

Performance Aesthetics and Discontinuities in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* Afikpo of Igbo, Nigeria

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Abstract

Nkwa umuagbogho is an indigenous maiden dance of the Afikpo people of Southeastern Nigeria. It originally emerged as a part of the Mgba [wrestling] festival with its attendant ritual performances of young maidens. Before now, the performance was attributed to the men while the women only cheer the wrestlers with ululation and dance movements. There has been disruption to the status-quo While the maidens take centre stage to execute the movements, the men now remain on the sideline to play the music. The involvement and negotiation that brought about the change in the performance generally is one area that have not been adequately explored. This study therefore looks at *Nkwa Umuagbogho* as a ritual-cum-secular African dance. It also examines the intersections of performance aesthetics and discontinuities in *Nkwa umuagbogho* dance performance of Afikpo people, Igbo of Nigeria. This study adopts the qualitative research method and performance analysis and is therefore guided by the ethnographic approach. Through this methods, the study exposes the evolution of *Nkwa umuagbogho* as an adaptive performance that has continued to evolve overtime through some performance mechanisms such as; costumes, music, movements, make-up and paraphernalia as these create gender boundaries and aesthetics.

Keywords: *African Dance Performance, Nkwa Umuagbogho Dance, Ritual Dance Performance, Performance Aesthetics, Gender Boundaries.*

INTRODUCTION

Nkwa umuagbogho is a unique dance performance of the Afikpo people of Ebonyi State of Southeastern Nigeria. Originally, the performance focused on the men who use it as avenue to exhibit masculinity. Like many indigenous African dance performances, *Nkwa umuagbogho* is as old as the people that own it. The performance was named after a segment in the performance exclusively reserved adult maidens of marriageable age and later demerged and adapted from the Mgba (wrestling); a bi-annual festival of the Afikpo people. (Agha, Interview 2019) There are many records to its evolution especially the Afikpo community of 'birth'. Accounts are often given based on what and how individuals recount what they heard or learnt.

Ebonyi State 2019 Carnival. *Nkwa umuagbogho* has become a cultural symbol and identity of Ebonyi State generally and Afikpo people in particular. Okeke, Agoha & Akas (2025: 30) assert that;

Nkwa Umuagbogho remains a symbol of the cultural identity of Afikpo people in particular and Ebonyi state in general. It is significant in revealing the value placed on women and their feminine importance in Afikpo. The dance, as a cultural symbol, evokes a sense of affinity and identity for the dancers and the community they represent....

Okeke et al (2025) above summarises *Nkwa umuagbogho* as a symbolic art form. The performance is the people's way of life. Whether ritually (sacred) inclined or secular, indigenous African dance is unique. This is because; "there is hardly any community in Africa without a ritual or ceremony. Each type of ritual has its particular drum rhythm, its own 'theme song', its combination of medicine, and its stylised behaviour, expressed in dancing and gestures Nii-Yarte (1991:1). To Ahmed Yerima (2006:21)

... each dance has a context and a story within the performance. The 'context' I refer to here is the meaning of a particular dance. Whether it is ritual dance or ceremonial dance, the context of the dance is most important because it guides the dancer on tempo, mood, and even the images and atmospheres the dance must reflect in the performance process.

Generally speaking, *Nkwan umuagbogho* performance has diverse social functions; it connects people, ensues social cohesive and communal bond. It is communally shared and serves as an effective vehicle for social control and cultural expression. Nwaru Ikechukwu C. (2015) in his thesis on *Contextualising Form, Content and Creative Practice in Igbo Dance Theatre* writes on the social-cultural significance of *Nkwa umuagbogho*. During the *Mgba* [wrestling] festival, able bodied men and maidens of marriageable age find the opportunity of the festival for courtship which often leads to marriage. According to Nwaru (108);

... as the young ladies perform *Nkwa-Umuagbogho*, men who wish to marry use the opportunity to woo ladies of their choice and sometimes such occasions lead to marriage. It is worthy of note that the first president of our country [Nigeria], late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe chose his wife as she was dancing *Nkwa-Umuagbogho* and then got married to her.

Although marriage proposal was common in the wrestling festival of pre-independent Afikpo, Nigeria, it continued with its symbolic nature of social and/or cultural roles because notable men like late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe got married to one of the young maidens he saw during an *Nkwa umuagbogho* performance. Okeke et al (2025 and Nnam and Onuora-Oguno 2018) are in agreement with the researcher when they state thus: "A notable illustration is the encounter between the first indigenous president of Nigeria, the Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who, captivated by the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance, proposed to and subsequently married one of the pioneer dancers, Prof. Uche Azikiwe". Suffice to state that "... the function, aesthetic quality, symbolic and contextual significance of each dance genre in the African context are of paramount importance and interest to the community. Components of the dances are the result of formalised and consciously manipulated cultural and social patterns ..." (Nii-Yarte 2016:9). This statement not only suggest the embedded qualities of indigenous dance performances such as *Nkwa umuagbogho* but the aesthetic qualities of its transformation.

Nkwa umuagbogho dance performance is not just movement. It is a product of African spirituality performed on stage to the delight of the audience. Before the demerge of the performance from *Mgba*, the young maidens who must be virgins, were usually the first to appear on the arena with a calabash filled with water and a palm front to cleans the land. When this happens, the maidens have crossed the liminal stage during the cleansing. Layiwola (2010: 1) agrees with the above position when he states:

Primitive (sic) or ancient communities have always adopted dance as a structural anchor for liminal and ritual purposes. It is used to commemorate birth, circumcision, age-grade initiation, marriage, death, cultivation and harvest

These scholar's positions suggest that dance has been a part of man since his existence. Over time, dance has continued to evolve as humans advance. *Nkwa umuagbogho* is not left out in this progression which could be positive or negative depending on people's perception and acceptance of change.

Nkwa umuagbogho as an indigenous dance is a knowledge repository, especially in preserving, sustaining, and promoting the people's tangible and intangible cultural ethos. It has also kept the link (tie) of their ancestral connection strong. Dance, Tierou Alphonse (1992:1). writes, "has more power than a gesture, more eloquence than a word, more richness than writing and because it expresses the most profound experiences of human beings, dance is a complete and self-sufficient language". Dance is a means of natural aesthetic expression. It is reflective of a society and instrumental in shaping it. Dance is an aesthetic point of entry into the analysis of society's past, present, and future (Bonnie Bird, 1964:21).

Nkwa umuagbogho dance performance is not devoid of role play. During performance, both the men and women have mapped out responsibilities which contribute to the overall performance aesthetics. While the men play the music, the women take the centre stage to respond in movement and gestures to the instrumentation of the drummers. Among the Igbo of Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, roles and responsibilities are shared according to cultural and/or societal belief.

One is born into a home and prepared to strictly adhere and perform the role which the society accepts and that which identifies the person in question. While the boys (male folk) are seen as being endowed with physical prowess and subjected to rigorous work that require more strength to achieve, the girls (female folks) are seen as 'weaker humans' whose work must, as a matter of necessity, be light and devoid of muscle task.

As a cultural activity, *Nkwa umuagbogho* dance is one of the many platforms that address gender in Nigeria generally and among the Afikpo people in particular. Throughout history, humans have expressed one feeling or another through movement, songs, and dramatisation, among others and these performances is shaped by gender roles. Furthermore, through costumes, musical instruments and paraphernalia, information is communicated. Among the Afikpo Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, *Nkwa umuagbogho* has at present, become a secular performance and is used to celebrate the birth of a newborn, puberty rites, marriage, coronation and even burials ceremonies, demonstrating its socio-cultural situatedness with specific patterns. (Okeke, Agoha & Akas 2025, Jayeola 2025, 2024 Nnam and Onuora-Oguno 2018) gave a very cursory historical origin of *Nkwa umuagbogho*. Coming from the perspective of social significance of *Nkwa umuagbogho* (Okeke et 'al 2025) and instruments and instrumentation and music traditions of *Nkwa umuagbogho* (Jayeola 2025 and 2024), these scholars highlight the historical origin of the dance performance while also discussing on the social significance and contribution of music to *Nkwa umuagbogho*. Nwaru Ikechukwu's (2015) submission centres on contextualising form, content and creative practice in Igbo dance theatre.

From the above discourse, it is clear that *Nkwa umuagbogho* has a good and far reaching scholarship. However, there is dearth in research and/or scholarship in the area of performance aesthetics and discontinuities in *Nkwa umuagbogho* Afikpo of Igbo, Nigeria. It is against this background that the study is set with the objective of exploring the intersection of performance aesthetics and discontinuities in *Nkwa umuagbogho* while also examining the complex dynamics that brought about change in the performance.

Performance Aesthetics: Meaning and Concept

Performance aesthetics as a concept is encompassing. Peter Snow (2011: 3) opines that performance aesthetics;

would include, broadly: the style of a performance work; the methodologies by which that work is created; and the cultural worlds in which the work is produced and disseminated. Style includes appearance, manner, shape and pattern. Methodologies include processes of training, making, rehearsing and performing. Cultural worlds include the material conditions of a performance, but also its social, historical and discursive contexts, which include hermeneutic, semiotic and aesthetic analyses. Clearly these modes are connected.

In this context, performance aesthetics means the creative actions of the dancers and the drummers. In sum, it is the execution of artistic action(s) to the audience's admiration. *Nkwa Umugbogho* dance performance is not devoid of creative actions. These include movement and gesture, ritual, poetry or speech actions, music, dramatisation/mimesis and acrobatics and their artistic interconnectedness that manifests and produce performance. The word performativity describes actions, gestures and behaviours planned to pass a message and/or achieve a set goal. Performativity is often used in dance, music and drama, among others. It also describes people's actions before an audience during performances. These components in *Nkwa Umugbogho* have been artistically blended and have passed through modifications/mutations in recent times. As mentioned above, the changes, which are the product of cross-cultural diffusion of the performative elements, have continued to change the face of *Nkwa Umuagbogho's* dance performance.

Aesthetics is the perception of beauty and/or the ugliness of art. It entails the feeling, understanding and appreciating what is beautiful and ugly. According to David Huron (2008; 151), "Aesthetics is commonly defined as the study of beauty, and its opposite, ugliness". Huron is defined as contradicting the layman's general understanding of aesthetics. As a subject, aesthetics means more than beauty in the literal sense.

The implication here, therefore, is that there could be beauty in the ugliness of a work of art. This follows that the way and manner aesthetics is perceived is contextual and very subjective. In his work titled 'The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement', Immanuel Kant submits that the judgement of beauty is subjective and based on the inherent qualities that produce the taste of the phenomenon in question. He recognises the universality of the concept of beauty and accepts its moral justifications to be called beautiful. By this, Kant refuses to recognise particularity, and it is upon this concept that the uniqueness of African performance aesthetics is produced.

African performance aesthetics, therefore, refers to the perception and appreciation of all artistic expressions as represented in an indigenous African performance. African culture and creative expressions are unique and part of their lived experiences. These experiences are drawn from their religious, socio-economic, political, cultural, historical and spiritual experiences.

These experiences are re-enacted as expressive arts and are harnessed into visual and performative forms and/or images. Amongst these expressive/performative arts are dance, drama, music, costumes, paraphernalia, make-up, oratory and many more. *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance performance is an Indigenous Igbo expressive performance form with the above-listed nuances.

Continuities in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* Performance

Although *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance reenacts the wrestling segment of the *Mgba* festival, where young men come out to perform ‘mock’ fights and exhibit masculinity through wrestling, its origin is traced to the *Mgba* [wrestling] festival. *Nkwa umughogho* was only performed after a winner emerges during the wrestling bout. The maidens appear as ‘cheer leaders’, heralding the emergence of a winner with ululation, movement and gestures. Usually, there are about four segments in the *Mgba* [wrestling] performance. The Ebini, Ogaluzo, *Mgba* and *Nkwa umuagbogho*.

The Ebini group is made up of little girls who are supposed to virgins and must be in range of five (five) years and 10 years. This group is very significant in the production of the *Mgba* festival. This is because, they are the first to appear on stage with water that is fetched from Ekwe nna n’ibe (a sacred stream). This sacred water helps to ward off malevolent forces around the Ogo [arena] before the wrestling commences.

The next performance is the emergence of the young wrestlers who are classified as mock wrestlers. Following this is the Ogaluzo comprising of young maidens between the ages of 11 and 15 years. The Ogaluzo group performs as an interlude to the main event which is the *Mgba*. This main wrestling bout climaxes the wrestling festival and is performed by the Ikpos – mature wrestlers.

The emergence of a winner in the bout signals the appearance of *Nkwa umuagbogho* group. This group is the older maidens that must be of marriageable age. No records exist of women participating in wrestling and hunting or competing with men in such manly contexts. The mythic narrative of the origin of wrestling festival that birthed *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, stems from the account of the two great hunters, Ina Aja and Ibe Akpan which suggests that wrestling and hunting can only be undertaken by men.



A cross section of adult males (Ikpos) set to be selected for a wrestling bout during the *Mgba* festival in Afikpo. Once an adult male appears as an Ikpo during a wrestling year, he seizes to participate in wrestling as this mark his final commitment as a wrestler



A cross section of none initiates of the Ogo cult as the audience. This group cannot participate in the wrestling festival



A cross-section of initiates of the Ogo cult ready for wrestling

Discontinuities in *Nkwa umuagbogho* Performance

The colonial era marked the beginning of a gradual change in the people's culture, attitude and behaviour. Through the missionaries, the people came in contact with other types of clothing. This was the typical scenario of the old Ehugbo [Afikpo] societies. While the aged and adolescents covered the 'sensitive' parts of their bodies, the children often remained unclad, suggesting that gender is a cultural construction. This is because, at this age, the children did not care about their sexes. During wrestling festivals in Afikpo, the aged men and women tied wrappers around their waists. The wrestlers tied small wrappers that could hold and hide their 'loins'. The young maidens appeared in the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* segment, clad in different wrappers for the performance. They usually tied a piece of wrapper around their chest region to cover their breasts.

The breakaway of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* from the *Mgba* [wrestling] in the post-independent era saw a massive change and transformation of the dance costume. At this time, the people were very much aware of their 'being'. Clothing became common and could be

easily accessed. During performances led by Chief Ikpor Ocha in the 1960s and later Chief Vincent Omeri Nwachi in the 1970s, the instrumentalists and dancers dressed in uniform costumes. Often, the costumes were different as each performer dressed according to their gender and what they had available. At this time, apart from the leader who organises the group, every other thing used for the performance, from the instruments to the costumes, was owned by individuals: dancers and drummers. Most of these antecedents seem to be history now, as there are few pictures or documented relics of the performance during the review.

Chief Vincent Omeri Nwachi's leadership from 1970 saw a significant leap from what used to be to what obtains now. This was a period of advancement and modernity. He started by structuring the dance movements and patterns to costume and makeup. There were new introductions in the area of costumes to reflect adaptation in the dance performance, and their deployment has contributed in small measure to the aesthetics of the performance to date. They include:

Skirts: Skirts are made of fabric and sewn to fit, covering the waist region and running down to the thighs. They can be likened to the present-day 'mini skirt'. These materials often come in appealing dotted red, pink, and yellow designs.



***Nkwa umuagbogho* dancers perform holding a cow tail prop**

The *Nkwa Umuagbogho* beat is fast-paced. The big wooden sledge drum (*uhie*) is the significant instrument here because it gives the dancers the cues and marks them as they execute the movements. This is often the performance's climax upon which the dance is named. The *Nkwa umuagbogho* group usually comprises maidens who are above 18 but single. The emphasis of this group is generally on the lower abdomen with particular reference to the solar plexus, which is located two inches below the navel. The dancers perform with strength and dexterity, undulating their pelvic region (centre) to the rhythm of the beat.

As the three groups enter the stage, they reach the next set. They all stay to perform the *Nkwa umuagbogho* with the senior group before retreating according to seniority. The *Nkwa umuagbogho* group leads, followed by the *Oga na uzo* and the Ebini group. They all join in the end to perform the *Nkwa umuagbogho*. The idea is for the younger ones to take over from the

older ones as they age or transition into motherhood/womanhood to avoid a lacuna. Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi has continued with this practice of the arrangement of the dancers according to their age bracket of *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, *Ogaluzo* and *Ebini*, as is seen in the attached picture above. The dancers undulate to the admiration of their audience/spectators while maintaining good footwork and balance.



The ‘Original *Nkwa Umuagbogho*’ entering the stage for a performance

Despite the emergence of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* as a separate art from the wrestling performance, the music has remained unchanged, apart from some individual creative additions here and there, which are expected. To date, the relics of the ancient musical rhythm have been preserved through the medium of *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. The instrumentation is usually accompanied by some melodious songs that herald the identity of the dance. Although the songs in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* add to the aesthetics of the dance performance, they patronise the male folk by eulogising and preaching marriage while also emphasising the consequences of destructive behaviours of women in their husband’s houses. An example of such a song is presented below:

Call: Ebie Nwankwo metugwu	We have seen that you are deficient.
Iweyowo, Iweyowo	You are warned
Resp.: Ihaahayii, ihaahayii	You are warned
Call: Elele Woo woo we ogoo	Listen, listen well.
Resp.: Oye die biaryls	Whenever your husband visits home
Nu osierie miri oku	Cook/boil water (for bathing) for him.
N’onwua ma ola	Let him bathe before leaving.
Elem na agba iokparaahia-orie	To avoid being called or tagged a prostitute
Nnayi na’ma gi ekwe hayii	We would disagree. Be warned
Ihaa hayii, ihaa hayii	Be warned

In the above song, it is evident that women in this society have been reduced to living in fear to the point of enslavement and made to believe in this gender construction that women must remain loyal to their husbands and satisfy their physical and sexual needs no matter the circumstance. This is possible in communal settings but will be questioned in contemporary

settings where women are more emancipated, have hectic work schedules, and are involved in various human endeavours. Today, families share responsibilities not just according to gender but in multiple areas that help to sustain the family.

The beats/rhythms change from time to time into different dance movements, patterns and/or choreographies with the same name given to the rhythm. Initially, the beat and rhythm suggested the “group” or “set” of the maidens that would appear on stage at a time. Some of the rhythms played included:

Nkwa Mgba

Ebini

Oga l’uzo and

Nkwa Umuagbogho

Nkwa Umuagbogho, as an adaptive dance performance, was followed sequentially to reflect the traditional wrestling performance of the people of Afikpo. Chief Ikpor Ocha led the separate creation in the 1960s before Chief Omeri Nwachi brought it to the limelight in the 1970s through his creative ingenuity. The *Nkwa Umuagbogho* music has remained the same to date. Apart from the *Mgba* beat played during the *Mgba* festival, the other beats have remained the same beat and rhythms played today in *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. They are the same drum and sound and perform the same function. Though people make new instruments, they ensure whatever they have produces the same sound as those used in the festival. According to Agha Okpani, “Despite the changes of time and development, the relics and rhythms of the ancient heritage remain”.

As observed by the researcher, there were no changes in the appearance of different groups/sets of maidens. When the researcher enquired, some of the dancers interviewed responded that things have rarely changed. According to Chinyere Nnanna, “We still observe the different rhythms and perform them accordingly, but this time, as a single group”. This was also corroborated by Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi who explained that “the young maidens, even the little girls, that are good enough move straight into the dance proper, where the three stages are performed sequentially. This is unlike during our own time (referring to herself), where you only learn about your group’s/set’s movement”.



The drummers also insisted that the rhythm remained the same as in the festivals. The only difference, they opined, is that they are not playing the whole sequence as seen in the festival. The musical rhythms are just the *Nkwa Mgba*, *Ebini*, *Ogaluzo* and the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* beats (See attached picture of the Ebonyi State Council for Arts and Culture performing with a complete set of the instruments during a performance in Afikpo).



Drummers of the Ebonyi State Council for Arts and Culture

Performance Aesthetics and Discontinuities in *Nkwa umuagbogho*

Costumes and make-up are signifiers of the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance performance. The unique costumes, body paintings, and adornments differentiate the dance from other indigenous maiden dances in the Afikpo and Igbo lands. The dancers are dressed in short skirts with colourful imprints, covering the waist region and ends between one to two inches before the knees. Waist beads, which the people call *alugbo* or in ‘general’ Igbo parlance “*jigida*”, adorn the centre or the solar plexus.

The waist beads are appropriately arranged to form a “boat-like” shape at the front, which invariably helps accentuate the lower body's undulatory movement. The upper body is covered with a yellow piece of cloth that covers the breasts and is tied at the back, while some smaller pieces are tied on both arms.

The head is also tied with a piece of yellow cloth, folded and tied like a bandana, while two feathers are stuck at the left and right sides of the head. Apart from the costumes for the dance performance, make-up is a significant complement to *Nkwa Umuagbogho's* overall package. It is almost impossible to see an indigenous dance performance in Igbo without its own unique makeup, body paintings, or designs.

Nzu [white clay chalk] and odo [camwood] are the primary or primary materials used for the make-up designs. While the feet of the dancers are rubbed with the camwood up to the shin, the nzu is rubbed on the dancers' upper bodies. A small or match stick gives body designs or drawings while still wet. The white clay chalk is rubbed around the navel to draw designs on the maiden's back and hands.

There have been some changes in the mode of costuming and make-up. From the late 1970s to the 1980s to the 1990s, the costume for *Nkwa Umuagbogho* was unique. Wherever it was seen, it could be easily identified. There are noticeable mutations in the costume and make-up of the late performance. Instead of the sakura [breast cloth], which was usually tied, the groups now sew a sleeveless blouse the women call "tube". This tube has replaced the former one.

The usual colour of identification was yellow. The choice of yellow is due to what the colour (yellow) represents for the people at the time (joy, happiness, optimism, friendship, and energy). It is significant to note that Chief Omeri Nwachi's leadership started immediately after the Nigerian Civil War, and the situation in the country at this time needed to be reflected in the new life of peaceful coexistence. Yellow was, therefore, seen as an ideal colour that identifies with the people's aspirations.

Today, people use colours ranging from purple, mauve, red or any colour that appeals to their fancy. The essence of the colour varieties was a means of breaking away from the static and monotonous yellow. There was a need to add varieties to spice up the costume. This colour change was identified during some performances witnessed by the researcher in some of the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance performances in Afikpo, Abakaliki and other towns of Ebonyi State.

One of the dance troupes was later revealed to the researcher as the original *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance troupe. It was original in that it was the same troupe that produced and/or gave birth to the various dance groups of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* today. It was owned and managed by Chief Omeri Nwachi, who was bedridden at this research and died afterwards.

He had handed the dance troupe over to his children before his demise. The maidens wore costumes of various colours (green designs) different from the regular pink and yellow costumes the troupe used to be known for.

During the burial of Chief Omeri Nwachi in December 2018, the same troupe (original *Nkwa Umuagbogho*) performed. Here, too, they wore a different costume. Rather than the usual tying of a piece of wrapper around the breasts, they wore white singlets and tubes. The white singlets concealed some of the vital spots that ought to be exposed, such as the navel. Exposing the navel is very important because it reflects the umbilical cord that connects men and women, the source of life.

Covering the navel renders the makeup to be applied in the area useless and invariably means incomplete makeup. In some of the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performances of the Ebonyi State Council for Arts and Culture dance troupe, the exposure of the navel was apparent. The dancers had white clay chalk [nzu] painted around their navels. Chief Helen Eluu¹ also corroborated the above view, saying that it is the usual thing, and encouraged her dancers to be as original as possible (see attached picture below of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* maidens set for performance after a complete costume and make-up with odo and nzu).



***Nkwa Umuagbogho* maidens set for performance after a complete costume and make-up with odo and nzu**

Social changes and girl-child advocacy, among others, have been identified as agents of change in indigenous dance performances in Igbo land. Apart from mutations in costume and makeup, musical instruments and leadership structure, there is notable information regarding the urgency of such changes. The researcher observed that the dance maidens with the Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi-led 'Original *Nkwa umuagbogho* Afikpo' adorn long 'tubes' or 'half cut' to cover their navel as seen in the picture below, which, according to the female dancers of the Ebonyi State Arts Council, is against the costume tradition of *Nkwa umuagbogho*.

The female dancers of the Ebonyi Council for Arts and Culture insist that revealing the female navel region is the beauty of a maiden as it has a purpose. According to them, it shows virginity as people will be able to determine a maiden's disposition faster, especially in the area of childbirth or abortion.

Ms Chinedu Nwachi informed the researcher that her dancers, especially the navel region, do not expose their bodies. She maintained that the girl child must be protected. If not, this will amount to exposing the young maidens to the preying eyes of the opposite sex. She insists that if their bodies are not adequately covered, it will attract men to them, which might lead to sexual harassment and assault. She queries why the young maidens must expose their navels. According to her, the girl child must be protected, especially these days when cases of rape are reported constantly. This, therefore, has contributed to the mutation of *Nkwa umuagbogho* dance.

This is a new development in the cultural life of the indigenous people who own these dances. Igbo society has organised ways of protecting their people: girl children, men and women of the land. Any man or woman who indulges in immoral acts receives punishment as prescribed by the laws of the land. The Child Rights Act was instituted to protect the rights of every child in Nigeria.

This modern law meant to protect the girl child means that the government is interested in and gets involved in the performance and somewhat regulates the troupe's affairs. This has changed the performance of 'Original Nkwa umuagbogho' because they are the only group that adopts the covering of the belly/stomach today. The implication of the above is that what used to be a source of beauty has been reduced to a gender-based discussion zone of protecting the girl child. There is nothing wrong with protecting the girl child, but this should not be done to discount the dance performance's aesthetic value.

The body of the dancer is in itself beautiful and culturally meaningful. This is in line with Chief Helen Eluu's assertion that the culture of the people is of paramount importance. "We must guard and protect it with our whole being". ²Nkwa umuagbogho is one of the ways this is achieved. "In my group, as you can see, we do not cover our navels apart from that which the *alugbo* (*jigida* or Igbo waist bead) has concealed already". As society changes, new policies and innovations are generated to uplift man and his environment. The arts, generally, and dance, in particular, have experienced such new developments in one way or the other. Part 1 (Sections 1 and 2) of the CHILD RIGHT ACT of the Federal Republic of Nigeria reads thus:

A child's best interest is the paramount consideration in all actions.

A child should be given the protection and care necessary for well-being (<https://lawsofnigeria.placng.org/laws/C50.pdf> n.d.n. 1).

These laws have become the guiding principle of most people with direct contact with children and young adults. The government and many non-governmental organisations, both within and outside the country, frown at trampling upon the constitutional rights of these 'vulnerable' people. Apart from the arts councils in the different states of the federation that have adults as dancers, other groups, especially those in the rural areas, have a combination of children, young adults and adults alike. It, therefore, means that the coordinators of these groups have the herculean task of protecting these children and treating them with dignity.

Children require care and attention, including guidance and direction. As Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi, Chief Helen informed the researcher, "Managing a group of young people is not always easy, but as a woman, it allows me to tend to their personal needs. I give them more protection, especially when we go out for performances".

Chief Helen's efforts in protecting the young dancers placed in her care are highly commendable, as they will go a long way in supporting the parents of these young ones in training them. She said, "I didn't get this kind of care and protection from our boss". The boss mentioned here is Chief Omeri Nwachi, the founder of the 'Original *Nkwa umuagbogho*'.

She narrated countless encounters both within and outside the country's shores. She feels strongly that the late Chief Omeri Nwachi was a selfish man who only cared for her children and made big plans for them, even at the expense of other children in his care. "His shortcomings challenged me to own a *Nkwa umuagbogho* dance where I can correct such anomalies. I am happy, and the children are happy. Everyone is happy because their welfare is of utmost priority to me".



The ‘Original Nkwa umuagbogho’ dancer covering the abdomen and navel region

Chorus

Instrumentation and chorus usually go hand in hand in *Nkwa Umuagbogho's* performance. Most indigenous Igbo dance performances are usually not complete without songs and chants. In *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance, the drummers also double as the chorus. The drummers sing as they play their instruments. Usually, a lead singer could be of either gender so long as the person (singer) has an excellent voice to lead and coordinate the chorus. The researcher observed that the young maidens were not singing while dancing; the male drummers who led the songs predominantly rendered the chorus. By this, the men are forcing dominance and total control of the dance, which they believe was hitherto theirs.

Onye Otiti/ Chanter

Onye otiti, translated into English as the chanter in *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, is a unique character in *Nkwa Umuagbogho's* dance performance. They might not be a good dancer, but they understand the movements and choreography of the dance. The ‘onye otitis’, often a woman, joins the orchestra/chorus and watches keenly while the maidens dance on stage. The chanter joins as part of the chorus but intermittently ululates to herald the dancers' performance, prompt queues, and alert those not following the sequence and/or movement.

During the wrestling festival in Afikpo, when the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is played, two chanters usually handle chants during the performance. This has now changed in the art of the *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, as the dance troupes only use one channel. The essence of having only

one channel is to be more organised and give the dancers proper guidance in cues, corrections, and motivation during the dance performance. Ogbonna Fred, who is a member of the 'old Nkwa Umuagbogho' and a former staff member of the Ebonyi State Council for Arts and Culture performing troupe, confirmed the change when he said that apart from the above-listed, having two chanters will be noisy, giving room for confusion, quarrel, and disorganisation. Chief Omeri Nwachi introduced this trend in the 1970s, lasting while he was alive. His death in 2018 signaled the introduction of another epoch in the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* chant.

Today, troupes no longer pay serious attention to the chanter. Any of the female dancers of Afikpo with a good voice can do the chant while on stage. The chanter is no longer a unique role in the dance performance structure. On why men, especially the instrumentalists/orchestral, cannot do the chant, the dancers insisted that it is mainly meant for women. Most men have deep voices, and the chant sounds feminine and does not fit the men. This position by the dancers implies that the voice can also represent gender. The voice quality of a man is differentiated from that of a woman. While it is argued that the man's voice should be deep and in bass form, the woman is expected to have a very 'light' and tiny voice. Ogbonna informed the researcher that he sometimes chanted during performances because he worked with the Arts Council, and from Afikpo, he had learnt it as an art. He insisted that, apart from being an artist, he also inherited his voice from his mother, one of the best chanters in Afikpo.

Recently, the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performance has continued to experience changes as the wrestling bit of the performance is no longer critical. Occasionally, depending on the client's choice, it can be incorporated into the performance. The Ebonyi State Arts Council has continued avoiding the wrestling segment, insisting that the performance is *Nkwa Umuagbogho* and not wrestling; therefore, the interest is on the maiden performance, not the men. This position reflects a revolution where women can take their rightful place in the performance. This means they complement each other as each needs the other during the performance. Implied here are the shared roles, which are normal societal activities.

Props and Paraphernalia

The central prop and/or paraphernalia in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is the horsetail. The dancers hold two horsetails, one in each hand. Although it is called the horsetail, the prop looks smaller than a normal horsetail. According to Agha Okpani, one of the Chief instrumentalists:

What you are seeing is not the horsetail. The horsetail is more extensive and can only be carried for elegance. It does not give or allow you much space to display, especially in a dance like *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, where hand movements and gestures communicate a lot. We use the cow tail, which is more minor and handy and gives room to achieve the desired movements and gestures without encumbrance.

Right from the time of the dance performance, as part of the wrestling festival, the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* performers have always used the horsetail/cow tail as a hand prop. Recently, there has been a new development where the dancers now use white handkerchiefs. During the FGD, the dancers responded that the *pim pim* group or Ebini, started using the handkerchief. This was significant because of what the colour white represents in Afikpo culture, such as purity, innocence and peace. Implied here is that the group *Pim Pim* represents purity because the young maidens are seen as virgins and exude innocence; the performance also radiates peace. Virginity is a female virtue celebrated generally among the Igbo and Afikpo.



A photo of cow tail used by the *Nkwa umuagbogho* dance performance

The recent development, which does not allow the separate performance of the three groups, namely the *ebini*, *oga n'uzo* and the *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, has eradicated the use of the white handkerchief. The people also used white for aesthetics but later resorted to using only the cow tail. Before now, women did not use the horsetail. It was mainly meant for the men as a symbol of machismo. It was used at this time as an emblem of masculine conquest, ascendancy and authority. In place of cow tails, women make use of handkerchiefs. Today, the *odu efi* [cow tail] is used during the *Nkwa Umuagbogho* dance performance. This negates the hegemonic social role, which hitherto made the men the only gender with the right to hold or carry the cow tail. It is possible that the dance adopted the cow tail as the prop instead of the white handkerchief because of gender recognition and acceptance of the female gender. The horsetail/cow tail symbolises authority, wealth and good taste among the Igbo. Afikpo women today attain many celebrated heights like their male counterparts in society in wealth, chieftaincy, and excellence in various human endeavours. This has significantly changed the earlier narrative, which sees women as mere societal subordinates.

Leadership or what we can call 'patronship' another area that *Nkwa umuagbogho* has experienced change. This involves the persons that organize and run the affairs of the group. Leadership is the process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in accomplishing a common task (Gaytá 2014, 7).

In the past, what defined the leadership of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* was the presence of a man. He was not only in charge of administrating the day-to-day running of the troupe's activities but also handled the finances and every other component that makes the troupe function. This particular action counters the principles of social role, which supports the involvement of the two genders in shared roles and/or responsibilities. Apart from the performance, there should be shared roles that give women some sense of responsibility, just like men. The societal stereotype of leadership continued to affect the structure of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* in particular and *Iri agha* until recently. Women are more conscious of the fact that they can lead even groups that have male folks. The leadership responsibility, therefore, does not mean that the women do not take charge of their assigned roles during the dance performances; they are also fully involved and in charge of managing the troupe(s) concerned. There are more women in leadership positions in *Nkwa Umuagbogho* presently, as about four *Nkwa Umuagbogho* groups are managed by women in Afikpo. While Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi is in charge of the supposedly 'Original' *Nkwa Umuagbogho* of Afikpo, as handed over to her by her father, Chief Omeri Nwachi, Chief Helen Eluu handles *Nkwa Umugbogho* International, another group in the same Afikpo among others. This cultural redefinition in the leadership structure of *Nkwa Umuagbogho* is proof of women's ability in management and administration and has changed the narrative of male dominance as often postulated. Several things might have informed this

new trend. These include agitation for gender equality and the women's rights movement. Some of these rights activism are still prevalent in most societies today.

CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of *Nkwa umuagbogho* lie on the application of its performance aesthetics. These includes understanding the historical and social significance of all the components including the structure of the dance performance. The interconnectedness of *Nkwa umuagbogho* Performance components, the changes and transition has contributed to the dynamics of the dance performance.

Performance tradition of the Afikpo people of Nigeria represents a beautiful discourse of the complex intersection and multifaceted nature on performance aesthetics, gender and discontinuities in indigenous Igbo performance and by extension, African performance studies. *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, perceived as an all-female performance, also has male involvement. The men are restricted to drumming and do not share the dance space with the women. In some cases (if demanded by a client), the men introduce the performance with a mock wrestling contest, and when they leave the stage, the women take over the arena and, by extension, the dance space. This singular action does not guarantee the men the ownership of the performance. This is because of the emergence of women in the leadership role in *Nkwa Umuagbogho*. Before now, this singular gesture (mock wrestling) gave the men more authority and dominance because they controlled the music (instrumentation) and, partially, the dance space. This has changed as the leadership position made the women claim ownership of *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, breaking the male performance hegemony. While highlighting the discontinuities in the performance, the dance challenges patriarchy through leadership and intricate performance traditions that reinforces the agency of womanhood.

Foot Note:

- 1) Chief Helen Eluu. In-depth Interview. 29th December, 2020. Afikpo
- 2) Chief Helen Eluu. In-depth Interview. 29th December, 2020. Afikpo

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Interviews

- 1) Agha Okpani. Key Informant Interview, December 29th 2019. Afikpo
- 2) Ms Chinedu Omeri Nwachi. Key Informant Interview. December 29th 2019. Afikpo
- 3) Chief Helen Eluu. Key Informant Interview. December 29th 2019. Afikpo

- 4) FDG, 15th March, 2021. Ebonyi State Council for Arts and Culture, Abakaliki
- 5) Fred Ogbonna Oko. Key Informant Interviews. 15th March, 2021. Abakaliki.
- 6) Chinyere Nanna. In-depth Interviews. 15th March, 2021. Abakaliki
- 7) Mr Chimezie Ohio. In-dept Interview. 15th March, 2022. Abakaliki
- 8) Chief Helen Eluu, Ms Chinedu Omeri. In-depth Interview. 29th December, 2020. Afikpo
- 9) Miss Josephine Nnnachi In-dept Interview. 15th March, 2022. Abakaliki