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COSTUME IN *NKWA UMUAGBOGHO* MUSIC AND DANCE

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Abstract
This article specifically addresses the cultural significance of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume and performance in modern Nigeria. *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is the label for a genre/style of Igbo maidens' cultural dance and its ensemble of musicians, dancers, costumiers, and instrumentalists within Afikpo, southeast Nigeria. Relying on notes from ethnographic fieldwork alongside statements from interviewees, as well as the extant literature on Igbo dances, cultural studies, sociology, and ethnomusicology, we present and discuss reasons for the changing trends to *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume, and also argue that they demonstrate the complex philosophical and sociocultural lines of intersection and distinction in relation to a notion of identity, tradition, and originality.
Keywords: Nkwa Umuagbogho, costume, tradition, Igbo dance, Afikpo
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Introduction

This article is the result of my interest in documenting both tangible and intangible changes in Nigerian traditional music and dances, which are being influenced by the forces of globalisation. The dance of a particular group of people or community speaks to their lives and arguably reflects their culture – of who they are, their common norms and values, and shared aspirations. For Rust (1969), dance is the basis of survival of a people because it is present during birth, circumcision, the consecration of maidens, marriages, deaths, planting and harvesting, a conferment of chieftaincy and other titles, coronation, hunting, war, work, festivals and feasts, and education. As well, "people dance for either recreation or amusement" (Kajobi 1974, 25). Among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria are dances for children, adolescents, adults, men and women, and masquerades. These include *Ikorodo*, *Mkpokiti*, and *Egedege* of Nsukka, *Egwu-Torch* of Idemili, *Atilogwu* of Ezeagu and, with reference to this article, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* of Afikpo. So, granted that there have been some changes to *Nkwa*

Umuagbogho costume and performance aesthetics in the twenty-first century, why am I keen on exploring and documenting them now? It is primarily because of the paucity of literature on *Nkwa Umuagbogho* in relation to a notion of functionality, change and continuity, and what Thomas Eliot calls the theory of preservation. According to him, "Even the humblest material artefact, which is the product and symbol of a particular civilization, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes" (Eliot 1949, 168). Furthermore, "preservation is not about holding onto the past, but keeping wisdom alive for the future", (Ford, B.M. 2024). This gave a great support to the researchers' ideology of documenting *Nkwa Umuagbogho's* costume which will help to unravel the past and present costume position.

Nigeria is a vast country with numerous and diverse genres and styles of cultural music, dance, drama, and craft. The common denominator with these cultural expressions is a palpable effervescence of creativity in culture and culture in creativity. As such, observing any artistic performance from and/or within Nigeria reveals an unspoken understanding of tradition and a tradition of understanding that preserves, for example, its musical arts and culture while also opening it up to other influences and innovation. Accordingly, Nigerian musical arts and culture is the "totality of processes, praxes, modes of dissemination and consumption, as well as the history of art, folk, popular and film music in or from Nigeria" (Sylvanus 2020, viii). In other words, the proprietary artefacts of a musical culture range from core musical attributes such as genres, style, instruments/instrumentation, language, dance forms, musical theatre, danced dramas, minstrelsy, musical forms, and compositional and performance practices. They also include indigenous music technology, extra-musical attributes of art, costumes, stage/backdrops, props, performance locations, the economics of their musical enterprise, forms of remuneration, social identity, as well as issues of (gendered) power and the politics of representation. These and other aspects together inform the musical arts/culture of a society. The same culture has expression in language, costume, cuisine, songs, folklore, narratives, theatre, and festivals – all of which coalesce to confer it with its own inviolable spirit and cultural autonomy.

The notion of an inviolable spirit and/or cultural autonomy further sustains the need for and relevance of gatekeepers or overseers whose core role is to decide on not only what and how, but also the degree to which such a culture influences and is influenced by others. One such musical arts tradition is the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* (lit., cultural dance for young unmarried women) of the Afikpo (Igbo speaking) people in Ebonyi state, south-eastern Nigeria. Specifically, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is the name for a genre/style of Igbo maidens' cultural dance as well as the ensemble of musicians, dancers, costumiers, and instrumentalists who perform it. The term cultural dance has been defined as "a practice [and] way of life [that] typically includes having a cultural or regional influence and is choreographed to cultural music" (Conner et al. 2021, 72). For the avoidance of doubt, there are various traditional music and cultural dances in Ebonyi, including *Nkwanwite, Odumagwu, Ugwogo umu, Ayita, Akanchawa, Odabara,* and *Oganiru*. These and other cultural dances within Afikpo have since been organised into seven categories by Agha (2004). According to him, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* alongside four others belong to the "social dance" category (Agha 2004, 26). I have, thus,

focused on *Nkwa Umuagbogho* because it is the most prominent and patronised social/cultural dance.

As the most popular traditional music and dance of Afikpo origin, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* has been performed both locally and internationally, and by Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike. Unsurprisingly, the dance's level of popularity has resulted in much mediation, negotiation, modification, and revision of those aspects that give it its objective identity. This is possible because "African musics and dances in Europe [and elsewhere outside the continent] covey an image of Africa that is still partly exoticised" (Cimardi 2022, 4). The particular aspects that underpin an authentic *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance include (1) the use of songs and song-texts in Afikpo language, which has a very negligible dialectical similarity with mainstream Igbo language, (2) the dance's original routine and rules and, as the focus of this article, (3) the aesthetics of its traditionally sourced costume and paraphernalia (discussed fully later). For example, the Afikpo word for water is "*mini*," while in mainstream Igbo it is called "*mmiri*." If, as part of the song-text, *mini* was changed to *mmiri*, then this would have arguably robbed the dance of its culturally specific, non-categorical and linguistically marked milieu. Similarly, if (as shown later) aspects of the costume were modified, the outcome would to some degree aesthetically contest the regional authenticity and cultural integrity of the dance. Granted also that dance is in and of itself a symbolic language, all (un)intended errors and modifications to the traditional *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance steps would equally work to mischaracterise and miscommunicate both symbolic meaning and originality to the culture-insider/outsider. This is possible because dance is a non-verbal, gestural, and communicative art form whose meaning inheres in the specific spatio-temporal context, occasion, setting and audience within which and before whom it occurs.

Consequently, this scholarly intervention heeds the advocacy that "such constantly evolving aspects as performance, processes of production, and forms of consumption require new and updated knowledge" (Sylvanus 2020, viii). And so, borne out of the desire to celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of cultures, as well as augment the deficit in literature, this article interrogates the cultural significance of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume and the effects of any modification on performance aesthetics for their relevance and contribution to global dance and cultural studies.

In terms of the methodology, data have been sourced from extensive fieldwork and detailed fieldnotes, consented interview sessions with some gatekeepers and practitioners of the dance, audio-visual recordings, approved on-site photographs of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers' attires and paraphernalia, as well as a review of extant literature. Specifically, the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted and pieces of information were collected between late 2018 and early 2020. I visited Afikpo (the cultural capital of *Nkwa Umuagbogho*) and Abakaliki (the capital of Ebonyi state) and interacted with key practitioners, including Okoh Ogbonnia (the lead singer) and Chinedu Omeri-Otu who is the current leader and director of *Nkwa Umuagbgohgo*. Their personalised views and those of other overseers of the dance culture like traditional rulers, Queen mothers, local expert dancers/instrumentalists, and the cultural analysts (whose impressions and interpretations of the various "signs" and "symbols" of the music and dance) helped to shape our understanding of, say, seduction and other layered

meanings to the costume. The post-fieldwork involved the organisation and textual/synesthetic analyses of the gathered data, including interviews and musical transcriptions using, for instance, Keyword and Sibelius software, respectively.

As an outline, I present a (historical) background to and an overview of the literature on *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the music (of songs and instrumentation), as well as the aesthetics and traditional features of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance costume and paraphernalia. Finally, I interrogate the changes to the original costume to establish the reasons for such deviation and their implications (if any) within the crucible of cultural preservation, identity, and representation.

Nkwa Umuagbogho: background and literature

The Igbo are one of the most migrant ethnic nations in Nigeria. They are predominantly found in the south-eastern parts of the country and speak a language called Igbo. Their presence in many parts of Nigeria, Africa, and the world has been attributed to their predilection for commerce, politics, enterprise, and education. Enter renowned Igbo scholar Chinedu Nebo who, while speaking at the annual Ahiajioku Lecture in Owerri, southeast Nigeria, stated that:

> No other ethnic nationality is so massively dispersed within the [Nigerian] geographical zones as the Igbo. From Sokoto to Nembe, [and] Maiduguri to Lagos, they line the marketplaces, the transportation business, and the artisan market as hard-working and peace-loving citizens of one Nigeria. There is almost no village in Nigeria where the Igbo do not live and contribute their quota to its economic output. (Nebo 2010, 60)

As the Igbo people traverse the lands and seas, they carry with them their culture and identity markers in the forms of names, rituals, myths, values, food, beliefs, language, festivals, music, art, textiles, crafts and, with respect to the current article, dances. Among these itinerant Igbo are the people of Afikpo whose ancestral home is in present-day Ebonyi state (Figure 1). Ebonyi state has thirteen local government areas, and its savannah and semi-tropical vegetation support the growth of such cash and food crops as yam, cassava, rice, cocoa-yam, oranges, mangoes, palm oil, maize, and plantain. The state is also rich in solid minerals like gypsum, kaolin, lead, zinc, and marble. Some of the tourist attractions of Ebonyi include the *Amanchor* cave, *Ndibe* beach, Green Lake of Abakaliki, *Abakaliki Juju* hills, *Ishi Nweze* waterfalls, *Nkpumaturugbo Ngbo*, and the *Akpoha* perching rock. Culturally, every local county in Ebonyi state has one or more functional cultural dance ensembles, most of which have performed both at the regional and national/global levels.

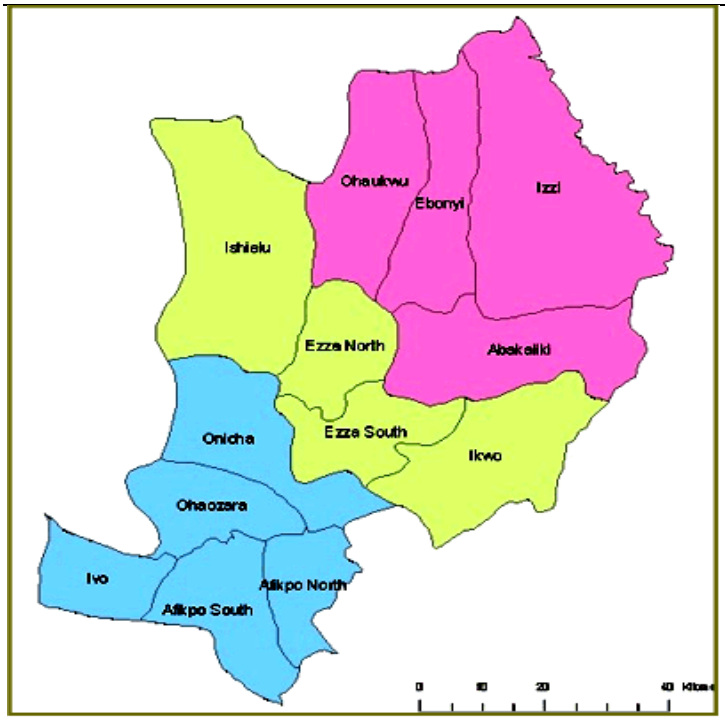


Fig. 1: The map of Ebonyi state
Source: Google.

Generally, the cultural dance of a particular group of people or community shapes (and is shaped by) their way of life and worldview. Like music, dance is one of the oldest performative art forms that is known to humans, and some scholars have even argued that dancing "plays a large part in everyday life of the primitive than it does in culture primarily because it was easier to express ideas by gesture than by speech" (Turner 1959, 10). Of this notion, Frances Rust has contended that dance "developed before speech and therefore functioned as a symbol of communication" (Rust 1969, 30). Accordingly, the evolution of dance as an art form in Africa may not differ greatly from elsewhere in the world. This is so because dances were (and continue to be) a part of rituals, festivals, and many socio-political events, including the worship of deities, rites of passage, marriage, birth and death, and so on. As such, Yerima (2005) is right to suggest that the origin of Nigerian cultural dances is inextricably linked to myths and legends that are preserved by/in folklore.

As may be found in other Nigerian culture areas, the Igbo ethnic nation has a plethora of dances for various seasons and reasons, including the new yam festival, the worship of ancestral spirits, masquerade performances, the celebration of land and water deities, wars, harvests, coronations, occupational activities, recreation, and numerous other rites. For example, whereas the *Alijah* dance of the Owerri people was created to celebrate the birth of a new-born baby, the *Agborugu* dance of the Mbaise people of the same locale was generated as part of a funeral ceremony for the deceased who led a very long and fulfilled life. To be clear, there are copious texts that discuss traditional Igbo music and dance (e.g., Hanna 1976; Onyeji 2004; Opara and Agbo 2022). However, no detailed study has been carried out on *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. The closest available work in relation to *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is by Agha (2004).

Although Agha's text is rather cursory, it does offer what I consider as a background to *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. Consequently, I shall defer to his work for only the contextual notes to the dance.

As stated at the outset, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is an Afikpo cultural dance that is traditionally performed at social events by young unmarried women. According to Agha (2004, 29), the dance itself "grew out of wrestling match dances" and, in subsequent years, both the interest and focus naturally pivoted towards the "important female [body] parts like the wiggling of the waist and [the] breasts, [which] stressed their [the maidens'] ripeness or adulthood and served as seductive elements in attracting young men who may desire a wife." The emphasis on seduction broadly aligns with some of the findings from research on sexuality and sex roles in African cultural dances by, for example, Stella Asare and Judith Hanna (see Asare 2014; Hanna 1989).

That said, the performance of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* was first conceived as something purely ceremonial. Historically, the dancing, singing, and drumming happened to announce and celebrate the victorious return of its wrestlers/warriors before a local Afikpo audience. Here, the dance was considered a final sacred event to "neutralise" any unfamiliar spirit that may have accompanied the warriors from the trenches of war and, consequently, reintroduce and re-integrate their heroes into the familiar human world. During the performance itself, the warriors were at liberty to marry any of the dancers. Although outside the scope of this article, this sort of practice offers a clue to how Africans deployed (and continue to deploy) dance as a therapeutic device. Of this notion, Conner et al. (2021, 73) have stated that "culturally oriented dance, and specifically traditional West African dance, has the potential to generate significant health benefits for dancers and communities, but is seldom scientifically studied."

Moving on, outside its source culture and owing to the forces of globalisation the *Nkwa Umuaghogho* cultural dance has in and of itself undergone much re-composition (discussed extensively in a separate text). According to a respondent, it was a certain Chief Vincent Omeri Nwachi (1932–2018) who, in the early 1970s, championed the idea to commercialise *Nkwa Umuaghogho* music and dance as a cultural product of Afikpo people. He did this by managing the contractual responsibilities and wellbeing of members of the ensemble, as well as securing performance and promotional deals often outside the host community and the ideological and social contexts of the dance. It was at one of those *Nkwa Umuaghogho* stately performances that Nigeria's first president Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe beheld Uche, a young dancer whom he later married.[1] Since then, the dance has gained much national, regional, and global prominence, and has been performed at various sociocultural festivals and dance competitions within Nigeria and around the world.

Numerically, the dancers of a typical *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance can range from four to more than ten persons (Figure 2). This number excludes the instrumentalists and lead singer/dancer who is usually equidistantly positioned among the first line of dancers. Over the years, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* song-texts functioned as a narrative device for communicating the daily sociocultural, economic, communal, political, and religious realities of Afikpo people. As such, previous lead singers or soloists were intentional about the choice of lyrics to guarantee

[1] Uche Azikiwe, who is a professor and member of the Faculty of Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, confirmed this to us in an interview. (Personal interview, January 19, 2020)

that the message was in the music just as the music was in the message (discussed further in Agha 2004). The focus on song and song-text was instructive not least because:

> Next to the local language, traditional music is the most widely used medium of expression for all manner of occasions and at all times and periods of life. Communities manipulate it to give voice and sound to their collective thoughts, actions, and even spirituality. In this way, while the people make use of music, the music makes use of them to imprint on character … [and] identity. (Okafor 2005, 35)

To date, however, emphasis appears to have gradually shifted away from the message in the songs to the message in the dance itself: of what its aesthetics, routine, rules of bodily movement, and costume may or may not reveal and signal to the viewer. One of the singers told us that "little [or no] interest has been given to words of [the] songs. [The] full attention or concentration is on the dance because that is the thing [that] people came to watch" (personal communication, June 10 2019).

Fig. 2: Some *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers from Afikpo.
Source: Author.

Furthermore, one of my field observation sessions revealed that it is possible to dance to purely instrumental music from the local ensemble of percussive instruments/instrumentalists who are capable of generating rhythms and melo-rhythms, which the dancers intelligibly decode and respond to in their steps (discussed further in Jayeola 2024). According to Meki Nzewi, melorythmic instruments are "those instruments which are made of wood, metal, and membrane-materials but are capable of a wide range of phonic-manipulations without producing defined pitches" (Nzewi 1991, 57). Thus, it might be argued that modern *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performances and its reception inheres more in the integrity of the dance than in the song-text. Consequently, the dancers' costume is just as important for discerning both identity and symbolic meaning as the dance steps that they display to the target (local) audience. This statement suggests that the degree of change in the features of the costume could arguably affect how the dance is (or might be) read. If so, what are the original features of *Nkwa Umuagboho* costume? But our understanding of this aspect cannot be complete without first scrutinising the music and its performance style. In other words, the songs and song-texts are just as important for discerning both identity and symbolic meaning as the dance steps and

costume that they display to the target (local) audience, especially because the dancers move simultaneously and spontaneously to both vocal and instrumental music. So, what do those *Nkwa Umuagboho* songs and song-texts sound like? How, if at all, do they differ from the music for other indigenous Igbo dances? As well, how are they to be approached in practice and literature?

Nkwa Umuagbogho songs and song-texts

It is common knowledge that music accompanies most dances in Igboland, Nigeria and indeed many parts of Africa. Specifically, the music of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* derives from musical notes that belong to both diatonic and pentatonic scales. Broadly, the melodies use three to seven tones within an octave. As shown later, the tones are derived from heptatonic modes, while some other tones are restricted to a smaller ambitus. Many variations exist within these different scale types, and these arguably depend on the performer's ability to vary the size of intervals within the scale. In terms of pitch, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs more or less depend on the quality of the lead singer and, to some degree, the vocal capability of those who sing the refrains. Indeed, there is the possibility for occasional tonal shifts and tone clusters; however, the songs rarely depart from their "tonal centres". Structurally, the melodies of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs offer great flexibility in the choice of intervals and melodic contours, which broadly make use of intervals of seconds, thirds, and fifths. In the current text, some in-field recordings of preselected *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs were transcribed and scored primarily for the purpose of analysis, which hereafter appear in the relevant section(s).

To date, this maidens' dance has developed to express various intricately choreographed local dance styles, including *odugbe, itike, chamkpuruegede*, *ewele* or *ebini, pinpin, ogala uzo,* and *nkwa*. Together, these styles form the order of routine/presentation that climax with a performance by the maidens themselves. For some nuance, a few words about these styles in the aforementioned order should suffice. *Odugbe* is the premier stage of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance and features athletically built young men who appear on stage to express their readiness for a wrestling contest. These men do so by raising their shoulders and stomping their feet to the sounds of the drums and calls of the praise singer. My ethnographic observation shows that this style is usually not performed in many social gatherings. Indeed, this opening routine is reserved for special occasions. Assuming that *odugbe* is featured, it is normally followed by the *itike* style, which mainly features two wrestlers. They dance to the stage and show off their muscles and physical fitness for the fight. This also involves a boastful sizing up of each other's chest, a subtle smacking of the muscles of the biceps and chests before finally proceeding to wrestle. To be clear, these fights are generally for entertainment and thus involves much simulation – something akin to America's WWE Smackdown wrestling show. As a penultimate climax to the dance, *chamkpuruegede* offers the concluding routine to the wrestling contest. It is usually performed either by a young male or female who celebrates the winner of the wrestling match in a circular movement. Enter the *ewele* style (also known as *ebini*) to further foreshadow *Nkwa Umuagbogho* proper. This style is mostly performed by the children to express their joy in dance to the winner of the wrestling contest. This is immediately followed by the *pinpin*, which is performed by girls who are not yet old enough to be married.

Their ages range from twelve to sixteen years old. *Pinpin* prepares the mind of the audience for the finale - the *nkwa* style.

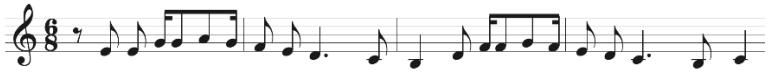
At this juncture, selected maidens or a few of the principal dancers then take to the stage with a handkerchief in either hand and perform a brief somewhat introduction to the main dance in a relatively slow tempo. This is referred to as the *ogala uzo*. Each dancer then gives their handkerchief to the winner of the dance, as well as other contestants. This is swiftly followed by the *Nkwa umuagbogho* performance itself. Here, the adult maidens file out onto the stage in even numbers – often in twos. The main body movement here is the supple wriggling of the hips and waist. Each dancer does so with the *jigida* (waist beads) to enhance the aesthetic appeal. The *Nkwa Umuagbogho* lead dancer dictates the pace and dance steps to the rest of the ensemble by cueing them with pre-rehearsed statements or ululation (spontaneous vocal calls), as well as facial and hand gestures for changes to footwork and other subtleties. Various steps in this closing style include what I have labelled as: (1) the *individual style*, which allows an individual dancer to use her waist in a free expression of the various rhythmic patterns from the instrumentation; (2) the *group or tutti style*, which features all movements in a synchronised manner; and (3) the *dramatic style*, which the maidens use as a coda to educate, express, and convey some of the society's cultural norms and values. This is a short danced-drama with the appropriate melo-rhythmic instrumental accompaniment.

Having said these, what do the songs and song-texts sound like, what meanings do they convey, and how are we to read the cultural significance inherent in them? From my fieldnotes, over thirty songs used during *Nkwa umuagbogho* performances were collated, recorded, categorised, and transcribed. For the avoidance of doubt, my research shows that there are six categories of *Nkwa umuagbogho* songs, namely: songs of love and beauty, songs of admonishment, songs of appeasement, proverbial songs, songs of praise, and songs of danger. However, granted that many of these songs broadly adhere to the same formal, tonal, and structural organisation, I shall present and analyse only one with its respective song-text. This will be followed by a brief discussion of such theoretical underpinnings of *Nkwa umuagbogho* songs as functionality and the transference of symbolic meaning in relation to cultural identity.

***Ogeruo*: song and song-text analysis**

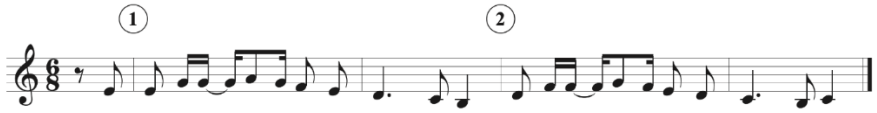
Ogeruo means "It is time." This song belongs to the category of love and beauty, and is often used as a *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance opener. Like most *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs, *Ogeruo* is a very short piece that lasts only a minute and four seconds long. The song begins with a section of drums only. This is followed by the lead singer and all the way to the end. There are three ululations in this song. Ululation is a common feature in most Nigerian (and even African) traditional music performances. The ululations in *Ogeruo* lay outside of the established tempo and rhythm of the instrumentation. In terms of scale, *Ogeruo* sometimes appears diatonic and, other times, hexatonic (i.e., a six-tone scale) with C=D=E=F=G=A, and without the note B. This could be the result of possible antiphonal singing from church music, which could have unconsciously made the song and singer go with an "F" and/or "B" (Example 1).

Example 1: Diatonic melody in *Ogeruo.*



In musical Example 1, one can distinguish two phrases of two measures each – the second being the translation of the first a degree lower (Example 2). This transposition is modal and respects the unity of the scale, and thus cannot be a tonal transposition because it would lead the song, for instance, from D minor to C minor. Also, both parts 1 and 2 are not strictly parallel, since the ending on D is followed by a stop on the sub-tonic low B (part 1) a definitive end on C (part 2).

Example 2: *Ogeruo* melodic phrase divisions.



I also note that the voices are in the call-and-response form. That said, some of the phrases and/or lyrics appear repeated often depending on the performance time and ambience. The singers did not perform in "key C". Rather, the note C was chosen in this analysis for analogy purpose only. The musical notes used then ranged from B below the middle C and up to B above the middle C. The endnote C can be categorised as a linear cadence. The choir sings in modal parallelism and alternates between minor and major thirds in harmony with occasional fourths.

Lyrically, the song-text, which is presented below, has been translated into the English language. The text offers an insight into the thoughts of the dancers and why they have appeared on stage before a local audience.

Ogaeruo mgbe anyi an-abia e e ya eee	The time has come for us to dance
Oruo mgbe-anyi naabia bia l'ere egwu anyi	It is time to see us perform our dance
Onuru egwu-anyi bata	On hearing our dance/song
Bia lere egwu di mma	Come and witness a beautiful dance
Egwu di mma puta	A beautiful dance appears
Ya adighi mma gi alaba	If you do not like it, you may go
Anyi achoghi obi'we eeee	We do not need grudges
Onye nwere obi ne laba eee ya eee	Anyone with grudges should go

Functionalist scholars like Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcot Parsons, and Robert Merton maintain that if something exists in society, it must have a purpose for its existence and, hence, serve some kind of function. The notion is used to express the way in which collective beliefs, values, and mores combine to create a shared sense of consciousness about various aspects of the social world within which a people exist. In effect, it reflects the idea that "society" is very much alive – just like a human being is alive – and the conscience of society is expressed as a kind of "totality" of the beliefs and values of people who belong to that society. In effect, the collective conscience represents the will of society as a whole, just as the individual conscience represents the will of particular individuals. The functionality theory also contends that literature is and ought to be relevant to the society that has birthed as

well as nurtures it. The theory explains that literature plays a major role in effecting and affecting social and intellectual changes within the community. In this way, literature becomes a potential weapon used to bring about enduring positive changes in the community that engenders it. In Igbo traditional communities, oral poetry and/or songs are significant to functionality because they are a part of everyday life. This accounts for why the oral art forms have persisted over generations. More specifically, music is of fundamental importance to everyday life of Afikpo people. To this end, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs are functional because they serve many purposes, not least, marriage. Marriage unites a lot of people and, therefore, promotes merry-making that rely on a lot of singing and dancing.

Beyond being a significant component of the traditional marriage ceremony, *Nkwa Umuagbogho* songs are crucial for (re-)constructing the identities of womanhood in Afikpo. They do so in both overt and subtle ways that shape how women behave. Women's gender roles, for instance, are reinforced by these songs: the song-texts encourage the notion to get life partners or husbands as a thing of enviable status, which the unmarried does not enjoy. The songs, however, promote patriarchy in a benign sense by strongly encouraging women to respect men and not be vocal in marriage. Most of the songs encourage women to take care of their husbands even at the expense of their own lives. If a married woman forgets such an "integral" teaching, the relevant song(s) would normally help to reinforce it. In all, these songs help to reinforce the culture and mores of Afikpo people. Some of these norms may indeed appear primitive when juxtaposed with global trends in developed societies of the world; however, they work to preserve aspects that underscore originality for both scholarship and practice.

Traditional features of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance costume and paraphernalia

One of the core philosophies of the Igbo inheres in the word "Ahamefule," which loosely translates as "My name should not be lost". Ahamefule is broadly about cultural identity, which the Igbo covertly and overtly express in names, food, clothes/dressing, music, dance, language, art, and so on. As a concept, cultural identity focuses on "what we really are," "what history has done to us," "what we have become," and "the way we position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990, 223). In other words, cultural identity brings into perspective the *destiny* of a group of people – of established abstractions and specific localised attributes which they may not disavow. In the current text, however, costume is treated as a cultural identity conveyor, which, according to Ajani (2012, 109) has "evolved from being an object designed to cover nudity among humans or as an article for 'looking good' to an instrument for the display of cultural identity and solidarity."

Specifically, my in-person observation and fieldnotes reveal that the aesthetics of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume and paraphernalia are not only age-long, but also carefully considered dimensions which recourse to the dance's own locale of origin. Consequently, nearly all of the dominant features of the costume are from materials that are locally sourced, located, and/or produced within Afikpo. This is instructive for our conversation about the significance of culture here, not least for interrogating the effect of modernity on *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. Indubitably, the degree of exactitude or modification of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume either

stimulates affirmation or rebuke from the target audience. My investigation also reveals that the original *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume consists of different apparels, colours, adornments, and accessories. For some nuance, I list and describe below twelve of the fundamental and most common features of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume. For some pictorial evidence, the image of a fully clad *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancer with labelled accessories is given in Figure 3.

- *Ikanda*: is the Igbo word for feather. It is one of the adornments used to beautify the dancer's head gear. Traditionally, only two feathers on either side of the head are worn. Each feather usually appears in any combination of colours, often purple (or red), blue (or green), and yellow. Both feathers signify youth, virility, and maturity.
- *Eku-esu*: is a red head-tie used to hold the *Ikanda* firmly in place.
- *Nza*: is a horsewhip that symbolises both authority and royalty. Every dancer is required to perform with *Nza* in each hand to exude poise and elegance.
- *Nkwoche-nti*: are special earrings made out of red beads without which the maidens are not allowed to perform. These red beads culturally signify fertility. As such, it is a fundamental requirement that arguably completes the costume and its layered symbolic meanings.
- *Asa-olu*: is the local word for necklace. The necklaces are usually of different colours and the dancers are required to wear more than one necklace for each performance. Culturally, Igbo women and, by extension, women in traditional African societies are known for their indigenously made necklaces. These add to the aesthetic appeal of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers, while also complementing their attire. Consequently, *Asa-olu* is a mandatory cultural identity marker for the maidens to distinguish them from other maidens and older women at the performance arena.
- *Eku-era*: is a small piece of cloth used to cover up the breasts during performance. According to some purists of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* indigenous practice, the *eku-era* is the only approved cloth or form of covering for use during its performance.
- *Eku-uku*: is a skirt that is purposely made for the performance of *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. Its style, shape, and length are specifically tailored to aid the dancers' supple and intricate hip movements, leg and (sometimes acrobatic) foot work, and overall synchronicity of choreographed actions. Whereas red is the *Eku-uku*'s traditional colour, other colours may be used.
- *Eku-eka*: is an armband that helps to beautify the hands of the maidens, as well as add some aesthetic uniformity to the dancers' appearance and appeal.
- *Ase-eka*: is a wrist band that is worn on both hands of the dancers to signify strength.
- *Jigida*: are big three-fold beads worn around the dancers' waists and over the *Eku-uku*. The *Jigida* exaggerates the wriggling of the waist during the performance and, thus, heightens the degree of seduction and the viewer's mundane imagination. Culturally, it signifies that the maiden has capacity to procreate.
- *Ase-uku*: is the name for long waist beads that are nearly of equal length to and worn over the skirt.

- *Odo*: is a substance made from yellow wood. It is normally grounded into powdery form and used to paint artistic patterns on the dancers' legs.
- *Tike*: is typically zinc oxide powder. It is white in colour and artistically applied on the legs and other parts of the dancer's body to signify purity.

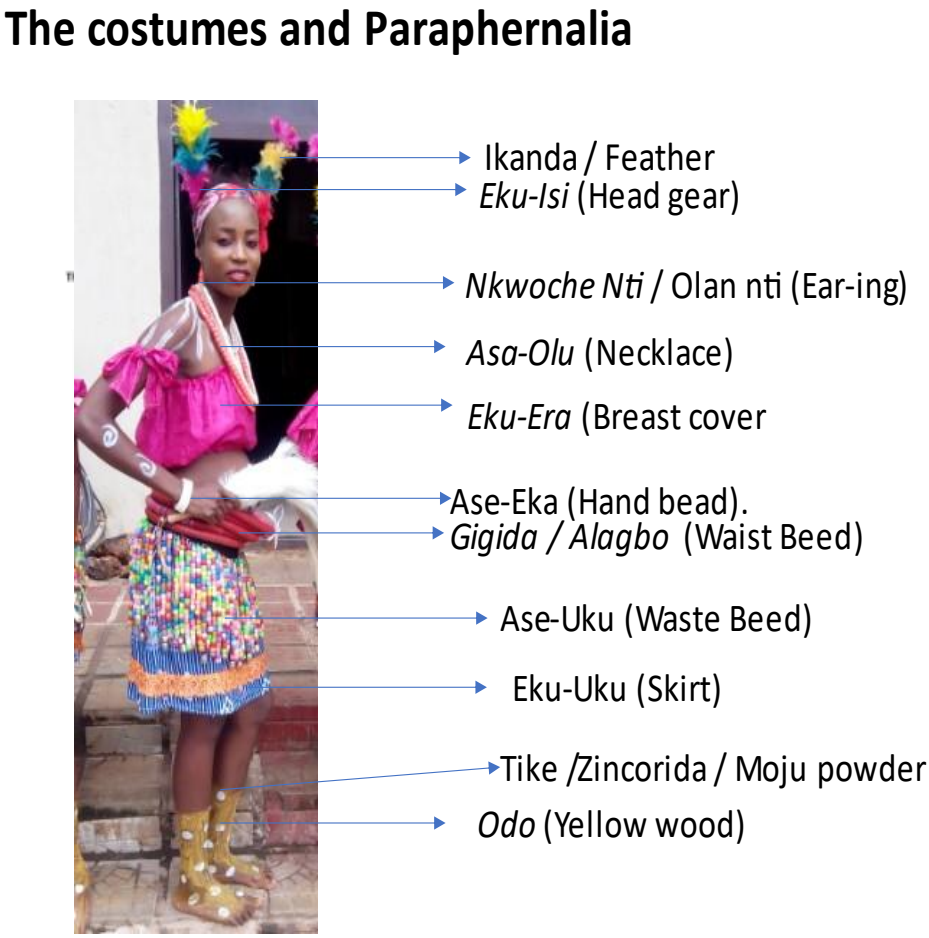


Fig. 3: A fully clad *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancer with labels.
Photo credit: author.

At risk of passing a value judgment on *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, I contend that while some obvious changes have been "introduced" to the dance, its contemporary target audience arguably understand the tradition and yet remain open to a tradition of understanding the need for and inevitability of change. What then has "modernity" done to *Nkwa Umuagbogho* traditional costume, and how might the concomitant change(s) be read in relation to cultural significance, identity, and sustenance?

From the original to the modernised: an understanding of tradition or a tradition of understanding?

Broadly, several world cultures have in more recent times been subjected to varying levels and degrees of adaptation and reform. These have been enabled by the processes of globalisation, which include global intellectual and capital flows, power structures, and faster ways of connecting and communicating (Giddens 1991), technology, migration, and new media (Grodin and Lindlof 1996), lived and imagined cultural influences/tensions, as well as the sustained socioeconomic benefits of the postmodern age. That said, one of the downsides of globalisation is what Erikson (1968) calls "a crisis of identity." Within the current text, the forces of globalisation have compelled notable dissimilarities between contemporary Igbo dances and their traditional archetypes. These differences further demonstrate the power of adaptation, negotiation, and transformation in and of traditional Igbo dances. Specifically, the different interpretations and approaches to *Nkwa Umuaghogho* costume (from the choice of fabric and adornment to the manner of dressing for the dance) by successive generations of adherents at home and in the diasporas have not only led to a cultural identity crisis, but also challenged the notion of tradition and its cultural significance and sustenance.

So, what exactly has been added to or removed from the original *Nkwa Umuaghogho* costume and paraphernalia? The information presented here have been corroborated in my interview with Chinedu Omeri-Otu who is not only the daughter of Vincent Omeri Nwachi, but also and more so the current director of *Nkwa Umuaghogho* in Afikpo. She told me that her decision to make some changes concerning aspects of the costume in particular was due mainly to her Christian religious beliefs. This reason alone is a tension point that echoes Thomas Eliot's idea of Christianity (i.e., the role of faith-based institutions) and culture, which in this context revolves around the evolution of traditional African cultural practices. Below is a list and discussion of the critical contemporary modifications to *Nkwa Umuaghogho* costume.

The use of footwear

For many decades, the use of footwear in most indigenous African cultural dances was rare. Some elders of Afikpo told us that *Nkwa Umuaghogho* dancers customarily performed without footwear to enhance both the beauty and clarity of synchronised footwork for the viewer. According to Chinedu Omeri-Otu, "Footwear was not part of the costume until the late 2000s when I took over from my late father as [the dance] director and decided to introduce it" (Personal communication, March 15, 2018). At a certain *Nkwa Umuaghogho* performance, one casual bystander noted that the use of different colours and designs of footwear "did not add beauty to the dance" (Figure 4). In other words, the use of footwear is not well-suited to an Afikpo-based dance aesthetic. While this statement may or may not be linked to ritual, spirituality, or legend, it remains a deviation that is comparable to watching a stereotypical prima ballerina perform classical European ballet without ballet shoes, indeed barefooted.

Fig. 4: *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers spotted in footwear.
Photo credit: author.

Starring non-maidens as dancers

As already established, this dance has for many decades been the exclusive preserve of young unmarried women. The featuring of married and sometimes pregnant women dancers in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* (as was witnessed during field observation) is arguably the most obvious and jolting change to date. This is a fundamental aberration for reasons that must be named: (1) it discourages eligible bachelors from attending such performances with a view to choosing a wife; (2) it blurs the rather conservative identity and intended symbolic meaning of the dance by contesting the original underpinning ideals for its creation; and (3) it changes the aesthetics of the costume when, for example, the dancer's previously exposed belly is now covered in order to accommodate a notion of decency that the society expects of married women. And so, there are instances where the *Eku-era* (i.e., the traditional covering for the breasts) is replaced with T-shirts, and the entire dance costume is jettisoned in favour of the statelier feminine cultural attire that predominantly promotes the use of wrappers (Figure 5). In defence of these developments, our respondents unanimously suggest that, in addition to the decency advocacy, the opportunity to earn money from the dance is principally why it has become an all-comers affair. And so, it is not uncommon nowadays to find a mix of spinsters and married women dancers in a *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance.

Fig. 5: *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers in T-Shirts and traditional wrappers.
Photo credit: 3rd Igbo World Festival of Arts & Culture.

Strange dance props and movements

To be clear, the most important and generally accepted bodily movements of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance are supple hip movements and vigorous wriggling of the waist. Today, however, dancers may be seen sitting, falling, and even lying down during a performance (Figure 6). These strange movements, which have been attributed to moments of excitement and overwhelming emotions, have equally inspired the use of new props as paraphernalia. For example, the *Nza* may now be replaced with sticks, which Chinedu Omeri-Otu argued "adds a new dimension to the dance" (Figure 7). Although the use of sticks offers a different spectacle to the dance, it equally robs the dance of its authentic aesthetic appeal, especially the cultural significance of the *Nza*, as well as the broad transference of symbolic meaning in the original and unaided dance routines.

Fig. 6: *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancers falling during a performance.
Photo credit: author.

Fig. 7: *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dancer using sticks.
Photo credit: author.

In all, I have presented and discussed some of the new trends in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance costume, which arguably range from the subtle to the most consequential. The aforementioned modifications to the traditional *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume might render it somewhat difficult for a culture-outsider (and even the insider sometimes) to readily identify the dance without prior information and/or performance notes.

Conclusion

As a summary and conclusion, these developments raise concerns about the complex philosophical and sociocultural lines of intersection and distinction in relation to a notion of identity, tradition, and originality. The fact that until the millennium, there was no obvious alteration to the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costume and paraphernalia suggests that an older generation of Afikpo people roundly determined the aesthetics of the dance. This has since changed; and a lot more may become of the dance and its costume in the near future. These changes create a purist–liberalist divide among the dance's adherents that essentially begs the question: does this trend demonstrate an understanding of tradition or a tradition of understanding on the part of contemporary *Nkwa Umuagbogho* practitioners? For me, the answer is both because this too is what identity is about – a two adversarial process that constantly requires the interrogation of its underpinning elements, which are never quite fixed and remain susceptible to the forces of change. In other words, both the "old" and "novel" *Nkwa Umuagbogho* costumes may dwell side-by-side, if only to provide a tapestry of its past, present, and future direction. These article will further serve as a bench mark to help scholars to in the files of ethnomusicology to continue African traditional research focusing on: costume, performance and identity.

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