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Research article

Indigenous Environmentalism through Dance: The Ohaji-Egbema Experiment in South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Scholars in the environmental humanities have engaged critically in how literature and the performing arts have absorbed the spirit of environmentalism as other disciplines have done. The greening of the humanities has been a subject of discussion from the last quarter of the 20th century. Ecoliterary discourse, ecofilms and ecomusicology have become buzz concepts in the arena of the environmental discourse. However, we argue in this study, that there is a paucity of critical works on how indigenous dance art forms can be used to communicate environmental stability, ecological consciousness, and be used as a medium to resist anthropocentric ideals. The questions that this paper raises are: In what ways can indigenous dances in Nigeria communicate ecological consciousness in the country? How and to what extent can indigenous dances be employed to discuss culture-nature entanglements in degraded sites? The researchers relied on Indigenous Standpoint theory, existing literature, interviews, and focus group discussions with stakeholders (indigenes, ministry heads, and oil company employees) and visits to oil-degraded sites in Ohaji/Egbema for information on the taxonomy, politics, and conflicts of space and oil in the region. In line with data gathered, indigenous songs and dances were packaged and performed to provide the much-needed platform for stakeholders (indigenes, government and oil firms) to rethink environmentally oppressive actions in the region toward ensuring environmental stewardship. This study examines the ways in which indigenous dance in Igbo land, Nigeria, can embody indices of indigenous environmentalism. It can also be a path towards decolonizing colonial ecological frameworks and epistemologies.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Ecosystem, Ecological consciousness, Decolonization, Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Indigenous Dance, Ohaji/Egbema

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS **Climate Action, Life on Land**

Introduction

Concerns regarding Nigeria's Niger Delta have generally been addressed from derogatory perspectives that see the area as only an oil field rather than as a habitat shared by people, aquatic life, and other flora and fauna (Aghoghovwia, 2014). The Niger Delta, made up of Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers State, Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Benin and Ondo States has been the focus of

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global concern due to widespread ecocide. Most people in the Niger Delta were farmers and fishermen whose glory days were cut short when oil production triggered an environmental calamity in the region. An estimated 40 million litres of oil leak are cleaned up either poorly or not at all, leaving the region a biological and ecological wasteland that portends untold suffering for the residents of the region (Uyigue and Agho, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2019; Cox, 2021; and Ugoh and Ukpere, 2017). The oil companies have not lived up to expectations in the region neither has the Federal, State and Local governments been firm with policies that bind these oil companies to cardinal imperatives of environmental service to the people, resulting in violence, militant protests (oil bunkering, bombing of pipelines and the kidnapping of oil workers as against the initially peaceful protests to attract local and international authorities to the squalid 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998) in the region and consequently, militarisation of the region by the government (Aghalino, 2004). The court decision on the case between Kiobel and Shell in 2013 as well as the killing of Ken Saro Wiwa and other eight environmental activists in the region by the Nigerian government further exposed? the "suffering ... caused by oil-producing operations of Shell and other oil-producing companies" (Mbachaga 2018, p. 4). Today, crops are not yielding and water bodies are gory sights to behold (Afolabi, 2018). The people, in the view of Binuomoyo and Ogunsola (2017), Asuni (2009), and Nnimmo Bassey (2012) are paying for Oil with blood.

The sustained ecological warfare in Niger Delta by oil companies and the government has galvanized militant and radical activisms with groups like the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), and the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) sought to take control of their resources by ordering the oil companies to leave the region. To curb these conflicts, certain structures and approaches have been adopted to address environmental crises by the government. However, the bulk of these structures have geared toward 'sustainability' which Princewill Abakporo and Stanley Ohenhen (2023) and Stephen Okpadah (2021) argue that it is a colonial construct that signals the continued exploitation of the region. One can barely see anything left of the landscapes, man, and waterbodies to be sustained in the region which, according to Mbachu (2020), has one of the most polluted places on earth and life expectancy is just 41 years. Secondly, most of these sustainable approaches seem to have been ineffective because of their "humanocentric" (Callicott, 2006) approaches such as the Amnesty Programme which Jegede and Olu-Olu (2015) see as temporary salvation in the Niger Delta, which focuses on humans in the region to the exclusion of environmental collaborators. Even so, the hierarchical nature of these humanocentric approaches excludes the indigenes in its planning and execution thereby making these efforts seem rather imposing, hence the need to evolve novel approaches to tie development to a reciprocal relationship between the indigenes, oil firms, government and their environment. The kind of narrative that recognizes the "intrinsic values of all species to the function of an ecosystem" (Stones, https://ausdance.org.au) which the researchers feel has been lacking in the relationship of government, indigenes, and the oil companies in the region

Against this backdrop, 'sustainability' and our colonially skewed idea of 'development' (the researchers elsewhere (2023) also argue that development, as introduced by colonialists, is an environmentally oppressive ideology in the Global South that excludes the non-human communities) may not atone for the dehumanized and 'environmentally-used-up' oil producing communities. This foregrounds the position of the researchers on the need to "dismantle the

normalization of wasting practices through continuous demands and reckonings" (Munos 2022, p. 172). For Folke (2021) it highlights even more how important it is to create social change narratives, innovate, and mobilize in order to connect the development to human stewardship of the environment that supports life.

Munos and Folke's ideology above has implications for inward retrospection toward forging a livable and viable society. In line with their thoughts, several scholars have engaged in experiments towards remediation methods for oil spillages and degraded landscapes. For instance, while Odoh and Zabbey et al (2019) explore the nature, progress and challenges of phytoremediation for oil spilled sites, Sam and Onyena (2023) et al explore the various arrays of green technology influences on reviving degraded landscapes. As laudable as these research and technological efforts are, what are the efforts to stop further spills as the ultimate strategy to avoid the impending apocalypse in these regions? Interestingly, the knowledge of environmental pollution and its effect on life is not in doubt by the stakeholders in this region however the issue has remained to transfer ecological ideas from the "domain of knowledge to the domain of feeling" (Tolstoy, 1997, p. 196).

In Ohaji/Egbema, oil pipes vandalization is still target of indigenes in their disputes with oil companies. This is a major driver of environmental pollution. In the same vein, corrupt, polarized and hierarchical government structures and policies in the region (aimed at polarizing the people to buy ways out of their Community Social Responsibility (CSR)) have their negative implications on the environment. Against this backdrop, the researchers look to indigenous knowledge resources expressed in the arts of the people to see how and to what extent they can be employed to reframe the environmental conversation for environmental advocacy in Ohaji/Egbema area of Eastern Nigeria. The researchers set out to interrogate how and to what degree the rich performative culture in region can be harnessed to provide the necessary platform for stakeholders (indigenes, government and oil firms) to rethink environmentally oppressive actions in the region towards ensuring environmental stewardship.

Methodology

This study employs the Indigenous Standpoint theory, existing literature, visits to oil-degraded sites in Ohaji/Egbema, interviews, and focus group discussions with stakeholders (indigenes, ministry heads, and oil company employees) provided information on the politics, nature, and impact of environmental devastation in the area. The data gathered, helped the creation of the performance content. Intervention sessions commenced after the performance by the African Pot Theatre (a troupe based in the municipal which the corresponding author is a member) to provoke dialogue on the need and how to ensure environmental stewardship in the region. Indigenous songs, musical instruments, and an array of indigenous movement materials of Ohaji and other parts of Imo State were used to indigenize the work and ensure that the project conforms to the culture, place, time, and peculiar socio-economic and environmental realities.

As an extension of the 'standpoint theory' (Denzel and Lincoln; 2011 and Harding; 2004), the indigenous standpoint theory propounded by Martin Nakata (2007) serves as both theory and methodology gearing towards empowering marginalized populations to question social norms

from the inside out. However, because of its decolonial stance and emphasis on indigenous ways of knowing and thinking, this theory has been downplayed by Western methodologies. To support this hypothesis, Nakata (2007) and Coates, Trudgett, and Page (2022) believe that the indigenous standpoint theory offers the chance to disentangle Western knowledge paradigms from indigenous modes of knowing and expose how indigenous knowledge is created. This idea generates more comprehensive and inclusive knowledge across cultural boundaries. Indigenous scholars can use indigenous standpoints as a tool to examine how indigenous communities are acknowledged and integrated into Western conceptions and practices. In tandem with the indigenous standpoint theory, participatory action is key for the researcher as it breaks the elitist hierarchy with democratic, equitable, and liberating approaches geared toward specific actions or actions that enhance life (Macdonald 2012). Indigenous standpoint theory implies that research, according to Choy and Woodlock (2007) ought to consider the cultural meanings and viewpoints of indigenous peoples and their communities.

Indigenous Dance and Current Environmental Predicaments in Oil-Producing Communities

Indigenous dance is more than just the intricate combination of rhythm and body movement in space and time; it's a language that reflects the geographical locations, innate personalities, political and religious beliefs, and life experiences of the communities who possess it. (Bakare, 1997; Arinze, 2000) There is hardly a facet of African life dance—work, play, religion, and the environment, that does not find expression in dance. Dances also emphasize the human connection to the non-human communities in the environment. For Hawkins (1988), because of the way humans interact with the universe through the body—which also acts as a sensory organ for humans to perceive and interpret the rhythms and tensions of the world around them — indigenous dance began as a way for humans to further understand and forge alliances with the environment. Indigenous communities in Nigeria respected the physical and spiritual agencies of the non-human communities in their interactions with the environment

Indigenous southeastern festivals such as Iri-ji (New Yam) are generally geared towards acknowledging the agencies of the terrestrial non-human collaborators in the maintenance of a balanced ecosystem. The Yam which is considered the King of Crops in these regions is symbolic of the physical and spiritual agency of the earth which is given recognition in the festivals of the New Yam. Activities such as bush fallowing were also indigenous methods of allowing the cultivated land to regain its potency. Indigenous dances in these ceremonies extend beyond speech and gestures to add deeper layers of meaning to traditional events.

To say that contacts with colonialism disrupted the pristine cultural and environmental values and ethos, upon which oil-producing communities navigated life, is to say the obvious. The imposition of alien religious, social, educational, vocational, and economic systems twisted the fortunes of indigenous communities. Environmentally, the explorations, clearing and cutting, extractions, and consequent displacement of non-human communities have remained at the core of environmental degradation (Lunberg, Regis, and Agbonifo, 2022; Martinez, 2022). The extensive farming and exportation of cash crops on large expanses of land were one of the first attempts towards environmental depletion and displacement of non-human species. The forceful shift from an agricultural-based economy to oil-based economy was another major blow on environmental

sustainability especially on host communities. The building of transportation systems, settlements and other infrastructures was also an effort towards degrading the environment of indigenous peoples.

Today, environmental issues in colonized landscapes like Ohaji/Egbema seem to have overwhelmed the government which is either ignorant of ways to remediate degraded landscapes or too gullible to evolve solutions (Munoz Martinez, 2022), or has become too greedy to feel the plight of the people. Colonial structures and policies have continued to dictate the pace of Nigeria's economic, political, social, religious and educational growth even after independence; or perhaps, 'pseudo or flag independence.' The several environmental impacts of oil on the life of indigenous peoples have reached a nauseating crag. Ibaba (2021) reports that Oloibiri is only a shadow of what it used to be. The community's economy once relied heavily on farming, but after years of oil prospecting and development, farmlands were damaged, fishing operations were suspended and aquatic life was almost non-existent.

Today, the idea that humanity is speeding towards the end of the world may have forced colonial overlords into becoming seriously concerned with the need to increase the earth's resilience as encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 13, 14, and 15. For Idogho (2018), "ecosystem and ecological studies across disciplines have become imperative as the world faces global environmental challenges intermittently" (p. 63). The arts, including music, film and literature are currently helping to advance environmental awareness and debates along with other scientific and bio-technological advancements. However, indigenous dance is yet to make a significant impact on the conversation about enhancing the earth's resilience. Dance and other indigenous performance forms are yet to join these debates and advocacy for maintaining and developing human connections with the natural world. This, for Collard-Stokes (2020), might be the result of dance's inability to convey the breadth of its expertise in this sector or a lack of awareness outside the industry. It appears that indigenous dance scholars and practitioners in Nigeria are not bothered by the persistent distortion of the rhythms of life or perhaps, they are not intentional about channelling creative energies toward bringing their art to speak to these realities (Nwabueze, 2011). Imo State has vibrant performative cultures that are yet to be harnessed towards emerging realities.

Environmental Entanglements of Ohaji/Egbema in Southeastern Nigeria

Through a presidential proclamation issued on August 27, 1991, the Ibrahim B. Babangida administration divided the previous Ohaji/Egbema/Oguta L.G. into the current Ohaji/Egbema Local Government. The headquarters of Ohaji/Egbema are located in Mmahu, Egbema District, whereas Ohaji West and Ohaji East house the headquarters of the other districts. Situated in the south-western part of Imo State, Ohaji/Egbema local government area borders Owerri to the east, Oguta to the north, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni in Rivers state to the south-west as well as made up of sixteen (16) autonomous communities. Due to their abundance of arable land and animals, the majority of Ohaji/Egbema people work as farmers, hunters, or fishers. The people of Ohaji/Egbema have a rich cultural heritage reflected in numerous festivals in the region as well as a high value for tradition and indigenous performance arts as evidenced in their several masquerade and social dances.

Oil exploration and extractions have been ongoing in this region for over twenty years but a cursory look at the environment surely reveals that the wealth produced in their land is possibly not meant for them. Upon entrance into the region, the environmental degradation in the region is readily in sight which stands at the root of conflicts in the region. Oil spills, gas flaring, and unchecked industrial activities such as bunkering, illegal refining of crude as well as the delay or refusal of oil firms to carry out their social responsibilities, have turned the land, air and waterbodies of this region into a shadow of themselves and, today, the region is "a tale of plunder and waste" (Ajumeze, 2018, p. 22). Indigenous means of livelihood and survival have reached a nauseating crag and are grossly uncompensated with the required social, educational, financial, and medical facilities. Succinctly, the people "are not only sick of dirty drinking water, oil-contaminated fish and toxic fumes. They are sick of waiting for justice; they are dying by the day" (*Premium Times*, 2020).

Recently, with Imo state's recovery of 43 oil wells from Rivers State, the state has moved up to the fourth highest oil-producing state in the country. 22 of those oil wells are situated in Ohaji/Egbema and others in Oguta area. The landscape of the Ohaji/Egbema region which houses several oil-producing communities is suitable for this research since the area is replete with repulsive sights of Oil-driven environmental degradation and its attendant health woes. The fact also, that the area has not benefited much from projects that alleviate and cushion the numerous negative impacts of a petro-insurgent environment further fuels the drive for this study. Studies on oil-producing communities have tilted towards the Niger Delta communities to the exclusion of the certain communities (Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa State) to the exclusion of other oil producing communities so are the very lofty intervention programmes of government and oil firms channeled to these Niger Delta communities. The few interventions in terms of infrastructural supports and financial aids (in the guise of development) have not done much in providing the much-needed respite from the persistent 'ecological wasting' (Bruce, 2022), infrastructural and socio-economic exclusion in communities like Obile, Awarra, Assa, Mgbede, Umuapu, and Obitti in Ohaji/Egbema.

The Ohaji-Egbema Dance Theatre Experiment

The experiment consists of three main stages which include the preliminary stage, the Performance stage, and interventions.

Preliminary Stage:

This stage includes studying literatures on the nature, impact, economics and politics of oil. It also included visits to oil-degraded sites in Obile, Assa, Obitti and Awarra in Ohaji/Egbema as well as structured and unstructured interviews of indigenes, oil workers, personnel of the Ministry of Petroleum and Environment, and the Imo State Oil Producing Areas development Commission (ISOPADEC) exposed the researchers to the politics of oil in the region. This helped to form the performance content executed by the African Pot Theatre with the variety of indigenous dances and songs in Imo State. African Pot theatre is an itinerant theatre troupe that is based in Owerri Municipal with a strong theatrical base and output as evidenced in several command and contracted performances within and outside Imo State. Representatives of the troupe

accompanied the researchers on initial visits to the study site and interview sessions with respondents.

Fig 1: Researcher's Preliminary visit to the study site and indigenes of degraded sites

Performance Stage

Data gathered from the preliminary stage were put into dance performances using the indigenous dance materials of the people such as the Alija Dance and Egwu Odinala. Three new indigenous dance forms were created to suit certain actions and incidents in the narrative as well as heighten the mood of the performance. Some indigenous songs too were either adapted or composed to suit the performance needs. The production took a historical angle shape showing the indigenous relationship with themselves and the natural environment.

Fig 2: Image of African Pot Dancers in Alija Costume for the performance

The next phase was the colonial intrusions into the community and the discovery of oil that heralded several environmental issues in the land. The contemporary period followed with government officials, oil firms and indigene representatives adding to the environmental plight with corrupt practices. Conflicts ensued resulting in the kidnap and killing of the Board Chairman (This was a recent happening in the area at the time of research), oil bunkering, and pipeline destruction.

Fig. 3: Images from the performance showing angry youths set to attack oil workers and pipelines

However, the tone of the production dwelt more on the indigenes who are the recipients of the devastating effects of environmental degradation from oil spills. The tone of the production aimed at letting the people understand that the oil firms and government will not live perpetually in Ohaji/Egbema forever. This was achieved through indigenous songs like:

	Song	***Translation***
1.	*Ala anyi maa mma eee*	*If our land will be good*
	O bu ndi no n'ime ya e	*It is the responsibility of those in it*
	Ala anyi joo njo ee	*If our land is bad*
	O bun di no n'ime ya ee	*It is the responsibility of those in it*
2.	*Ohaji maa mma O mara mu na gi*	*If Ohaji is good, it is good for you and me*
	Ohaji Joo njo o joro mu na gi	*If Ohaji is bad, it is bad for you and me*
	Ohaji/Egbema maa mma	*If Ohaj/Egbema is good*
	Omara anyi niile	*It is good for all of us*
	Onye o bula tinye aka	*Let everyone contribute*
	K'anyi mezie ala anyi o	*Let's fix our land*

Interventions:

This involved interaction with the audience and feedback from the stakeholders. The interactive session provided a platform for dialogue between all stakeholders. Representatives of the government, oil firms and indigenes reacted to the content of the production. The corresponding researcher being part of the performance artistes, was able to easily engage the audience in the intervention period to find out to what extent they understood the performance content.

Fig. 4: The corresponding researcher leading a reconciliation dance before the interaction with audience

Results

From the preliminary study, performance and interventions, the following results were achieved;

1) ***All stakeholders share the blame in the burgeoning degradation of the environment***

Pre-performance research via structured and unstructured interviews, pieces of literature, and focus group discussions reveal that the deteriorating environmental conditions in the region are the collective action of all stakeholders (oil firms, government and host communities). The government over time has compromised its responsibilities in the region towards ensuring that cleanups are carried out where and when necessary by the oil firms in line with the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA). As part of the dictates of the PIA, oil spills should not last more than 24 hours because of its devastating effects on the environment. The PIA also included that 3% of the Annual

Operating Cost including salaries of oil companies, should be given to the host communities through the Ministry of Petroleum. However, these two aspects of the PIA have been at the root of several conflicts in the area due to the complacency of the government to demand and sustain compliance of these oil firms. On the flip side, the creation of Law in Section 162, sub-section 2 of the 1999 constitution to quell the restiveness in the oil-producing areas states that 13% of oil derivation fund should be pumped back into the oil-producing areas has been bastardized as a result of poor monitoring.

On the other hand, the oil firms too have harped on the corrupt system of governance to circumvent their responsibilities. Through bribery of top government officials, a divide-and-rule system of interacting with indigenous peoples, and militarisation, certain oil firms in the area have reneged on their environmental and social responsibilities to the host communities. This too, has spurred several conflicts between the host communities and the oil firms. The people also have contributed to the degradation of their environment through vandalization of oil pipes, bunkering and illegal refining plants that fall very short of international best practices. The Community Development Board (CDB) is made up of indigenes of the community is also culpable of environmental degradation and restiveness in the region as well as the Board directly receives the 3% operating cost from the oil firms but does not utilize them for the welfare purposes for which they are received. This has provoked several rifts in error between indigenes and oil companies with the thoughts that oil firms have reneged on their responsibilities. The law enforcement agents have contributed to the environmental issue due to their lack of knowledge on environmentally safe methods of disposing of the facilities of these illegal refineries when invaded. They prefer to burn or spill the confiscated illegal crude refining facilities which further environmental depletion.

More often, the people are quick to vandalize oil wells and pipes in their protest for the government and oil firm attention without recourse to their environmental health. This reveals that more education and sensitization should be carried out in these communities, especially regarding its direct impact on health, food security, livability and viability of their environment. In their exploration of the health risks of rural farmers in oil-producing areas of Imo state, Eberendubueze-Ogaraku and Ogaraku (2018) observe many health hazards and difficulties that residents of Imo State's villages that produce crude oil experience. Data from their study site showed that noise and vibrations from oil drilling companies' industrial operations posed a significant risk to the hearing of 75% of the area's farmers. Furthermore, 94% of respondents said that health issues associated with cancer would probably be an issue. Agricultural yield loss issues brought on by farmland degradation are a primary source of food insecurity and related health issues like malnutrition that affect 100% of the population. In their research, 100% of respondents said that the loss of wildlife and aquatic species contributed to the issue of food insecurity. 94% of respondents identified limited availability to alternative likelihood activities as a challenge.

2) ***Indigenous performances and arts, in general, are under-utilized in environmental sensitization***

Sensitization campaigns about issues of health and sanitation have previously been carried out in the study area but the indigenous arts have not been featured in these campaigns. According to a respondent in ISOPADEC, indigenous languages and dress patterns are utilized in the Commission's programmes for instance the COVID-19 sensitization in 2021 but indigenous

performances are yet to be captured in our approach. Another respondent in the community felt that these programmes are rather imposing due to the hierarchical approach in which the organizers package the programmes to the exclusion of the people. The arts of the people have not featured prominently in the various campaigns and sensitizations of the people in oil-producing areas. The Ministry of Environment also has engaged in environmental health sensitizations and conflict resolution in the area but has not utilized the arts of the people in their strategies for conflict resolution.

3) ***The experiment sparked the much-needed all-inclusive conversations on the need for environmental stewardship in the region***

In the intervention that followed the performance, the researchers were able to marry several events and actions in the play to scientifically proven data from the World Health Organisation and other research outputs on the effects of environmental degradation. Representatives on each side of the divide related to the performance from a more empathic stance. Environmental advocacy as projected in the tragic tone of the performance was able to move beyond mere knowledge to feeling. In the end, each party in the politics of oil in the community was able to feel the impact of their actions and inaction on the environment. The experiment also projects environmental remediation as a collective responsibility by all stakeholders for sustainability in the Obile community of Ohaji/Egbema towards achieving global goals 3, 11, 13, 15 and 17. In their reports, the representatives of the oil firms, Ministry Of Petroleum, Community Development Board, and kindred representatives agreed to work together towards evolving remediation strategies in the region and a consequent consideration of the environment in their dealings. While the oil firms re-assured their compliance with the policies, the government representatives through the Ministry of Petroleum affirmed their commitment to ensuring compliance. The Board and kindred representative on the other hand promised to be more patient with the oil firms and embrace a more diplomatic approach to disputes other than violence and consequent vandalisation of the pipes leading to further spills.

Engaging Indigenous Dance for Environmental Advocacy: Modalities and Prospects

> Those critical factors of existence, which bedevil all neocolonial and postcolonial states—issues of political instability, economic vibrancy, self-valuing, self-reliance, and self-worth-designing, are shredding this country and culture workers and theatre practitioners cannot and should not be caught at the margins of the envisioning process. (Obafemi 2002, p. 3)

Every human career and occupation must contribute to the earth's and the environment's overall, harmonious functioning. Two broad areas are critical to the modalities for engaging indigenous dances for environmental advocacy in indigenous communities: Decolonizing indigenous dance scholarship and Theory-praxis complementarity.

1) ***Decolonizing indigenous dance Practice***

The fact that colonialism altered the functionality and aesthetics of indigenous dance forms is no longer the question. The researchers are concerned with the fact that in trying to give the art of indigenous dances an academic face, scholars have colonized the various art forms. Scholars want to give the art a holistic definition to stamp their feet as authorities in the scholarship of indigenous dance art. This tempts scholars to make sweeping definitions of 'African dance' even

when they may not have travelled the entire scope of the African continent. These definitions of African dance have populated scholarship in the African continent so much so that individual unique forms of dance in the continent are academically impoverished. For instance, where can one find a definition of the Ekombi dance of the Cross River people in Nigeria? And how can we develop indigenous dances that we cannot even define? These dilemmas of definitions are what Barba (1995) qualifies as the 'Paper Canoe' that can sail through the currents of the sea and safely hit the shores but no one is ever sure of how its cargo will be accepted and used.

In their attempt to validate indigenous performance forms as theatre for early Western scholars, the indigenous dance forms have become colonized and have not seemed to go beyond semiotic and traditional sociological readings for the host community. Today, new realities have emerged such as ecological concerns, migrations, technoculture, and insecurity. In Nigeria specifically, new tales and myths are emerging with snakes and rats for instance, taking the place of the tortoise in the emerging folk-comedy of manners and errors that characterize the political space. Given the ecological situation in Nigeria caused by colonial ideologies, migration and industrialization in certain areas like Onitsha, Lagos, and all states in the Niger Delta, the precolonial conceptualization and practice of our indigenous dance forms will not push these conversations without adjustments. In this regard, one cannot agree less with Nwosu (2014) that

> Theatre to start with is conservative. It is an ancient order engaged in the changing texture of its garments but essentially the robe remains a cloaked long flowing gown. Its buttons may change therefore from stone or wood to fiber or silver, to bronze, gold, diamond etcetera depending on taste and prevalent social order (21).

What the project has done with the indigenous dances of the region is to weave them into addressing current realities about our environment. The livability and viability of ecosystems have become a global concern and indigenous Nigerian dances must have to join in this conversation on advocacy for a safe environment. In doing this, the artist must join the advocators for change who "use the dances that exist in his cultural background as raw materials and establishes linguistic property to express his purely creative thoughts' (Bakare 2014, p. 66). Being a social art form, indigenous dances can come in handy in pushing environmental consciousness from knowledge to feeling in indigenous communities.

Regions with a long history of degradation, exclusion and restiveness like the Ohaji/Egbema appear to have lost faith in the policies about restoration and indigenous dance performances can serve as alternative platforms for dialogue towards self and collective help as witnessed in the project under study. To do this, scholarly energy must shift to the independent dance forms and their applicability to new realities. Scholarship in indigenous dance must help the transition of giving indigenous dances a new platform for relevance in contemporary times – like putting 'old wines in new skins' (Tume, 2014). In this way, entirely new dance forms may emerge that speak to these evolving environments and contemporary realities directly. This is advantageous for the expansion, improvement, and popularity of indigenous dancing since dance would have been made to serve its purpose for contemporary indigenous culture and environment. Humans are the main creators of their own surroundings, and cultural norms are always evolving. Culture, in its widest and most inclusive meaning, allows men to give their life shape. (Langley, 1987)

2) ***Theory-praxis complimentality***

> Acknowledging and appreciating African dance and its roles in order to increase its visibility depends on how effectively this art form is represented. (Kuwor, 2018, p. 74)

A major factor that has affected the growth of the nation generally and indigenous dance in particular is the lacuna between the scholars and practitioners. These two sets of people are described by Udoka (2006) as the major predators who poach traditional dances in Nigeria. They assume the role of predators because in spite of the knowledge and authority each group possesses (the dance scholar in research and documentation, the popular local performers in production and performance styles), there is no correlation between their efforts. They are poachers of indigenous dance in the sense that each only takes from the dances that belong to the society without giving anything back to the society in a manner that would situate the function of the art form as a strategic medium in shaping the realities of the nation.

Dancing in a community clarifies an ideological focus and aids citizens' comprehension, internalization, and interaction with their surroundings. As a result, participants in a culture are more likely to recognize their place in society. This process of comprehension and internalization aids individuals' attempts to reconcile with cultural standards and behaviour patterns (Udoka 2006). Scholarship must guide practice and vice versa if any meaningful effort would be made to transform indigenous dance art into a critical pedagogical tool in contemporary times. In Nigeria for instance, the duo can begin to set the tone and practice of 'Ecodance' which, according to Rios (2020) instills a deeper understanding of nature and the laws that keep life going. It promotes ecological wisdom as a means of enquiry and healing—personal, societal, and global — towards harmony with ecological principles. The restorative connection between the natural world and oneself is more advantageous and healthful involvement in the ecosystems we live in. In light of these, the theorists and practitioners must complement each other towards the task of building environmental resilience as well as validate their relevance and professionalism in contemporary times. In agreement with Taylor (2005), evaluating a theory's applicability, theatre professionals can avoid losing their intellectual influence, becoming stagnant and complacent, or sticking to antiquated ways of thinking that do not take into account.

Conclusion

As societies continue to evolve, certain indigenous forms can be remodeled to suit new realities. No law says that indigenous communities cannot blend with or create indigenous aesthetics in line with their evolving realities. This is where indigenous dances have not got it right: their fixed beliefs that the dances as created by their forebears must be performed in the same way, using the same aesthetic and philosophical materials even when the society is out of favour with them, especially in the twenty-first century. This thought in turn has negatively impacted the appeal of indigenous dances since postcolonial times. These dances were created out of the aesthetic, movement, rhythmic, and philosophical realities of the time and space of their creation centuries ago and to maintain their verve and vigour in these times, it must be created or repackaged to fit the emerging and prevalent realities. This process must be intentional in both theory and praxis in line with Adeoti's (2014) submission that dance frequently travels across space and time, and

when it does, the aesthetics change to reflect the realities of the new location while retaining elements of the old time and place.

The livability and viability of our environment is the overriding reality of the contemporary world that has been projected to be heading to an apocalyptic state. This reality is too great to be left to government and scientists hence all must act and collaborate in the task of building a resilient biosphere – dance inclusive. Efforts with the scholarship and practice of environmental dance have begun in Europe but Nigeria, which houses some of the most polluted sites in the world is yet to embrace the potential of dance art. It behooves indigenous dance professionals to situate the art within the global matrix and show that the indigenous dances have the potency to address world issues, are flexible enough to incorporate global aesthetic changes and fit enough to be reckoned with the choreographic and innovative inundations of other dance forms for it to remain relevant in contemporary times.

The performance project studied provides evidence to the utility of the art of indigenous dance to drive ecological consciousness in degraded sites in the country. More than other strategies adopted in similar campaigns and advocacy projects in the study region is the fact that the project provided platforms for inclusivity, dialogue and collective resolutions toward environmental stewardship kin the study area. Although art cannot change society, it can change the people who can then change society (Marcuse, 1964). Dance is a continuum and more than ever, we are in a time where knowledge about depleting earth must translate into feeling and action and indigenous dances can become a potent tool to drive this agenda. In doing this, the researchers note that new indigenous dance forms may emerge in the bid to tackle these realities, but again this helps the growth, appreciation and relevance of indigenous dance forms in contemporary times.

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