

Dance as a Signifying Practice: A Study of *Iri-Agha*

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Abstract

Dance has been closely associated with humans in their day-to-day activities, yet the performers of dance art in Africa are treated with disdain on account of the often non-professional status of the form. But the main reason for this attitude, this study argues, is because many people do not understand the nature of dance and how it generates meaning. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the *Iri-agma* dance in relation to its mode of meaning generation. The paper clarifies issues on form and content and how the two generate meaning in dance. It recognizes the literal and non-literal modes of dance communication, using *Iri-agma* as a case of study, and ultimately submits that dance could and often does communicate through both form and content.

Introduction

Art is said to be as old as human society itself (Umuokoro, 2001:8). Historically, there has been some form of controversy over form and content of art. In the 20th century, the organic unity of form and content was subject to classic pronouncements. There had been formulated a dichotomy of form and content. Form is often used to indicate the physical shape of an artwork, in which case one can say, an artwork has a circular, angular or spherical form. And this could be seen in sculptures. Form also refers to the makeup of a thing. It gives an idea of what a particular thing is meant for or set to do. Simply put, content means what a particular artwork is saying. Dance as an art could be used in finding the modes of generating meaning from creation of form and content to the process and moment of signification.

Dance as Signifying Practice

The central focus of this study is to expound on dance art as a signifying practice. Signifying practices imply the meaning producing behaviors people engage in following particular conventions or rules. According to Susanne Langer,

No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgment, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing.... Consequently, there are numberless misleading theories about what dancers do and what they signify (1953:19).

There are two basic schools of thought that view the meaning of dance from different angles. The formalist feels that meaning in dance need not refer to specific dramatic character or situation or even to a personal emotion. Those of this school are of the view that what matter are the wonderful and beautiful things the body can do when it is not trying to say something. While those that, on the other hand view dance as a representational art form believe that the meaning in dance is based on its content. W. Ofotsu Adinku asserts that:

The relativists (representational) state that dance, all over the world, for instance, develops out of the influences of the society's artistic heritage and movements are linked to various ideas and feelings of the society and choreographers make use of these. To judge a dance without any link to the society's feelings and idea would, therefore, be robbing it of its extended meaning (1994:330).

Bakary Traore, discussing the role of dance among Negro-African peoples, sees dance as serving both the formalist and representational schools. He affirms that:

The dance also, by the use of the human body, reproduces the passions and actions of men in order to express a collective emotion, to teach a religious rite or simply to entertain. It can also enact a legend or a story (1972: 27).

Iri-gha dance can signify through the use of form, through content or through both.

Form

Formalist theories of dance see the reception of dance as the appreciation of aesthetic form, unaffected by external or extra-aesthetic consideration, such as representation. Talking about the beauty of form in dance, Selma Jeanne Cohen (1978:5) asserts that:

...We enjoy the movements of the ballerina without feeling the need to define their meaning. We take pleasure in the visual designs made by her body, in the harmony of her balanced poses, in the contrast between straight legs and gently curved arms. We take pleasure in the musicality of her phrasing, which gives emphasis at climactic moments and provides smooth transition between them.

We take pleasure in her control of dynamics; we enjoy these patterns for their own sake and interest even above their interest of meaning.

The Ozuruimo and Ugwuabia which are the umbrella festivals where *Iri-Agha* dance is usually performed see form as a radiance of beauty which is revealed in a conjugation of all the elements which make up the presentation, such as movement, music, props, costume, makeup and so on.

The movement style in *Iri-Agha* is determined by the nature of the Ohafia people. They are mostly farmers and hunters who dwell in the hinterland. *Iri-Agha* is an energetic dance. (<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/mccall/ohafia/index.htm>) This dance, an artistic 'hallmark' of Imo and Abia State of Nigeria, is native to the Ohafia area of Abia State. It is a war dance that re-enacts the traditional war exploits of the warriors of old. Here, the hard and rugged beats of the instrument determine the woven movements of agile male dancers as they demonstrate how the warriors fought and won the battle. The sequence of the dance (*Iri-Agha*) flows harmoniously with its fast movements from the beginning to the end. Some of the dance movements vary according to the context of the performance, though some movements remain primal to the identification of the dance. The dominant movement has a staccato quality, which suggests hesitation and the use of vibratory bodily gestures to signify anger and fright. The beauty of the dance is in the fast and monotonous movement of the chest. The staccato movement, which is the theme of the dance, stands for the transitory movement which bridges one sequence of meanings and actions and another in the plot. The wonderful manner in which the chest and legs interpret the rhythm of the music also marks the beauty of the dance.

In a typical performance, the dancers, who in most cases are eleven in number, come into the arena stage in groups following the cue from the lead drummer. The entrances of the dancers are staged in two segments. First, four dancers who take the lead in searching for an ambush of their enemies scatter into the four cardinal points of the stage forming a square within the arena where the audience members surround the performance area. The dance is presented and patterned so the audience can see from a number of viewpoints and angles. Taking a cue from the drummer, the staccato movement stops with the dancers raising their right hands slightly above their knees while maintaining their positions at the four cardinal points of the stage. At this point, the four dancers dance to the centre stage and hurriedly dance off the stage, only to reappear with the remaining seven dancers. As the eleven dancers take their positions, the song changes and the tempo of the music becomes faster. The lead dancer carrying the *isi-oya* (carved human head) and two dancers take the centre stage and position themselves horizontally, facing one side of the audience while backing the drummers. The 'carrier' takes the centre position, one dancer at his right with *okeopka* (a white-live cock) and the other dancer to his left, *armed* with his *opia* (small knife). From the position of the drummers, three dancers take to stage right, another three to stage left; the remaining two dancers circle around stage centre, thus forming a symmetrical design on the floor. On cue from the lead

drummer, the feet of the dancers move four steps to the right, starting from the left to the right and back to the left; and four to the left, starting from the right to the left and back to the right. In all these movements, the muscular rippling of the chest is constant. The right hand holds the *opia* (knife), while the left demonstrates a zig-zag movement. The movement is locomotive in nature as it is taken as a 'run' to change from one floor pattern to another. The dancers conclude the opening sequence with a sharp freeze that prepares the dancers for the next movement.

In the second sequence the music suddenly changes from a smooth sweet melody to a staccato rhythm. This leads the dancers to the fourth position with the formation of one big circle while the carrier (the lead dancer) and the two dancers by his side position themselves at the center of the circle. At the formation of this circle, the musicians change the songs from call and response to a solo rendition. With a turn-in position, still maintaining the circle and backing the audience, the dancers take side steps. The right foot takes the lead by starting the side movement positions at the first count and the left foot meets the right on the second count. This pattern of movements continues for a while with dancers maintaining the circle except the 'carrier' and the two dancers in the middle of the circle. The two dancers in the middle face each other, the one with the white cock raises it and the other with the knife on his right hand raises it as well, while the carrier re-adjusts the base of the *isi-oya*. All the movement in the center is done through gestures. At the fifth dance sequence, the dancers take different positions, keeping some distance from one another, except for the carrier and the two dancers by his sides. The dancers' right hands are positioned closer to the neck with a firm grip on the knives while the left hand moves closer to the position of their right hands as the left hand mimes gripping a piece of meat which the right hand wants to cut into pieces. In this movement, the dancers adopt a different posture; they concentrate the now familiar rippling torso actions lower, below the waist thus, positioning their bodies asymmetrically on stage. The music that is played in this dance sequence is light, including the beats from the lead drummer which punctuate the movements of the dancers.

This staccato movement which also serves as a transitory movement propels the dancers into a curved position. At the cue from the drummer, the 'carrier' comes out to do his solo, making use of the space created by the curved pattern of the other dancers. He takes four steps to the right, four to the left, and with a staccato movement, he repositions himself at the center and takes any other movement that is peculiar to him. He concludes his solo dance by stepping closer to the audience at down center stage and freezing. As the lead drummer gives the next cue, the lead dancer unfreezes and starts the 'magical' movement of the neck. Led and steered by the lead drummer, the carrier dancer jerks his neck towards the left continuously and the *isi-oya* (carved human head) begins to rotate dramatically and in line with the musical time. As the *isi-oya* gets back to its position through the circular rotation, the staccato rhythm takes the dancers out of the stage, still facing the audience as they dance out.

The musicians make fast movements round the stage, playing a fast tempo and with song accompaniments they too move out of the stage. The movement of the dancers could be represented thus:

DANCE

IRI-AGHA

(OHIAFIA WAR DANCE)

KEY

DRUMMERS.....⊕
 DANCERS.....⊗
 MOVEMENT DIRECTION...→

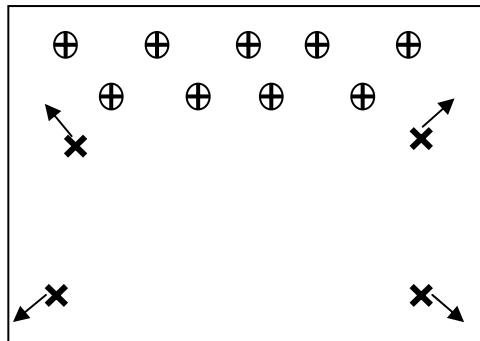


Fig 1: Movement One: *Iri-Agha* the four dancers face the four cardinal points as the survey the war field in dance, searching for possible ambush of their enemies. The four cardinal points show that enemy area of the battle field is properly surveyed before other warriors come in.

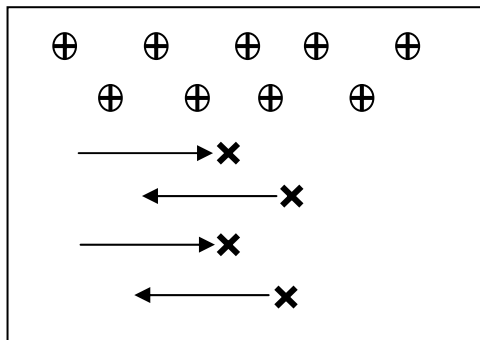


Fig 2: Movement Two: Here the four dancers dance to centre stage to agree before they leave in order to usher in other dancers, having satisfied themselves of their safety after surveying the battle field.

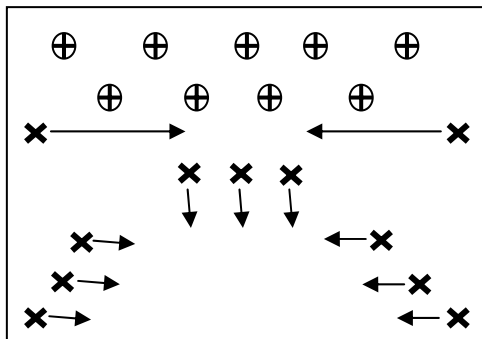


Fig 3: Movement Three: The eleven dancers on the stage. The 'carrier' and his guards take their position on the centre stage because it is not advisable for warriors to cluster at a particular area hence the diversified position of the warriors.

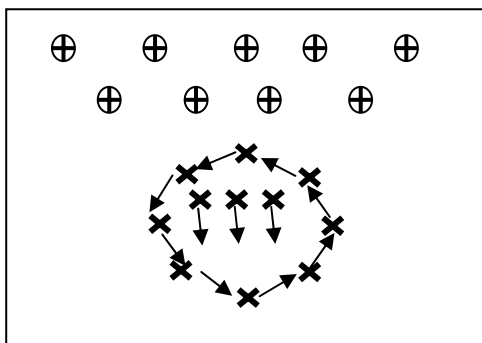


Fig 4: Movement Four: The dancers encircle the carrier and his guards during the ritual at centre stage. The movement of the dancers at this stage refers to how *Iri-Agha* warriors used to consult their gods even in the battle field for better direction. The circular direction of movement makes it impossible for an enemy to penetrate.

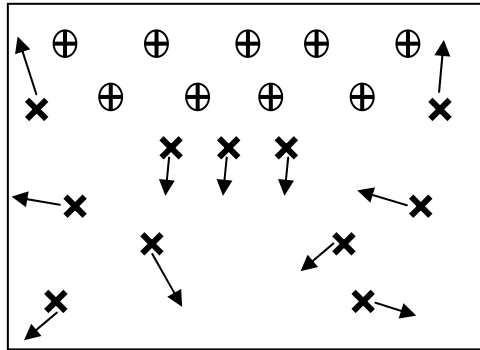


Fig 5: Movement Five: The war dancers scatter all over the stage during the fight. The carrier and his guards are positioned on centre stage communicating with the gods. The scattering movement shows the actual killing of their enemies and also indicates that the gods heard their prayers.

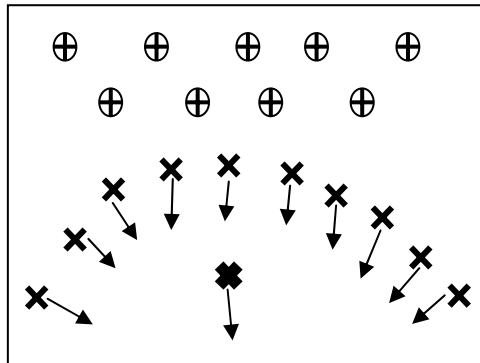


Fig 6: Movement Six: War dancers in curved position as the carrier does his solo dance to execute the magical movement of the *Isi-Oya* (carved human skull). It is worth noting that for the first time the carrier is left alone in the battle field to express their victory in dance.

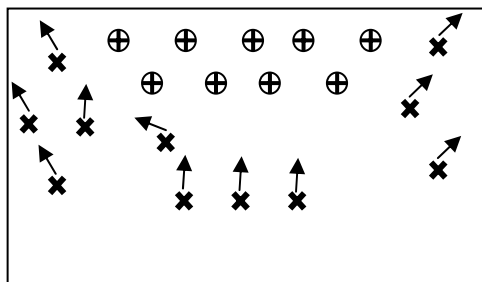


Fig 7: Movement Seven: The war dancers moving out of the stage as the dance comes to an end. At this point they are agile and ready for action, even when the war seems to be over.

The use of core space (immediate space or personal space around the dancer) and the peripheral space (space on the remaining parts of the stage) is very prominent in *Iri- Agha*. This is due to the movements of the dance. Worthy of note also is the use of levels which dancers cultivate and develop from cultural experience and beliefs. The acquisition and use of these movements serve as a marker of identity for Ohafia people.

Music as rendered in the *Iri-Agha* is both instrumental and vocal. Both are communication devices used to connect with the supernatural. Music is inextricably woven into the very fibre of the Ohafia people and they respond kinesthetically to it. It is very functional to the presentation of the *Iri-Agha* and cannot be divorced from the dance experience. Limon (1978:191) supports this view by asserting that “there is a perfect mating between the two arts so that it is difficult to imagine one without the other”. H’Doulder also asserts that:

As an accompaniment, the music is a means of helping the observer to sense the dancer’s thoughts and feelings, for it is one more sense perception added to the visual and kinesthetic. The association between dance and music is close and natural (cited in Limon, 1978:188).

In the musical ensemble, instruments such as the talking drum, the small wooden slit drum, clappers, and so on, are used for the instrumental back up to the songs and dances. *Iri- Agha* uses few of these instruments. This makes it possible for the musicians to stand on stage while playing the instruments. One remarkable quality of the music is that it produces a harmonious rhythm which invariably spurs even ponderous dancers to ecstatic action.

The songs are rendered by the instrumentalists. The solo singer chants, evoking the ancestral spirits to go before and after the warrior-dancers as they set out for battle. The ritual songs also serve as a cleansing agent employed to clear away obstacles in the form of unseen evil forces who may wish to obstruct the people’s war strategies. The emotions, feelings and idea of the singers are passed through the songs as the lyrics of some of the war songs illustrate:

Call	-	Àgụ dumbe dumbe
Response	-	Àya nma, nma nma
Call	-	Àgụ nnem ooo
Response	-	Aya nma, nma nma
Call	-	Ọnwụ atụ egwu lé é é
Response	-	Àya nma owee é
Call	-	Ànyị agala ije a'gha
Response	-	Àya nma nma nma
[Call	-	The lion is about to strike
Response	-	Yes, strike, strike, strike
Call	-	My lion brother, please come
Response	-	Yes, strike, strike, strike
Call	-	One who is not scared of death
Response	-	Yes, that is true
Call	-	We are about to go to war
Response	-	Yes, strike, strike, strike]

This song is processional as it leads the performers/warriors on their way to the shrine for sacrifice and final preparation before they take off to the battle field. The Ohafia war dance has a basic African performance trait which is repetition. There is emphasis on the repetition of dance movement and songs for communal recognition and identity. The performance which is by nature a field performance is carried out in the day time in order to make use of the natural lighting condition for the benefit of the audience. The different units as analysed reveal the aesthetic form of *Iri-Agha*.

Content

Generally speaking, the word content means the amount of a particular substance contained in something. Artistically, content has to do with the ideas that are contained in a work of art. In this study, we are more concerned with the meaning of content as it relates to dance. Therefore, content refers to the different units that make up a presentation and its subject matter; the issue or re-enactment that the dance is treating. The message which the choreographer intends to communicate to the audience is the content of the dance. Content is the issue that is addressed in a particular form. The form helps to guide the content so that what the choreographer has to say will not be shapeless and meaningless. In discussing content, we will use Ohafia war dance, (*Iri-Agha*) which has been treated under form to illustrate what content is and how it is located within a dance form.

In *Iri-Agha*, certain movements were used representationally. Gestures often utilized in the dance end at referential statements. We will take a step by step analysis of the movements and see how they could have represented some other

things. The first movement commenced as the dancers used staccato movements to locate themselves at the four cardinal points of the stage e.g. East, West, North and South. They made use of the lower, middle and upper levels of the stage. They also had their knives properly gripped by their arms as they dance around. When the warriors enter the battle field, only four of the dancers get to the cardinal points; survey the land, searching for possible ambush by their enemies. The four cardinal points show that every area of the battle field is properly surveyed before other warriors come in. The use of different planes shows that their enemies could possibly hide somewhere e.g. hanging on the trees or lying flat on the ground. With their knives, they are ready for possible attack.

At the second movement, the dancers, facing each other as indicated in the diagram (Fig 2), dance towards each other, still with their knives, and they meet at the centre stage, and then dance out from the stage. The dancers' gestures and facial expressions show that, having satisfied themselves of their safety after surveying the battle field, gather center stage for a brief meeting and then disappear from the battle area to meet their men at their hide-out in order to give an account of their mission. With all the warriors satisfied with the report of the four men, other warriors go en-masse into the battle field, hence the third movement. (Fig 3)

At entrance of the warriors in this third movement, the lead dancer carrying the *isi-oya* (carved human head) takes the centre stage. Two warriors position themselves by his left and right hand side. The one at the right is holding a life cock while the one at the left is holding his knife. The carrier has the palm fronds on his lips, other dancers take their positions on the right and left stage as they dance to the front or down stage. The *isi-oya* represents the heads of defeated enemies. The live cock represents the presence of the ancestral fathers at the battle. The movement towards the front shows attack and that accounts for the aggressive nature of the dance. In a battle field, it is not advisable for warriors to cluster at a particular area hence the diversified positions of the warriors in Fig 5 or Movement Five.

The fourth movement took the form of a circle (Fig 4). In this circle position, the dancers move round as they dance leaving the carrier with his two guards at the centre. The guards raise their hands and the carrier adjusts the base of the *isi-oya* after some gestures. The movement of the dancers at this stage refers to how the Ohafia warriors used to consult their gods even in the battle field for better directions. The circular direction of the movements indicates the level of affinity that exists among the warriors. Moreover, the circular movement makes it impossible for an enemy to penetrate. When the two guards raised their hands, they did it to cover whatever that they are doing for people not to see them because they are operating from the secret chamber. The Ohafia people also believe that the three people or warriors at the centre of the circle are the representatives of the trinity hence they are always together. The gestures of the carrier while at the centre of the circle refer to the prayers and consultation of the gods.

The fifth movement takes the dancers into a haphazard position as they make use of the very low plane to execute their dance. Through the use of gestures and movements, the dancers scatter into different areas of the stage, position their knives closer to their neck, with their left hands signifying the desire to kill. This movement indicates the actual killing of their enemies at this point. They scatter all over the battle field killing as many as they can, just like they positioned themselves at different areas of the stage. It is worthy of note that this massive killings only takes place after they had consulted their gods for help in the last circular movement. This shows that the gods heard their prayers and indeed helped them. This random killing of their enemies leads to the next movement which is the sixth movement.

The sixth movement takes the dancers to the curve. The lead dancer carrying the *isi-oya* dances out front to perform his solo. The solo comes to a conclusion with the magical turning of the *isi-oya* while the carrier freezes on a spot. This indicates the celebrative mood of the Ohafia warriors after slaughtering their enemies. As they are rejoicing and celebrating, this is what prompts the lead dancer and carrier of the *isi-oya*, out of excitement too at victory, to come out to do his solo. Note that for the first time in the battle, he is left alone. He does his solo and it is believed that as the gods begin to dance in the sky, that is to say, rejoicing with the humans, the *isi-oya* begins to rotate. This indicates that the gods are happy. This is also the point the villagers wait for so as to know the feelings of the gods. As the gods approve by rotating the *isi-oya*, everybody rejoices and this leads the dancers to their last movement.

The last movement is marked by the exit of the dancers from the stage. As the dancers leave the stage they do not back the audience, rather they face the audience and gradually disappear from the stage. The attitude of not backing the audience while leaving the stage refers to the behavioral patterns of old Ohafia warriors. They are even agile and ready for action, even when the war seems to be over.

The solo musician sings/chants throughout the dance, even when others are singing in unison. In Ohafia, it is believed that the solo singer constantly communicates with the gods through his chants. He also praises the war lords of the past. Concerning make-up, all the dancers and instrumentalists except the carrier, circle their left eyes with the *nzu* (white traditional chalk). Only the carrier circles both eyes. This symbolizes the dancers being half-spirit and half-human, because with the circled eyes, they see the spirit while the other eyes are for their man to man communication. Only the lead dancer (the carrier) sees the spirits fully, hence the palm frond on his lips to prevent him from saying what he sees.

Every movement in *Iri-Agha* is a symbolic representation. Apart from the movements, the songs, costumes, make-up, props etc are semiotically significant as they refer to one thing or the other. Therefore, the *Iri-Agha*, as a dance art, has form and content being used as conveyors of meaning.

Meaning

In explaining the meaning of dance, Trevor Whittock proposes that:

Much (though not all) meaning in dance can be understood as non-verbal metaphor, an intriguing proposal that shed worthwhile light on the elusive art form of dance (cited in Camp, 1996:177).

Presenting a contrary view, however, Sparhott painstakingly lays out the variety of ways in which we could consider the issue of meaning in dance. He notes that “the very fact that dances has meaning. The fact that a society dances tells something about that society” (also cited in Camp, 1996: 183). Maintaining his position on the role of metaphor in dance communication, Whittock asserts that:

It is still my contention, however, that the very specific shape and quality of dance movements – many defying verbal labeling – frequently are made the vehicles for metaphors, and it remains my conviction that to attempt to interpret dance works without taking into account the dimensions of meaning provided by metaphor is to miss a great deal that is there (1997:280).

Julie Van Camp, writing on the possible meaning of dance, supports Sparhott’s views. She posits that the “audience can obtain meaning in performances by categorizing the elements of the overall performance in ways that relate the performance to other things in the experience of the audience. A movement might be symbolic or expressive in some way...” (1996:183). It is the finding of this paper that *Iri-Agha* dance, and perhaps all dances, could communicate in three different ways to the audience: literal, non-literal or a combination of both.

Literal Mode of Dance Communication

A literal dance is more or less a dance that tells a story. It develops a dramatic plot, brings an exposition, develops it to a point of conflict, brings it to a climax and comes to a resolution; literal dance uses movement in such a way that it passes direct messages. For example, in performing the *Iri-Agha*, dancers make use of symbolic movements and such movements pass direct messages to the audience. An example of such representational movement is the sign which symbolizes the killing of an opponent made by the Ohafia war dancers, especially when they placed their knives closer to the neck while the left hand held the imaginary *victim*. This movement gives an impression that either the dancer is fighting with somebody or he is killing something. Literal dance is descriptive in nature. It is characterized by dramatic gestures that have specific meanings. This is quite evident in the movements of *Iri-Agha* dancers as they execute the theme movement of the dance which portrays the posture of the warrior. In support of this literal mode of dance communication, Van Camp notes that “the movement might be referential. It might also be a discrete language such as traditional mime

in which a particular bodily movement specifically referred to a set meaning". (183).

Non-Literal Mode of Dance Communication

Non-literal dance is the art of movement and motion. Here, dance relies almost exclusively on movement and motion as the vehicle for communication. As non-verbal medium, dance itself is less about thoughts and ideas but about feelings, attitudes, images, shapes and forms that can be communicated directly through the senses. Some of the audience members appreciate the *Iri-Agha* from the perspective of "form" alone, without paying attention to what the gestures symbolize or refer to. They appreciate the fast tempo of the rhythms, the movement qualities, such as the vibratory movement of the chest, the beautiful use of levels and so on. According to Turner (1971:6), Archibald Macleish expresses his idea of a work of art by asserting that:

A dance should also be that, its aesthetic value is in its very existence, in its creation of a movement – motion – space-time entity. Neither imitative nor representative. It is simply itself – a unified matrix of kinetically designed movement and motion.

The elegant and beautiful designs in *nkwa-agu* (Leopard Dance) appeal to the audience. Most times, after a performance, members of the audience wait behind to congratulate the dancers on the wonderful and beautiful things (movements) their bodies do on stage. The audience does not see or care if the movements represent anything, rather they are thrilled by the performers' agility, dynamic and vigorous movements and how the dancers demonstrate their skills in the execution of the movements.

Conclusion

The audience visits the theatre to "see" and to "hear". In a dance production, so many elements come into play at the same time. These elements put together create the form, and the form houses the content. Such elements are: movements, costumes, designs, rhythm, space, dynamics and so on. During the dance performance, some members of the audience only appreciate the costumes; others appreciate either the music or designs created through the movements. They individually select what they want to see and what they select makes meaning to them. Other members of the audience may appreciate everything they see in the performance. The point is that, one way or another, communication has taken place.

Therefore, in the course of this study, we are of the view that dance can communicate or make meaning through its form, content or through a combination of both, and *Iri-agma* definitely communicates at and through these levels.

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