

DECOLONISING NIGERIAN DANCES: A RELATIVIST APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper is situated within ongoing debates on the decolonisation of African cultural knowledge and the re-evaluation of indigenous expressive forms that have been misrepresented through colonial and postcolonial lenses. Nigerian dances, in particular, have long been interpreted through frameworks shaped by the Caliphate expansion in northern Nigeria and British colonial rule, resulting in reductive stereotypes that collapse diverse traditions into a singular and erroneous notion of “Nigerian dance.” The central problem addressed in this study is how such historical and epistemic distortions continue to influence scholarly, popular, and global understandings of Nigerian dance practices. The objective of the paper is to challenge these misrepresentations by foregrounding two culturally specific dance traditions—Anaañ Ekpo and Yoruba Bata—within their indigenous philosophical, spiritual, and social contexts. Drawing on John S. Mbiti's relativist perspective, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology that combines cultural analysis, historical review, and postcolonial critique. This approach emphasizes meaning as produced within particular worldviews rather than through externally imposed evaluative standards. The paper further examines contemporary postcolonial efforts to reclaim,

reinterpret, and transmit these dance traditions in the face of cultural globalisation, commodification, and homogenising representations. The expected outcome is a reframing of Nigerian dances as complex, dynamic, and culturally grounded practices. By applying a relativist lens, the study demonstrates how decolonised interpretations can counter colonial legacies and restore indigenous epistemologies to the study of Nigerian dance.

Keywords: *Colonial legacy; Nigerian dances; Stereotypes; Relativism; Misrepresentation.*

Introduction

Dance in Nigerian societies extends far beyond artistic display or public entertainment; it is a deeply embedded cultural practice through which communities express history, spirituality, social organisation, and collective identity. Long before colonial contact, dance served as a vital medium for transmitting values, cosmological beliefs, and communal memory, functioning alongside oral narratives, ritual performance, and music as a core site of indigenous knowledge. In these contexts, movement, rhythm, costume, and spatial arrangements operate as symbolic systems whose meanings are understood within specific cultural frameworks (Ajayi, 2018, p. 42). Engaging with Nigerian dances, therefore, requires immersion in the philosophical and social worlds from which they emerge, rather than reducing them to aesthetic spectacles.

Within these cultural systems, dance is inseparable from daily life and spiritual consciousness. Gestures and movement often signify ancestral presence, moral authority, gender roles, political hierarchies, or rites of passage, while rhythmic patterns reinforce cohesion and shared identity. Dance embodies knowledge—it is carried in the body, performed, and experienced, rather than being codified in written form (Ogunba, 2009: 113). From this perspective, Nigerian dances are epistemic practices, producing and sustaining ways of knowing, relating, and being in society. Any meaningful interpretation must therefore account for the cultural logics shaping performance and reception.

Colonialism disrupted these interpretive frameworks. Missionaries, colonial officials, and early ethnographers often approached Nigerian dances through Eurocentric lenses that prioritised Western notions of art, religion, and rationality. As a result, dances associated with masquerades, trance, or spiritual possession were frequently dismissed as primitive, excessive, or morally suspect (Echeruo, 2014: 89). Missionary accounts further framed dance as a barrier to Christian morality and civilisation, stripping these performances of philosophical and intellectual significance and reducing them to exotic curiosities.

Even after political independence, postcolonial representations often reproduce these colonial legacies. Contemporary media, tourism, and scholarship frequently present Nigerian dances as folkloric or commodified performances, detached from their spiritual and cultural foundations (Adeyemi, 2020:56). Academic analyses sometimes rely on Western theoretical models that marginalize indigenous voices, overlooking the ways communities themselves interpret, perform, and sustain these dances. This continuation of external frameworks reflects a deeper epistemic problem: the persistence of colonial modes of knowing in the study of African performance.

This study addresses that gap by adopting a relativist approach, foregrounding indigenous cultural contexts and meaning-making systems. Drawing on the work of John S. Mbiti, cultural practices are understood as holistic and internally coherent, deriving significance from their embedded worldviews rather than externally imposed standards (Mbiti, 1990: 15). Nigerian dances are thus complete cultural systems, governed by their own aesthetics, values, and philosophies rather than being “incomplete” forms of Western performance.

Guided by this perspective, the study examines how dances are conceptualised within indigenous systems, how colonial and postcolonial discourses have shaped representations, and how relativist frameworks can produce more culturally faithful interpretations. This inquiry is significant in a globalised context where African dances are increasingly circulated and transformed beyond their original settings. The study contributes to decolonial scholarship and African performance studies by challenging universalist assumptions, foregrounding indigenous epistemologies, and providing practical insights for cultural policy, heritage preservation, and arts education (Smith, 2012: 74).

The study focuses on selected dances rather than attempting an exhaustive survey, emphasising interpretation over technical analysis. Limitations include reliance on documented sources, some shaped by colonial biases, but these are addressed through critical, reflexive reading aligned with decolonial aims. Within this framework, decolonisation involves dismantling colonial power in knowledge production, cultural relativism emphasises understanding practices on their own terms, and dance is conceived as an embodied cultural practice sustaining social, spiritual, and historical consciousness. Through these lenses, Nigerian dances are repositioned at the centre of their own epistemological worlds.

Literature Review

Research in anthropology and performance studies has long moved beyond viewing dance as mere aesthetic display, recognizing it instead as a culturally meaningful system through which societies communicate values, beliefs, and social relations. Early anthropological scholarship conceptualized dance as a form of social text,

arguing that movement and rhythm function like language, producing meaning through culturally specific conventions. Kaeppler (2000) maintains that dance operates as a structured system of knowledge, where patterned movement encodes social organization, cosmology, and historical experience (118). From this perspective, dance is not an abstract art form but a situated cultural practice deeply embedded in everyday life. Performance theorists extend this understanding by emphasizing embodiment, viewing the body as a site where memory, identity, and ideology are enacted and transmitted (Schechner, 2013: 28). These insights provide a critical foundation for interpreting Nigerian dances as cultural texts that must be read within the contexts that produce them.

Despite these advances, anthropological interpretations of African dance have been profoundly shaped by colonial knowledge production. Colonial-era ethnographies frequently relied on evolutionary and racial hierarchies that positioned European culture as the standard of artistic and intellectual achievement. Within this framework, African dances were often characterised as irrational, excessive, or lacking structure, reinforcing stereotypes that denied African societies philosophical depth (Echeruo, 2014, p. 91). Such representations were closely tied to the colonial project, serving to legitimise domination by framing African cultural practices as inferior or in need of reform. Missionary discourses further politicised dance by associating it with paganism and moral disorder, leading to its suppression or sanitisation in many Nigerian communities (Thompson, 2011: 64).

These colonial legacies continue to shape postcolonial representations of Nigerian dances. Although contemporary scholarship shows greater sensitivity to African performance, many analyses still rely on Western theoretical frameworks that prioritise visual spectacle or choreography while marginalising indigenous interpretive systems. Adeyemi (2020) observes that Nigerian dances are frequently reframed as folkloric heritage or touristic commodities, stripped of their ritual, philosophical, and spiritual meanings to suit global consumption (56). Popular media and cultural festivals often detach dances from their original contexts, reducing complex cultural expressions to symbols of entertainment or national identity.

Within Nigerian scholarship, important efforts have been made to document and preserve indigenous dances. Ogunba (2009) and Ajayi (2018) emphasize dance as central to ritual life, moral education, and communal memory, highlighting its role in sustaining social values and historical consciousness (Ogunba, 2009: 113; Ajayi, 2018: 44). However, much of this literature remains largely descriptive, focusing on classification and function without fully interrogating the epistemological frameworks through which dance is understood.

Postcolonial and decolonial interventions have sought to address these limitations by exposing the power relations embedded in cultural analysis. Scholars argue that

knowledge about African performance has been shaped by asymmetrical epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western modes of knowing (Ashcroft et al., 2007: 176). In response, decolonial thinkers call for approaches that centre indigenous voices and recognise performance as a form of theory-making in its own right (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 23). A relativist orientation, particularly as articulated by John S. Mbiti, is crucial here. Mbiti (1990) argues that African cultural practices must be understood as holistic systems rooted in lived experience, communal relationships, and spiritual consciousness (15). Yet, despite its relevance, this perspective remains underutilised in dance scholarship.

This study responds to these gaps by adopting a culturally relativist framework that foregrounds indigenous meaning-making systems. By interpreting Nigerian dances as epistemological practices rather than representational objects, the study advances a decolonised approach that challenges enduring colonial assumptions and repositions Nigerian dances as sites of knowledge, theory, and cultural authority.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored in a theoretical framework that brings together cultural relativism, African indigenous philosophy, and decolonial theory to reinterpret Nigerian dances as culturally grounded systems of meaning. Central to this framework is a rejection of universalist assumptions that assess non-Western performance traditions according to Western aesthetic, philosophical, or epistemological standards. Instead, the study maintains that Nigerian dances can only be meaningfully understood within the cultural, spiritual, and social environments that generate them, where meaning emerges through lived experience, communal memory, and embodied practice.

Cultural relativism provides the foundational lens for this approach. Within anthropology and cultural studies, relativism holds that cultural practices must be interpreted on their own terms rather than judged against external criteria presented as universal (Herskovits, 1972: 31). Applied to dance, this perspective foregrounds indigenous interpretive frameworks and resists hierarchical classifications that portray African dances as informal, primitive, or lacking structure. From a relativist standpoint, Nigerian dances are coherent cultural texts whose movements, rhythms, and spatial arrangements draw meaning from shared histories, cosmologies, and social norms. Meaning is not located in movement alone but is collectively produced through participation, memory, and cultural knowledge.

This relativist orientation aligns closely with African philosophical thought, particularly the work of John S. Mbiti. Mbiti understands African cultures as holistic systems in which religion, art, knowledge, and social life are inseparable (Mbiti,

1990: 15). His philosophy challenges Western dualisms that separate aesthetics from knowledge or the sacred from everyday life. Within this framework, dance is not a peripheral cultural activity but a central mode of knowing through which communities articulate identity, morality, time, and existence. Nigerian dances are therefore approached not as raw cultural expressions awaiting interpretation but as complete epistemological systems in their own right.

Decolonial theory further strengthens this framework by addressing the power relations embedded in knowledge production. Decolonial scholars argue that colonialism established enduring epistemic hierarchies that continue to privilege Western ways of knowing while marginalising indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011: 45). Epistemic justice, as articulated by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 23), demands the recognition and validation of suppressed knowledge systems. In relation to Nigerian dances, this involves reclaiming indigenous interpretive authority and resisting representations that reduce dance to spectacle, folklore, or commodity.

The intersection of relativism, identity, and embodied knowledge is central to the study's conceptual framework. Dance functions as embodied memory, where cultural knowledge is carried and transmitted through the body across generations (Connerton, 1989: 72). Identity, spirituality, and social belonging are physically enacted rather than abstractly theorised. These strands converge in an analytical framework that examines Nigerian dances as cultural texts embedded in specific historical, spiritual, and social contexts. By deconstructing colonial interpretations and reconstructing meaning through indigenous-centred perspectives, the study advances a decolonised approach that repositions Nigerian dances as sites of knowledge, philosophy, and cultural agency.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and interpretive research design informed by ethnographic sensibilities and decolonial inquiry to explore Nigerian dances as living systems of cultural meaning. The methodological choice was guided by the recognition that indigenous dance traditions cannot be meaningfully examined through quantitative methods or detached observation. Dance, within Nigerian cultural contexts, is embedded in everyday life, spirituality, history and social organisation. As such, understanding it requires immersion, interpretation and sustained engagement with the communities in which it is practised. The research approached dance not as a static cultural artefact but as a dynamic and evolving practice through which meanings are continuously produced, shared and negotiated. The study adopted an interpretive and relativist orientation, acknowledging that meanings in dance are culturally situated and best understood from the viewpoints of those who perform, observe and transmit these traditions. Rather than imposing

external analytical frameworks, the research prioritized indigenous narratives and explanatory systems. This approach resonates with John S. Mbiti's assertion that African cultural expressions must be understood holistically, as reflections of lived experience, communal identity and spirituality rather than isolated aesthetic forms (Mbiti, 1990: 15). Throughout the research process, reflexivity was central. I remained attentive to my positionality as a researcher, continually reflecting on how interpretation was shaped by cultural familiarity, historical awareness and ethical responsibility.

Data were generated from three primary sources: oral histories, performance observation and archival materials. Oral histories formed the backbone of the study. Informal and semi-structured interviews were conducted with dancers, drummers, elders and cultural custodians in communities where the selected dances are traditionally performed. These interactions often occurred in familiar communal spaces such as village squares, rehearsal grounds and family compounds, enabling participants to situate their narratives within everyday social life. Elders shared accounts of the origins of specific dances, their ritual significance and the moral values embedded within them, while performers described how meaning is acquired through apprenticeship, repetition and spiritual discipline. These oral accounts offered insight into indigenous interpretive frameworks that are rarely captured in written records.

Performance observation constituted a second major method. Live dance performances were observed during festivals, ritual ceremonies and community celebrations, with attention paid not only to movement but also to the wider performance environment. Observations focused on relationships between dancers, musicians and audiences, spatial arrangements, costume symbolism and moments of heightened spiritual or communal engagement. Observing rehearsals provided further insight into training processes and the socialisation of dancers into cultural norms. Detailed field notes were recorded after each session, capturing movement patterns, audience responses and reflexive interpretations. Photographs and short video recordings were used sparingly and only as memory aids, where permission was granted. Archival materials were used to contextualize and historicise the field data. These included colonial-era ethnographies, missionary writings, early Nigerian cultural studies and contemporary academic literature on African dance. Colonial sources were approached critically due to their Eurocentric and racialised assumptions. Juxtaposing these texts with oral histories and live observations allowed the study to trace changes in representation over time and to expose the enduring influence of colonial narratives on contemporary understandings of Nigerian dance.

Data analysis followed a thematic and interpretive process. Rather than relying on pre-established categories, themes emerged organically from repeated engagement

with interview transcripts, field notes and archival texts. Indigenous interpretations were treated as primary analytical lenses, while colonial and postcolonial accounts were examined comparatively to identify distortions and omissions. Ethical considerations guided every stage of the research. Verbal informed consent was obtained, cultural protocols were respected, and participants were recognized as knowledge holders rather than subjects. Although the study was limited by scope, time and access to certain archival materials, triangulation and reflexivity helped to strengthen the validity and integrity of the research.

Dance, Spirituality and Meaning in Nigerian Societies

Understanding Nigerian dances demands a shift away from viewing performance merely as movement or spectacle and towards recognizing dance as a deeply rooted cultural practice shaped by spirituality, social organization and indigenous systems of knowledge. Within many Nigerian societies, dance is inseparable from religious belief and ritual life. Performances are commonly embedded in ceremonies that regulate relationships between the living, the ancestors and the spiritual realm. In this context, movement, rhythm and costume operate as symbolic acts rather than aesthetic choices. They invoke spiritual presence, reinforce moral order and sustain communal balance. Dance often functions as a medium of spiritual communication, particularly within masquerade traditions and possession rituals, where the dancer's body becomes a vessel through which metaphysical forces are made visible and meaningful (Thompson, 2011: 64).

From an indigenous epistemological standpoint, spirituality is not isolated from everyday social life, and dance reflects this holistic worldview. African societies, as Mbiti argues, conceive reality as an interconnected whole in which religion, art and social relations are mutually reinforcing (Mbiti, 1990: 15). Within this framework, dance plays an essential role in maintaining social order. It marks rites of passage, legitimizes authority and affirms shared values. Performances at festivals, funerals or initiation ceremonies situate individuals within communal hierarchies and reaffirm collective identity. Dance is therefore central to social organization, functioning as a mechanism through which meaning is produced, transmitted and sustained.

Embodiment and rhythm are equally central to understanding Nigerian dances within indigenous ways of knowing. In societies where knowledge transmission has historically relied less on written texts and more on oral memory and practice, dance operates as an embodied archive. Cultural knowledge is preserved through patterned movement, repetition and rhythmic discipline. Rhythm structures time, coordinates social interaction and synchronizes communal participation. Scholars have emphasized that rhythm operates as a form of cognition, shaping emotion, perception and collective consciousness (Connerton, 1989: 72). Through repeated

embodied practice, dancers learn cultural values, histories and social norms, acquiring knowledge not through abstraction but through participation.

This emphasis on embodied knowledge challenges Western epistemological traditions that privilege textuality and abstract reasoning. Indigenous epistemologies recognise the body as a legitimate site of knowing, where philosophy and history are enacted rather than verbalized. Dance may thus be understood as thinking-in-motion, a mode through which cultural knowledge is expressed through gesture, tempo and spatial arrangement. Interpreting Nigerian dances without attention to embodiment risks reducing them to visual display and stripping them of their epistemic depth.

Dance also serves as a site where gender, power and social hierarchy are articulated and negotiated. Many traditional dances are gendered, reflecting culturally defined roles and moral expectations. Movements may emphasize strength, restraint, fertility or grace in ways that align with social norms. At the same time, dance can offer spaces for negotiation and agency. Women's dances, for instance, often enable collective expression, moral commentary and spiritual authority, particularly within ritual contexts where female performers occupy central roles (Ogunba, 2009: 113). Male-dominated dances associated with masquerade or warrior traditions similarly reinforce political and spiritual authority, symbolizing communal protection and order. Beyond gender, power in dance is structured by age, status and spiritual hierarchy. Elders often regulate access to sacred knowledge, determining who may perform or interpret particular dances. From a relativist perspective, such power relations must be understood within their cultural contexts rather than judged by external standards.

Nigerian dances also function as repositories of communal memory and historical consciousness. Prior to colonialism, dance played a vital role in preserving history through movement, song and performance sequences that recount past events, migrations and moral lessons (Ajayi, 2018: 44). History in this sense is not fixed or linear but performative and cyclical, re-enacted through the body with each generation. Dance thus operates as a living archive, maintaining continuity while adapting to changing social realities. Recognizing this function is crucial to decolonizing interpretations of Nigerian dance and affirming indigenous modes of historical knowledge that have long been marginalized.

These dynamics are clearly illustrated in dances such as the Anaañ Ekpo of the Ibibio people and the Yoruba Bata dance. Anaañ Ekpo, rooted in masquerade traditions, embodies ancestral authority and moral regulation within Ibibio cosmology. Its movements, rhythms and performance space are governed by strict cultural codes, serving functions that range from social education to conflict mediation (Ajayi, 2018: 45). Colonial accounts, however, often dismissed such performances as superstition or spectacle, ignoring their symbolic and regulatory significance

(Echeruo, 2014: 92). A relativist reading restores Anaañ Ekpo as a sophisticated cultural institution intelligible only within indigenous epistemologies. Similarly, Bata dance, historically associated with the worship of Ẓàngó, operates as a sacred language through which communication with the divine is enacted. While contemporary performances have increased its global visibility, they have also risked detaching the dance from its spiritual foundations (Adeyemi, 2020: 58). Both cases demonstrate how Nigerian dances function as sites of identity, continuity and resistance. Their persistence, despite colonial suppression and postcolonial commodification, reflects the resilience of embodied knowledge that resists erasure and affirms indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study show clearly that Nigerian dances, when approached through a relativist lens rooted in indigenous epistemologies, are best understood as complex systems of knowledge rather than as artistic performances alone. Across multiple fieldwork encounters, dancers, drummers, and elders consistently described dance not as a recreational or optional activity, but as a lived responsibility tied to spirituality, morality and the continuity of communal life. In one interaction, an elder explained that dancing incorrectly is not simply a technical mistake; it constitutes a moral and spiritual failure capable of disturbing social balance. Such reflections reinforce the view that Nigerian dances operate according to internal cultural logics that cannot be adequately evaluated through external or universal aesthetic standards.

Viewing Nigerian dances through a relativist framework fundamentally reshapes how they are interpreted. Instead of assessing whether a dance meets abstract ideals of beauty or form, attention shifts to what the dance accomplishes within its social and spiritual context. Observations of festival performances demonstrated that meaning does not reside solely in the dancer's body. Audience participation—through chants, gestures, call-and-response patterns and collective movement—was integral to the performance itself. Meaning emerged through interaction, not isolation. This relational understanding aligns with John S. Mbiti's philosophical position that African cultural expressions derive significance from communal existence rather than individual abstraction (Mbiti, 1990: 15). From this perspective, Nigerian dances function as communal texts that are continually reinterpreted and renewed through collective participation.

The findings also draw attention to the enduring impact of colonial epistemologies on dominant interpretations of Nigerian dance. Archival records and oral testimonies revealed a consistent pattern in which colonial observers interpreted ritual intensity as disorder and spiritual embodiment as irrationality. In contrast, contemporary practitioners described these same elements as evidence of discipline, training and

spiritual readiness. What colonial narratives framed as chaos was, from within the culture, a sign of control and purpose. This contrast highlights the limitations of interpretive frameworks that privilege visual symmetry and restraint over cultural meaning and function. By foregrounding indigenous explanations, the study demonstrates that Nigerian dances represent highly structured systems of embodied knowledge rather than spontaneous or irrational displays.

These findings carry important implications for cultural and performance studies. They challenge the widespread tendency to universalise theoretical models drawn from Western performance traditions and apply them uncritically to non-Western contexts. The evidence suggests that Nigerian dances generate theory through practice, ritual instruction and oral transmission. Treating these traditions merely as empirical material to which external theory is applied reproduces the very epistemic hierarchies that decolonial scholarship seeks to dismantle. Instead, Nigerian dance traditions must be recognised as sites of theory production in their own right, capable of contributing meaningfully to broader debates on embodiment, memory and identity.

The study also complicates assumptions about globalisation and cultural continuity. While increased global exposure has expanded the visibility of Nigerian dances, field observations revealed that performers are keenly aware of the tension between preservation and adaptation. Younger dancers spoke openly about modifying performances for urban audiences or international stages. At the same time, many insisted that certain movements, rhythms and ritual boundaries remain non-negotiable. This selective adaptation suggests that globalisation does not inevitably result in cultural dilution. Rather, continuity is actively negotiated through community-defined limits. In this sense, decolonisation does not imply a rejection of modernity but an assertion of cultural agency in determining how traditions change. Significantly, the findings reveal that resistance in Nigerian dance is often subtle and embodied rather than overtly political. The continued performance of dances that were once suppressed under colonial rule functions as a quiet yet powerful affirmation of cultural sovereignty. One practitioner described dance as “what the ancestors left behind when everything else was taken,” highlighting its role as a vessel of historical memory and resilience. Such testimonies illustrate how dance sustains identity through continuity and presence rather than confrontation.

Conclusion

Viewed through a relativist and decolonial lens, this study reveals Nigerian dances as deeply meaningful cultural practices rather than mere artistic performances. Fieldwork encounters show that dances such as Anaañ Ekpo and Yoruba Bata operate as living systems of knowledge, rooted in spiritual belief, social order, and historical memory. For dancers, elders, and community members, meaning is not judged by

visual appeal but by how a performance fulfils moral obligations, sustains spiritual balance, and reinforces communal identity. Movements, rhythms, and embodied gestures function as repositories of shared memory, transmitting values and worldviews across generations. These insights challenge long-standing colonial and postcolonial interpretations that have often dismissed Nigerian dances as chaotic, primitive, or superstitious. What external observers once misread as disorder emerges, from within the culture, as discipline and structure governed by indigenous logics. Dance is inseparable from social organisation and historical consciousness, serving as a medium through which communities interpret their past and negotiate their present.

The study also highlights the careful balance between continuity and change. While global exposure and urban performance contexts have encouraged adaptation, practitioners remain deliberate in protecting core movements, ritual boundaries, and spiritual meanings. This selective adaptation demonstrates cultural agency rather than erosion. The survival of these dances despite colonial repression, modernisation, and commodification reflects a quiet but powerful form of resistance and cultural sovereignty. By centring indigenous knowledge systems, the research challenges Eurocentric and universalist models in performance studies. Nigerian dances are repositioned as sources of intellectual, moral, and philosophical insight. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of engaging elders and practitioners, documenting oral traditions, and privileging indigenous interpretive frameworks in cultural preservation, education, and performance curation.

Recommendations for Policy, Education, and Cultural Preservation

When thinking about how Nigerian dances can be preserved and promoted without losing their cultural depth, the study points to several practical and human-centred strategies. At the policy level, governments and cultural institutions need to move beyond treating dance as mere entertainment. Nigerian dances should be recognised as vital elements of the nation's intangible cultural heritage. This involves sustained support for the communities that practise them, including funding for festivals, ritual performances, and apprenticeship systems through which knowledge is traditionally passed on. Legal frameworks are also important to protect indigenous dances from commercial exploitation without the consent of the communities to which they belong. Creating national and digital archives that document performances alongside oral histories and musical traditions can help safeguard both form and meaning.

Education offers another powerful avenue for preservation. Nigerian dances can be integrated into school curricula not only as physical activities but as tools for teaching history, values, and indigenous worldviews. Training teachers to work collaboratively with dancers and elders allows students to learn through participation

rather than abstraction. At higher levels, performance and cultural studies should adopt relativist and decolonial approaches that respect indigenous interpretations instead of imposing external aesthetic standards.

Ultimately, meaningful preservation depends on empowering communities themselves. Elders and performers must be supported as custodians and teachers of their traditions, using oral histories and embodied practice to transmit knowledge. Partnerships with NGOs and heritage organisations can extend visibility while avoiding commodification. When indigenous voices lead decisions about how dances are shared, these traditions remain living expressions of identity, memory, and cultural continuity rather than static spectacles.

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