The Nature of Nigerian Dance: A Dialectical Overview

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Abstract
Nigerian dance in performance is usually questioned on the issues of significance and connotation of the movements employed. Spectators, especially indigenous ones observe the dance mainly from a cultural insight, and all appurtenances accompanying the dance are appreciated as a whole, and even given interpretations. An example is masquerade dance. Obviously, the dance movement of a particular masquerade cannot be appreciated without the costume, props, chants, songs, instrumentation, ritualism and other components that accompany the masquerade dance. These are enjoyed by the audience not only for their aesthetic value but also for their functional purposes. This means that Nigerian dance is mainly utilitarian in nature. This paper is therefore a review of the components making up Nigerian dance. From evidence gathered, it is clear that Nigerian traditional dance goes beyond moving the body in space and time especially for aesthetic purpose, but inculcates different cultural syndromes which demonstrate the actual nature of Nigerian dance.

Key Words: Nigerian Dance, Dialectical Overview, Cultural Undertones, Utilitarian Motives, Spiritual Entity, Traditional Dance.

Introduction
In every society, dance is accepted as an integral component of its existence. Everyone or indigene is culturally conscious of his or her traditional dance; which is more or less the person’s mark of identity. In this regard, dance is not seen merely as an aesthetic or artistic endeavour, but as a way of life or the actual life of the people. The culture of the people is therefore represented in the dance and, or presented in its authentic state; a typical example is a veritable ritual dance which is efficacious.

Nigerian traditional dances have cultural undertones which depict or demonstrate the life of the people. In fact, Nigerian traditional dance is not complete without the functions of such cultural nuances. These cultural nuances are pointers to the nature of Nigerian dance; they help us to
characterise or describe the indigenous Nigerian dance in its proper perspective. The nature of Nigerian dance can therefore be recognised through the cultural behaviours of the people, which include spiritual, ceremonial, social, political, occupational, educational, entertainment and recreational behaviours of the people. All these are often displayed in the dance. The emphasis on these cultural undertones indicates that the paper is guided by the theory of social sciences; the discourse is therefore, to a large extent a socio-cultural one.

A Dialectical Overview of Nigerian Dance
The origin of Nigerian dance has been described by many scholars, such as Begho, Ogunbiyi and Layiwola, as ‘speculative’. In Clark’s perception, Nigerian dance has a ritual origin. He informs that the origin is from “early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the Yoruba, egwugwu and mmo masques of the Ibo and the owu and oru water masquerades of the Ijaw” (58). Two other scholars supporting the ritual origins of dance are Apel who sees it as “primarily ritualistic” (222), and Mbiti, who notes that Nigerians are deeply religious in their ways of life, including dance. According to Amah, Nigerian ritual dance identifies with “three phases of existence”: “the world of the living (present), the world of the dead (past) and the world of the unborn (future)”. Krama’s notion of Nigerian ritual dance is slightly different from Amah’s view as expressed above. For him, Nigerian ritual dance expresses a tripartite world view where the dead, the living and the gods are linked in a cyclic order (33). Both Amah and Krama emphasise the continual interaction of the world of the living and the spiritual. When an old citizen dies, he is said to have gone to join the ancestors in the spiritual realm. This is seen as a state of transition, and some deceased take over new mantles as deities. These dead ancestors as gods as well as other deities are usually commemorated through grand and spectacular exhibitions which Horton describes as ‘festivals’ such as those happening among the Ekine people of Kalabari (96). Horton concentrates here on the ‘village heroes’, ‘water people’ and the ‘dead’ who are all represented by their characteristic masquerades (94). Horton reveals that these masquerades are carried by humans who portray the deities through their characteristic movements. Horton explains further that a particular god is brought to the village or community through three different means. These are through the masquerade which represents the god and worn by the performer; through mime where the person inside the masquerade demonstrates characteristic movement gestures of the god; and through
possession where the masker takes leave of his senses and dances under the spell of the god (103).

The interaction between the corporeal and the incorporeal worlds through dance is expressed by Monyeh as follows:

Dance is an avenue for total expression of natural and the supernatural. A masquerade in its performance communicates to the living and the underworld. In this case there is the relationship with the world of the living and the world of the spirit. The body could make the invisible concrete thus creating a completely self-contained world for dancers in which they can perform physical feats and prowess which are far beyond normal daily occurrence or normal movement (111).

Apart from observing Nigerian dance as ritual, some scholars are of the view that it is a total expression of the life of a people. Akunna reviews this as “a manifestation… of the socio-political, economic, religious and aesthetic life of the people” (15). This goes on to express the total presence of dance in the life of the people. For Harper, “dance is an integral part of life” (5). But Lo-Bamijoko and Asante go beyond reviewing Nigerian dance as an integral aspect of life to seeing it as life itself. Buttressing this view, Bame emphasises that the Nigerian man is a “real man of dance … to him dance … is a way of thinking, living and communicating” (7). Similarly, Fodeba expresses that man is able to communicate with his kinship, his community, and even with his environment (21).

Dance in Nigeria, according to Ojuade, begins with the birth of a child which “elucidates dancing activities of joyful movement” (238). Ojaide refers to this as a symbolic communal renewal and revitalisation (45). Harper notes that the child, while developing to maturity is celebrated at different stages. This she refers to as the rite of passage which culminates in death. She reports that:

Dance plays a cathartic role during the key transition from one social state to another: a child is welcomed into the community at his naming ceremony; an adolescent is initiated into the responsibilities of adult life; a woman moves from her paternal home to join her husband’s family; an elder receives recognition for service in the form of a
title; a member leaves the community to join the world of the spirits (3).

Nigerian dance has been described by scholars like Ziky Kofoworola and Onuora Enekwe as a socio-religious activity where the people engage in communal ceremonial activities which Enekwe highlights as “festivals, ceremonials and masquerade”. Ulli Beier also endorses the socio-religious function of dance. He is quoted here by Graft:

The ritual dance always takes place at night. It is preceded by sacrifice and accompanied by praise songs and prayer. It culminates in the appearance of Efe – a powerful mask – preceded by a young girl who carries a witch in the form of a bird in a calabash … the dance that usually follows the next afternoon is more interesting for the avowed purpose of this dance is to provide entertainment to the witches and keep them in good temper – and – of course – at the same time entertain the townspeople at large who had been excluded from the night ceremony. (gtd. in Graft 8).

Harper expands on the discourse by stating that Nigerian dance fulfils several functions simultaneously apart from the social and religious. However, there is always one overt function on which other subsidiary functions depend. These several functions described by Harper include: “religious, ritual or ceremonial; expression of a pattern of social organisation; expression of political hierarchy or organisation; economic or occupational; expression of history or mythology; educational; recreational and entertainment” (6).

Apart from appreciating the ritual function of Nigerian dance, Krama observes that “the social purpose of Nigerian dance is largely dependent on social forces which encourage people to interact with one another leading to the creation of dance forms and styles” (21). Enekwe corroborates this feeling of togetherness where members understand themselves and express a sense of solidarity. According to him:

The beauty of Nigerian dance lies in its combination of purposefulness and high aesthetic concern, its celebration and reflection of communal life and virtue, its seeking to unite the dancer with the dance, its embodiment of the
collective beliefs and symbols, which constitute both the structure and content of the art, and its ideal frankness and intensity of expression (28).

Angol, supporting Enekwe, emphasises that the cultural and functional properties of Nigerian dance “stretched beyond the aesthetic” (6). It is in the light of this that Clark, Bakare, Dasylva and Ogundeji argue that there is nothing such as dance for dance sake in Nigeria. Dances are always done with utilitarian motives and not for overt “aesthetic enjoyment” (Adedeji 93). However, it is in satisfying the utilitarian objective that the aesthetic is appreciated.

Ugolo makes us to understand that the utilitarianism of Nigerian dance lies in the coded movements and symbols executed by the dancers which are readily found within the culture of the people (29). This expressive characteristic of Nigerian dance makes it a very vital tool for communication in the society. The human nature of the Nigerian man in achieving his realistic dance expression is influenced by his emotional response to the music; Enekwe adds that the love for such music inspires him to dance (30).

Occupational dance in Nigeria is mostly based on mimesis. It is normally observed by professionals as a form of relaxation and entertainment after a hard day’s job. They use this dance form to demonstrate the nature of their profession with the aim of amusing themselves. Such is the case with the popular Swange dance which developed from songs and dances the farmers used in entertaining themselves at leisure. It is interesting to note that movements associated with different occupations have been developed into full-fledged dance performances. Harper below describes some of these performances:

In Nigeria, Nupe fishermen are renowned for their net throwing, which they formalise into dance patterns, and young Irigwe farmers on the Jos Plateau leap to encourage the growth of crops at festivals related to the agricultural cycle. Occupational guilds and professional organisations of experts, such as blacksmiths, hunters, or wood-carvers have their own expressive dances. Hunters may re-enact their exploits or mime the movements of animals as a ritual means of controlling wild beasts and allaying their own fears (16).
Beier describes recreational dance in Nigeria as similar to folk dances where people with similar interests organise themselves into groups and entertain themselves. This normally takes place in the evenings where people in the villages meet to engage in informal dancing. Beier reflects that this was how Agbor traditional dance began (241).

Various scholars have defined Nigerian dance to include various expressive modes: Monyeh says that “Nigerian dance expresses movement, mime, costume, make up, music and song” (111); for Ogene, it includes “sculpturing, painting, ceramics, graphics, and textiles” (196); Anigala sees Nigerian dance expressing “characters, mime, mask and music” (29); and Graft, “mime and music” in dance. (9). For Osanyin, there is an incorporation of “music, dance, poetry, masking and topicality” (154); Adedeji notes: “the inclusion of mimetic masks, chants, song, gesture, costume, myths, legends, folktales, sculptures and other artistic manifestations” (139); Nzewi also observe the expression of “mime, gymnastics and acrobatics” (433); and lastly Monyeh notices the expression of “movement, mime, costume, makeup, music and song in Nigerian dance” (111). All these modes subsume into dance performance where they become living arts (Osanyin 155).

The incorporation of all these artistic expression is what Ugolo refers to as ‘total theatre’ when he states that “Nigerian conception of dance art is holistic and total in nature” (72). This holistic nature of Nigerian dance is supported by Oyewo when he notes that “performance/theatre and the visual arts” are the hallmarks of African festival dance presentation. For Ogunba, the success of this integration culminates into a carnival of dance and drama (4).

Dance is seen by Enekwe as a very essential instrument to masquerade display (13). For Okoye, “dance is the fundamental medium of performance during festivals” (242). Focusing on the Igbo masquerade, Okoye reveals that its movement “ranges from simple and often spontaneous body movements to intricate and sophisticated dancing; and from solo to highly choreographed formation dances” (242). The masker which Nzekwu says represent gods, the dead, ancestors, and, or any spiritual being in the community have different characteristic movements to symbolise their identities and worldviews (133). According to Ogene, “the exposition of any mask reveals a dual identity; the personality of the masker and the spiritual entity behind the mask. This spiritual entity of the mask influences the dance movement of the masker (205). He adds that the Ijele dance reveals information about the society from which it originates.
According to Ogundeji, a masker or dancer can assume a “state of spiritual ecstasy” at which he has no more control of his action but the spiritual entity in him (9). This experience is usually a temporary one where the dancer appears to have been transformed and therefore executes movements that are beyond the ordinary. Onwuejeogwu reflects on the Bori dance example when the spirit called Mai-gangaddi, also known as ‘the nodding one’, a spirit responsible for sleeping sickness, possesses a female dancer initiated into the Bori cult. When this spirit inhabits her, she dances and suddenly dozes off in the middle of some act and wakes up and sleeps again and wakes…” (gtd. in Onwuejeogwu 204). Harper equally informs us about the performance of a priest of Sango, a god in the Yoruba pantheon who “dances into a state of deep trance … expressing the wrath of the god of thunder with the lightening speed of his arm gestures and the powerful roll of his shoulders” (3).

The audience in traditional dance is a vital component and determines the success of the dance performance. This is the view of Adedeji who insists that the audience “completes the cycle of communication” with its reception and participation (93. Kunene observes the interaction between the audience and performers as a “normal and natural process that does not require rules for its application” (xvi). Enekwe adds that skilful demonstration from performers usually earns audience appreciation and applause (6). On the other hand, an audience may not be patient to express its disapproval when a performance fails to be impressive. This is why Gore observes the role of the audience as the “community aesthetic arbiter by displaying or withholding its approval, and as social check when an individual performer is being over-assertive by dancing for too long” (62).

Nigerian dance has been illustrated by scholars as an art that is always influenced and complemented by music. Such scholars as Aluede and Erege, Tracy, Nketa and Akpabot have all affirmed that Nigerian dance cannot exist without its correspondent musical accompaniment. Omojola refers to them as “inseparable artistic twin” (38). McQuirter in her review writes that “dance cannot be studied apart from its symbiotic relationship to music…. This may not be far from the fact that music and dance as transient rhythmic arts are used by man to express his emotion. This is similar to Kinni-Olusesanyin’s position when she states that the Nigerian society uses “music and dance to incite or to exhibit emotion” (55). Enekwe emphasises the practice of the musicians and dancers who apply every necessary step to ensure that their relationship is ever cordial during any dance experience. While the dancer is encouraged by the rhythm of the
musician, the musician in turn ensures that the music does not contradict the steps and movements of the dancer. Enekwe explains further:

The Nigerian dance is characterised by a formalised rapport between musician and dancers. There is active interaction between them. The music does not merely accompany the dancer. Both encounter each other, sometimes in a dialectical sense. For example, in the *Atilogwu* dance of the Igbo, instead of merely dancing to the rhythm of the music supplied by the musicians, the dancer often challenges the instrumentalists who are obliged to follow his dance steps (26).

Some dances are named after their musical accompaniment, instrument or song. According to Achudume (qtd in Uche 96) *Egwu Amala* dance “was first called *Egwu Ogene*. He reports further that *Egwu Ogene* is a “slit wooden drum used in the accompaniment of the Amala dance”. Another example is *Swange* dance which originally comes from the songs sung by Tiv farmers during their leisure times.

In the relation of dance to music, Aluede asserts that Nigerian dance “could be a distinct art form devoid of music” (95). He sustains his argument by citing various dances that are spontaneously executed. An example is the joyful dance executed by a person on hearing of the birth of a child. Surely, he or she does not require the attendance of professional musicians to supply him or her with the requisite rhythm to dance. Nabofa also informs us about a performance by the Igbe religious group of the Urhobo people. He claims that the dance is done without any musical accompaniment save the “percussion produced by the beat of their bare feet” (18). This brings to mind Nathan’s observation that man as an endogamous being has rhythm built into his central nervous system. This is called the “circadian rhythms”. This apparently is enough for him to create his personalised rhythm in order to achieve dancing especially when it is spontaneous. This sense of spontaneity inspires the Nigerian man to dance.

Nigerian traditional music is noted by scholars to thrive more on different rhythmic structures and stylistic expressions; where different rhythms and counter rhythms are played mainly on percussive instruments. Such rhythm and counter rhythm are rightly described by Gore as complex and polyrhythmic. Esi Kini-Olusanyin, who describes this as “polyphony”, discloses that the contrasting and complex rhythmic composition is equally
experienced in the movement of the anatomy where different parts accomplish different movements. Senghor notes that these variations or complex movement engages the entire body or every part of the dancer’s anatomy (33).

Aluede observes that the dancer, in response to the complexity of Nigerian dance, develops, or is required to get himself attuned to the “psychomotor skill”. Psychomotor is rightly defined in Encarta as “physical and mental activity” where body movement is “triggered by mental activity, especially voluntary muscle action.”

**Conclusion**
The nature of Nigerian dance is first motivated by biological experience where the Nigerian man simply expresses his natural function of movement, especially in relation and reaction to his environment. Dance at this juncture is seen as life. The attribute of dance as life is manifested in the various activities or engagements of the Nigerian man which include social, ritual, educational, occupational, recreational, ceremonial, political, and the like. These engagements, which are clearly demonstrated through dance, indicate that the nature of Nigerian dance is primarily utilitarian and down-to-earth.

**WORKS CITED**


