

THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN FOLKLORIC DANCE IN CHANGING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The quest for change in government has been a topical issue in Nigeria. The concept of the term 'change' has also been viewed differently by different people. While some people see change in the instance of positive development others view it otherwise. This paper attempts to redefine the primary essence of dance performance in African community life with a view to stating the fundamental role the long forgotten tradition has played in the development of the child with the home as first socialising agent. It is not an overstatement to posit that the popular theme of corruption in the Nigerian polity is primarily a failure of a re-engineering of the missing link in the African theatre and its positive effect on community development. For this summing deviation, this work recommends the re-positioning of Orature as a core topic at all levels of learning to positively affect those who had less opportunity to experience its rich traditions.

Much of the African life was rural and people lived in communities which had traditions that led to peaceful co-existence. Customs were deeply rooted in the minds of the people who also transmitted them to younger generations in uniquely shared folkloric performances. Orature, which included songs, dances, myths, legends, folktales, incantations and other performances provided the bulk of values: morals, beliefs and other traditions and customs that guided and guarded the communities.

In Nigeria today, the search for improved living conditioned by the quest for power and property in a fast changing globalized world has shifted the peoples' priorities to urbanized regions and to live individualistic lives. Urban life has created a collection of people of different cultures who have come together to form new communities with different ethical views and values about human existence.

The dynamic world creates avenues for new interactions but there is no gainsaying that, such communities have taken rich dance performances to the back burner of their daily living. However, many nations have become enviable, nationally and internationally, for their rich traditional dance performances. Some include;

Culture	Festival
Tiv	Kwagh - hir
Igala	Ogani, Egbe
Yoruba	Egungun, Eyo
Ogori	Ovia Osese
Hausa	Arugungu
igbo	Iriji
Idoma	Ij - Aiekwu
Ebira dance	Ikwechi

The list of dance performance is inexhaustible just as culture abound. Such traditions have provided the content and aesthetics of proper living. It is not an overstatement to posit that the present rate of evolving corrupt practices which has metamorphosed from economic crimes to religious fanaticism, kidnapping and pipeline vandalization are a product of the Nigerian's loss of identity and a further deviation

from the African essence which is embedded in the avowal of racial pride as propounded by the negritudists as Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor in the 19th Century. The voice of the Black Movement of the 17th century with front runners as W.E.B. Dubois were a clarion call to remember the enviable substance of African pride rather than accepting the euro-centric point of view of African folkloric traditions as barbaric, healthenistic, primitive and fetish. **The case for Dance**

It has been observed by folklorists that there is a degradation of our traditional theatrical performances generally. Al-Bishak (2000) reveals the case for Nigeria in his words:

... when it becomes unselective and a hoarse replacement of our natural theatre or traditional theatre to the point where we begin to loathe what is traditional, and instead, embrace more of the foreign, that comes to be the negative quality of the foreign influence of theatre in our lives (Pp. 336).

Irrespective of industrialization, urbanization and technological advancement, the need for re-positioning the Nigeria folkloric dance culture and performance traditions cannot be over-emphasized. Bakare (2005) sums it up clearly:

Dance in the African society is not mere entertainment but a folk media of human communication. As an art, dance communicates the culture of those (sic) who own it. It then follows that it communicates every facet of our lives since our culture is the vehicle through which the African mode of living was transmitted... their achievement in technology, commerce, trade and warfare, their behavioural pattern and belief systems, their moral values and historical experiences, their mode of occupation and geographical environment.. (Pp. 85-86).

With reference to the need for specific institutions for the study of African artistic cultures that maintain the essence of history, Okeke (1979) cites an example of the booming artistic culture begun at the Nsukka School of art stating:

Art should train men and women of ideas, designers and creative citizens who can transform their environment and decolonize the process of thought in our society (Pp. 3),

Concept of Dance

Dance has been conceptualized by various authors from different perspectives. This is because of its centrality to various folkloric performances. It is sometimes accompanied by songs to give an undulating effect to performance and at other times it forms the nucleus of festivals that link active participants and the community. Olumu (2007) sees dance from an aesthetic point of view when he says:

When the human body moves In space, forming shapes, within a given time sequence, maintaining a given rhythm in an organised pattern, the resultant effect is what one may call dance and of course the shapes must be aesthetically pleasing. Dance steps are created from many basic movements (P. 27).

The points of rhythmic balance and the costumes paraded in dance are of immense communal advantage. The common goal of dancers, individual or group, is usually a process of improving of steps and costume effect at practice from conception stage to the actual performance. This communal stance achieves a success when the spectacle translates positively on observers. The underlying belief is that, the product of dance performance is a manifestation of the creative prowess of the dancers who are usually given accolade in group.

Oyegoke (2006) in the 42nd inaugural lecture at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago - Iwoye gives a comparative definition between Dance and Language when he posits:

The cultural importance of language is a product of the centrality of the spoken and the written word to human life. Culture is the totality of experience including evidence of intellectual development of the group of people held together by that culture. And, dance has been and is still a language of the African culture neglected by its people (Pp. 5).

It is clear here that dance is language since it forms an integral part of the community's way of life. Usually all the experiences of the community during hunting, war, childbirth, initiation and others are displayed in 'spectacle' as binding it together. Little wonder then, that all cultures are identified with peculiar dance performances and movements. For example, while the Tiv (Nigeria) performer is dressed in costumes of animal hides and takes movements imitating his prey during hunting, the Zulu (South Africa) dances with his spear and shield displaying his attacking stance and basic movements during wars.

The Role of Dance

Many researchers have given reasons why folkloric dance should be re-positioned in the Nigerian polity. It has been observed by this researcher that, only a few ministries of arts and culture in Nigeria are really motivated by their state governments in performances as dance. The Professor Victor Uwaifo owned *Paparrazi Garden* and his efforts at uplifting the Edo State Ministry of Arts and Culture is a good example of an attempt to rediscover the fading tradition.

AI-Bishak (2000) reveals on the role of dance thus:

Well, there are many, and each has Its distinct character, depending on background and the ethnic composition the ethnic setting of the environment which produces a particular theatre. Every community in this country has its own theatre. Theatre is a way of life, and society requires theatre for regeneration, recreation and for the survival of the society (Pp. 336),

On the periphery, the ill-informed of African folkloric traditions would only perceive dance as mere entertainment. It is so if it creates recreation for participants and observers by providing a balance in rhythm and movement that translates to give the people mental stability. However, the salient role of dance to communities in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. They include:

- Improving community lives as dancers are engrossed in working together on the art form from conception stage to actual performance.
- Sharpening of dancers creative prowess as communities share novel ideas in the art which could informally be popularised.
- Regenerating community ideals by natural transmission of dance traditions to younger ones who later modify them to suit the spacio-temporal realities.
- generating funds as participants and observers come out in turns to make voluntary donations when performance is satisfactory. Moreso, dance groups have become professionals and attend performances at a price.

Relevance of Folkloric Dance in Post Independent Nigeria.

According to Iriwieri (2012) citing Lawal (2006):

Following Nigeria's attainment of political independence and the relevant outbursts of nationalism and the call of her cultural heritage, the need to project a 'Nigerian Personality' in art became more imperative than before. Artist not only incorporated traditional forms and motifs in their works but also drew inspiration from folklore and myths. Rarely in human history can a people have been confronted with an overt and conscious choice between having an art of their own - the greatest contribution to the richness of human culture. What is needed is now art that will reflect the cultural realities of the present, while at the same time retaining a link with the past (Pp. 30).

Dance, like most folkloric traditions, has its roots in revealing ethical values of communities. In many Nigerian communities, dance movements accompany praise songs, satiric songs, lampoons etc. Unethical issues are mocked while morality is praised. For instance, among the Tiv people of Benue State, a thief is made to dance round the town with his loot tying a long rope around his waist. This discourages such unethical acts in the community.

Conclusion

It is clear that the African cannot forget his roots in the present situation by accepting fully a culture that is foreign to him without witnessing gaps either in the content or style of operation. Individualistic tendencies have given rise to different forms of corrupt practices, extremism and kidnapping. The country is torn apart by imbibed foreign cultures that have crept into the crevices of the fundamentally satisfying African folkloric traditions. Creative potentials are rarely tapped and harnessed towards functional ends that will benefit communities. Rather, individual looting of the country's treasury is rampant. In fact, social vices are praised and traditionally acceptable norms and values are condemned. Dance in Africa encourages group or community involvement in development. The position of this paper is to encourage group participation and set common goals. Consequently, respect for one another should replace selfishness. In his inaugural speech, President Muhammadu Buhari on May 29, 2016 summed up this position in a paradox: *I am for everybody, I am for nobody.*

Recommendations

To ensure positive change in the Nigerian Community, the following recommendations are necessary:

1. Government should impress on the ministries of arts and culture by monitoring and motivating them to showcase the Nigerian performance tradition and show its functionality.
2. State Governments should choose a state culture day where all the cultures would display the essence of such traditions.
3. Government should establish more colleges of arts with specific purposes of promoting indigenous Nigerian folk traditions. This will enhance the retention and retrieval of the culture for the growing child who was not opportune to have grown in his rural enclave.
4. Attention should be paid to educate teachers of Orature on the need for tutelage under custodians of folklore.
5. Students of arts should be allowed to undergo a one year compulsory training in their villages then finally embark on field trip to other zones for comparison with other cultures outside their immediate environment.

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