

Repositioning Nigerian Music and Dance for Cultural Diplomacy: Lessons from *Swange* Music and Dance in Nigeria

by

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Abstract

The emphasis of this paper is on *Swange* dance of the Tiv people in Nigeria which has been repositioned, popularized and performed by the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture in and outside Africa. Using pragmatic and functionalist approaches, the paper outlines the contributions of repositioned *Swange* music and dance to national and international cultural diplomacy which is seen as a soft power approach to: resolve conflicts, settle disputes, build sustainable relationships between countries, strengthen economic ties, and to respect for human rights. Hence it is argued that apart from treaties and other political actions that constitute diplomacy, cultural diplomacy through the use of music and dance is a good way to foster cultural understanding as a basis for dialogue and trust.

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is practiced alongside other generic forms, and it has grown to become a global industry with legal foundations and a comprehensive set of conventions epitomized by the Vienna Conventions on consular and diplomatic relations. Many governments enshrined the approach to cultural diplomacy within a foreign policy document and appoint a Foreign Minister to lead its implementation. In most cases, there are cultural attaches to foreign embassies who are saddled with the responsibility of coordinating and promoting cultural indices of respective home countries in countries of their resident. These cultural indices include: a people's beliefs, rules of behavior, language, rituals, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems. Since no human society exists in complete isolation, different societies also exchange and share culture, providing many benefits for all engaged societies.

A recourse to history shows that cultural exchange and diplomacy are considered the foundations on which most developed countries find their initial inspiration. According to Galen M. Fisher:

Americans were fascinated with Japanese art. In the early years of Japan's opening to the West, art curator Ernest Fenollosa from Harvard University became entranced by Japanese art and took a teaching job at Tokyo Imperial University. Fenollosa worked for the preservation of Japan's traditional art and became curator of Imperial Art Museum of Japan. Like many Western art aficionados of the time, Fenollosa also took a large number of Japanese art objects out of Japan back to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts where he became curator of Oriental art. In addition, American women became very interested in art trinkets from Japan and they sold well in the United States in the interwar years (1994, 122– 23).

Considering Galen's chronicle as it relates to the potency of cultural diplomacy, it is also believed that as "Oriental" as Japan seemed, the Japanese had escaped. Japan had modernized itself on the Western model and looked not at all like the Orient, but more like the modern West. "But Japan has proved itself possessed in high degree of the very qualities which we have regarded as peculiarly belonging to the Occident." (Kiyo Sue Inui, 150). This lack of interest in the transfer of culture made in the USA" across the Atlantic is surprising, because postwar Europe would not be the same without the ubiquitous presence of America—in television, movie houses and music clubs, fast food and matters of lifestyle, popular literature and musicals, education and the style of political campaigning.

Alexander Stephan has it that:

In a sharp reversal of its withdrawal from Europe after 1918, after the end of World War II Washington employed all available tools of public and cultural diplomacy to influence the hearts and minds of Europeans. Simultaneously, and with much more success, American popular culture, which had already established firm footholds in the Old World during the Golden Twenties, invaded Europe with new intensity in the second half of the twentieth century, first by winning over the young and then by gradually eroding the resistance put up by elites eager to protect traditional high culture. The anti-Americanism that had been expressed in different forms and in varying intensity since the 1940s in most European countries by the political right and left alike seemed to have largely vanished by 1990 (2006,1).

To buttress this further, German conservatives today still complain that German postwar culture was overwhelmed by outside forces (Hans Egon Holthusen 1973, 47). They claim that Anglo-Saxon mercantilism, with its utilitarian model of civilization, has triumphed over German values and traditions, while washing machines, refrigerators, and electric shavers have usurped the place of humanism, intellect, and insight (Erich von Kahler 1999, 91) Technology, the big cities, and tourism are described, without mincing words, as “extermination camps for the individual.” (Erich Kuby 1999, 93).

Although, such cultural diplomacies and exchanges may also have drawbacks, the advantages of such practices are overwhelming with this global policy, the United Nations has encouraged cultural exchange as a means of fostering goodwill between countries by way of cultural touring which includes folk troupes. Hence, national, state, and local tourist agencies have gone beyond ambassadorship and have discovered the value of dance and music troupes so that visitors can be entertained and introduced to some local culture, and also support the economy in regards to national development.

Following these kinds of global developments on cultural adaptation and transfer, Nigeria has a cultural policy that is closely linked to an important aspect of foreign policy operated within the framework of its strong cultural foundation. The experience of performing some Nigerian dances beyond the shores of Nigeria or Africa as a region is quite interesting for Nigerians staying abroad and others. This is affirmed based on several occasions when foreign scholars and students of dance are visiting the Department of Dramatic Arts at Obafemi Awolowo University at Ile-Ife researching various kinds of Nigerian dances with seriousness. This kind of development involving shows that Nigerian dance can be marketed for cultural diplomacy with attendant international dividends.

However, Nigeria is lagging behind in the area of policy implementation that would support the global marketing of the various dances for cultural diplomacy. This negative attitude towards indigenous dances by policy makers informs the problem which this paper is set to address. Using *Swange* dance as a template, the paper attempts to outline the justification of Nigerian dances to cultural diplomacy which is a strong potent alternative to other means of diplomatic ties.

***Swange* Music and Dance in Cultural Diplomacy**

Swange, a popular Tiv music and dance in Nigeria has gone through several repositioning in response to the purview of Tiv socio-economic and political changes (the Tiv is an ethno-linguistic group of approximately thirteen million two hundred thousand based in Nigeria and Cameroon). To be precise, the modifications began from *Gbangi* to *Swange*, *Swange* to *Kpingi*, *Kpingi* to *Ngigh-Ngigh*, and, recently *Baka* (*Baka* is currently used at night clubs while *Swange* is been repositioned and maintained by the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture, Makurdi). This makes the origin of *Swange* dance obscure because of its changing and transitional nature.

However, Gbilekaa postulates that:

Swange music and dance started as Gbangi in 1940s in Makurdi. By 1950s, it had spread to Gboko. At the time its chief exponent was Yanmoel Yashi. It was a dance band that was created by the exigencies of urban life, as a tool for protest which gave vent for the expression of frustration by Tiv youth who felt they were not fairly treated by society or fate (1993, 44).

However, this work is not concerned with the evolution of *Swange* dance, but a fundamental issue worth knowing about *Swange* is that it began as a folk dance, now repositioned and popularized within the precept of cultural diplomacy. In this way, the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture (BSCAC) is able to carry *Swange* dance to many countries in their quest to encourage peace and intercultural harmony (BSCAC has been doing cultural diplomacy for twenty thirty five years), and even though there are other troupes of *Swange* dance performed in Nigeria or abroad, the group has repositioned and popularized the dance wherein the dance is basically owned by the BSCAC troupe. In personal interactions with Terseer Aernyi, the present executive director of BSCAC, and Richard Tsevende, the immediate past executive director of BSCAC posits that the popularization of the dance has earned their audiences undying love and respect for Benue, and Nigeria in general.

In recognition of this, the federal and state governments have often sent the troupe to many parts of the world where it keeps performing for selected audiences, bringing back state and national honours. According to Denis Teghtegh in an oral interview:

Its reputation has widened its scope even abroad that other countries like Burkina Faso, South Africa, Guinea and other nations' cultural troupes have adopted *Swange* dance as part and parcel of their artistic forms.

Teghtegh, also emphasized the functionality of *Swange* music and dance, stating that:

Dance has been able to unite the Tiv people, even when in disagreement; the Tiv man cannot be dispassionate when he or she hears the sound of drums. In the case of *Swange* dance, nobody either Tiv or Ibo or Yoruba or Hausa, listens to its lyrics and fails to at least nod his head in appreciation. Through this dance, diverse people are often seen at state functions gyrating to its erotic dance steps. At this point, nobody remembers where they come from (2004, 157-8).

These lyrics clearly show that *Swange* dance can be viewed within the context of national integration. Elaborating on this therefore, Jenkwe concludes that:

Swange is therefore taking a new and significant cultural meaning as 'respectable' music and dance will most likely assure and added importance in the life of the Tive people as the icon of their contemporary cultural life (1998, 36).

This dance is not only popular within the Tiv social milieu, essentially, it has become a national dance, and the presidency and other federal ministries in Abuja, Nigeria [Abuja is within the FTC: federal capital territory] are constantly inviting the BSCAC to perform *Swange* dance for international visitors.

In an oral interview, Shanyo Monica, troupe manager of BSCAC unequivocally states that:

During the pre-mobile phone era in Nigeria, that is when the use of handsets were not in vogue, especially during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, the BSCAC troupe was always on the road to and fro Abuja for performances. Sometime after leaving Abuja for Makurdi after a command performance they were made to return back to Abuja from the Agan toll gate, Makurdi for a *Swange* performance for yet another set of august visitor(s).

From the above, we can see the reason why *Swange* dance is without doubt considered an international dance. If *Swange* dance is accepted and appreciated locally and globally, how can it not be used as a tool to engender cultural diplomacy for national integration and development? Advancing further on the above, it will be apt to catch up with what Teghtegh considers a good development about *Swange* dance. According to him:

Event of the recent past, such as CHOGM, COJA etc, have proven that *Swange* dance is an effective rallying point for national integration. For once the entire country was basking in the euphoria of hosting the world, the best were brought to choreograph the opening and closing ceremony and *Swange* formed the basis upon which other dances were built (2004, 160).

This was a good development that a bit of Tiv culture was let loose for others to learn as the Tiv artistes also learn from other cultures. One could also imagine that as the festivities were going on, artistes would have been able to communicate with the Benue artists and become friends. This friendship will expand beyond the present scope as an Ibo person may visit Benue to see his friend and the Tiv boy may visit Oyo to see his friend. This certainly will enhance tolerance, thus, paving ways for national development.

Again, during the 2014 Nigerian University Games Association (NUGA), hosted by Obafemi Awolowo University, the BSCAC *Swange* troupe as powered by the Federal University of Agriculture at Makurdi performed *Swange* to colour the scenario that gave the Vice Chancellor of the University of Agriculture at Makurdi to win the hosting right for the next edition of the NUGA. During the time of their performance at the event, I made an attempt to sample opinions from students and officials of the event who came from various universities to ascertain if there was need for the dance at that moment. All of the respondents commended on the *Swange* dance performance and held that the dance was a factor that stands to establish Benue state as a cultural icon. These positive responses from the various respondents suggest that, cultural material such as dance could be used to foster unity amongst the multifaceted population in Nigeria.

At the Obafemi Awolowo University Staff Club, the BSCAC *Swange* troupe performed after the closing ceremony of NUGA 2014 and most colleagues who I am a Tiv person came giving complements to the wonderful *Swange* dance they watched. According to Adewale Adedolapo:

As the troupe began the performance at the club, all the people who were at the club, were moved and unconsciously danced to the rhythm alongside with the troupe dancers without actually understanding the meaning (oral interview).

This positive reaction from people of various cultural backgrounds to *Swange* music and dance is an indication that it is not only appealing but also a potent tool for Nigerian national integration and development. Similarly, a colleague from the department of Philosophy, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Y.K. Salami said upon watching the dance in an oral interview with me that:

Swange dance like any African or Nigerian folk or popular dance is a potent tool for cultural orientation and national identity which must be harnessed for a national development. The diversity of Nigerian nation states and cultures can be used to bring out a Nigerian culture. More importantly, Nigeria can only survive when we are able to use these dances and other related cultural indices that reflect the cultural nationalities in Nigeria (oral interview)

At the National Conference and Annual General Meeting held at Benue State University at Makurdi in 2013, the same BSCAC troupe performed for the conferees at the cocktail party and, all present expressed satisfaction for the wonderful *Swange* dance performance, and another colleague in the department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Bayo Afolabi who was in attendance concluded an oral interview that:

Swange dance as performed by the BSCAC was really a display of Tiv and Nigerian national identity. It is an avenue for relaxation, social commentary and above all a tool for national integration, economic and political development (oral interview).

In furtherance of the diplomatic networks of *Swange* dance, the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture has in many times performed the dance to go beyond Nigeria. Hence, *Swange* received patronage from the government, especially the then Benue-Plateau State under Governor of J.D. Gomwok wherein *Swange* dance was then featured at various Nigerian national festivals and ceremonies like Independence Day celebrations. Thus, Aliyu Akwe Doma, then Benue-Plateau State director of the Council for Arts and Culture in Jos chose the troupe and handed them to the governor for screening and final preparation for departure to perform internationally in Algeria and Canada which gave the troupe recognition above some of the traditional dances in Nigeria (Mbatyeredede, oral interview).

This kind of cultural diplomacy highlights the necessary ingredients to bring into diplomacy, linked to development. In recognition of this diplomacy, it acknowledges a new recognition, understanding, and appreciation of the various cultures that were previously comprehended with prejudices.

But now, the process of cultural diplomacy brings cultural equity/democracy to a set of related commitments that involve: protecting and promoting cultural diversity, recognizing the right to culture for everyone in Nigeria and around the world; encouraging active participation in community cultural life; enabling people to participate in cultural policy decisions that affect the quality of cultural life; and assuring fair and equitable access to cultural resources and support.

This methodology of cultural diplomacy and exportation ensures that all recognize the distinct cultural dynamics of the other. Hence, such a recognition affords equal human rights on equal terms as the parties gain an understanding of the traditions, history, language and general way of life that pertinent to parts a particular culture. This does not necessarily mean that all aspects of culture must be accepted. The concept here is merely to be understood that cultural diplomacy respects the traditional communication requirement of encoder vs. decoder. *Swange* dance in this regard becomes one of the folk media that is constantly negotiating the cultural diplomacies between Nigeria and other parts of the world.

And in this communication, other countries sponsor the BSCAC troupe to perform *Swange* dance in their various countries which presupposes that while the other person, one is speaking, others should be listening. Symbolically, in dance, this means while the other party is presenting a performance, the other party watches and thinks about the intricacies. After the presentations, dialogue is opened where comparisons and analysis are made, and thus, it may bring out possible areas of cooperation between nations. Sometimes this dialogue is held with the aid of an interpreter which logically leads to cultural exchanges with the sole aim of playing a critical role in the cultural diplomacy of a government as it seeks to develop a cultural understanding between citizens of different nations.

For instance, in the United States, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State sponsors in whole or in part many exchange programs, such as the Fulbright Program and the International Visitor Leadership Program. Nigeria is doing this, but it is not yet formalized. For example, in 2008 the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture toured Mexico when Iyorwuese Hagher a Theatre Arts practitioner was the Nigeria Ambassador to Mexico which resulted in Mexico sending female choreographer Mary Carmel to visit and learn from BSCAC *Swange* dance and thus, she taught the group dances of the Chinese, Mexican, India, and Japanese for a year which actually began a diplomatic link between Nigeria and Mexico. And furthermore, cases of *Swange* dance in Nigerian diplomatic missions are enormous, hence, the Benue state, like other states in Nigeria has been actively involved in using *Swange* dance to advance the mandate of cultural diplomacy as expected of all ministries of cultures in the country.

This exercise provided a good market for the music industry world-wide. BSCAC was even test-recorded as a pre-requirement for the festival on compact disc by manufacturers of the compact disc system, which launched its presence soon after the festival. For this recording BSCAC was paid five thousand pounds. Performances were scheduled in two major places: an indoor theatre and an open air arena.

Every day, people converged at these two venues to watch performances from countries. Each session of the events, was chaired by a prominent citizen of Britain. Symposia were also organised. The press was heavily present, representing the interest of their various organisations national interests. It is, as expected, that after this festival, some of the commonwealth states that participated, maintained their contacts and cultural collaboration in many ways. Like already stated, this is a clear avenue that binds the member nations together.

Again in 1992, there was a world trade mission, an exposition of trade potentialities of the different nations, despite their political leanings. Countries from the North, South, East and West were all represented. The economy was the main focus. The fair was meant to pave way for the economy of the state. Nigeria took Benue State troupe to this event. For the BSCAC, it was quite an experience in that for the very first time, blacks from South Pacific, (Papua, New Guinea) were performing alongside with the Benue troupe. A close interaction with this blacks revealed that they were the last slaves that were on board to United States when the slave trade abolition was announced. The Slave Merchants had to find a nearby island to abandon them, thus they are a black nation in the middle of whites (Tsevede, oral interview).

Subsequently, in 2008, the Cuban government invited the Benue State troupe to visit. This was the period when Fidel Castro handed over power to his brother when he was indisposed. The Benue contingent performed at the ancient city of Cuba along with local Cuban theatre troupes. All the places visited were pre-arranged by the Cuban authorities. It was not very clear why the government had invited Nigeria, but one suspects there was a political undertone since all the venues were filled to capacity. The performances provided some kind of relaxation to the nation that was obviously tensed up, probably as a result of Fidel Castro's indisposition as was alleged.

In addition, in 2009, the BSCAC *Swange* troupe had a trip to celebrate Nigeria day in Israel. The invitation came from the Nigerian Embassy in Israel. Members of Nigerian film Industry were also invited. During the occasion, the Nollywood team talked about the Nigerian Film Industry while the Benue State Council talked about Benue people, their dances and movement. It is on record that the Benue State *Swange* dance has being the first dance that brought out the Mayo of Tel-Avil, Jerusalem to dance publicly, along with the troupe.

As earlier pointed out in one of the segments of this work, whenever there is a visitor to Benue State from the oriental countries, BSCAC trills them with the repositioned *Swange* dance steps to their surprise. It was during this visit that the Government of Benue and Mexico saw the need for the troupe to visit Mexico again. This second visit resulted into the two countries signing an agreement for the development of a wild part in Kyogen, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. After this, the troupe was again invited to Mexico for the third time to attend the Gwuanagwato International Festival, 2007. This exchange was and is still mutually beneficial to both countries. It served as a catalyst for cooperation between individuals and organizations in Mexico and Nigeria that is still vibrant.

Conclusion

Through cultural exchanges such as dance and music, nations can appreciate their differences and common interests; hence, this importance of culture has informed all diplomatic entities to incorporate cultural specialists on the list of their corps. Cultural dance performances can thus open up salient areas such as belief systems or world view which in turn explains why nationalities make decisions on which country to relate with and what the relationship should be and the extent of mutuality in the relationship which exposes countries to the cultural aesthetics of one another.

Hence, *Swange* music and dance like any folk performance is a good diplomatic instrument as it speaks volumes during performances as it conveys the message through music, movements and the attendant gestures and facial expressions. Seeing the potentials and power of dance as an export product capable of cementing relationships with other countries, it is not an over statement to conclude that *Swange* dance like most cultural dances is an exportable commodity like other solid products, but the advantage of cultural export is that it intricately communicates with the importing of community in unique cultural idioms that also entertains. And in this mix, more effort should be made by state and federal government so that folk and popular dances are promoted abroad, and placed in the visibility of foreign markets in order to attract tourist who can engage sites and events where local government can facilitate national culture for international consumption as they scrutinize, control and police public spaces where manifestations of culture are exhibited.



Swange dance troupe in Paris.



Swange dance as performed by BSCAC.



BSCAC arranging musical ensemble for *Swange* dance while an international observer watches with keen interest.

Appendix

Diplomatic Engagements of *Swange* Dances from the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture

- 1980 Northern Nigeria Exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Stuttgart, West Germany
- 1981 Music Festival in Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom.
- 1981 Indigenous People's Theatre Association Festival in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
- 1983 World Music Festival, London
- 1992 Universal Exposition, Seville, Spain.
- 1997 OAU Pan African Music Festival, Congo Brazzaville
- 1997 3rd Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST '97) in Ghana
- 1990 The Troupe performed in Libya on the invitation of that country.
- 2000 The Troupe also performed in Libya for the second time on the invitation of that country
- 2006 India
- 2006 Venezuela 2006
- 2007 Canada, Qubeque and Ottawa, Toronto, London and Niagara Falls
- 2008 Cuba: Invitation by Cuban Government

- 2008 Mexico: Invitation by Mexican Government
- 2008 South Korea: Invitation by Korean Government
- 2009 Canada: Invitation by Canadian Government
- 2009 Jerusalem: Invitation by the Israeli Government (August 20-28)
- 2010 Golf Tournament, Otukpo Golf and Country Club of Benue State vs Achimota Golf Club of Ghana.
- 2010 France, Paris
- 2010 United States of America, Atlanta (August 2010)
- 2012 Malaysia, Kota-Kinabalu
- 2012 South Korea, Yeousu
- 2014 USA

Sources: BSCAC Performing Troupe of Nigeria at Nigerian Week of Arts & Culture, Tel-Aviv, Israel (Events' Programme), 20-26 August 2009, and oral interviews.

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