

## **Articulated Communication of Ethics and Aesthetic Values in African Dance: A Study of Ikorodo Dance**

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Dance in African ethnic groups is decorated with other forms of arts and well articulated movements to communicate ethnics, values and cultural identity. Every indigenous dance denotes meanings which are translated to and encoded by spectators. The dancer being the channel for transmission of message, while the audiences are the recipient of cultural connotation carried in the message of dance. This communication establishes commonness between the decoder and the encoder. Therefore, cultural aesthetics and meanings are shared within a social experience of dance in Africa. Thus, this paper set to investigate African dance beyond rhythmic movement of any part of body. It investigated the articulation of other forms of art in African dance to communicate meanings, and integration of motor gesture potentials to evoke symbolic ideas; its capability to communicate the culture and philosophy of a people. The paper ends up exposing the conceptual framework of African dance and its communicative power to support a motion or refute contradictions. Data was drawn from traditional dance of the Igbo community, particularly Ikorodo dance of Oba/Nsukka, Enugu state of Nigeria. Related literatures were also reviewed.

### **Introduction**

Traditional dance in Africa is born out of African culture, therefore every indigenous African dance is culturally patterned. The signifiers and symbolic body movements expressed by dancers are embedded in the cultural background and life experiences of the people. Thus, it goes beyond mere rhythmic movement of the body as is often defined. African indigenous dance integrates other forms of African arts and aesthetics such as, costume, masquerade, instruments etc. the environment, geographical location and occasion of the dance also contribute in the articulation of its meaning.

Dance basically makes use of non verbal signals to communicate. Every bodily expressions and movements are rhythmically blended to communicate the emotions and the intended meaning of the dancer. Dance

in Africa possesses the element of entertainment but it also focuses more on sharing conceptual ideas of the dancer. The conceived idea may first start as psychological or emotional process, and then end up in social experience where both the dancer and the spectator share in the common experience. It exploits both locomotive and non-locomotive movements, facial expressions and body structure to tell stories that are of cultural and communal importance. This implies that there is a complementary relationship in communication between rhythmic movement of the body in space, time, and the application of cultural tendencies and aesthetic in sharing meaningful ideas within a social experience of traditional African dance.

### **Concept of Dance**

Dance is the art of rhythmical movement to music that follows a set of sequential steps. Some scholars perceive it as a series of steps and movements that match the speed and rhythm of a piece of music. Longman dictionary of contemporary English described dance in two ways, first, as a special set of movements performed to a particular type of music and secondly, as a movement of feet and body in a way that matches the style and speed of music. Plato, a popular Greek philosopher said that ‘Dance is an instinctive desire to explain words by gesture’. Aristotle described it as an imitation of actions, characters and passions by means of gesture and rhythmical movement. According to Encyclopedia Britannica (1971), Dance is the art of moving the body in a rhythmical way, usually to music, to express an emotion or idea, to narrate a story or simply to delight in the movement itself. Dance therefore, is commonly performed by humans since it is an articulated movement to music with the aim of expressing ideas and emotions

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is anchored on expression theory of art. Expression theory of art in encyclopedia of Aesthetics claims that art should be viewed as the expression of the mind of the artist his or her emotions, feelings, thoughts. Theory of expression embraces conscious expression of experiences, emotions, ideas, imaginations etc. and dance expression falls into this category. According to Milton and Carole (1979) dance is the last stronghold of the expression theory. This is readily understandable because dance, in contrast to paint and bronze which are not literally expressive, is composed of humans and expression terms are paradigmatically applied to humans. Onwuka (2012) argued that dance is a functional art. It is the

expressive medium of the body, an outward interpretation of musical rhythms and movements that is sensuously carried out by the human affective domain. However, since dance is an expressive art, expression theory of art is necessary in the study of dance.

### **Dance and Communication**

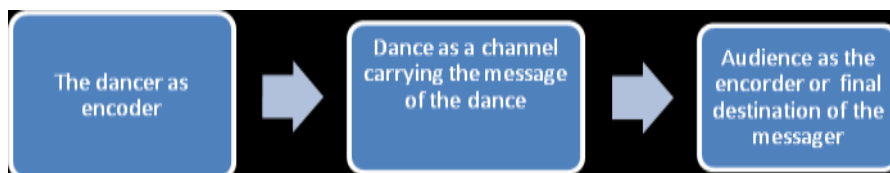
Dance is an expressive human behavior. Many dance scholars and philosophers have proved that only human can dance. Hanna (1987), in her exploration of African dance from the rural villages shows that it is as human to dance as it is to learn, to build, or to fight. She further describes dance as human thought and feeling expressed through the body: it is at once organized physical movement, language, and a system of rules appropriate in different social situations. She offers a theory of dance, drawing on work in anthropology, semiotics, sociology, communications, folklore, political science, religion, and psychology as well as the visual and performing arts.

Although, some animals like chimps, dogs, parrots, etc can choreograph a dance performed by man if trained, but they cannot express emotions like human, neither can they express the same level of symbolization that man can articulate and connote in the act of dancing. This was as a result of extensive development of human brain. The capacity for neurological cross-modal cortical connections allows relatively unlimited expansion of symbolization which necessitates appreciation of an object, and the ability to associate it with a picture, label or other elements which denotes it. (Gardner 1973:90, Hewes 1973:7)

Owing to the fact that limbic region which makes up most of the cerebral cortex is appreciably developed in human, only human can communicate through connotations and signifying of ideas in their dance. This is because limbic region of the brain is relevant for language, tools making and dance. (Geschwind 1973). Therefore, only human can communicate to her audience. In response, audiences decode the connotations and respond accordingly to prove that communication has taken place.

Communication on the other hand is the establishment of commonness between the encoder also referred to as the source and decoder also known as receiver. It is a way of transmitting conceived ideas and sharing common understanding with the receiver. Proper communication requires at least three elements. They include *the source*, *the message*, and *the destination*.

In the case of dance situation, the source is the same person as the dancer, the message is the act of dancing itself which is the same as the channel, while the receiver or destination is the same as the audience. See illustration below,



However, the term dance basically refers to the movement of the body in a rhythmic pattern usually, with the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion. Encyclopedia Britannica (2008) states that the most basic motive of dance is the physical expression of inner emotion. Boas [1955] defined dance as the rhythmic movement of any part of the body. It is an expressive human behavior. Dance is human thought and feeling expressed through the body: it is at once organized physical movement, language, and a system of rules appropriate in different social situations. It occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements. In this context, Dance is an intellectual and cultural involvement in the idioms of rhythmic motor activities of the body.

### **Dance in African Context**

Dance in African context, is refers to the indigenous dance of African people, which are culturally or traditionally stimulated. It is the most popular and common art form of African expression. Dance expression in Africa utilizes symbolic gestures, imitative acts, and other visual devices like masks and body painting. Dance in Africa is primarily for the purpose of sharing ideas, expression of emotions, themes, with the aid of rhythmic gesticulation or body movement. The incorporation of the costumes, paintings, masquerade, body painting and cultural traits in the dance is to maximally employ various visual media for social, cultural and spiritual expressions. Indigenous African dance is basically a form of media communication which incorporates the historical and traditional perspective of the people that own it. Onwuekwe (2009), argues that,

In Africa, the dancer is more than a performer, the dancer is also a teacher, a historian, a social commentator, a celebrant,

a spiritual medium, a healer, and a storyteller.... 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. African dance often has a strong narrative role.

In like manner, Okafor (2005), submits, that dance is an 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.

### **Ikorodo Dance of Oba Nsukka Community Of Igbo Ethnicity**

*Ikorodo* dance of Oba in Nsukka is an indigenous dance of Oba community. This dance is very prominent around Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. It is usually performed at occasions of cultural celebrations and seasons. It exhibits great deal of signifiers and symbolisms in the expression of her ideas. Every stage of this dance is symbolically structured in a way that it communicates meanings that are clearly understood by both the dancer as a sender, and the audience members as the receiver.

In any event or occasion where *Ikorodo* dance is to be displayed, dancers do not begin until the field is set and spectators are well seated waiting for dancers to come and display their dances. Audiences usually seats in a circular form or semicircular form in their village square known as *Otobo*, leaving the centre as the space for the dancers to display their dance. In a circular sitting, an opening is usually systematically created by the spectators themselves, such opening serves as a holloway through which the dancer make their way into the centre of the *Otobo*. *Ikorodo* dance group traditionally have their first performance in the community's *Otobo* (village square) for some traditional reasons. First, for the enjoyment of the community that owns the dance, secondly, to receive the blessing and support of the entire community. This allows the elderly members of the

community to shower their blessing and prayer to the dance group and their entire community, while chief priests mediate between the people and their ancestors beyond. Every member of the community participates in one way or the other in support of their communal dance group. This maiden performance is usually not received in any other venue other than Otobo to ensure reception of the ancestors too. These are done before the dance group can go outside their community on invitation or other cultural activities. Otobo serves as a muster point for communal event for communities around Nsukka Local Government Area.

*Ikorodo* dance is usually an outdoor performance involving every community members either as an active or passive participant. The *Ikorodo* dance usually appears in three different stages. At the initial stage of the dance performance, the lead dancers first step out in a rhythmic walk pattern, throwing their legs and arm to connote welcome greetings to the participant audience seated. As they dance around, their welcoming smiles and facial expressions complement the communications of the rhythmic movements. The number of dancers involves at this stage of the dance ranges from one to three. The number variation depends largely on the groups. While the dancers are expressing their gratitude to audience, a melodic instrument like *Oja* (Local Flute) or *Opi* (Animal trunk) is played alongside following the speech pattern of the community to reflect the intended meaning of the dancers. This would enable effective communication of the conceived ideas, as well as, praising prominent people and royalties amongst them. Their primary aim of this instrumental accompaniment is to function as additional art form in the expression of the dance.

This whole initial gestures and displays are traditionally referred to as *Igbu Omanyangala* in Nsukka language and some parts of Enugu state. Some other parts of Igbo communities like Anambra state have it as *Itu Unya*. *Omanyangala* is a gracious walk and rhythmic gestures well encoded to express or communicating the intentions of the entire dance group. Even though, only few members of the group are seen at this very stage, they symbolically represent and reflect the ideas of the entire group. Therefore, *omanyangala* dancers who are the lead dancers are not on their own, rather they function as part of a group. They serve multiple functions, as introductory section of the dance or prelude and to express welcome greetings to the audience and signal the readiness of the group to start their dance performance. This would help to prepare audience mind and emotion to receive the dance. On the other hand *Omanyangala* dancers serve as the

eyes of the group. As they are pouring out their greetings to the spectators, they also observe the preparedness of the field and the audience to receive them which will be communicated to the group as they dance back. Their report to the group will either make the group to start performance immediately or send forth another group to sensitize the audience the more.

This particular gesture is not just dance pattern but reflection of life pattern in Igbo community where every member of the community functions as a part of the whole. Non African spectators would wonder why all these protocols. Most importantly, this reflects the true life and communal living pattern that exist in traditional Africa society. The traditional rulers and chief priest set the rhythm of life in their community by their consultation with ancestors. Other members of the community sit back and wait for them to consult and communicate back to them. The reports of the chief priests from the gods will determine whatever steps to be taken by the entire community. When the traditional rulers or chief priests go on negotiations with the gods of the land, they do not do it for themselves nor for their families alone, rather, it is done in favour and benefits of every member of that community. If they do it well, the whole community enjoys it, but if they flout in any way, the entire community suffers the consequence. So, every individual in the community functions for the success of their traditions and cultures. When success is recorded the entire community rejoices, dancing in expression of victory and thanks to their gods, but in a situation when failure surfaces, the entire community would be in the state of agony and distress.

In the same manner, when the lead dancer goes back to the group and expresses positive report, the dancers would immediately follow them to the centre of the audience for real dance performance. In a situation where a negative report was given to the dance group via bodily expression, the dancers will remain in their corner while the lead dancers would take yet another turn out until such a time the audience communicate their readiness to receive the dance through their expressive response which may include, winking of their eyes, nodding of their heads and waving of their hands. These show the readiness of everybody in the field to receive the dance.

African traditions greatly emphasize dance, the movements involved are seen as an important mode of communication. For this purpose the dance utilizes symbolic gestures, mime, props, masks, costumes, body painting, and other visual devices to express their ideas. The basic movements may be simple or complex. But in all, they involve coordination of different parts of the body and intricate actions such as fast rotation, ripples of the body, and

contraction and release, as well as variations in dynamics, levels, and use of space. The dance may be open to all, or it may be an activity in which one, two, three, or four individuals (regardless of sex) take turns in the dancing ring. Group dancing is more popular. The formations may be linear, circular, serpentine, or columns of two or more rows. In all, which ever form or style that is adopted in the expression of African dance, it goes a long way to tell stories, histories, replicate way of life and various other pertinent issues around and within the communities. (Boas 1955). Nketia (1962) argues thus,

no one who has had the opportunity of seeing an African festival or a public ceremony or the opportunity of watching some other occasions on musical performances would disagree with the assertions that music is a dominant form of artistic expression in African social life nor would he quarrel with many descriptions that abound of its functional importance or its use as an outlet for emotional, as a vehicle for verbal expression and as special means of action or a means of communication.

In every dance in Africa, the conceptualized ideas are put forward as signifiers which are meant to be decoded by the members of the audience. The dance patterns are figurative and symbolical in the actual meaning, which make its reception more effective in a homogeneous community of common culture and language.

### **Conclusion**

Dancing in the actual sense is part of human movement, it is also a means of human communication through bodily expressions and gestures. Dance from any culture expresses symbolically the belief and norms of the people or culture that owns it. Dance is used to symbolize the experiences of life. It is also a means of penetrating the spiritual realms in Africa. It encompasses the integration of gestures as a way to heal the sick, a means of praying and praising the gods, a way of encouraging the young to gracefully and confidently transit from childhood to adulthood and creating awareness to the entire community involved. It is in its totality a representation and communication of community life and culture in Igbo community. To the inhabitants of African nations, the history and traditions of the dance and movement center on communicating ideas to their spectators.

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