Dancers as Emissaries in Irigwe, Nigeria¹

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The Irigwe, numbering around 17,000, are the third largest of several dozen so-called "plateau pagan" tribes on the Jos Plateau in Benue-Plateau State, Nigeria. Situated on the western edge of the Plateau around 20 miles west of the towns of Jos and Bukuru, the Irigwe have their own language and social traditions which clearly distinguish them from the other plateau tribes. They are currently re-knowned all over the Plateau, indeed all over Nigeria, as skilled dancers. The focus of this paper will be to describe and analyze briefly the importance of Irigwe dance groups as emissary delegations, traditionally between various Irigwe sub-groups, and nowadays also between Irigwe as a whole and the rest of Nigeria. The maintenance of boundaries between socio-cultural groupings which regularly interact often involves agents of one sort or another who serve (on a *de facto* if not on an explicit basis) as bridges between the groupings.² Dance group members in effect form such bridging agents in Irigwe.

Irigwe is a segmentary society lacking any traditional political chieftaincy. Twenty-five semi-autonomous agnatically based tribal "sections" are bound together on the one hand by each section's having exclusive responsibility for performing one or another ritual felt to be necessary for the tribe, and on the other hand by cross-cutting affinal and cognatic bonds mediated by both primary and "secondary" intersection marriages (Sangree 1972). The Irigwe divide their 25 sections into two geographically discrete clusters: Rigwe, the "parent" division, south of the swiftly flowing Ngell River with 10 sections, and Nyango, the "child" division, north of the river, with 15 sections. They also divide these 25 sections into "male" and "female" groupings, some of each of which are found on both sides of the river. The "child" division sections are said to be offshoots from, and ritually subordinate to, the "parent" division sections. The "male" division sections are principally concerned with dry season hunting ritual, whereas the "female" division sections' ritual specialties generally center around rainy season farming ritual (Sangree 1970). In addition, with each of these divisions, sections are further graded in terms of relative seniority vis-a-vis putative founding agnatic tribal ancestors.

Each tribal section has its own shrine house (*branyi*), presided over by a senior man of the section's senior lineage, where the skulls of big game, and formerly the heads of enemy neighboring tribesmen, are preserved. Two sections have a privileged place when it comes to ritual matters: the most senior "male" section which controls the rituals of most importance for hunting and other dry season

activities, and the most senior "female" section which is responsible for the principal rainy season farming rituals. The ritual chiefs of these two sections clearly hold the most revered offices in the tribe, and they in effect act as a supreme court in matters of inter-section or pan-tribal import, but it is generally believed that they must remain fairly aloof from mundane administrative affairs, lest their ritual powers be weakened to the detriment of the crops, the hunt, and thus the entire tribe's well-being. Consequently secular matters such as leadership in warfare, and nowadays formal tribal leadership roles, usually, and most properly in Irigwe thinking, devolve upon the leaders of ritually less important "children" division sections, and particularly upon the ritually less qualified members of these less important sections (Sangree 1970, 1972).

The presiding ritual chief standing in front of Zobwo Section Shrine House, Miango, Irigwe, Nigeria, 1964.

I shall illustrate the significance of Irigwe dance groups as boundary-bridging emissaries principally by giving examples of their importance in this regard for Tahu Section which is one of the largest in the tribe. First, however, I must outline Tahu Section's particular position in the tribal scheme of things.

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Although it is one of the largest, Tahu is also one of the most subordinate sections, ritually speaking, in the tribe, and this has a direct bearing on Tahu peoples' involvement in extra-tribal "alien" affairs, and thus indirectly on the Tahu dancers' preeminence on occasions when Irigwe dance for non-Irigwe audiences.

Men from ritually less important junior sections traditionally supplied the leadership as well as most of the manpower for intertribal fighting. In modern times men from these same junior sections have become the top level leaders in the British-introduced tribal administration particularly in posts involving contacts outside of the tribe. Tahu Section, in particular, which we have already noted as the largest and one of the most junior of the "children" division Nyango sections, has supplied most of the tribal administration's top leadership and also a large portion of the educated and Christian Irigwe; the section is purported to be riddled with witches. They are the sort of people, other Irigwe say, who can best deal with the outside world, just as their forebearers made the best warriors.

Tahu is typical of other Irigwe sections in having a special ceremonial relationship with its agnatically linked section of the other tribal division; in Tahu's case this is with Zigwe section located in the Rigwe "parent" division of the tribe. In terms of the overall ritual ideology of the tribe, Zigwe, like Tahu Section, is a "male," junior "son" section, standing ideologically, and even geographically to some extent, in the same position vis-a-vis the "senior" "female" and "male" sections of Rigwe division as Tahu stands vis-a-vis the senior "female" and "male" sections of Nyango Division. But as regards Zigwe Section, Tahu is said to be Zigwe's "son" and conversely, Zigwe is Tahu's "father" because it is claimed that Tahu is a "split-off" from Zigwe, the principal founding ancestors of Tahu having left Zigwe and migrated to Nyango Division more than six generations ago. This putative agnatic link between Tahu and Zigwe sections is principally expressed socially, as with other agnatically linked sections, by two things: by a prohibition against contracting secondary marriages with each others' wives and by the practice of sending men's dance groups over to perform at each other's special mortuary rites (*dzie riue*) held after the death of either section's ritual chief.

Each of the Irigwe's 25 sections has its young men and teen-aged boys organized into dance groups who perform at the mortuary rites of the ritual chief of their linked sections, and this is the principal stated reason for each section having these groups. But more frequently than that, section dance groups put on performances at the mortuary rites of heads of smaller compounds of their own section, and at the "hero" (*šúá*) ceremonials held annually by all those sections whose hunters killed any big game that year. Also section dance groups' members frequently dance informally at the evening parties (*vwevwe*) held to honor a member who has just taken a new wife. Thus nearly all Irigwe men's dancing in a traditional context is performed within the confines of the section for its own members, even though the Irigwe speak of the men's dance groups as being organized and existing on a section basis so that each section's youth will be able to

dance at the mortuary rites of its linked section's ritual chief.

I had the good fortune to be present when the dance group of Zigwe came to perform *dzie riue* mortuary for the deceased ritual chief of Tahu towards the end of the dry season around 9 months after his death. On the appointed day they arrived in the middle of the afternoon together with on-lookers and elders from the same section.

They were garbed in white sleeveless undershirts and black shorts, wore red beret-like caps, and had rubbed oil on their bodies to make their skin glisten. In addition some dancers had red monkey skins, furside out, slung from their left shoulders, and some wore leg rattles tied around their ankles made of dried palm leaf fashioned into little spheres with pebbles inside. Most of the dancers carried fly whisks in their right hands which they brandished as they danced. There were about two dozen men in the dance group, all in the prime of their manhood, and a couple of drummers with large drums slung from their shoulders. One of the drummers was a middle aged man who someone told me served as the manager-director of the group.

The dancers, dancing several abreast, followed their two drummers into Tahu Shrine Center Compound (*Brari Tahu*) through its ceremonial entrance. Once inside the compound and approaching the Shrine House and the grave where the deceased ritual elder was buried, the dancers dropped to their haunches, and continuing their intricate rapid rhythms with their feet and arms, shuffled in unison towards the shrine house while chanting their greetings in chorus. Finally, right in front of the shrine house the dancers straightened up and finished their entré with a number of intricate leaps all done in unison.

The next few minutes were frantic. Without the piston-like movements of the dancers to serve as a focus of their attention, the mass of people, crammed into the small area in front of the shrine house, became very excited. The amount of jostling and volume of noise from the shouting voices was almost overwhelming; there was great difficulty in quieting the crowd sufficiently so that the ceremonial beer, arranged in several great pots about 15 feet in front of the Shrine House right in the thick of the dancers, could be blessed by the Tahu elders and then distributed in calabashes according to the proper protocol; first to the more distinguished visiting elders, then to the dancers. Not much beer was actually drunk at this time. Instead, the Zigwe dancers quickly regrouped themselves in columns and followed their drummers back out of the main entranceway of the shrine house. Spectators fell over themselves in frenzied efforts to make room for the dancers who danced up the path to an open area about 75 feet in diameter situated between three neighboring compounds. There the dancers performed their intricate steps and body motions in a unison counter clockwise single file in a large circle. Usually the legs and torso moved to differing beats while the arms and head sometimes followed third and fourth rhythmic patterns. The dancers chanted in unison as they danced—the meanings of the chants often being obscure or unintelligible, I was told, to the dancers themselves.³

Each dance ran for three or four minutes, followed by a break of several minutes. Then another dance followed: There was considerable variation from one dance to another in the drumming, steps and bodily motions, as well as in the chanting. I was dazzled by the complexity and variety of the dances, and by the dancers' acrobatic and athletic prowess. The crowd was most appreciative, and in the breaks between dances many of them expressed their approval by rushing to one another dancer or a drummer, and "dashing" him with a penny, which the receiver acknowledged with a smile and stuck in his pocket.

After about an hour the dancing ended and the performers, dripping with perspiration, either chatted with admiring girls and women in the crowd or slipped back with the elders to Tahu Shrine Center for some more beer. At dusk the Zigwe Dancers gathered together one final time at the dance ground in columns four abreast, and following their drummers they exited down the pathway dancing for several hundred yards as they headed for home, to the cheers and farewells of the men and women of Tahu.

Now I shall briefly describe the Irigwe New Year's Day celebrations where traditional Irigwe dancing is performed in a new context. These celebrations were first started in the 1950s by the Government appointed Chief of Nyango District, Irigwe, who was a Christian and a member of Tahu Section. They are explicitly held for the entertainment of non-Irigwe visitors and tourists as well as for Irigwe. The New Year's Day celebration apparently started as part of an effort to consolidate the chief's own standing in the eyes of outside European administrators and to augment the political influence of the Irigwe in the Plateau. This was particularly true in Jos where several hundred Irigwe live, who for the most are employed as laborers, and where an Irigwe had been appointed as the town's vice mayor.

I attended the New Year's Day celebrations on January 1, 1964, accompanied by several British and American tourists who had sought me out to guide them to the New Year Festival. We arrived a bit before noon, and parked our cars near a large temporary enclosure made of straw mats in front of the Chief of Nyango's compound.

The crowd was enormous; several thousand people milled around the outside of the enclosure, pushing towards an entrance which was perhaps six feet wide and located opposite the Chief's house. Most were Irigwe, both Christian and Pagan, dressed or adorned in their festive finery, but in addition there were large numbers of Fulani, Hausa, and other Nigerians of varying tribal affiliation. Several dozen European missionaries, business people and tourists were there. The hubbub of the pushing, yelling crowd was almost overwhelming; groups of dancers at the edges of the crowd outside of the enclosure jested and yelled to friends as they warmed up, and adjusted their costumes. After shoving and pushing to obtain our tickets we found ourselves being propelled through the entrance gate by the crowd like cattle crushing into a corral. The dancing was preceded by seemingly endless speeches and Christian prayers delivered by various tribal functionaries, pastors, and school teachers. Clearly the Christian

Irigwe associated with the Chief of Nyango's tribal administration were in charge of this program. The fact that all announcements and speeches were delivered in Hausa instead of the Irigwe language underlined their intention of running a Festival for non-Irigwe as well as Irigwe spectators.

There was a total of eight dance groups. Each danced a half dozen numbers or so, with brief breaks in between, and then was quickly followed by another group. Four of the dance groups were listed on the program as coming from each of the four major geographical sub-divisions of Nyango Division District, but it was clear to me and Irigwe spectators from recognizing the individual dancers, that each group was in fact made up of the better dancers from each of the four largest and ritually more junior Nyango Division sections. In addition there were three "junior" dance groups consisting of "apprentice" dancers ranging in age from approximately 11 to 15. They were almost as accomplished as their senior counterparts, only lacking some of the latter's polish and spectacular acrobatic vigor. Finally there was an eighth group composed of youths and young men living in Jenta, the predominantly Irigwe ward in the town of Jos. I later learned that this group was organized and manned largely by Tahu Section dancers currently working in Jos and Bukuru. On this occasion they had been brought to Nyango by lorry. They were probably the most skillful and polished of the eight dance groups.

The same dance types and accompanying chants were performed on this occasion as at the *dzie riwie* mortuary ceremonial which I have already described. To my knowledge there are no restrictions limiting any dance-chant type to a particular ceremonial context in Irigwe. The most lively and spectacular ones were chosen for New Year's Day and other occasions when performing for outsiders. The dances and chants used by all the dance groups throughout the tribe are essentially the same. Variations in detail and style, however, are frequent, and those that prove popular are quickly taken up by the other groups.

A total of 1,765 people paid to gain admission to the enclosed dance arena. The crowd outside the enclosure was larger than inside, and actually more dancing took place outside than in the enclosure; each of the groups warming up out there beforehand, blowing off their excess spirits and showing off for the very appreciative outside audience afterwards.

A lot of traditional beer which had been brewed with the celebration in mind was being sold and consumed in nearby shady areas and compounds. By 3:30 the European visitors were feeling dreadfully sunburned, dusty and dehydrated, but the performing groups kept pouring in, one after another, in a seemingly endless stream which I am quite sure had no relation any more to the official program. Clearly the real performances and the truly appreciative audiences were now to be found outside of the enclosure. Suddenly a whirlwind "dust devil" appeared about a quarter of a mile down the road from the Chief's house; it proceeded at about the speed of a slow walk right toward the Festival enclosure, getting steadily bigger and more ominous. Irigwe, Hausa, Fulani, casual passersby, spectators, and

peddlers hawking cooked meat snacks, bean cakes, and other items, all scattered towards the trees on both sides of the road, their wares tumbling to the ground; stray dogs and chickens scurried with them, too frightened by the fleeing people even to stop and scavenge for these fallen goodies. The dirty yellow funnel wound right up the middle of the road, on into the wide clearing in front of the dance enclosure where it suddenly lifted and vanished before it ever reached any of the crowd. Within a minute or two the dancing and merrymaking resumed both within and outside of the dance enclosure as if nothing had happened. But the dust devil's appearance seemed to blow away my guests' interest in seeing more of the festival; they made it clear to me that they were ready to leave, and soon afterward we departed for Jos. I was later told that the festivities went on, formally, for about another hour, but the informal activity outside the enclosure continued until after dark.

Whatever the Irigwe Chief's motives may have been in starting the New Year's Day celebration, it could not have been more successful as a public-relations gambit. Good dancing, and fine dancers, regardless of their particular dance form or style are almost universally admired and appreciated in West Africa, as of course, is the fine drumming which invariably accompanies the dancing. In 1959 a Nigerian national dance competition was organized as part of the festive preparations for pending national

Irigwe "Miango" Tahu Section Dancers at a special performance in front of the Chief's House, Miango, Irigwe, Nigeria, 1965.

independence. The Irigwe Vice-Mayor of Jos, whom I have already noted was a Tahu Section member and a Christian, arranged for an Irigwe dance group, comprised primarily of the best dancers from the Jenta and Tahu Section groups, to dance in the national competition. Known as the "Miango Dancers" for the market where the Nyango District Chief lives, they won the national competition, and later had the honor of dancing for the Queen and Prince Phillip during their state visit to Kaduna.⁴ In 1960 the competition was held again; the Tiv dance group won the competition that year, but the Irigwe dancer's national reputation was already well established. During my 1963-65 field work period, in addition to

the New Year's festivals, various Irigwe dance groups performed for the outside public on a number of occasions.

It should be noted that the Christian Irigwe minority, most of whom are from the very large ritually junior Tahu Section, have played and continue to play a central role in the growth of the tribe's outside reputation for dancing. We have seen that the Christian Chief of the tribe's Nyango District, and the Irigwe Christian Vice Mayor of Jos initiated the first arrangements. Nowadays it is the Irigwe Dance Association whose officers are Christian literate Irigwe for the most part living in Jos, which takes care of scheduling practices, costuming, etc., for the Jenta-based Miango Dancers, as well as promoting and scheduling public performances for them and the other tribal section-based dance groups. Irigwe Christians, all being of an evangelical Protestant persuasion, do not participate themselves in traditional Irigwe dancing. They regard it as "pagan." Their role, however, in recent years as dance impresarios for the tribe has done much to elevate their status in traditionalists' eyes from despised consorters with enemy outsiders to respected and useful, if not totally admired, members of the tribe who have reaffirmed their place in the tribal scheme of things. The fact that Christian administrators and Irigwe Dance Association leaders eschew participation in traditional dancing for themselves at first appears a gross anomaly; but most of these Christian leaders have passed the age for participation in these dance groups, and in the case of those who have not their abstention from dancing lends them an aura of seniority appropriate to their assuming responsible leadership roles.

Perhaps it is misleading to assert, as I have, that dancers serve as emissaries in Irigwe, because they do not carry out this function unaided. Indeed I am quite sure that the elders who accompany the dancers in the *dzie riue* mortuary rite ceremonial I have described, and who drink most of the beer on that occasion, would consider themselves, rather than the dancers, as the emissaries between their section and that of the deceased. Similarly, the Christian leaders of the tribal administration and the Irigwe Dance Association would regard themselves as the emissaries between the tribe and the rest of the world. But in these as in other situations, the dancers and their admired activities form both the excuse for and the immediate focus of the rapprochement between the groups or categories of people involved. And in addition, as we have just seen, Irigwe dance groups have facilitated a new unity between traditionalist and Christian Irigwe because of the latter groups' much appreciated impresario role for the traditionalist dancers.

In conclusion I think it is worthwhile to review the appropriateness of the unifying role of Irigwe dancing and dance groups in view of the traditional nature and locus of Irigwe tribal authority. Irigwe world view, as I have noted on other occasions (Sangree, 1971, 1974), is profoundly dualistic, with either aspect of this dualism characteristically being the obverse of, or in contrast to, the other. As we have seen, Irigwe ritual and political affairs stand, analytically speaking, in complementary opposition to each other. Old men of the most senior sections perform the sacred ritual believed to be crucial to the tribe's

well being, and it is felt they must be protected from profane outside influences to insure their success. Men of the junior sections have the responsibility for protecting these senior sections from outside dangers; and it is expected that they will obtain and utilize profane alien powers when necessary in order to cope with and hold these outside dangers at bay. Today the Irigwe Christian leaders, predominantly members of the most junior section of the tribe, are those who stand most removed from, and in greatest contrast to, the traditional ritual leaders of the most senior sections. It is entirely appropriate, indeed obligatory from a traditionalist Irigwe's point of view, that these Christian Irigwe should be at the forefront of affairs and situations where the tribe is dealing with the outside world.

Dancing is traditionally an activity universally admired and considered suitable for many occasions which involve all Irigwe tribal sections; but dancing is an activity of the youth—of those still too young to be subjected to the ritual constraints imposed by their particular section affiliation. Appropriate as an adjunct of both the most sacred and the most frivolous events, dancing links together the practitioners of the tribe's most protected inward-facing sacred ritual with those involved in its most exposed outward-facing alien activities. And finally, dancing links the Irigwe as a whole in a most felicitous manner with the rest of modern Nigeria through the respect and fame it gains for the tribe.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings, Mexico City, November 20, 1974. The research on which this article is based was carried out in 1963-5, and was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.
- ² Discussions of social boundary definition and maintenance in Anthropology have overlooked or underestimated the importance of linking or emissary groups in this context (*Vide* Ross 1975).
- ³ Francis Speed, in the spring of 1965, took 16 mm black and white sound movies of several Irigwe men's dance-chants (the performers were some of the Tahu Section senior dancers). Edited portions of this issued in 1968 (Speed and Harper 1966) give a good sampling of Irigwe men's dance and chant forms being performed at that time in both traditional and secular contexts. The pamphlet which accompanies the film presents some of the chant texts, translations, and some cultural commentary.
- ⁴ The 1962 Life World Library publication on *Tropical Africa* (Coughlan 1962) has a photo of Irigwe dancers performing before the Queen of England and Prince Philip (p. 124). The caption (p. 125) which describes them as "... a gyrating array of dancers" makes no mention of their tribal or ethnic affiliation. Elsewhere in the same volume (pp. 24-25) is a two page color photo of "Dancing Maidens of the Miango district" These are indeed Irigwe girls performing a shuffling *šo gberi* mortuary chant in the late afternoon—not a marriage celebration, as the photo caption proclaims.

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