

**Igbo Traditional Performances in Nigerian Drama: The Paradigm of Dance in
Emeka Nwabueze's *Rainstorm in the Desert***

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Abstract

The need for cultural promotion, especially in this era of cultural degradation and globalization is of paramount importance. Dance as a traditional performance is symbolic representation of emotions geared towards the understanding of the nature and existence of a group of people. Thus, it is a source of cultural identification and sustainability. This paper focuses on the use of drama in the promotion and preservation of Igbo culture and aesthetics; and the significance of Nwabueze's presentation of dance in the play, Rainstorm in The Desert as a unifying cultural force. The study employs the descriptive and analytic method of the qualitative research method to realise its set objectives. It submits that dramatists are useful agents of cultural preservation and promotion and recommends that more plays that promote Igbo culture be written in pursuit of the campaign for cultural promotion and preservation.

Keywords: Dance, Tradition, Performance, Culture, Cultural Preservation

Introduction

Globalization, modernization, and cultural imperialism have affected many cultures in recent times. Cultural globalization whose objectives have been the transmission and exchange of ideas, attitudes, values and meanings for better communication and development; have been producing observable negative effects on the preservation of the cultural heritage of the people. Globalization has the power of alienating from their root because it advocates for all the countries in the world to come together irrespective of race, cultural affiliation, etc to form a compressed world. With the aid of digital technology, the world is becoming one global village where everyone is expected to look the same, speak the same language, eat the same food, have the same fashion sense and even profess the same faith. This trend has exposed many cultures to the danger list of extinction as very few cultures remain intact; hence the current campaign for cultural preservation among nations, the Igbo nation inclusive.

The problem of this study stems from the observation that there is a threat of extinction to some indigenous Igbo cultures. According to Chris Nwaru:

The Igbo have over the years, from the colonial era through the Nigerian civil war to this time, had their culture battered and destroyed in a lamentable manner. They have not only lost their material culture, which were either ignorantly destroyed by the early Christians or are carefully removed by colonial masters to different parts of the world (20).

Culture separates people and gives them identity. It is the totality of behavioural pattern of a group of people that distinguishes them from others. According to Aghamelu, “culture presupposes the existence of a human society and provides the necessary guide for sustaining it (25). Cultural identification therefore is very important for an inclusive development of a group of people. The need for preservation of Igbo culture in the current wave of globalization and imperialism is hinted by Nwaru thus “though several of their material cultures have either been destroyed or removed, a lot of their cultural heritage still remain to be preserved” (20). It thus becomes imperative that cultural preservation should be the concern of every citizen or member of a given cultural entity. The need therefore arises for the integration of traditional values in the day-to-day activities of the people irrespective of professional, religious or social affiliations.

It is on this premise that this paper examines the place of drama in the preservation of and promotion of Igbo culture and aesthetics, and the identification of dance as a viable cultural entity that embodies Igbo norms and values. Drama, generally has been described as the mirror of the society and dramatist as the watch dog whose duty is to “observe, document and warn the society against inimical attitudes and behaviors that can stampede and impede its growth and development” (Tekena, 19). Contemporary Nigerian playwrights tend to tend to reflect their ideological commitments in their plays as historical, political and cultural issues form the thematic content of their plays. To this end, this paper examines the use of drama for cultural preservation as portrayed in the play *Rainstorm in the Desert* with emphasis on dance as an embodiment of cultural entity of the Igbo nation.

Dance and Culture

Performance Arts are integral part of Igbo cultural identity. This is because they contribute in the delineation of other cultures. These performances aid in aligning cultures with its beliefs and communal heritage by performing both entertainment roles and at the same time fulfilling their religious and cosmic principles. Dance as a performance art penetrates the various aspects of the people’s belief system in its effort to express and communicate an

ideology. Nickolas Akas observes that “dancing is deeply rooted into people’s social structure, their national peculiarities and their racial temperament” (50). This is because dance itself is a reinforcement and reenactment of communal life. Thus, Ossie Enekwe observes that “dance (in Igbo culture) is a vehicle through which the ancestors speak to the living” (11). Iyeh adds that “dance has served as a gateway to people’s culture; it has helped in documenting the things that are buried in the subconscious of a people” (132). Apart from this communal role, Aghamelu observes that “dance plays important communicative function in the society by telling stories and sharing some meanings with the audience” (129). The communicative and entertainment essence of dance lie on its relationship with the people. This is because dance derives its life line from the society and its content is encapsulated in the beliefs, norms and values that form the culture of the people. Harper attests to this by saying that:

dance play cathartic role during the key transition from one social state to another; a child is welcomed into the community at his naming ceremony; an adolescent is initiated into the responsibilities of adult life; a woman moves from her paternal home to join her husband’s family; an elder receives recognition for service in the form of title; a member leaves the community to join the world of the spirit (3).

Africans generally, and Igbo in particular, dance for everything, from birth to death and any event that comes in between in the life of the individual. Thus, Gladys Akunna defines dance as “manifestation of the sociopolitical, economic, religious and aesthetic life of the people” (15). Furthermore, Akas opines that “dance as an art belongs to the community in which the culture is embodied” (52). The relationship between dance and the community is that every aspect of the communal life is reflected in dance movements hence it is believed that traditionally, dance does not occur in Igbo society without a purpose, rather every movement is influenced by either past events or present happenings. The popular postulation that Africans dance for everything is also applicable to Igbo culture. This is because Igbo people dance for joy, they dance for mourning, hunting, planting, harvesting, calamity, prospect, love or hate.

Igbo dances, like all African dances, have the cultural undertone which demonstrates the peoples’ way of life. Dance for the Igbo is like a mirror through which they glance at the past as well as set standard for the present and project into the future. “It is a cultural product that captures the essence of a people and the meaning transcends the visual” (Abbe, 142). Thus Mcfee states that “the understanding of a particular dance presupposes the understanding of the traditions from which it emanates” (112). It is worthy of note that in Igbo setting, people do not just dance, rather every of their movement is an expression of

happenings in the society. It is a cultural expression through which the people is represented and documented.

Synopsis of Rainstorm in the Desert

The events in the play are centered on Odogwu Nwogbo, an accomplished businessman whose desire to identify with his people's cultural heritage influenced his decision to participate in a dance ceremony called Abia Dance. The dance is a popular dance competition and the winner becomes the Abia Laureate, a highly respected and envious position in the community. Unfortunately, Odogwu's ambition is vehemently opposed by his wife, Ugoada and his Uncle, Okosis. The objection is based on the assumption that they are protecting him from the hidden negative consequences of the Abia dance. However, convinced that he is up-to-date with the requirements to participate in the dance, Odogwu defies all family opposition for the contest and eventually emerge victorious. The consequence of this victory is the sudden death of his uncle. The demand by the village elders that Odogwu should give his uncle a burial rite as his first son triggers Odogwu's quest for his paternity. In the course of this quest, he discovers that he is not qualified to take part in the dance contest because the man he believed to be his uncle is actually his biological father and his only son is not biologically his but is fathered by his best friend. Odogwu's confrontations with his mother and his wife confirms his suspicion and out of frustration, he kills both women and ends up in jail.

Dance and Cultural Promotion in the play, *Rainstorm in the Desert*

With dance as the major tool of expression in the play, Nwabueze succeeds in conversing for cultural preservation and promotion by bringing out some characteristics of Igbo cultural performances that are often ignored or misinterpreted in the course of discussions of Igbo culture.

The play confirms that every traditional Igbo performance has a clear stipulated rule and regulations that guide each performance. Nwabueze in the play clearly points out the requirements for contesting in the Abia dance and consequences of their violation. Obi: what is there to be afraid of? The main stipulations are that the person's father must have joined the ancestors else he will be compelled to join them soon, that the person should be a married man, have a son and must never have been involved in forced sex or violation of another person's wife. The essence of these stipulations is for the participants to examine themselves to avert any dangerous consequences on themselves or their family. Traditional performances in Igbo land are always clear with its requirements both individually or as a

group. This offers the participant opportunities to either partake or decline if participation is optional or to work towards meeting the rules if participation is mandatory.

Traditional Igbo performances may seem artistic and entertaining in the eyes of the observer but for the initiate, it is not. Nwabueze, in the play, is able to inform that these performances are highly ritualistic in nature. He emphasizes the need for proper investigation before participating in any as seen the conversation below:

Okosis:...listen to him. You are only chewing the chord of foolishness. Abia dance is intricate that you think you know the meaning of what you think you know (35).

Odogwu: Uncle, I can assure you that before taking this decision, I carried out extensive research on that and other traditional activities involved in it. I am convinced that I am in a perfect position to be an Abia Dancer (35).

Purity of mind and body is an important requirement in every Igbo traditional performance. A participant in every Igbo cultural performance must make himself available both spiritually and physically by ensuring that he does not have any questionable character. Nwabueze emphasizes in the following words of Odogwu that purity of mind and body is an important element of traditional Igbo performances:

Odogwu: I have critically examined the prescriptions. My dear father died longtime ago, I am married and have a son. I have never polluted myself through involvement in the vices enumerated. I know myself more than you do (36)

Although traditional Igbo dance is very artistic and entertaining, Nwabueze succeeds in informing his audience of its ritualistic aspect and the need for participants to investigate before partaking in any cultural activity. He emphasized that Abia “dance is so intricate that you think you know but you do not know the meaning of what you think you know” (Nwabueze, 35).

Nwabueze in the play presents traditional performances as cultural activities with religious undertone that may not be observed by the uninitiated members of the community. He further reiterates the need for proper knowledge of the intricacies behind traditional performance to enable the participants in such activities to fully conversant with what he is embarking on. Thus Odogwu informs his uncle that before taking the decision to participate in the dance, he had investigated its requirements. Elements of spiritual attachment in traditional Igbo performances are evidenced in the play. The performer is believed to be spiritually possessed by the spirit behind such cultural performances. Odogwu narrates what happened thus:

Odogwu: Most of my actions and reactions are spontaneous. I am not a superstitious person but I felt as if there are forces pushing my every movement and directing

my actions...Believe me, I don't believe I was the author of everything I did in that arena (35).

Nwabueze also demonstrates in the play that majority of those that eschew themselves from participating actively in Igbo cultural activities are mostly those that in one way or the other violated the norms, hence are afraid of the consequences. Thus Ugoada, Odogwu's wife tries to dissuade him from participating in the performance because she is scared of divulging her infidelity secret. This fear prompts her utterances below:

Ugoada: My spirit is reluctant to accommodate the activity. I have the feeling that this is a time of catastrophe and disaster. One has to be careful with everything he embarks upon especially in the traditional society, (30).

In the same vain Okosisi's objection to Odogwu's participation in the dance is also prompted by his fear of the consequences of his illicit relationship with Odogwu's mother that resulted to his birth. Okosisi is aware that if Odogwu partakes in the dance, he being his biological father will definitely die. He therefore strives to fault the Abia dance to discourage Odogwu in order to sustain his secret. The play also discusses the importance of purification rites in Igbo cultural performances. When the stipulations of any Igbo cultural performance are contravened, especially in error, the offender is offered the opportunity of appeasing the ancestors by undertaking some purification rites. Engulfed with the dismay of what he has gotten himself into, Odogwu asked:

Odogwu: wise one, is there any way of atoning for it. What is the solution to this?

Agidigbo: yes, there is solution. You will be free from the wrath of the gods only if you un-dance the dance.

Odogwu: No sacrifices to the ancestors?

Agidigbo: just un-dance the dance. Once you do it, there is nothing to worry about.

Public confession is emphasized here as form of atonement when there is a breach in traditional Igbo performances. Violators of cultural norms are encouraged to confess openly for their offence to be forgiven and accepted by the community and avert the imminent dangers of their offence most especially when such offence is in error. Thus Agidigbo advises Odogwu thus:

Agidigbo: Assemble the crowd again. Tell them that you have no more faith in the dance that you inadvertently danced in error, that you have realized that you were lacking in some of the requirements of the dance, I'm sure the audience will understand your meaning.(81).

The participatory nature of Igbo traditional performances is also seen in the play. In the course of the dance, the entire community forms the audience and they contribute in one

way or the other in the performance by responding to the chorus, clapping and moving from one point to the other

In traditional Igbo society, performances are presented by a group of people connected by age, marital status, social status, or even religious status among others. This is evidenced in the play as Nwabueze informs his audience that the years' performance is to be presented by Odogwu's age grade. Excerpts:

Odogwu: ...I know it is the turn of our age grade to perform this year but ... (27)

Also in the play, Nwabueze tries to alleviate the fear that traditional Igbo performances are avenues for the practice of sorcerers and witchcraft. Abia Dance is exonerated by the playwright from such mundane activities thus:

Ugoada: what if they try their charms on him. What if they try to bewitch him? There are a lot of evil men in this community and I don't want my husband to be firing point for village sorcerers.

Obi: Sorry Madam, Abia dance is a traditional activity that does not involve such mundane demonstration of occult power. It is merely a social affair (33).

Igbo culture is currently being threatened by globalization and cultural imperialism. The need for promotion and preservation of Igbo culture becomes inimical in situations like this because culture is the people's identity. Cultural promotion and preservation can only be achieved through cultural awareness. The play is a clear demonstration of cultural promotion / preservation through drama. Nwabueze uses dance in the play, *Rainstorm in the Dessert* as a cultural performance to highlight various characteristic of Igbo cultural performances to his target audience for proper expression and documentation for generations unborn.

Having tried to present drama as essential tool for cultural promotion and preservation, the paper advocates that playwrights should explore the various Igbo cultural performances by inculcating them in their works. Community heads and Pro Igbo culture advocates can contribute in this campaign by sponsoring plays with thematic content of cultural promotion and preservation to encourage cultural promotion and preservation through plays.

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