

SIGNIFYING SYMBOLS IN TRADITIONAL DANCE:A STUDY OF NKWANWITE DANCE

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Abstract

The use of iconic symbols during traditional indigenous performances (Dance), has remained an indispensable tool. The major problem facing the use of signifying symbols during performances is because, they are seen as mere cultural artifacts or for aesthetic flexibility display. These assumptions might be generally accepted, but in core dance scholarship is not acceptable and must be redressed through this paper. The aim of this paper is to communicatively interpret some of the signifying symbols, used in dance towards understanding their socio-cultural essence. Objectively, this paper would analyze the signifying symbols used in Nkwanwite traditional dance for the following reasons: (a) To acknowledge the use of cultural symbols as part of people's mythology belief. (b) To interpret, analyze and document the signifying symbols as a socio-communicative tool. (c) To give each of the signifying symbols, sense of belonging and value wherever they exist in the dance. In order to achieve this; Sense Making Theory would be used as theoretical frame work towards interrogating the essence of the signifying symbols. From the findings, due to lack of interpretation and documentation on the use of signifying symbols in dance. It is gradually going into extinction or mis-classify as mere props. In conclusion, non dance scholars should

always attribute meaning to every signifying symbols used in traditional dances beyond the aesthetics perception; because in them people's cultural identity and sustainability are imbedded.

Keywords: Traditional Dance, Nkwanwite, Mythology Belief, Sense Making Theory

Introduction

Dance as an art used non-verbal forms to communicate with its audience. The non-verbal forms always come in the form of gestures, movements, symbols and otherwise. In non-verbal communication using a signifying symbol, rhythm and movement are of great essence. The use of communicative signifying symbols in traditional dances tells us the situation of events at a particular time, what gave rise to situation and proffer the possible way in resolving the situation. Akas Nicholas observed that "In dance the use of signifying symbols in traditional dance is not static, it changes because its thematic potency always centers on communal mythological belief system. (2).

Aspasia Dania concurred;

Signifying codes are a form of knowledge representation which retains the characteristics of things or behaviours that are directly observable in the environment (eg trees, animals and people). (24)

The use of useful and meaningful signifying symbols in dance, makes it symbolic language tool for communication. The level of the symbolic language exhibited in dance using signifying symbols cut across barriers of language and culture, making it a

universal tool for communication irrespective of; tribes, religion, tradition and profession. Roxy levy maintains that;

Choreographers/dancers use symbolism to communicate with the audience. They usually have a certain story or idea in mind that they want to portray. This is what is called the “intent” of the dance world. (5)

The essence of signifying symbols in dance brings the people closer to their various dances with an interpretative mindset of seeing it beyond mere annual festivals and use of signifying symbols as mere artifacts Akas suggested that;

The movement pattern of symbols during performances vary greatly from one culture to another depending on the way in which environmental, historical and sociological circumstances are portrayed semotically through the use of symbols. (21)

The dancer uses his body movement/signifying symbols to externalized the choreographer’s inner most emotion and reproduce it before an audience in order for them to understand the originality of the existing dance in form, styles, contextualization and otherwise.

Rosemarie Samaritan further postulates that;

For the dancer’s body to communicate effectively using signifying symbols, it must undergo series of training, formation and adaption in order to enhance the communicative cum interpretative essence in dance movement. The dance steps are

well crafted within the signifying symbols during dance festivals, in such a way that it will make a positive statement before the live audience. (185)

Theoretical Framework

All analysis in this paper is anchored on Sense Making Theory by Dervin Brenda. Sense Making Theory helps to examine the communicative value in any creative work of art; be it dance, music, printings and drawing. It gives the artist that sense of belonging that at the stage of creation every idea matters, especially when utilized positively. Naresh Kumar Agarwal observed that;

Sense Making Theory is all about trying to reconcile apparent differences and polarities without wishing away the difference, but reorganizing them as important. (106)

Dervin Brenda as cited by Foreman Wernet opines that;

The use of sense making theory while analyzing cultural symbols pays explicit attention to the “hows” of communication that occurs at every level of performance, that helps us not only to understand how performance communicated, but rather to intervene, change and improve the potency. (116)

The above assertion shows that no cultural symbols exist in abstraction; rather the environmental factors give rise to its existence and substance. The essence of any symbols used in traditional dances is to pass the required information across, but

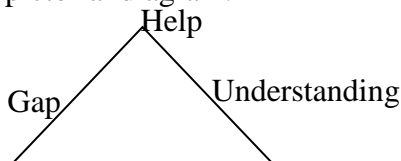
in a situation whereby the intended message is not achieved, it automatically becomes ordinary props. Dervins Brenda stated that;

Be it in music, dance, symbols, play analysis and costume analysis the sole aim of any creative work is to; bridge the gap of complex or multiple misinterpretations placed on content analysis of performance, rather than aiming to assist individuals and community to make sense in the usage of cultural symbols beyond generalized assumption. (64)

This paper adopted this theory in order to give the iconic symbols used in the dance understudy (Nkwanite) sense of belonging and socio-cultural values. Devins maintained that;

If the communicative gaps in the use of symbols are not well analyzed, interpreted and documented. The required essence (communication) becomes mere art for art sake only. (4)

Dervin further stated that every cultural symbol used in performance or literary work must be appreciated by the evidence from its point of pictorial diagram.



It is based on this pictorial analysis by Drevin Brenda that the various symbols used in the dance (Nkwanite) would be analyzed for effective understanding.

The Socio-Cultural Values of Signifying Symbols

Akas posits that “though symbols are beautifying in the eyes, its usage before the choreographer automatically becomes a corrective instrument”. (65)

Uji Charles concurred that;

People should always look beyond aesthetic cultural attachment in the use of symbols: rather what should be is the interpretative utilization before the ideal audience. (48)

So far, every signifying symbols in dance to be identified and appreciated, it must always perform the following cultural values:

1. It always stands as a corrective tool.
2. It stands as a watch dog.
3. It stands as historic referral for proper documentation especially in oral traditions.
4. It aids in cultural identification.

Perspectives on Signifying Symbols in Traditional Dances

The use of signifying symbols in dance is gradually been misinterpreted as artistic enhancement or indigenous tool for performative display. This assumption based on generalized perception is true and acceptable, but in this paper it goes beyond that. Scholarly wise, in dance, for any signifying symbols to be culturally acceptable as communicative tool, it must undergo four due processes such as:

- (a) What gave rise to the emergent of the symbols?
- (b) The effectiveness of symbols beyond its assumed usage.
- (c) The communal belief system on the symbols.

- (d) The socio-cultural essence of the symbols in solving situation of things in the community.

Signifying symbols vary in their usage but what should be the basic perception of any choreographer is its sociological function. It is the sociological perspective attached to the use of symbols in traditional dances that reawaken people's consciousness to begin to value the use of symbols in dance as a communicative tool. Akas affirms that;

The use of signifying symbols must be made sacrosanct for the initiate only, because they are the ones who understand and uphold the cosmological ideology imbedded in them as cultural signifier, identifier and sustainability. (47)

The Origin of Nkwanwite Dance

This dance centers on women and their various experiences in their matrimonial home. The dance started in 1905, according to Mrs Orji Agha in an interview by a woman called Mrs Udu Ibeh, who was believed to be the first woman to perform this great and ageless dance in Afikpo community. Mrs Udu Ibeh in an interview said; she played a symbolic role in this dance because, she was the first woman to get married at the age of eleven in Afikpo community. So, because of her inexperience in what marital life is all about, she suffered a lot in the hands of her husband. According to Mrs Ibeh in an interview too, her husband beat her every day because she was not good in sex, she did not know how to wash her husband's clothes and she was not good in cooking. So because of all these, her husband beat her claiming he wanted his wife to be strong, sexually active and caring. According to Mrs Julian Uruh in an interview, "the beating was so much on Mrs. Udu Ibeh that as a child, she ran

back to her parents for help. But her parents would return her back that same night to her husband telling her that in marriage, parents are not allowed to interfere. On several occasions, Mrs Udu Ibeh was disgraced in public by her husband for forgetting to call him the pet name he loves which was “di m oma”. Mrs Ejem in an interview said; ‘It was recorded that each time she forgot to call him the pet name, her husband would flog her with any available stick around. Mrs Udu Ibeh was highly maltreated in the hands of her husband who was 45 years older than her’. Her husband on his part was a drunk, a womanizer and a chain smoker. On several occasions, the husband would be so drunk that he would end up inside a gutter, at times her neighbours would call her and say "that your drunk and good for nothing husband has chosen his comfortable place again as usual, go and carry him". Mrs Udu Ibeh in her interview said once she heard this, she would run out to go and save her husband. Mrs Julian Uruh still in an interview explained, “If Ibeh sleeps inside the gutter till the next day, he would kill his wife the next day”. So each time she hears her husband was inside a gutter, she rushed out to save her husband. So one fateful day, according to Mrs Ibeh, she was trying to carry her husband who was heavy both in size and body structure, when she had a dislocation and was taken to a midwife for treatment. It was in the house of the midwife under serious pains that she started crying and singing. Her crying and singing was narrating her ugly experiences in the hands of her husband, starting from the first day till that particular moment. She said in one of her songs that “marriage has a sweet and bitter taste; it is the duty of a woman to accept both taste for peace to reign”. It was her cries of lamentation that originated Nkwanwite dance in Afikpo till date. Nkwanwite dance performance in Afikpo bases its origin and communicative potency on some metaphoric guide, serving as a

reflective pointer and as a reminder in the mind-set of any woman in Afikpo that wants to get married.

Nkwanwite Dance Performance in Afikpo, Ebonyi State

Initiation Ceremony

The initiation ceremony into Nkwanwite dance performance is of great essence semiotically. It is strictly meant for young ladies between the ages of 20-34years. The reason for this age is because it is believed that at this age bracket, any young lady in Afikpo is supposed to be in a relationship and/or preparing to get married. So once any lady in Afikpo has gotten to this age bracket, she will be fully initiated into the dance. During the initiation ceremony, there is no sign of ritual of any kind, rather the body of dancer determines whether they will be initiated into the dance or not. The body of the dancer stands as the only decisive tool in becoming a member of this group. The body of the dancer remains highly indispensable symbolically; because it helps to determine whether the young men who will come to watch the dance will be attracted and afterwards seek for any of the ladies' hand in marriage. According to Mrs Ibeh in an interview; 'what makes a good dancer and a full initiate in this dance is the ability of the dancer to take care of her body. It is believed that once she can achieve that, she will look charmingly attractive in the eyes of young men who will be searching for their future wives during the performance'. In order to achieve the required body configuration to be a member, the selected young ladies to be initiated will be assembled together in a compound fenced round which symbolically is called Ngkachi Umunwaanyi (protector of the ladies). The essence of this symbolic fence (ngkachi umunwaanyi) is to protect the outside world from seeing the ladies until the D-day. Inside this compound, the initiates would be taught a lot of things like;

- a. how to seduce their husbands

- b. how to feed their husbands and children
- c. how to take care of their mothers- in-law
- d. how to avoid being a gossip subject
- e. how to manage in the time of lack in the family
- f. How to take care of themselves and still be in good shape before and after giving birth.

The above pictures shows what some women suffer in their husband's house; all these would be taught to the initiates by a special woman nicknamed Mma ugoibe nwada (the beauty of the maidens). Mma ugoibe nwaada remains a symbolic woman during the initiation because during her days as a young lady and a full member of Nkwanwite, she kept all the rules and regulations guiding the initiates then. She had up to eight suitors all asking for her hand in marriage, and there was a general saying that 'whenever she is dancing, all the men watching her performance would be carried away to empty their pockets on her'. So during the initiation, she makes sure that the initiates are very attractive, charming and beautiful for the young men who will be watching their performance on the D-day. It is a belief that any initiate who has gotten to the age of marriage and keeps the rules and regulations guiding the dance must surely get her future husband from the young men who are watching the performance. During the full initiation into the dance of Nkwanwite, the initiates always appear in three symbolic dance line formation;

- a. The sampling formation
- b. The bravery formation
- c. The readiness formation

All these formations are communicative in nature more especially, in exposing the different stages nkwanwite initiates

pass through before becoming full initiates. The communicative potency of this formation is as follows:

The Sampling Formation



Plate 1: A cross section of maidens on the sampling formation

This Sampling formation is dotingly called the formation of queens. This formation is solely meant for maidens who are complete women and have all it takes to make their various would-be husbands remain forever faithful to them. The idea of being complete women is that the maidens are virgins who will get impregnated on their first sexual intercourse with their would-be husbands. The special gift from their ‘chi’ to those who maintain their virginity before becoming initiates into the dance is a male child. The male child serves as a proof of faithfulness of the woman before getting married to her husband. At this point, the initiates are told to always be attractive to their husbands before, during and after child bearing, because once they stop being attractive, their husbands will have the necessary justifications to cheat on them. They are also advised to always expose those attractive parts of their body like their stomach, breasts, waist, laps and hair, because once all these are well kept too, their husbands will forever remain faithful to them. It is at

this point that the initiates are fully educated and informed on what it takes to be a wife both in child bearing, looking attractive to their husbands and also knowing how to encourage, motivate and sustain the family during agonizing moments.

The Bravery Formation



Plate 2: A cross section of maidens on bravery formation

This can be interpreted as the moment of tribulations in the various families the women will be married into. The initiates are here reminded that marriage is not a bed of roses, rather at times the taste differs like;

- a. Some marriages are sweet sweet sweet
- b. Some marriages are bitter sweet bitter
- c. Some marriages are bitter bitter bitter
- d. Some marriages are neither sweet nor bitter

But whichever situation they meet in their marriages, all they need to do is to give unswerving support to their husbands and guide their children. The bravery formation fortifies and presents the various realities of life to the initiates by telling them that depending solely on their husbands will at times warrant dehumanization, starvation, and make the woman a ‘non-

locomotive engine' before the eyes of her husband's mother in-law and her husband's siblings, thereby belittling the woman to the general adage of 'oriaku'. So in order for the initiates to maintain their respects in their husbands' house, they must contribute positively at home.

The Readiness Formation



Plate 3: A cross section of maidens on readiness formation

The body communicative potency of initiates here presents them as being fully trained, informed and equipped on how to take care of the house, their husband and their children. Also, it means the initiates are fully prepared for marriage and any man that marries them at this point, marries forever to breakthrough and open doors. The semiotic- interpretative gift that follows the initiates at this point is always showcased whenever they spread their hands during performance which implies – 'we are a blessing to any man that marries us and remains faithful to us'. The initiates at this point are seen as full initiates and are officially welcomed into Nkwawite dance performance.

Music

The use of the music called Akwa Oyiri in Nkwawite dance performance is of a symbolic essence. It is of symbolic essence

because the thematic strength of the song centers on reminding any married woman in Afikpo, the disadvantages of being a barren woman. According to the thematic analysis of the music, any married woman in Afikpo that is not pregnant nine months after her wedding or that has stayed years in the marriage without any child, is always seen as a she-he and cannot be associated with.

The husband of the barren woman or wife is free to marry another wife once it is confirmed that the barren woman fondly addressed as 'she-he' cannot give birth to a child, or she will be asked to go back to her parents. The music semiotically portrays the various sufferings barren women go through in their husband's house in Afikpo. This suffering goes as follows:

- a. She will not be allowed to cook for her husband, because it is a belief in Afikpo that once a barren woman cooks for her husband, he will not be able to impregnate any woman again should he decide to re- marry.
- b. She is not allowed to send the children of her co-wife on an errand, because it is believed that sending the children on an errand blocks the favour that will follow the child when he/she gets married in the future.
- c. She is not allowed to stay in the same room with her husband, rather she is subjected to a thatch house, the reason for subjecting her to this symbolic thatch house is to remind her that she is not yet a full woman.
- d. The barren woman is also subjected to constant cries which are full of rhetorical questions for her 'chi'. The symbolic essence of the cries of the barren woman is to beckon on her 'chi' to remember her and give her own child.

Aside the suffering of the barren woman stated in the song Akwa-oyiri, the theme of the song for effective interpretative

understanding is divided into three symbolic sub-headings such as;

a. Akwa Oyiri na chi ya (The cry of the barren woman to her God)

The woman is expected to ask the gods of fertility in Afikpo why she is still barren while others are giving birth in numbers. According to Mrs ibeh in an interview, it is of their mythological belief in Afikpo; that once the barren woman can cry well, she might touch the heart of the ‘god of fertility’ and she will start bearing children again. In order to achieve this effectively, the woman is expected to do three symbolic things like; be totally faithful, avoid envying those who have children and their children and to be always submissive to her husband.



Plate 4: This dance movement symbolically represents akwa Oyiri na chi ya

b. Akwa Oyiri bere di ya (The cry of the barren woman to her husband)

This is another symbolic action in the dance. The barren woman is expected to cry to appeal to the heart of her husband not to marry another woman, not to rule out her chances of giving birth completely and not to address her as she-he again. At this point,

Oyiri (the barren woman) is advised to always do everything humanly possible in putting a smile on her husband's face.



Plate 5: This movement represents Akwa Oyiri Bere Di ya

Dance Movement

The dance movement here is very symbolic, communicative and of great semiotic essence. The semiotic interpretation of the dance movement lies in the symbolic communicative formation of the dancers on stage. It is the symbolic communicative formation of the advanced women dancers that portrays the message of the dance to the audience. The dancers being advanced women and not young ladies is of symbolic essence. It is believed that these women dancing are real women and they all gave birth in their various husband's houses exactly nine months after their marriage and all their first issues are all males. So they are seen as complete women and not 'she-he' (barren woman). Another effective essence why advanced women are the only dancers, according to the belief of Afikpo, is that women performing Nkwanwite dance is to prove three symbolic thoughts on women such as; to prove the strength of women irrespective of their age, to prove their fertility and also to prove their readiness to give birth to more children if age permits them.

The communicative semiotic essence in the dance is divided into three symbolic dance formations such as:

Aka Ije Oyiri

This dance movement based on its symbolic interpretative essence centers on women of Afikpo especially the married ones. It exposes the negative effects of been barren for years after marriage and not being able to conceive in the first nine months after marriage as the tradition demands. It is of great belief in Afikpo, based on the interpretation of the dance movement, that any barren woman in the community is yet to be accepted by her husband, her husband's siblings and husband's kinsmen based on the fact that anything can happen to the fate of the woman. The use of the tale of a black horse as a prop during the dance movement is of great significance. The black horse tale symbolizes the uncertainty in the married life of the barren woman in the community. The black horse tale based on its symbolic hand movement during the dance, reminds the barren woman of the following;

- i. That her husband has the right to return her back to her parents.
- ii. That her husband can still keep her as a wife but totally ignore having any sexual intercourse with her.
- iii. That her husband can still keep her while he remarries.
- iv. On no account is she allowed to send the child of the favoured wife on any errand. All these can be witnessed with the symbolic throwing of hands by the women with the tale of the black horse in their hands during the dance movement.

Oyiri nnoo

This dance movement is highly symbolic and communicative in nature. The symbolic, communicative and interpretative potency of the dance movement centers on the following; the two

women, black horse tail and the white handkerchief. This dance movement communicatively portrays the total acceptance of any married woman in Afikpo community in her husband's community. The total acceptance is always effectively based on the mutual understanding between her and whatever she meets in her husband's house. The following portrays the yardstick for measuring total acceptance in oyiri-nnoo dance movement formation. Those yardsticks are as follows:



Plate 6: *This dance step symbolizes Oyiri Nnoo*

- a. To be an achiever.
- b. He wants his wife to be a go-getter.

These are symbolic meanings placed on the open arena performance space, which any woman married into the community is expected to fulfill throughout her stay in her husband's house. The open performance arena transcends from being a mere venue to a serious reflective tool for married women in Afikpo community which helps them imbibe good character in their homes.

Conclusion

From findings so far, signifying symbols is an indispensable tool in any traditional performance in Nigeria and beyond. What

should always be the working metaphor of any choreographer is to make use of communicative iconic symbols to avoid myopic misinterpretation. At this point if possible, the choreographer should always alert the audience before and after production; that beyond the mere props used by the dancers there is an interpretative undertone in them. It is through the undertones that dance (especially Nkwawite), will be appreciated as didactic tool. In conclusion, dance scholars should put more effort in analyzing, documentary and preserving symbolic cultural artifact before they are been misinterpreted as log of wood or ordinary sculptural work.

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