

# Dramatic features of the Abang Dance Performance of the Efiks of Nigeria

Ene, Offiong Amaku

Department of English & Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Calabar, Nigeria

E-mail: [offyene@gmail.com](mailto:offyene@gmail.com)

**Abstract**— This paper highlights the dramatic features of Abang Cultural dance, particularly in the areas of Costumes, Dance, Songs/Music, Symbols, and Gestures. The paper also examines the objectives via a general background study, a review of related scholarship and a descriptive detail of the theoretical framework upon which the work is hinged. The ethnographic research methodology was adopted for data collection during fieldwork. The findings of this enquiry concretize the idea that the Abang indigenous performance is an enthralling theatre on the go. As a matter of fact, its artistic apparatuses and dramatic orientation deepens our understanding of Efik epistemology. The paper therefore, recommends the preservation, promotion and transmission of this cultural art through the aid of technology as well as through dance competitions, dance societies, dance troupes in schools, universities and across households. In summary, this research is an attempt to address the lacuna in the critical documentation of the Abang dance of the Efik people in Cross River State, South-South Nigeria.

**Keywords**— Efik, Dance, Culture, Indigenous Drama, Performance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dance can be viewed as a form of communication in addition to its therapeutic tendencies. Primarily, dance is a remarkable form of artistic expression that offers room to birth passion and emotions. Lee Warren rightfully observes that “dance is a direct form of dramatic and theatrical communication” (63). Therefore, as a performative art, dancing is one of the numerous modes adopted by man to communicate messages, tell stories, showcase culture and reveal emotions. Invariably, through the rhythmic and artistic movement of the head, torso and limbs, man is able to formulate meaning about the nature of the world he lives in. Thus, dance reflects society – its beliefs, values, struggles, and experiences. Hence, the Abang cultural dance of the Efik people is no exception, because it brilliantly offers a window into the worldview of the Efiks, as gleaned from its form, functions, music, techniques and poetry.

The Efiks are a minority ethnic group in Nigeria, West Africa. Their dialect is also known as Efik, which is highly tonal. Albeit, Therese Nyambi locates the Efik dialect as a Bantu rooted language (20). The Efiks occupy the basins of the lower Cross River in the southern part of Nigeria. As a matter of fact, the Efiks are indigenes of the Calabar metropolis and are mostly found within Odukpani, Akpabuyo and Akamkpa local government areas even

extending all the way to the Bakassi Peninsula in the Cameroons.

However, Calabar, the capital city of Cross River State remains the ancestral homestead of the Efiks. Covered in verdant rainforest, mangrove swamps and surrounded by many rivers and creeks, the city of Calabar enjoys a temperate climate all year round, little wonder its inhabitants eke out a livelihood from aquaculture and agriculture.

Incidentally, the river plays a dominant role in the lives of the Efiks, for not only is it the habitat of their Ndem (marine deities of female colony), it is also, the mainstay of their economy (majority of her oil wells are off shore) and the river essentially features largely in almost all of their orature. As such, this close bond with earth’s resources aims at perpetuating the vitality of the community (Bakary Traore, 13). Thus, the word ‘Abang’ which when translated means ‘waterpot’ in Efik language, is an indigenous performance which seeks to extol the importance of the sea/water. Fundamentally, Abang is a large and round earthenware or plastic vessel used primarily for the storage of water or palm wine in every Efik homestead.

## II. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ABANG DANCE

A lot of Efik folktales, legends, dramas, songs and stories have it that, whenever the Ndem were appeased, they appeared and disappeared on the river surface, often times caught dancing beautifully on the surface of the river. Of course, these revered mermaids never danced in full glare of anyone, albeit, female acolytes of the Ndem cult and several Efik maidens of old, allegedly claim that while going to fetch water or offer sacrifices in the river, had stumbled upon dancing mermaids on the river surface.

In an interview with Rita Okon-Eyo, a former Abang dancer, she admits that the Ndem are “marine spirits who dance gracefully on the river surface, in fact, their dance is of a serpentine nature, for their body movements appeared to be in sync with the waves of the sea”. Okon-Eyo explained to the researcher that the women or the female worshippers of the Ndem, who espied this spectacle on the river bank, in an attempt to communicate and relate with the supernatural naturally, attempted a re-enactment of what they had witnessed as a form of adoration to the marine deities. Nonetheless, this religious dance grew to become more than a ritual at the river bank to a scintillating performance at the village square. In any case, it is believed that as the maidens made their way home, they naturally engaged in this serpentine dance with their water pots securely balanced on the head.

Of course, to dance with a pot of water on one’s head requires a great level of skill, grace and art which ideally was perfected after many mishaps. However, dancing with a pot laden with water did not deter these maidens from flaunting their mermaid-like dance steps during moonlit gatherings or when the occasion warranted. As such, they continually tested out their new dance steps in the village square, the market place and at marriage ceremonies. Moves that were not humanly possible were altered and replaced with feminine dance moves, but the sole intent remained that of communion and worship. Amaury Talbot affirms that among Nigerians “...the god was not evolved out of the dance, but was there first and the dance was developed as a method of worship” (803). Thus, Abang was an artistic means to communicate with the Ndem.

Although, as with any oral performance, the maidens added colour and glamour to their ritualistic performance by experimenting with whatever household item(s) they could place on their head. Items such as baskets, gourds, lanterns, pitchers, calabashes, trays, and mortars were lavishly ornamented and used to express delight and

celebrate their Ndem. However, over time, the damsels settled for the waterpot (abang) and the tray (akpan). And only skilled performers were allowed to carry the Abang and the Akpan, whilst others danced around them in a circle. For this reason, the Abang dance performance is otherwise known as “*Abang ye Akpan*” or “*Ekomo Iba*.” Which translates as “waterpot and tray” or “two vats” respectively.

Hence, Abang became a quasi-traditional-religious dance for the womenfolk and popular *Ekombi* songs like “*Nta nta eyen mi*”, “*Otop eyop mkpe esa*,” “*Idem mi eye ye*” were all co-opted for its performance. (*Ekombi* is a popular recreational dance of the Efik women). Other folk songs, shouts of ululations and worship songs were also created on the spur of the moment. At the time, there was neither set costumes nor a definite choreography so the women danced until they became tipsy and vulgar and eventually dispersed.

Apparently, being a marine dance or a performance whose source can be traced to the river or the river goddesses, its efficacious benefit was not lost on the Efiks as theatre scholar, Uwemedimo Iwaketok rightly asserts that “Abang was associated with fecundity, therefore women especially the pregnant and barren patronized them (*abang dancers*) more than men did” (134). This was so, because one of the most renowned Efik goddesses, Anansa was the sole giver of children. Etop Akwang corroborates that; “Anansa is the archetypal mother of children in Efikland” (123). Therefore, Abang was not only for entertainment purposes, but was also meant to secure the many blessings of the supernatural.

However, in the early nineteenth century, Abang’s ritualistic hold began to decline, for Ndem worship became outclassed by the rapidly growing Christian values and beliefs propagated by the Scottish missionaries. As such, quite a number of Abang dancers who were also fervent acolytes at the Ndem shrine converted to the Judeo-Christian religion and subsequently reinvented the original essence of the dance. Abang became a dance form targeted at the public for entertainment; it had no doubt lost its religious purpose of veneration to the marine deities. Its shift from ritual to secular corroborates with Ossie Enekwe’s argument that “ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency” (155). This is not to say that, Abang performance does not retain vestiges of its ritualistic base – it still does as demonstrated in its songs and its movements.

However, it was during the mid-50s through the 70s that Abang began to have a definite form i.e. stylized floor

patterns, choreography and dance sequences. It became a pleasurable and an informal forum for grooming adolescent girls about Efik culture, acceptable values, feminine graces and creativity. Thus, Abang was regarded as a means of indoctrinating younger girls into understanding Efik cultural epistemology. Obviously, the older women were preoccupied with this responsibility, serving dutifully as transmitters of Efik lore and wisdom.

And so, Abang grew to become a dance competition amongst young girls from different *ufok* (extended families), who would often move from house to house to display their skills and in turn be rewarded with monetary gifts or food items by their patrons. It was at this point that uniformed costumes and accessories were introduced, primarily for the purpose of identifying each group. The number of dancers was fixed to about fourteen – the Abang carrier and thirteen others in attendance, and of course, a handful of smaller children who made up the orchestra. *Ekombisongs* still held sway then as it is now, however, as it was during the period of Nigeria's independence, patriotic songs were composed, one of such was "*Abang Nigeria*."

Furthermore, from the late 90s on, Abang evolved to assume a place in theatrical performances, as evidenced in its appearances at carnivals, international and national concerts, cultural festivals etc. with a well-trained troupe of adult women and men, not necessarily of Efik origin. In all, Abang is clearly recreational and is characteristically performed during the customary Nkugho/ Ndo rites (fattening room and marriage ceremonies), Emana Jesus (Christmas holidays), burial ceremonies and conferment of Chieftaincy titles in parts of Cross River and Akwa Ibom States.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated earlier, little critical attention has been paid to the literary stylistics of the Efik Abang dance. Onyile Onyile in his paper "Abang Dance: Radiance from the River Ideals of Femininity among the Efik," articulates his thrust as "the examination of the multidimensionality of the Abang dance" (2). As such, his work is broad spectrum capturing the modalities of space, rhythm and unity, alongside the artistry of costumes, the femininity and sexuality of the Abang cult. His explication of Abang's dynamic form, its narrated content and conceptual meaning, indicates a literary style, albeit a closer look locates it more as a socio-cultural approach. Nonetheless, his contribution remains one of the most recent and significant essays on Abang Dance.

Yet another effort which deserves attention is that of Iwaketok, although her paper entitled: "Ibibio/Anang Women Oral Performance" focuses on the traditional rites of passage of the female child in the Ibibio-Annang locale, she no doubts dedicates a section of her work to the Abang performance. For Iwaketok, Abang is a quasi-dramatic pubescent dance that extols the virtues of purity, chastity and contentment as revealed through its song texts, dance steps and costumes. Although, Iwaketok discusses Abang as oral literature alright, her approach differs significantly from the present work as this research interrogates Abang in depth and from the instrumentality of an afrocentric theory, which has been delineated in the next section.

### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethnodramatics is an afrocentric theory which has been adopted for this study. As its name implies, it is ethnic centered, geared primarily for the interpretation of African indigenous performative arts. Propounded by Ndubuisi Osuagwu and Uwem Affiah in 2012, Ethnodramatics as a theory aims at identifying and interpreting the defining characteristics of indigenous African drama. Outlining these characteristics to be Dance, Costumes, Symbols and Symbolisms, Mime, Songs, Music, Make-Up and Gestures, Osuagwu and Affiah make us understand in their treatise, "Ethnodramatics: Towards a theory for indigenous African Drama," that, "Ethnodramatics calls for a decentered dramatics which views and reads the indigenous drama of Africa outside the Western tradition" (9). Thus, unlike Western theories, Ethnodramatics pays close attention to the artistic components of the oral performance in order to arrive at its meaning, purpose or function. In the same vein, Ngugi wa Thiong'o confirms that "values are often expressed through people's songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies" (4). And this is the thrust of Ethnodramatics, for through its critical interrogation of traditional aesthetic devices it elucidates African cultural epistemology. Thus, the four dramatic characteristics of Abang that the paper amply discusses are dance, costumes and make-up, songs and music, symbols and symbolisms.

#### COSTUME, ACCESSORIES AND MAKE-UP OF THE ABANG TROUPE

The Efiks decorate themselves lavishly for their dances, masquerade performances and carnivals. Colourful and expensive fabrics made of silk, damask, velveteen, cotton or brocade are often adorned by Efik performers during any festive outing. So, the Abang performance is no exception,

for each member of the Abang dance troupe is extravagantly adorned from head to toe. In the table below are the costumes used for the realization of its performance.

EFIK NAME	ENGLISH EQUIVALENT
Nkwa esit iton	Beaded Choker
Ekari iton	Short neck cape
Ofong idem	Camisole
Ekpa nku nkwa	Criss-crossing chest beads
Ofong ukod anwan/Atiae	Waist wrapper/Mini skirt
Okpono	Broad waist band
Akasi	Hoop
Ofong Akasi	Hoop wrapper
Anana Ubok	Woolly arm and wrist bands
Ndom	Camwood chalk
Nkparetim	Jingling bells for the shin
Nyok	Anklets
Ibot Abang	Water pot crown
Ibot Akpan	Tray/Basket crown
Mbobo Ibot Abang & Ibot Akpan	Scarves for decorating the waterpot/tray
Ntang	Peacock feathers
Ukudiso	Mirrors
Edisad	Combs

Typically, an Abang performance has a dance crew of ten to twelve maidens, excluding its drummers. The star dancer is the Abang carrier, she carries the Ibot Abang on her head. The Ibot Abang is a round frame securely attached to the waterpot. It is festooned with several headscarves (mbobo ibot abang) and feathers (ntang) which not only add colour to the paraphernalia, but when tugged at or pulled by its carrier, creates exciting effects. The abang (waterpot shaped like a pitcher) which lies atop the frame is also decorated lavishly with mirrors, fabrics and feathers. Mirrors have always been a major accessory of Efik feminine dances, as it is an object of divination as well as a make-up item for women. In any case, the tiny mirrors attached to the waterpot serves ornamental purpose as it glints off light during the performance. Originally, a lantern was placed on the Ibot Abang for the same effect.

Going further, the star dancer, like all the other dancers, wears a beaded choker (nkwa esit itong) around her neck. The beads are a bright orange colour and are gotten from sea corals. These coral beads no doubt symbolize royalty and the wealth of the Ndem as well as the Efiks. Around her bosom, she wears a loose fitting camisole (ofong idem), on

top of which are the long criss-crossing beads (ekpa nku nkwa) that drop from her neck across both sides of her ribs. It is worthy to note that originally, nothing was worn on the upper part of the body except the heavily patterned neckcape and the breasts were in full view. This was so because nudity was a reflection of aesthetics and well-being amongst Efik maidens. Ekei Essien Oku confirms that “nudity was a social practice with a cultural significance...the girls of this grade were called NKA IFERI (band of naked girls)” (189). However, as a result of westernization, a camisole is donned.

Encircling the Star dancer's waist is a hoop. This hoop is known as akasi and is made from cane. The akasi actually has two rings, the inner ring which fits closely around the dancer's middle, and the outer ring with its larger circumference encircles the inner one. Invariably, the two hoops are kept in place by cane rods sewn in a zig-zag fashion to hold them together. Draped loosely over the akasi frame is the ofong akasi, a long fabric that covers the entire frame right down to the ankles of the dancer. However, strewn across its wide perimeter are some carefully folded silk and velveteen materials which gives an air of aesthetic appeal.

Around her arms and wrists, the dancer ties patterned woolly bands (anana ubok), and on her shins are the nkparetim which are hidden under the ofong akasi. The nkparetim are quite a lot like shinguards albeit made of velvet and cross-stitched with little bells and jingles. Their primary function is that of musical instrumentation. Similarly, encircling one ankle is a string of ankle-rattles (nyok). The nyok is made of dry seeds and serves same purpose as the nkparetim. All Abang performers dance barefoot. They have their hair woven in three braids - one braid in front and the other two tucked neatly behind. This coiffure is known as “Mmong-mmong idet” and usually decked with brass combs. (edisad).

For their facial make-up, animal figures, symbolic shapes or patterns from the natural milieu are beautifully designed with camwood on their foreheads, nose and cheeks. It is common to find such designs of reptiles, twigs, wavy lines or circles (ikong ube) on the dancers' body. These designs are highly significant as they go beyond mere aesthetics to depict the efficacious potency of the Efik marine spirits. As mentioned earlier, Abang is a water dance affiliated with the Ndem. Thus, the application of camwood/ white clay chalk signifies the spiritual purity and loyalty of the dancers to the Ndem cult. Moreso, the camwood mixture serves as a body coolant during the dance performance.

The dancers' eyelids are usually darkened with kohl and they wear a bright coloured red lipstick to enhance their lips.

In essence, this is a vivid costume description of the Abang carrier. If the performance includes an Akpan carrier, she is dressed likewise, albeit the Ibot Abang is swapped for the Ibot Akpan (a rectangular cane tray). The other eight dancers are in attendance to the star dancers, and so are not as elaborately costumed. However, the eight of them are uniformly dressed with similar coloured chokers, a neckcape, arm and wrist bands and a flimsy camisole which exposes the mid-section. They neither carry the abang (waterpot) nor wear the hoop around their waist, rather they tie a short loin cloth around their waists, and on their shins are the nkparetim. The members of the orchestra are usually of the opposite gender and they adorn the Efik traditional attire, complete with the Efik beaded velvet cap and beaded footwear.

#### SONG TEXTS AND DRUM POETICS IN ABANG

Man is an expressive being and the song mode is just one of the countless artistic avenues through which his energies are released. According to Tracy Hugh, "music in Africa means vocal participation, the physical manipulation of instruments and the rhythmic or dance movements associated with it" (10). Therefore, Abang relies chiefly on *Ekombi* songs and drum poetics for the realization of its performance. Drum Poetics simply refers to the language/tones communicated through musical instruments. Accordingly, Isidore Okpewho submits that "a tone instrument is a musical instrument that makes sounds similar to the tones of human speech" (253). As such, the Abang orchestra consists of a plethora of these tone instruments which interestingly reproduces Efik words. Ruth Finnegan corroborates this when she writes "the 'speaking' and comment of the drum form a linguistic complement" (527). Hence the beauty of these tone instruments are amply demonstrated in performance. Below are some musical instrumentation in Abang.

The Talking drum (Eyara ekomo): this comes in different sizes and shapes. It produces a mild treble tone and offers cues to the dancers.

The Slit drum (Umon ekomo): this is a large cylindrical drum with two square openings at the top, when struck at, produces the heavy bass tones.

The Metal gong (Nkong ekomo): these are of two varieties – the large conical shaped one that produces just one tone

and the twin gong that produces two tones albeit smaller in size.

Rattles (Nyok) this is constructed from a dried out gourd with beaded netting. It is shaped like an hour glass and produces a rattling effect when shaken.

Some others are the native piano, maracas, castanets, cymbals etc.

The importance of drums in Africa cannot be overemphasized. Talbot describes them as "the greatest of all musical instruments" (809). Little wonder before any traditional dance commences, the drums are first heard. This is done firstly to invoke the supernatural, secondly to draw attention and thirdly to prepare dancers for the performance. In Abang, it is the Eyara ekomo that is first heard. It begins with such lowly sounds that says; "*Tebede! Tebede!*" which means "calm down or be calm." In essence, this is a get ready call, dousing all anxieties and fears that the dancers may be experiencing. Then still in lowly tones, it appears to be saying "*Nsiongo ndek ke eyen fo*" (2x) which translates as "remove the discharge from your eyes and just get ready."

Next comes "*Negede ofong fo*" (2x) which means adjust your cloth. At this point, the throbbing language is approaching its peak, and the other musical instruments join in to heighten the urgency of the call. However, throughout the performance, the talking drum can be heard distinctly over the other accompaniments and choruses, for it gives the dancers their cues and continuously cheers them when it says "*Sio ke aba edem!*" (use your back), "*Dong ekete sun isin!*" (Shake your waists) or "*Da ga da*" (stand up) or "*Ki song*" (go down) and much more.

In any case, several *Ekombi* or Efik folksongs are sung during the performance. Although these songs are often short in length, they are no less evocative of Efik traditional beliefs and worldview. Stylistically couched in harmonious melody, proverbial sayings, repetitions, riddles and euphemisms these songs are not only pleasant to the ears, but compelling enough to provoke dancing. Below is a short interpretation of some songs rendered in an Abang performance:

*Eswana eda* Fill the space

*Enek Abang* Dance Abang

This song projects the entertainment value of Abang, as it admonishes both spectators and dancers to make merry, dance Abang and celebrate life.

*Ndada nsonkpo ndoro udia* What do I use to serve food

*Nno ebe mi?* For my husband?

*Okpokoro mi obung ukot* My table has a broken leg.

This song is couched in form of a riddle. It is also very ironic, for the answer to the riddle lies in the Star dancer's waist- the hoop around her waist as it is large enough to serve as a table. Moreso, Efik women are generally known to be wide-waisted, as a result of their fattening room practices (nkugho). Therefore, this song suggests or points at the voluptuous figure of Efik women. Another song text popularly sung in the Abang performance is "*Ediye Inuen*" which translates as "beautiful bird". The beautiful bird being referred to is the peacock, which is of particular significance to the Efiks for its feathers (ntang) are used as decorative accessories during traditional marriages, Ekpe performances, chieftaincy titles and in Efik dances. It is important to note that its feathers are used to adorn the ibot abang and ibot akpan in Abang. Another song text goes:

*Mmen kpe tear tear* Do I sit?

*Mmen kpe nana* Do I prostrate?

*Mbong akam* To worship

*Obong sosongo* God thank you

Clearly this is a song of worship, supplication and thanksgiving that expresses gratitude to the ndem perhaps for the provision of children, a bountiful harvest or a healthy life.

*Mkpo mi* This thing (Abang dance)

*Oto ke ekpuk* is a heritage

*Uso iyeneke* Your father does not own it

*Uka iyeneke* Your mother does not own it

The song text above seeks to extol the Abang dance as a cultural heritage communally owned by the entire community. It reiterates the fact that even though it has no authorship it is genuinely Efik in all entirety.

Thus, as depicted above, these folk songs exalt and uphold Efik worldview.

#### DANCE DRAMATICS AND SYMBOLISM IN ABANG

The Efiks have an adage that goes "*akak edemikakke itong, akak itong, itong obungo*" which translates as "it tires the back, but not the neck, if it tires the neck, it breaks" thus, this saying encapsulates the movement of the entire body during an Abang dance. In any case, the Abang performance commences with the 'four beat count' this simply refers to four rhythmic counts observed by the dancers, and upon the fourth count, they turn towards the right all lined up in a single file. The attendant girls lead the procession gleefully smiling, they are closely followed by

the star dancers and the orchestra who bring up the rear. Because Abang songs are fast paced and energetic, the dancers virtually come running unto the arena singing the entry song, "*okom kom iya ya*". With their palms outstretched, albeit interchangeably cupped and recupped in each other, they enact the 'greeting' step, calling on the spectators to attend to their performance whilst forming a circle. But the major dance movement exhibited during the entry is the Ekombi dance. The star dancers take their place at the centre until the greeting song is changed. Once this happens, the dancers arc their elbows like a bird in position for flight, and allowing their wrists drop freely to their front, turn their bodies partially to the left – this is the first count, then to the right; which is the second count, then to the left again, being the third. But, at the fourth count, they turn fully to the right in a rapid motion, that is different from the half slow turns of the previous counts. This is the four beat count, that precedes Efik feminine dances.

With their wrists still dangling freely in front of them, the dancers incline their back forward with knees slightly bent, do a swift jump to the left and then to the right till they are able to break into two parallel lines. Then at a cue from the talking drum- "*ki song*" they go down, moving their trunks in a serpent-like motion, in and out, all the way back up. When the beat changes again, they break into a semi-circular formation, and gradually lift up a foot, shake it vigorously before stamping it and engage in a mock run. Their elbows are still arced in front of them and the star dancers always take centre stage.

Immediately the music changes, they revert to the four beat count before they engage in the next dance sequence. This time, they tip their back slightly forward and shake their waists vigorously, then begin to go down to squatting position, then gradually rise till they are virtually standing on tip toes. All the while their trunks are moving inwards and outwards and their arched arms are swaying to the left and to the right. At the peak of the performance, the attendant girls form a curved line and the star dancers move to the centre and pretend to engage in a mock competition- each performing intricate and complicated movements of rapidly strutting, twisting, spinning, twirling, nodding, wriggling their trunks, scrapping feet, tugging at their headscarves and shaking their enlarged waist. Symbolically, these movements exude a fascinating appeal that can only be ascribed to the marine spirits or the underworld. Whilst the star dancers display these trance like sequences, the attendant girls continue gracefully with the

four beat count, wearing broad smiles. Then upon cues from the talking drum, everyone breaks out in a mad frenzy displaying whatever styles. Some dancers would dramatize the action of preening their hair before a mirror, albeit using a raised palm as their mirror, others will enact the actions of admiring themselves in a mirror, while some others may gyrate their hips raunchily, or perhaps stretch out their arms as if in supplication. It is at this point that the orchestra plays “*Eswana eda enek abang*” and truly the dancers fill the space and throw in their everything to the realization of the dance. Significantly, these re-enactments are total embodiments of worship, and a profound demonstration of feminine beauty, sexuality and wellness.

Eventually, they would converge in a semi-circle, and in unison go down to a squatting posture, then gradually kneel down, bend their trunks backward until the head almost reaches the floor, albeit just as it is about to, they jerk it up again and continue right up again. This sequence is performed repeatedly, until the music is changed. This dance sequence no doubt exhibits the flexibility, skills and the general well-being of the women.

Yet another delightful scenario enacted is that of a boatman paddling. In a squatting posture, all the dancers clasp their fingers together and stretch out their arms in front of them, and mimicking a fisherman rowing, they draw their clasped hands into to the left armpit, stretch it out ahead of them again and draw it to the right armpit. Of course, the dominant occupation of the Efiks is not eluded in Abang – it is captured in this sequence which also advertises their basic means of transportation. The last sequence, is the farewell step which signifies the end of the performance. The dancers fling their palms forward as if to ward off something, but this signifies goodbye and as they sing their goodbye song, “*Away!Away!*” they strut their feet rapidly against the surface and in a single file, they exit the arena. Because, Abang is a graceful dance, the transition between dance segments are often seamless, flowing harmoniously till the end.

Ultimately, Abang dramatizes the Efik’s love for their marine deities. It is a dance of the marine spirits for its roots can be traced to the sea. Thus, its swift and wriggly dance movements are imitative of the waves of the sea, the wind, fishes and mermaids. Accordingly, the dance celebrates the marine deities as the giver of children, extols the importance of women and recognizes the vital role the sea/water plays in the life of the Efiks. In all, the Abang performance reflects the Efik society as it elaborately

reconstructs images of her milieu and socio-cultural philosophy.

## V. CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

Dance no doubt is a story in action which communicates its subject matter via organized movement, music, gestures, symbols, make-up and costume. As such, this paper has reviewed and portrayed the dramatic uniqueness of Abang performance, evaluating it within its cultural frame of reference. Leaning heavily on the Ethnodramatic theory, the interrogation of its song texts, costumes, symbolisms and dance dramatics were illuminated as vital components that make up the Abang dance theatre. However, the paper recommends that in order to project the aesthetics of Abang, and propagate its philosophy then more documentation, research, recording and teaching of the dance form should be encouraged at all levels of education and in cultural centres within the nation and in the diaspora.

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#### **Interviewees and informants**

1. Ansa Asuquo  
Seventy-two years old.  
From Eniong Abatim.  
Former Abang Dancer and Teacher
2. Rita Okon-Eyo  
Eighty years old.  
From Adiabo, Okurikang.  
She was an Abang carrier in her youth