

DANCE DISCOURSE AND SCRIPTS FOR THE STAGE

VOLUME 2



Edited by
Felix A. Akinsipe

DANCE DISCOURSE

AND SCRIPTS FOR THE STAGE VOLUME 2

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FELIX A. AKINSIPE

**DEPARTMENT OF THE PERFORMING ARTS,
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Dedicated to:

The Librettists,
The Choreographers,
The Dancers,
The Technicians,
The Audiences,
The Critics;
The personnel who make dance happen
and
The Greatest Artist who inspires them all.

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To all readers, performers and choreographers of any of the scripts in this volume you are highly appreciated.

To the Supreme Artist I remain forever grateful.

Felix A. Akinsipe
felisipe@yahoo.com
Ilorin – Nigeria.
August, 2018.

Notes on Contributors

Felix A. AKINSIPE is a Librettist, Playwright and a Choreographer. He has been teaching dance and choreography in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria, from 1993 till date except between 2005 and 2009 when he taught dance and choreography at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State. His creative works in the area of libretto include; *Talking Bodies: A Collection of Dance Librettos*, (2003) and *Dance Discourse and Scripts for the Stage*. Vol. 1. (2016) He was the former General Secretary and present Public Relations Officer of the Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON).

Peter Adeiza BELLO teaches dance and choreography with special interest in Dance Ethnology in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Redeemer's University, Redemption camp, Mowe, Ogun State, Nigeria. He is presently the Treasurer of the Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON).

Morenike FOLABALOGUN teaches in the College of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences, School of Visual and Performing Arts, Fine and Applied Arts Department, Kwara State University, Malete.

Mariam Asabe IYEH (Ph.D) is the immediate past Head of the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria. She is in the area of choreography and dance ethnology. She is currently an Ex Officio of the Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON).

Abdulmalik Adakole AMALI teaches in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. His area of interest is Technical Theatre which includes; costume, props, set design/construction and Lighting.

Josephine Doofan TULUMA is a Masters degree holder in dance from the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Hairat Bukola YUSUF teaches dance and choreography in the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts, Faculty of Communication, Bayero

University, Kano. She is presently pursuing her Ph.D. degree at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Her research interest is in Nigerian dance ethnography.

Kazeem RUFAl-AHMAD teaches Theatre Management in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. degree in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin. His research interest include; Theatre Management, Cultural Administration, Tourism, Show Business and Events Management.

Yaki Daniel MUSA teaches dance and choreography in the Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria. His research interest is in the area of dance experimentation, theatre/events management and African drums ensemble.

Justin Tijime AWUAWUER (Ph.D.) teaches in the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Rudolf KANSESE (Ph.D.) teaches dance and choreography in the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Amassoma, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. His research interest is in Nigerian Contemporary Dance.

Taiye Shola ADEOLA (Ph.D) is a music scholar and practitioner. He has been teaching music courses in the department of the performing arts, university of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria since 1993 to date. He is a musicologist, composer, conductor, orchestrator and music director with many creative works to his credit.

Chris UGOLO (Ph.D.) is a Professor of African Dance and has taught dance at the Universities of Ilorin, Abuja, Delta State University, Abraka and currently University of Benin. He is presently the President of Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON). His research interest is on national choreographic style

Olorunjuwon OLORUNTOBA is a Masters degree holder in dance from the Reedemers' university, Redemption camp, Mowe, Ogun State, Nigeria. He uses dance to provide psychological support and improve the

psychosocial wellbeing of children to provide emergency response in the North East Nigeria.

Michael O. FERNANDEZ teaches dance and choreography in the Department of Performing and Film Studies, Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. His area of interest is in the area of dance education, practice and African drums repertory.

Kehinde Adedamola OLALUSI teaches dance in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. His interest is in the area of dance education, practice and African drums repertory.

Olayinka MAGBAGBEOLA is a First Class graduate of Theatre and Performing Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He is presently pursuing a Masters degree from the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Itsewah Steve JAMES is a dance teacher/Cultural Administrator, in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria. A dancer by choice and not by chance. He is the President, Dance Guild of Nigeria (GOND), and founder/CEO Ivory Ambassadors Dance Company, Lagos.

Oreoluwa LAWRENCE is graduate of the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. His interest is in African traditional and contemporary dance, choreography, dance education and African drums ensemble.

Muhammed Bolaji OLORUNOJE is graduate of the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Adewale Olatoye ADEMUYIWA teaches dance and choreography in the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. His area of research interest is in dance ethnology and choreography.

'Tosin Jobi TUME teaches dance in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. She teaches dance

and choreography, her research interest is in Nigerian Neotraditional Danceturgy.

Temitope ADEDOKUN-RICHARDS is a choreographer and dancer. She teaches dance in the School of Visual and Performing Arts, Kwara State University, Molete, Kwara State, Nigeria. Her area of interest is in contemporary African dance. She is presently the Financial Secretary of the Assosiation of Dance Scholars and Practitoners of Nigeria (ADSPON).

Olusegun OLUJOBI is a Masters degree holder in dance from the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. He is presently the President and Artistic Director of Eda Theatre International based in Ibadan, Nigeria.

'Biola ADUMATI teaches play directing, play writing and performing arts workshop in the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. Her area of interest is play directing and play writing. She is currently on her Ph.D. dissertation.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE ROLES OF CULTURAL FESTIVALS IN MANAGING HUMAN BEHAVIOURS IN AWON MASS WEDDING FESTIVAL OF SHAO PEOPLE

KAZEEM RUFAT-AHMAD

Abstract

The essence of traditional dances to the people of Africa cannot be over-emphasised. This is because of its cultural, social- political and economic importance to national development. Dance serves as a means of information, education and entertainment. It also performs a therapeutic function in some cultures in Africa and other parts of the world. However, it is observed that Awon dance which is an integral part of Awonga festival of Shao people in Kwara State, has not been given adequate intellectual and scholarly attention when compared to other traditional dances in Africa. This paper, therefore, examines the significance of Awon dance in Awonga festival of Shao people in Kwara State. The study employs participant-observation and interview methods. After a careful exploration of main themes and tendencies within Awon dance, it has come to the fore in this study that Awon dance contributes to positive change in behaviours and cultural emancipation of the people of Shao in particular and Kwara state in general. This study, therefore, concludes that there is need to revive the dying culture in Awon dance within the context of African traditional dances.

Keywords: Dance, Cultural festival, Mass wedding, Behavioural change.

Introduction

Dance is an integral part of African culture. Its relevance and uniqueness in cultural integration and national development cannot be over- emphasised. Dance performs various functions in democratic Nigerian society. It serves as instrument for change through social, political, economic, education, information and entertainment functions. It can be said that the acceptability of dance as a functional art cannot be divorced from its aesthetics

presentation. Dance, according to Ediri (2008, p. 200) is a “mutual relationship between the various systems of the body harmonised into a force of human movement orchestrated by an accompaniment”. Dance is a movement of the body in well designed pattern or form with the aim of invoking, sensitising, informing, educating or entertaining the audience. The audience in this case may be physical or metaphysical.

Dance as a tangible and functional art is more encompassing as it involves orderly sequence of movement which is presented or performed in the presence of an audience; either in festivals or theatrical performances. Dance is an essential part of human culture and a way of life of people. This made Ediri (2008, p. 203) to stress that dance has been used for “socio-exhilarating conditions... it is a therapy for admonishing and freeing the soul from what Jerzy Grotowski calls artistic obstacles”. Similarly, Ajibade (2010, p.13) asserts that “every music and dance has a purpose to serve in traditional Africa. It is a powerful instrument which stands to proffer peace, signalling war, to caution, to warn and to give solution; not just a jamboree”. Emoruwa (2006, p. 39) shares a similar view when he states that:

Dance is a reflection of culture patterns of a people wherein culture itself is described as the sum total of people’s ways of living; their shared beliefs, practices and social behaviour. To the Africans, the ideal is for every important event in the lives of people to be defined, designed, commemorated and be accompanied with dance.

These scholarly views are relevant to this discourse as they give a clear insight into the concept of dance. The Awon dance which is the focus of this paper is an important part of Awonga festival of Shao in Kwara State. It is peculiar to their lifestyle to perform Awon dance whenever Awonga festival is being celebrated. However, to our knowledge, Awon dance has not been given adequate intellectual and scholarly attention when compared to other dances from other cultures such as Bata dance from Oyo, Tsuwe-Tsele dance and Swange dance of the Tiv people in Benue State among others.

This is due to insufficient media coverage, inadequate corporate sponsorship and low governmental supports which the festival attracted. In view of this, this paper projects Awon dance as an instrument of behavioural change in democratic Nigerian society. By projecting Awon dance, this researcher

further supports Musa's (2004, p. 78) opinion that "choreographers of the multicultural theatre must therefore understand most of the dance patterns of the numerous tribal dances in Nigeria. They must know that within each of the ethnic groups in Nigeria; there are numerous dances". Furthermore, the paper examines the significance of Awon dance to Awonga festival to the people of Shao in Kwara State.

Cultural Festival: The Contextual Perspectives

Festival is as old as the existence of man on earth. In every tribe, race and culture, festival is celebrated. Some ethnic groups celebrate festival annually while in some cultures it is celebrated bi-annually. This may be in accordance with the laid down tradition and beliefs in socio-religious relevance of festivals to their existence. Ogunba (1978, p. 4) defines traditional festival as "an indigEkaitieus cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on African soil over the centuries and which has, therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form". Festival is a global practice. Every community in Africa has one form of festival or the other. Tyodoo (2014, p. 13) corroborates that:

Festival is an event ordinarily staged by a community, centering on and celebrating some unique aspect of that community and its traditions. Festivals that centre on cultural or specifically ethnic issues also seek to inform members of their traditions and the involvement of community elders; sharing stories and experience provides a means of unity among families.

There are various levels at which festival is being celebrated in Africa and all over the world. There are traditional, trado-contemporary and contemporary festivals (Oyewo, 2012, p. 221). While Oyewo classifies festival into traditional, trado-contemporary and contemporary festival, Rotimi, as cited in Yusuf-Audu (2014, p. 63) classifies African festival as traditional, religious, social and political festivals. Awonga festival, therefore, falls within the traditional African festival form. This is because its existence is dated back to the history of Shao, a town in Kwara State. Awonga is a cultural event which depicts its significance in the life of the people of Shao town. Abiona (2007, p. 187) confirms the significance of festival in African society when he states that:

Cultural festivals are moments of joy and celebration done through drama sketches, wrestling and religious sacrifices. Hence, most communities in South-Western Nigeria now employ festival theatre, embodying drama, music and dances, to mobilise their people for development programmes.

Awonga festival has made positive impact to the peaceful co-existence and cultural emancipation of the people of Shao town. Shao Awonga festival has brought the people of the town together. Every household, family and compound involves in this annual event. It is a form of re-enactment which is full of aesthetically pleasing dramatic performances such as dance, music, dialogue, ritual, costume, make-up, props and so on. For the purpose of this study, it is imperative to discuss the historical development of Awonga festival.

Awon Mass Wedding Festival

The history of Awonga festival can be traced to the emergence and visit of 'one-breasted' woman to Shao town. This woman was said to have stayed in Shao town for eighteen days. At the time of her departure, she was escorted by the then Baale of Shao- Chief Olanibo and two other chiefs. As they were going, she suddenly stopped at a place near a foot path in the bush and then discloses her name to be Awon. She gave the people who escorted her charm to establish a strong settlement. Thereafter, she mandated them to name the town after her as Shao Awon and that a day should be set aside every year to commemorate her visit to the town. She also mandated that, all the maidens of Shao town should be given out in marriage to their suitors on this day at the same time. This led to what is popularly known today as Shao Awonga mass wedding festival. The programme note for Awonga festival (2014, p. 7) indicates that:

Immediately after her speech, the stranger and the mysterious woman, fell down and vanished only for water at that spot to start gushing out and flow as a stream which later developed into a big river called Awon-river. The spot where she fell down and from where water started to gush out is called Awon Yale. Also, the spot is significant to the people of Shao as it is referred to as Ojubo Awon; that is a spot where people gather together to worship Awon goddess.

Awonga, in the present day of Shao in Kwara State connotes different nomenclatures to the people of the town in particular and Nigerian state in general. The name means the goddess who visited the town during the time of Chief Olanibo. The name also implies the river from which water is given to the maidens during the mass wedding festival. It also means the festival for the celebration of mass wedding in Shao town. Awonga festival is full of variety of aesthetically pleasing traditional events such as dance, acrobatic display, music, display of bridal wealth (Igba iyawo) and bridal wail (Ekun iyawo). For instance, the aesthetic of poetic rendition, according to Oke (1996, pp. viii- ix) is given below:

Shao Awonga omo Onibueja	Shao Awonga, Children of the depth full of fish,
Shao Awon wowe, Aribusola	Shao Awon “wowe”, whose wealth lies in the depth of the river,
Ajoda, apotubu erin	Ever grinning depository for other rivers,
Akogun Oya,	Heroic tributary of the River Niger,
Olomo winkin winkin	Owner of a multitude of children
Abile gbangba ni Basa	With a massive building inside River Basa,
Abodede pirimu pirimu ni Wede.	An expensive parlour inside River Wede
Shao S’odun Awon, kodo ma gbe	Shao celebrates Awon festival without causing the rivers to dry up
Shao S’odun Awon, kodo ma fa,	Shao celebrates Awon festival without causing the waters of rivers to evaporate.
Shao Awon omo Onibueja	Shao, children of the depth full of fish,
Shao Awon gbogbo ode kiki isin ati koro	Shao Awon, all your rivers are filled with clarias and tilapia,
Shao Awonga omo Onibu remiremi,	Shao Awonga, Children of the deep, deep depth,
Ati ’sin ati koro	Clarias and tilapia, cooked in okro soup,
L’ao fi j’orunla ni Shao Awonga.	is our meal in Shao.
Shao Awonga omo Olohun meje	Shao Awon of seven voices,
Oke Sinniga ab’ohun mefa,	Oke sinniga with six voices,
Idi opoto ab’ohun merindinlogun,	Under the fig tree are other sixteen voices,
A papo, o di mokandinlogun.	Summed up, you have twenty-nine voices.
Shao ki gbe onile, bio se ajeji;	Shao, a town that does not prosper natives

Iyawo (Bridal wail) to the people at the square where the mass wedding takes place. Also, on this day, series of dances take place to entertain the audience. For instance, there are cultural dance troupes from the nearest Local Government Area such as Moro, Irepodun and Ifelodun respectively. Likewise, the cultural dance troupe of the Kwara State Council for Arts and Culture and Alagbe dancers form other troupes which entertain the people during the Mass Wedding Festival. At the top of all the various dances in Awonga festival is Awon dance. Awon dance is emphasized here because it has been part of the festival since inception.



The brides during Awonga festival, Shao, 2014

Awon (mass wedding) dance as an instrument of behavioural change in the Nigerian society

Dance has been known in African culture and all other cultures throughout the world as an art of expression, means of communication, medium of cultural preservation and transmission. Awon dance is not exonerated from these functions. Over the years, Awon dance has contributed to cultural emancipation and integration, preservation and peaceful existence of the people of Shao town. Awon dance has been neglected over the years before it was brought back into the festival recently through the efforts of the Kwara State Council for Arts and Culture. This body has been responsible for training Awon dancers especially during the preparation for the festival.

It is discovered through this study that there has been a transition from the actual day which is usually schedule for the performance of Awon dance. It was initially slated to take place two months after the festival. However, Awon dance today takes place during the day schedule for the festival. Awon dance is performed to appreciate and thank Awon goddess for protecting the town since the preceding year. While the dance is performed, a prayer is offered to Awon goddess for a fruitful harvest, peaceful co-existence and bidding the people who attend the festival a journey mercy. Awon dance is

performed in the afternoon. In those days, it involves all interested women in the town.

However, the dance now involves only women from Alawon and Iboo compounds. The dancers are elderly women, though young ladies are now being incorporated into the dance in order to preserve and transfer the culture to the young ones. The dancers range from 12 to 15. All of them are housewives excluding the men except the drummers. Awon dance is an energetic dance which is usually performed in a circular form. The dancers form a ring with a circular movement in Alawon compound where Awon shrine is located.



Awon dancers in a group photograph after a performance

There are two major movements in Awon dance. There are the slow and gentle, as well as fast and violent dance movements. Each of these movements is accompanied with a particular pattern of drumming and appropriate songs. The songs, however, determine the dance pattern and movement. Awon dance is accompanied with Bata and Dundun ensembles. In the midst of the dancers is the leader who also serves as the lead singer. She raises songs in form of call and response. The songs are parables and metaphors which address social, political and cultural issues in Shao community. For instance, Awon dance corrects social vices such as jealousy, infidelity, disrespect to elders, laziness and gossiping, among

others, through dance movements and songs. These acts of misconduct are socio-cultural issues which are portrayed and addressed through dance.

As indicated earlier in this paper, the songs determine to a large extent the energy which is built into the dance. The dancers employ adequate manipulation of their waist by swinging intermittently and stamping of feet on the ground, especially when the movement migrates from the slow and gentle one to more violent one. The slow and gentle dance movement in Awon dance goes with the song below:

Iyawo boo lo o lo	Wife, leave if you want to
Obun ko ba nile o x2	You did not meet unkempt people in this house
Obi mon le kan	You gave birth once
Agogo yo sobi	Stomach protrudes like Sobi hill
Boo lo o lo	Leave if you want to
Obun ko banle	You didn't meet unkempt people in this house

This song ridicules a housewife who is unkempt and dirty. The aim is to correct her to turn a new leave by dressing appropriately. This song is accompanied with a slow dance movement. From this stage, the dancers change the songs to a faster one, remove their wrapper or headgear and start swinging it over their heads while running with a massive energy round the ring which they have formed. They sing:

Bo le dija ko dija x2	Let it be fight x2
Bo omo olomo doju de le	If someone's child falls down
Kosi temi nbe x2	Nothing concerns me

Awon dance also addresses other social issues such as jealousy and constant face-off between a man and his wife. The dance in this aspect is slow, and this depicts a kind of appeal to the offended husband by the women dancers. They plead with him to be calm and forgive. The song which goes with this dance has a connotative meaning as it sends a message of plea to the Awon goddess so that whatever offence the people of Shao have committed can be forgiven by the Awon goddess. This goes with this song:

Sebuola Ajoda	Sebuola Ajoda
Fiye denu o	Be calm
Iwo na lo lare	You are not at fault
Aribusola fiye denu o	Aribusola, be calm

Iwo na lo lare	You are not at fault
Gbohun mi gbohun mi	Take my voice, take my voice
Efufu lele o	the breeze
Gbohun mi gbohun mi	Take my voice, take my voice
Lodo Awon lo odo o	To the goddess of river Awon

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is observed that Awon dance possesses peculiar features in terms of its relevance to the people of Shao and Nigerians in general. Therefore, it can be said that anything which affects Awonga festival will surely affect people's perception about the various canons within the festival. It has, so far been observed that the Kwara State Government has not been living up to expectation in her quest to promote cultural festivals in the State. Adequate support and promotion have not been given to Awonga festival from the state government and the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture; and in recent times in the Nigerian Cultural Policy, it was clearly stated that the Nigerian festivals can be preserved through research, documentation on audio, video and film medium.

In the same vein, the same policy recognises private participation in the cultural heritage of Nigeria and emphasises emphatically that "the state shall promote traditional festivals in order to preserve them 'in situ' so that they may continue to be factors of communal interaction and cohesion in their localities and develop interaction of larger national and international dimensions" (Cultural policy of Nigeria, 1988, p. 14). This, however, has gained momentum and recognition at the national level but, some states in Nigeria have failed in their responsibilities to promote cultural festivals. This neglect has hindered the development of dance, music and dramatic presentations found within the traditional festivals in Nigeria.

Therefore, in order to preserve the re-emerging culture within Awonga festival and to continue projecting Awon dance as an instrument of behavioural change to the people of Shao and the Nigerian society, this paper thus recommends that the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture should make efforts towards funding and promoting Awon Mass Wedding festival of Shao, Kwara State. Television stations all over the country should be partners in progress by giving Awonga festival a wide coverage of the event as a way of fulfilling their social responsibility to the society.

More so, cultural studies should be introduced at all levels of education in Nigeria. The study of culture at these levels will bring Nigerians back to the

root in order to appreciate our cultural heritage. Theatre practitioners should incorporate Awon dance into stage play productions and finally further research is required in Awonga festival especially in the areas of music, costume, the oblivion Ikosin masquerade and other tourist attractions in Shao town.

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