3

DEVELOPING A NIGERIAN – CENTERED APPROACH TO TEACHING DANCE: AN EXAMPLE OF 'IGBO DESCRIPTIVE DOCUMENTATION STYLE'

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Abstract
In recent times, the teaching of dance in Nigeria to a very large extent has relied on the Western approach rather than any African/Nigerian methods. Some of the dance-teachings methods do not actually help in the advancement and development of dance arts in Nigeria and Africa. Examples of such teaching methods are the Laban and Benesh dance notation. The Laban and Benesh notation which is widely used in recording dance in the United States and Britain is not suitable for recording African dance. This is because Igbo dance, like most African dances is polyrhythmic and polymovemental in nature. The diversity of movement expression available to dancers make such a rigid framework inappropriate in the recording of a dance form based on individual and internal body movement and dynamics. This paper therefore attempts to encourage the development of an 'Igbo descriptive documentation style', which uses symbols and notes to document dance as an art form. The aim is to situate the 'Igbo descriptive documentation style' as a template for reading Igbo/African dances and also to use it as a creative framework for reproducing and re-interpreting Igbo/African dance forms and performances in general.

Key Words: Developing, Teaching, Dance, Descriptive, Documentation Style

Introduction

Generally, teaching methods comprise principles and techniques used for instruction which are meant to be implemented by teachers to achieve the desired learning or memorization by learners. These strategies are determined partly by the subject matter to be taught and partly by the nature of the learner. In this case, the author analyses the documentation of dance through the notational system with the aim of developing a notation that can be suitable for documenting African dances. According to Ugolo (2006):

> Dance documentation basically has to do with the collection and classification of information related to the performance and practice of dance. Dance preservation on the other hand, attempts to keep safe and maintain the performance and practice of a particular dance form and style in the existing state to prevent adulteration and extinction. Dance notation is another method of documentation (P. 48).

The need to create a notational system for African dance cannot be over emphasized; considering the fact that, the popular and workable dance notations (Laban Notation and Benesh Notation) are mostly used in noting American and European dances. Nikolais (1976) notes,

> It is of course, impossible to compensate for the neglect of centuries, but in our present knowledge there is no reason why we cannot use some system of writing in other to begin to create a library of choreographic records of our own day (P. 146).

The dance notation system developed by Laban and Benesh is considered unsuitable by the author in the documentation of African dances. This is due to the polyrhythmic and polymovemental nature prevalent in African dance forms.

Green (2012) posits the need for developing an African dance notation thus:

> Any society that is totally dependent upon oral communication for the transmission of its culture between generations is doomed to failure because of outside interpretation and the breakdown of the human memory over the course of time (P. 7).

Ugolo (2006), a renowned dance scholar in Nigeria notes the difference between dance documentation:

> "the collection and classification of information related to the performance and practice of dance' and dance preservation 'to keep safe and maintain the performance and practice of a particular dance form and style in the existing state to prevent adulteration and extinction" (P. 48).

Dance notation is a method of documentation that scores functions like musical scores (perhaps with slight differences) and provides a stable written record based on codified symbols that can be used to recreate

or study the work. The notation of dance art may include recording its form and style in an accurate manner (Dance Heritage Coalition, 2006), making it accessible to dance researchers and performance groups that may want to reconstruct and perform it.

Since dance is a performing art, the survival of any dance work depends either on its being preserved through physical practice, oral retelling or by written notes, recorded on film, or a combination of all the aforementioned formats. Traditionally, preserving dance especially in Africa came about by practicing and memorizing the dance steps and movements whilst passing them orally and physically (practice in form of training or teaching) from one generation to another. Paz and Hart (2009) observe that in the past, the memorization of dance steps was common with those who approached the lesser complex Argentine ballroom tango. Memorizing the way two feet move, with relation to body alignments and sense of direction, lasts a day or two before all is forgotten. With the aid of festivals, traditional African societies have been able to preserve some of their dances, although this method has its limitations. For example, since dance is an ephemeral art, some movements can easily be forgotten over time. Moreover, the death of the choreographer or dance leader may lead to changes in some dance movements, since members may have relied on the choreographer or dance leader to remember the dance steps.

On preserving dance art through written works, Burtner (1978:128) observes that, "of all the records of art forms of the past, that of the dance, which has movement for its medium of expression, comes off least well; in fact, hardly at all". Dance notation aims to document choreography for preservation (Ugolo, 2006) and this article aims to creating a notational system for reading, documenting and preserving African dance with specific focus on Igbo dance forms. Dance notation is to dance what musical notation is to music and what the written word is to drama and literature. There is nevertheless, a growing body of dance records and recordings, although the majority of African dance forms and choreographic practices have remained on the peripheries of documentation or of being recorded on video without being notated in either African or European languages or forms; so they remain subject to the ravages of chance and change.

A look at some of the historical works on dance notation will help in justifying a new method of documenting dance in Nigeria. Records of dance notation go as far back as ancient Egypt, showing that notations have transformed over the centuries according to the development of dance techniques and the role and function of dance within a society, such as the notation of mainly floor plans and single hand and foot gestures around 1700 through Raoul-Auger Feuillet.

History of Dance Documentation through Notation

Safra (2003:943-944) gave evidence of dance records dating back to the ancient Egyptians, who used hieroglyphs to represent dance movements.
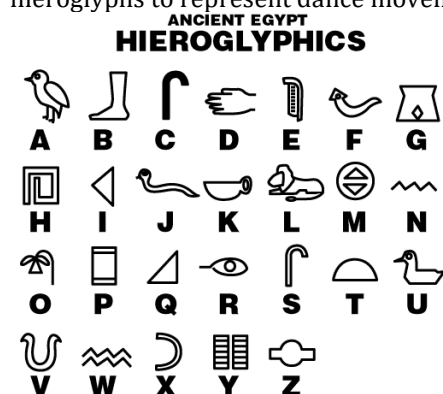
*Figure 1. The ancient Egyptians hieroglyphs used to represent dance movements, (Laukens, 2015)*

Similarly, the native Indians codified dance into a series of rules by depicting the gestures to highlight different themes and emotions. Thoinot Arbeau's (1588) *Orchesographie* provided valuable descriptions of the dances in that period, placing the names of the dancer's movements next to the vertically arranged music. The French dancer and choreographer Arthur Saint-Léon, recorded a notation using stick figures, the first of which was La *Sténochorégraphie* 'The Art of Writing Dance', published in 1852. This system however, could not record the timing or musical coordination of movements. In 1928 Rudolf Laban developed *Labanotation*.
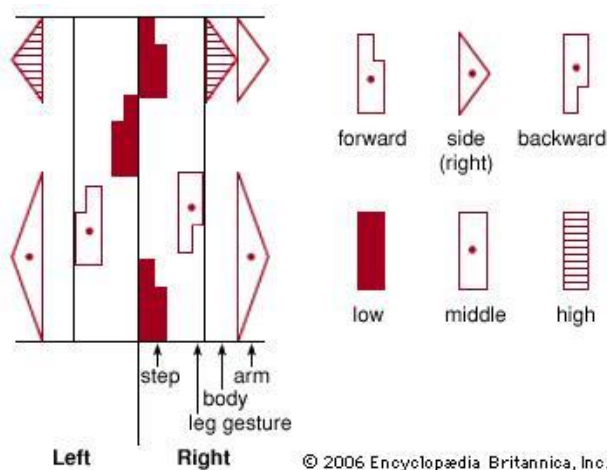
*Figure 2. The **Labanotation used in recording dance movements developed by Rudolf Laban (Guest, 2005)***

The Laban system is an 'alphabet' system in which symbols represent movement components through which each pattern is spelled out. Everything that occurs can be notated – the movements and direction in space, the floor pattern, the tempo, rhythm and meter, dynamism and flow. Inclusively choreology, developed by Joan and Rudolf Benesh in 1955, is based on a clearer visual rather than symbolic forms of notation.
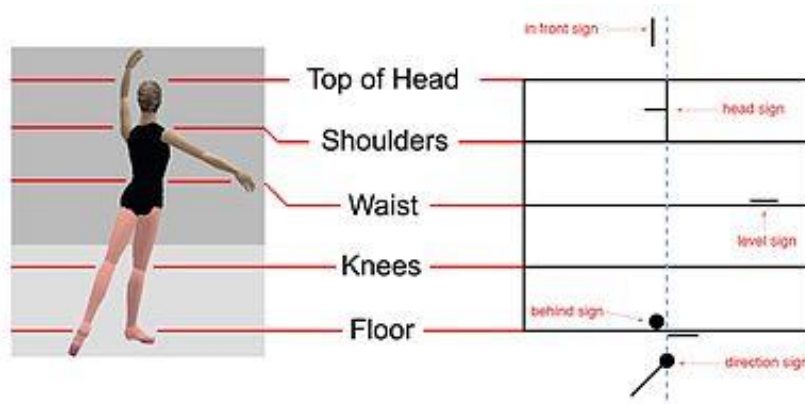
*Figure 3. The **Choreology used in recording dance movements developed by Joan Rudolf Benesh (FI Chor,2017).***

It is written on a five-line stave, recording the dancer's position as viewed from behind. The top line shows the position of the top of the head; the second, the shoulders; the third, the waist; the fourth, the knees; and the fifth, the feet. It is particularly used in Britain by the Royal Ballet of England. Ann Hutchinson's Motif Notation (1970), also known as 'Motif Description' and 'Motif Writing', is closely related to Laban notation. Both practitioner-theorists use most of the same symbols and terminology; have a similar format, and both record fundamental components that are found in all styles and forms of movement (Brown, 1998). The main difference between Laban notation and motif notation is the type of information they communicate. Laban notation gives a literal, all-inclusive, detailed description of movement, so it can be reproduced exactly as it was performed or conceived. In contrast, motif notation depicts just core elements. A motif score might convey the overall structure and intention of a dance improvisation, but allows the individual performing the movement to decide how that movement should be carried and therefore allows for a creative approach in dance notation.

Some attempts have been made towards the notation of African dances. Green, an ethnomusicologist, created 'Greenotation' (though mainly used to record African music). Kariamu Welsh Asante developed 'Unfundalai' techniques. Peter Badejo's recent effort to reconstruct, document and notate Yoruba 'bata dance' is also worthy of note. Felix Akinsipe adapted the 'Stick Figure' notation (discovered in 1852) for African traditional dance use (Akinsipe, 2015). Israel Johnson is currently working on 'Mauyoneon Notation', while Chris Nwaru has or is developing the 'Igbo descriptive documentation style' which is the focus of this paper.

Perhaps the only African scholar who has developed a notation that specializes in recording African music instrumentation rather than dance is Doris Green. Green, as earlier mentioned, is the creator of 'Greenotation', a system for notating the percussive instruments of African ensembles that enables one to notate the music, and align it with the dance movements, creating an integrated score with a conterminous relationship just as it is in Africa (Green, 2012).

The Laban and Benesh Notations

The Laban and Benesh notations which are widely used in recording dance in the United States and Britain is not suitable for recording African dance. This is because for instance; the Igbo dance, like most African dances is polyrhythmic and polymovemental in nature, in the sense that in rhythm and movement, African traditional dances cover a wide-array of different action at the same time of execution. The diversity of movement expression available to dancers in Igbo dances makes such a rigid framework inappropriate in the recording of a dance form that is solidly based on individual and internal movement dynamics. Critics of *Labanotation* such as Nikolais (1978:146) observes that, "The symbols he [Laban] choose are cumbersome; their inflexibility and bulk make a formidable picture". The practice of dance notation has not been easy as Mackrell (2010) notes that, the problems with all systems of dance notation is that few choreographers—and even fewer dancers—are literate in them. As presently practiced, dance notation is mostly used only for the recording, rather than the creating and learning of dances. Layiwola (1997:261) observes that:

> The multiplicity of culture in Africa does make for a precise style of identification known solely to be African; as such there is no uniform dance style which could represent the various creations of the different ethnic groups. This truly makes the attempt at documentation almost impossible as there is no "common heritage or a 'universal' alphabet (P. 261).

Sharing the same view with Layiwola, Yerima (2006:17), observes:

> The major difficulty in attempting a discourse of Nigeria dances and dancers is that, the dances in Nigeria are as diversified as the cultures and people of Nigeria. This has been one great obstacle to this study, because in the course of my research, I found that for every one kilometre in Nigeria, villages have different languages, dance forms, music, history and concepts of patterns and shapes for each dance (P. 17).

However, there is an urgent need to develop a system that will produce a creative framework for reading, notating, reproducing and re-interpreting Nigerian dance forms. This will be of great help to choreographers, dance practitioners, training institutions, the universities, arts councils, performing troupes and groups that teach and run programmes in dance. To accomplish this, there is a need to accept a workable system of notation and make it a foundational standard for every dancer, choreographer and dance educator, regardless of what style, school or idiom they favour or practice. This article outlines such a system of dance notation which may be called the 'Igbo descriptive documentation style'.

Igbo Descriptive Documentation Style

The 'Igbo descriptive documentation style' uses symbols and notes to document dance art, and can be applied to other Nigerian and African dances in general. This dance notational system is divided into two parts, namely; a drawing that houses the dance symbols and the descriptive aspect consisting of notes. Guest (2010) recommends the combination of notes and symbols for a notational system. The symbols represent the sex of the dancers and their positions; floor patterns and movement directions. The note contains the descriptive movements, rhythms, space and dynamics used in executing a dance. It also encloses the name and origin of the dance piece, costumes, props and make-up. The combination of description (notes) and notation (symbols) in a system for dance documentation is necessary for easy comprehension of African dance that prioritizes both features and the need for a standard notational system. 'Igbo descriptive documentation style' will first provide a creative framework for reproducing and re-interpreting Igbo dance forms and performances and serve as a basic foundation for other dance notations in Nigeria and Africa. In this paper, the author makes use of the *Nkwa-Ike* dance theatre to analyse the operational mode of the 'Igbo descriptive documentation style'

Nkwa Ike (Strong Dance) Dance Theatre

'Nkwa-Ike' as the name implies, means strong dance. It is a choreographed traditional based dance theatre. The dance is performed by men and women. It narrates the war expeditions of the Igbo people. The dance structure is in three stages. Stage one is the war preparation, stage two re-enacts the exploits of the warriors in battle field and stage three depicts the war victory celebrations.
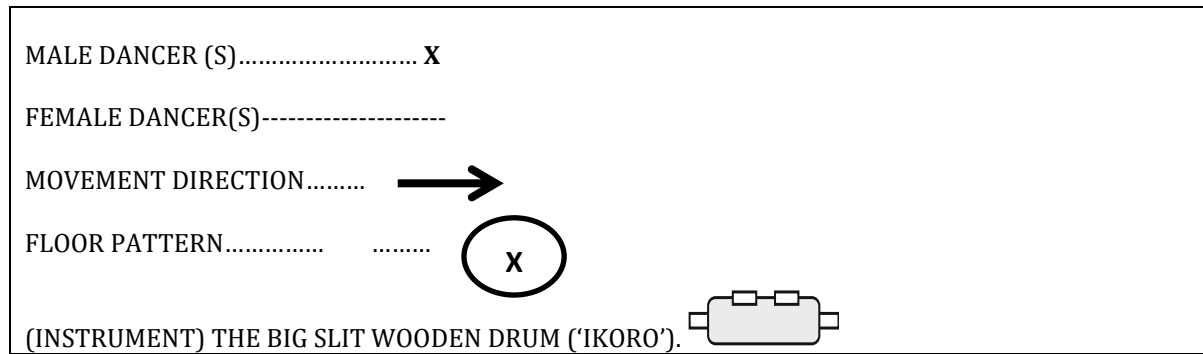
MALE DANCER (S)........................ **X**

FEMALE DANCER(S)--------------------

MOVEMENT DIRECTION......... ➡

FLOOR PATTERN.............. .... (X)

(INSTRUMENT) THE BIG SLIT WOODEN DRUM ('IKORO').

Figure 4. Igbo Descriptive Documentation Style: Key

Different Stages in *'Nkwa-Ike'* Dance Theatre

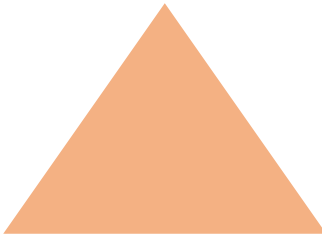| Stage 1. Beginning (Green)	Stage 2. Middle (Red)	Stage 3. End (Pink)

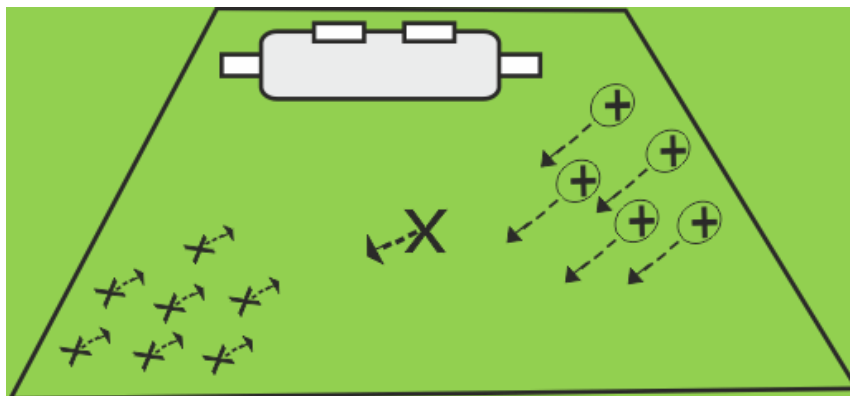*Figure 5. Documenting Nkwa Ike Dance with Igbo Descriptive Notation*

Figure 6. Stage I: Beginning (Green) of 'Nkwa-Ike Dance, Njikwa-Agha' (War Preparation). The chief priest welcomes the warriors while the women wait behind the chief priest to embrace their sons, brothers, and husbands.

Description

The seven male dancers **(X)** take a diagonal movement from down stage right as they travel to upstage left. One of the *Nkwa-Ike* instrumentalists makes a sharp sound by blowing a traditional horn (Opi-ntum). The sound of the horn ushers in the chief priest and the women to the stage. They come in from the up stage right, facing the dancers. The chief priest is in front, ahead of the women. He takes a sharp step to meet the dancers at the centre stage as he signals the women to wait. The chief priest collects the knives from the dancers as the lead drummer accentuates his movements. The shout from the women leads to the next movement.

Meaning/Translations

The diagonal movement from down stage right, as the dancers travel to upstage left, demonstrates the movements of the *Ohafia* warriors as they enter the *Achichi* arena where their relations are waiting to welcome them. The sharp sound of the horn as played by one of the *Nkwa-Ike* instrumentalists portrays the sound of the '*Onyentum'* (traditional horn flutist) in *Ohafia*. It is this sound that communicates to the

villagers that, the warriors have returned from battle. The movement and position of the chief priest in the dance shows that nobody is allowed to touch or embrace the warriors until the chief priest disarms the warriors by collecting their knives and bringing down their right arms. As the chief priest brings down the right hand of the dancers, it portrays that he is taking the charms off that were placed on the warriors before they left for war. Without this action by the chief priest, the warriors may mistake their relations that have come to welcome them as enemies and kill them. The dancers are seven, one died at the war front.
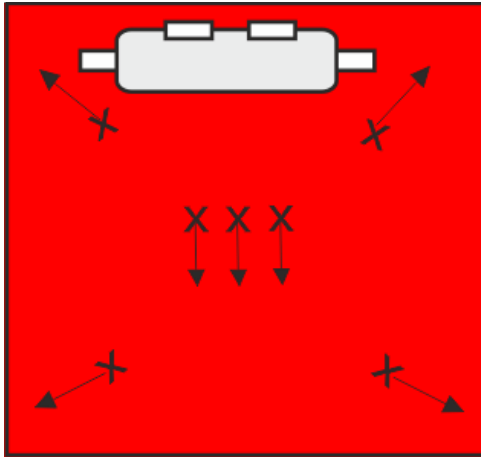
*Figure 7. Stage two: Middle (Red) of 'Nkwa-Ike Dance, Ihu-Agha' (War Front)*
The war dancers scatter all over the stage during the fight. The carrier and his guards are positioned on centre stage communicating with the gods. The scattering movement shows the actual killing of their enemies.

Description

In this sequence, the dancers keep some distance from one another, except for the dancer carrying the *'isi-oya'* and the two dancers by his sides. The dancers' right hands are positioned closer to the neck with a firm grip on the knives while the left hand moves closer to the position of their right hands as the left hand mimes gripping a piece of meat which the right hand wants to cut into pieces. In this movement, the dancers adopt a different posture; they concentrate the now familiar rippling torso actions lower, below the waist thus, positioning their bodies asymmetrically on stage. The music that is played in this dance sequence is light, including the beats from the lead drummer which punctuate the movements of the dancers.

Meaning/Translation

Through the use of gestures and movements, the dancers scatter into different areas of the stage, position their knives closer to their neck, with their left hands signifying the desire to kill. In *Ohafia*, this movement indicates the actual killing of their enemies at the battle field.
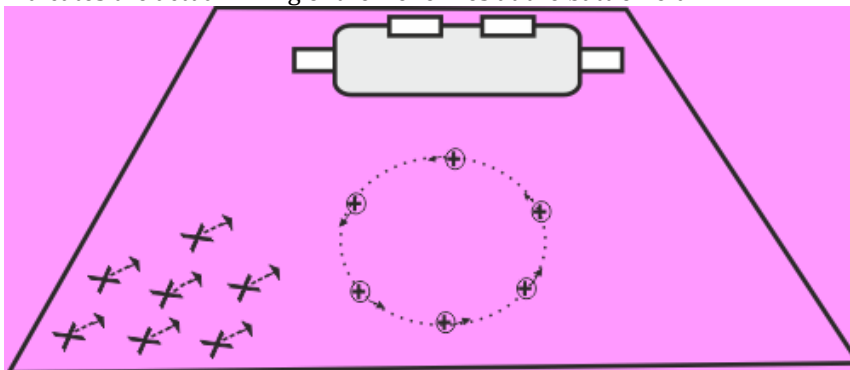
Figure 8. Stage three: End (Purple) of 'Nkwa-Ike Dance, OnunaUreNmeri Agha' (Celebration of War Victory). At their entrance the maidens adopt a circular direction of movement, while the warriors watch in admiration.

Description

The maiden dancers come in on the stage with a locomotive movement in a circular formation. Starting with the right leg, they step forward, followed by the left leg. Their hands are positioned by the sides of their trunks with the horsetail in their right hands. With this movement, they travel in a circle. The fast movement of the waist region is paramount in this movement phase. While in circular movement direction, each dancer turns round three times using the core space and continues with the travelling movement direction. The rhythm is fast, while the slit wooden drum marks the movements of the dancers. The

maidens were colourfully dressed. On the top, they wear a head gear made up of feathers and waist beads that match with the flower coloured skirt and blouse. Leg rattles enhance the rhythm of their movements as well as the overall sound of the music.

Meaning/Translations

In *Ohafia*, while the celebration is going on, the women and maidens will be sharing food and entertaining the community and their guests. This is similar to other celebrations in Igbo society. In *Afikpo*, the '*Nkwa-Umuagbogho'* came to existence through the entertainment of winners in traditional wrestling contests. The movements in this dance centres on the waist region. The fast undulation of the waist marks the beauty of the movement, while the reverberation of the waist beads captures the interest of onlookers. The costumes which are designed or worn help to enhance the movements.

Use of Colours in the Igbo Descriptive Notation

Stage one (Beginning) is '*Njikwa-Agha'* (War Preparation), stage two (Middle) is '*Ihu-Agha*' (War Front) and stage three (End) is '*OnunaUreNmeri Agha'* (Celebration of War Victory). In the proposed ''Igbo descriptive documentation style', different colours are used to identify the different stages of *Nkwa-Ike* dance theatre. The colours are used not only for identification; the meaning of the colours also helps in interpreting the activities at different stages. Gage (1999) argues that, colour is a contingent, historical occurrence whose meaning, like language, lies in the particular contexts in which it is experienced and interpreted. In the Igbo descriptive notation diagram, stage one is identified with the colour green. Green is the colour of nature, it symbolises growth, harmony, freshness and fertility (Cerrato, 2012). In the Igbo society and *Ohafia* in particular, before the war, the colour green is used to represent the peace and harmony that co-existed among neighbouring communities. Vallest (2012) argues that, colour may have different expressions in different cultures.

For example, in *Ohafia* (Nigeria), field evidence (Nnate Maduka) suggests that red represents danger, war and violence while in Lahore (Pakistan) according to Nadia Anwar (Interview, 11 July, 2003) red means happiness, marriage or prosperity. Colour and their meaning as interpreted in Igbo descriptive notation considered to an extent the nature and cultural practices within the Igbo society and general source materials on the meaning of colours within African society, accuracy not claimed. The perception and reception of colour may differ from one society to another as Smith (2013), opines that colour is a sensation resulting from different wave lengths of light on receptors in our eyes. The stage two of *Nkwa-Ike* dance theatre is the battle at the war front represented in red. Cerrato (2012) opines that, red is the colour of fire and blood, so it is associated with energy, war, danger, power and determination. Stage three is the celebration of victory in war which is believed to lead to marriages among some of the young men and women in *Ohafia* and *Afikpo*. This stage is marked with the pink colour. When red is highlighted with white, we have pink the softer side of red. Situations associated with this include; romance, marriage, charm, beauty, sweetness and feminine. People who like pink tend to be romantic and take care of those around them in a sensitive way (My Life My stuff, 2012).

Conclusion

it is the personal opinion of the author that, in Nigeria and perhaps Africa, there is a need to attempt a workable system of notation that may be accepted and used efficiently by dancers, choreographers and dance educators. It is in this line that the author proffers the 'Igbo descriptive documentation style' system as a contribution that can be improved upon.

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