

THE CULTURAL TRUTH IN DRUM DANCE FESTIVAL OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN NORTHWEST TERRITORIES OF CANADA

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Abstract

Dance is one unique art whose cultural truth has been misinterpreted based on individualism, assumption, and scholarly perceptive thinking because of its major functionalities of identity and entertainment, thereby suppressing the core truth of originality and essence. It is the originality and essence of any dance that makes it culturally communicative, culturally relevant, and culturally diverse anywhere performed. The problem of this study, therefore, interrogates the true interpretation and cultural communication of the Drum Dance festival beyond the mere aesthetics of beating drums and stylized dancing styles. The objective of this research is; to interpret the cultural truth of drum dance festival beyond the oral tradition of being a mere form of identification only in the Northwest Territories of Canada, to interrogate what truly gave rise to the origin of dance and this research will contribute immensely to any existing literature on Drum Dance because there are scanty research on the Drum Dance of Northwest Territories of Canada. To understand the essence of cultural truth in the dance, the content analysis would be used as the research methodology in giving the required scholarly detailed analysis and findings to the Drum Dance of Aboriginal people of the Northwest Territories of Canada. To justify claims or findings in this research paper the cultural consensus theory by Williams H. Batchelder (which states that people must communally understand and appreciate their culture with one tone before it would be accepted by others) would be used as the working theory for emphasis on Drum Dance festival of Aboriginal People in Canada. From the findings, there is scanty scholarly research and literature on the Drum Dance festival beyond the generalized assumption that the dance is a form of cultural identity in the Northwest Territories of Canada only, and this is what the researcher sets out to correct. This research recommends the following, the documentation of the drum dance should be done with strong literary backups(not the scanty write-ups on the internet) by dance scholars in Canada for further research, the government of Northwest Territories should sponsor research on the drum dance by University dance professors to do proper cultural analysis and interpretations on dance beyond been a mere oral tradition as it is now, the government of Northwest Territories should encourage their youth to strive harder and study dance as a course in the university, it will help to train notable Professors and PhD holders in dance that will help to preserve the dance from not going into extinction, the study of dance as a culture based on interpretation and appreciation should be introduced in primary and high schools in the Northwest Territories because it will help the children to value dance studies as communicative tool and not as mere indigenous performance. In conclusion, the potency of any dance must be fact-based on communally accepted truth on unaltered originality and essence, and not individualized ideology as mere identifying tools and entertaining amplifiers.

Introduction

The dance is an act that gives people a form of traceable origin and a documented way of writing or rewriting their history. Dance helps to unify the community irrespective of their ancestral origin, profession, and cultural heritage, thereby helping them to appreciate every beat of the performance. Egorov Marks confirms that;

The primary assignment of dance be it folk dance, Contemporary dance or indigenous dance is to successfully preserve the identity truth of the people and the development of cultural truth for further research and education”. (276)

The dance of every community is culturally based because it tells the story of the people in various ways such as their style of dressing, feeding, hunting, marriage, education, and worship. In the days of our forefathers, dance, and music were the only safeness ways to tell some of the core indigenous beliefs which were meant for true initiates only and not for commercial purposes, Akas Nicholas opines that;

When it comes to core indigenous dance performances with storytelling, entertainment is deemphasized, then the use of dance becomes highly ritual for imitates and pure born only”. (45)

Dance has been misinterpreted to be a mere entertainment tool because of its aesthetic appeal thereby making everyone assume that indigenous dances are for everyone. This myopic approach to indigenous dances gives room to the creation of two types of indigenous dances which are “the social dance and the ritual dance”. The social dance is meant to entertain and open more doors for tourism thereby giving non-indigenes to participate in the dance without proper rehearsals or any form of restriction. Kwashie Sylvanus posits that; ‘Social dance is an integral part of African performance, where the sole main of a dancer with dance is to entertain and lighten the mood of the audience. (3)

The use of social dance is to promote and encourage participation in cultural acculturation, diversity, and inclusion.

Ritual dance is the opposite of social dance, it is aesthetically appealing and engaging, but spiritually charged for initiates only. In Ritual dance, the aesthetics is not what makes the dance rather the ability of the dancers to maintain its originality without alterations and adaptations. Adegbite Adesina maintains that “Ritual dance has become a therapeutic tool which requires that everyone that participates in the performance to receive blessing” (136). The ritual always reminds people of who they are, what they believe, and how they must sustain their performance, especially dance. Benjamin Onyeoma (interviewed on the 3rd of March 2024) observes that “Ritual dance is the linking bridge between the living and dead, thereby transcending the dancer's body into half human and half spirit”. He further explained that “Cultural truth in dances is based in the ritual and aesthetics”.

The beauty of any dance is in the incomparable nature of the cultural truth, which always awakens people's curiosity to understand the emergence of such performances and how it is associated with them. To understand the cultural truth of any performance, what becomes remarkable is what Akas called the "OSPE". He explains, "Every indigenous dance is an offspring of OSPE, where the truth is being told, interpreted, and evaluated" (56). The use of OSPE is what makes cultural truth in any dance unquestionable and undeniable amongst any community wherever it exists. Some indigenes doubt the potency of dance as a cultural truth indicator because "OSPE" in the dance context has been degraded to a mere assembly of performances for entertainment purposes only. Akas explains OSPE to mean; O- Originality, S- The Space, P- Performance, and E- Evaluation. He says "The OSPE is the pointer of cultural truth in any dance if not that cultural dance performance remains social exhibition art for art's sake only" (67). The problem of this study, therefore, interrogates the true interpretation and cultural communication of the Drum Dance festival beyond the mere aesthetics of beating drums and stylized dancing styles.

Cultural Consensus Theory

The ability to understand the cultural truth in indigenous dance performance has been a serious debate among scholars and non-scholars. A lot of people have viewed indigenous dance performances with the perception of a single-story ideology based on hearsay, passive participation, and very weak oral tradition in telling the story thereby forcing the dance to go into extinction. This ideology has caused some cultural dance performances to lose the hidden truth embedded in them as a means of cultural sustainability, Cultural transformation, and Cultural development based on Originality.

William Batchelder states that "cultural consensus theory centers on the ideology that cultural beliefs are learned and shared among people not based on a single story but generalized accepted assertion for common understanding and interpretation". He further adds, "Since the amount of information in a culture is too large for one individual to master, therefore it is mandatory to make cultural beliefs an open book for easy research by researchers and easy understanding for indigenes and beyond". (45)

Gurkan Necdet confirms that "cultural consensus theory can estimate the competence of cultural truth in any performance-based generalized agreement on the culture and now people react towards accepting it" (1153). Therefore, this theory serves as a mirror for understanding the cultural truth of the Drum Dance of Aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories of Canada.

Who Are Aboriginal People in Canada: Brief History

Based on the Government of Canada platform, the history of Aboriginal people (also known as the Indigenous people) is very rich in culture, politics, and education. The historic chain of Aboriginal people revolves around the following: the First Nations, Inuit, and Metis, who to date are grounded in rich cultural experiences, exposures, and costumes. These great people of

the First Nation, Inuit, and Metis are bonded together with one notable culture called the Drum Dance.



Plate 1: First Nation person in Cultural Costume (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)



Plate 2: Metis persons in cultural costume. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)



Plate 3: Inuit persons in cultural costumes. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

Dance and The Quest for Originality!

Some of our dances have suffered the act of suppression when it comes to being original and sustaining their originality, thereby forcing some of the indigenous performers to struggle for survival. The concept of acculturation is what every culture will love to behold and adopt because of dynamism, it becomes troublesome way when one cultural aesthetic is trying to suppress the indigenous cultural dances all in the name of aesthetics, social media marketing, and social engineering art for art's sake. Mr Paul Ikem (Interviewed on 3rd of March 2024) said;

The quest for Originality in indigenous dances is to call home our children and indigenes to always remember where they are coming from before accepting others based on aesthetic influences “Mr. Hedy Ifems (Interviewed on the 2nd of February 2024) opines that “Dance or any cultural performance remains relevant when its originality has never been altered”.

Some of the dances are gradually devaluing their originality based on the myopic ideas of they are barbaric, not aesthetically engaging, or maybe their true potency was not well documented for easy access and reference. It is based on these affirmations that dance based on the

Originality quest survived what Akas refers to as the “Cultural identity Decaying Ulcer”. In cultural identity decaying ulcer every performance struggles to overcome the originality issues based on the following;

1. **Who are the Originators?** This is where dances have lost their originality potencies because the survivors could not tell the story of how their performances started beyond the general slogan “It was our forefathers hereditary, and it was handed over to us”. This ulcerogenic response reduces indigenous dances into serious problems without a definite redemption.
2. **Whose duty is to protect the dance's originality?** This is where Western education and exposure to an extent push supposed custodians of the true originality of indigenous dances into seeing it as something ritualistic (thereby forbidden) a mere waste of time to be associated with and mere outed cultural appropriation that should have ended its existence with the originators. It is on this myopic assumption that a lot of dances stopped existing or if still in existence their originality is being altered to something preferred suitable without any logical explanation.
3. **Who should tell the tales of the dance's performative styles?** The issue of getting people to tell the tales of their indigenous dances based on their performative styles has remained controversial. Some believe it should be left for the old parents to continue the tales, some believe if not properly documented no need to seek clarification and some believe there is no need for such research to be carried out if any of the survivors are still alive.

It is based on the above assumptions that Akas believe that;

“Culture identity decaying Ulcer is a form disease that remains incurable in performance studies because dance has been reduced to entertaining tool based on body flexibility, Cultural aesthetics for brand recognition and derogatory perceptions on it as a mere native act”. (39)

The performative ideology of any dance becomes valued if its originality has never been altered, questioned, or tasked with barbaric.

Types of Cultural Beliefs in Dance Performance

Different types of cultural belief systems are affecting the real cultural truth in indigenous performance. Those beliefs are.

1. The Individual belief:

This is the type of belief system where everyone describes its indigenous dances or performances based on individual beliefs it was just our village performance, I was told that our forefathers performed it and it is an ordinary performance. This type of belief system does not want to look beyond the little they usually assume they know and can be shaken if attacked by the external forces of “Religion or Education” (then

automatically every little thing they know will be erased). They are always passive and ready to switch over to trending issues.

2. The Professional Belief

It is the belief system that affects the cultural truth in our indigenous dances because of education and Western exposure. This type of believer at times thinks that everything about culture should not be wasted time upon because education and inventions have better benefits to achieve than mere/outed cultural performance. To them, cultural performance is an exercise tool for their parents to be entertained or keep the community engaged. They always encourage their aged parents to do it in order to stay healthy, strong, and good-looking.

3. The Religious Belief

This is where the Western religion has seen, tagged, or reduced core cultural truth in the originality of indigenous dance traditions into some barbaric, devilish, and punishable by hellfire. They believed that the partakers in such cultural traditions and practices should be tagged outcasts or reaccepted back into Christendom through baptism only. They do not want to be identified with such performance nor are their children being initiated. They attack anyone who asks this question “What is the cultural truth of indigenous dance performance that makes an identity for anyone”.

4. The dynamic belief

This is where younger generations do not see anything interesting, engaging, and meaningful in dances. To them, such performances cannot ignite burning desires based on new dance trends and traditions, so they emphasize more on art for art's sake rather than cultural communicative arts for sustainability, interpretation, and understanding. These hinder the growth of cultural truth in traditional performances.

The Cultural Truth as The Soul of Dance:

The beauty of any cultural performance is the ability to understand beyond aesthetics rather as a bearer of unquestionable truth. Eze Chinelo maintains that “Through dance, a culture is known and many become acquainted with the people through it and with time making it a culture” (34). The essence of keeping or maintaining the cultural truth in every indigenous performance is that it is the only true key to their identity. It is through cultural truth that people will begin to understand what gave rise to the origin of the performance, who they are, and what they are known for. Owczarek Dominika observes that “The cultural truth in dance is a type of human activity that combines the physical and the emotional with the intellectual, individual with the social” (54)

Some people based on social experience believe myopically that nothing meaningful can be seen in any indigenous dances except entertainment and tradition only. But this assumption is subjective because dance scholars have proven that there is more cultural truth of profession,

lifestyle, history, pains, and ideology embedded in dance all it requires is understanding and interpretation. Ojo Bakare states that “When dances are being viewed from an individualized perspective the cultural truth remains hidden but viewed with an open mind of learning, understanding, and awareness, then cultural truth remains unchanged and engaging” (46)

The cultural truth is the only working soul of indigenous dances that have made it a sustainable development art for longevity. This helps to give indigenous dances and their indigenes a traceable origin for easy identification (especially the Drum dance of Aboriginal People in the Northwest Territories of Canada). Thereby making whoever seeks their performance understand what gave the origin to its performative tools such as dance movements, costumes, drumming, and music. The cultural truth always goes beyond mere assumptions into dealing with facts.

The Signifiers That Help to Maintain Cultural Truth in Dance!!

The cultural truth of every culture lies in the notable signifying objects beyond general knowledge or perception. This signifying tool helps to tell the unadulterated stories of the community performances wherever they exist. Akas Nicholas as cited by Judith Umeh affirms that “Cultural Signifiers in dance is one technique tool indigenes use in passing the ageless cultural truth in performance based on histories and beliefs. The cultural truths embedded in the signifiers make the indigenous cultural performances communicative, interrogating, and effective.” (16)

Tosin Tume Kooshima further explains that “To understand the essence of signifiers as an object of cultural truth the signifiers must be interpreted based on the physical representation of something it signifiers and the ability to give the signifying tool’s interpretation based on its usage at the point of creation and not generalized meanings” (2)

Therefore, the signifying objects of cultural truth in the drum dance of Aboriginal People in the Northwest Territories of Canada are as follows.

1. Drums

This is the first signifier holding the cultural truth in the dance. The shape and style of the drum are different from the ideal general drum. Drum during the performance seized to be ordinary drums rather a tools that remain in the aboriginal people of Northwest Territories, how their forefathers struggled to survive during the political victimization period in Canada. The making of this drum is done by a particular person(s) based on experience and being a member of the performing for a long period. The shape of the drum is a circle with an opening at the back which shows that “once the drum has been played in reminds them, they must be united to protect their lands as owners of the land and not them belonging to the land”.



Plate 4: The Drum used during the dance. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

2. Gestures

Every culture indeed has its style and unique way of performance, but the uniqueness seizes to be perceived from the sight of assumptions into a more communicative way of passing information if effectively interpreted. The essence of the interpretation of cultural dance gestures is to understand what gave rise to the origin of the movement, whether is it based on religion, profession, wars, victimization, or marginalization. To accept the gestures used in any dance performance (especially in the dance under study Drum Dance of Aboriginal people in Northwest Territories of Canada) the people must be able to tell their own stories as reflected in the cultural dance gestures.





Plate 5: Dance Movement of the Drum Dance. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

3. Reactions!!

This is the ability of the owners of the performance to be able to accept the dance and the cultural truth embedded in it, as their own true culture and not an act forced on them due to colonialism or cultural adoption. The reactions of the indigenes wherever they see the signifying potency of the dance, will always be an identification of who they are and where they are from.



Plate 6: The audience's reactions while watching the Drum Dance Performances.
(<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

The Origin of Drum Dance

This is a unique cultural dance festival among the Aboriginal people of Canada (popularly known as the Indigenous people of Canada). According to Mr. Edward Oudzi (interviewed on the 29th of April 2024 and also a popular drum maker of the drum dance), drum dance came into existence as an ageless tradition from the days of their forefathers to the present day. He said, “Drum dance was a celebration dance for their forefathers who were notable hunters then”. They used the drum dance to celebrate their consecutive season and ask their gods of the land to give them more great seasons ahead. Mr. Edward Oudzi said “One notable hunter was in the forest hunting and trying to be very careful not to be attacked by the bear during the hunting experience. At one point he was so tired and needed to rest. While he was resting, he saw an unknown man coming out of the forest. He wanted to run thinking it was a bear. But the unknown stranger told him not to run, rather he came in peace. The unknown stranger told him that he was going to teach him a drum dance, which he would use to celebrate the successful hunting period, any other great celebration, and as a means to seek good things from gods who protect them and the land”.

Mr. Edward Oudzi during the interview further added that “Before Stranger, the Aboriginal people do their drumming with the beating of two stones together to produce rhythmic sound for body movement, but the coming of the stranger officially introduced the type of drums used for drum dance”. He also said, “The stranger came with the original drum, but refused to give it to the hunter then, but rather agreed he will teach him how to make it “. It was that moment that gave rise to what is known as the Drum Dance of the Indigenous People of Canada.



Plate 7: The Picture of Mr. Edward Oudzi and the Researcher Dr. Nicholas Chielotam Akas during the Interview



Mr. Edward Oudzi: The Master Drum Maker for Drum Dance in Norman Wells Sahtu.

Dance Movement

Mr. Edward Oudzi during the interview said that “the dance movement is very slow which portrays the slow nature of the hunters during hunting to avoid missing their prey targets and the way they jubilate with families once they are out of the forest with lots of meat”. He continued further by saying “the dance movements can be classified into three such as; the imitation of the polar bear movement, circle dance and the throwing of hands movements. Each of these movements has a great communicative interpretation.

1. Polar Bear Dance Movement

The bear is a respected animal in the community and is mostly cherished by everyone in the community and region. Mr Edward Oudzi said that “the polar bear though dangerous, but its style of walking gently contributed to this style of dancing. The polar bear is believed to be gentle and calculative while looking for food to eat either in the forest or along the riverbank. It was his majestic gentle movement that made the dancers to always imitate him through dance movements. The dancers while performing this movement are expected to move majestically like a polar bear looking for food to eat or just walking around on its own. The dance movement is very slow and faces look down and sideways like polar bears looking for food.



Plate 8: The Pictorial of the Polar Bear. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)



Pictorial of dance dancers doing polar bear dance movement

2. Circle Dance

According to Edward Oudzi, “Their forefathers suffered a lot in the hands of colonial masters which contributed to taking their lands away from them”. He said the dehumanizing acts of the colonialists still affect them and their descendants to date. He said the essence of the circle dance movement is to remind the great indigenous people of Northwest Territories that “the more united they are, the more they belong to the land and not the land belonging to them as generally assumed”.

Mr. Edward Oudzi during the interview also said “The circle dance movement is a symbol that reminds them to protect everything that belongs to them and continue regaining everything their forefathers lost in the hands of the colonial masters with present or past government of Canada. So, the circle dance movement is a symbol of their reaffirmation to be united, determined, and focused on achieving any of their goals, especially for their children and grandchildren.



Plate 9: The pictorials of dancers in circular movements. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

3. Throwing of Hands Movements

According to Mr. Edward Oudzi, “This is a very simple movement in the dance that anyone can do. It simply means that whatever you want to do in life as an Aboriginal person or Indigenous person always try your best to stand out the best among your equals”. He also added that “The way dancers throw their hands and face direction of the hand while dancing, that’s how every indigenous person interpretatively strives to always be in every aspect of professional endeavors in Canada trying to do best of their abilities “.



Plate 10: The dancers doing throwing of hand movement. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

Song

Mr. Edward Oudzi during the interview said “The song sang during the drum dance centers on jubilation and Celebrations. But one major peculiarity of the song is that hunters then used it to explain how harsh the cold weather (snow) is on them during the hunting season “. He also said “Some hunters will use the song to tell their mothers that their feet are cold and they need a heater to heat it”

But based on the current situation and dynamism, the songs can be used to show celebration of life, celebrations of being a senior in the community, and celebration of any success in the community. The song and dance can be learned and performed by anybody, there are no cultural restrictions.

The Drum

Mr. Edward Oudzi maintained that “This is the engine of the dance and without the drum, there is no performance”. He said “Before the use of the present drum the communities were using two stones to make sounds for body movement. When the first hunter had an encounter with a stranger, he taught him how to make the current drum”. He further explained “The drum is made with a unique material and placed in front of a fire to be heated up and tightened its grip strongest”

Mr Edward Oudzi stated that “the making of the drum is a mastered act that requires serious training. He started making the drums at the age of 15years old. When his late father trained on how to produce the drums.

He also stated that the drum performs three symbolic jobs aside from rhythmic sounds. They are as follows;

- A. The semi-circle of the shape of the drum, always reminds them to be in unity and focus**



Plate 11: The pictorial of the semi-circular drum. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

B. The stick for the drums, simply signifies boldness and fearlessness in all their endeavors



Plate 12: The pictorial of the semi-circular drum and the stick. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

C. The drummers are always holding the cultural truth embedded in the drumming based on originality, where the indigenous people of Northwest Territories are reminded that united, they continue to win every battle.





Plate 13: The pictorial of the drummer's drumming. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20th of 2024)

Conclusion

The beauty of every culture becomes more interesting and appreciative when given the required interpretation and understanding. The single-story format of seeking the cultural truth embedded in indigenous dance makes it paltry and unassuming thereby suppressing its communicative potency. The drum dance of the Aboriginal people of the Northwest Territories portrays their struggles and victimization at the hands of the colonial masters, which made their forefathers lose their lives while protecting the land and this was showcased in their pattern dance movements. This was able to be ascertained based on the findings obtained from the feedback during the research fieldwork. Therefore, it is important to note that cultural truth in indigenous dance should always be ascertained based on communal beliefs and acceptability and not based on mere hearsay.

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