

Conceptualizing African Dance Theatre

Dele Layiwola,
Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

1. Statement of the Problem

The group of non-western performances variously referred to as Ethnic dances [Murray, 1979]; Folk dances [Kurath, 1949]; Festivals [Cazeneuve, 1957; Bastide, 1958; Metraux, 1958; Malinowski, 1922; and Duvignaud, 1965, 1973] manifest both as elements of religion, ritual, sports or pastime. It is true that dance, or indeed performances of most kinds, create a borderline between art and religion but when taken as a vocation, the application of skill and innovation becomes an issue. This is because religious experience consists of both intuition and skill in varying complementarity.

James Mooney observes about the ghost dance of American Indians both aspects of faith as well as that of historical awakening:

What tribe or nation has not had its golden age...when women were nymphs and dryads and men were gods and heroes? And when the race lies crushed beneath an alien yoke, how natural is the dream of a redeemer, an Arthur, who shall return from exile or awake from some long sleep to drive out the usurper and win back for his people what they have lost. The hope becomes a faith and the faith becomes the creed of priests and prophets, until the hero is a god and the dream a religion, looking to some great miracle of nature for its culmination and accomplishment. The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew Messiah, the Christian millennium, and the Hesunanin of the Indian Ghost dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope or longing common to all humanity [1965:1 as quoted in Royce, 1977:24]

Dance as a performative concept had always underlain the first fundamental response of faith and the hope of man's redemptive consciousness [Layiwola, 1996]. It is okay that Mooney has made a pan-cultural reference but I intend to narrow it down to our experience in West and East Africa. But before then, it is pertinent to adopt the affirmation, on the dance, of the Sufi mystic, Jalallu'ddin Rumi who, in the 13th century, wrote that 'whosoever knoweth the power of the dance, dwelleth in God'. This will seem to confer the powers of spectacle and creativity on the techniques of the dance. I shall, therefore, attempt an analysis of spectacle and creativity in (i) Gelede and Obatala dance dramas of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and (ii) the dramaturgical

experiment by the Tanzanian playwright, Mukotani Ruyendo in *The Contest* [1977].

II Theoretical Positions in African Dance Studies

A. Instances of Ritual Fusion

- (i) The famous Gelede dance drama of the Yoruba indicates a disparity between male and female roles in established polities. The roles are then temporarily reversed in that the dominant male becomes subservient to the fairer sex. The consequent mode is that a transvestite dancer emerges as the compromise of the fusion between the male and female. Theoretically, equilibrium is temporarily established.
- (ii) Another instance of ritual condensation and fusion is exemplified in the Obatala festival dance at Ede, a traditional Yoruba town [Beier, 1959]. On the second day of the festival, a sacred dance, not unlike a passion play, is enacted. The ritual personality of Obatala, the god of creation bifurcates into two complementary priesthoods. One is *Ajagemo* depicted as elder, and the other, *Olunwi*, a temperamental and ferocious junior. These two complementary aspects of the personality clash. *Ajagemo* is taken prisoner but later ransomed to the delight of all. The dance resolves the conflict whereby suffering and atonement is graphically demonstrated as the component of the god's as well as the elder's personality.

B An Instance of Ritual Disjunction

- (iii) Dance is here reduced to a ritual play where there is an open contest on the arena of public opinion. Mukotani Ruyendo draws upon the epic-heroic form of a diverse but related culture cluster – the Bahima, Banyankole, Bakiga and Banyarwanda of western Uganda; the Bahaya of Northwestern Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi.

It must be born in mind that African performance studies and choreology recognize that the arena of dance is a 'battlefront' where the performer does not only confront the antagonist but also other related forces of margins and spaces. The ace dancer or performer is therefore a protagonist and warrior.

The theatrical conflict is even more profound in that it is compounded by the fact that the visual content of African dance performance extends beyond the third dimension. Nketia refers to this aspect of dancing as 'polyrhythmic' whilst Robert Farris Thompson [1979] refers to the same phenomenon as 'multimetric'. This infers that linear forms of notation as in Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh are not sufficiently representative. Because of concerns with

linear, geometric forms, ballet dancers seek to contend with the laws of gravity and create the impression of extraordinary lightness [Murray, 1979: 48]. But African dance steps depend on rhythmic patterns and puts premium on weight transfer and counterbalancing. Much like Indian dances, therefore, skills consist in extraordinary manipulation of definite muscles of the physiognomy, shoulder blades, the solar plexus, the torso and the tarsal and metatarsals. In Indian Kathakali, it is even carried further in isolating muscles of the eyes, neck and knuckles for definitive manipulation.

III Methodology

In terms of social science and humanities terminologies, I shall adopt anthropological and structuralist theories of performance after Tambiah [1979]; Mitchell [1959]; Royce [1980]; Duvignaud [1973]; Murray [1979]; Tierou [1989] and Ajayi [1998]. There is a sense in which the structure of societies or nationalities replicates themselves in symbolic expressions whilst expressions, fears and affectations of the individual represent themselves as intuition and skills. But there may be an intersection of the two where group dances depend on individualist projections as opposed to group identification. Group performances excel in ideological pursuits whilst individual projections manifest as skills. Performance analysis must therefore derive their structure from the totality of the purpose of the art as well as the role of the player in the particular craft. The skill is the overall application of the cognitive, affective contribution of the individual.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to advocate a concept of analysis and notation, which takes into consideration ritual and religious issues which go beyond the fourth and fifth dimensions of space and matter. It is only in this regard that a holistic experience can be derived from the African dance experience. One bold, innovative but seminal experimentation that has so far been introduced is that of the Ivorian dance teacher and analyst, Alphonse Tierou in what he calls the Eternal Law of African Dance [Harwood, 1992]. What is not clear in his conceptualization is whether his sculptural emphasis is on postural identification as a means to an end or whether these are ends in themselves. This paper recommends that identifiable postures should seek to be means to sacred, metaphoric ends.

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