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**Awuawuer Tijime Justin**  
Ph.D., Department of  
Dramatic Arts, Obafemi  
Awolowo University,  
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

## Understanding Swange dance of the Tiv people of central Nigeria within the perspective of socio-political changes

**Awuawuer Tijime Justin**

### Abstract

Dance can respond to and as well as generating socio-political change. Conversely, that change could be identified, analyzed, and understood in terms of contemporary and societal circumstances. This is the reason why dance productions in any society are based on the life and practical issues bordering the citizenry within a socio-political context. Therefore, this paper using a participatory observation approach, scores Tiv dances as they are interpreted differently by different people within different socio-political and economic backgrounds and histories. Accordingly, this paper using Swange dance of Tiv people from Central Nigerian as a model observes that dances in Nigeria have taken new roles within the fast-growing features of socio-political and economic pliability. The paper consequently concludes that in Nigeria, dances have assumed the lead characters in socio-political commentaries because of their popularity thus becoming a popular culture capable of sustaining buckle patterns of socio-political ideology and hegemony.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, dance, socio-political, changes

### Introduction

Dance is from time to time taken as a serious Performative art because of its clarity in self-expressive and communicative sense. It is socio-politically inclined because it is an integrated part of human lifetime. This is why, in many African traditional dance festivals, participants find solace in using dances to express themselves better. By so doing, dance then forms a part of their existence, socio-political interactions, co-existence and well-being of individuals or group of individuals. Instructively, dance does not exist in a vacuum; it reflects truthfully the society, which in turn creates its styles, body movements, semiotics, codes, attitudes, mannerism and cultural traits in its entirety. From several African communal activities, events, ceremonials, such as annual festivals, different dance movements are developed, out of which ideas, emotions and feelings are freely captured and expressed irrespective of people's background. Considering these insinuations, this paper is looking at the political and social interpretations of Swange dance of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria who occupies mostly the Benue valley. Nevertheless, many scholars have done much scholarly works on dance in African socio-political narrative of some nation states. Scholars like Lisa Gilman (2004: 33-60), Schauert Paul (2015), Peggy Harper, (1961)<sup>[26]</sup>, and many others have written extensively on dance in political electioneering process in some parts of Africa without recourse to the Nigerian context. Saint Gbilekaa (1993)<sup>[9]</sup>, Arnold Benjamin Udoka (2016), Tor Iorapuu (2007) and many others back home in Nigeria did an extensive work on Nigerian dance in politics without looking at the aspect of Swange dance within the socio-political context. This therefore informs the motivation for this paper because it will add to the fountain of knowledge in African in general; Nigeria by extension; and Tiv society in particular.

### According to Walter terry

Dancing should deal with such serious matters as poverty, racial bias, neuroses, and even war. Some of these dances would not be entertaining. They would be disturbing to the mind and the guts. They would demand that audiences feel deeply and think deeply. (1989: 56)

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Awuawuer Tijime Justin**  
Ph.D., Department of  
Dramatic Arts, Obafemi  
Awolowo University,  
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Inferring from the above therefore dance as a performative genre of art should be able to make statements that will discuss societal issues. This confirms the notion that every work of art reflects and represents to a greater or lesser degree the society that produces it in essential aesthetic quality. To this extent, most of the dances emanating from contemporary Nigerian society reflect and represent to a greater degree the decay that characterizes Nigerian society. The political and socio-economic problems that bedevil Nigeria are what feeds the country's contemporary dance; quite several Nigerian dances have treated such issues. In most cases, it is presented through satire, parody, and metaphor in these dances.

This, therefore, follows that dance can engender social and political change, conversely, that change in dance can be identified, analyzed, and understood in terms of social currents and societal conditions. This is the reason why dance production in any society is sometimes based on the life and practical issues bordering the citizenry within a socio-political context. Hence, dance is interpreted differently by different people with different socio-political and economic backgrounds. Thus, dance as an art form transcends the ecstasy of mere entertainment that recycles within the ambiances of art-for-art's-sake. Dance in recent times has taken a new role within the fast-growing features of politics and globalization. In Nigeria dance has assumed the lead character in socio-political commentaries because of its popularity thus becoming a popular culture capable of sustaining patterns of ideology and hegemony. Dance is thus an integral part of theatre which has existed throughout man's history. Almost every nation uses dance to express different emotions. Thus, dances are aimed at expressing something functionally. In this position, Oscar Brockett says that

...Dance may convey themes and ideas. By providing the proper mood, by characterizing agents, by condensing action or elaborating upon emotion or attitudes, it creates emphasis that points up relationships and patterns of meaning (1979: 664).

The quotation above expresses the symbiotic relationship between dance and society. It, therefore, touches on the use of dance for societal issues by reflecting on themes and ideas.

In the same vein, Dennis Teghtegh asserts that

The fact that through dance, ideas are conveyed, and themes are also suggested which portends that, apart from the entertainment value dance possesses, it can be used for something as serious as National Integration....Body movement, also referred to as non-verbal cues are quite potent depending on the situation they are exhibited at. (1997:155).

It is thus not an overstatement to emphasize the potency of the language of dance within the context of social change. Acholonu in the same direction posits that

The art of dancing is the art of moving the body rhythmically, usually to music to express an emotion or ideas, to narrate a story or simply to take delight in the movement itself. ... Dance is communicative, it can tell a story sometimes better, more effectively, and powerfully than words (1996:51).

These messages and ideas that are transmitted through itinerant dances as non-verbal communications serve not only to entertain but to influence political attitudes and behavior. However, on the efficacy of non-verbal cues, Mehrabian (1981) [22] confirms in his research findings that, "93 percent of meaning in a conversation is conveyed non-verbally; 38 percent through the voice and 55 percent through the face" (103). Thus, one obvious thing to note about dance is that it speaks for itself. A good dance will thus automatically appeal to someone who is not from the background such dance is coming from because of the universal language of dance.

According to Martin, J. (1983) [19, 20] "Dance can be seen to be a basic, fundamental element of man's behavior and one which is motivated by impulses and intuitions to express that which lies inside and is too deep for words" (8). This presupposes that dance is a means to express with our bodies and to communicate our inner selves to others. As such, all cultures have dance and the universal urge to dance can be seen throughout the ages as expressed by all human beings. Primitive man probably first used dance to bridge the gap between himself and his Creator and to communicate praise, thankfulness or supplications. Dance has always played a part in human social interactions and celebrations. However, dance goes beyond being only an activity that is important to share at social functions. Curt Sachs (1937) [30], a notable dance historian, makes this profound statement about dance as one of the foundational arts of humanity:

... Dance is the mother of the arts. Music and poetry exist in time, painting and architecture in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still the same things. Rhythmical patterns of movement, the plastic sense of space, the vivid representation of a world seen and imagined-these things man creates in his own body in the dance before he uses substance and stone and word give expression to his inner experiences (3).

This means that dance only requires the body and its inhabitant's desire to express something, for dance is the art of gesture and movement. It transforms images, ideas, and feelings into patterns and narratives that are personally and socially significant. Dance organizes physical energy within time and space. Dance is a natural means of communication and expression, integrating movement, feeling, and intellect. Dance is thus placed within the Fine Arts strand. After all, dance is an art form. Dance is different from sports: although both are useful physical pastimes and promote physical health, sports do not address moving the body as a means of expression. But what is an expression and why is it important for us to experience it? It could be said that expression is getting out your inner emotions, and according to David Best: "Artistic expression is thought to be a release of feelings through the artist's particular medium, a sort of emotional catharsis" (1989:3). Are people who know how to express themselves artistically, and particularly physically in dance, healthier mentally, physically, and, dare we say, spiritually? Are they made happier and more complete by exploring their inner landscape and sharing it with others? It would seem that people who know how to express themselves physically and express their emotions are people

who are more empathetic and in touch with others and are thus better communicators, as well as being better able to appreciate all aesthetic qualities inherent in the world.

### The political reading of Swange dance

Swange, a dance of the Tiv people from central Nigeria is considered to be social and political, performed by both male and female in social and political event for edification and entertainment. In most cases it is used as a tool for social and political consciousness. It is a dance that has evolved and transformed into various stages of dance movements and patterns reflecting the socio-political context that it is intended to depict. Swange dance is not an exception where many civic areas within Nigeria, dance styles have evolved and is evolving because of the prevailing socio-political unfolding. In understanding the politics of Swange dance and other dances in Nigeria, it is pertinent therefore to compare the Nigerian socio-political and economic terrain at the time of emerging dances during Buhari/ Idiagbon austerity measure, Babangida /Abacha eras of SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme), the Goodluck Economic meltdown, and presently the Recession period. There are clear pieces of evidence from dance movements crafted by most of these popular Nigerian musicians. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in his reaction to this negative economic development during the military evolved.

In conceptualizing Tiv dances, Tor Iorapuu (2008) postulates that the evidence that dance (amar) is an integral part of Tiv social order can be found in numerous taxonomy of dances among the Tiv. Some of the popular dances are *Gberchul, Takeru, Ange, Dasenda, Igough, anchanakupa, Manyi, Ihinga, tsough, Jiga, kwaza, Girinya, Gbangi* and *Swange* which are popularly known in Nigeria. The categorization includes political, social, religious and vocation al dances (Hagher, 1987). For Tor Iorapuu (2008),

Each dance has a symbolic story behind it. Dansenda for instance is a dance that was created to mimic and lampoon the colonial police and their Nigerian allies....Igyough dance reminds every Tiv generation of the period of economic depression in the 1930s that brought about social crisis caused by poverty resulting to mass death, kwashiorkor among illness, and hunger.

In Tiv historical events, social-cultural political and economic issues usually provide abundant materials for creative dancing. Charles Keil (1979) <sup>[16]</sup> reveals that one of the reasons for this is the need for historical re-enactment:

In Tiv, dance provides historical documentation as well as historical trends. For example, the kuza dance represents the forceful conscription of Tiv youth to provide cheap labor at the Tin industry in Jos. Ingyough dance is a re-enactment of epidemics that swept across Tivland and left many with several bodily distortions and maimed limbs. Dasenda is portraying police brutality of the colonial era (35).

Using the Swange dance of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria as a template, Saint Gbilekaa (1993) <sup>[9]</sup> commenting on the Tiv music and dance as forms of communication posits that "music and dance in Tiv society are used to express various emotions" (56). This explains that there are music and dances for funeral occasions, marriage ceremonies, installations, ritual processes, political events, and the different festivals in Tiv society. Within the context of politics, Gbilekaa (1993) <sup>[9]</sup> pointed out the political involvement of Tiv dances in the electioneering process of the Nigerian Second Republic that

In the late seventies and early eighties...the National Party (NPN) and Nigerian People's Party (NPP) used music and dance to canvas for votes. In fact it is on record that when the former Vice president, Chief Alex Ekwueme came to Kastina-Ala town in Tivland to campaign, no speech was made much. Members of the party indulge in dancing the famous NPN DISCO '83 version. Of course, the NPP also had its own version of the DISCO '83 which parodied the NPN.

Thus, going memory lane, Swange and other dances have overtime proven to be veritable tools for political sensitization. Swange dance for instance could be interpreted within the framework of politics through a close reading of its popular songs that the composer was calling for a state creation that has been on the minds of almost every Tiv person.

Tor Gondo Aluor  
Ka ma kaa mer  
Ipav tar I nam  
Mer eren  
Ikyo here  
Tor maa paav  
Maa nam Jukun  
Tor maa paav  
Maa nam Jukun,

### English

King Gondo Aluor  
When I say  
They should create another state for me  
So that I will prove tough  
King divide the state  
So that I will rule over Jukun  
King divide  
And give me Jukun

Like the above Swange dance song, is a representation of long quest of the Tiv people, that Tiv people should be divided into two states considering their numerical strength. In recent times, there was a serious crisis between the Tiv people and Jukum because the Jukum people felt the Tiv people were mere settlers and had no political and social rights as indigenes of the then Gongola State no Taraba state.



**Fig 1:** Swange dance in a political arena

However, a close reading of the above song and dance movements align with the historical records that by 1918 all the minority ethnic groups of the province, south of the Benue River such as Bassa, Idoma, Igala, Tiv, Jukun, Kuteb, Chamba etc were all regrouped under Tiv Province, which was then Munshi Province (a nick name for Tiv). The size of the population of Tiv in these areas was a source of concern for the other groups who knew the full implications of population and governance in a representative democracy where elections were based on population and voting is done mostly along ethnic lines in Nigeria. This same reason bothered the colonial government and led to the administration of some Tiv people in Wukari, others in Ogoja and Lafia. Records from the National Archives, Kaduna (ref. NAK/MAK/PROF/4377) show that in 1946, 51% of People in Wukari, 32% of those in Takum, and 33.8% of those in Donga were Tiv. At the same period only 24% of Jukun were in Wukari, 2.3% in Takum and 0.6% in Donga. In the same way, the 1963 Census shows that Tiv constituted 68.2% of the population of Lafia, which now comprises Lafia, Awe, Obi, Doma, and Keana LGAs of present Nasarawa State.

With the above vivid background, this Swange songs and dance movements at this time were therefore means of agitation for the creation of Kastina-Ala State which would have as well cover part of the Jukum as the minority ethnic group and the other large part of the Tiv land as the majority ethnic group. This establishes the fact that Swange dance is not silent or docile regarding issues of politics. The song sees Nigeria within the context of development as beginning from the state creation and political participation which, in its true meaning is synonymous with grassroots democracy. Grassroots democracy is a people/community – driven participation in elections, governance and decision making. Grassroots democracy can be seen as a tendency towards designing political processes where as much decision making authority as practical is shifted to the lowest level of organization at the local government level of administration meant for meeting peculiar grassroots need of the people. Before this period, Swange dances were used as protest theatre against Fulani/Hausa kingdom. The songs during this time some of the Swange dance and other dances during this period had lyrics that were out to react sharply against the domination of the Hausa/Fulani in the northern Nigeria with elements of Islamic religion. Thus, these Swange songs were tagged *Baja*, metaphorically meaning Muslims. As such, whether at the individual, group, or public level,

Swange gives us ways to express: our dilemmas; our political views, whether conservative or radical; our insights, however tentative; our problems, shortcomings, fears, intentions, complaints, angers, commitments. Swange dance allows us to enter difficult and dangerous territory, whether emotionally, socially or politically, by virtue of its capacity for narrative, embodiment, symbol and metaphor. Some of the ways are that Swange can be used in community organizing, community education and development, as a bridge from one community to another; as a celebration of a community's achievements, or indeed of its very existence; as social critic, reveller of contradictions through thought provoking songs and poetry. Swange can be applied to very many aspects of Nigerian political development. For example, in 1996 a Million March for 'Abacha must Stay' at the Eagle Square Abuja, they adopted a popular song into a political lyric that promoted Abacha's campaign for continuity.

Abacha nuba wan  
Or gener ngu ga  
Ka we tseer  
De hoo Nijiria  
Or gener ngu ga  
Ka we tseer  
De hoo Nijiria

#### English

Abacha number one  
There is no one  
It is you  
The whole Nigeria  
There is no one  
It is you  
The whole Nigeria

In a similar development, the song below is politically in praise of Governor Gabriel Suswan of Benue, urging him to dance for victory that nothing is wrong as far as the government of Benue state is concerned. The dance movements and song here seem to be a commentary of the governor's administration in such a way that he will be more spurred towards doing better.

A chaa amaa loo  
Suswan chaa a maa  
Se yeme...

#### English

He should dance  
Suswan dance  
Let us go...

This song below is also kudos to the re-election of Gabriel Suswan as the governor of Benue state of Nigeria in 2011. The metaphor of the song is that, even if he was re-elected through a wrong means there is no problem. This song came out when Prof. Stephen Ugba keenly contested with Suswan, the incumbent and was said to have worn if not the use of the government apparatus to rig in favour of the incumbent.

Nyoor paapa  
Tso m due...

### English

Enter paapa (an alliteration indicating a forceful entry)  
To come out...

Swange as political dance could be likened to the In the 2015 presidential election, dances in Tiv land were performed at campaign rallies of the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) and All Progressive Congress (APC). For instance, when the Benue state PDP played host to the party's presidential flag bearer, Good Luck Jonathan Swange dance and various dances were performed, of which most of the dance lyrics were politically motivating. This political commitment of Swange dance links its audience to the aspect of civic engagement which refers to the commitment of the people to participate in, and contribute to, the improvement of the community, and the nation. Swange dance espouses through this engagement many ways in which people can participate in civic, community, and political life and, by doing so, express their engaged citizenship from proactively becoming better informed to participating in public dialogue on issues, from volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy. This civic engagement may be either a measure or a means of social change, depending on the context and intent of efforts for a better national growth through Political participation which encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue and at the same time deriving from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; and the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs.

### The social interpretation

In many societies dance is an expression of social organization in that it differentiates and defines the roles of individuals, the sexes, and groups within the society. Social units, such as age groups, express their identity and cohesion in dances which are seen on occasions of social significance (Peggy Harper, 1969) <sup>[26]</sup>. This draws us to the symbiotic relationship between dance and the social order which Kur and Iwokwagh (2011) <sup>[17]</sup> pointed out that

Traditional music and dance occupy a very important place in Tiv society. As communication devices, traditional Tiv music and dance have done a great deal in the preservation and transmission of Tiv history, culture and folk love. They are extensively used in religious, social, political and economic life. Thus, they contribute immensely to the wellbeing of the Tiv people and bring about development in the Tiv society (101).

Charlse Keil (1979) <sup>[16]</sup> again acknowledges the following as the depth of dance among the Tiv people

The Tiv have gained some reputation in the wider world both as warriors and as song-and –dance-men. The soldiers fought well for the British in Burma during World War II...Tiv dance groupe have won top prizes at African arts festivals, and if anyone were to organize the diverse song -and – dance resources in

Tivland, the variety and quality of Tiv African would put multicultural "ballets" of most African nation-states in the shade (10).

More significantly, findings for this paper showed that, capitalism and socio-political crisis had caused the major shift in the moral values of the already distorted cultural norms and values in Tiv society, and that, there was also a shift taken together of standards or rules of behavior in the society. Therefore, kpingi dance is responsive to the society that produces it as affirmed by Gbilekaa:

The impact of the Nigerian Civil War was felt in all aspects of society. Therefore, if the Kpingi variant of the Swange captured sexual promiscuity and moral permissiveness, it was the general Nigerian picture that it presented and not particularly that of the Tiv. It would, therefore, be an error in judgment to conclude that the Tiv are sexually lax or that they have no moral gumption. Rather, one would argue that as a creation of the urban setting itself, Swange and the Kpingi variant for that matter, was a veritable attack on sexual excesses of the young women who indulged in prostitution (1993:47).

The finding is therefore justified considering the affirmation from Gkilekaa. To make it more explicit, one of the Kpingi dance songs best captures its attack on commercial sex or prostitution.

Apu gba yan Ashawo ve  
Kpoo kpoo kpoo  
Nomoo zahanna?  
Ashawo, ka nyi yan u er nom ga?

### Translation

The vulture is devouring a harlot corpse  
Kpoo kpoo kpoo  
Where is your husband?  
Harlot, why did you not marry?

In trying to understand the deeper meaning of the dance movement and song during the writer's interaction with some Swange dance troupe leaders and dancers, it was confirmed that the song and movements were depictions of how morally lax women and prostitutes in urban centers were indiscriminately killed while plying their trade by unknown men purported to be their customers. They are murdered and dumped on the streets where their corpses decompose beyond recognition and vultures feast on their carcass. This explains why the songs composed by Swange musicians heavily attack prostitutes (Gbilekaa 1993) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Through careful observation, it is realized that, the songs or the lyrics one will be able to locate the aesthetic experience in the content and form of Swange dance. This is because each genre of Swange is best understood through peculiar songs and music, which are treated in the subsequent chapter (47).

In this regard therefore, the dance movements of the *swang* dance were erotic in nature either danced as solo or group.



**Fig 2:** A solo Swange dancer in 1983

Thus, the popularity of Swange dance resides in the fact that it employs movements that are enveloped in satirical lyrics and several oral poetic art forms that are performed consisting of derisive movements and songs that are used to ridicule caricature or lampoon perpetrators of things that are considered evil in Tiv communities and the entire nation. Swange, the people's dance, aims to transform its audiences, and also, the music of Swange popular and otherwise - has a social structure and polity-forming capacity of its own concerning issues of national development.



**Fig 3:** A contemporary Swange dance of the Benue state council for arts and culture in a social event

The ever-growing popularity of Swange is based on its acculturation of patterns that are modern and graphic. Swange, as performed presently by the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture (BSCAC) has been transformed from its primordial stage to a more contemporary form utilizing modern dance techniques - floor patterns, balance, form and other choreographic neoteric aesthetics. This transformation follows the position of Thomas, A. Green that

Classic research studies, furthermore, demonstrate that the degree and extent of acculturation within a culture depends on and ultimately occurs at the behest of the culture that is doing the borrowing (the receptor culture), rather than the culture from which the other is borrowing (the donor culture). An individual culture's emphasis upon and mechanisms for maintaining its

cultural boundaries, the relative degree of flexibility of its varied internal structures, and the degree and functioning of its mechanisms for self-correction are all major cultural traits that directly and indirectly affect acculturation. The existing values and patterns of the receiving culture serve as a filter that controls the process of acculturation and allows the enthusiastic and wholehearted acceptance of some traits while providing for the firm rejection of others. Thus, acculturation does not proceed at an even rate in terms of all elements of culture within the same group. Research also has indicated that technology tends to be altered more readily than non-tangible elements such as beliefs or values (1997:12).

In light of this, we can state that the stronghold of this paper resides where examines the socio-political aspects of the dance understudy. In addition, swange dance in this paper could be seen as a socio-political product because, it treats severe and common socio-political issues with the admixture of entertainment and edification. The reason is not farfetched because it the dance of the people, created by the people, and appreciated and valued by the same people.

### Conclusion

In essence, the paper using Swange dance as a model illustrates the potential application of Nigerian dance as a political and social resources as well as a powerful agent in enhancing socio-political awareness. It also recognizes Nigerian dances as ways of improving social cohesion, a vehicle for team building and a mechanism to build community and political solidarity. The historical and social contexts of Swange dance suggests many themes that have persisted to the present and influence how the dances are represented today: class, politics, cultural, and economic conflict; the perceived threat to the working-class violence and lewdness; the squandering of resources; and a lack of respect for civil authorities and social hierarchies. We cannot separate our analysis of cultural identity, cultural practices, and cultural change from an analysis of power, and politics

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