

IKPEBA DANCE AS AGENT OF SOCIAL MOBILIZATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG THE OKPE PEOPLE

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Introduction.

Several aspects of the culture of the Okpe people, a distinct group of people who inhabits part of the wetlands of the Niger Delta region is crying out for documentation. It is like a mature field of maize waiting to be harvested. Available information on aspects of Okpe's culture still lies deeply in oral tradition. This informs the author's determination to write this paper on the Ikpeba dance of the Okpe people.

Historical Background of the Okpe People.

The Okpe people are found in Okpe and Sapele Local Government Areas of Delta State of Nigeria. They are found within latitude 6° and 5° 15' north and 6° 25' east in the central region of the defunct delta province' (*Idolor; 1985*). Like the origin of most African kingdoms, the origin of the Okpe people still lies in myth and mystery shrouded in various oral accounts of origin. According to oral tradition, the Okpe people are 'the direct descendants of the ruler of Ife who came towards the direction of Benin in about 1170 A.D.' (*Otite; 1973*). On their arrival in Benin, the hostility of the then Benin monarch made them to migrate further into the Delta. According to Jolly Odjegba, around 1170 A.D. the ancestor of the Okpe people,

'Prince Igboze migrated from Benin and settled in Arhowa in the present Isoko Local Government Area. Prince Igboze's son obtained from him and founded

Okperisi. Discovering that his domain was too close to that of his father's he moved to Okpe-Olomu where he stayed and died. Orhue the first son and a great hunter discovered Orerokpe. He invited his three brothers to join him and the four brothers lived at Orerokpe where the most junior was crowned as king. (*Odjegba; 2004*)

Prize Okpe was the son of Prince Igbize, the progenitor of the Okpe Nation. The four sons of Prince Okpe founded the Okpe Kingdom. (For a detailed discussion of the Origin of the Okpe Nation, see <http://okpenation.org>) The Okpe people are the descendants of Prince Okpe's four sons namely: Orhue, Orhoro, Ewreke and Esezi. Thus, all Okpe people belong to the four ancestral royal gates of families. The Okpe kingdom, the largest in Delta State, has an Orodje (King) as the head of its monarchy. His seat of government is at Orerokpe. The Okpe kingdom stretches from Orerokpe to Eghalokpe, Oha, Amuokpe, Arhagba, Elume, Okokporo, Ugborhen, Imereje, Jeddo, Ughoto, and Ugolo down to Sapele. These areas which are also called districts for administrative purposes, have Sapele as their urban centre with Orerokpe as the administrative headquarters and ancestral home. The Okpe kingdom possesses the highest population in Delta Central Senatorial District. By natural stratification, the Okpe are mainly farmers, palm-fruit hackers, hunters, traders, and fishermen. They are remarkable for palm-oil production, which brought them in contact with the early European traders. Contact with modern ways of life has however led them into white-collar jobs. Today the Okpe man can be found engaging in virtually any profitable vocation.

The Okpe are a very hardworking lot, but they are also a people who will not sacrifice cheer leisure for hard work. That accounts for the reason why there abound many

entertainment-based performances in the area today. For the purpose of this discussion, we shall take a close look at one among the numerous dances in the Okpe Kingdom. .

What is Dance?:

Dance as a dynamic art form has been with man from time immemorial. But only in recent times has it attracted attention from scholars. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines dancing as: "... the art of moving the body in a rhythmical way, usually to music, to express an idea or to narrate a story, or simply to take delight in movement itself".

Dr. Meki Nzewi writing about Dance, Drama and the stage in Nigeria defines dance as: "A stylized and structured movement in time and space" (1981). Dance in the context of Nzewi's definition includes mime, gymnastics and acrobatics structured to; or orchestrated by music.

From the forgoing, four deductions can be made:

- (1) Dance involves movement that is structured.
- (2) Dance is stylized
- (3) Dance is placed within a time space
- (4) Dance includes mime actions, gymnastics, and acrobatics structured to or orchestrated by music.

We can then safely define dance as a structured movement in time and space. A natural expression of rhythm. Dance can also be said to be any movement of the body that is controlled by a particular rhythm (i.e. rhythmic movement).

We know that dance is as old as man himself. For early man to express his innate desires, he used dance. Man tries to communicate his joy at the birth of a child and his sorrows at the death of his loved once by dancing.

Surrounded by the rhythm of nature and the animal world, early man saw dance as a natural instinctive impulse that must be obeyed for life to go on. Unlike modern man who may jerk and twist his body in self-enjoyment to one variety of music or the other without any purpose, early man never indulged in dancing as a superficial act. His dances were always spontaneous and never without purpose, because rhythm is primordial with him. He saw dance as a way of thinking and feeling. Though it is not compulsory for music to be supplied externally, drumbeats only helped to organize his rhythm.

Occasions such as birth, death, marriage, war and victories at wars, harvest, hunting, healing the sick, exorcising evil spirits, incantations for rain, sun, fertility, protection of the gods and forgiveness, were all veritable occasions for dancing. Most of early man's dancing was done by the male folks, especially by chieftains, shamans, witch doctors and warriors.

Thus, dance serves as a form of communication or expression. Human beings express themselves naturally through movement. Dance is the transformation of ordinary functional and expressive movement into extraordinary for extraordinary purposes. Dance may involve a fixed vocabulary of movements that have no meaning in themselves as in much of ballet and European folk dance or pantomime and symbolic gestures may be used as in many Asian and African dance forms. People of different cultures dance differently and for varying purposes; their varying forms of dance can reveal much about their way of life. Dance in Okpe Kingdom is used to express richness in language and culture, religion, geography, condition of social and economic systems, values, belief system and ways of life.

Dance and Human Culture:

In various cultures of the world, dance can be an art, ritual, or recreation. Dance transcends the functional purposes of the movements used in work or athletics in order to express various emotions, moods or ideas; tell a story; serve religious, political, economic, or social needs; or simply be an experience that is pleasurable, exciting or aesthetically fulfilling and valuable. Thus, dance becomes an invaluable way of looking at and appreciating the culture of a people.

Dance and Society:

Because of the physical and psychological effects dance has on the human body and mind, it enables humans to serve many functions in the society. Dance may be performed as a form of worship, a means of honouring ancestors, a celebration of life, a way of propitiating the gods, or a method to effect magic. Dance often occurs when an individual passes from one role to another. Thus, dancing may mark birth, death, initiation, marriage, and succession to office. In contemporary societies, dances provide a medium where young people can meet and socialize.

Dance and the Human Body/Mind:

The human body can perform such basic movements as bending, rotating, stretching, jumping and turning. By varying these physical actions and using different dynamics, human beings can devise an infinite number of body movements. Out of the infinite number of body movements that the body can perform in dance, each culture emphasizes certain features that are characteristic of their dance styles. Ikpeba for instance, emphasizes leg, hand and chest movements to the preference of any other bodily movement.

Through long period of specialized training, the ordinary potential of the body can be expanded in dance. In Ikpeba for instance, the dancer learns to throw his legs and hands faster in a rhythmic pattern while at the same time jerking, stretching and rotating the chest at the same time. In ballet, the dancer exercises to rotate or turn out, the legs at the hips, making it possible to lift the legs high in an arabesque. In India some dancers learn to choreograph their eyeballs and eyebrows.

Of primary concern to dance and the human body therefore are:

- The use of time- the tempo, the length of the dance, rhythmic variations and the attitude of the dance towards filling time.
- The use of space-The floor patterns, the shape of the moving body in space and the designs made by the limbs in movement.
- The use of energy flow- tense restrained or bound movement of free flowing motion.
- The use of body weight, overcoming gravity executed in light graceful movements

To the human mind, besides giving physical pleasure, dancing dose has psychological effects. Feelings and ideas can be expressed and communicated, sharing rhythm and movement can make a group feel unified. In some cases, dancing often leads to trance or some altered state of consciousness. This state in some societies is often regarded or interpreted as signaling spirit possession. Or simply this state can be sought as emotional release. When in a state of trance, the dancer may be able to perform remarkable feats of strength, endurance or danger. In some cultures as well as in Okpe kingdom, shamans

dance in trance in order to heal others physically and emotionally. The modern field of dance therapy developed in order to help people express themselves or to relate to others.

Elements of Dance

The dance choreographer has basically three elements to work with. These are space, time and intensity. As a visual medium, dance is conceived in terms of line, shape and special relationship.

Lines formed by the movement of individual dancer help to define the shape of the dance and to mark out total space. Basically, line in dance can either be straight, curved, horizontal or vertical. While it is possible to make use of only one kind of line, most choreographers prefer a combination of line patterns depending on the size of the stage floor (space). The choreographer manipulates line, shape and space in terms of individual dancers and the entire group. He creates visual patterns from the interaction of the dancers on stage. Space in dance however is dynamic; the visual patterns are constantly altered in time.

Time makes use of three factors: rhythm, tempo and the time consumed by the complete dance sequence. Rhythm is created by regularly occurring pulses or beats. Beats are organized into larger units comprising of many measures. Dances are normally composed and learned in terms of these rhythmic units.

Tempo simply refers to the speed at which the pulses or beats are repeated. These pulses or beats may be fast or slow, staccato or may change often. Lengthy dances may develop more complex patterns, emotional state and ideas than short ones and may require greater complexity in its handling.

Intensity results from the bodily movement, attitudes, gestures, and steps of the individual dancer and the group as a whole. Tempo is what creates the tensions and relaxations in the dancer's bodies and describe such attitudes as frenetic, restless, concentrated, free, restrained, or relaxed. Spatial and time patterns may be infused with widely varying qualities through differing treatment of intensity.

The elements of dance are organized in accordance with the principles of design, which are unity, variety, proportion, balance, and emphasis.

Unity creates the impression of harmony. All aspects of the dance must be tied together to give variety and unity. This creates the impression of control.

Proportion has to do with the choreographer giving each dance sequence appropriate emphasis, while emphasis consist of the choreographer giving each movement he considers most important to his concept appropriate attention while subordinating others.

Balance then has to do with equal distribution of weight on either side of the stage.

Weight as it applies here is not actual, it is perceived through the choreographer's placement of the dancers on stage and the line patterns made in relationship to the total dance area (space).

With these deductions in mind, let us proceed to discuss Okpe dances in general.

Taxonomy of Okpe Traditional Dances.

Basically in Okpe kingdom, two main kinds of dance exist. First, dance for participation, which does not need spectators. Second, dance for presentation, which is designed for an audience. Dances for participation include work dances, some form of religious dances, and recreational dances such as folk, popular or social dances. To ensure that every

person in the community can take part in them, such dances often consist of repetitive step patterns that make for easy learning.

Presentational dances are in royal courts, shrines, Village Square, and in the modern trend, theatres. These dancers may be professionals and the dance may be considered an art. The movement in presentational dances tend to be relatively difficult and require specialized training.

Today however, some dances that initially were conceived as participatory dances have been adapted for presentation. Thus, making the dividing line between presentational and participatory dances very transient.

In Okpe kingdom, dances are a vehicle for social mobilization in communities since dances are a communal or group affair. All Okpe dances could be classified under four broad categories viz: Ceremonial dances, Religious dances, Funeral dances and Secular dances. However, it will be pertinent to state that the boundary separating these dances is not hard drawn.

Ceremonial Dances:

Among the numerous dance types that exist in Okpeland, Igbegbe-Ewgbotor (Maidens dance), Ema (Chieftaincy dance), Iphri (War dance), which are accepted generally as classic dances are mainly ceremonial dances. While Ema and Igbegbe-Ewgbotor are purely dance accompanied by music, Iphri is mainly a song performance accompanied by a distinctive dance of its own. Ema and Iphri dances are purely male dances reserved for such occasions as the celebration of chieftaincy or coronation of kings, death of kings and chiefs or such highly placed individuals within the kingdom, Igbegbe-Egbotor is purely a female dance performed by women between the ages of eighteen to forty-five years old

for the less privileged ones on such occasions as marriage ceremonies and final burial ceremonies of the under-privileged or average citizens within the society.

Religious Dances:

The Okpe people like any other African race practice polytheism. Dance occupies an important part in the worship of the gods and goddesses that inhabit the cosmos of the Okpe worldview. As a matter of fact, there is no worship of any god or goddess in Okpeland that does not make use of dance. This is because in the Okpe belief system, the ways of the gods are far removed from the ways of mortal men that every effort is made by the supplicant to properly communicate with the gods. The Okpe man therefore dances before the gods to celebrate victory, to placate the anger of the gods, to solicit for help, for the healing of both mind and body, as a medium through which trance can be achieved, e.t.c. Such dances include Igbe-ame (performed by the Igbe religious sect), Edjokpa dance (performed by all male of palm fruit collection, Eho-ekporo (Masquerade dance), and Oghene-Uku dance (performed by a religious sect). All these dances have their place in the religious life of the people.

Funeral Dances:

These are those dances which are performed as part of the funeral ceremony either to keep_ the funeral ceremony lively or to entertain those paying condolence visit to the bereaved family, or those dances_s that are performed by the grave side to bid the deceased farewell which also serve as accompaniment to the bereaved on his journey to the great beyond. These include Ikpeba, Ema, Iphri and Udje dances.

Ikpeba dance will be discussed in detail later. Ema and Iphri dances have been discussed as belonging to the well to do. Udje is a special kind of dance that is different from the

Udje performed by the Urhobo. The Udje of the Okpe people is a special kind of dance performed by the children of the deceased after internment in which they costume themselves with the cloths of the deceased parent and dance, miming the life of their late parent. Other varieties of Udje also exist in Okpeland.

Secular Dances:

These are those dances that are performed by the Okpe people on purely secular occasions. These include: Igoru, Ohworhu, Ighophan, Idjurhi and Ikpeba dances. It could be noticed that the Ikpeba dance also appeared under funeral dances. This is so because the Ikpeba is a purely social dance even when performed in funeral ceremonies, it is mainly to entertain those paying condolence visits to the bereaved family. The Igoru is a satirical kind of song-dance performance used in Okpeland to insult or ridicule. Igoru as a satire has its place within the over all judicial system of the Okpe people. This is because 'traditional societies in which satire originated and found most violent and pervasive expression had, for example, no prisons' (Nwoga; 1981). The Idjurhi dance is the most popular and most dramatic secular dance throughout Okpeland. By its nature, the Idjurhi dance is purely a dance drama, which draws its materials from all walks of the people's life. It deals with a variety of themes and stories. Men and women perform it as a group.

The Origin of Ikpeba Dance:

The origin of the Ikpeba dance of the Okpe people could be traced to antiquity. According to oral tradition, Ikpeba is the oldest and earliest form of dance to exist in Okpeland. Ikpeba songs and dance originated out of the wish to keep a funeral ceremony lively and warm, and for social interaction between youths in the community as a form of

social satire. According to an Okpe adage, *Amua ro vwo vwi 'gbegbe, idama-amua na erhobo ra soseme-e*. Which being interpreted means, a village with no dance, the youths of such a village do not know how to dress. Dance in Okpe kingdom is synonymous with civilization, socialization and level of group consciousness.

During funeral ceremonies, Ikpeba dance is performed by the Idama-amua (young men of the particular village) and customarily by the eldest in-law of the deceased to keep the funeral ceremony lively and to entertain visitors. Today however, the Ikpeba dance can be performed on any secular occasion for purely entertainment purposes. Like in most African dances, in the Ikpeba dance, 'there is no provision for professional and amateur dancers. The individual has a right to express himself' (Enekwe: 1987). This does not imply that excellence is not taken into consideration. In fact, great attention is paid to excellence. To the Okpe, like any other Nigerian ethnic group, excellence is measured by "amerhen" literally translated as "sweetness or goodness" (Uyovbukerhi: 1986). Thus, how good or how sweet a dance is can be measured by the qualities that constitute 'amerhen' which include 'erhumu' (beauty), 'ehoho' (resemblance), *odidi* (numinousity), 'agbengben' (aesthetics), and 'emrerhon' (attunement). How good a dancer performs thus depends on the qualities of 'amerhen' he inculcates into his dance.

STRUCTURAL ORGANISATION OF IKPEBA DANCE

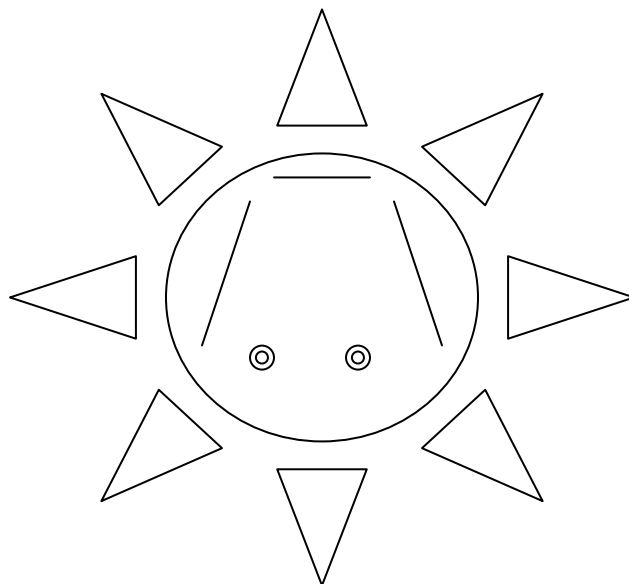
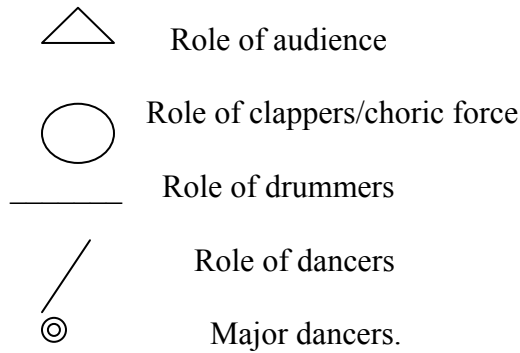
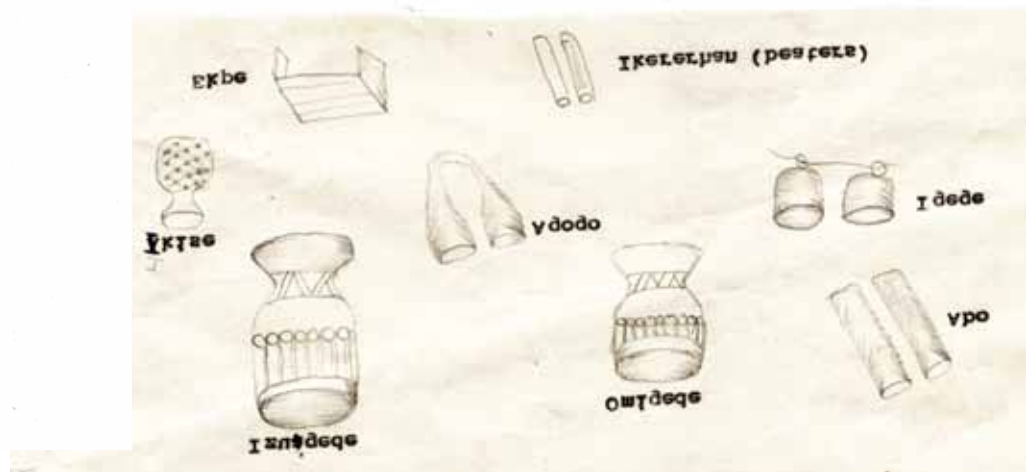
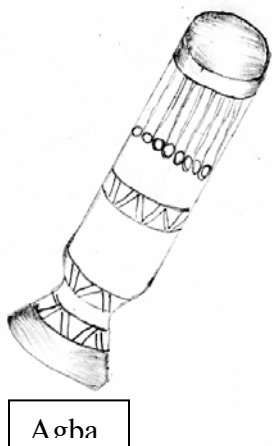


Fig.1: Diagram showing the structural organisation of Ikpeba dance.



In most cases of the presentation of the Ikpeba dance, major dancers do not exceed two at a time. The dance is choreographed in such a way that it allows for a group of dancers to take their turns in twos. After finishing their beat, they step back to join the other dancers. The structure of Ikpeba dance is such that it allows for audience participation, thus the circle of audience is an integral part of the circle of the performance itself. The lines formed by the movement of the dancers and the circle of audience serve to define the shape of the dance and mark out the total space.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS USED IN IKPEBA DANCE



A

Fig. 2. IKPEBA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Basically there are three types of drums in the Ikpeba ensemble. The ‘Agba’, ‘Izuigede’ (mother drum) and omigede (baby drum). The other instruments in the ensemble are: ‘Abo’ which is a set of clappers carved flat from bamboo stem; the ‘Ikise’ (maracas), which produces a tambourine-like sound; the ‘agogo’ (clapperless metal gong); ‘Igege’ (strung metal bells that are tied round the waist of the dancer or clapped against each other to produce a jingling sound); ‘Ekpe’ (an improvised wooden box); and ‘Ikererhan’ (two wooden beaters) which are used together with the ‘Ekpe’.

As practiced in dance, man's inner proportion to become orientated towards the continuous inner flow of intentions to move and to act in definite effortless rhythm, the re-occurring prevalent group movement as dominant in action thinking of the community resulted in the creation of community or tribal dances. This thinking is buttressed and cultivated by the social group thinking milieu, as Rudolf Laban puts it, ‘tribal or national dance reminds the observer of the states of mind or traits of character cherished within a particular community’ (Laban: 1972). The Ikpeba dance thus becomes a means of schooling the young within the community to learn and adapt to the ways of their ancestors, through entertainment, the customs and traditions of the Okpe society is passed on to the young as a form of education connected with ancestor worship, religion and recreation. Through the dance, moral and ethical standard accepted within the society are cultivated and passed on to the younger generation. Compliance or adherence to these standards thus becomes a basis for measuring decorum.

In Ikpeba songs and dances, social satire plays a dominant role. Satire is the means through which social criticism is carried out as no one, no matter how highly placed in the society is spared the butt of Ikpeba satirical songs and movement.

Ikpeba Dance and National Development.

The concept of development in this essay involves the intensification of people's awareness of themselves in a cultural milieu, which fosters creativity. The fulfilment of the cultural, spiritual, intellectual and many other needs of a people within a given society is therefore crucial to the structure of material development within the society and lays a solid foundation for embracing development in other spheres. The highest level of development humans can attain does not lie in technology, but rather it lies in moral and spiritual well being of humankind; because after all said and done, it is humankind that the development in the natural technological sciences is going to benefit within a cultural setting. As Adah A.O. succinctly puts it,:

The wider application of this is that the social and human scientist must concentrate their attention on the social need for appropriate invention on the part of the natural and technological scientist development (*Adah. 1991*).

Those who are unsympathetic to the cause of the arts have often asked the question of what the arts, especially, the expressive arts, has to offer to national development. This question is generally posed from a position of ignorance, as it is through the arts that a people's culture is made readily apparent. Thus we cannot talk of national development without talking about a people's culture, since development does not exist in a cultural vacuum.

The basic study object in dance is humanity. Humanity and the human condition in culture, this condition cannot be removed from ethics or issues of human choice. In essence, the type or speed of development of a people is directly tied to the kind of technology they opt for, (i.e. the choice of an appropriate technology) which as has been stated is culture bound.

According_ to Stephanie Arnold, ‘through dramatic rituals, we reinforce community values and act out community stories that preserve a way of life’. (*Arnold, 2001.*)

As can be seen from the foregoing, Ikpeba dance is not only used to educate the people on accepted norms within the community, it is also used to control behaviour. Ikpeba dance is a potent choice in effecting behavioural change within the community towards positive end.

Conclusion.

From the forgoing it can be seen that dance as an art form represents a group’s consciousness. The development of the human body, mind and intellect in dance cannot be over emphasised. As a social being, a nation’s group consciousness and level of technical and artistic development is mirrored in the kind of dance its people participate in and patronise. ‘Dance has played important roles in theatrical entertainments since earliest times’...(*Brocket, 1964. p. 662.*) and still continues to play important roles in drama and theatrical performances till date. As noted from the above discussion, the Okpe kingdom abounds with several dances, which are typical of a growing African nation. The Ikpeba dance contains rich cultural elements in spite of cross-cultural influences. The dancing is done excellently, orchestrated to music produced from locally

made musical instruments. Each subtle body movement, gesture and song is produced to carry out a function of teaching social and moral lessons.

In 1986, the first national symposium on Nigerian Dance was held at the University of Ibadan, where it was resolved that the Nigerian Government 'should establish without delay a national academy of creative and performing arts where:

- (a) The proposed national Troup will flourish.
- (b) Professional dance, music and drama practitioners will be trained for government and private establishment.
- (c) Dance and other creative arts teachers as well as youth organizers will be trained for the 6-3-3-4 educational system'... (*Ezughha, 1986.*)

Therefore, if the encouragement is given to our traditional dance institutions and if the decision reached at Ibadan in 1986 is carried out, it will go a long way at re-awakening and orientating the consciousness of the present day youths who look at our traditional dances as belonging to old men and backward societies and to obviate these dances from going out of fashion.

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