of the Nigerian people to an extent that they became intertextual references with which an existence of meaning or meanings could be established. And as long as the black man found meaning to these questions, he could appreciate, enjoy and worship life.
- b. Nigerians had also discovered and developed the lyrical applications of sound and music no matter how crudely made, technically limited and noisy his instruments were, to the rhythm of his movements, for the dance.

This means that the white man as it was earlier believed 'did not give the black man culture'. The black man had culture before he arrived, but sadly, from the arrival of the white man, the black man's culture became subjected to influences and alien standards of measurement of the quality of the culture the black man had.

The colonial master was therefore an accidental admirer who saw the Nigerian dancer and his music as very passionate, imprecise most times, especially when he got carried away with the loudness of his music and his very energetic dance movements. The white man came with his Eurocentric notions of the African traditional art and dance forms. They gave him little room for assimilating any form of innovations. The dances were "wonderful,

but to be kept at bay as they emerged from active African 'juju' beliefs for worship of the Devil". The dancers were seen as:

- a. representatives of a cultural or ethnic group celebrating a backward culture;
- b. the naked dancer who had nothing to give in terms of cultural interactions — as he was already set in his ways. His costumes smelt, his naked body and that of his female counterpart needed to be covered up. His idea of make-up was heavy white chalk, and the symbols were unintelligible. His dances had no pattern, just loud music.

The differences were enough to echo the determinism of tradition. Three major differences were time, space and the dichotomy between the audience and dancers in dance performances. Peggy Harper, an accomplished dancer, teacher and critic, highlights these differences when she observed that dance was used:

As an expression of the patterns and rhythms of daily life, a dance performance may continue for hours or may repeat familiar patterns as part of a festival or ceremony extending over a number of days. Both performers and audience revel in this as a statement of their deepest convictions and the common experiences of their daily lives. There is seldom an exact length of time allowed for a dance. In contrast to a theatrical situation in which a performance of specific duration is deliberately created by a director and his performers for an unfamiliar audience.⁷

The white man kept to his Government Reservation Area Club Houses, with Easter and Christmas shows, and Cantatas. Sometimes when there was an occasion like the presence of the District Officer, there was Ballroom dancing, while the black man served the drinks as stewards. The District Officer also saw some of the traditional dances, only officially at the Government House, or when he visited the king in the palace.

But it was in the schools and churches that there were any form of direct contact between the white colonial masters and the black natives. There was no established syllabus for the formal teaching

of the dance in schools, but the school calendars provided opportunities for the practice of dance in schools. Official occasions such as the Empire day, end-of-year school activities allowed the school teachers to organise class competitions, and sometimes village competitions in order to find the best young dancer that could represent the school during the inter-schools or inter-villages competitions. The young dancers were now taught how to dance within a limited period of time, wear clothes when necessary and expand their venues for performances by dancing in school halls, town halls on a proscenium stage or raised platform. In churches the same influences took place. But the greatest influence of the churches on Nigerian dancers was the inclusion of a story — a dance-drama form into the context of Nigerian dance performances. The products of this influences, Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo, infused the Western concert party tradition to their performances which included social or historical drama, rich Yoruba music, dances which either were from the old traditional worship dances or social dances depending on the themes of the dance-drama. A total package for an evening performance had three major parts;

- a. an opening glee of dances and a performance of the theme song;
- b. the dramatic play with songs and a few steps of dances;
- c. then an epilogue which ended up with dances.

While Kola Ogunmola expanded the techniques of practical drama presentations through a workshop he had with the then University College, Ibadan under Geoffrey Axworthy, Hubert Ogunde expanded the focus of dance through the process of assimilation of other dance forms from other countries, and also tracing dance influences from other countries to their original roots in traditional dance forms in Nigeria. Upon his return from England in 1947 for example, Eburn Clark describes the influence of the trip on Ogunde's dance repertoire when she says:

When Ogunde returned in September, he arrived with "£2,000 (N4,000) worth of theatrical equipment". He also gave the public an indication of what it should

expect in his forthcoming performance, for example, “an introduction of the tap dance into the African ‘Batakoto’ and also into the African Rhumba”. A “special demonstration” he went on, “will show that the people of Nigeria, especially the Yorubas, have rhythm and physical steps of the tap dance in their ‘Epa’ dance and a routine dance will show the relation between the ‘Waltz’ and the African ‘Batakoto’.”⁸

This is why one feels that one of Ogunde’s greatest contributions to Nigerian dance was his choreographed piece titled, “The Fisherman dance”. The dance is a hybrid of various dance steps strung together into a pattern of fast pace and rhythm, from the tradition of the ‘Egun’ and Badagry dances, with the fishermen’s professional props, with gyrations from almost all the cultural experiences in Nigeria. The piece has remained in the repertoire of the National Troupe of Nigeria since 1989 where Ogunde taught it and was the first Artistic Director and Consultant.

The practitioners of these types of creative dance and dramatic performances started a performance heritage called the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre. Their major contributions to the development of the traditional dancer were the:

- movement of the dancers from their original traditional settings as they were a travelling theatre group. They travelled round the country.
- introduction of the professional and commercial aspect of life to the traditional dancer. The dancers could now make a living off dancing. This was a refreshing development as artistes generally were earlier seen as never-do-wells.

At this same time, the influence of the colonial masters on the music also affected the development of traditional dancers. Nigerian musicians such as Bala Miller, Roy Chicago, Bobby Benson, Victor Olaiya, to name but a few, were beginning to include western instruments in their ensemble. And since they performed also in new settings like clubs, hotels and government gala nights, they used dancers to spice up their performances.

So they sometimes introduced acrobatic displays, and wriggling

of the waistline and chests of dancers which were gyrating aspects of traditional dances, to hold the attention of their audience. But gradually, these traditional dance movements became vulgar and sensuous in nature. In practice, this also meant a distortion of most of the original dance steps by the dancers, in order to interpret the new music which was different in content—sometimes Nigerian in language, and lyrics—and which needed different steps and dance patterns from the ones danced in the villages.

Post-colonialism

This period started from 1960 when Nigeria got her independence, and started to be faced with the challenges of democratic freedom. At independence, Nigeria was divided into three major regions; Western Nigeria, Eastern Nigeria, and Northern Nigeria. By 1964, the Mid-Western region was created out of what used to be the Western region. Each region developed its cultural identity, and celebrated its heritage also in the form of dance, music and drama. It is important to note, however, that the period of the civil war in Nigeria (1967-70) slowed down the development of the traditional dancer in Nigeria. Islam had slowed down the almost total growth of the arts because of its imitative powers in Northern Nigeria. It was believed that certain artistic manifestations that have to do with imitation and representation would stretch the belief of the believer to a point where he would begin to question the faith and that most traditional performances drew from religious and cultic beliefs, and were therefore evil and satanic. Only a few survived and were put in the palace environment or tied to Islamic ceremonial celebrations where they could be controlled. The Bori dance, which survived, for example was relegated to performances in hotels and brothels, and the dancers were mainly prostitutes. The Bankaura dancers of Katsina, have also survived because it is a comic and religiously harmless dance of clowns imitating monkeys, with a satirical flavour. The Igbos of the eastern region were obviously the most hit during the period of the civil war. Since the then Republic of Biafra needed soldiers to fight the war, the traditional dancers were forced to become soldiers, even though once a while, they performed victory dances or even carried

masquerades and danced during special occasions but majority of them had no time to dance. Instead, songs which usually accompany war because of their emotional contents were encouraged. The late Professor Sonny Oti remembers fondly how they used songs and a few dance steps to capture the mood of the period.

"I had a small band of mainly musicians during the civil war and we performed for our platoon and other platoons. I composed the songs and added a few dance steps drawing from my experience at the University College, Ibadan, when we performed the dance-drama, *Danda*".⁹

The Mid-western region of Nigeria had the same experience with the eastern region. But immediately after the liberation of the mid-western part of Nigeria, artistic activities were organised to bring life to normal. It was during this period that the mid-western region highlighted the "Sapaide" and "Ugoh" dances of the palace and the acrobatic masquerades of the Ishan people called, "Igbabo nelimi" (I clap for the spirits).

But of all the regions, it was the western region that was most developed in terms of the person of the traditional dancer during the war. The western part of Nigeria was far from the eastern part where the war actually took place. Even when the Biafran soldiers got to Ore, they did not occupy Ore for long, and they never occupied in a real sense any Yoruba village or town after that. So the culture of the Yoruba performances and dancers remained intact. But the bulk of the soldiers who fought the civil war were from the middle-belt region which comprised of the Plateau-Benue axis of the country. Their presence in the army also meant a transfer of their culture to the army culture which was predominantly dominated by the Hausa culture since the time of Lord Lugard. In the army barracks, the traditional dancer again found a platform to show his steps. Because of the incessant coups d'etat and witch-hunting that went with such coups, there was a lot of insecurity in the barracks such that ethnic and tribal groupings were encouraged. Each ethnic group, not region, formed its own union or association of indigenes. They looked out for one another during promotion problems, financial problems, marital and burial problems, and also kept their culture alive through such associations. One of such cultural developments which gave new meaning to old dance

steps was the *Achanhapukpa* dancers who took their steps from the Tiv people. Originally the songs and dances were performed by Tiv warriors during the local tribal wars, but in the army barracks, they were performed as comic relief. Still keeping some of the vulgar lyrical tradition of the songs, the dancers in old army uniforms, retained the fast dance steps, flying up and down, making maneuvers as if at the battlefield in search of enemies, and with songs and gyrations of the body, the dance and its humour were complete. This was the beginning of the tampering with and stretching of the meaning of the Tiv dance within our dance history. The traditional dancer remained in the barracks for a while, as he found ready audience, and sometimes money, food and drinks as appreciation for the hard work.

The arrival of Television first in Ibadan in 1959, was also good for the development of traditional dances and dancers. By the time each region had a station in the regional capitals, it was easy to package traditional dances which represented the multicultural influences from immigrant communities, cultural translations of interactions with similar or non-similar cultures and some influences from the colonised culture. Lagos for example, was the capital city of Nigeria, and with the influences of the Saro descendants of freed slaves from Sierra-Leone, Benin origins, the Yoruba influence, and a strong western influence had become the melting pot of Nigerian culture. It still serves this function to date. Dance development therefore, happened at the same time all over Nigeria. Each region organised its own arts festivals. Peggy Harper again comments on this development and its objectives when she says:

Arts Festivals which have been held annually in the former regions of Nigeria have proved to be an important catalytic element in the movement of dancers and musicians away from their home areas into the sphere of entertainment and modern culture. The organisers of these Arts Festivals have two principal aims: first, to give traditional performers a sense of the dignity and value of their arts in the modern ferment of cultural transition and to find a place for these arts in the

contemporary urban context. And in doing this they aim to achieve their main purpose of exhibiting the arts of their province, region or state in such a way that they become known and respected by people of other cultures and countries.¹⁰

By 1960, the Federal Republic of Nigeria organised the first National Arts Independence Festival, which invited the regions to compete and showcase their various cultures. There is no doubt that the traditional dancer benefited immensely from this festival and subsequent Festivals of Arts and Culture that was to be later organised by a parastatal of the Federal Government called The National Council for Arts and Culture. In fact the 1985 and 1986 versions of the festival had special symposia on dance. Dance as a subject was discussed, just as states competed for the gold, silver and bronze prizes of the festivals. The establishment of the States' Councils for Arts and Culture in each state also assisted the development of the traditional dancer. The dancer was now employed to do nothing but dance. His major task was to go into the dance history of his people and teach his colleagues the dance or invite elders who knew the dance to teach members of the state dance troupe. Bakare, Ojo-Rasaki¹¹ has helped to set up and train most of the state dancers as a choreographer and dance innovator. This exercise expands the knowledge of dancers about the various dances in the state which are usually many in number. One good thing is that it also forced the State Councils to choreograph and set the hitherto long and organised traditional dances into well structured dances which respected the rule of time, venue, space of dance or dramatic performances. A good example is the setting of the Tiv dance of the Benue people into a professional dance piece, called the "Swange" by Bose Tsevende¹², a choreographer who worked at the time with the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture.

But it was in 1977 with Nigeria's hosting of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture that was the turning point for the Nigerian traditional dancer and indeed, the Nigerian arts. The objectives of the festival were clear on the issues of *rediscovery, revival, and reawakening* of the culture of Black and

African peoples.

- i. To ensure the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of Black and African culture and black cultural values and civilisation;
- ii. to represent Black and African culture in its highest and widest conception;
- iii. to bring to light the diverse contributions of Black and African peoples to the universal currents of thought and arts;
- iv. to promote Black and African artists, performers and writers and facilitate their world acceptance and their access to world outlets;
- v. to promote better international and interracial understanding;
- vi. to facilitate a periodic "return to origin" in Africa by Black artists, writers and performers uprooted to other continents.¹³

The festival showed the traditional dancer the importance of dance to peoples of other countries. Through the presence and performances of dance ensembles from Ghana, Gambia, Senegal, even the Federal Government realised the importance of a central troupe which would represent Nigeria in festivals of this nature. It was not until 1989 that the National Troupe of Nigeria was established under Hubert Ogunde. But the black South Africans had shown the whole world what dance could be used to achieve through the performances of Ipi Tombi. Through their dances, the Nigerian dancers realised that dance could be used as a tool for social and political statement as well as remain as an entertainment tool. The two major effects on the traditional dancers by the festival were:

- a. there was the need to devote more time to dance and make it a lucrative business. The festival had shown Nigeria's traditional dances and had showcased the spirit, energy and power of the Nigerian dancer. Invitations started coming for individual dancers to go abroad and dance. Dance groups owned by Africans were being set up in Europe, thus

allowing for engagements of Nigerian dancers abroad.

- b. Dance became more attractive. Lagos, the home of FESTAC also became the 'home' of the dancers. They flocked to Lagos in search of jobs. The National Troupe had started turning out sets of dance artistes after their contracts expired; some returned to their States Councils to work, but some remained in Lagos and set up their own dance clubs depending on the experiences gathered during their work period in the Troupe. Lagos now had an explosion of dancers with the traditional dancers coming from the villages with their different talents to hunt for fame and wealth. And as Lagos is a cosmopolitan city, there were opportunities for the dancers to get by. As most of the traditional dancers were not educated, exploitation set in and so it became difficult for them to feed. These reasons forced the dancers to form *The Guild of Nigerian Dancers*, presently under the leadership of Shaibu Husseini. This ironically returns the dancers to the guild tradition of the villages or local communities. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Guild sets out to benefit its members by concerning itself mainly with the state of the welfare of the dancers:

1. The guild shall assist in the provision of legal aid for any member for unfair labour practice by an employer(s).
2. A member who is hospitalised as a result of injuries sustained during active service shall be entitled to a sick benefit of an amount that will be determined and reviewed periodically by the NEC.
3. A member who is deceased shall be entitled to a benefit that will be determined and reviewed periodically by the NEC.
4. The guild shall organise periodic seminars, lectures, symposia and training fora occasionally in the interest of its members and shall issue certificates as appropriate.
5. The guild shall assist depending on the availability of funds indigent members in furtherance of their educational or professional pursuit amongst other benefits.¹⁴

Conclusion: The New Traditional Dancer

Please note the deliberate use of the words 'New Traditional Dancer' rather than 'modern' or 'contemporary' dancer or dance. I am hesitant in the use of the word modern or contemporary, because of its confusion with *the new dance*. Margot Fonteyn in her book, *The Magic of Dance*, attempts to define the words for us:

"The modern and contemporary dance that we know now is something absolutely new in the world in this century. It is the only dance form that comes from the intellect instead of, one way or another, through existing dance steps of ancient or peasant origin".¹⁵

Martha Graham, an accomplished dancer, and exponent of contemporary dance, gives us another clarification in our attempt to define "modern dance" when she says:

"I have repeatedly insisted that the so-called "modern dance" is not a contemporary phenomenon. Always there has been some dancer who was dissatisfied with the existing forms, some dancer for whom the traditional style became too sterile and who broke it open".¹⁶

In Graham's definition, she stretches the link which the contemporary dance has with the old traditional but now 'sterile' dance. This means that even in Europe or the United States, as it is commonly believed, contemporary dance did not grow out of nothing. Even when it is profoundly abstract in content and form, it bears that link, call it cultural or whatever, within the subconscious aspect of the mind of the choreographer.

One of the leading new Nigerian traditional dancers Liadi Adedayo defines the new dance steps in Nigerian dance scene when he says that:

We do, mostly, contemporary African dance. And contemporary African dance, in my reckoning, does not have a specific definition now. I define personal dance innovation, which derives from both African as well as contemporary dance style.¹⁷

Again, he highlights the link with tradition. It is this link with the original African traditional dance, what Margot Fonteyn calls 'peasant origin' that makes one hesitate to call the present Nigerian

dancer a modern dancer or contemporary dancer, even when dancers like Arnold Udoka, Abubakar Usman, and Liadi Adedayo have taken the traditional step forward. What they have significantly done is to also show the element of fusion, cultural hegemony, in simple terms, a blend of the western and original traditional influence. In practice, dance critics have noted, with concern, that the new works do not become so abstract in content and form, that the dances choreographed are not lost to the owners of the dances and the traditional content — Nigerians.

But by 1987 the foreign Cultural Centres of Britain, America, Germany and France had started to invite music, drama and dance troupes from their various countries to Nigeria for performances.

The German Cultural Centre, the Goethe Institut has introduced Nigerian dancers to new German experimental dance forms through sponsorship to festivals. They have through the House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt) also influenced the Nigerian traditional dancers in the aspects of style, techniques and creative innovations. They have also joined other Cultural Centres in inviting professional dancers to Nigeria. The Nigerian dancers in Lagos saw most, if not all, of these performances and were greatly impressed with what they saw.

Between 1987 and 1994, the French Cultural Centre invited seven dance troupes to perform in Nigeria. But in 1994 a bridge was finally built to connect the traditional Nigerian dancer and his French counterpart of modern and contemporary dance. That year, The Claude Brumachon Dance Company was invited to hold classes with some Nigerian dance troupes based mostly in Lagos and Ibadan under the French choreographer Claude Brumachon. The intention was that the best of the Nigerian Dancers from the classes, would attend the "Conservatoire Itinerant De la Danse" (Itinerant Academy of Dance) with a primary objective of making possible for international choreographic exchanges to assume the height they have not yet reached, in terms of educational methods.

On a more modest level, the French Cultural Centre is eager to take part in this great move by organising classes that will bring together a French choreographer and the best in terms of Nigerian dance among the following troupes:

- National Troupe of Nigeria
- Centre for Cultural Studies Cultural Troupe (UNILAG)
- Ebony Cultural Group
- African Heritage
- Injile Cultural Troupe
- University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Under the supervision of Claude Brumachon, this workshop which took place at Maison de France on May 23rd, 24th and 25th 1994 was aimed principally at taking concerted action in the future, through the merging of the two areas: the traditional and the contemporary.¹⁸

If the merger of the two traditions was the initial objective of the project then it succeeded. But the project expanded the focus of the traditional Nigerian dancer. Most of all, it made him think about the content or context of the traditional dances. He started to think of how to move the dances beyond what his forefathers handed over to him in the earlier training sessions in the villages. In terms of practice, the new traditional dancer started working on dances from two levels.

a. Semiotics

This is the use of symbols, not sacral — but dance symbols which were also used to increase the dance language or vocabulary. One then understands Arnold Udoka when he described his choreographed dance *Moments* which was performed in the 2002 version of *Dance meets Danse*, a yearly festival of experimental dances. The performance was by the National Troupe of Nigeria. On the issue of symbols and semiotics, Udoka said:

The play, *Moments* (28') is the story of the human desire for movement and creativity of the body to organise thought and action in relation to our external environment. The piece brings to consciousness the liberative energy of mind, body and rhythmic interplay in cultures and periods. *Moments* derives its movement vocabulary from traditional dances and contemporary too. The result is the complexities and beauty of body

forms as catalogue of body energies and symbolic gestures in the Nigerian cultural history.¹⁹

b. Deconstruction

This is the process of collecting dances or being conscious of them, and in order to create new steps, one breaks down the old steps in order to further achieve newer, fresher and more entertaining meanings to the new dance created. Liadi Adedayo captures this succinctly when he says:

When I'm creating my dance concept, I usually have a lot of pictures, rhythms, images as well as a lot of things on my mind. It takes a lot of time before I arrive at a particular dance. Sometimes, it takes three months to create something meaningful that the whole world will respect, you need to take your time and embark on extensive research. After that, you start innovating the dance little by little. Most times, our traditional dances in Africa give us a lot of inspiration.²⁰

This is a most refreshing development to the growth of traditional dances and traditional dancers, as new intellectual and practical structures are being put in place for continuity and innovations.

One cannot end this discourse without mentioning the issue of documentation of dances so that one generation can pass on the knowledge of dances to another in a less tedious manner. This would formalise the training of the new traditional dancers yet to be born or discovered. It is important to mention here the work of Peter Badejo, a Nigerian traditional dancer who presently lives in London working on his style of dance which he calls, "contemporary African dance". His company is called "Badejo Arts" and it works "consistently at transmitting the essence of African dance and music aesthetics". "Integral to our work", they note in the company pamphlet, "is the encouragement of practitioners in African dance, to understand and achieve the many contemporary possibilities of the medium". Peter Badejo was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for the work he has done so far towards the development of contemporary dance in Britain. Presently, to

help in the documentation of Nigerian dances so that the western world can learn the steps of Nigerian dances, Badejo is leading a study of the Yoruba *Bata* dance, which he calls, "*Batabade*" which he hopes can make the complex dance steps of *bata* dance more accessible through a form of notation.

Taking some basic techniques from Rudolf Laban's notation technique, Badejo intends to create materials: film, cassettes and demonstration video tapes that can help notate *bata* dance. He hopes that his technique when properly developed, will be a model for the description of other Nigerian and African dances with the teaching codification technique and formalisation materials. The end result of his experimental work will be in three parts, namely:

- a. Taking excerpts of traditional forms and teaching styles around the world of *Bata* dance.
- b. Codification which will involve the written and practical *Bata* dance forms.
- c. "*Batabade*" technique proper will then be the new variation of *bata* dance as will be created by Peter Badejo and some part of the original content of the traditional *bata* dance forms.²¹

Most of all, Badejo sums up the hopeful effects of his work when he says, "I hope that my work will help the theatrical and traditional dancers find parallel possibilities of development. The dancer will have the codified technique to help him understand new dance forms and also develop the old dance forms with inspirational influences and personal creative instincts."²²

Whatever limitation this study may have, Badejo's experiment will move Nigerian dances forward. It will make our dances easy to learn not only by people from the culture. And it will finally begin the process of formalising the training of new dancers, whether traditional or contemporary. It is important to note that for the Nigerian traditional dancer to grow, he must document the old steps taught him and left behind by his forefathers, then he will know what new steps to add to the old steps, and move his practice forward, and then add newer steps of the future. With documentation he will even know what he is adding the western or new and foreign influences to.

It is clear that the new traditional dancer in Nigeria has a future. The western world is beginning to turn to Africa for new and innovative energy and magic for world dance. African dance also has so many symbols, images and metaphors yet to be discovered. African dance is no longer primitive to the western world, which now appreciates the aesthetics of African dance. The challenges are many, but with determination and assistance from foreign cultural organisations, the traditional dancer will be able to blend his traditional dance forms with the western technique and style which the western world has to teach. He also has a good audience, owners of the original dance culture who are watching with keen interest to see what developments are happening to their culture. Culture is important to dance, and culture is the people's way of life. Therefore dance has a fertile ground to grow, as it grows with the people and helps to point to the development of people's culture. I shall therefore end with a quotation from one of scholar dance in the western world.

"THE FUTURE of the dance lies not alone in the hands of the dancer; it is equally in the hands of the public. No real artist is ahead of his time — he is his time but the public is sometimes unwilling to desert nostalgic memories of an earlier day and face the present as the artist must."²²

Martha Graham's observations to my mind reflect accurately even the situation of the development of the Nigerian traditional dancer and his audience or society in the study of his practice and history.

Notes

1. This is a general definition of culture championed by Raymond Williams. For further readings, see Raymond Williams, *Culture*, (Glasgow, 1981) and Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, (London, Blackwell, 2000).
2. John Onaiyekan, "The Priesthood in Owe Traditional Religion", in E.A. Ade Adegbola (ed), *Traditional Religion in West Africa* (Ibadan, Sefer, 1998), p.40.
3. Stephen Muecke, "Footwalk", in *Performance Across Cultures, Writings on Dance*, no. 13, Autum 1995. p.8.

4. Malborg, Kim, "Criticism of the Dance and the Dancer" in International Academic Conference of Dance, KIDE '95, Seoul, p.244.
5. Interview with Lati Ogundele in Oyo in 1997.
6. Interview with Obiageli Okongu in Augwu in 1998.
7. Peggy Harper, "Dance and Drama in the North", in *Nigeria Magazine*, September 1967. no. 94, p.219. Peggy Harper taught me dance at the then University of Ife in 1978. People gave their lives and dedicated themselves to teaching Nigerians about the existence of various dances in the world.
8. Eburn Clark, "Ogunde Theatre: The Rise of Contemporary Professional Theatre in Nigeria 1946-72" In *Nigeria Magazine*, December 1974, no. 114, p.13.
9. Quoted from a letter to me in 1980 when the late Professor Sonny Oti sent me materials of songs and poetry of the production of *Danda*, and the civil war to assist me in the work of Axworthy which I was involved in, in Cardiff, South Wales at the time. I have remained grateful to him.
10. Harper, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-222.
11. Dr Bakare, Ojo-Rasaki teaches at the University of Abuja. He continues to remain a great force in the development of dance in Nigeria.
12. Mrs Bose Tsevende teaches dance at the University of Jos. Her dance arrangement of the Swange remains in the repertoire of all dance troupes in Nigeria to date.
13. See "Festac '77" official handbook of the festival, published by the Africa Journal Ltd. (Lagos, 1977).
14. See Guild of Nigerian Dancers handbook.
15. Margot Fonteyn, *The Magic of Dance* (London, BBC, 1979), p.98.
16. Martha Graham, "The Future of Dance" April 1939, p.116.
17. "Liadi Adedayo: Dance Takes the World", Interview with Erhumu Bayagbon, *The Guardian*, Sunday Jan. 2, 2005, p.7.
18. From the invitation papers of The French Cultural Centre, Lagos, to a performance of The Claude Brumachon Dance Company to the Recital Hall, Muson Centre on the 26th May

1994.

19. Description of the National Troupe's presentation titled, "Moments", choreographed by Arnold Udoka, taken from the *Programme Book of Dance meets Danse* of Feb. 21 to 24 2002, p.5.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Interview with Peter Badejo, December 28th 2004.
22. Martha Graham, *op. cit.*, p.116.