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**The Aesthetics and Mechanics of African Dance, Costumes and  
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# The Aesthetics and Mechanics of African Dance, Costumes and Rattles in Yibo Koko's Seki Dance Drama

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**Abstract:** With its distinctive form and content, African dance stands apart, carving out a unique identity that sets it apart from other continents. Its inherent rhythm possesses a magnetic quality capable of compelling people to move, transcending language barriers—an attribute that has propelled African musicians, particularly those from Nigeria, to a dominating position on the global music stage. This paper delves into traditional African dance, explicitly focusing on the rhythmic opulence found in the dance of rattles, costumes, and water pots within Seki. This captivating dance drama pays homage to the vibrant culture of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, Africa. Authored by Yibo Koko, the Seki dance drama undergoes a transformative journey, skilfully repackaging the traditional village square theatre into a digitalized theatrical experience accessible both as a live performance and in the dynamic space of new media. The paper employs a robust methodology and theoretical framework, drawing on dance theories, historical surveys, and analytical reviews of Seki performances to unravel the nuanced layers of this artistic expression. In scrutinizing Seki, this paper not only sheds light on the captivating exploration of rhythmic elements, including rattles, costumes, and water pots but also underscores the broader impact of Seki's performance. The dance drama is a compelling canvas that radiates colors and a flawless rhythm, capturing global attention and playing a pivotal role in restoring the splendor of African ancestry. Through this repackaged theatre experience, Seki becomes a vehicle for exporting African culture, offering a renewed perspective that transcends borders and celebrates the rich heritage embedded in the dance's vibrant tapestry.

**Key words:** cultural dimensions, technology, performative arts, culture

**Abstrak:** Dengan bentuk dan isinya yang khas, tarian Afrika menonjol, mengukir identitas unik yang membedakannya dengan benua lain. Irama bawaannya memiliki kualitas magnetis yang mampu mendorong orang untuk bergerak, melampaui hambatan bahasa—sebuah atribut yang telah mendorong musisi Afrika, khususnya dari Nigeria, ke posisi mendominasi di panggung musik global. Makalah ini menggali tarian tradisional Afrika, secara eksplisit berfokus pada kemewahan ritmis yang ditemukan dalam tarian mainan kerincingan, kostum, dan pot air dalam Seki. Drama tari yang menawan ini memberi penghormatan kepada budaya dinamis Delta Niger di Nigeria, Afrika. Ditulis oleh Yibo Koko, drama tari Seki mengalami perjalanan transformatif, dengan terampil mengemas ulang teater alun-alun desa tradisional menjadi pengalaman teater digital yang dapat diakses baik sebagai pertunjukan langsung maupun dalam ruang dinamis media baru. Makalah ini menggunakan metodologi dan kerangka teoritis yang kuat, memanfaatkan teori tari, survei sejarah, dan tinjauan analitis pertunjukan Seki untuk mengungkap lapisan nuansa ekspresi artistik ini. Dalam mengkaji Seki, makalah ini tidak hanya menyoroti eksplorasi elemen ritme yang menawan, termasuk mainan kerincingan, kostum, dan

*pot air, namun juga menggarisbawahi dampak yang lebih luas dari penampilan Seki. Drama tari ini merupakan kanvas menarik yang memancarkan warna dan ritme yang sempurna, menarik perhatian global dan memainkan peran penting dalam memulihkan kemegahan leluhur Afrika. Melalui pengalaman teater yang dikemas ulang ini, Seki menjadi wahana untuk mengeksplor budaya Afrika, menawarkan perspektif baru yang melampaui batas dan merayakan kekayaan warisan yang tertanam dalam permadani tarian yang semarak.*

**Kata kunci:** dimensi budaya, teknologi, seni pertunjukan, budaya

## INTRODUCTION

Dance is a beautiful art form that involves movement, rhythm, timing, and space. It can be defined in many ways and is influenced by the genre, location, and occasion. Dances can be choreographed or freestyle, allowing for intricate spatial dynamics. African dance is particularly notable for its combination of skill and grace, and it has been used as a transformative force locally and globally by many communities who have made it a part of their collective memory.

The origins of many African dances can be traced back to moonlit performances by various tribes. These dances are a shared heritage that transcends individual ownership. Some believe the genesis of these dances can be attributed to supernatural revelations manifested in dreams or encounters during fishing and hunting expeditions. One example is the Seki dance, which involves fishermen encountering a dancing masquerade on the sea and bringing back spiritual teachings to their village. This transmission of knowledge involves a progression from subtle foot shuffles and torso movements to elaborate choreography, complemented by costumes, rattles, and resonant drumbeats, which enhance the overall aesthetic experience.

African dances serve various purposes, such as marking life's milestones, celebrating harvests, honoring royalty, commemorating weddings, and enacting rites of passage. They are not just limited to ceremonial functions but also serve as a universal language of expression and a means to narrate compelling stories. Dancers draw energy and strength from the ground beneath them through intricate movements, fostering a collective spirit through choreography. This close connection to the earth is symbolically expressed, making the dances a conduit for joy and a way to celebrate life.

Costumes play a vital role in expressing the artistic vision of the performance. They vary from revealing outfits that capture the audience's attention to more conservative full-length dresses. The dancer's attire is embellished with various accessories, such as leg rattles, walking sticks, beaded bags, hoop earrings, necklaces, arm bands, and leg bands. Each accessory adds to the visual poetry of the performance.

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the rich rhythmical dance and costumes displayed in the Seki tradition. It highlights how Yibo Koko has ingeniously turned the traditional village square theatre into a digital experience, which can be accessed as a live performance and through new media. The Seki dance is celebrated for its cultural diversity in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

## SYNOPSIS OF SEKI DANCE

Seki begins '*in media res*' with a celebration scene where villagers are enjoying the splendor of the '*Ójongowu*' masquerade dance like seen in Figure 1, the dancers wore vibrant traditional

African attire, beautifully complementing the colorful costumes of the masquerades. This attire not only adds to the visual spectacle but also highlights the youthful vigor of the performers, who are predominantly young men.



**Figure 1:**  
The *Ojongowu* Masquerade Dance

Unexpectedly, they find themselves besieged by intruders bent on desecrating their cherished culture, seeking to impose an alien one in its place. Among these victims are frail, undernourished children and enslaved individuals, forcibly seized and transported to distant shores (see Figure 2). Once in these foreign lands, they are consigned to toil in plantations, subjected to dehumanizing conditions. This exploitation breeds malnourishment, illness, and tragically, the untimely demise of the most vulnerable among them.



**Figure 2:**  
A scene showing captives being taken away. The scene is enhanced with a still picture of malnourished children and slaves projected on the screen which serves as the cyclorama.

A narrator comes to share the sad tale as follows:

**Narrator:**

That was how the serenity of our community was broken  
Shattered, like eggshells  
Our bodies were lined with whips, inscribing marks that were not tribal  
Our forebears, strung together and frittered on a journey in chains through the  
seas, to the plantations beyond.  
While holy water doused the painful tears streaming down our cheeks  
And the pulpit, the rhythm of our salvation

The narration is followed by a melancholic chant that bemoans the fate of a person whose identity has been stolen and have been stripped bare. This introduces another narrator who represents the resolve of people who are poised to reclaim their identity, culture, and pride. As the narrator puts it,

**Narrator:**

Now we have come home, with songs from yesterday  
Songs with dance steps that trace our footsteps  
From the distant shores and toiling from many migrations back to our roots and  
pride  
We have come home with the wealth of the rivers of aesthetic cultures, proud  
heritage, and timeless wealth.

The sequence introduces yet another narrator who becomes the storyteller. He narrates a story of how two fishermen encounter a strange dancing masquerade on the high seas. The masquerade teaches the men various dance steps which they in turn return to teach the villagers. This exercise heralds the coming of a Priestess who is brought to cleanse the land and usher in different colorful dance performances to the admiration of the royal family and other villagers.



**Figure 3:**  
**The fishermen scene.**  
**The river and mangrove are projected on the cyclorama for dramatic effect.**



Here, Figure 3 shows a captivating fisher scene unfolds. The dancers skillfully portray a fishing expedition along the riverbank, only to stumble upon a mesmerizing masquerade performance on the water's surface. Overwhelmed with a mix of fear and awe, they intricately mimic the masquerade's intricate dance steps. With hearts racing, they hasten home to eagerly recount their extraordinary encounter. This vivid storytelling is brought to life through the art of pantomimic dramatization.

## SEKI IN PERFORMANCE

Seki is a name that has a deep connection with the art of dance. It is not just limited to the Seki Dance, known initially as *Owuamapu Ti* in 1998. Over time, Seki has become a representation of dance in general, and it stands as a brand that promotes the cultural richness of dance as a powerful tool for sustainable development. The visionary director and creator of the Seki brand, Yibo Koko, believes that this dance form has been crafted meticulously to evoke a nostalgic feeling of pristine proportions in its audience.

Koko's approach to designing Seki involves a deep consideration of the traditional ethos that is deeply embedded in the cultural tapestry of the *Ijaw*, *Igbanis*, *Ikwerres*, *Ogonis*, *Ogba Egbema Ndoni*, and other ethnic groups of Old Rivers State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This intentional integration of cultural nuances serves as the foundation for Seki's unique identity and resonates with its audience on an authentic level.

Seki's commitment to cultural authenticity does not limit it to traditional boundaries. Instead, it has transformed Seki dance performances into an art form suited for the digital age. The director has infused the conventional practices that were once confined to community village squares with a contemporary digital touch, leveraging his creative skills. This fusion has broadened the appeal to a global audience while preserving the inherent cultural essence and originality that defines Seki. The result is a stunning metamorphosis that takes the grandeur of Seki to new heights while maintaining its cultural roots in a captivating dance narrative that resonates locally and globally. According to him,

Seki presents an amalgam of the traditional and the contemporary forms of the dynamics of modern theatre performance as technology is employed through the use of 3D scenic designs projected on digital screens to create an illusion of verisimilitude in a bid to accentuate and authenticate the African storytelling technique, whilst complementing the action of actors on stage. To this extent therefore, one of the critical essences in designing SEKI is to appeal to the mass of its audience in theatrical performance through the concept of eclecticism. In practical terms, in design, we were conscious that we were presenting a performance to people who were overtly familiar with the dances and masquerade displays. (2019)

The Air Peace in flight magazine Alice also notes:

Historically, Seki traces its roots to the oral tradition narrative of how the gods transferred to certain fishermen the dance skills that they in turn mobilized the entire community in the town square and taught members of the community via the pantomimic medium. Seki is a collaborative art form; a rhythmic covenant of dance steps and patterns of different ceremonial dance groups predominantly from

the Okrika, Kalabari, Bonny, and Ikwerre ethnic groups in the lower Niger Delta Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The dance groups include Iria, Owembe Dancers, Pioru/Ogwein Dancers, Ojongowu Dancers, and Ikule Pamba Owu Dancers. (2022)

Seki has gained worldwide attention by utilizing digital technology to manage cast and crew for seamless and impactful performances across various platforms. A typical Seki performance involves coordinating a large ensemble of at least 120 performers to create a captivating tableau reminiscent of the vibrant scenes in local village squares. Seki has gained worldwide attention by utilizing digital technology to manage cast and crew for seamless and impactful performances across various platforms. A typical Seki performance involves coordinating a large ensemble of at least 120 performers to create a captivating tableau reminiscent of the vibrant scenes in local village squares.

After the Priestess has delivered her compelling narrations and conducted the ceremonial purifications, the *Opu-Iria* performance takes center stage. This segment features accomplished women who gracefully represent a diverse range of sizes, celebrating opulence within the community. *Opu-Iria* is a cultural heritage highly respected by the people of Rivers State, symbolizing the dignity and pride inherent in womanhood. The performance not only captivates the King and villagers but also serves as a living testament to the rich cultural tapestry of Seki, transcending geographical boundaries to embody the essence and grandeur of Rivers State's cultural legacy. According to Sani:

The *Iria* costumes or dress patterns are visually impressive, rich in accessories, and costly in outlook with breath-taking dance steps portraying identity and ways of mature women in most communities. They are used either as ceremonial costumes for the rite of passage in Bonny and Opobo. In Kalabari, they are used as ceremonial attires in traditional marriage, childbirth, and funeral rites. In Okrika, the costumes are used in pre-marriage ceremonies as preparation for females who have come to the age of marrying. It is required that any female for *Iria*'s "fattening room" ceremonies must stay indoors for weeks or months. The costuming is carried out by any experienced woman in *Iria* outfits and it must be costumed by another female. Its costuming involves the use of many types of coral beads and accessories to enhance traditional outfits with small, big, and large coral beads mainly in white and red colors among other colors. (2021, pp. 36-37)



**Figure 4:**  
A pictorial presentation of the *Opu-Iria* in Seki Dance Performance

After the enchanting *Opu-Iria* performance, the *Kala-Iria* takes center stage. In this ceremony, maidens between 12 and 21 display their refined dressing and sitting habits. Unlike the *Opu-Iria* participants, these young women do not have to undergo the traditional practice of weight gain in the fattening room. Instead, the *Kala-Iria* maidens undergo a meticulous orientation to refine their presentation skills. This preparation ensures that they exude grace and charm, making them poised and attractive to potential suitors in their journey from adolescence to maturity.



**Figure 5:**  
Pictorial presentation of the *Kala Iria* Dance Performance in Seki

Other dance performances include the *Ogwein* Masquerade; a water masquerade (see Figure 6) that glides through the stage colorfully adorned and accompanied by maidens, *Pamba-Owu* Masquerade (see Figure 7), *Pioru* Masquerades (see Figure 8) and the *Owembe* Masquerades (see Figure 9).



**Figure 6:**  
*Ogwein* water masquerade



**Figure 7:**  
The *Pamba-Owu* Masquerade in Seki Dance Performance





**Figure 8:**  
**The *Pioru* Masquerades in Seki Dance Performance**



**Figure 9:**  
***Owembe* Masquerades in Seki Dance Performance**

Alice magazine maintains that Seki as an ingenious piece of art has become a toast globally judging from the demand to showcase the richness of the Niger Delta culture in diplomatic circles and before a hybrid audience of government functionaries, the organized private sector, and the public, at large. (September, 2022). It further states:

For instance, Seki, on invitation performed to the delight of the members of the diplomatic corps at the Nigeria House in New York, United States of America in December 2021, and in July 2022, Seki was hosted as a guest performance from Nigeria at the Jamaica at 60 events, in the country's capital, Kingston. In August 2022, at the behest of the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), His Excellency Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, the Seki troupe performed as an integral part of the DRC's Africa Music Week – it was a command performance at the Presidential Gala Night to honor the President's assumption of the rotating presidency of the SADC. Seki was in Kinshasa with a 40-man troupe. From September through November 2022, Seki is booked for performances within and outside Nigeria. (2022)



**Figure 10:**  
**Curtain call showing all members of the cast of Seki**

As the curtain rises for the final bow, as depicted in Figure 10, the dancers, singers, and all the masquerades grace the stage once more, seamlessly executing a meticulously choreographed routine. Their movements coalesce into a formation that exudes the majestic unity of a community reveling in the euphoria of self-discovery and embracing the profound pride of their cultural heritage. A momentary pause for a shared exchange serves as the cue, followed by a graceful bow, symbolizing the culmination of their collective artistic journey.

## RHYTHM OF AFRICAN RATTLES (IGBIRI) IN SEKI

Yibo Koko offers a vivid description of the Seki dance, describing it as a jubilant convergence of "colors and clatter." (year, page? link?) The vibrant hues emanate from the kaleidoscopic array of costumes, lights, and accessories worn by the performers, which creates a stunning visual spectacle. Meanwhile, the animated sound of rattles and rhythmic knives wielded by the masquerades adds a captivating auditory dimension that complements the energetic movements of the dancers.

Koko also sheds light on the origins of the Seki dance. He explains that it traces its roots to the development of American Tap Dance, an art form that Afro-Americans pioneered in the 19th century. The dance form evolved from a fusion of African rhythms and European dance styles. Interestingly, Seki's story leads back to the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, where the *Igbiri*, a traditional rattle, takes center stage in the rhythmic orchestration of the dance performance. Koko's description of the Seki dance captures its visual and auditory appeal and provides valuable insights into its historical and cultural significance.

Koko asserts that the unique sound emanating from the *Igbiri* goes beyond the historical origins of tap-dancing shoes in America. He draws a comparison, acknowledging that the early slave trade in the United States resulted in a cultural collision. Slaveholders were concerned when they discovered that Africans communicated through coded rhythms using drums and native instruments. However, the Africans preserved their traditional rhythms by ingeniously transferring them to their feet. Tapping complex rhythmic passages created a sophisticated and intricate physical expression code. By the mid-nineteenth century, African Americans fused their footwork with Irish and British clogging steps, leading to the development of the style known as "Buck and Wing," which was a precursor to the evolution of Modern Tap Dance in 2019.

The *Igbiri* is a unique and essential instrument used in traditional African dance, particularly in the vibrant tapestry of Seki. It consists of two wooden sticks, each around 30 cm long, held together by a tightly wound string. The *Igbiri* serves as the rhythmic heartbeat of the dance, providing a steady and consistent beat for the performers to follow.

The instrument is predominantly wielded by masquerades, who are highly skilled. These performers, adorned in elaborate costumes and armed with machetes, strike the *Igbiri* precisely, creating a harmonious and synchronized auditory tapestry. The sound produced by the instrument is a unique blend of the rhythmic resonance of rattles and the sharp and percussive strikes of machetes.

Noteworthy is the extraordinary dexterity these masquerades display as they seamlessly blend the different sounds produced by the *Igbiri*. The performers create an atmosphere of intense energy and excitement, showcasing their immense talent and skill. This sublime fusion of artistry and cultural heritage is a testament to African dance and music's rich history and traditions.



**Figure 11:**  
Pictorial representation of Yibo Koko adorned in colorful costumes leg rattles while playing the role of the storyteller

Combining various dance forms results in a well-coordinated performance distinguished by various colorful costumes and accessories. Koko explains that this fusion provides an entertaining experience and tells a story of cultural significance. He compares the captivating effect of this performance to that of a Japanese Kabuki theatre production. By doing so, Seki goes beyond mere entertainment, becoming a meaningful and historically enriched spectacle that immerses the audience similarly to the highly respected Japanese Kabuki tradition.

## CONCLUSION

Dance is often considered a profound form of expression that connects the physical body with the vastness of the earth and sky. Alphonse Tierou once said it is "tangible proof of man's repeated endeavor to transcend himself" (1992, p. 35). Seki is not just a conventional dance group for entertainment purposes. According to Koko, the visionary behind Seki, the group's main objective is to "deepen the conversation for cultural integration, accelerate the 17 Sustainable Development Goals through Culture and Knowledge Economy skill-sets, guarantee employment generation, and drive wealth creation opportunities through Heritage Impact Marketplace programs in Nigeria and Africa."

Seki is a brand that has the noble objective of promoting traditional village theatre performances across the African continent, which were once dormant. The brand is committed to revitalizing such performances, which are vital to African culture and heritage. This initiative seeks to encourage the reawakening of cultural identity among the youth in Africa and the diaspora, which is essential to preserving and promoting African traditions.

Seki believes in promoting cultural integration and socioeconomic progress through its programs. The brand contributes to realizing Sustainable Development Goals by creating

employment and wealth generation pathways through innovative Heritage Impact Marketplace programs in Nigeria and throughout Africa. These programs empower local communities and stimulate economic growth by creating opportunities for local artisans, performers, and other stakeholders to showcase their talent and earn a living.

The essence of Seki goes beyond the confines of artistic expression. It is a catalyst for cultural integration and socioeconomic progress, essential for African communities' overall development. Through its initiatives, Seki is contributing to promoting African culture, heritage, and identity, which is vital for preserving Africa's rich history and traditions.

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