

Historicising Dance in Mkpát Enin: The Example of Abre Dance

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Abstract

The people of Mkpát Enin Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, have a performance of Abre dance, which is a very important indigenous cultural performance. Originally associated with the planting and harvesting of water yam (Abre), the dance has today become an important socio-cultural institution for married women in Mkpát Enin to share experiences, settle marital disputes, promote communal harmony and uphold tradition. This research studies the history, cultural significance and present-day relevance of Abre dance within the socio-cultural context of Mkpát Enin. This study will utilize a qualitative research approach. It will utilize Cultural Expression Theory, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Heritage Theory. Together the three theories show that dance is a form of communication, identification and preservation of heritage. The results showed that Abre dance is not just for entertainment, as it serves as a vessel of community history, a platform for women's empowerment, a conflict resolution method, and a way to transmit indigenous knowledge from past to future generations. This however is now being threatened by modern technology, Christian ideology, low level of Youth participation, lack of attention by Afia Abre, as well as the change of socio-cultural value systems. The article concludes that the Abre dance is an inalienable heritage to the Mkpát Enin people and can be kept alive through documentation, educating cultural values, institution support system, community involvement, incorporation into festivals.

Keywords: Abre Dance, Mkpát Enin, Cultural Heritage, Dance, Women Society, Cultural Expression, Indigenous Performance, Preservation.

Introduction

In Africa, dance occupies a crucial social function that most societies perform. Thus, it plays more than just entertainment. Also, dance serves as a means of communication, education, rituals and social interaction. In Africa, many communities use dance as communal memories, community dreams and vision, community morals, and a symbolic language that promotes their history and identity. Consequently, examining the native dance traditions allows for a great opportunity to study history and culture of a people.

Bakare (6) describes dance as “the rhythmic movement of the human body in time and space to make a statement”. It is this definition of dance that shows us the importance and significance of dance in a person's life. It also shows us that dance is not

merely movement but the means to convey an idea, belief, emotion or experience. Similarly, James (62) claims that “dance is essentially a non-verbal expressive activity and touches upon every sphere of human activity. It is a human necessity and a cultural universal”. This shows us that dance is a language of cultural expression which is very essential and significant in a person's life.

Communication also happens through dance, sometimes. Eyre (98) defines communication as the transfer of information from one party to another so that it is understood and acted upon. In society, dance performs this communicative function using body movements, gestures, songs, rhythms, costumes, body adornments, and symbolic actions which have some understanding among members of the community. As such, every traditional dance carries its own

communicative code deeply associated with the experiences of its people.

The Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State regard their vibrant traditions that have linked them to their rich history and identity. Traditional dance is one of the ways they achieve this. The Abre Dance is very popular, and it comes from the Mkpato Enin LGA. The word "Abre" or "water yam" as called in Ibibio is derived from the farming of women during the planting and harvesting of this important crop. Through the years, yet, the Abre dance evolved from mere agricultural dance to a structured women's institution. Moreover, Abre dance serves as a tool for women to socialise, educate, resolve conflicts and welfare. Oral interviews conducted with people reveal that the Abre Women's Society gradually became a platform for women to dialogue about problems with husbands, mediate between warring couples, promote peaceful living and render emotional and social support. Through their execution of Abre dances accompanied with songs, chant and movements imbued with philosophical meanings, these women disseminated valuable information about moral conduct, justice, respect, family values, family development and the future progress of the community thus making Abre dances a social institution in themselves that exquisitely reflect the married life of a woman in Mkpato Enin apart from their being an artistic show. It is the usual item in every festival, a part of marital rites, funeral obsequies, harvesting, communal get-togethers as well as other meaningful cultural festivals with distinctive dance routines, indigenous costumes, indigenous musical instruments and

indigenous music conveying the history and cosmology of Mkpato Enin people which foster their communal solidarity and contribute to the oral transmission of indigenous knowledge. However, indigenous Afe Abre has seriously encountered immense difficulty in keeping itself afloat due to modernization, Westernization, urbanization, increasing role of Christianity, exodus of youths, the decrease in youth involvement, abandonment of old custom and practice and a decline in reverence towards indigenous institution of the people. The diminution and disappearance of the olden Afe Abre, increased intrusion of Christianity among the Mkpato Enin people and exodus of the youths, particularly women, coupled with apathy towards traditional cultural heritage of the people is pushing to endanger the invaluable wealth of tradition. As age and their untimely death rob us of the documentation as an invaluable aspect of this dance becomes erased into oblivion, this work herein examines the History of Abre dance: Its genesis, development, cultural impact, music, dress, symbols and its empowering role in the life of a woman in Mkpato Enin Society with its present day challenges and strategies for sustainability as an integral part of Nigeria's intangible cultural heritage.

History and Meaning of Abre Dance in Mkpato Enin

In the pre-colonial times, the Mkpato Enin community was a very structured society in which women performed important functions through their age grades and special groups which became an arm of local government. One such organization was the

Abre Women Society. This was a very important organization. It was not only active and vocal but also organized. They tackled issues affecting women and aimed to instil moral standards and protect women from abuse. It shows that women's collective strength is acknowledged under the Ibibio traditional governance system which is a good thing. Mkpát Enin is known for its rich culture and unique Ibibio customs involving food, dance, hospitality, clothing, marriage and burial rites as well as a strong kinship system. Among these energetic people, the Abre dance is one of the many popular traditions of the community. The "Abre" means water yam which is an important crop in Akwa Ibom State and a widely consumed food (or taken with palm oil). Water yams were harvested and were always sown in August to September, and it is the harvest period where the origin of the abre dance is based on.

Informally spoken to Mma Esther, the abre society first appeared during the harvest period.

It is in tribute of the gods for fruitfulness, good health and security. Membership was restricted to married ladies who committed themselves to appear regularly at meetings and also, were without an unpunished criminal. (Interview with Adiaha Obong). At a period when women were treated like kids and they had no say whatsoever on public matters. The Abre afforded them respect and a means of influencing public affairs. Mma Ikon mentioned that the very first leader of the Abre, was the wife of the chief priest of the village. The Abre society was a revered organization

with deep spiritual significance. Libations were poured to pay homage to its deity, and all activities unfolded in a special sacred hut known as the "afe abre." This space was off-limits to men, with only initiated members granted entry. The group's main goal was to unite women, resolve marital conflicts, and offer mutual support. Eka Unwa (personal interview) shares that during their gatherings, a live python was kept in a native pot at the heart of the afe abre, while the women danced around it as part of their rituals. This practice underscores the spiritual and symbolic aspects of their community. But Abre was more than just a place for rituals; it also played a vital educational and regulatory role. The society was known for mentoring young girls, teaching them about economic, moral, and social ethics. Festival programs served as a platform to create and discuss policies impacting girls and marriage. Music was a key element in this process. Adiaha Obong (personal interview) notes that the songs expressed the hopes and dreams of women, often reflecting their everyday experiences. Ikon adds that the dance was not merely for entertainment; it also acted as a means of social control and, at times, a form of protest against male dominance. The performances were brought to life by a vibrant orchestra of locally crafted wooden drums, rattles, gongs, and other traditional instruments.

Discipline in this community was taken very seriously. Those who broke the rules, especially when it came to infidelity or theft, faced a rather unique punishment: they had to wear a python around their neck and dance publicly as a way to acknowledge their

wrongdoing. This unusual practice certainly discouraged many women from straying off the path. The Abre dance group, on the other hand, was a vibrant part of the community, creating their own songs and often being invited to perform at various ceremonies. Many of these songs reflected their personal journeys and everyday experiences. These performances not only provided a source of income for the members but also helped cover registration fees. The Abre dance tradition in Mkpát Enin was much more than just a dance; it was a vital means for women to unite, tackle issues, and support each other. For years, the Abre dance group served as a haven where women could share their stories, confront their struggles, and seek solutions to marital issues and infidelity. Each dance step was carefully choreographed, drawing inspiration from their real-life experiences. The Abre dance was not merely entertainment; it was a powerful way for women to connect, communicate, and express themselves. Through their movements, they conveyed messages, shared emotions, and offered support. The Abre dance group stood as a beacon of unity and strength among the women of Mkpát Enin.

The Abre dance tradition is at a low point in the lives of many people in Mkpát Enin today. Younger women are giving up the practice, embracing more contemporary dances, which not only affects the Abre practice directly but will deprive these young women of their cultural heritage and the ability to form strong relationships as well as support each other and overcome obstacles. This crisis for the group of women that practice Abre dance has been ongoing for quite some time

now under the challenges posed by modernity. Many feel that the group practices something so sacred that it may or may not even be worth perpetuating; or in simpler terms it is just old and no longer suitable. Historically, women in the community who practiced Abre did not originally practice Christian beliefs instead their practices revolved around the sacred hut, its deity: the “Eka Ima”. The dances and movements performed by these original members were based on common social interaction with some of the steps mirroring ritual “witches” dances. Nonetheless, Abre dance has continued to thrive in Mkpát Enin as one of the group’s many achievements. Through its rich symbolism and social role, this dance has been essential in promoting women’s empowerment and addressing gender inequality.

Costumes and Make-Up in Abre Dance Performance

In Abre dance performance, costumes and makeup are essential for communicating cultural identity, values, embodying spiritual concepts, and communicating the dance’s message to the audience. The elaborate designs, traditional tools and materials, and use of substances like the “native chalk” (ndom) symbolise joy, purity, peace, and well-being, while also distinguishing the Ibibio culture and expressing the dancers’ roles within their own community, particularly in the context of the Abre festival and tradition. According to Amatokwu, costumes and makeup are vital elements of dance. “This is because clothes and makeup constitute an artefact of non - verbal communication, which

"can also communicate manners, mood, feelings, choice of group, cult, and society" (114).

Costumes are clothing worn and used by the actors and dancers when performing before the audience. Costume represents a character, and also helps in defining the role of an actor, in a performance. A costume may be designed for use in specific work, or it may have a traditional design, such as those used in some ceremonial and folk dances. This designs help the audience to be able to identify the purpose and meaning of the dance. According to Penrod James, "typically, dance costumes are designed to harmonize with the dance and not to hinder the movements of the dancers involved" (6). Johnson also contributes that, "Costumes are worn by actors and dancers for several reasons, namely, to cover nakedness, to provide warmth for the body, to show the status of the character played, to distinguish sexes, to identify cultures, and to depict the period and time of the production" (151). He further states that:

The world in its current form has assumed a very sophisticated posture, such that clothes are not just worn to cover the skin, but more so, to induce appeal. Even underpants which are not necessarily to be seen and admired by others when worn, are enjoying the best of designs. It does appear as though the human skin cannot condone anything that does not appeal to it (151).

In the Abre dance performance, as with many Nigerian traditional dances, makeup and costumes are vital for cultural expression, identity, and storytelling, serving to enhance the performance's aesthetics and sending

messages about beliefs, social status, and spiritual elements. They also add visual appeal, define the characters, and help to establish the performance's authenticity while also functioning as semiotic tools to transmit cultural values and identity.

The choice of costumes and makeup is relevant in establishing cultural identity in Abre dance performances. Each every dance has symbolic costumes and makeup that enhance the accurate transmission of cultural codes. Mayokun describes costume as "the creation of clothing for the overall appearance of a character or performer during theatrical, film or television productions" (150). All the cultural elements visible in Abre dance performance play important role in the construction of identity. The mkpin and the native chalk are one of the important aspect of the Abre costume. The Mkpato Enin women attach values to the costume as a presentation of the women's salience to their regal status. The Abre women also make use of the costume as a symbolic tool to highlight the importance of peace, love, togetherness and purity in the collective fabric of the society. Costumes and makeup are crucial signifiers of cultural identity and the most visible elements in dance performances. Wanyama states that "costume helps in communicating crucial information on the identity of the dance" (225).

In Mkpato Enin, the women of the Abre dance society made use of lots of traditional costumes, makeup, and even props. All these elements have their own unique significances and purposes. The Costumes which include the wrapper, mini skirt, which is known as mkpin, tops, blouses, beads, and head tie are all

relevant to the Abre performance. According to Utoh - Ezeajugh, "costume also has to do with accessories, and ornamentation worn by the actors or actresses (or dancers) to define a character" (32). However, while a costume can stand alone as a separate art, Lyndersay argues that "it must never be seen as an independent element but rather, as an integral part of the whole production design, harmonising with the chosen style, concept, mood and atmosphere of the particular presentation" (98). A typical Abre woman was identified with 2 pieces of wrapper, which the eye of the owner considered the superior, blouse, headtie and a string of beads tied around the neck. Among the important elements of this group are the Ekuriku staff, which was also used by members of Idiong and Ekong societies and symbolised authority as well as "akpan Udua, known as the" (traditional woven basket) which describes their occupation of farming and trading.

In the context of the traditional Abre festival, which addresses the societal issues of mistreated Ibibio women, the costumes and makeup convey a message of politeness and decency among the women. Abre dance is deeply rooted in history, ritual, and spirituality, and all these elements are explored and expressed through the costumes and makeup worn by the Abre performers.

Musical and Instrumentation Elements of Abre Dance

In Mkpato Enin, the music and instrumentation of the Abre dance are central to its ability to convey emotions and to communicate ideas. Abre is a traditional

performance of the Ibibio people, performed primarily by women during the water yam harvest festival to celebrate a bountiful harvest and to address social issues, particularly the maltreatment of women by their husbands. As with other African traditional music, Abre music expresses life in all its aspects through sound, using songs and instruments shaped by the society's beliefs, laws, customs, and traditions. It falls under the category of traditional or folk music; the oldest form transmitted orally from generation to generation despite colonial disruption. In Ibibio society, music is integral to all spheres of life, political, social, and religious and serves to educate, inform, and entertain. Dance movements in Abre are almost entirely dependent on songs and instrumentation. The music provides rhythmic and tonal structure that establishes characterization, mood, and narrative in the performance. As Nwamuo notes, "dance messages come from the music and musical instrument".

The Abre dance relies on a minimal, local instrument line-up: wooden drums, shakers like the ichaka, and the big sounding percussion gongs, the nkwong and the akakan. Each dancer in the Abre Women Society is responsible for playing a specific instrument. The traditional rattles start off the basic cyclical backbeat and beat out the measure; traditional drums and gongs provided a robust rhythmic frame from which to drive singers, dancers and all listeners.

As Bebe notes, the African drum in many ways is the definition of the rhythm, and it can be said that the African drum is music that speaks in rhythms.

Even in its absence, however, the African drum remains-and its insistent pulse can be felt through clapped hands, stomped feet and the rhythmic onomatopoeia that results. African instruments are a fundamental part of life, and the presence of the large slit wooden drums in Ibibio life symbolize authority and are used for announcing community matters or calling to order.



Plate 5: This is an Ibibio traditional wooden gong, known as the ntakrok, which is played by Abre women as a musical instrument.

Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025.



Plate 6: Ibibio Traditional Drum.

Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025.

The songs sung by the women of the Abre society during their meetings and festivals are crafted by the women themselves, drawing from their personal experiences, challenges—especially those faced in their

marriages—and their observations of the community around them. These songs serve as powerful narrative tools, social commentaries, and means of social control. Most of the performances are in Ibibio and feature the call-and-response patterns that are a hallmark of African oral traditions. Here are some of the songs that were recorded during the fieldwork:

1. “Ebe akeno idiok ikot oh”

Ibibio: Ebe akeno idiok ikot oh_ (Response)
_akpakpa ifono nkong efere ifono ono ama
omum obo (Response) akpakpa ifono nkong
efere ifono.

Translation: My husband handed me a piece of farmland that turned out to be a real disappointment. The corn just wouldn't thrive, and the vegetables struggled too. Eventually, he took it back from me after all that.

Interpretation: This song takes a hard look at a terrible husband who handed his wife a piece of land that's practically useless, washed away by the rain. It's a powerful symbol of economic neglect and the unfairness in their marriage.

2. Dibio mo oh!

Ibibio: Dibio mo oh! (Response) Dibio mo
Akpan ebre nnyin

Translation: Help me and bring down my farm basket. Help me and bring down our Abre container.

Interpretation: This song is performed during the performance when the sacred “ebre Abre container,” a significant identity symbol of the club, is brought into the arena or Abre hut.

3. “Ebe amasin ndo oh ke ntak una okrikang usen ita”

Ibibio: Ebe amasin ndo oh ke ntak una okrikang usen ita. Ami nyung nsin enye oh ke’ntak uwong akaikai nna ke awa!

Translation: My husband kicked me out because I spent three days in okri-ikang. I also decided to leave his house for good since he was always getting drunk and embarrassing me.

Interpretation: The song captures a powerful exchange of grievances and defiance, illustrating how women harness the power of music to express their frustrations with male behaviour and negative attitudes.

4. “Iban emedi”

Ibibio: Iban emedi oh (Response) anke nke nke oh. Iban esong idem oh (Response) anke nke nke oh.

Translation: Ladies, you’re all warmly welcomed. Women, welcome! Great job, ladies!

Interpretation: This is essentially the opening song during Abre performances, serving as a heartfelt welcome to all the members as they gather in the arena.

5. Eyomo Mma Mary oh!

Ibibio: Eyomo Mma Mary oh! Akpa nkpo Ake ayip aran oh! Oyoho iba Ake ayip nkadi oh! Oyoho ita ake ayem adiyip ibat edisuene enye oh. Sese nkpo do, abre ayakpeke ndisi oh!

Translation: Shame on Mary oh! The first time she swiped some oil. The second time, she took garri. The third time, she tried to steal bonga fish and got caught, bringing her shame.

Just look at that, Abre is now coming down hard on her.

Interpretation: This song exposes the way in which Abre is a social control by bringing a public embarrassment to the theft and immorality of women. The informative and satirical tone of these Abre songs gives credence to the fact that they are not mere entertainment. They serve educative purposes, plus they help instill community values. Further, they tackle issues of male dominance and immorality. These Abre songs are meaningful. The music enhances the dancers’ movements and message, turning their performance into an echo of women’s voices. The diversity of instruments and musical genres available in the African culture is tied to the surrounding environment and local jobs (Akpabot). In forests such as Mkpato Enin, leading instruments are wood based including drums and xylophones. The music and drums utilized in Abre dance of the Ibibio society of Mkpato Enin serves vital functions of education, activism and social norm enforcement in the society.

Factors Threatening the Survival of Abre Dance Tradition

Abre dance in Mkpato Enin at the verge of dying. There are a series of elements that have eroded the importance and continuation of the practice over the years, foremost of which has been the afe Abre, an erected sanctuary of women where members meet to undergo ritual practices and perform Abre dances, serving as the custodian of holy things like the python and was only made open for initiates members. As of now the afe Abre

have collapsed and the members of Abre no longer gather for rituals, singing of songs or passing of dance steps to new entrants thus the rift between the old and younger generation.

Christianity has also taken its toll to its detriment. As EKAH IMA noted "In those days people who belonged to the Abre society were not Christians and her belief in an altar devoted to the sacred hut and its god" Now most churches discouraged members going for it due to association of with ofe Abrie and its paraphernalia to allow young maidens and Christian women go for it. This change has been a big factor in the downfall of the Abre dance and has also made it difficult for the society to enroll new members. A younger generation of women has a different view of abré due to modern gastronomy.

Many consider this dance to be outdated or too sacred for the contemporary world and prefer to engage with the music and dance trends they see on television and social media. The growth of the Abre society is affected by the contemporary fashion, lifestyles and more. As a result, the songs, drum patterns, and dance steps of Abre will likely be lost to posterity. Most of the other dancers are older women, and when they die off, this information could die off too. There are also problems from financing. To become a member of the Abre society women pay registration fees and contribute to costumes and group activities. Previously, the group used to perform in the ceremonies and earn an income. Not anymore though.

Abre has become less impactful when it comes to addressing inappropriate behavior. In early days, the community would use songs

and rituals to address issues of adultery and stealing. At times, it made the person wear a python around their neck and dance in front of all. These days, people would opt for the court or even the church to settle their disputes leaving such punishments in oblivion. The Abre society has lost its status with the community. Furthermore, not much attention was given to documenting the songs, history and dances of Abre. Most of this rich knowledge is now just stored in the memories of the older generation. If steps are not taken to preserve it, we risk losing these traditions entirely when they are no longer around.

Strategies for the Preservation and Promotion of Abre Dance

For the Abre culture to continue, a great many of measures should be taken at both community and international level and in particular: A first step will consist in transmitting the Abre culture to the children. One can achieve it by organizing training courses which would gather the old people and the children so that the singers, musicians and the choreographers would be in the position to transmit their heritage to young people. Indeed, it would be ideal if the Abre culture were again taught in the schools of Mkpát Enin. When children are aware of the culture that they belong to, they accept to be participants in it.

The existence of a documented heritage will also contribute to preserve it: because the oral heritage (songs, stories, styles of dance etc.) of the old members is based on the memory, it is imperative to register it. It will be, in fact, possible to take a recording

(audio, visual) and to catalog the recorded materials through transcribing the songs and the history into writing so that researchers or cultural centers may use them. The community must also work towards showcasing Abre's work on new platforms. Public events, weddings, and cultural festivals may invite the Abre group to perform to foster this tradition alive. This provides an opportunity for the women to practice but also earn an income to support their activities. When people see the beauty of this dance at public events, they will ultimately give respect and support for many years.

Community and religious leaders have equally important roles to play in social mobilization. Seeing Abre not as a threat to religion but an interpretive inroad or explanation of its cultural value, encouragement of fusing tradition and religion peacefully. Their support may liberate more women to participate without being judged or criticized. Ultimately, government agencies and cultural organizations must support the Abre group by providing small grants, supplies and training on group management. This can relieve members of their financial burden making the group much stronger and robust. If people perform these steps together, the Abre dance will be preserved for the future generations. It will continue to serve as a source of cultural identity, women's support, and community values in Mkpato Enin.

Conclusion

Truly, one of the best cultural traditional performance this Mkpato Enin people have, is the Abre dance, as it reflects its

identity, culture, belief, and social organization. The function of the Abre dance transcends mere entertainment to become a means of cultural conservation, morality imparting to youths, social coherence, conflict settlement and empowerment of women. With the exciting music, scintillating costumes, deep meaning-oriented symbols, rich meaningful messages and creative choreography, the Abre dance has given Ibibio-culture its own share in its richness in its diversity. But like other forms of indigenous traditions, the Abre dance is now under threat from the impact of modernity, new religious ideologies, globalization and general disinterest from the young ones. If steps are not deliberately put in place to sustain and protect the Abre dance, there are portions of its qualities that will inevitably fade with the passage of time (Ekon, R2, n).

The study stressed the importance of preservation of Abre the dance on cultural identity of Mkpato Enin people; that it can play a major part in our efforts to showcase some of Nigeria's indigenous performing art traditions. It also calls for greater synergy between state as well as governmental agencies (with all its department) cultural institutions, scholars, higher learning institution, royal father, traditional rulers, community leaders and local peoples to archive, celebrate and transmit this wonderful piece of artistic heritage to the next generation.

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