THE MUSIC OF THE DANCE: A STUDY OF MUSIC AND DANCE IN AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

The continent of Africa is rich in music and dance. They are both enshrined in the cultural milieu of the African people. The paper therefore examines the concept of Music and Dance in African society, discussing several definitions of dance as postulated by scholars in the field. Using the bibliography method of inquisition the paper explores the dimensions by which music and dance influence specific aspects of the daily lives of the people as the functions of the dance is highlighted and discussed. Through an interpretative lens, the paper discusses the interrelationship of music and dance, and how the thin line of distinction is seen in efforts to explain their similarities and differences. Ultimately, the paper provides a framework towards a better understanding of music and dance as a phenomenon in Africa.

Keywords: Music. Dance. African Culture. Acculturation.

Introduction

A foremost music scholar, Meki Nzewi once described African Music as the 'Music of the dance' (Nzewi, 1968). This is because each musical item is a synthesis of many fabrics, one or two of which dictates the dance steps and movements. By general definition, dance is a type of art that generally involves movement of the body, often rhythmic and to music. It is performed in many cultures as a form of emotional expression, social interaction, or exercise, in a spiritual or performance setting, and is sometimes used to express ideas or tell a story . Dance has been described as a language which communicates

as a medium to persuade and control, reflecting what is, and suggesting what could be (Bakare and Mans, 2003). However, Dagan (1997) defined dance as

> *'…human behavior composed... of purposeful, intentionally rhythmical and culturally patterned sequence of nonverbal body movements other than ordinary motor activity… the motion having inherent and aesthetic value and symbolic potentials' (p. 211)*

Mackrell (2019) defined dance as the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. He stated further that dance is a powerful impulse channeled by skillful performers into something that becomes intensely expressive and that may delight spectators who feel no wish to dance themselves. Fraleigh (1987) described dance as a performance art form in which the basic tool is the body and the body's purposefully selected movement in an intentionally rhythmical and culturally pattern with an aesthetic value and symbolic potential. Midelfort (2004) sees it as one of the essential forms of human's expression and communication.

A dance performance may be considered as a dramatic phenomenon induced by a psychological state. Unlike music and dance in Europe that is mainly engrafted in 'arts for art sake'. A change in perceptual alignment is needed to understand the role of creative music in African ritual music because the composite hierarchic aesthetic that 'allows for meaning' in African culture does not recognize the principal divisions that underlie western assumptions of 'aesthetic-integration' and/or perceptual involvement or fulfillment (Braxton, 2019). African music and dance transcends 'music for pleasure'. Far more than entertainment, dance and its music have traditionally served a most important purpose in the socializing and educating process of African people (Badejo & Banerji, 2002). African dance has been described by Badejo & Banerji (2002) as

"indigenous dance forms practiced by the peoples of the countries of the (sub-Saharan) African continent in social or religious contexts, for entertainment or as a choreographed art form (Bakare and Mans, 2003). It is a vital part of the social, ritual and educational life of the people. Through Music and dance, Africans celebrated religious festivals and give thanks to the gods for good harvests. One unique feature of African dance is the meaning it conveys to the people. African dance is cultural behavior, determined by the values, attitudes and beliefs of a people (Hannah, 1973). The dances convey different meanings following the cultures in which they are practiced. Traditional African dance delivers far more than meets the casual on looker's eyes. It represents the actual fundamentals and belief systems that the specific African culture stands for. This article therefore takes look at the cultural and sociological dimensions of African dance.

Historicity of African Dance

On the historicity of African music and dance, Nketia (196-?) is of the view that our data on the history of African music must not only be drawn from its structural analysis but also from studies of interaction between music and other aspects of culture. Documentary sources of African music are unfortunately not always reliable where statements about purely musical consideration are concerned. However, they do give a fair indication of the social context of the music. It is however still imperative we make use of oral evidence when it is available. This is because in some societies; there are oral traditions that associate individuals with particular dances, musical types or one feature of a musical style (Nzewi, 1968).

The historicity of African music cannot be fully grasped with western form of notation. There are also insinuations that it lacks the kind of historical documents as we see in the western world (Bukofzer, 1956). Hence we have been made to swallow the bitter pills of past documentation of early explorers and missionaries. While some gave a far unbiased account of what they witnessed about our music, other

brought the music to disrepute with their biased comments. This, Robert Farris Thompson (1979) tried to capture in his historical analysis of African music and dance. He undertook a historical journey by giving a lucid account of African music from the middle ages. He cited the accounts of historians and explorers whose primary concern was a documentation of the on the spot accounts of the area. His line of argument was that even though written description of music and dancing was very scanty in the middle ages, the accounts of the people that witnessed and documented what they saw back then would give us an understanding of the way African music was being portrayed. While we may agree with him on some conclusions arrived at, we cannot but question some generalization of the forms and practice of African music and dance in some isolated areas.

The contact with Arab scholars and Islam created a useful account of Africa and sporadic reference was made by geographers and traders 9(Farmer, 1939). The writing of an Arab explorer by name Ibn Batuta threw more light on this. (Thompson, 1979) In his words, Ibn Batuta observed musicians in the court of the Sultan of Mali. From the account given by the Arab explorer, it is believed that there was creative arrangement in the blending of the music and arms display in the King's courts. He saw the rulers in majestic walk as punctuated with full strops. Suffice to say that the style of elegant walking when the King is in procession is a phenomenon related to the kings in Africa. This description can be likened to the procession of the emir of Northern Nigeria when he is arriving or departing his domain (Akpabot, 1986).

In her account on the height of a festival in the Yoruba town by Ede, Peggy Harper described the procession of his highness the Timi of Ede, as the traditional ruler, going through the town led by the Dudun ensemble of drums to perform the "royal step" which portrays his authority and dignity in dance and song (Harper, 1997) . La Villault gave an account of the voyage of Le Sieur to ketu were he saw the king being entertained by a woman in dance (Thompson, 1979). A

similar situation existed in the court of Ashanti. In his court, special music was played at various times of the day in the court of the king. Many arrays of musical instruments, orchestra, musical types and minstrels were found in the king's palace (Nketia, 1959). In the royal palace of the Oba of Benin, the Benin dignitaries performed the Izua-Sakpa, a dance to honour their ruler-particularly at the Igwe and Uhieroha festivals (Harper, 1997). Within the privacy of the palace, the royal wives dance the graceful Ugha dance to the king which expressed the dignity of their position. Robert Thompson made an account about the king who was a great dancer called Munga of Mangbetu. The description of the king's boisterousness in dancing and gesticulation can be compared to the legendry Sango, the king of Oyo. History hard it that he was also a great dancer whose love for Bata music is still in vogue till today. As stated earlier, a lot of these documentaries were memoirs extracted from the diaries of the explorers and traders. These were on the spot accounts of what they saw the people do in relation to dance and music. Even though their line of assignment was primarily outside the area of music, their accounts provided vivid information as to the role of music in several functions that they witnessed in the course of their journey and inquisition.

Gesticulation and Dramatic Expression in African Dance

All African dances are closely knit to percussive music. A repetitive rhythm is initiated by a musical instrument and is then taken up by the dancer in a localized part of the body, such as the rhythmic beating of the feet or rapid constructions of the hips or shoulders from which the movement flows through the dancer's body. Dance is always expression of emotion which gives a deep sense of pleasure to the dancer and the spectators The Africans love to show their response to music through verbal or physical behaviour. The responses elicited reveals that the music and the dance serves as a singular degree as modes of expression of African feeling or as an accompaniment to social or religious activity. (Harper, 1997). In African dance, 'emotions are expressed by gesture and positions while the faces themselves

are generally stereotyped' (Thompson 1979). Thompson stressed further that for the African, the musical experience is by and large an emotional one. Sounds, however beautiful, are meaningless if they do not offer this experience or contributes to the expressive quality of a performance.

Aesthetics of African Dance

Through a vivid study of African music, Robert Farris Thompson came out with some philosophy he used to describe the music and dance of African people. He described African music as cool and calm having ingredients of beauty, visibility of mind, newness and freshness. Furthermore, the quality of visibility talks about the fact that African dances do it clearly and openly for all to see. Luminosity is a state of brilliance and clarity. This can also be defined along smoothness. The philosophy of rebirth and reincarnation gives the mystical aspect of dance. Dance for rituals significantly upholds the view that a person dies in order to be reborn. This philosophy is strongly upheld by African scholars like Wole Soyinka who sees the three worlds in man -the world of the living, dead and the unborn. He believes the living can go to the other world (the dead vise versa). This he referred to as reincarnations. He went to highlight a fourth stage which is the world of indeterminable existence. It is regarded as the realm of the dancer of tragic actor. The description of early writers on the music and dance in African history is revealing. Even though not all their descriptions can be well used to represent the general practice of music and dance in Africa, it nonetheless gives a broader picture of the beauty of African music. This will go a long way in correcting the misconceptions some people may have in time past about African music.

Basic Components of Dance

Dance, like any form of art, has basic components. It requires knowledge, skills and creativity before it can be performed since it is observed and appreciated by people. According to Agu (2003), there are five basic components of dance.

A cultural context, purpose and meaning of the dance

This refers to what the dancers do and for what purpose. It also defines the context and content of the dance. Is it for entertainment or for ritual purposes? Is it meant for all people or are there social restrictions meant for the dance? The context of the dance is also enshrined in the culture of the society within which the dance emanates. The historical backgrounds of the people will go a long way in further interpretation and understanding of the dance.

Dancers and their relationship to society

This is defined by the type of people meant to participate in the dance. It is equally dictated by what the dance is meant for. A puberty dance can only be enacted by people of their age group.

The dance itself, with its culturally informed movements actions, order and sequence of movements

Dance in the African society is audience participatory. However, there are individual dance sequences that can only be enjoyed by the audience. The dance itself can be in choreographed movements with sequences or can be in 'freestyle'.

Music and musical instruments

Dance can only function effectively with music and musical instruments. Dances are accompanied by songs or musical instruments as this further re enforces the movements made by the dancers

Adornments and other material properties

Dancers are normally adorned with paraphernalia, make-up and the appearance of the musicians and dancers.

There several factors that influence the African dance. However, a few will be mentioned below:

Dance as a Way of Life

Dance to the African is a way of life, a true representation of a people's existence expressed through rhythm and movement. It is deeply imbedded with meanings and symbols that reflect the cultural beliefs and their lifestyle. In Africa, dance serves a complex diversity of purposes. Each performance usually reflects the communal values and social relationships of the people. Unlike all dance traditions of the world, the polycentric nature of African dance sets it apart from all other dances. In the African cultural paradigm, the relationship between rhythm and movement is one that is inseparable; one cannot exist without the other. As the dancer is given breathe through the drummer's rhythm so does the drummer feeds of the dancers breathe of expression as movement articulates rhythm; a perfect marriage where two become one in a synchronization of rhythm and movement that creates dance. Because traditional music is directly associated with traditional religious and political systems and preserved by culture, it generates social experiences which go deep and serves as link which binds each ethnic society; giving each individual that sense of belonging (Okafor, 2005). Writing on dance in Nigeria, Okafor submits:

> *The dance is a ubiquitous medium of communication or expression in African cultures. By its nature, a Nigerian dance or music engages all the senses in performer and spectator/listener alike. It is the patterning of the human body in time and space in order to give expression to ideas and emotions (p. 34).*

Dance is the expression of the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values, of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance of a community (Onwuekwe, 2006). Before the advent of Christianity, people in the riverine areas appeared to believe in the existence of mermaids who were responsible for endowing them

with many gifts ranging from children to wealth, power etc. They understood the language of rowing the boat or paddling the canoe. All these aspects of culture are reflected in the people's dance *egwu amala* (canoe dance). From the foregoing, it is clear that dance in Africa is used as a functional tool of expression and has and is used for a variety of reasons. Dance is used in ritualistic purposes, as a secular activity engaged in for recreation or entertainment, embracing such factors as physical exercise, performance of skill, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity. In general dance is used to commemorate important events in African life and society and since every second is an important event in the life of an African, dance becomes a way of life. African dances might be great to watch and take in at a surface level, however they are not just show, and they communicate to on-lookers various stories, cultural activities and belief system through body movements, symbolic gestures and music. There is virtually a dance for every occasion, no matter how little.

Dance as Expression of Social Organization

Music and dance contribute to the integration of society by expressing social organization, validating instruction, perpetuating values and promoting group solidarity. The funeral rituals provide the medium for people to negotiate their social space. It is through funeral ceremonies that chiefs and prominent figures demonstrate their social status, men and women establish gendered space in music (Woma, 2012). Music and Dance thus become the medium of expressing and channeling such sentiments. Dances teach social patterns and values and help people work, mature, praise or criticize members of the community while celebrating festivals and funerals, competing, reciting history, proverbs and poetry; and to encounter gods. Dance serves a vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of communion with each other. As a result, people are liberated from the bonds of individuality… societies whose traditional values are still

intact tend to value the cohesive or unifying effects of the dance (Nicholls, 1984).

Dance for Funeral Rites

The subject of African ritual music as applied to funeral celebrations and ritual burial is a complex subject that is consistent with the composite nature of African creativity (Braxton, 2019)._Within the African circle, funeral ceremonies are lay for the most significant life cycle where music dance performances are performed. At the funeral rituals for instance, music and dance performs various roles and functions. The performance is the appropriate way through which people honor the transitioning of the dead into the ancestral world. As stated by Anita Glaze, "The constant musical vigil at Senufo funeral is intended to comfort the grieving relatives, to honor and please the dead and above all to communicate and reinforce public discourse" (Glaze, 1981). The music connected with funeral is the most profound in the African repertoire, when the ancestors mingle with the living in the meeting ground, the full force of tradition can be observed (Thompson, 1979) Farris Thompson, a famous Historian, gave an account by Pieter de Marees on the way and manner the dead was being honored in the gold coast. He talked about the West African tradition of treating dead men as if he were a sculpture, to be imparted rhythm and power one least splendid moment before internment (Thompson, 1979:32). Another description he made was that of Binger who witnessed a superb procession for the dead man among siene – Re. Rifles are fired to announce the burial. A group of women brandish fly whisks and dancer as they sing the virtues of the deceased. Strong youths balanced the corpse upon their heads, striking one of the supportive poses of West African Art and life.



Plate 1: Rite of passage song in South Africa .
Courtesy: The Guardian Newspaper

Dance in Religious Worship and Rituals

Music and dance are commonly associated with rituals and religious worship. This is what Adekanye (2019) calls 'summoning and possession'. She observed:

> *Summoning and possession are the most common and popular forms of African folk dance. Most of the indigenous tribes perform this dance for "calling a spirit." These "spirits" are worshiped by many tribes. Some tribes also perform this dance type during the time of war or a drought in the belief that this will bring them good fortune.*

It is believed that during the ritual and public worship, both the gods and the worshippers participate. Africans believe dance connects people to their ancestors and nature. As part of a spiritual ritual, dance may be a symbolic form of communication with natural powers, or a trance-inducing movement enabling the dancer to communicate directly with the spirits. In some masked dances, the dancer assumes the temporary identity of a god or a powerful ancestral spirit. In many traditional rural societies, group dances mark rites of passage

such as coming of age in which young men or women compete against each other in dance as part of their initiation into adulthood (Nketia, 1974). Nketia further described the dance in some communities in Yoruba land where Priests and their initiates may be the most brilliant dancers within their community. It is not uncommon to find the Sango priests of the Oyo Yoruba who express the character of the god of thunder in the dramatic Bata rhythms and elegant precision of their dance.

Possession in rituals is a common phenomenon, which in many cases brought about through the time of music and dance. A spirit may possess an individual and the movement in dance-like form may become agitated, erratic, and jerky, sometimes approaching the convulsive. Nketia describes six general stages in such rituals:

1. *Preliminary drumming and preparation; entry of priest and media.*
2. *Opening of the dance-ring by the senior Priest, accompanied by attendants.*
3. *Vigorous phases of dancing by media, but still calm and pleasant.*
4. *Evident possession as media get more esthetic; shouts and chants from worshippers; impersonation of gods.*
5. *Medium's possession by the chief god. Drummers redouble efforts.*
6. *Worshippers sing loudly and cheers; chant continues till possessed; medium enters the ring, dances, then withdraws; musicians become silent.*
7. *Final return of media dressed in colorful roles amidst shouts of Joy (Nketia, 1974).*

The total sharing of knowledge is the purpose of this study of rituals in music and dance. The integrity of dance in African ritual is protected because the society prepares all members of a group to serve as arbiters. Thus, the participation of the entire sundry in the ritual setting indicates that the community believes in the total

cultural immersion process. The result is the joyous participation by all in the creative, restorative process in African ritual activity.

Dance in Nigerian Festivals

Festival can be said to be an event, usually and ordinarily staged by a local community that centers on some unique aspects of that community. According to Adegbite (2010) a festival can also be seen as a series of performance involving music, plays, dances, etc., usually organized annually or as agreed upon, where people of a particular community come together to dine and wine; in order to celebrate and share common tradition. Ultimately, it is enshrined in the African concept of theatre, in which experiences of the participants could also be shared "through acrobatics, puppetry, myths, rituals, legends, initiation ceremonies, festive dances and celebration, masquerading, circus drama of carnival, ancestral worship, and so on" (Adegbite, 2009:46). The Africans love to show their response to music through verbal or physical behaviour. A major religious atmosphere for the use of dancing in the African setting is in the commemoration of festivals. Festival dance is an integral part of religious ceremonies which regulates the relationship between the members of the society and the supernatural powers which control their lives. The music and dance is performed by priests and priestess and they include leading members of the cult (Harper, 1968) Examples of such festivals are the Asala festival (Enugu State), the Ameru Yanyan Festival (Ekiti) and the Egungun festival. The festivals which has some unique customs – social, political, and religious in characteristics connected with it. It has a distinct row of parade which is rounded off with a dance. Rituals are common features of the festivals. In the course of the rituals, music and dance features intermittently with ensemble accompaniments. The following is a description of Ameru Yayan festival and the dance paraphenelia:

> *"Ameru Yayan is brought out as usual in a horizontal portion supported on the shoulder of the supporters, head first, and propped up in circle previously described. The chrome and orchestra dance round it three times*

before dancing back and forth in the street. The old men dances as the orchestra dance round about the group propping up Ameru Yayan (Enekwe, 1991).

In the final phase of the festival, the town doers meet in the palaces. There is afterward a procession to the town hall with singing, drumming and dancing all the way.



Plate 2: Carniriv Festival from Calabar Courtesy, Hotel Guide

The Egungun Festival

The Egungun Masquerades are known as one of the most awe – inspiring groups in Yorubaland. They are a group of traditionalists specially trained in their ability to commune with the dead, and meditate between the ancestors and the claims of the living (Enekwe, 1991). During Egungun festivals, the masquerades impersonate the spirits of the dead, who are believed to reside in them when the dance is on. Examples of such masquerades found in Nigeria include the following: 1. Great Epa Masquerades of the Ekiti

2. Sacred igunnuko Masquerade of the Nupe
3. Amana Masquerades of the Gwari Abuja
4. Dodun Wugu Masquerades of Northwestern part.
5. Agada Masquerades of Egbado-Ketu.



Plate 3: Egungun Festival from the South-Western part of Nigeria
Courtesy: Hotel Guide

Inter-relationship of Music and Dance in Africa.

There is no denying the fact that Music and dance in Africa has a lot of relationships. They are in fact, inseparable as there can be no dancing in the African context without some form of music to accompany it. It is connected to Africa's rich musical traditions. There are many structures shared by both music and dance that makes them interrelated: (Theme, phrases, dynamics rhythm, metre, form etc.) Dance has been defined as the movement of the body in space. Sound of music is what the body language of the dancer experiences. There is the general melodic sound with a well-established rhythmic pattern which all the dancers in a group relate to in a general way. The music maker and the dancer need one another; one plays and the other dances. This is crucial because a musician playing a song that is not danced to is assumed to be playing to himself. A dancer on the other hand who dances without any musical accompaniment has nothing to show for it. So the musician and the dancer complement each other. It is not without reason that the array of musical instruments which identify African as one of the most musical people in the world is equally matched by a lot of dance movements. All African dances are closely knit to percussive

instruments; it gives the rhythm. The other side of the coin is that dance not accompanied with music is an anomaly. That is why a dancer in Africa who is dancing without music is referred to as a mad man.

Conclusion

Music and dance, as we have so far treated, is an expression of the inner state of the African, which plays a cathartic role at important time of his religious life. Dancing as a means of artistic expression in the religion circle has helped the African in sustaining their beliefs and control of the society. Dance in African ceremonies offer occasions, which serve to consolidate the individual as a member of a community by identifying his place in the universe in relation to the supernatural, the living and the dead. Through the insistent – repetition of persuasive and kinetic rhythm, their experience becomes rooted in his personality. Music and dance, which in the African societies unites body, mind and emotion in expressive action based on repetitive rhythm, is essentially a ritualistic activity and an integral element of all religious ceremonies.

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