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Dance in the Worldview of Yorùbá–Speaking People of Nigeria

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Abstract

Every human community has a reason for dancing. These reasons are usually not in isolation of the happenings around them. You can therefore find in a peoples' dance what led to their choice of movements and the way they execute them. These are usually a product of the worldview such community. This is why this paper looks at the worldviews - the factors responsible for the choices, packaging and appreciation - of dances in the Yoruba communities of South Western Nigeria. It employed analytical methods to deduct the reasons behind dancing and appreciation of dance in the communities. It was discovered their language (axioms), behaviour and beliefs that the perception of the Yoruba people, to a very large extent, dictate and control their dances. The paper concludes that custom and traditional beliefs of the Yoruba people dictate significantly the methods and practice of dance in their communities.

Keywords: Dance, Worldview, Yoruba people, Yoruba dance

Introduction

While Gray (2011: 58) considers a worldview to be “a collection of attitudes, values, stories and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action”, worldview according to Oliver and Gershman (1989: 87), is “the way we perceive, apprehend, and then actually experience the world and the communicative structures used to express this experience”. The worldview of an individual will therefore encompass the totality of the structures within and around such individual. Thus everything

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human action can be located within a particular worldview for proper understanding. This is the case with dance.

All over the world the nature and conception of people about dance and what constitutes dance is not the same. The range of activities usually referred to as dance cover what people do privately or publicly to simple movement here and there to the most complex movement one can ever imagine, to movement by a group of people, as well as, movements by an individual. It also covers what human beings, animals and sometimes non-living things do. What people do consciously or unconsciously sometimes can also constitute dance. The nature of activities that can be called dance is so limitless. Dance has many forms and patterns that are subject to the perception and acceptance of the different people involved. There are numerous benchmarks needed to assess and analyze certain movements by specific people or society before they can be approved or classified to be dance.

One of the reasons why dance is largely difficult to classify is probably because it "is not a substance that can be felt, lifted or weighed..." (Nadel, 1978: 1). From this opinion, dance can therefore be regarded as an intangible substance but for the fact that it is carried out through a bodily medium which is physical, it can therefore also be tangible. Moreover, the reasons for which and the ways people dance all over the world differs from tribe to tribe, society to society and country to country making what is acceptable as dance in different societies and countries disparate to the other. The nature and varieties of dances available even in a given society or locality within that same society is also highly diverse. Each dance has its own peculiarity of forms, styles and flow that makes it distinct from others, yet all are seen as dances. Consequently, dance have been looked at and defined from various angles depending on the background and focus of scholars involved.

Dance, therefore, has different definitions from the anthropologists, to philosophers, to historians, to psychologists, to critics, to dancers, to choreographers and dance ethnologists. This is because the nature, complexities and the range of activities that can be called dance are limitless. The fact that what constitute a dance to some people may not be so to others also contributes to these different opinions and unquenchable quest for

appropriate definitions for dance. This is because everyone gives a definition from their own perspectives and the function dance performs to them.

Dance appreciation depends largely on the aesthetics and the worldview of a people. What such people considered as beautiful or pleasing and not contradictory to the accepted norms is therefore accepted to be dance. Aesthetics has been a subject of study among scholars and especially philosophers with various opinions and postulations for a long time. From classical theories of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus through the modern theories of Fichte, Hegel, Kant, Burke to the contemporary theories of aesthetics by Danto (1973), Musa (2001), Kofoworola (2004) and Ododo (2009) the principle of aesthetics refers to the appreciation of the beauty of a performance by people. What is appealing, amusing, attractive and colourful in a performance by the people is the aesthetics of such performance.

This type of judgment is highly personal and peculiar to the observer whose experience, taste, emotion, physiological state, sense of reasoning, cultural values and the general worldview will dictate the basis of his judgment. With such parameters, the appreciation of beauty will no doubt differ from an individual to another and society to societies. Therefore, the ethnographic study of a dance places the aesthetic appreciation of the dance on the totality of what Kofoworola (2004: 3) describes as the physical (tangible) and the non-physical (intangible) elements of the dance. Dance ethnologists look beyond the movements that are seen to consider the cultural essence of the movement, as well as, the space, the physical paraphernalia and the aural accompaniment of the entire movements. This is therefore adding the general worldview of the people to the understanding of a peoples' dance.

Concept of Dance in Yoruba Worldview

Just like most societies in the world, dance took its roots from the traditional festivals of the Yoruba people. It is as old as the society, passed down from generation to generation according to the perception or worldview of the people which makes it conform to the submission of Nicole Note, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Josef Estermann and Diederik Aerts (2009: 1) that;

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A worldview reflects what generations of people have experienced, prior to any conceptual notions. These pre-conscious “experiences” have been and continue to be translated into comprehensible orderings which subconsciously explain how the world ontologically is, becomes, or is experienced.

Dance is a collective property, a way of life and the mode of worship of their gods and deities. It is a common feature at all festivals and ritual ceremonies. This is what was carried on to the theatre when it began. The origin and development of the theatrical dance art in the Yoruba communities is credited to the efforts of the Alarinjo Travelling Theatres (the foremost theatre practitioners of the Yoruba speaking area of Nigeria) who incorporated some of the Yoruba festival dances into their stage performances. Yerima, (2007: 117-118) records that;

By the late 1960s, the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners led by Chief Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, and Kola Ogunmola had established themselves as individual impresarios, actors, composers, musicians, and dramatists. They had used Yoruba dances in their plays first as opening glees, and also as part of the presentations. But ironically, all three projected the Yoruba traditional dances, costumes, dialogue, music in their plays and cultural performances.

This situation made the dance in the theatre performances distinctive from other forms of dances outside the theatre. This tradition was adopted by the ‘Contemporary Yoruba Theatre Practitioners’ (the next stage of the practitioners who built on the achievements of the latter) pioneered by late Hubert Ogunde who spiced his operas with dances (See Ebun Clark 2008). The trend was sustained by other artistes in this genre. The likes of Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Ishola Ogunsola, Jimoh Aliu and a host of others sustained the tradition.

Akinsipe and Babarinde-Hall (2018: 118) posit that “The Yoruba culture, like other cultures in Nigeria, has a long history and dance has remained an intrinsic part of the culture”. Therefore, to say that dance is the

string of life and a very vital tool of harmonious living in Yorùbá culture is not an understatement. From birth to the grave, dance plays prominent roles in all their activities; in beginning, development and the shaping of the peoples' life. It is observed that;

Yoruba Dancing is an important element to the live of the Yoruba Society. Trying to illustrate the importance of dance in the Yoruba culture is almost like trying to illustrate the importance of food in human existence. Dancing, drumming and singing are important to every aspect of life. For example, if you are a fisherman, there are special dances that you would perform along with special drumming and songs (<https://sites.google.com/site/yorubadance7>)

Thus dance permeates all aspects of the lives of Yoruba people.

Dance in Yorùbá culture

Dance (ijó) in the Yorùbá culture is the art of continuous shaking or movement of the body to express joy and fitness. Dance is seen as an outward appearance of the internal blissful condition of the dancer. Ládélé, Mustapha, Awórindé, Oyèrindé and Ọládàpọ̀ (2006: 249) posit that; “nígba tí inú bá dùn, tí ọwọ̀ sì dìlẹ̀ nì a maa n lu ilù, tí a ó maa kọ̀rin tí a ó sì maa jó.” [the drums are played, people sing and dance when they are happy and less busy.] Dance is an expression of good health and fitness. A good dancer is compared to a spinning cone-shaped object - òkòtó. Hence, they say of a dancer “ó n jó bí òkòtó”. That is, “he spins in dancing like the cone object”. The spinning connotes the continuity of the movements for a certain but not too short period. It could be a vigorous or mild movement but the body must sway. Tsevende (2006: 1) agrees with this assertion when she says that “no wonder the Yoruba people of West Africa believe that everyone can dance, as their world view holds that if you cannot move your legs, just sway your body a little”. Hence, they say: “à ì dúró nì'jó”, meaning being that as long as you are not just standing (still), you are dancing.

The study of any Yorùbá dance is a study of the ethnography of the people. Their dances are dictated and controlled by their customs, traditions, norms and religious beliefs. Dance is a major part in the ritual worships of

the Yorùbá people and, this, is inextricable from these rituals. Dance is used as a means of communicating with the gods. Hence, the series of ritual dances spread over the communities. Every ritual or festival has its accompanying dance that is named after the ritual or festival itself, the drums for the ritual or festival, or something to identify it with such a ritual or festival. Hence, bata dance is the dance performed to bata drums and Ogun dance is the dance done at Ogun festivals.

Generally, dance and music are inseparable in the African culture. Green (2018: 4) observes that:

African dance is inseparable from its music. In fact, no dance is performed in Africa without some form of musical accompaniment that ranges from the voice, simple handclaps, or orchestras of percussive instruments. Throughout my research on the continent of Africa, I have not witnessed any African dances that are performed to melodic instruments unless it was a xylophone, balafone, and marimba, as part of a percussive ensemble.

Consequently, dance in the Yorùbá culture is an expression of musical rhythm. That is why every dance movement is usually done to music. It is believed that music or drum is the tonic for dance therefore any Yorùbá person dancing without music is believed to be mad. Ajuwon (1981: 7) confirms this when he says; “Èni tí kò rílù tó mú jó, bí kò bá sínwín, a sì jé p’ó gbà ‘lejò nì” [Whoever dances without drumming, if not already insane, he must be about to be]. Talking about African dance, Euba (1982: 233) submits that “dancing takes place on a great number of musical occasions”.

While music can and is often performed on its own, dance rarely occurs without music in Yorùbá communities. It is believed that for dance to take place there must be some sort of accompanying rhythm even an internal rhythm – an ongoing underlying pulse that may be going on within the dancer that may not be audible to others. Hence, the Yorùbá people say; “ìròmìromi tó ñ jó lóri omi onílù rẹ wà ní isàlẹ odò, meaning that the drummer for the water insect found dancing over the water is beneath the water. Despite the fact that the drummer is not seen and the music not heard, it is believed that a rhythm is coming from an unknown source. There is therefore and usually an

inseparable communicative link between music and dance in Yorùbá land. Where there are drums, a dancer is adjudged to be good if he gives a correct interpretation or responses to the drums dictates. Ládélé, Mustapha, Awórindé, Oyèrindé and Oládàpò (2006: 259) submit that: “*ẹ̀sẹ̀ oníjọ̀ gbọ̀dọ̀ bá ilù mu, ẹ̀ni tí ẹ̀sẹ̀ rẹ̀ kò bá bá ilù mu nì a kà sì ẹ̀ni tí kò mò-ọ̀n jọ̀.*” [the feet of the dancer must correspond with the rhythm of the drum, whoever is not able to coordinate his feet to the drum is regarded as a bad dancer]. This explains the intricate relationship and coordination that must be between the dancer and the drums rhythm.

It is, therefore, not usually normal or possible to see a dance not accompanied with any form of rhythm from songs, drums or at most clapping. Ajayi (1998: 34) affirms that “One other contributory factor to the high communicational value of Yorùbá dances is the accompanying music. Music is an integral part of Yorùbá dances, there is no Yoruba dance that is not performed to some basic music, no matter how simple”. She concludes that “any Yorùbá dance event is actually a dialogue between the music and the body; sometimes the music is dominant, at other times the body gestures dictate the pace, but both are inextricably tied to the main content of the event”.

In Yorùbá land, anybody found dancing is assumed to be in good health. Dancing is thus a show of the general well-being of the dancer in the body, soul and spirit. Yorùbá people will say; “*inú dídùn abẹ̀ ọ̀dẹ̀dẹ̀ níí múnì jọ̀ àjórìn lónà oko*” [what can prompt dancing on the way to the farm is happiness on the home front]. Adeoye (1979: 121) posits that: “*inú didun níí múnì aráya-wá, ẹ̀ni tí inú rẹ̀ bá sì dùn, tí ara rẹ̀ yá yoo yò, yoo sì jọ...*” [happiness connotes well-being, whoever is happy and healthy, will merry and dance...]. Dance, to the Yorùbá people, is therefore an outward expression of inner feelings. Not only that of the dancer but also the welfare of his family members. This is the level of communality of the Yoruba dance, hence the popular saying: “*àgbàlagbà tí a bá lóde tó ń jọ̀, bí ilé san bí kò san tí kúrò lórò tirẹ̀*”, that is, “an elderly one found dancing outside does not need to be asked if all is well or not with his home”. It is assumed that if all is not well with him/her and the family such a dance will not be taking place. Thus, one dances expectedly, when everything is all right with the dancer and his family. The implication is that in the Yorùbá society the

situation of one's family can dictate the extent of one's ability to dance. It will be totally out of place in Yorùbá land, to find anybody bereaved dancing except during the funeral rites for the dead. Or to find anyone related to the bereaved dancing within some days of the calamity. This, perhaps is why Lange (1975:34) describes dance as "the art of expressing the sentiments of the mind..."

This is a pointer to the cultural and collective nature of dance in the Yorùbá society where the problem of one is the problem of all. People have had their social events postponed because somebody related to them or their neighbour is bereaved. It is a general norm that no dancing or merriment is allowed in a society where tragedy has just occurred. Where the occasion is inevitable, the dancing there will be solemn; the prevailing circumstance thereby having influence on the dance. It therefore indicates that the nature, flow and tempo of a dance in the Yorùbá land is a combination of the dance, the dancers and the interests of the entire community.

Yorùbá dances and dancers lay emphasis on the waist area of the body. The body is tilted forward from the torso so that the dancer can manipulate the waist hence they say "Ìbàdí ni ijó wà" [dance is evidenced in the waist]. Ajayi (1998: 35) corroborates this when she states that:

An essential component of the form is the standard posture of Yoruba dances. The upper torso is held forward at an angle of about 120 degrees to the rest of the body while the lower torso is flexed forward at the knees. Getting the proper posture is an important step towards the dance, since it is from this posture that the relevant various body parts starts moving in rhythmical sequence to the music.

This position enables easy and appropriate manipulation of the waist which is therefore rolled, jerked in all directions or moved sensationally, especially by women, during dance. (See Plates 1, 2 and 3 below). The Yorùbá dancers' hands are mostly held in front of the dancer, folded at the elbow joint. The hands are not left loose. The dancer controls the hand and moves them consciously as part of the dance; that is why the Yorùbá say: "Ọwọ gẹgẹ nìí síwájú ijó" [the hand held delicately forward announces the commencement of a dance]. The fingers are typically held together to form a knuckle while

dancing. This they capture in the saying that: "Ijó tó bá ká ni lára láá di ikúùkù jó" [a highly interesting dance is done with a knuckle] (See Plates 1, 2 and 3 below).



Plate 1



Plate 2

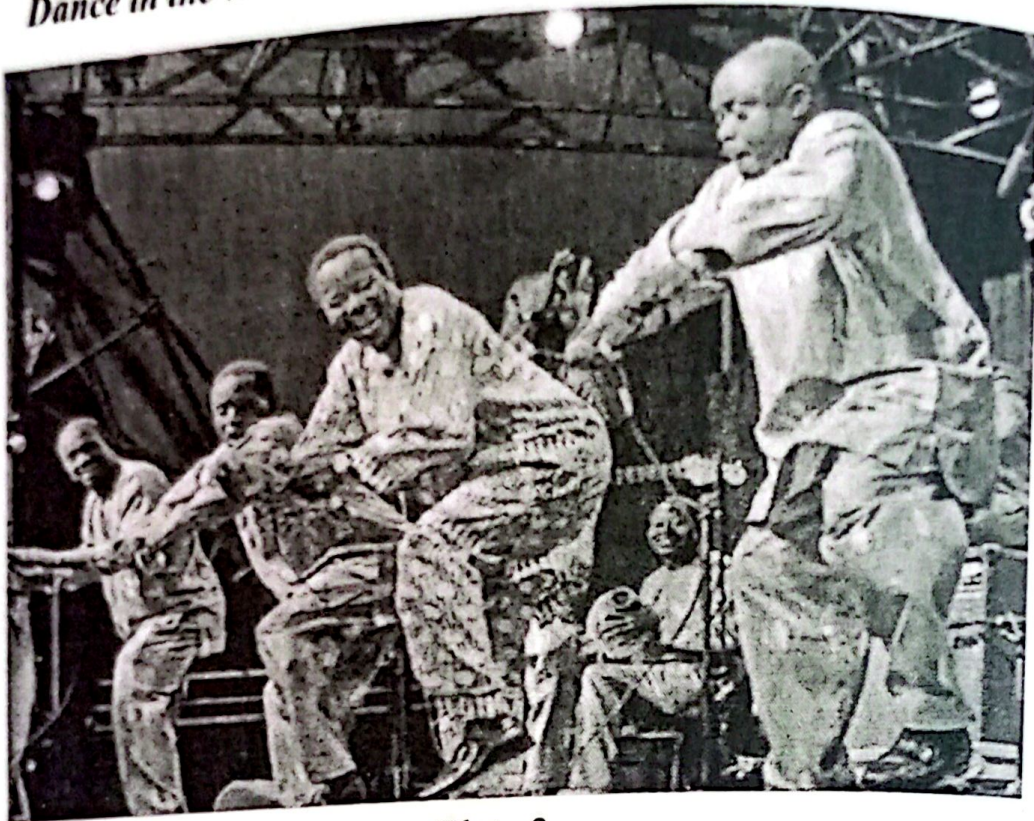


Plate 3

Plates 1, 2 and 3 showing the common postures of Yorùbá dancers. (Source: <https://www.google.com/yoruba+cultural+dancers> Retrieved on 27th January, 2021)

Age is fathomed into dance in the Yorùbá society. It is believed that maturity that comes with age should be expressed in the dance. Only the younger ones are, therefore, expected to dance energetically, the elderly people are expected to dance with some sort of control and dignity. Hence, the two popular sayings; “jẹ́jẹ́ leégùn àgbà n jọ” (an elderly masquerade dances gracefully) and “àgbàlagbà kii jọ lán gbálán gbá” (an elder does not dance indecorously). Young dancers are always presented first while the elders wait and watch. When the elderly takes to the floor it is usually brief and with controlled dexterity.

Yoruba people most often hold the hem of their dress (usually the top as we have in plate 2 above) and fling it around as a part or an extension of the dance. Any movement in the Yoruba society not conforming to the above are not considered and accepted to be a good dance. Yoruba people most often hold the hem of their dress (usually the top) and fling it around as a part or an extension of the dance. Any movement in the Yoruba society not conforming to the above are not considered and accepted to be a good dance. Like when an elder dance without decorum. Anyone caught dancing outside

these norms is said to engage in *ijó iyà* (idiotic dance). It is deemed to be disgusting and not patronized.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to study the Yoruba peoples' manner of dancing in relation to their worldviews. What constitutes acceptable, good and format of dancing are well captured in their proverbs and philosophical sayings which we have explored to document their concept and conception of dance in the society. Every dance and the occasion in which they are performed must obey the rules of the society. One can see vividly that Yoruba dance is rooted in and controlled to a large extent by their cultural beliefs and worldview. Acceptance and appreciation of dances in the communities depend largely on their conformity with the peoples' worldview otherwise it is regarded as repulsive.

*All translations in this paper were done by the writer.

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