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# AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION, DANCE PRACTICE AMONG THE ILAJE OF ONDO STATE, INSECURITY AND COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*A plethora of researches have been carried out on dance practice across cultures of the globe. However, the encumbrances of insecurity, COVID-19 pandemic and the monstrosity engendered by its outbreak on dance practice and audience participation in Nigeria have not been examined, hence, the justification of this paper. The paper adopted Richard Schechner's performance theory which sees a performance as representation of the inner and outer self and advocates the transplantation of drama or performances with theatrical liminality from theatre for ubiquitous enactments. The paper garnered information through oral interviews, secondary materials like textbooks, journals and cyber resources. The paper discovered that dance is a form of entertainment, ritual integration, social cohesion and exercise among the people of Nigeria. However, the paper found that insecurity and COVID-19 conundrums inhibited dance practice and audience participation. It found that dance is prophylactic, therapeutic and that it, to some extent helped to curtail drastic contagion of COVID-19. It also found that social distancing also impeded the form of dance in which body contact is needed, despite its aesthetic significance. The paper also showed how strict compliance with other COVID-19 regulations like lockdown, the use of nose masks, sanitizers and avoidance of hard surfaces also inhibited unfettered dance practices on the global space. The paper recommended daily dance practice for its therapeutic and prophylactic significance, but with strict compliance with security and COVID-19 regulations.*

**Keywords: Dance practice, COVID-19 regulations, prophylactic-therapeutic significance, performance theory, contagion.**

## Introduction

*Biripo* is the Ilaje indigenous oral/ folk-performance with dance as the nucleus of its aesthetic fabric. The name *Biripo* has been argued to have been evolved from the dance pattern of the folk-performance. *Biripo*, the name which refers to the dance in the performance. The performance itself connotes dancing in circle ("biri-biri") in Ilaje dialect of the Yoruba language. The "biri" in the name of the dance is borrowed from the rolling of the sea waves or the fluidity that characterises the flow of water which is the symbol of the littoral habitat or habitation of the people. This fluidity that characterises the nomenclature of the folk practice also finds incontrovertible expression in the performance and its aesthetic nuances. This fluidity translates to the adaptability and versatility of the form to any occasions and also the versatile nature of the people in adapting to any situation or environment where they find themselves from their earliest times of existence till the present. The name of the performance

evolved from the environmental or ecological feature of the society of origin of the practitioners and the dance.

From practical prism, the dance is done by the dancers and the performers forming a circle which is a pan-semiotic signification of the communal and ancestral bond or cord that that binds the people together and the social cohesion needed for the success and effectiveness of the performance. In *Biripo* or *Kiriji* dance, the dancers dance in close contact with one another through side-by-side embraces or arm-in-arm postures which betokens the unity of the people and the tenacity required in the dance or the entire performance. Sequel to the close body contact attributable to the dance practice, the spreading of sweat from one body to the other is not impossible. There is high frequency of the body of one dancer touching that of his/her co-dancers or peer-partner in the dance. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 contagion, its accompanying "forced" social distancing rule and other COVID-19 regulations have slammed stern restrictions and encumbrances on the people and the dance practice among the people. This is so sequel to the mandatory and regimented stay-at-home order otherwise known is lockdown, lock-up or lock-in as the case may be.

The lockdown order that characterised the first wave of the pandemic which whittled down the propensity to gather for the performance and do accordingly was thus a hydra-headed conundrum scaring people away from large gatherings and body contact which is a child of necessity in *Biripo* or *Kiriji* dance practice among the Ilaje of the littoral southern belt of Ondo State, southwestern Nigeria. The social, physical and medical implications of the outbreak of the pandemic, the attendant lockdown order, other COVID-19 regulations and their attendant vicissitudes and their overall effects on dance practice are the thematic preoccupations of this paper. Both *Kiriji*, the royal funerary rite of the Ilaje-Etikan people of Ondo State, involving crowd performance and participation, and *Biripo* the oral performance of the Ilaje which has dance as an intrinsically embedded core aesthetic feature are drastically affected by the outbreak of the pandemic. These effects and their inhibitions on the performativity of dance practice among the people is the kernel of this paper.

**Audience Participation in *Kiriji* and *Biripo* Dance Practices among the Ilaje**

In *Kiriji*, the royal funerary rite of the Ilaje-Etikan people and *Biripo*, the Ilaje oral performance which has dance as its nucleus of survival and performativity, like other oral performances around the globe, the public, designated as the audience either by deliberate design or by default, are integral and inseparable parts of the performances, either *Biripo* or *Kiriji*. They either participate directly or indirectly; consciously or unconsciously in the performances which, when detached from the sacred groves and its vaunted sacredness, "province of ritual", in Schechner's term, assumes the status of a drama in both contents and context as it also serves the purpose of entertainment. An audience is a group of people who participate either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously in a show, encounter, a performance, a work of art, literature (in which they are called "readers"), theatre, music (in which they are called "listeners"), video games (in which they are called "players") or academics or any medium (Wikipedia.org). From this opinion, the audience are not naturally or professionally parts of the performance of the drama, so to speak, but their functions are, to a predictably large extent, necessary for the success of the performances or drama. So, let us situate the people who come to the village's traditional square (as a theatre or seeing place or stage) at Ode-Etikan during the *Kiriji* either during the daily or nightly (nocturnal) proceedings, during Biripo performances or the grand finale of Kiriji rite within this threshold

of the audience. During Kiriji and dance Biripo dance performances among the Ilaje, the people who are familiar with the indigenous performances are telepathically wired and electrified to participate, in most cases, by joining in the dance steps.

Etymologically, the word "audience" derives its root from the Latin word "audienta", from the word "audire" meaning "hear" or "to hear". Pragmatically speaking, an audience may be crowd in the seats at a sporting event, or people who tune in to a specific morning radio show or even, people who enjoy watching a specific genre of movies. An audience can also be the assembled spectators or listeners at a public event such as a play, film, concert or meeting. It may also be the people giving attention to something or the entire readership of a newspaper, magazine or book. The word "audience" can also be used to refer to a group of people who watch a sport match or often large event or group of people who have come to a place to see or hear a film, performance or speech, etc. The people who see a work of a particular artist or read the work of a particular writer or a group of people who admire or support a particular person, belief, idea, etc (www.macmilliandictionary.com; www.lexico.com; www.writing.colostate.edu). For the sake of this research, I agree with the definition of audience as the large number, crowd or group of people who have come to a place to see or hear a performance or to admire a belief. At the village's traditional square otherwise known as Ogwa Olikan (Erede Oghonne Ajaloron Traditional Square, Ode-Etikan) which, for the purpose of this study, has assumed the status of and performs the functions of a theatre is now, a "seeing place" for a large number of people to see all the traditional and customary performances lined up as funerary proceedings during the *Kiriji* (royal funerary rite) of the Ilaje-Etikan people of Ondo State, Southwestern, Nigeria.

The crowd that have come to either celebrate the funerary rite or pay the last respect to the late monarch are classified as audience. Michel Muraski identifies the following three (3) categories of audience viz: Lay audience, managerial audience and expert audience. According to Muraski, the lay-audience has no special or expert knowledge in a specific field, including the rite and the ritual performances therein. They are non-initiates or non-officiants of the ritual proceedings of the rite without the residual cultural knowledge of the rite. The managerial audience may or may not have more knowledge than the lay audience about the subject, but they need knowledge to make a decision about an issue. The expert audience maybe the most demanding audience in terms of knowledge, presentation and graphics or visual. They are often "theorists" or "practitioners." They have residual knowledge of a document or performance and they partially flow along with performer during the performance. Isidore Okpewho (1992) offers a remark about the word "audience" and its status in oral performances. His remark is that

> An audience is the only content within which oral performance makes any sense. There are, of course, performance situation in which an audience is either not present or is not significant. For instance, shepherds and cattle herders often entertain themselves with flute music and songs as a way of relieving the boredom of their long hours of work; quite often no one but their animal is listening. Some forms of ritual chanting are done solely by the priest or officiant and addressed to the divinity in a shrine. These examples can hardly be seen as oral performances in the normal sense of the word, especially when there is no one to attest to the activity. An oral performance truly exists

> where there is an audience that compels the respect of the performer and puts the performance on record (whether of memory or of tape) (18).

Like the opinion of Okpewho above, the public, that is the large cheering or jeering crowd of people who have come to see the ritual performance during *Kiriji* in Etikan Kingdom constitute the pragmatic context through which the rite (now seen as a secular profane performance, uprooted from the province of ritual and sacredness; and situated or transplanted to the province of performance or entertainment, through Schechner's binoculars), makes any meaningful sense. Without them, the entire process or the performance would have assumed the status of a drab and uninteresting sacred activity devoid of sensuous pleasure. Through Okpewho's binoculars made available where he says that an oral performance truly exists, which when the performance is put on record, whether memory or of tape, the spectrum for seeing *Kiriji* as an oral performance or ritual drama is provided and established.

During the various ritual performances in *Kiriji*, the audience are present, they clap, laugh or even pass some frivolous and extraneous comments which constitute side attractions. They are the ingredients that make the performance more vivacious, compelling, and livelier and they also constitute the behavioural spectrum through which the performers in the rite examine their proficiency. So, they are not just for autotelic presence, but they also compel the attention and respect of the ritual officiants. Who are the performers? In the light of the various performances during *Kiriji*, the Abojutoro, drummers, singers and other officiants in the rite are called performers. They give life to the rite and the performances therein. Akporobaro sees the audience as a factor to reckon with when he submits that

> A vital feature of oral forms of literature is the audience. The audience is very often involved in the actualization and recreation of any given pieces of oral literature. The particular way in which this is so lies in the fact that the artist, is usually receptive to the audience – to its reactions, expectations and cultural assumptions depending upon the genre or personality of the narrator. The reactions and beliefs of the audience are woven into the story, a poem or recitation. In addition to the role which the audience exercises on the narrator, there is also its unavoidable presence. Oral literature, as a performed mode of creation demands an audience (10).

All the features or functions of the audience accentuated by Okpewho above are true of the public or crowd that are present during the performances in *Kiriji*. Unlike the write, the performers or the officiants in the performances in ***Kiriji*** and Biripo cannot escape from face to face confrontation with his audience. The significance of the unavoidable face to face interaction between the audience and the performers or officiants during performances has been perfectly captured by Ruth Finnegan thus:

> A further essential factor is the audience, which as is not the case with written forms is often directly involved in the actualisation and creation of piece of oral literature. According to convention, genre and personality, the artist may be more or less receptive to his listeners' reactions but with few exceptions, an audience of some kind is normally an essential part of the whole literary situation. There is no escape for the oral artist from face to face confrontation with his audience, and this is something which he can exploit as well as be influenced by. Sometimes, he chooses to involve his

> listeners directly, as in story-telling situation where it is common for the narrator to open with a formula which explicitly arouses his audience's attention: he also often expects them to participate actively in the narrative. The audience can be exploited in similar ways in the performance of poetry, particularly in sung lyrics where it is common practice for the poet to act as leader, singing and improvising the verse line, while the audience perform a chorus keeping up the burden of the song, sometime is the accompaniment of dancing to instrumental music. In such case, the connection between artist and audience can almost turn into an identity, the chorus directly participating in the least certain parts of the performance.

In *Kiriji* dance, the place of the audience doubling as performers is not coincidental. It is intrinsically natural. On one occasion, the Abojutoro faces the audience and announces that one of the children of the departed monarch is about pick one of the "props" or paraphernalia displayed alongside the remains of their father in the conversation exemplified below:

**Abojutoro**: – (f*acing the audience, pointing at them*) Oja, an ma ka gho iran o o! meaning towns people, watch the scene carefully. Okan nara aghan oma Oba Adeleke Adedoyin Oyetakin fe wa mu nara urun elo ghan yi iba ghan gbanre naye lo. One of the children of the late Oba Adeleke Adedoyin Oyetakin is set to come and pick one of the royal paraphernalia left behind by their father. *He (the Abojutoro beckons on one of the sons to draw closer to the platform on which the paraphernalia are displayed in manner of printing or stage direction and signals him to pick one "Prop").*

**Son**: – *He dances gleefully towards the platform, hesitate for some seconds, as if thinking of what to pick. The audience also look with keen interesting tainting him pick one prop or paraphernalia.*

**Audience**: – Oya ke! Mu un! Abi we to ma urun wo lemu? Go ahead and pick, or can't you pick?

**Abojutoro**: – (*from the back stage*) An ka gho iran! You should watch!

**Son**: – *Dances more frantically, goes to the platform and picks a cloth. He displays the cloth*

**Audience**: – Oma wo gha rin! You are a son and not a bastard.

**Abojutoro**: – *Now at the centre stage begins announcement* Oja, oma Oba Adedoyin Oyetakin ghan ma mu aso o. Eyi tuna ni pe an ma pea de ati ada ti oja rin, bi o ba se pe o mu ade abi ada, oja ra gba nowo re. Eyi tuma nipe ade ei to lo agbole yen ma.

- - - Towns people, one of the sons of Oba Adedoyin Oyetakin has picked from the props on display. If he had chosen, the royal scythe or crown. The "Oja" would have retrieved it form him because it is an abomination to do so. The crowns and the scythes belong to the kingdom and not to individual family. The punishment for doing so is that no king will ever emerge from that family.

**Audience**: – *Clapping as the drumming and singing continue, fretting to diminuendo*.

In the filmic illustration above, the audience participate in the actions and the performance. Their clapping and their side comments also form parts of the overall aesthetic value and meaning-making processes in the performance. Beyond watching as spectators, they have also assumed the role and importance of performers and judges (critics) in the way the Abojutoro faces them to make his announcements, the way the prince picks his prop and jubilantly shows it to them while acknowledging their applause as he dances to the rhythm of Olumoghonne drums and in the way they also hail him in chorus for getting it right. Turn-taking has also taken place. Abojutoro first opens the stage, followed by the Prince and the cheering audience, all acting as performers at different stages of the performance. Okpewho lends credence to the submission above when he says:

> In a truly traditional setting of an oral performance,
> It is highly usual for members of the audience to
> Watch passively and not make any sort of comment
> Whatsoever as the performer sings or narrates.

Contrary to the extract above, the audience in *Kiriji* are active as though they participated in prior rehearsals where they have been told what to say or do during the performance. Merville Herskovits (1958) posits that:

> One usage that is as common to discursive speech
> as to narrative is the interpolated explanation from
> the listener or listeners. So important is it for
> narrative tempo that in the absence of the audience,
> or where the interjection is too long delayed, the
> narrator himself pauses to exclaim "Good". While his
> pause serves stylistics ends in narration- to introduce
> a narration, as a memory aid, or to heighten suspense,
> among others_ it is but part of a traditional complex
> of patterned responses from listener, demanded by the
> canons of taste. A Dahomean views the silent European
> listener as either boorish, or incapable of participating
> adequately because of lack of feeling or understanding.

As evident in the opinion examined above, including the ones postulated by the so called Eurocentric theorists like Finnegan and Herskovits, the public who constitute the audience in *Kiriji,* the royal funerary rite of the Ilaje-Etikan people and *Biripo* among the entire Ilaje people of Ondo State, southwestern Nigeria unconsciously perform the functions of both unsolicited critics, actors and even the chorus as we have in most classical and western dramas. Their roles are utilitarian, integral and indispensable to the over-all success of the performances.

**Dance Practice among the People of Ilaje**

Like other indigenous performances or modern theatre, drama, dance, comic relief are indispensable elements in *Kiriji*. This is one of the reasons I tend to situate *Kiriji* within the

ambits of traditional or indigenous drama. Ajimisan (2016) sees dance as "the conscious and calculated body movement or foot-steps to the accompaniment of a specific sound and rhythm." The reflection of cultural patterns of a people is found in dance (Emoruwa, (2005). Dance and dancing among the people of Ilaje is a reflection of the "inner self" of the dancer. This reflection of the inner self is further widened and envisioned through several facial expressions and covert expressions of joy and happiness. The affirmation of the expression of the dancer's inner self is also found in Opoku (1968) in his submission that

> We, the people accept the dancer's special roles as the centre of our Life- in his subtle flexions of the hands and figure, our prayer; in his thrusting of arms- our thanksgiving, his stamp and pause…Thus, he dances, not alone but with us and we with him. We are not spectators, but co-creators and participants in the drama of the African way of life.

Dance, according to this opinion is not only magical but also symbolic because of its capability to reflect the using aspiration and disposition of the people through body movement. The position of Ajulekun (2014) is akin to this when he posits that "dance is a reflection of the cultural heritage of a people." Omosule (2006) further suggests that "its function as an expression of social organisation, safeguards the traditionally established social and political hierarchy and equally emphasised the standard of behavior and instruct moral within society." Dance and dancing are tied to human psychological and emotional state of being and it is a potent tool of social mobilisation, self-expression, mobilisation, socialisation among the folk where folk dance is practised. Dance is not just a display of kinetic motion but also a corollary of the inner sensation expressed only through it (dance) and smiles or facial expression Ajimisan (2016). Emoruwa (2005) is of the opinion that "dance serves a vital function in every human society as it helps to achieve social cohesion, or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of communion with one another" (5). This thus, further situates dance within the social milieu. However, dance is also a religio-spiritual affair, with therapeutic and prophylactic significance. In some cultures, it is believed that people are launched into the realm of the spirit through dance. In this sense, it may also be of ritual significance. Ajulekun (2018) observes that

> Dance is a universal language of movement that conveys meaning and evoke emotions in the participants. It is primarily a non-verbal mode of communication that can express life experiences, observation and reflections. In another sense, dance is a physical activity widely used in a variety of settings with people who have social, emotional, cognitive or physical concerns. In other words, dance is not just an ordinary or uncoordinated act, it is an organised act aimed at influencing the people socially, mentally, physically and even spiritually (65).

This opinion further buttresses our earlier submission that dance transcends the physical realm alone. It is not just a tool for social cohesion but also a tool of spiritual cohesion and integration. It also serves ritual purpose since it is believed that ritual is the kernel or nucleus of every "spiRITUAL" communion or activities. To Bridget Webster, "arts and culture are cornerstones for a healthy society and dance is an elemental part of that fabric". This is so because dance is an integral part of both arts and culture. Webster goes further to add that

> Dancing is a natural feeling, it makes you feel stronger, happier and is hugely important for our development as adults. It improves communication skills and has only positive benefits in every aspect of our lives…. Dance is not just an important and fundamental component of the performing arts, it is a core ingredient for happy, healthy citizens.

Dance has also, according to Webster here, been narrowed down to physical exercise and fitness which engender healthy and happy living. Dancing can, besides serving as the tool of social integration, also serve as a tool of human communication of desires and education, since it involves the propagation and promotion of the people's culture and heritages with the intention of attracting tourists and regularly feature in the itineraries of tour operators. Dance, though very complex, may be described simply as ordered bodily movements, usually performed to music. Apart from its physical aspect, the rhythmic movements, steps and gestures of dance often expire as a sentiment or mood or illustrate a specific event or daily act, such as religious dances and those representing hunting, warfare and sexual activity (Luiz Santoz, on ich.unesco.org. retrieved February 17,2021).

Dancing, from this context, can also serve as a non-verbal expression of the dancer's immediate disposition or attitude such as sexual activity. Dance is also a tool of identity and also brings about sexual attraction and the expression of the dancer's mood or sentiment. It can also be used for the reinforcement of morality, as a way of bringing biblical stories to life, (Diana Dart Harris "*Origin of Musical Theatre Dance*" an excerpt from *Origin of Musical Theatre Dance* with Web Resource, Us.humankinetics.com. retrieved February 17,2021). This observation about drama being used for telling a story has also been substantiated by the opinion made available on Wikipedia. Dance often tells a story, perhaps using mime, costume and scenery, or else it may simply interpret the musical accompaniment, which is often specially composed (Dance,en.m.wikipedia.org. retrieved February 17, 2021). Dance is a performing art form consisting of purposively selected sequences of human movement. This movement has aesthetic and symbolic value, and is acknowledged as dance by performers and observers within a particular culture (en.m.wikipedia.org) retrieved February 17,2021). Dance has symbolic codification and this has been summed up by Nketia, J.H.K. (1965) when he submits that

> Traditional dances give scope for conveying thoughts or matters of persona or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions. Through dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility or co-operation held by others towards them. They may show deference to their superiors, gratitude to their benefactors, their own estimation of themselves in the presence of their rivals, servants, subjects and others through their choice of appropriate symbolic gestures.

Dance is the behavioural denotation of the person's inner being, essence and the expression of self through gestural movement or body manipulations. It as well shows the devotion or symbolic signification of the dancer's piety towards the forces believed to be benevolent to her or him. It is also a form of entertainment. Ajulekun (2018) is of the conviction that beyond entertainment or exercise, dance is also a means of alternative dispute resolution among the Ilaje-Etikan people when he postulates that during the performance, "some people who might have been having some differences would be deliberately called on to involve in the dance

duel and embrace each other at the end of the dance as a way of settling every difference between them" (68).







***Pictures illustrating audience presence and Biripo/Kiriji dance practice among the people of Ilaje-Etikan***

**Insecurity: The Nigerian Reality**

Insecurity is one of the staple social threat to the 21st century world and Nigeria, by specificity. Starting from the First World War to other regional insurgencies, the world and the denizens have come under one form of insecurity or the other. Insecurity is a state of being unguarded, sustained or unprotected from what can result to loss of life, property or inner peace. It was first used in the Medieval Latin Lexicon in 1649. The Latin root of the word is in+secures" which means a state of being open to attacks, dangers, harm and threat. Security experts have attributed the causes of insecurity in Nigeria to leadership/power tussle, unemployment, porous borders, proliferations of weapons among local or ethnic militias, ethno-religious conflicts, weak security architecture, wrong perception between the public and government, absence of institutional capacity which culminates into failure of governance and desperation on the parts of Politicians and power brokers which result to empowerment of thugs, hooligans and touts for political gains. Nigerians has experienced different forms of insecurity ranging from political thuggery, banditry, religious fanaticism, herdsmen's invasions of farm lands and terrorism. The numerous activities of the Fulani herders, Boko Haram insurgents, ISWAP etc are instances of insecurity in Nigeria. Insecurity thus connotes a state of lack of safety or protection (www.merriamwebster.com).

**Therapeutic and Prophylactic Significance of Dance among the Ilaje of Ondo State**

During an interview with Imomotimi Armstrong on *Awugiri* dance of the Kaiama-Ijaw of Bayelsa State, he claims that "*Awugiri* is an enemy of rheumatoid arthritis." This claim does not only uphold the belief in the curative power of dance as anti-arthritic, but also its preventive or prophylactic significance. Dance helps to exercise the body joints and the muscles. The waist, the knee joints, the hip bones and the ankle bones or muscles flex themselves easily during dances. Dance being a form of exercise also helps relax the pectoral muscles, lower abdominal muscles and the intercostal muscles or the body nerves. What Armstrong says of *Awugiri* of the Kaima-Ijaw of Bayelsa is true of *Biripo* of the Ilaje of Ondo State. The two dance forms are akin to each to each other in body postures, forceful and intense joints and muscles flexion. Like *Awugiri*, *Biripo* is a dance practice involving kinetic activity with healing or preventive significance.

Ogundeji (2022) argues that sequel to the acrobatic or callisthenic nature of *Biripo* dance, a lot of energy is exerted, which results in profuse sweating, which in turn flushes out the ailments in the body and allows for free flow of blood through the veins and capillaries. It also promotes mental health and alertness as the nerves that have nexus with the brain and the heart undergo renewal and transformative processes through the kinesis involved. Adetunbo Okun-omo and Ademibo Ajimisan, during oral interviews, agree that during *Biripo* dance, harmful or toxic substances that could have remained in the body or blood stream and caused health hazards are purged with the sweat that comes out of the body. Constant dance practice is thus recommended as prophylactic panacea to attacks of rheumatism, arthritis and cardiovascular related diseases. Osih 2022 and Nkane (2022) jointly agree with this opinion with regard to the Ogoni waist dance which they claim is anti-ageing of the internal organs and the physical body, which promotes and enhances total rejuvenation and revitalisation of worn-out tissues in the body. Even, COVID-19 cannot survive the throes of a body that is always charged as a result of quotidian dancing. COVID-19 flees at the sight and taste of intense exercise which serious dance practice engenders as proven by the professional recommendation of exercise for victims of COVID-19 during the peak of the infection all over

the world. Thus, the fear of exercise becomes the beginning of wisdom and gradual flight of COVID-19 out of the body of dancers like the metaphorical stranger that will be skunked out its hiding place in the book of Psalms 18:48 which says the strangers shall fade away, and be afraid out of their close places".

**COVID-19: Through Pragmatic Binoculars**

Corona Virus Disease which broke out in the third quarter of the year 2019 was named after the year of its outbreak. The disease is bio-scientifically and epidemiologically confirmed to be caused by ultra-microscopic microbes or genomes of the virus pathogens which survive and spread through the transfer of body fluid such as blood, sweat, saliva, sperm, semen, breast milk from breast-feeding mother to her baby, vaginal fluid during coitus or child delivery and body contact either during dance practices as it is the core of attention in this paper, exercise, sports, sexual intercourse, blood transfusion, ritual observances, breast-feeding, church gatherings, cluster travelling, cluster trading in the local market square or global markets etc. According to africacdc.org, Coronavirus Disease 2019 also known as COVID-19 is a communicable respiratory disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus that causes illness in humans.

Scientists and epidemiologists have continued to learn about the disease, and asserted that the virus emanated from animals or infected human agents who were infected by animal carriers of the disease who eventually transmitted or continue to transmit it in chain or cycle through any of the human activities stated above. The disease spreads from one human agent to the other through infected air droplets projected during sneezing or coughing. Besides, the transmission is also wrought through human contact with hands or surfaces that carry the virus touch the eyes, nose, or mouth. Cennimo (2022) avers that "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as illness caused by a novel coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV) which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases". Cennimo goes further to state that the outbreak of the virus "was initially reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) on December 31, 2019. The pathogenesis of the virus and its spread have been traced to Wuhan City in the Chinese Province of Hubei, where the Chinese were mythically believed to have contacted the virus by eating every form of unholy creatures, mating with and consumption of unholy animals and creatures such as bats, monkeys, tarantulas, cockroaches, lizards, geckoes, shrews and other hosts, mythically believed to be primordial carriers of the virus.

On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared it a global pandemic, the first of such characterization since the declaration of H1N1 influenza a pandemic in the year 2009. The illness believed or proven to have been caused by SARS-CoV-2 was termed COVID-19 by the WHO, the acronym derived from Coronavirus Disease 2019. The name was chosen for the avoidance of stigmatization of the origin of the virus in terms of populations, geography, or animal association. On February 11, 2020, the Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses issued a statement announcing an official designation for novel virus: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS- CoV-2). McIntosh (2022) claims that Coronaviruses are important human and animal pathogens. It is a disease that broke out at the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus identified as the cause of a cluster of

pneumonia cased traceable to the Chinese city of Wuhan. The rapidity of its spread transcended China and it eventually became global pandemic.

From the point of view of virology, coronaviruses have been designated as pandemics enveloped positive-stranded RNA viruses. Full-genome sequencing and phylogenic analysis indicating that coronaviruses that cause COVID-19 is a beta-coronavirus in the same sub-genius as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus as well as several bat coronaviruses, but in a different clade. Variants of COVID-19 include Delta Variant, Omicron, Alpha (B.1.1.7. lineage). Epidemiologically, the scourge has spread from its province of origin across geographical borderlines, to other continents of the world, thereby escalating into millions of deaths and over 300 million confirmed cases in the global space. Epidemiologists have identified the following control measures such as regular hand washing, wearing of nose or face masks, covid-19 vaccinations, covering of the mouth while coughing, staying at home and constant interactions with health facilities, among other things, to curb and curtail the spread of the contagion.

**When Body Began to Avoid Body: The Conundrums of Observance of COVID-19 Regulations, Audience Participation, Insecurity and Dance Practice in COVID-19 Nigeria**

As pointed out in the introduction above, during the early period of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria and supposedly across the globe, several regulations were rolled out as preventive measures against the spread of the contagion. These regulations ranged from total lockdown, partial lockdown, as described by Ajimisan (2021), social distancing, hand-washing habits, mouth-covering while sneezing or coughing, avoidance of surfaces and mandatory use of nose/face masks and helmet ubiquitously and during all activities. Medically, these health/hygienic practices or bio-medical regulations have their health benefits to humankind and they perform preventive or inhibitory functions against the spread of the COVID-19 scourge. Social distancing is the habit of avoiding body contacts while in the house or crowded gathering. Contrary to the Yoruba adage that says "ara ki i sa fun ara" which means body does not avoid body becomes seemingly invalid, as husbands and wives, after plying their daily activities became scared to have sexual intercourses, deeply wet kisses or warm embrace on returning home. Nursing mothers were also almost scared of breastfeeding their babies sequel to the monstrosity of the scourge. Was body not avoiding body?

Social distancing helps to prevent body contact, which can snowball into the spread of infected body fluid among parties or members of a group. This health practice or COVID-19 regulation practically paralysed audience participations in dance practices across the globe since dance is an energy-sapping and sweat-inducing socio-human and anthropocentric activity. Sequel to this reality, some dance practices requiring crowd and larger audience participations, especially the *Biripo* and *Kiriji* dance practices of the Ilaje people, in which dancers dance together, holding hands, holding each other's waists of flexing shoulders on one another, which in turn permits sweats to exchange body are practically inconceivable and impracticable. Body began to avoid body, to avoid contacting COVID-19. This is one of the encumbrances of the scourge on both dance practice, dancers who earn their living through the activity, the audience who catch their fun through the practice or are unsolicited performers and entertainment industry in general both economically and socially.

Insecurity and total lockdown were also some of the hindrances to dance performances or practices across the globe as the scary scourge imposed stay-at-home-and-be-safe order on the peoples of the world. Insecurity also poses traumatic threat to dance practice and audience participation across the globe both now and then. Let us pause and take clue from ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Can the Russians and the Ukrainians go to the balls to dance or put up any customary performance involving dance? Only the people affected can answer the question better. Going by global best practices, safety is the most important of all basic necessities. Safety first! It is a person who is healthy, free of infection and feels secured that can go out and dance or watch dances. The strict compliance with or observances of other COVID-19 regulations such as the "imposed" use of nose/face masks and avoidance of hard surfaces believed to be agents of spread of the pandemic also posed tremendous threats and set-backs to dance practices on the global space. How does one dance without fear on the glee ground when s/he has to avoid hard surfaces?

**Conclusion**

Dance is a major aesthetic nuance and socio-religious practice across cultures of the globe. It is a practice believed to enhance and engender socio-spiritual cohesion among the people where a specific dance form is a norm and a vogue or popular culture. Among the Ilaje of the southwestern Nigeria, *Biripo* and *Kiriji* dance performances are the cultural dance practices that unite them and bind them to their culture like a the umbilical cord. Among the Kaiama people of the present day Bayelsa State, the Nonwa of the present day Ogoni-land, Rivers State of south-southern Nigeria, *Awugiri* and waist dance practices are their symbols of identity and unity. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity in Nigeria and the world in its entirety constituted and still constitutes conundrums to these societal and "spiRITUAL" these norms. Who goes to dance when you hear of the booming of the cannons and the attendant looming disasters on the dance-floor? Who goes to dance without anxiety of COVID-19 and insecurity? Who does that? This paper, in view of its awareness of the insecure status of Nigeria and the world in the face of seemingly intractable security challenges and COVID-19 pandemic, recommends the perpetuation of dance practice but in strict compliance with COVID-19 regulations and other safety precautions, for safety reasons.

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