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Decolonizing Tropical Environments: Awakening Nigeria's Indigenous Dance Theatre

Princewill Chukwuma Abakporo
Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1033-8200

Stanley Timeyin Ohenhen
Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5740-6448

Abstract

The projected apocalypse triggered by centuries of consistent environmental abuse has attracted multidisciplinary attention which has intensified in the last few years. Scholarship largely figures colonial mechanisms and their variables such as imperialism, industrialization and militarism as responsible for the wasting of tropical bodies in the guise of development. The focus of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to establish that colonialism and neocolonialism is at the center of ecosystem degradation in the tropics and examine concepts of development as colonial constructs to sustain polluting rights in Nigeria. Colonialism remains at the center of the toxicity and wasting of humans and the environment in Nigeria, hence the call for decolonization of environmental discourses. Secondly, foreground the need to dismantle the tropes of development, civilization, and industrialization, as colonial installations to sustain the toxicity of the tropics. Thirdly, to investigate the necessity to return to Indigenous knowledge resources in order to forge new mindsets for envisioning sustainable futures. The rich multiethnic culture of Nigeria points to the potential of Indigenous dance theatre as an Indigenous knowledge resource to provoke much-needed conversations and change towards decolonization and posthuman consciousness. Towards this future, the paper addresses the present challenges of Indigenous dance theatre as well as the modalities for engaging it for effective results in rewriting the Nigerian stanza in the colonial-enforced tragedy of the tropics.

Keywords: Indigenous dance theatre, environmental decolonization, Colonialism, Indigenous knowledge, Niger Delta tropics, toxicity and wasting

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Introducing Nigeria's Depleted Tropics

> According to a 2018 UN IPCC report, Africa is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and 10 of the countries which are predicted to be most affected by the phenomena are situated in Africa. While Africa is often used as an example of all the things wrong with the environment, not much is said about the efforts of African peoples all over the continent trying their best to change that. (Ugochukwu, 2020)

The tropics have had to endure, and are still enduring, centuries of colonial and neocolonial plundering of human, land, air, animal and sea bodies. It was with the advent of colonialism that resource exploitation (including the human resource of slaves), extraction, plantation and exportation developed. This trend has intensified with capitalism and into the current phase of neoliberalism, both of which are related to neocolonialism in which humans and nature continue to be colonized for profit without consideration for the long-term effects on the environment and communities. Today, tropical areas in Nigeria such as the oil producing, manufacturing and transporting regions of the Niger Delta and Lagos State battle severe effects of these long years of exploitation, dispossession and exclusion. As John Agbonifo of the Global Affairs and Sustainable Development Institute has argued, the destruction of the environment of the Niger Delta has historical roots in colonialism and the postcolonial government retains the multinational corporations which perpetuate the polluting of the delta in an instance of environmental violence (2002). The Africanfuturist writer, Nnedi Okorafor (2014), in her eco-speculative petrofiction novel *Lagoon,* examines the toxicity of petrochemical waste in an imaginary Lagos based upon current realities (Sarkar & Rangarajan, 2022). As Joseph Agofure Idogho states, the need for "ecological studies across disciplines has become imperative as the world faces global environmental challenges" (Idogho, 2018. p. 63).

Furthermore, the need to protect life of the air, land and seas has become the focus of various scholars, governments and organizations of the world with a view to provoking collaborative relationships between humans and their physical environment. Environmental discourse has formed part of the projected UN Sustainable Development Goals due to the nature and manner of ecological oppression by humans over time. Consequently, the subject has been approached from history, science, anthropology, agriculture, media, and the arts.

The focus of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to align with scholars like Anita Lundberg, Hanah Regis, John Agbonifo (2022), Ysabel Muñoz Martínez (2022) and others, on the fact that colonialism is at the centre of the toxicity and wasting of the tropics. We also critically read the concepts of development and sustainability as neocolonial constructs that maintain polluting rights in the tropics. Using the oil producing sites in Nigeria (the Niger-Delta region) and industrialized areas like Lagos State, the researchers maintain that colonialism remains at the centre of the toxicity and wasting of humans and the environment in Nigeria. Secondly, to foreground the need for dismantling the tropes of development, civilization, and industrialization as colonial installations to sustain the toxicity of the tropics. Thirdly, to investigate the necessity of using Indigenous knowledge to create new mindsets for planning sustainable futures in the tropical regions of the "planet that is increasingly and unevenly polluted" (Muñoz Martínez, 2022, p. 176). The spotlight of this study is cast on Indigenous Nigerian dance theatre as a potent Indigenous knowledge resource for Africans. While this study explores the potential of Indigenous dance to contribute to a decolonized environmental agenda in Nigeria, we also address the ensuing issues in the theory and praxis of Indigenous African dance, and its modalities for engagement as a decolonial art.

Colonialism, Anthropocene Discourses, and Tropical Entanglements

> The human dimension has become a dominant force in shaping the evolution of all species on earth. Through artificial selection and controlled reproduction of crops, livestock, trees, and microorganisms, through varying levels of harvest pressure and selection, through chemicals and pollution altering life histories of species, and by sculpting new habitats that blanket the planet, humans, directly and indirectly, determine the constitution of species that succeed and fail. (Jorgensen et al. 2018, p. 837)

The statement above sums up the gamut of anthropocentric debates that figure humans as the dominant force of a depleting ecosystem which numerous contemporary scholars have chosen to identify as the Anthropocene. While the start of the Anthropocene epoch is difficult to ascertain, several academics argue that its beginnings are closely tied with the exploitative age of colonialism (see DeLoughrey 2019; Yusoff, 2019). Scholars use a variety of terms to highlight its specific anthropocentric aspects. Baird Callicott (2006), sees it as 'homocentricism or human supremacism' which involves essentialization of the human to the exclusion of other non-human communities and agencies, while Val and Richard Routley (1979) prefer to use the 'human chauvinism' and Donna Haraway

(2008) employs the notion of 'speciesism' to explain the privileging of human species above non-human elements that share in the ecosystem. Some authors, such as David Kidner (2014) argue that the basis of the Anthropocene is not anthropocentrism but 'industrocentrism' with its inherent power structure of colonizing both people and nature, subjecting both to the capitalist economic system.

Whatever trajectory the concern for a depleting earth takes, the fact remains that human activity is pointed to as the root cause of what Futures Studies envisage as an impending apocalypse. Whether in the guise of speciesism, homocentrism, capitalocene (Moore, 2017), Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016), or 'technocene' (Lopez-Corona et al., 2020), the thought and practice of human-centric ideals, essentialize humans to the exclusion of our non-human collaborators in the ecosystem. Supported by Western radical relativist philosophies that espoused the notion that 'man is the measure of all things,' non-human components of the ecosystem are figured as mere objects or "means to human ends" (Callicot, 2006, p. 119).

Humanist philosophy, empowered by scriptural charges from Genesis 1:29 where God commanded man to subdue and dominate the earth, gave (Western) man permission go forth and plunder the non-human – land, sea, animals, trees, and micro-organisms. Furthermore, in denigrating non-Western humans as animals, Indigenous peoples too were plundered – their lands and their bodies. The cumulative humanist activities have seen a rise in sea levels, extinction of numerous species, dissipation of Indigenous peoples, climate crises, and the outbreak of diseases. Bill McGuire (2007), sees these effects as signs that "the earth fights back" years of oppression and exclusion. He warns that while the oceans and atmosphere are conspiring against us resulting in baking temperatures, uncontrollable wildfires, powerful tropical storms, wave surges, unprecedented floods, and ever-climbing sea levels, the crust beneath our feet seems likely to join too.

Granted that these pointers aptly capture highlights of anthropocentric discourses and realities about the wasting of the planet, we wish to reiterate that situations of toxicity and wasting in tropical landscapes are imposed by colonial and neocolonial forces. When studies about a depleting earth or Futures Studies' anticipation of the apocalypse is mentioned, there also arise the memories of centuries of plunder and waste in Africa predicated upon colonial contacts. Africans prior to colonialism were not responsible for the wasting of their land, animal, sea and air bodies. Originally, Africans, according to

Delali Dovie (2015), had systems that governed the relationship between humans and their environment; systems that acknowledged the agency of non-human collaborators.

Considering the contemporary environmental outlook in the global south, especially in Nigeria, one finds impoverished land, water and seascapes which severely threaten the survival of both human and non-human communities. The Global South is itself a construct of colonial hegemony and delineations. This global divide is more precisely the planetary region of the tropics which has experienced the full force of colonial conquest characterized by centuries of extraction, plantation and slave trade. The tropics still suffer extremes of human and environmental degradation as a legacy of colonialism and in the form of neocolonialism through extractive industries and technologies, and neoliberal economies including carbon trading, among others. This scenario is triggered by what Jason Moore (2017) refers to as the 'capitalocene' – a system of power, profit, reproduction, and oil politics. A case in point is the Oloibiri community in the Niger Delta where oil was first discovered in 1956. Samuel Ibaba (2021) reports that:

> Oloibiri is a shadow of its former self. Farming which used to be the mainstay of the community's economy has been paralyzed as farmlands have been destroyed, fishing activities grounded and aquatic life virtually castrated by many years of oil prospecting and exploration. (p. 12)

Samuel Ibaba's position aligns with that of Dulue Mbachu (2020) that the Niger Delta is one of the most polluted places on earth. Life expectancy is just 41 years as at 2022. These despoliations placed side by side with the gross lack of attention from citizens, oil companies and governments have triggered several agitations in the region. The agitations over time have taken the form of peaceful protests, violence, a clamour for secession, guerilla activities, and militancy which threaten the security of life in local communities and the nation at large.

Nigeria continues to suffer severe environmental depletion including air and water pollution, lead exposure, inadequate waste management, flooding (which has impacted sanitation), and deforestation. Environmental degradation is reflected in the declining health of the people. The highest-ranking causes of death and disability are those associated with environmental risk factors which include air pollution, especially in the form of particulate matter, ozone pollution, exposure to lead, water pollution and

sanitation. Death from environmental factors include respiratory diseases, cardiovascular disease, diarrhea and enteric infections. Maternal and neonatal deaths also result from environmental risks associated with waste and toxicity (Pona et al., 2021).

Such scenarios, which are repeated in other tropical places, provoke Ysabel Muñoz Martínez' opinion that the ultimate form of colonialism is the right to pollute. We also see links between her assessment of waste and toxicity in the Caribbean tropics and the situation in Nigeria when she submits that the neoliberal predicament has blinded governments and compelled them to "sell lands with disregard for the local communities and environment" (Muñoz Martínez, 2022, p.172).

The persistent abuse of land, sea and air bodies has attracted international attention and calls for environmental restoration. Given the threat to existence of the ecosystem and humans, there is a burgeoning environmental discourse that rethinks humancentric activities. The cumulative ideologies around this new thought have resulted in the concept of posthumanism which speaks about environmental restoration, reciprocity, and ecological equality and justice. Posthumanism in the view of Helen Kopnina (2020), advocates for deep ecology, animal rights, and ecological justice in recognizing the interrelatedness and importance of the non-human elements within the biosphere. Posthumanism is a movement that views the human element as one life form among many others in the ecosystem. The concept, according to Haraway (2008), is associated with attitudinal change in social interactions and responsibility, in a move towards the coexistence of multispecies.

It is a movement that seeks to replace human essentialism with 'eco-essentialism', in other words, it privileges the idea of the ecosystem as all life forms. Robert Pepperel (2005), and Luca Valera (2014), explain that while humanists regard humans as distinct beings in power struggles with their environment, posthumanism strives to undo this hierarchy. It rethinks the conception of human beings to include our wider cultural environment, our ecological networks, and our technological environment as not just external to the human condition but as an inherent part of what constitutes us in the first place.

Nigeria's human-environment ecosystems are deeply neocolonial and technological. In the last few decades, the rhythm of nature in the Niger Delta areas of the nation have been greatly distorted by gas flares, oil spills, erosion, and baking temperatures as

exploitation, commodification and thingification of life continues under the guise of neoliberalism. Life of many Indigenous communities is greatly impacted and there seems to be a heightened ignorance of the value and need to protect life and the environment by both the government and Nigerian citizens. This ignorance of humans and their ecosystem or lifeworld is one of the factors captured in the attempt of Ziauddin Sardar (2010),[1] to examine the salient features of a postnormal epoch: a time where everything we considered normal is crumbling right before us. The post-colonial Independence of Nigeria was anticipated to come with the reclamation and revival of the nation, but has turned out to be the reign of black colonialists (neocolonialism). The post-colonial government retained all the apparatuses of colonialism in their plunder and exploitation of life and ecosystems in Nigeria.

This situation seems to tally with Muñoz Martínez' (2022) analysis of the Caribbean tropics where those in government are ignorant of ways to remediate degraded environments or are too gullible to evolve solutions. In the case of the Nigerian tropics, the government see monetary aids as escapist routes to mask their gullibility or to leverage on the bourgeoning hunger and exclusion of the people to allow for more exploitation. The Niger-Delta agitation comes to mind again, for it foregrounds our position in this study that environmental remediation and collaborative human and species co-existence is too urgent and too large to be left in the hands of government alone. There is therefore the need to "dismantle the normalization of wasting practices through continuous demands and reckonings" (Muñoz Martínez, 2022, p. 172) by provoking a new consciousness in the ways environmental issues are perceived and engaged towards restoring life in the tropics.

Indigenous Nigerian Dance for Environmental Decolonization

In recent decades this environmental challenge has been taken up in the African arts. In drama there are the works of Ahmed Yerima (2006), Ben Binebai (2010), and Greg Mbajiorgu (2011), while in music the works of Titus Olusegun (2019)[2], and Olatunbosun

[1] Sardar (2010) talks about the postnormal times in which long held beliefs and ideologies are fast giving way. Modern times have become postnormal, marked by fast change, power realignments, upheavals, and unpredictable behaviour (chaos). He sees contradiction, complexities and chaos (which he refers to as the three C's of postnormal times) as postnormal times' drivers, forcing us to reassess our ideals of development, modernization, efficiency, and enhancing the relevance of social values, individual responsibility, and the role of creativity.

[2]Titus Olusegun is a Nigerian music scholar whose works speak predominantly on ecomusicology. Attempts to explore the potential of music in drawing attention to Indigenous knowledge for environmental sustainability have preoccupied his recent works.

Adekogbe (2016)[3] are lending to the burgeoning discourses on despoiled landscapes, sea bodies and air pollution. However, the contributions of dance are yet to be felt. As much as we agree with Geoffery Gorer (1962) that Africans "danced for everything" (p. 212), there is little or no response from Nigerian Indigenous dance-theatre scholars and practitioners that speak to the present realities of our depleting environment.

Scholarship in African dance first started as a response to validate dances as theatrical events. Subsequently, dance studies and practices have spoken to body essentialism, expressions of ritual and imported dance styles, corporeal and spatial dynamics, iconic and semiotic embodiments, and identity questions, as well as its potency to equate and interact with other forms of art. However, conscious efforts to incorporate dance within discourses of environmental justice, or to reveal the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment, have continued to beg for attention. Yet these goals are especially pertinent in contemporary times, as Pona et al. (2021) inform us, "most of the highest-ranked risk factors causing the most death and disability combined in Nigeria are environmental-related" (p. 9). Dance seems to have lost its vigor in the burgeoning environmental discourse in Nigeria.

Indigenous dance in Africa is a collective effort, as well as an engagement with the audience, who are usually members of the local community. The dances express the values and desires of the community more than that of the individual. Although dances may appear spontaneous, they are usually strictly choreographed styles passed down from one generation to the next. Improvisation is mostly limited as it places the focus on the individual over the group. Traditionally, dance in Africa occurs collectively in a community setting. For Sebastian Bakare (1997), Indigenous dance in Africa goes beyond the mood of the individual or group dancers to project communal life, ethics, and cosmic views about their world.

In villages throughout the continent, the sound and the rhythm of the drum express the mood of the people. The drum concept in African traditional dance, is the sign of life; its beat is the heartbeat of the community. The drum is believed to evoke emotions, to touch the souls of those who hear its rhythms. Therefore, in an African community, coming together in response to the beating of the drum and the ensuing dance is an opportunity to give one another a sense of belonging and solidarity. It is a time to

[3] Olatunbosun Adekogbe is another Nigerian ethnomusicologist who interrogates the intersections of music in the wake of climate and environmental realities in Nigeria.

connect with each other, to be part of that collective rhythm of the life in which young and old, rich and poor, men and women are all invited to contribute to the society.[4]

Given the incorporation of dance into African life, the potential of African traditional dance as environmental discourse is almost palpable. African traditional dance has the potential to add a loud, distinct and effective voice to the environmental discourse and to get its message to African communities, including those of the Niger Delta and Lagos regions of Nigeria. Environmental dance is particularly important in addressing the effects of the bourgeoning toxicity and wasting of the Nigerian tropics, but it can also play an important role in larger sustainable development discourses towards ensuring our ecological – human and nonhuman – health and survival. As Carl Folke et al. (2021) reflect:

> Whether humanity has the collective wisdom to navigate the Anthropocene to sustain a liveable biosphere for the people and civilizations, as well as for the rest of life with which we share the planet, is the most formidable challenge facing humanity (p. 834).

Climate change, desertification, deforestation, lead exposures, flooding, poor waste management and water pollution are among the avalanche environmental issues plaguing Nigeria, and worse still is the fact that only the government and very few citizens are aware of the need to build earth's resilience for sustainability of life. Climate justice and environmental health as burning issues have become too massive to be left in the hands of the Nigerian government alone, especially seeing the recent flooding in Lagos State as well as the states of Bayelsa, Kogi, Ibadan and parts of Imo State between 2020 and 2022, as well as oil spills and black soot in Portharcourt, Bayelsa, Imo and parts of Delta Nigeria. The fact is that life in terms of its quality, expectancy and the ecosystem is at risk; the earth is losing balance due to the overburdening of toxic anthropocentric activities. We are aware that since ancient times African dance has always touched issues of survival and existence, mutating through the ages from pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial and into neocolonialism. Depicting the human body in space and time, dance establishes a profound connection with the habits of the period in which it is created.

Human habits, aims and behaviors in the present period are largely anthropogenic and what nations like Nigeria currently suffer are the effects of decades and centuries of

[4] See https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/African_dance

environmental plunder. We are fast reaping the rewards of "slow violence" which is a term coined by Rob Nixon (2011), to refer to the gradual, almost unseen nature of the effects of environmental plunder. According to his thought, the outcome of slow violence is environmental degradation and climate change; the aftermath of colonial exploitation and wasting of life which virtually all parts of Nigeria, and Africa, witness today. This is the same with the neocolonial structural inheritance which is causing self "poisoning, dispossession and exclusion" (Ezquerro-Canete, 2016) across the tropics.

Nigeria has made some efforts to address the realities of environmental degradation reflected in several environmental policies and agencies. However, the impacts of these efforts are yet to be felt. As Abimbola Fatogun notes "the more politicians legislate, reform and amend, the less significant and effective laws seem in achieving or delivering appreciable social benefit and the more unintended and undesired consequences appear" (2022, p. 436). This accords with Jordi Serra's assessment that, "those who think that only governments can deliver, cause or achieve whatever needs to be done, are deluding themselves" (2019, p. 249). It appears that the more environmental degradation persists, the more Nigerians are unaware of the looming crises. The communication gap between lofty government policy discourses and the people is too great to bridge, and the people have experienced decades of neocolonial style governance where the leaders are influenced by capitalist and neoliberal incentives. It becomes necessary to engage narratives that will touch the myopic attitudes of our leaders whose gullibility has mortgaged the well-being of the Nigerian tropics and has made the region (people, land, sea, plants and animals) more vulnerable to complex and unwanted dependencies on colonial ideologies. Money incentives in the form of grants and aid have only further earned corporations the right to pollute the region and push us faster than we can control toward the apocalypse.

Against this background, the concept of 'development' is flawed; it aggravates the problem of environmental degradation and colonialism. The idea of development privileges anthropocentric activity that see "only humans as worthy of ethical considerations" (Callicott, 2006, p. 119). Our concept of development must be changed to start what Folke et al. (2021) read as the:

> urgent need for people, economies, societies and cultures to actively start governing nature's contributions to wellbeing and building a resilient biosphere for future generations. It is high time to reconnect development to the Earth system foundation through active stewardship

> of human actions into prosperous futures within planetary boundaries. (p. 858)

Development is humancentric and therefore, an environmentally oppressive ideology. Habitats have been lost through the pursuit of development. It is to be noted that for every developmental milestone in Nigeria, there is a poisoning, dispossession and exclusion of other environmental stakeholders, human and non-human, and consequently our future. This again, re-echoes colonial effects on the quality of life in the tropics and the need to go beyond just legislating, speculating, gullibility and ignorance, to evolving strategies that can drive acceptable practices for sustainable development from the domain of thought to the domain of feeling in the people. The same goes for words such as sustainability, civilization and industrialization. In fact, at the moment, in certain regions of the nation we have found the use of the word 'sustainability' to be derogatory, especially in oil producing regions, for example communities in Southern and Eastern Nigeria. The general quality of life (human and environmental) in these regions is so poor that one can barely see anything of land, air or water bodies to be sustained. For people in these sites, sustainable development, civilization and industrialization would mean maintaining the colonial and neocolonial ideologies of thingification and commoditization of their life for the profit of corporations and the government.

The need therefore to turn to Indigenous knowledge resources becomes paramount in order to navigate and untangle colonial constructs in the Nigerian tropics. This is where Indigenous dances of the people can serve us in these times of severe environmental degradation as they possess the potency to "communicate emotions directly and sometimes, even more powerfully than words" (Ohenhen, 2016, p.34). In this regard, Indigenous dance has the potential to help as the communities can identify with it, thereby creating a healthy and receptive outlet for the emotional engagement of people towards environmental decolonization. Dance has the potential to engage narratives of environmental colonization and oppression and push posthumanist consciousness. According to the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions (CRED) (2009), dance appeals to both the emotional and analytic processing centers of the human brain. As Folke et al. (2021) state: "our prosperity and wellbeing for present and future will require mobilization, and narratives of social transformation that connect development to stewardship of human action as part of our life-supporting biosphere" (p. 835). Such narratives can be told through dance.

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Indigenous Nigerian Dances for Environmental Decolonization

> The field of dance has largely remained unacknowledged in discourse about the preservation and cultivation of human relationships with nature. This may be due to a lack of awareness outside the field, or dance's failure to communicate the depths of its knowledge in this area. (Collard-Stokes, 2020)

Indigenous dance is yet to feature the current concerns and modalities of and about environmental colonization and oppression which is the reality of the present times, and acutely felt in the deltaic and coastal areas of Nigeria. While some African scholars will criticize Collard-Stokes' position above on the premise that African dances have always shared human-environment relationships. Her position is nevertheless relevant within the framework of this study, for the point here is not to question Indigenous dance's human-nature understanding, but rather to attest that this relationship is not being embraced to communicate the current environmental crisis. Hence, it seems that dance has not yet engaged in theory and praxis within the framework of environmental decolonization.

Dance is primarily an art form that focuses on "motion and movement as the vehicles of communication...a non-verbal medium which concerns itself not with thoughts or ideas, but with feelings, attitudes and images, relationships, shapes and form that can be directly communicated through the senses" (Turner et al., 1971, p. 3). In every era of Nigeria's existence, dance has addressed different facets of the lives of the people, adapting and blending in with new realities while having a significant impact. Chris Nwaru (2017, p. 38) submits that given the variations, roles, techniques, forms, and performance aesthetics that distinguish the various dance forms currently present in the Nigerian theatre, attempting to define the subject may prove to be challenging. Yet, this abundance also suggests that dance has great potential as a way of sharing Indigenous knowledge about environmental concerns.

However, three major factors hinder Nigerian Indigenous dance from being able to address environmental decolonization. First is the fact that the human element in dance represented by the body is viewed by posthumanist environmental scholars as the major instrument involved in the depleting of the earth. How can the dancer engage in environmental discourse when his or her art celebrates the human entity and machinery that got us here in the first place; when his or her art is couched in human body essentialism? Other artists such as the poet, dramatist, and musician can distance

themselves from their art, but the dancer is his or her dance and the dance is the product of body essentialism which is the basis for anthropocentric ideologies. Therefore, the dance(r) seems to be trapped within his or her tool (the body) and the art of dance seems unfit to lend itself to the advancement of posthumanist discourse. How then do we engage the body in issues of the environment when it is implicated in the anthropogenic factors that triggered the demise of nonhuman collaborators in the ecosystem?

Second is the inability or unwillingness of Nigerian dance performers and critics to acknowledge and analyze the impact of climate change and the need for climate justice in their works. It is worrisome that over the last decade, drama and music have substantially contributed to environmental discourse, but dance scholarship and practice seem not to have found a place in the environmental debate. This questions the ideologies on the importance of dance beyond entertainment in contemporary times as well as questioning the position provided by scholars about the potency of dance in society. According to Udoka (2005), dance has a social function in defining an ideological focus and assisting the populace in comprehending, internalizing, and interacting with their surroundings. Participants in a culture are then more likely to understand their place in relation to society – and their environment. Perhaps, in contemporary times, Nigerian dance practitioners have either become so carried away with aesthetic validations of African dance forms as theatre that they have become alien to our environmental entanglements, or they are aware, but do not know how to engage the art of dance to interact with the new environmental realities in Nigeria.

Third is the rigidity of the concept of African dance which limits the scope of the art form in contemporary times. The fact that African dance is conceived out of the cultural uniqueness of the people and that to dance is to externalize codes of cultural identity may not be sufficient to set a clear path conceptually for dance to speak to current attempts to decolonize the environment. Industrialization, consumption, deforestation, toxic air, poor water, low life expectancies, technologism and gas flaring, are the prevailing contemporary realities in the Nigerian tropics which the current conceptualization of Nigerian Indigenous dance is unable to speak to. To push this further is to ask: which culture should dance represent in a time when the ideologies that birthed the various cultural forms no longer exist? Where then are the cultural characteristics that gave rise to these various African dances in times like these when environmental, technological, economic, and social forms have made the world a complex, contradictory and chaotic place?

These are urgent questions. Yet, the reactions of Indigenous dance forms to these contemporary matters have remained in limbo because any attempt to project these new realities would be viewed as adulterations of Indigenous dance. Yet, how many Indigenous dances in Africa are still pure in contemporary times? Are the various forms of African dance surviving today not tampered with in one form or the other to meet various aesthetic and utilitarian ends? Do we now say that they are no longer Indigenous dance forms? If certain Indigenous dances such as the Ohafia War dance, Abigbo, and Ekombi can be adapted aesthetically and performatively over time, why not dance's concept and contents in line with the emerging realities, hopes and aspirations of the people? We are at a juncture in which Nigerian Indigenous dances more than ever, must be made to exude and adapt their age-old potential of "shaping man's environment and history as well as ensuring survival" (Nwaru, 2017 p. 47). In contemporary times, we especially need Indigenous dance as an Indigenous knowledge resource.

Navigating these issues is to first align with Ayodele Langley's (1973) position that people are the first creators of culture. Humans are able to give structure to their lives through culture in its broadest and most comprehensive sense. His position is an attestation to the fact that culture is orchestrated and driven by humans and can be adjusted to suit the realities of place and time as humans encounter new realities. New Indigenous dance creations can emerge to address awareness of the environmental situation to help drive policies on best sustainable practices in the different societies. Indigenous dance has the potential to steer a change towards posthumanist consciousness through awareness of improved environmental health practices and by extension, an improved quality of life.

Choreographers can also leverage on the existence of different Nigerian Indigenous dance forms to galvanize discourses that connect with environmental decolonization, and remediaton for sustainable development. Some of these dances include Abigbo, Ekmobi, Atilogwu, Egbenuoba and the Boat Regattas of the delta and riverine peoples.[5] The Abigbo dance with its stylised rhythm and music has been used in the past to regulate and highlight human behaviour and actions in relation to ideal cultural practices of the people of Mbaise in Imo state Nigeria. Issues of environmental awareness and stewardship can be infused into this dance to speak to environmental realities. Egbenuoba dance which is the Indigenous hunting dance of the Anambra people in Eastern Nigeria can be adapted to reflect the current need for animal rights welfare and

[5] On the colonial and postcolonial cultural history of Boat Regattas see Nzeda Tagowo (2005).

ecosystem restoration rather than the killing of these animals. The Boat Regattas of the Southern Region of Nigeria can be adorned with images to protect the life of the tropical water bodies. Certain Indigenous dances have been known to be remodeled and yet remained relevant in the light of the new realities of the host communities. Dances like the Ikprikpe War Dance of the Abiriba people in Abia State Nigeria, have been retouched aesthetically and conceptually since there are no more wars in these times. While it was a dance to prepare people for war and the celebration of victory by the warriors upon their return, the dance has been utilized to celebrate the life of monarchs and men who have accomplished feats in the various fields of human endeavor. These conceptual and aesthetic touches have made this dance widely accepted and popular.

Dancers need to rethink the place and potential of the dancer's body in line with the burgeoning discourse on posthumanism to be able to speak to the new environmental realities in Nigeria. This starts with shedding the body (and its components – physical, mental and emotional) of all supremacist thoughts and activity to recognize the non-human as environmental collaborators in sustaining human life and building earth's resilience. The human body itself is an ecosystem. It comprises various microbiomes that combine to shape the body as a unique ecosystem and ensure its survival. These microbiomes are the oldest forms of life on earth and their existence dates back more than 3.5 billion years (AMNH, 2016). They have been undergoing evolutionary change with humans for the last six million years and have developed intricate interactions over time. They are necessary for human health, and they require the environment of the human body to survive. Viewing the body itself as an ecosystem within an ecosystem, comprehending the interrelatedness of the body and these non-humans will help the dancers deploy their art towards the maintenance and sustenance of the ecosystem in what what Folke et al. (2021) describe as, "collaborating with the planet that is our home, and collaborate in a socially just and sustainable manner" (p. 835).

The concept of African dance should be decolonized from the colonial grip of African Scholars, for such scholarship no longer serves the complexities of the present African society. Their sweeping comments, definitions and tenets about Indigenous dance-theatre subsume all dances of the continent under one definition, or use a few dance forms they have experienced to address the whole, and this conceptualization, in turn, has affected the art. Their ideologies fit into Eugenio Barba's assessment that:

> Those who have built theatres, but not with stones and bricks, and who have then written about them, have also generated many misunderstandings. They wanted their words to be bridges between

> practice and theory, between experience and memory, between the performers and the spectators, between themselves and their heirs. But their words were not bridges: they were canoes. Canoes are slight crafts; they fight against the currents, cross the river, can land on the other bank, but one can never be sure of how their cargo will be received and used. (1995, p, 135)

As a result of colonial thinking, Indigenous dance seems not to have made any progress beyond being validated as a medium which has theatrical values. We must begin to channel academic energies towards the various dance forms that abound in Africa.

In its present state, the topic of 'African dance' as a broad ideal is rich in scholarship while its various forms like the Zulu (South Africa), Zaouli (Cote D'Ivoire), Koroso and Bori Dance (Northern Nigeria), as well as the famous Atilogwu (South eastern Nigeria), among others, are yet to be given scholarly attention. Unbundling the conceptual framework of African dance frees various forms to engage with the changes and influences on our cultural and environmental realities. Decongesting the concept of African dance breaks the rigidity of the form, and gives Indigenous dance the platform to be evaluated as a performance text wherein its relationships with the changing conditions of our social and natural environments can be interrogated. Decolonizing African dance is necessary in order to decolonize our environment. There is no concept such as 'European dance.' What exist are dance forms of western descent which are engaged separately rather than as a homogenous whole. In this case, rather than definitions of European dance, we instead see academic energy channeled to the forms such as Ballet. Rather than definitions of 'African dance', we can instead engage academic energy into the numerous Indigenous dance forms.

Conclusion: Indigenous Dances as Indigenous Knowledge

Art deteriorates or becomes stale when it fails to adjust, react, and identify with emerging realities. We must begin to utilize the medium of Indigenous dances to step our way out of colonial constructs and towards self-actualization – politically, economically, environmentally, and socially – in order to ensure better living conditions for present and future generations. To do this, Indigenous dance, as an Indigenous knowledge resource, must be embraced and its potential for contributing to the imaginative and creative process of decolonizing the environment in the Nigerian oil extracting, producing and transporting regions of the Niger-Delta and Lagos State must be realised. Dancers, choreographers and scholars of Indigenous dance forms are

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called upon in this endeavour to involve dances in new ways that address the needs of their host communities. Indigenous knowledge has an important place in decolonizing tropical environments by detangling them from the colonial and neocolonial ideologies and imperatives that remain at the centre of the toxicity and wasting of humans and non-humans in complex tropical ecosystems.

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Princewill Chukwuma Abakporo is a Nigerian performer, teaching artist, and researcher. Currently, he teaches dance and performance in the Theatre Arts Programme of Bowen University Iwo, Osun State Nigeria, and is the Artistic Director of African Pot Theatre (APT). Inspired by his current research on Nigerian Indigenous dances and emerging socio-cultural, political, pedagogical, and environmental realities, Princewill has created and presented works that reflect this interest, such as the Oyi Dance (social reflections), This is Nigeria (a statement on Nigerian politics) and Ara Wa Ninu Jigi (A cultural piece) among other funded and self-funded performances. He has a BA in Theatre Arts, MA in African Drama and Theatre and currently pursuing a PhD in African Dance and Choreography. His research interests in repositioning Indigenous Nigerian dances are evidenced in the majority of his publications. Princewill is from Imo State, an Igbo-speaking part of the country which also is part of the oil-producing communities in Nigeria that witness political exclusion, environmental exploitation, and degradation, but with a rich cultural performance tradition that inspires his work.
He can be contacted at princewill.abakporo@bowen.edu.ng

Stanley Timeyin Ohenhen is an Associate Professor of Theatre Management, Arts Administration, Advocacy, and Entrepreneurship. He has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Benin, Nigeria, an MA and PhD, both from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, specializing in Theatre Management and Arts

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Administration. Besides the focus of his doctoral dissertation, titled *Management and Marketing Communications Strategies of the Musical Society of Nigeria* (1983-2007), which is a significant contribution to the economics of the performing arts and culture, his other main research foci and presentations at local and international conferences have been about colonialism and the de-neocolonization agenda of African Countries especially as portrayed by African Dramatists, Eco-criticism, and the nexus between Theatre and Society, in the manner that the theatre and its various arts such as dance, dance-theatre, drama, and music, contribute to the struggle against the consistent degradation of the environment and the world climate. Stanley is also a research scholar in Gender Studies, Diversity and Inclusivity. He presently is the Provost of the College of Liberal Studies at Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria, where he teaches Theatre Management and Arts Administration, Entrepreneurship, Aesthetics, Gender Studies, and Performance Studies. He has a number of published journal articles and books to his name. He can be contacted at: stanley.ohenhen@bowen.edu.ng