The Dance-Plays of Biafra's Ubakala Clan

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RÉSUMÉ

Non seulement l'expression artistique est-elle une forme de comportement humain, mais l'art exerce une influence sur les systèmes culturel, social et de personalité en même temps qu'il en est l'expression. Six danses nigériennes sont analysées pour démontrer ces inter-influences.

Artistic expression is human behavior[1]. As symbolic expression of social reality, art reflects and influences the social, cultural, and personality systems of which it is a part. African dance provides a good opportunity to explore these interrelationships because it is a significant sphere of human behavior in many African societies. Where it does not exist, European missionary activity has probably been a determining factor (Hanna 1965a).

Our specific subject is the *nkwa* of Ubakala Clan in what was formerly the Eastern Region of Nigeria, a "dance-play" combining dance movement, song, and musical accompaniment. Six *nkwa di iche iche* (the plural of *nkwa,* literally meaning *"nkwa* of various types") are examined, initially to describe their manifest content and folk evaluation, and then heuristically to suggest some of their likely socio-psychological functions. Thus we are

[1] This paper is the revised version of "Ubakala Dance: A Special Festival" presented by Judith Lynne Hanna at the 1964 Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology. The research on Ubakala dance was conducted in 1963; recording equipment, stock, and ancillary support were supplied by the African Studies Center, Michigan State University. We are deeply grateful to the late Chief J. O. Ebere (Uba of Ubakala Clan), J. B. O. Ezem (President of the Ubakala Improvement Union), the Ubakala Elders, V. I. Iroakazi, and the performers of the "Special Ubakala Festival" for most generously giving of themselves to make this study of Ubakala dance possible. We also thank Victor Uchendu, Alan P. Merriam, and Priscilla Reining for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

attempting to fill part of the gap noted by Evans-Pritchard (1928: 446) almost forty years ago but of little concern to scholars since then (Hanna 1966a and 1966b). He wrote:

> In ethnological accounts the dance is usually given a place quite unworthy of its social importance. It is often viewed as an independent activity and is described without reference to its contextual setting in native life. Such treatment leaves out many problems as to the composition and organization of the dance and hides from view its sociological function.

Since an ethnography of the Igbo has been written by an Ubakala anthropologist (Uchendu 1965), only a brief background comment is necessary here. The 15,426 members of the Ubakala "Clan"[2] (controversy exists over whether Ubakala is a clan in the anthropological sense), who are part of the Igbo tribal grouping, live approximately ten miles south of Umuahia-Ibeku township on either side of the main road to Aba. In peace-time, most clan members are engaged in sedentary subsistence agriculture, although for some, palm produce was a cash crop. Sex is an important basis for the clan's division of labor. Ubakala's traditional religion — still influential — is polytheistic and includes reincarnation and ancestor honor as cardinal tenets (see Uchendu 1964 and 1965:94-106). The moral strictures of the clan are enforced by a shame-orientation.

Social organization in Ubakala is patrilineal and patrilocal; authority tends to be based upon achievement, as demonstrated by an individual's ability to accumulate wealth and to persuade others in matters of community interest. Frequent validation of these abilities appears to be necessary in order to retain one's position. Villages were traditionally non-hierarchical semi-autonomous administrative units which occasionally united on a clan-wide basis for such mutual interests as defense against external threats and performance of special ritual ceremonies. To early European administrators, Ubakala appeared to be more united than its neighbors (Pleass 1934).

Pre-war changes brought about by exogenous pressures appear to have been less destructive to traditional culture in the

[2] The 1963 Census figure was obtained by personal communication from the Director of the Centre for Population Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Ubakala territory than in most adjoining areas. In part this can be explained by the late initiation of missionary activity in the clan area and, as a corollary, Ubakala resistance to the dissolution of its indigenous belief system. On the other hand, the modal Ubakala characteristics of individualism, competitiveness (personal, inter-village, and inter-clan), and materialism (cf. Uchendu 1964:36; Ottenberg 1959) help in explaining a receptivity to change which the Ubakala have displayed. The corporate striving of Ibos is suggested by this observation: "Every Igbo community wants to 'get up'" (Uchendu 1965:9).

Selection of the six *nkwa di iche iche* to be discussed in this paper was based upon their being specially performed (necessitated by filming and tape recording requirements for audio-visual analyses)[3] in the Ubakala Clan's Central Market. With two notable exceptions, the milieu and authenticity of the special performances closely approximated their natural counterparts, many of which we either witnessed or had described to us by informants. The "stage" was typical: it consisted of an open space of hard-packed dirt, adjoining the market place, where associational groups (based on age, sex, kinship, or achievement) often dance (cf. Uchendu 1965:27-28). Also characteristic were the crowds, the flowing palm wine, and the utilization of a rain-maker's service when rain fell interrupting a performance (he stopped the rain for us).

One difference between the special performances and the natural situations stemmed from the selection of groups to participate. The groups had previously been chosen by clan elders after they had judged a preliminary dance-play competition among representative groups from the thirteen Ubakala villages. This unusual procedure was devised specifically for the occasion. A second difference was in the behavior of the audience. To facilitate audio-visual data collection, we arranged for a small space to be maintained between the dancers and the audience. Usually, the audience is first a decorative frieze as it views the dancers and musicians "in the round". Then, when the dance-plays are fully underway, the audience virtually merges with

[3] The analyses, briefly noted herein, will be reported fully in our forthcoming book on African dance.

the performers, shrinking the stage in enthusiastic empathy and encouragement. The performers are urged on through gesturing, verbal praising, wiping performers' faces with handkerchiefs, and placing coins or currency notes on the foreheads of favorites.

In this article, we consider several of the ways by which each dance-play appears to make a contribution to (a) the continuity of Ubakala society and (b) the personal welfare of individual members of that society. Thus we explore how an *nkwa* may, in functional terms, be "adaptive from the standpoint of the society and adjustive from the standpoint of the individual" (Kluckholn 1944:47), i.e., how it is "eufunctional" (Levy 1953: 77). The ways in which the dance-plays may be dysfunctional to the society or the individual (Levy 1953:77; Sjoberg 1960) will not be discussed, although such an analysis would be possible.

We hypothesize that the following three functions are performed by the Ubakala Clan *nkwa di iche iche:* (a) socialization, (b) anticipatory psychic management, and (c) alternative catharsis. These functions do not constitute an exhaustive list. Rather, they are presented because they appear to be relatively important in the "functional totality" of dance-plays (as well as the dance forms of many other ethnic groups) and because the professional literature has failed to report their importance satisfactorily (more adequately discussed, for example, are the contributions rituals may make to group reaffirmation and personal euphoria). We do not mean to imply that an *nkwa* ranks relatively high in terms of a hypothesized function; each is assumed to be multi-structural, and we have not conducted a study of the function — only of the *nkwa di iche iche.* Nor do we imply that the functions are mutually exclusive; to the contrary, it is likely that they are coordinate components of several *nkwa di iche iche* analyzed in this paper.

All three functions — especially the latter two — operate largely at the latent level, in the sense that their behavioral consequences may not be intended or generally recognized by Ubakala people (Merton 1957:25). The latent meanings of dance-plays are deducted from their cultural setting as well as from more general theoretical considerations (cf. Richards 1956:115). Because of limited evidence, we hope that the three hypotheses are

viewed, *inter alia,* as a program of inquiry for additional research in a previously neglected area: the psycho-social study of dance in African societies.

The three hypothesized functions of Ubakala dance-plays require theoretical elaboration. *Socialization* includes initial conditioning, making possible the effective performance of social roles, and continuing role reinforcement (Herskovits 1949:491), which helps to maintain societal effectiveness. The importance of this function stems from the fact that "a society cannot persist unless it perpetuates a self-sufficient system of action" (Alberle *et al* 1950: 109). *Nkwa di iche iche,* which are frequently performed and intensively experienced, provide many opportunities to reward participants through activity satisfaction (e.g., through experiencing aesthetic pleasure and heightened collective affirmation) and social approval (from fellow performers and observers) and thus to motivate continued conformity to the society's structure of action (cf. Hanna 1965b).

Immanent in socialization is communication (Lasswell 1948: 51). When an Ubakala *nkwa* is performed, communication takes place kinesthetically, as well as at the verbal level (if accompanied by song) and through the sounds of drums. These media are "shared, learned, symbolic modes of communication" (Levy 1953: 167). Over time, the verbal, kinesthetic, and percussive symbolism undergoes evolutionary change (rarely revolutionary, since each represents a semi-autonomous cognitive system). As social and political leaders rise and fall, for example, new names and deeds may be substituted at the verbal level; but so long as shared symbolic modes exist, socialization in the society can continue. It can take place using only one medium, but the three usually occur together in an Ubakala dance-play, and thus they provide constant mutual reinforcement. The significant impact of this multiple media approach is consonant with the results of audio-visual research. As Wittich and Schuller put it, "Where sensory experience is involved, it should be as complete as possible. One learns better when all pertinent senses are employed" (1953:197). Dance adds a unique dimension to the audio-visual presentation in that it involves the sight of moving performers in time and space, the sounds of physical movements, the smells of physical exertion, and the feeling of kinesthetic activity or empathy. Thus

the *nkwa* has the potential of going beyond the audio-visual techniques of socialization with which we are generally familiar.

Anticipatory psychic management prepares the individual for a threatening experience by rehearsing it until the potential affect is reduced to manageable proportions. "Every fresh repetition," wrote Freud, "seems to strengthen this mastery for which [the individual] strives" (1955:43). Thus this function is a type of socialization, but from the psychological rather than the sociological perspective. Usually, repetition to manage or assimilate is related to a past traumatic event. We believe, however, that it can be used with equal force to manage anticipated future events. Military training and theatrical rehearsal in part substantiate this view.

The importance of African dance-plays for anticipatory psychic management has not been discussed in the scholarly literature. Nevertheless, several theorists have dealt with relevant issues, Freud's comments (1955:14-17) being especially important:

> Art is one of the forms of adult activity that continues the play of children. Play is a complex process that fulfills various needs. Among them we encounter, as a comparatively constant purpose, the attempt at mastery through play. A traumatic situation is playfully repeated in a harmless setting, not only in order to overcome the original fear, but also to achieve enjoyment through active mastery of a formerly threatening situation.

It appears that some Ubakala *nkwa di iche iche* are settings for the anticipatory psychic management of such traumatic events in African life as attainment of adulthood, warfare, and death. Psychic management is facilitated by the positive enjoyment achieved through mastering in simulation what initially is viewed as impending trauma (cf. Kohut 1955).

Alternative catharsis involves functional relativity. Merton (1957:52) provides a relevant preliminary orientation:

> Once we abandon the gratuitous assumption of the functional indispensability of particular social structures, we immediately require some concept of functional alternatives, equivalents or substitutes. This focuses attention on the *range of possible* variation in the items which can, in the case under examination, subserve a functional requirement.

A dance-play, like other forms of exercise, "often provides a healthy fatigue or distraction which may abate a temporary rage

crisis and thus allow more enduring personality patterns to regain ascendancy" (Monroe 1951:630). A specialist in African psychodynamics put it this way: "The rhythm, vigorous movements, their coordination and synchronization, tend to induce some degree of catharsis... The essential psychological function of the dance, in fact, is the prevention of depression and accumulation of other psychic stresses" (Lambo 1965:41). Among the Dogon people of Mali, the *gona* figure, a rapid dance movement performed by a masqued dancer, is described as "a relief, like vomiting" (Griaule 1965:189). Thus some African dance-plays are "safety-valves" which control disruptive forms of behavior, and in this sense are similar to the rituals of rebellion which have been reported by Gluckman (1954) and others.

African dance-plays can be viewed as only one of numerous alternative activities which might satisfy the need for individual or group catharsis. In some instances, a non-dance alternative might be less eufunctional to the continued existence of Ubakala society than the dance-play. (Alternatively, the non-dance alternative might be non-functional and dance-play eufunctional, or the non-dance dysfunctional and dance-play non-functional, etc.). In his report of a study of gambling, Parsons (1951:307-308) makes a similar point: "It is a mechanism for expressing and thus releasing strains related to the economic context which, if this outlet were completely closed, might be diverted into other more dysfunctional channels." Returning to the dance-play, one can speculate, for example, that the personality needs of a group of individuals might be such that, at a particular point in time, a discharge must take place, and if the two visible alternatives facing the group are injuring the chief or engaging in a cathartic war-dance, the latter activity can be conceived as a relatively positive alternative.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NKWA DI ICHE ICHE

Each *nkwa* requires a particular performing group, set of instruments, dance style and structure, and general theme. Before analysing specific *nkwa di iche iche,* however, some general

characteristics of these dance-plays will be examined. The interrelationship of some characteristics is suggested by the word *nkwa* itself, because it denotes either a "dance-play" or an individual "dance" or a "drum." Thus the dance is fused with other arts, and specifically with the drum (Echezona 1962:24; Madumere 1953:63). Such an interrelationship is not uncommon in Africa. Thus Coker (1963:8) reports: *"It is meaningless, indeed impossible, to talk of Efik dancing in strict isolation.* There can be no dancing without music, and the music is usually a combination of drumming and singing" and Evans-Pritchard points out that the *gbere buda* (beer dance) of the Azande comprises the elements of music, song, and muscular movement, any one of which without the others "would be inconceivable" (1928:447). For clarity, we use the word *nkwa* only in connection with a dance-play, i.e., a set of interrelated dances accompanied by their music and performance requirements. Each dance within an *nkwa* is generally referred to by the song-phrase which usually accompanies it; if there is no song, the theme of the dance is used.

Participants.

Almost every member of the Ubakala Clan may dance, and most do so from time to time. Participants range from the infant on a mother's back and the toddler trying a few steps on his own, to the wizened adult executing a skillful solo on a ceremonial occasion. Dance-plays generally recruit participants from a particular compound, village or sometimes a clan. Thus the participants have bonds of common association and experience based upon propinquity of kinship and residence. The traditional divisions of age, sex, and society memberships are additional bases for organizing contemporary Ubakala dance-plays and most of these sub-divisions have their own *nkwa*. (Competition among groups on various levels is common.) On some festive occasions, however, individuals may join those in other sub-divisions to dance.

The number of dance-play participants and spectators depends upon occasion (e.g., practice or polished performance, work day or holiday, weather, status of observers), the size of families and villages (including the relative and absolute number of wives

and the proportion of out-migrants), and the personal and/or group reputations of dancers or musicians.

A person recognized as the best dancer or the specific dance's innovator usually assumes the role of dance leader. (One of the musicians may, in effect, also participate in the leadership of some *nkwa di iche iche.*) The criterion of age is often used to chose among otherwise equal persons. The leader, usually relying upon a ringing voice and considerable *élan,* stimulates his group's members to participate fully, encourages onlookers to gather about watching and praising the performers, and prevents disruptions from those dancers who are overcome by excessive physical activity, palm wine, or emotionally sensitive *nkwa* themes. The dance or orchestra leader usually indicates the specific dances to be performed and dance pattern changes to be made during the performance, the former with a whistle, the latter with a whistle and/or other instrument.

Accompaniment.

"It is nearly true to say," writes Igbo musicologist Echezona (1962:24), "that wherever there is drumming there is dancing. It certainly is true to say that the drums have a social significance not possessed by any other instrument... They are the very foundation of a social occasion". For the most part, *nkwa* musical accompaniment follows this cultural tradition. Percussion predominates, the instruments are membranophonic and idiophonic and the rhythms are heterometric and polymetric. The social significance of drums is suggested by the custom of referring to them by names symbolizing the sex they symbolically represent, based upon their shape and function. Names of other instruments commonly indicate their functions, e.g., providing unison. The percussive instruments are indigenous to Ubakala and/or nearby clans or tribes.

Another common instrument of a different type is the metal whistle, used by dance leaders or musicians to indicate changes in dances or dance patterns. These whistles, which are imported, have replaced traditional baked clay or paw paw branch flutes.

Some of the rhythms played by the Ubakala (along with the appropriate dance and song) are recognized to have entered

their repertoire through contacts which Ubakala travelers have had with other groups. It is said that a few can be traced back centuries to the time Ubakala people migrated to their current home area. Others date to the slave-raiding and war eras, whereas many were introduced in the contemporary period thanks to the new communication-transportation infrastructure. Two patterns of learning from outside have existed: the foreigners' arts were learned elsewhere and then brought home or skilled foreign performers were invited to Ubakala to teach their arts.

At the beginning of an *nkwa,* the dance leader sings the tonal melody of the first phrase of the song, or a drummer beats the tonal melody of the dance. From the melody and rhythm, the dancers are expected to recognize a specific dance within an *nkwa.* Since *nkwa* dance communication is not always referentially precise, songs or rhythmical words are added to specify meaning, provide emphasis, and enhance the illusion of realistic or stylized movement. The antiphonal pattern is common. Singers are divided into a cantor and the chorus; the chorus either echoes the cantor's various statements or answers them. Ululations, yells, and other emotional ejaculations, used to signify joy, praise, and agreement, reflect the infectious excitement of the performers.

Symbolism.

Discovering the specific symbolism of movement, where it exists can be very difficult. Most dance steps and other movements are not reported to have names; rather, individual dances (which may have movements specific to them) are known by the most frequently occuring phrase of their accompanying song or, if there is no accompanying song, by the theme. Although the dances range from abstract symbolism to realistic mimicry[4] dramatic concern to comic relief, most of the movements probably symbolize fertility, potentiality, and instinctual energy. The symbolic portrayal of fertility is acknowledged, but otherwise reports of symbolic meanings are few and fragmentary.

[4] See Nkezwu (1962:43) who argues that with the exception of Ohafia and Abam war dances, Igbo dance is abstract or "classical."

Fertility became a prime goal in an era when big families were necessary for work, protection, and a manpower pool to replace the victims of infant mortality, war, and disease. Offspring were, of course, also valued because of their obvious essential link in family continuity. Generally, it has been believed that "to have children is a mark of success with the spirits, of health and of the continuity of life" (Ottenberg 1964:31). Today, however, less hazardous living conditions lead to population explosions; in some places it is now difficult to provide large families with food and shelter, no less such modern imports as Western education and Western medicine (both require cash payments). Yet, most Ubakala believe that a large family can, with its communal wealth, cope with both old and new necessities.

Explanations for the limited reports of symbolism are at various levels. Because African cultures have often been misrepresented, some informants withhold information which they fear may be misused. Others may be eager to boost their culture by portraying it favorably in terms of perceived European cultural values. Many informants find it a formidable task to verbalize abstractions and to report symbolic references which, since for the most part they developed decades ago, are forgotten (as one Ubakala spokesman put it, "Time has drowned them"), taken for granted, and/or suppressed. The latter probably stems from the desire to achieve social consensus among those whose religious beliefs and practices conflict. Some Ubakala practice their traditional religion, some have become ardent Christians, and many are religious syncretists. As a result, an articulated consensus about the symbolism might be difficult to achieve. Cultural consensus, "an understanding that one holds symbolic meanings in common... [recognized by] explicit communication, discussion and debate" (Fernandez 1965:914) seems to be sacrificed for the sake of social consensus. The latter is "an acceptance of the necessity for interaction... for the sake of a social satisfaction — the satisfaction of orienting their activity towards each other with the resulting... benefits whatever these may be..." (Fernandez 1965:913; see also Goldschmidt 1966:41). In this way both Christian and non-Christian can participate in the syncretistic *nkwa di iche iche*.

Dance Style and Structure.

Styles in dance are socio-cultural elements. Just as music depends upon the "habit responses of those who have learned through practice and experience to understand and feel the relationships in a particular style" (Meyer 1955:28) — the responses becoming habitual after performance and observation usually begun during the pliable learning years of childhood — dance too has its stylistic roots in culturally specific learned behavior. Lomax's discussion of folk music style is also enlightening in this regard. "Style," he writes (1959:8), "is ... an important link between the individual and his culture, and later in life brings back to the adult unconscious the emotional texture of the world which formed his personality".

Ubakala dance style, especially in women's groups, is perhaps most distinctively characterized by the recurrence of movements symbolizing fertility. The dances are not erotic *per se,* but they are naturally sensitive in their glorification of fertility. As in most African agricultural societies, posture is loosely bent and forward-oriented with the torso often at right angles to an earth thought to the basic genus and grave of life. Pelvic and breast movements, symbolically related to sexual vigor (male generative potency and female fertility), are dominant. Both sexes dance with the center of movement in the pelvis, basin of the reproductive organs, as they manipulate their hips and buttocks; youth and warrior movements also include vigorous shoulder shaking and vibration.

Ubakala *nkwa di iche iche* have the structure of an artistic production: there is a beginning and an end (a specific dance may, however, be abruptly ended by the dance or orchestra leader if the performance is not considered to be of appropriate quality), a temporal sequence, and a key incident of meaning. The most notable characteristics of a dance-play's composition are unity and repetition. Greenway, a specialist of the literature of less developed technological culture, argues that "repetition is beyond doubt the most common quality of [their] song and poetry" (1964: 113). The rhythm of Ubakala dance movement, its musical accompaniment, and its songs are all marked by a significant proportion of repetition. These may reflect Ubakala people's general concern with group continuity and, more specifically, their rein-

carnation beliefs and the symbolic reflection of natural generational cycles of animals and plants.

Each Ubakala dance-play has its own coherency. Transitions between dance movements and between the dances themselves may be subtle or bold, following the direction of the dance or orchestra leader. Dancers in a group simultaneously perform about the same steps and patterns, although they have some individual freedom within a prescribed movement. The dance leader may be creative, introducing new steps or new sequencing of old steps.

One way of examining style and structure in dance is to focus on the specific elements of dance — space, rhythm, and dynamics — and the use of the body, the instrument of this art form.

(1) *Space:* Man's feelings about space develop in response to his experiences. Living space was relatively constrained in old Africa because venturing far beyond the home village was often dangerous due to the perils of wars, slaving, and the unknown. These and other hazards made village solidarity essential, a fact reflected in the use of space in dances. The most common spatial design used in *nkwa di iche iche* is a circle; it is stable, ordered, and symbolic of the cyclical cultural patterning characteristic of agricultural societies. Associative feelings of confinement are aroused in the viewer by the characteristically small and curvilinear movements.

Progression into the circle formation is usually from a curved single-file dancing line. In dance-plays performed by both boys and girls, the former lead. Because clockwise movement is believed to be the path of the dead, it is used to indicate sorrow; counterclockwise movement expresses pleasure. Usually the musicians are in the center of the circle. The dance leader may perform inside, demonstrating sequences, indicating pattern changes, and occasionally beckoning one of the dancers into the center to demonstrate. Focus generally follows the direction of movement or, when movement is performed in place, the dancers focus on the circle center (focus is never upward).

(2) *Rhythm:* Synchronization and stimulation of movement is achieved through rhythm. A further effect "is to center atten-

tion on itself rather than on the effort of moving to the rhythm" (Hughes 1948:164). The rhythmic movement of performers varies according to age, sex, and affiliation, as well as the function of the *nkwa*. For example, whether for the birth of a child or the death of an aged woman, the tempo of the women's dances is relatively slow (most likely in deference to the pregnant participants). On the other hand, the young girls' and teen-agers' dances move at a more rapid pace. The men's *Ese* is also quick-timed. Movement phrases of most groups generally have an isometric design with duple, triple, or quadruple groupings. Most movement phrases are accented on the first impulse; however, within a meter of four pulses the accent may fall on the last beat as in the Latin America conga dance. Rhythm is first learned during infancy. Women commonly dance with infants tied upon their backs. Later, a child may learn rhythm patterns as well as tones through language (Nketia 1959).

(3) *Dynamics:* Movement is most commonly sequential, continually ongoing, rarely coming to a halt with the completion of a step until the end of a dance is reached. It is flowing, impelled forward with the sensation of the passage of time and the projection of strength. Power is manifest through flexibility, the disciplined yet loose and free expenditure of energy. Grace and coquetry are expressed by maidens and women in their respective dances. Boys and men both display their virility through dance.

(4) *Use of the body:* Ubakala dances, in their glorification of fertility, are earthy. The body, medium sized and stocky, is accepted as natural and used unashamedly and without undue tension — in contrast with the average Anglo-Saxon's shame-orientation and machine-like image of the body. The individual's past experiences with his body, i.e., the ways in which his muscles and physiological processes have become culturally conditioned, exert their influence upon his movement. For example, in the rural areas, the dancers' ease in maintaining the common angular position (upper torso forward inclined, pelvis tilted upward), knee flexibility, graceful hip rotations, and stamina, finds its basis in such activities as bending to fetch water, washing in a stream, cultivating, squatting to defecate, and carrying heavy loads on the head (which requires lifting high in the pelvis and

subtly moving the hips). The dancers' projection of strength is more than illusory, for at an early age young people begin to participate in such family chores as pounding yam, cultivating, hewing wood, and transporting heavy burdens. Through these kinds of physical experiences, the dancers develop a sensitive kinesthetic awareness — sensitivity to fine degrees of differentiation in muscle action. The dancers, with their bare feet subtly scouping and arching, seem forever to caress the earth as they move along its surface or in place. Bare feet allow the dancer freedom and security in movement and balance as the partly relaxed foot is placed firmly on the ground and immediately contracted.

NKWA ONU NWA

The dance-play *Nkwa Onu Nwa,* meaning "Rejoice for the New Born Child," takes place immediately after a normal healthy child is born (twins, children born feet first, or those with other specified abnormalities were put to death in olden times); some of its specific dances are performed again on the child's first birthday. A mother drum, male drum, clay pot, wood block, and gourd covered loosely with a net-like flounce of beads constitute the musical component. The manifest function of this *nkwa* is to express joy and thanksgiving, and to inform the grandparents and other kin of the blessed event. The usual participants — both dancers and accompanists — are married women, from the compound of the newly born child's father, who have themselves given birth and thus achieved the status of womanhood. These women perform for about three hours at the father's compound and then move on — dancing, singing, and playing along the way — to the compound of the mother's parents where they perform again. Then, together with some women of the maternal grandparents' compound, they visit other relatives of the newly born child's parents. The observers' proper responses are specified: when performers visit each compound, they are supposed to be given drink, food, and/or money as a token of appreciation and hospitality; if they are not generously received, they leave singing about the mistreatment so that all present know the hosts are shamed for improper conduct.

Entrance to each performing area is usually in a danced, curved, single-file line moving gradually into a counterclockwise circle (symbolizing happiness). The musicians enter as a group in the front inside of the curved line and then seat themselves in the center of the circle. Movement patterns are small and repetitious, performed simultaneously by the group but with slight individual variations permitted. The dynamics are sustained and continuous as the dancers move with the common Ubakala posture of forward inclined torso, a backward tilted pelvis, head forward as a natural extension of the spine, and knees slightly flexed. The dancers take small steps with a touch and then a step and concomitant shift of weight and hip extension, never tending away from the ground but moving along its surface. When stepping, the leg is sometimes rotated as in the American Charleston dance. Hips and buttocks rotate in movements which either cover distance or are in place. The upper arms rest in a natural position, and the lower arms are usually held forward horizontally as if carrying a valued object.

One of the functions of this *nkwa* appears to be socialization. Using movements, gestures, and referentially clarifying songs, the performers communicate the goals of being fertile, a good parent, and a good spouse. The former is expressed by a specific dance called *Zik Mara Mma,* "Zik is Handsome" (*seq.,* "we wish to continue giving birth to such a child"). "Zik" is the nickname for Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, former President of Nigeria and leader of the nationalist movement which obtained independence for his country in 1960.

The *Nkwa Onu Nwa* supports and enhances the prestige of marriage, the appropriate setting for procreation and raising children. It is important to be a good parent so that the child can fulfill its prophecy as revealed by a diviner, care for his parents in their old age, and honor them when they die. One duty of parents is to provide appropriate nutrition for their children. The dance entitled *Iyoakpu,* "Preparing Cassava Flour" (*seq.,* "the food they prepared for their daughter was not in vain; it helped her give birth") stresses this obligation. Qualification for participating in this *nkwa,* and the performance itself, help girls and women to become assimilated to, and to accept,

their marital sex role and the attitudes toward the technical activities of it: through the *nkwa,* fertility is glorified and praise is generously given to child-bearing women and midwives.

The women also communicate to the males of the community when defining the role of a good father and husband — one who is expected to provide for his family in spite of the vicissitudes of life. This is illustrated in the dance called *Dim Le Dim Le,* "My Husband, My Husband" (*seq.,* "my husband, whether or not I have good manners, have patience and look after us").

Possibly, an additional latent function of this *nkwa* is alternative catharsis. It may provide a safety-valve mechanism for the women's release of empathetic delivery tension and pain, and anxiety over infant mortality — emotions which might otherwise be directed into relatively dysfunctional activities. Although the dance tempo is slow and the movement texture sustained, in deference to the pregnant women participating, catharsis may be achieved through dynamic continuous motion, full throated song, and explosive yells and ululations. Perhaps as compensation for being considered the inferior sex in a male-dominated society, the performance in various villages of this vivid audio-visual *nkwa,* which proclaims the great achievements of women, is a means of female self-assertion. As in the case of most Ubakala *nkwa di iche iche,* this dance-play also presents an opportunity for participants to meet friends and relatives, gossip and banter, and in general, escape from the tensions and strains of daily life (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1928:457).

NKWA UMUNNA

The dance-play *Nkwa Umunna* is composed of dances performed by a relatives' society and accompanied by young boys playing four drums of diminishing size, plus a gong, a gourg, and two sticks clapped together. The *Umunna* Society, organized on the village level, is open to all married women from the same natal village (cf. Jones 1961:127-128 for a discussion of *umunna*) who meet the society's subscription requirements. The society is believed to have originated as an expression of the desire of

related women jointly to confront the problems of family life, to share economic resources (cf. Ardener 1953), and to form friendships among co-wives. It should be noted that in Ubakala, a patrilineal and patrilocal society, women have taken little part in such other potential friendship-forming activities as politics and religion.

If a member of the *Umunna* Society "puts to bed" (i.e., gives birth to a child), the group will perform its *nkwa* for her. Evidence of a woman's fertility, which sanctions her status and security for old age, is cause for celebration. This practice is similar to the previously examined *Nkwa Oñu Nwa*. In addition, the society usually dances every market day (*Nkwọ*); it also meets in a member's compound on the third day (*Afọ*) of the traditional four day short week (*Izunta*) to practice in private.

Basically, the dance style and structure of this *nkwa* are the same as in the *Nkwa Oñu Nwa,* with the exception of a faster tempo and greater use of the body. The women walk with a rolling wavelike quality as the upper torso undulates up and forward with a forward step and scoops down and backward as the rear foot pushes off to begin another forward step; the arms gracefully move in opposition. In some of the movements of this dance-play, posture is also more exaggerated with the upper torso almost parallel to the earth.

The functions of *Nkwa Umunna* and *Nkwa Oñu Nwa* are also similar. Socialization takes place by communicating the goal of a large family and defining the female roles of wife and mother. The dance called *Mma Nwanyi Budi,* "Woman's Beauty is a Husband" (*seq.,* "a woman's beauty is appreciated as long as her husband lives; it is absent when he dies"), communicates the goals of being a wife and caring well for a husband. In *Unu Ahula Onye Ije,* which means, "have you seen a traveler?" a paradigm of behavior in gesture and song is presented. A young married woman takes a short journey going about her business and is confronted by a rather bold, strange young man. She bids him let her go, threatens to tell her husband, and in fact speaks with voice and authority that her husband gives her. The dance-play is designed to educate the young women; the assumption is

that when they remember it, they will know how to cope with such a situation and thus will not disrupt marital stability.

It appears likely that the latent function of alternative catharsis is performed by this *nkwa* by means of venting grievances. The accompanying song may serve as a vehicle for specific contemporary social criticism, and the movements emphasize the argument as well as release physical and psychological tensions. Of course, the *nkwa* is only one means of womanly grievance. Uchendu writes, "Women manifest much aggression of the indirect, verbal sort. The sharpest weapon of indirect aggression, the tongue, is a favorite of women" (1965:65). Extraordinary cohesion has been known to develop in some women's societies, largely as an attempt by the "outsiders" (in a patrilineal, patrilocal society) to counter the bonds of blood, religion, politics, and title which unite their husbands.

In the Umuahia area as elsewhere in Igboland, women's societies similar to the one which performed the *Nkwa Umunna* have aggressively rallied large number of their sex to advance their grievances forcibly. As a case in point, Meek (1937:201-202) reports that in 1925 bands of women in what was then Owerri Province proclaimed and acted as follows:

> In order to increase the birth-rate, the people must return to the customs of olden times. A check must be put on prostitution, and more attention paid to sanitation... No one was to use British currency, and market-prices were to be fixed. Women were henceforth to wear their clothes in a prescribed manner. At Umu-Ahia a crowd of elderly women entered the market and tore off the clothes of all unmarried girls... the Native Courts should be abolished. At Isu the Native Court buildings were actually destroyed (see also Eastern Nigeria Government 1925).

The so-called "Women's War" is an even more notorious example (see Nigerian Government Report 1930a and 1930b; Perham 1937:206-220). Obviously, on these occasions behavior more disruptive than the *nkwa* was relied upon.

NKWA UMU OMA

Nkwa Umu Oma "Nice Children of Laguru," is a dance-play performed by boys and girls, about fifteen years old, who

are organized into a company at the village level. The accompanists, all boys, play three hollow log drums and three skin drums, each set with three sizes. The teen-agers' use of dance space is similar to that of the above-described women's groups. There are, however, marked differences in the dances' dynamics: vibratory and brushing qualities are characteristic. Facing into the circle, body at a right angle (i.e., upper torso parallel with the ground), the performers sometimes take fast, precise, tiny steps to the right, advancing only two or three inches, rapidly flexing and extending the knees, each step making the buttocks bounce. At other times, the teen-agers face the direction of the circle and move forward with a brisk shuffling walk. Gestures include foot brushes, while brushing first one then the other lower arm with the opposite hand, and handkerchief waving.

The manifest function of this *nkwa* is recreation and participation in several festivals, including the indigenous *Egwu Iri Ji,* "Play for New Yam" (celebration of first fruits), held in August and September; the Christian celebrations of Easter and Christmas; and traditional market days which fall on the Christian Sunday. In Igboland, religious festival seasons are usually times when energies are the most diverted from work to worship and enjoyment (Nzekwu 1962:38). On these occasions, the teen-agers often dance all day, both for their own enjoyment and to entertain the larger community.

This *nkwa* appears to socialize young people to the importance of prestige and power gained through aggressive and competitive striving for self-betterment. There is an Igbo saying, "No one knows the womb that bears the chief" (Uchendu 1965:20). Dance competitions within the group and against similar groups both reflect and emphasize the Ubakala Igbo's strong achievement-orientation. The leadership of most dance groups is determined on a competitive basis: best dancer or best innovator (age may break ties). Respect for leaders is emphasized through such specific dances as *Unu Ahula Eze Anyi Nabia,* (i.e., "you have seen our chief coming"). The accompanying song includes these courteous and endearing phrases: "Come respect him," "Come recognize him chief," Come open the door," and "Come pet his neck."

Because the participants often mime and sing social criticism, it appears likely that this *nkwa* also serves as a vehicle for alternative catharsis. Socially acceptable outlets for suppressed aggressions, generational and otherwise, are provided in the *nkwa* because greater freedom of expression is permitted than in ordinary conversation and movement. The *nkwa,* like other forms of folklore, is an impersonal vehicle for personal communication. The imperative, wish, or suggestion of an individual or group may be externalized and the responsibility for it projected beyond. For example, in the dance *Zik Neme Ka Odi Mma,* (i.e., "Zik tries to make things good,") Zik is praised for being a great man, whereas the stubborn and uncooperative people who try to hamper his work are denigrated. The movements of the dance may also serve to release tensions and channel primal energies into socially acceptable activities (cf. Read 1938:10).

It should also be noted that the public performance of *Nkwa Umu Oma* provides an opportunity for courtship. The teen-age performers can openly express themselves, displaying their sexual attractiveness and exhibiting their dance skill. The Ottenbergs (1964:28) write, "Physical strength and agility are admired and remembered, and are among the few ways a young man can rapidly obtain prestige in a society in which recognition of individual males for accomplishments normally does not come until middle or old age". Sexual attractiveness and dance skill are interrelated because the individual's personal worth is believed to be revealed in the dance. Thus, just as with teen-age dances in the United States, Ubakala dances provide a milieu for selecting life partners (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1928:457).

NKWA EDERE

The dance-play *Nkwa Edere,* an "Upper Torso Shimmying Dance," is performed by Nsirimo Village girls from eleven to sixteen years of age. This *nkwa* is said to be performed on festive occasions purely for entertainment, and to have come from the people of a nearby clan who perform it in a pagan festival. The six musicians, boys between fifteen and twenty, play three side-blown horns and beat two drums and a wood form. Neither the

dancers nor the accompanists sing. Small bells, tied around the girls' backs, are shaken by the shimmying dance movement called *edere.*

This *nkwa* has more variation than the other dance-plays, for the base of movement ranges from the feet to the knees. The spatial design and movement patterns are also more intricate. Vibration and looseness are characteristic dynamics; fast walks, low leaps, shuffles, and knee-steps are the locomotion patterns. Equivalents of the Latin American Conga dance pattern of one-two-three-touch, as well as movements identified with various Charleston steps, occur during the dancing. In general, the young girls emphasize the physical and social changes of pubescence in their dance movements (cf. Raum 1940:272).

The functions of this dance-play appear to include socialization and anticipatory psychic management. According to the Ubakala people, young girls should be proud, skilled, and respectful of wealth. These norms are communicated in the following three specific dances: *Edere,* meaning "Shake the upper torso uniformly and systematically," *Egbenwamfe,* "Flying Kite," referring to a clever child dancing well, and *Onye Koji,* meaning "Tell me the names of the different yams your father has produced." Yams, it should be noted, are important symbols of wealth (see Uchendu 1965:24-26).

Anticipatory psychic management can be seen in two specific dances of the *Nkwa Edere.* The first, *Ogbede Turuime,* "Pregnant Child," refers to a small girl's fear that when she becomes pregnant she may not be able to deliver properly. This nonverbal dance-play's focus upon the anxiety of childbirth (a dangerous process without modern medical treatment in which tragedy may occur for seemingly inexplicable reasons) has even broader anticipatory relevance: the transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition is probably more traumatic for a girl than for a boy because her marriage means leaving the familiar home environment to live among strangers while at the same time adjusting to the new roles of wife and mother.

Nwagbogho, "Young Girl," is the second dance and has to do with dancing the waltz. The young girls are paired, embracing and caressing each other. At one level of analysis, the dance

developed because public physical contact between men and women was not traditionally approved, so the European's embracing ballroom dance position, which seems too publicly intimate and free, became a subject of mimicry. At another analytical level, the young girls are emotionally anticipating courtship generally and the new way of courtship in particular. The fear of embracing and caressing in public, or observing such activity, is in part overcome through behavior in the dance-play. This suggests that *Nkwa Edere* is a channel for introducing change into Ubakala culture. "The vanguard of progress," wrote Malinowski, "is often found in works of leisure and supererogation" (1931:643; see also Keesing 1960:131).

NKWA UKO

Nkwa Uko, the fifth dance-play, is normally performed after the death of an important aged woman. The deceased usually has lived at least to the age of seventy, born many children, and become independently wealthy. Participation in this *nkwa* is open to all, but it is primarily for the female relatives of the deceased, some of whom may travel long distances for the opportunity to participate. The *Nkwa Uko* includes a specialized orchestral accompaniment (*uko*): two men each play six of a set of nine leather-covered drums (they share playing the middle three drums), a third man plays a separate mother drum, and a fourth strikes a wood block. When the music is underway, the women assemble and begin to dance in a informally organized way. Their movements are stylistically similar to those of the other women's *nkwa di iche iche.* Occasionally, two women dance together, each with an arm about the other's waist; some informants report that this is an act of condolence.

The N*kwa Uko* is supposed to praise, propitiate, and show respect for the deceased on behalf of her kin. The spirit of the deceased is believed to exist in limbo between living and ancestral states — perhaps wrecking havoc upon living kin instead of joining other ancestors — until the performance of final mortuary rites, called "second burial," featuring the *Nkwa Uko.* It appears, however, that the living kin may themselves be in a state of limbo

because of the felt uncertainties surrounding the status passage of the deceased. The latent functions of the *Nkwa Uko* appear to be (a) to release the living from the psychic burdens imposed by the death, in a way not dysfunctional to Ubakala society, (b) to give the living an opportunity to anticipate, and thus better manage, the coming of their own deaths, and (c) to socialize Ubakala people to the clan's beliefs about life and death.

The death of an associate creates problems of psychic management for the living. Second burials and other mourning ceremonies constitute institutionalized means of working through the problems gradually. If all affect were discharged at once, the twofold result could be overwhelming individual stress and group disruption. Fenichel (1945:162) writes:

> What today is called grief is obviously a postponed and apportioned neutralization of a wild and self-destructive kind of affect which can still be observed in a child's panic upon the disappearance of his mother or in the uninhibited mourning reactions of primitives.

The communal solidarity experienced in the *nkwa* and the physical expenditure of tension in its performance help to improve group morale and dissipate anxiety. Thus the *Nkwa Uko* appears to provide alternative catharsis which is relatively eufunctional.

Despite the universality of death, its rationalization, and the Ubakala belief that ancertors are the continuation of a lineage's living representatives, there is still anxiety about death (see Uchendu 1965:12). The Ottenbergs (1964:31) have written, "This anxiety is often well hidden in formalized ways of talking about illness, or in cure-seeking rituals... every blessing, be it of the ancestors in the serving of palm wine, be that a sacrifice, contains the statement, 'Let there be long life'." In a society whose religious beliefs include reincarnation, participating in a ceremony concerning the death of another may give the living an opportunity to cope more effectively with the coming of one's own death. This is especially true when the ceremony emphasizes generational continuity and praises the dead. Thus this dance-play performs the function of anticipatory psychic management.

The *Nkwa Uko* may also socialize Ubakala people to their clan's beliefs about life and death. It communicates knowledge

about the relationship between the proper performance of roles on the part of the living and the ascension of a woman to the ancestral world. An important motive for assisting kin to be successful in life and later to provide for the costly burial ceremony is the enhancement of the prestige and social standing of the deceased's kin — almost as compensation for the loss of the beloved one. "The Igbo say that a child who has not buried his parents properly cannot boast of having conquered life's problems" (Uchendu 1965:66). From the titles of the dances included in the *nkwa,* four specific themes can be identified. The first is one of sympathy and the point is directly made in "Sympathize With the Relatives." The second theme is to respect the dead. It can be seen in such dances as "A Relative Is Mourned," "The Deceased Are Praised," and "The Queen Mother Has Arisen." A third theme deals with experiences in life. Examples are "I Remember My Past Days," "A Man Has Nobody to Care for Him," and "It Remains a Short Time." The fourth theme recalls the joy and continuity of life; it can be illustrated by dances dealing with children, such as "The Children Are Going to Play in the Moonlight Tonight."

NKWA ESE

Nkwa Ese (named for the musical accompaniment) is the dance-play normally performed at the second burial of an old and important man who has made a significant contribution to his community. Such a man would have achieved wealth (conceived to include a large family) and the leadership position given to a man of eloquence. The number of deceased children is relevant to the performance of the *Nkwa Ese* (as well as the *Nkwa Uko,* above) because they are the core participants. The Ottenbergs (1964:31) observe that among the Igbo, "For a person to die without children to perform funeral rituals for him is a tragedy. Implicitly it means, of course, that he is soon likely to be forgotten, for who will sacrifice to him as an ancertor?"

The deceased's respected male adult relatives are the dancers. Professional male musicians from one of two Ubakala villages

are called upon to play two hollow log drums and a set of seven membrane drums arranged according to size. The dancers assemble in front of the musicians, usually all facing in one direction within a circular space. They may individually move about counterclockwise or move forward more-or-less together in a row. The line of movement is upright or at a low support, and the size of the movement ranges from small-subtle to large-dramatic. Movement texture is strong and the flow is free, including such characteristic qualities as lunging, swinging, vibrating, tensing, and reflecting. Tense, rapid, small steps on the ball of the foot, lunges, jumps, and hops are among the locomotion patterns. Throughout, the participants gesture with swords or walking sticks, brandishing them and changing them from the right to the left hand and back again. (Sword brandishing became so realistic during this performance that the chief, fearing trouble, eventually terminated the presentation.)

Despite the manifest contrast in mood, the *Nkwa Ese* is functionally equivalent to the *Nkwa Uko*. All three hypothesized functions appear to be performed. A further point is made by Wilson (1954:230-231) who, although writing about funeral dances among the Nyakyusa of Tanganyika, provides a description and analysis that largely applies in Ubakala.

> The men, for their part, express their passionate anger in the war dance, charging back and forth over the new-filled grave, brandishing spears, and ready to quarrel and fight at any moment. Funerals commonly did end in battles between contingents from different villages.
>
> The dance is a form of mourning. "We dance because there is war in our hearts — a passion of grief and fear exasperates us." A kinsman when he dances assuages his passionate grief; he goes into the house to weep and then comes out and dances the war dance; his passionate grief is made tolerable in the dance; it bound his heart and the dance assuages it.

In the *Nkwa Ese,* the dancers vigorously portray the deeds, exploits, and prowess of the deceased, or his ancestors, in order to bestow praise upon him and his decendants, and to inform all present of valued perspectives and goals, including achievement, longevity, and strength. The latter is still considered an asset in social relations during peace-time although its need for survival against the hazards of slave-trading and headhunting are long

past (Ottenbergs 1964:34); the current conflict has caused a reversion to the older values.

CONCLUSION

During the past half-century, Ubakala society has experienced many interventions and undergone many changes. Although receptive to change, it has remained an identifiable system. The six *nkwa di iche iche* we have explored seem both to reflect the degrees of change and continuity, and to contribute to them. The social organization and substantive communication of the dance-plays interweave with those of the larger society, and as a result of these connecting threads, the dance-play mirrors societal developments. Change has modified some aspects of traditional Ubakala *nkwa di iche iche,* especially those entwined with indigenous religion. But many of the older dance-plays were still performed, and the available evidence suggests that these display a continuity of structure and non-religious function.

Of course, the impact of change upon the dance-plays and their components has varied considerably. Some have disappeared, some are but vaguely remembered, and some have undergone fusions and substitutions. To illustrate the latter, the Ubakala, as in the past, performed traditional dance-plays on significant occasions — the birth of a child, organizational activities, death, and the like. But, in addition to the traditional occasions, the settings of some have broadened to include Christian holidays, traditional market days falling on Sunday, dance competitions (at and beyond the clan level), political party rallies, and such gala modern occasions as the dedication of a modern school or hospital and the celebration of personal advancement in modern life.

The *nkwa di iche iche* which have survived appear to continue to meet some of the needs of the flexible, achievement-oriented socio-cultural system of which they are part. The dance-plays preserve elements of traditional culture while accommodating modernity, and thus cushion acculturative stress. They seem to continue to make a contribution to the existence of Ubakala society through socialization and the provision of channels for

anticipatory psychic management and alternative catharsis. Thus the *nkwa di iche iche* appear to have "a net balance of functional consequences for the society" (Merton 1957:32).

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