

# ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL: A MUSICOLOGICAL AND EXPLORATIONS OF DANCE FORMS IN CALABAR INTERNATIONAL CARNIVAL EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** This paper took a critical look at dance forms in carnival performances with focus on the Carnival Calabar. Carnivals are predominantly, better felt and experienced in dance. Dance is as old as mankind although its origin is lost in antiquity. dances are usually performed and feats into majority of the music played by different bands during the Calabar carnival. The paper argues that aspect of performance is peculiar to youths as they make up more than 80 percent of the carnival bands, that gives it verve and street credibility, especially because of their mastery of the dance routines. The paper concludes that the emergence of these new forms of dance in Nigeria has not gone unnoticed hence the attack on it by cultural relativist critics, theorists and scholars in the society.

**Keywords:** Dance Forms, Musicology, Ethnomusicology, Carnival Bands, Traditional Dances, Music.

## Introduction

Dance is the primary way to feel and enjoy a carnival. Movements and gestures express a variety of intentions to capture the mood of the celebration, from sensuous, sensual, and erotic movements to acrobatics, stunts, and masquerading, among other things, even though they are also associated with other activities like costume parades, floats and decorations, pageantry, live music performances, and fireworks, among others. Different dancing styles are demonstrated during this time, drawing on both the old and the modern, and new trends are subsequently introduced to the delight of the audience. Finding and locating the distinctive aesthetics of these dancing movements between individuals and groups is clear. Aside from festivals and carnivals, no significant African event—including those in Nigeria—is unaccompanied by a celebration in which dancing plays a central role (Onyemuchara, I, Eze, J.O., Molokwu, U.C., et al, 2025).



Plate 1: Vibrant dance movements (from Carnival Calabar-2022)

In traditional societies, dance derived its major importance from its function as an integral part of the social and religious life of man. Because the art (dance) has endured across the ages, every age or period has had and still has their particular way of expressing emotions and feelings through dance, due to the transit of time. Dance is an ancient art that is ingrained in human activities such as work, communication, and expressions toward others as well as in the worship of deities and/or ancestors. Dance is the entire way a people's life is conveyed via rhythmic movement and gesture. It plays a significant role in their daily lives and serves as the thread that connects them all as a group. Although its beginnings are lost to antiquity, dance is as old as mankind, according to Olomu Jane (26). Writing about the age-old art of dance, Royce Peterson (3) echoes as follows:

Although dance has been dubbed the oldest of the arts, it is also possible that it predates the other disciplines. Dance is distinct from other arts in that it is characterized by the human body creating patterns in time and space, which may also explain its age and universality.

The aforementioned remark emphasizes the connection between dance and human existence, hence the genesis of dance is lost to antiquity. Dance is a lifelong endeavor that finishes with death. This is obvious in African dance traditions, including those in Nigeria, where dance performances take place at milestone events like marriage, the initiation of men into manhood, and the birth and naming of a new infant. Other examples include royal coronations, meetings with dignitaries, celebrations of extraordinary achievements, and funerals, to name a few. Since dance unites the community and brings people together, people share in one other's joys and sorrows by dancing together. According to Peggy Harper, "Traditional dance is an essential element of all aspect of life in a

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homogenous society" (Harper, 280). The dancers and audience are typically connected to and in contact with each other throughout dance performances.



Plate 2: Native American dancing forms (from Carnival Calabar-2018)

When Onyemuchara (21) says that indigenous dances from Africa, specifically those from Nigeria, are "electrifying," he is in accord with the writers. Anyone observing will be caught up in it as it comes like a whirlwind. Everyone then takes part, whether consciously or unconsciously. "There is strong mutual identification based on kinesthetic and psychological empathy when both dancers and spectators are present" (Hanna 314). When Primus (cited in Kariamu, 3) says that; she clearly describes the 'infectious' aspect of African traditional dances;

They unconsciously retreat back into their cozy living rooms and block out the sight that their eyes seem to be following because they are either perplexed or terrified by the strength of their feelings, or they are seized, yanked up, and thrown into the dancing ring by an invisible force.

#### **Traditional Dances Aspects of Carnival Performance**

Therefore, dancing in Nigerian traditional society entails encoding important meanings that immediately touch on all facets of peoples' lives, i.e., their cultural identity (Ugolo, 46, Eze & Molokwu, 15). These are the emotions that traditional dances typically evoke when they are performed during celebrations such as new yam, fishing, and other festivals that honor various deified gods and ancestors among others and are typically held in village squares (Arena), along riverbanks (Regatta), in markets, or in town halls. These Nigerian celebrations include Osun Oshogbo, Ogun, Sango, Eyo, and Mmanwu/Masquerade Festivals. There are some of these dances that are more secular or social in nature, despite the fact that most of them are sacred in nature and substance due to their ritualistic inclinations. These dances may be done during naming rituals, weddings, installations, farming, games, and other events. In either case, they stand for the traditional African (including Nigeria) political, social, economic, and religious life.



Plate 3: shows a presentation of cultural dancing troupes (from Carnival Calabar 2022).

Traditional dancing, according to Yerima (217), "formed a major part of society's religious, social, ancestral, and existential reality." This means that there are essentially two categories of indigenous dances in Nigeria: social/recreational or secular dances and sacred or ritual dances (Yerima, 17–19). Nigerian dances are being performed outside the boundaries of traditional festivals and ritual reenactments. They currently make up the vast reservoir from which motions, gestures, costumes, make-up, music, and other accessories are pulled for entertainment and artistic endeavors. As the world continues to be a global village, urbanization or industrialisation has made this feasible (Molokwu & Uchime, 10). Culture must remain distinct and vibrant in the face of ongoing change. As societies develop, they take ideas and concepts from other cultures and adapt them to their own, while also trying to eliminate or incorporate some of them into the ones that currently exist, Anyira and Essi (67). Diffusion is the term for this. Any area of human endeavor where it might happen is culture. For the purposes of this essay, culture—and the consequent cultural diffusion—will continue to be the main topic. Cultural diffusion is described as "the spread of cultural elements from one people or district to others" (266) in the New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language. Diffusionism, a theory that focuses on how cultural elements transfer from one community to another, first emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century.



Plate 4: Displaying cultural dancing troupes (from Carnival Calabar-2022)

Diffusion is defined as "the spread of culture items from one place of origin to others" by Titiev (446) as cited in Onwumah (40). Acculturation is a concept or theory that is connected to diffusionism. Although they are frequently used interchangeably, there is still some difference between the two. According to Kroeber's quotation from Onwumah (on page 41), acculturation is "the change within a society that were caused by another with the result that both societies become very similar culturally." The difference between the two concepts, according to Kroeber, is that whereas diffusion is the transfer of specific cultural qualities from one civilization to another, acculturation is a significant cultural transformation that takes place inside a community as a whole (Onwumah, 41). This forecast of carnival in Nigeria generally and the Calabar carnival in particular revolves around the aforementioned discussion. Due to the rich and diverse cultural legacy it draws, this Carnival places special focus on the development of dance performance styles.

It is sufficient to say that Nigerian carnival is a recent innovation or a culture that has been taken, presenting and expressing beauty in performance through choreography, costuming, and makeup, Anyira and Essi, (49). Nigerian societies have their unique traditions of celebration that are founded in festivals and other traditional African performances (Ilami, 9). Aloha, Ilami

Traditional African communities have vibrant celebrations made up of universally recognizable components. Every component of the celebration plays a role and is always handled artistically. Masks, costumes, sound, music, dancing, feasting, myth, games, sports, and stories are a few examples of these aspects (9).

The opening of these festivities through their conclusion frequently feature notable performances of these traditional dances. This has consistently helped to support dance culture in Nigeria in general and Cross Rivers in particular, as well as to preserve and promote it. Ahmed Yerima (217) argues that "the need for dance to survive could not be over-emphasized for dance as a tool for communal unity formed the integral part of culture" to support his claim.



Plate 5: shows a cultural dance performance (from Carnival Calabar-2022).

A festival, however, does not happen in a vacuum in African civilization; rather, it is an expression of the people's desire to recreate and express thanks to their ancestors, particularly to their creator, Anyira and Essi(78). When he claims that "the African theatre is in communion with the gods," Bakary Traore (13), confirms this. Thus, dance frequently plays a key role in accomplishing this feat throughout the festivals and can be thought

of as the foundation of an African festival. Additionally, despite new norms, the rise of technology, and industrializations, Nigeria's numerous ethnic dances have managed to maintain their popularity. In support of this, Arnold Udoka (21) asserts

Because of the naturalistic nature of industrialization, people desire entertainment, which cannot just be traditional dances. Cultural variety exists because it influences what people seek in terms of industrialisation and/or technology. (In-depth Interview)

### **Emerging Dance Performances in Carnival Calabar**

Since its debut in 2004, the Calabar Carnival—often referred to as "Africa's Biggest Street Party"—has remained true to its vision and objective, particularly when it comes to acts, dance included. Festivals and carnivals cannot take place without performances (movements and gestures, clothing and make-up, acrobatics, music, props and paraphernalia, mime, and dramatization). When they state that "Carnival celebrations all over the world are a combination of music, dance, choreography, and spectacle," Ekweariri and Ogbonna (132) are in agreement with this claim. A carnival cannot be called a carnival without songs, music, and synchronized movement. The acts mentioned above are common at traditional African festivals because they serve as the foundation for ceremonies and/or festivities. In any case, dance and the feature of movement and gestures are particularly notable since they contribute to the parade's and procession's fluidity.



Plate 6: A performance of contemporary dance (Source: Carnival Calabar-2022)

Dance, as defined by Bakare (3), is the rhythmic movement of the body in space and time intended to express a message. The meaning and concept of dance are relative, hence this description by Bakare is debatable. While it is true that dance is fundamentally about movement, dance is also much more than that because it can also be characterized as a particular art movement based on the expressive movements of the human body (MarusaPusnik, 5). The traditional dance performance and the modern or contemporary dance performance, each expressing its uniqueness to the enjoyment of viewers, are the two main dance performance groups that make up the Calabar Carnival. The traditional dance of the people of Cross River State is a part of the local content of the Calabar Carnival, which promotes competitive participation by all local government areas (Udoka, 319). Because it attempts to sustain, promote, and conserve the people's cultural history, which is captured through dance performances, this part of the carnival is very beneficial.

Emerging dance forms, which make up the second category and are the focus of this study, have continued to flourish and get better and better. Dance has evolved over the past few decades, going from intricate to simple motions. In Africa generally and Nigeria specifically, there is a paradigm shift from the natural dance creators (dancers and choreographers) to pop artists. Since the year 2000, Nigeria has benefited from an onslaught of dance moves that have been popularized by musicians who also use this platform to market their songs. From Makosa of AwiloLogomba to the sensual and African-themed Sukusu to the current pop music craze in Nigeria, Anyira and Essi (67).

Daddy Shokey, Baba Fryo, African China, and Suo, which replaced Makosa and is credited to Danfo Drivers (Mad Melon and Mountain Black), Azonto, which is a Ghanaian-inspired dance but was made popular in Nigeria by Wizkid, Alanta associated with Artquake, Yahooze by Olu Maintain, Skelewu by Davido, and Kukere by African China are some examples of these dances and their originators in Nigeria

During the Calabar carnival, many bands typically incorporate these dances and others into the majority of their music. Since teenagers make up more than 80% of bands, this part of performance is unique to them, giving it energy and street cred, especially given their proficiency with the dance routines (AwofesoPelu, 29–30). Five bands make up the Calabar Carnival: Master Blaster, Passion Four, Seagull, Freedom, and Bayside. The Governor and Executive members, Nollywood stars, Beauty Queens and Princes, as well as other dignitaries from within and beyond the nation, are all a part of the Governor's Band, which was added in 2015 as a non-competitive band aimed for entertainment. Revelers, which refers to the games and dances of a celebratory occasion, are the name given to dancers at the Calabar Carnival. To be joyous and intensely happy (Webster's Dictionary, 851).

It makes sense that the word was chosen because of its connection to a celebration occasion like the actual Carnival. This is due to the fact that the dance performance is intended for the Carnival and any dance that emerges in the field of choreography is only relevant to the theme of the celebration (Bakare Ojo, 4). A dance creator's choice of dance at any given time depends on the stimulus that informs the idea. It is sufficient to say that these revelers are not chosen at random because there are established procedures to be followed if one wishes to join a specific band, as described above. According to Raymond Iyang,

Each form costs #1000 (one thousand Naira only) and is sold to interested parties. Previously, this was the situation as the carnival began. The price of each form is #2000 (Two Thousand Naira only), the same as at the last Carnival (2015). Dancers and revelers are put through a variety of auditions before being accepted into the bands. Each year, the organizers release a subject or themes that the attendees collaborate on with the designated choreographer(s) of the Band(s) (personal interview).

The partygoers/dancers are mostly young people who are willing to tolerate the long distance walking while in a performing environment. This requires a lot of energy, without a doubt, but the competitive spirit encourages a "never give up" mentality along with lovely costumes and choreography. In addition to the dance steps mentioned above, the Calabar Carnival also features several new dance styles. The following are just a few of them: Tango, Chachacha, Salsa, B-Boy, Hip-hop, and hybridized traditional dance styles. The outfits are made to capture the loco-aesthetics of

the movements, and dance performances during the Carnival are created using movements and patterns from these dances.

Cultural festivals and carnivals often feature theatrical components like music and dancing (Okachi, 95). The carnival theme that is depicted in the performance is intended to instruct and educate the crowds of onlookers in addition to providing them with entertainment. When AwofesoPelu submits that, he also captures this;

The Calabar carnival is undoubtedly a vibrant procession, but it also has a serious side that many tourists are unaware of: it is a "intellectual theatre on the move," combining creativity and in-depth analytical thinking. One reason is that having a broad concept to work with is one thing; it is quite another to understand those themes, express them in concrete symbols, and reflect them in dance performances (29).

The value and expansion of dance performances over the years have been enormous, and they are now considered essential to carnivals and festivals, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies of athletic events like the Olympics, Nations Cups, World Cups, and Dance Reality Shows, among others. This further demonstrates how dancing and other human activities are incorporated into one another as a result of the trend of global industrialization and urbanization. The dance performances are nevertheless taken outside of the typical river bank, temple, and village squares by discovering these new locations as a boundary breaker, Anyira and Essi (4). African music has changed the way that African dance has evolved over time. More contemporary dance moves are gradually replacing more traditional African dancing styles ([www.answersafrica.com/popular-african-dance.html](http://www.answersafrica.com/popular-african-dance.html)).



Plate 7: Special dance performance

(Source: Carnival Calabar-2022)

These new dance genres in Nigeria have not gone ignored, which is why cultural relativist critics, theorists, and academics have attacked them. The debate has focused on the hybridization of indigenous or traditional dance forms, the erotic or sensual nature of some of these dance movements, and how these dance movements are caused by cultural diffusion and acculturation, which aim to erode the cultural content of the people's worldview and are represented in performances, Anyira and Essi (8). The truth is that the advantages associated with the formation and growth of these new dance styles outweigh the disadvantages. These include

expanding job prospects for dancers and choreographers, whose livelihoods depend on the dance industry.

"However, dance as an art has over the years become more versatile, productive and lucrative as a career and means of livelihood," writes Ohenhen Stanley (4) in support of this viewpoint. Ohenhen Stanley (7) continues by arguing that in addition to the employment and financial benefits, carnival events serve as platforms to promote dance as a unique cultural and custom midwife capable of bringing about unique societal enlightenment, education, entertainment, and endowment. Since its inception in December 2004, the Calabar carnival—often referred to as "Africa's Biggest Street Party"—has inspired people all over the world, particularly when it comes to dance acts. In response to this, DemolaOjo and FunkeOlaode (5) write, "Despite the heights the end-of-year showcase has attained in recent years, the last edition upped the ante with even more outstanding performances by dancers.



Plate 8: A performance of modern dance, from Carnival Calabar in 2022

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