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The Evolving Face of the *Iwa Akwa*

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Abstract

The proposed paper examines the Igbo traditional coming of age festival, the *Iwa Akwa*. More specifically, it focuses on a scene of spontaneous modern, creolized and eroticised choreography danced unexpectedly by a group of children in Umukpa, Obowo, Imo State, Eastern Nigeria in January 2012, at a family friend's celebration. Observation of this scene conjured questions about tradition and its preservation. The paper considers the effect of popular music and dance culture on the *Iwa Akwa*. In a world where technology has made cultural exchange more mobile, the author considers the survival of traditions as they increasingly contend with the modern era.

Introduction

It is no secret that we live in a fast moving world. New technologies and social platforms have enabled cultural exchange across the world to become increasingly rapid, dynamic and fluid. Consequently, the latest dances being danced in clubs in a specific country or region, can spread across the world within hours. This creates a new local, defined by Ronald Robertson as 'glocal' (Robertson, 1994:34). The term addresses what globalisation has neglected, that is the assumption that the local is superseded by a global culture. With glocal the local is projected through contemporary global identities, creating new fusions and identities within ethnicities (Robertson, 1994:34). Considering the current movement of cultural exchange, this paper examines the interplay between tradition and popular dance culture, using the age–long Igbo initiation ceremony the *Iwa Akwa*, focusing on an observation made in Umukpa, Obowo in South Eastern Nigeria in 2012. This paper analyses how the ceremony has

changed and addresses tradition and identity in relation to this. In terms of ethnographic observation, I moderately participated in this event as a guest at a family friend's celebration. However, it was my first time experiencing Nigerian culture.

There are three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria; these are the Yoruba who are mainly situated in the west, the Hausa, situated in the north and the Igbo who are predominantly situated in the east. *Iwa Akwa* or 'wearing cloth ceremony' is a tradition that dates back generations. It is not documented or known when or the circumstances surrounding its inception. Traditionally, a young Igbo boy would have not worn clothes until this time, marked by tying brightly coloured and intricately detailed cloth around his waist (Ihemebiri, n.d:2). The ceremony is a social initiation into manhood; it is a thanksgiving where family and friends come together to celebrate the child's survival into adulthood. The ceremony is celebrated every three years by specific Igbo towns. It is a loud, bright and vibrant celebration, after which the participants have adult status and are required to attend family meetings , permitted to speak in adult conversations, pay levies and do that which otherwise would be reserved for a man to do (Maduka in Anyanwu and Aguwa, 1991:63).

Historically, this ceremony occurred typically between the ages of twelve and fourteen. Like the rest of Nigeria, Obowo was colonised by the British during the period 1800-1960. Before this time, there was a traditional society which had functioned for many years prior to colonisation. It could rightly be asserted that the community had an organised political order before colonisation. Obowo had a government which took its form in the council elders who made the laws that affected the land and punished offenders (Diba in Diba *et.al*, 1989:23). Pre-colonial Igbo society was organised on the age grade system. This system is not unique to the Igbo people, other ethnic groups are also organised on the basis of age groups. However, the distinct recognition of particular age groups is only institutionalised in a few societies, Obowo being one of them (Onyeagwu in Diba *et.al*, 1989:99). Culturally, the age grades keep the community lively with dances and masquerades throughout the year. Each individual age group has its own idiosyncrasies which are recognised accordingly. The age grades sustain the cultural heritage of the community through participation, identification and association. The age grade defines social privileges and social activities such as ritual and other communal activities (Maduka in Anyanwu and Aguwa, 1991:64). Maduka states that the age grade system is an important phenomenon in Igbo society as it cuts across the political, social and economic life of the people; 'it is a cultural factor which seems to constitute a way of life and mark of identity'

(Maduka in Anyanwu and Aguwa, 1991:61). It is through the *Iwa Akwa* that each age grade is established and thus its identity.

Throughout this paper references to a popular culture or popular dance culture will be made. But what exactly is meant by popular culture? According to Johannes Fabian (1978), the term popular culture (a) suggests contemporary cultural expressions carried by the masses in contrast to both modern elitist and traditional 'tribal' culture; (b) evokes historical conditions characterised by mass communication, mass production and mass participation; (c) it implies a "challenge to accepted beliefs in the superiority of 'pure' or 'high' culture, but also to the notion of folklore…"; (d) it signifies, potentially at least, processes occurring behind the back of established powers and accepted interpretations (1978:1). This is driven by the youth, and global media platforms have seen its rapid spread worldwide. Popular culture often poses a direct contention between modern and traditional, indigenous and nonindigenous forms (Agwuele and Falola, 2009:4). The global spread and acceptance of Hip-Hop is a great example of how popular cultures are not limited to their geographical context.

One has to recognise the problematic nature when referring to the *Iwa Akwa* as tradition. What is tradition? In a very basic sense, there has been two schools of thought concerning tradition; the dying purist perspective, which sees tradition as the most organic form of a culture and should be upheld in that way, and the most academically accepted view in which tradition is a moving, growing entity that adapts according to its environment. Tradition has been defined and redefined over the past thirty years or so by scholars in light of this new perspective (see Shils 1981, Handler and Linnekin 1984, Gailey 1989, Glassie 1995, McDonald 1996, Bauman 2001, Friel 2004, Noyes 2009). Glassie (1995) says we should 'accept that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past, a continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present….' (Glassie, 1995:395) Handler and Linnekin (1984) have concluded that tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness, given-ness or essence. In this sense, tradition is an interpretive process, which embodies both continuity and discontinuity (Handler and Linnekin, 1984:273). Using tradition as an interpretative process in relation to the *Iwa Akwa* allows for analysis relating to the wider context and focuses on the symbolic value of tradition prevailing over common sense comprehension, which suggests tradition is static. Academically, it is important to clarify the notion of tradition in relation to culture. Notwithstanding, a consideration of the people's perception of tradition is also of equal importance, after all, it is their own. This will be explored in more detail further on.

Although idealistically we would all like to take the view of the purist, I am in agreement with Greenblatt (2009) that there is no going back to the fantasy of perfectly settled, coherent and integrated ethnic communities (Greenblatt in Greenblatt *et al*, 2010:2). Anyanwu, an active historian within Igbo studies, describes what he calls the Age of Purity, a period prior to the imposition of colonial rule (Anyanwu, 2011:18); within this age traditional Igbo religion, morals and politics were dominant in Igboland with no western influence. However, in an interview with the professor, he did admit when it came to popular dance and music or even culinary traditions, although not documented influences from neighbouring countries such as Ghana or Cameroon could have infiltrated the traditions (Anyanwu, 2012). So in reality, what we have within Igboland is cultural synthesis as described by Pita Ejiofor (1980) in his book, *Cultural Revival in Igboland,* as a principle which '…states that since no culture is perfect in itself, and all cultures, like living organisms, come into contact with other cultures, nations and people engage in selective adaptation to new cultural environment (Ejiofor, 1980:58). Ejiofor blamed the 'bombardment' of western culture through colonisation that the Igbo culture has experienced since the sixteenth century for what he sees as the now weakened traditional culture.

In the introduction to the book, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance*, Jackson (2005) tears down the reality of a pure tribal culture; he claims at best black culture or cultures is a shorthand for a profound process of cultural formation, inflows, and outflows (Jackson in Jackson, 2005:19). During my time in Nigeria, the inflows and outflows of popular dance and music culture were very evident to me. Like in many cities across the world, youth and old alike had access to music and dance from the African diasporic communities and beyond through radio, television and the internet. For Nigerians, music videos are a salient way of keeping up-to-date with the latest moves from the US and other countries around the diaspora such as South Africa and Ghana (this is replicated worldwide and not specific to Nigerians). As stated in the introduction of this paper, globalisation and technology have played a dominant role in the increasing fluidity of popular dance and music culture. This coupled with the increasing power of global media and glocal manifestations have made pinpointing and identifying individual cultures within popular dance culture extremely complex and near impossible. It can be argued that it is this hybridity that Ejiofor sees as weak culture. It is this syncretic nature that threatens the identity of the Igbo people, and it was this, often manifested in close proximity juxtapositions that I experienced in January 2012 on a family trip to Nigeria.

The initiation ceremony started early in the morning, with the women of the village clearing the roads and the market area of rubbish. All women were expected to participate, so this included me. Using a big branch from a nearby tree I helped to sweep the village. The women were happy to offer their labour; they sang danced and shared jokes whilst they worked. We ended the work together in the market square where many of the musicians had already gathered and started playing. The women started to dance with energy, bent at the waist and shaking their hips vigorously in their traditional dance, *Egwu Ukwu* or *Avu Ukwu*. The king of the village blessed the celebrants and the women began to throw white talcum powder on each other as a sign of their happiness and unity. A pathway out of the centre of the village was marked; this was the journey the participants took to manhood - nowadays it is more ambiguous when the transformation from boy to man happens. Conversations with my father-in-law and husband have concluded that somewhere between the king's blessing and the participants' return from their journey around the village. This has not always been ambiguous; my father-in-law described to me tasks of strength, this included jumping huge distances across a dried river bank, which he was required to complete during his *Iwa Akwa* ceremony over twenty years ago. During the celebration the crowd gathered around the pathway but were never allowed on the pathway which was guarded by volunteers and masquerades. These masquerades carried machetes and whips with which they were threatening the crowd, but at the same time entertaining the onlookers with their indigenous dance *Egwu Ukwu* or *Avu Ukwu*. The journey was rowdy and full of excitement as the young boys ran under the heat of the day blowing their whistles. As they travelled, they were followed by musicians, employed by the participants to provide accompaniment to dance to. It was a very loud celebration with gunshots being fired and fireworks being lit. Each celebrant carried a machete kept in a sheaf made of cow skin and hair. Typically, this is either handed down through the father to the son or is bought, and is held throughout the celebration.

As the participants returned to the market square as men, they were met by their families and friends who accompanied them back to their individual compounds for private celebrations. The journey on the main road back toward the residential area is demonstrative of the traditional and popular culture, and how the festival has been susceptible to change. The celebrant's family and friends often dressed in uniform to mark their unity as they travelled back to their compound. This could consist of unified colours or a printed T-shirt. The journey back from the market square was varied depending on who was accompanying the participant. From my observations, a family celebrating together typically walked in a slow

rhythm moving in unison towards their compound; examples of this type represent the traditional. Arm in arm, they made progress slowly but together as a group. On occasion, the mother or an aunt broke away from the group to dance the *Egwu Ukwu* or *Avu Ukwu*; they were often accompanied by a small group of musicians who set the rhythm. Friends or modern families celebrating with the participant created a different energy altogether. They lifted the participant on to shoulders or the roofs of cars, whilst the latest hits blasted from a car stereo. Alcohol flowed from one hand to another, whilst the latest dance moves were performed. It is evident here that the 'selective adaptation' that Ejiofor speaks about within syncretism is at work. Selective modern aspects such as the alcohol and car were used to enhance the experience of specific participants. Friederike Pannewick (2010) talks of syncretical processes intermingling with and subliminally adapting and transforming traditions, and what we have here is an explicit image of popular culture infiltrating the traditional. This results in a 'new and modified form that is neither a cultural misunderstanding nor a failed reading' (Pannewick in Greenblatt, 2010:216-217). The two forms of expressing the same tradition represented through the juxtaposing celebrations (family and friend), have become the same and accepted as the same despite being informed by different generations, morals or values. This is just one example of how we see the *Iwa Akwa* evolving to accept popular culture and ultimately creating a new or different face of the festival.

It was in the compound of a family friend, Kennedy Ihemmadu, in January 2012 that I observed a surprisingly hybrid and syncretic movement language danced by a group of children. The movement language of the dancers was not indigenous, but had references to expressions of cultures from other regions in Africa and the African Diaspora. The reason I found this movement so interesting was not necessarily the content alone, but the content within the context. The traditional framework which was set highlighted the different movement languages which were being applied by these children. The break-dancing, whining, and manipulations communicated something foreign within that context. The children entered the compound and began to dance in unison to a popular Nigerian hit, 'Chop My Money' by P Square. Most of the movement quotation at this point used popular dance moves from Nigeria and Africa. The most interesting movement combination and increased cultural mobility was seen during the improvised section, where each child had a moment to creatively express themselves and impress their audience. As previously mentioned the children took elements from all over Africa and the African Diaspora and made them their own with little or no concern for authenticity or the origins. Instead, there was a sense of liberality in

the quotation and development of the movement used. For example, a young boy spun on the floor, stood on his head and fell down into the splits. This type of movement is characteristic of *Breaking* and *B-Boying*, and the way he fell into the splits is seen amongst the Dancehall Queens in Jamaica. An older boy danced around him with intricate foot work and rolled his hips in a way that is more characteristic of Congolese than the Igbo. What is most cohesive about this example is that its characteristics derive from the African Diaspora, seen in the grounded centre twinned with the hip movements, and polyrhythmic patterns. Although I have recognised characteristics of movement, it cannot be said to be a direct movement quotation of any particular style, but a new style which incorporated all the styles that these children have been exposed to.

A more significant example of popular culture from the diaspora infiltrating this movement was seen in the two youngest girls of the group (approximately aged five or six). Dressed in white with hair slicked back in a ponytail, their improvisation was the most intriguing by far. As the change in music from the choreographic to the improvisation section started, the girls broke into dance, or as the Jamaicans say 'bruk out!' I describe it in this way because the movement content was very similar to something one may see in the Jamaican Dancehall context; whining their waist, thrusting their hips forward, snaking to the ground and coming back up, pushing their bottoms out as far as they would go and stroking their hips and thighs. What these children were performing was fundamentally more complex then they may have realised. Greenblatt (1990) wrote of cultural mobility as not an expression of random mobility but of exchange (229). These children were actively exchanging movement, worldwide and applying them to themselves within a traditional context. This example of the young dance troupe at the *Iwa Akwa* determines the complexity of cultural mobility in relation to popular dance; no one culture is able to be distinguished but microscopic elements are being digested and regurgitated to create something new – the glocal, but one which nevertheless has references to the past, within the framework only. What we have is an active dialogue between countries, and it goes beyond what Ejiofor (1980) called the 'bombardment of the [W]est'. It is not just Africa to the West anymore but Africa to the African Diaspora-named by Paul Gilroy (1993) as the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora to Africa and the West.

Tradition in the light of Shils (1981), Handler and Linnekin (1984), Glassie (1995), and all other scholars who share their perspective is clearly applicable here. The *Iwa Akwa* has not remained static but has continuously developed since its inception; global media has significantly contributed to this change demonstrated through popular dance culture.

Although we have accepted this view, it is important to consider the attitudes of the Igbo people and the role of tradition in relation to this change, not just of the *Iwa Akwa* but also of the wider cultural traditions. The Igbo people are known for upholding their traditions and are known as the 'wise men' throughout Nigeria for their ability to thrive in adverse conditions (Nwanaju, 2013: 23). The attitudes I have experienced on my visits to Southern Nigeria suggest that the older generation hold onto their traditional customs more than the younger generation. However, both young and old alike have an open attitude to different cultural practices being adopted into their own. F.C Ogbalu (1979) in his book, *Igbo Institutions and Customs*, talks of, '… the I[g]bo readiness for a change in favour of anything they consider superior to theirs….' (Ogbalu, 1979:8) In an interview Mrs Mere Roseline (head of the performing arts department at Imo State Council for Arts and Culture), spoke of the positive influence the west has had on the dance sector in Nigeria, making it more acceptable as a profession and giving the underprivileged an opportunity for a stable career. Mrs Roseline expressed the significance of the Igbo identity within dance,

> Our people cannot do without dance; it is very peculiar to us … very very peculiar to us. There is nothing that we do in this state (Imo State), in our communities, that does not involve dance, whether negative or positive. There must be dance to show for us… even if nothing is spoken through the dance, the message will be related to you… (Roseline, 2012)

If as with the *Iwa Akwa*, Igbo traditional celebrations are evolving so much, what does this mean for the identity and morals that are so salient within the culture? Shils (1981) suggests that a tradition may change significantly, however, to its recipients it may be regarded as unchanged; tradition in this sense rests on the essential elements being recognisable in order to keep it a tradition. In the *Iwa Akwa* we see the frame work of the celebration being almost identical to its beginnings in the wrapping of the cloth and the journeying around the village. However, it is the content around these key recognisable elements which have and are evolving. Roseline emphasised to me the importance of contexts when it came to dancing in traditional celebrations. She claimed that during events of entertainment, it was perfectly acceptable to have these cultural exchanges at play. However, she emphasised that when it came down to recreating dance in a traditional setting or 'business' as she put it, it must be danced in the original way. Within her department she personally auditions and appraises affiliated dance troupes to ensure their authenticity (Roseline, 2012). So we can extrapolate as a representative of the local government

that it is important to the local government that some sort of regulatory measures are in place to preserve the Igbo dance culture.

With further examination of the movement danced by the youngest members of the troupe we see a clash between what could be described as the travelled culture and the host culture. Igbos in general tend to be quite conservative, especially in the Obowo area which has a strong Catholic presence. Although the shaking of the hips is idiosyncratic of Igbo dance, the sexual nature of the movement danced by the young girls is not representative of the Igbo movement language, or what is widely accepted within their culture. These young dancers clearly have access to global media, and popular dance culture has influenced their movement. Interestingly, this movement represents much more than bodies moving in a space. It conjures questions of culture and identity made visible in the context of the *Iwa Akwa* (I am certain in a club setting questions of cultural identity would not arise). Although no one openly condemned the movement of the younger dancers and many (predominantly men) threw money (or 'sprayed' money) over the young girl dancers' heads - a Nigerian custom - there was a sense of unease surrounding the movement. In conversations after, many laughed whilst squeezing their face in disapproval. My husband (a Nigerian) had said to me that it was 'bad' but he wasn't outraged or complaining, examination of the video footage of the performance shows a mixture of delight and indifference from the crowd. The reaction from the audience demonstrated to me the controversy of the movement within the context. It is clear that this way of dancing in public may be more acceptable in a Caribbean carnival context, but it is not embraced by the Igbo people. I described this scene to Professor Anyanwu. He reacted by saying that it is a major problem within Igbo culture, a problem that is creating a gap between generations. This is caused by the demands of the new age, westernisation and globalisation. This is producing a generation that is not typically Igbo or relates to Igbo idioms (Anyanwu, 2012). These dancers consume, produce and act as what Toyin Falola and Augustine Agwuele (2009) describe as '… instruments in the realm of contestation and are energetic in shaping narratives, in fashioning the discourses, and ultimately in producing the evolution of popular cultural practices …' (Aguwele and Falola, 2009: 3-4). Furthermore, this evidently changes not only the popular cultural practices but the traditional cultural practices and impacts the identity of a people. If current generations are identifying less with concepts of Igbo identity, how can they be expected to uphold these cultural practices and pass them onto future generations? What implication does this have for the survival of tradition?

Conclusion

Hope, however, is not lost; across Igboland there are government initiatives such as cultural festivals on a national level as well as in schools to educate and preserve their rich heritage, and efforts by local governments to reinforce identity amongst the Igbo people and this has been met with approval (Anyanwu, 2012). The future definitely belongs to the youth, and it is inevitable that in the world we live in cultural mobility is and will continue to bring popular dance practices dynamically in and out of individual cultures as it always has done. The evolving content of the *Iwa Akwa* could be seen as negative, or positive; positive in the sense that it demonstrates the importance of a living, growing celebration. Anything that is stagnant is dead and innovation has allowed for a vibrant celebration to continue being relevant to Igbos all over the world, many of whom travel thousands of miles just to honour this tradition. In her book, *Dancing at the Crossroads*, Helena Wulff insists that '… a dance tradition has to change and develop in order to survive…' (2009:24). If this is so, then changes within the *Iwa Akwa* are a natural process of creolisation that is unavoidable. Negative in that no matter how you look at it Igbo values are being compromised in the advancement of cultural mobility and popular culture. How far can a tradition move from its origin and still be representative of a cultural identity? Whichever way one looks at it, it appears that tradition amongst the Igbo people is at a cultural crossroads.

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