

INDIGENOUS DANCE BEYOND MOVEMENT: A SEMIOTIC METAPHOR OF IDUU AKPO DANCE PERFORMANCE.

Akas, Nicholas Chielotam

Theatre Arts Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria

Email: akasdancescholar@gmail.com

Abstract

Indigenous dance has been myopically misinterpreted as mere annual festival, while according to some people it is "just their village dance". These misinterpretations have really made people to enjoy various indigenous dances based on its aesthetics, pattern and style without considering its communicative potency if been interpreted. Indigenous dance when scholarly interpreted has gone beyond a perfect aesthetic combination of motivating movements; rather it stands as a serious tool for effective communication when interpreted. The core interpretation placed on indigenous dance movements broadens the indigenes' understanding horizon of seeing the indigenous dance as reflective mirror on their social, religious and economic status at the point the dance is been choreographed. This will make indigenes to see the indigenous dance as a communicative tool, a watchdog on their daily activities in the community, and a sustaining tool for upholding communal moral beliefs. This paper therefore, will critically analyse IduuAkpo dance performance beyond its mere movement into an indispensable communicative tool in Aguata.

Introduction

The major concern of indigenous dance history is to acknowledge the changes that have occurred with time. Therefore it requires the explanation of events, which have necessitated changes as understanding the history that gave sense to identity and continuity in

our indigenous communities. To understand the potency of indigenous dance in our indigenous community, it becomes imperative to trace it from the three sources of origin which are: emotional, impulse and improvisation, the need by man to release psychic tension by means of semiotic rhythmic movement and also through ecstasy on magic.

Enekwe is of the opinion that:

In early man's attempt to control and communicate with the forces around him, developed symbolic gestures and movement that expressed the way he felt to his supreme creator. This makes ritual one of the major sources of dance. (24)

The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form that has its roots in the numerous indigenous festivals across the country has made our indigenous dance a total performance. Ogbonna is of the opinion that: Our indigenous dance movement both in styles and form are not done haphazardly but rather geared towards conveying the meaning and message of the festival(132). Indigenous dance like any other African art form is not for aesthetic use only rather, it commits individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community. Akas states that: Indigenous dance as an art is interwoven around the fabrics of our indigenous communities especially based on their socio-political, economic and religious experience. (34)

Indigenous dance in traditional African societies is the expression of beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance movement of a community. Onwuekwe is of the opinion that:

Indigenous dance can be an art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the merely functional movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable exciting or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotion, mood, ideas, tell a story or portrays political or social needs. (178)

Indigenous dance in core African setting is appreciated based on its communicative potency. It is the communicative ability of dance as a unique act in our indigenous community that gives the dance of any community a traceable origin both in its form, style and content. Akas opines that:

In choreographing contemporary indigenous dance styles, the choreographer does not evolve dance steps from empty space or mere imagination rather those choreographed dance movements both in name, form and style are embodiments of socio-environmental problems raised through body movement to be answered while being entertained. (1)

Indigenous dance also represents a physical instrument or symbol for feeling and thoughts that can serve as a more effective media than verbal language in revealing one's needs and desires. Kuper maintains that:

Movements in dance become standardized and patterned symbols, where the members of a society may understand that these symbols are intended to represent experience and give meaning to an individual's external and psychic world. (238)

Indigenous dance has remained an indispensable tool towards communicative and effective cultural identification.

The Sociological Perception of Indigenous Dance Forms

Indigenous dance depicts lives, rhythms and cycles, labours, values, aspirations, history, economic condition and realities. Akas states that:

The traditional African dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people from where it emerged. Dance steps in traditional African dances sometimes praise, criticize and even work as a tool for social mobilization. (186)

Each dance type and style is distinctly different from the other, because of cultural differences in melodic and movement styles. Most of African dance forms exhibit the social pattern prevalent among indigenes and those dance forms can be classified based on the following communicative sub theme:

An Overview on Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs by which humans communicate meaning words, images, behaviour or an idea is relayed by a corresponding manifestation we can perceive. Enahoro states that: Semiotics is the science of the production of meaning in the society, is concerned with the processes involved in the generation and exchange of meaning or of signification and communication. (37)

The study of signs and their meaning has been as important as any movement in 20th century culture theory, thereby informing developments in all areas of theoretical endeavours. Semiotics is a system of knowledge that studies signs and offers explanations about how signs are used to communicate meanings. Enahoro is of the opinion that:

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts. The word text refers to a recorded message that is physically independent of its sender or receiver. Text exists in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal or both. It is an assembly of signs, gestures, sound, and image, constructed or deconstructed with reference to the conversion associated with a particular medium of communication. (28)

Signs are organized into code and systems governed by rules which are consented to by members of the community. This means that codes and signs operate within a culture which in turn depends upon the use of these codes and signs for its existence. Aguiá maintains that: "A sign can be 'anything', any entity or process that works as a sign, that is, anything that is able to act semiotically representing something for someone, an organism, a creature or simply any interpretative system"(146). Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, image, sounds, gestures and objects. Saussure states that: A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign (39).

The Essence of Codes in Performance

The essence of codes in performance is to aid in effective understanding of the communicative code infused in the performance. It is the communicative potency of the codes in the performance that guides its essence beyond mere aesthetics, literary understanding and stylized movements or actions into a serious analytical interpretative tool. The use of meaningful specified codes in the performance motivates the spectators towards understanding what gave rise to the emergence of such codes and how it has enabled in their cultural sustainability. Jon White More states that: Codes are culturally derived signs that have been assigned meanings that are understood by the inhabitants' of a given society. The level of understanding of codes comes through the spectator's background education, environment, ethnic, political and socio-economic (9). The effective essence of codes in performance has really succeeded in taking the

performance closer to its indigenes irrespective of their location, profession and religious beliefs for easily understanding and appreciation. More maintains that: Cultural codes are rules or guidelines that govern the operation of a society and its culture base on its Language, dress, manners, the arts, social strata and level of education. (9).

Semiotic Analysis on Iduuakpo Dance Performance in Aguata Anambra State

The semiotic analysis on indigenous dance performance especially IduuAkpo dance, makes the meaning of the dance bare before the people that owns the dance and also the foreigners that come to watch the dance as an annual event. The interpretative understanding of the use of semiotics used in the dance IduuAkpo makes it more communicative than a mere tool for cultural sustainability cum traceability. At this point people will understand and appreciate what gave rise to the emergence of such a dance. IduuAkpo dance performance is highly semiotic in its performance; the high level of the use of communicative semiotic symbol distinguishes the dance from other neighbouring dances in Aguata. The use of well interpreted semiotic symbol in IduuAkpo dance performance has really presented the uniqueness of the dance both in its aesthetics, communication and cultural sustainability.

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History on Iduuakpo Dance Performance

This dance according to history of Aguata people started as far back as 1918. This dance Iduu was believed to have been performed by the strongest man in Akpo village in Aguata. This man was declared the strongest because he was a strong wrestler, a good farmer and a fearless man. On several occasion, it was said that he has fought with the spirits unconsciously and defeated them. In other to sustain the masculinity and bravely in the dance, the present young men of Akpo community still perform the dance both in its style, form and ideology to conform to its original movement. The dance IduuAkpo dance performance is an annual performance from primordial era till present day in Akpo community. It is usually performed by strong men during their notable festive period like new yam festival, chieftaincy title of a notable brave man and during the burial of a notable man in Akpo community. Once the dance is been performed during planting season and after harvesting period, it simply shows that their "chi" will bless them with good harvest. Also the appearance of Iduu dance performance during the burial of a notable man according to their history simply shows he did not die a shameful death, rather he died as a brave man. It is also good to note that this dance is not performed during rainy season, because rainy season is period of

farming and serious labour, while the dry season which is the period when the dance is being performed serves as period of enjoyment and relaxation after harvesting the farm produce. During the annual performance of this festival, it is opened to everybody both indigenes and foreigners who might want to carry out a research on dance or see it as means of tourism development. The dance styles in this dance are not just mere aesthetically combined steps, rather the communicative potency of IduuAkpo dance movements portrays what gave rise to the emergence of those dance movement.

Ritual Dance

This type of dance is very symbolic in nature during the dance performance. It serves as a connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This ritual dance is been performed by the chief priest who is the lead dancer, fully costumed in red, carrying a red pot, holding a fowl, palm fronds and finally at his back their a mini-load. Before the priest embarks on the journey into the forest for the ritual dance, he will be purified by another oldest chief priest who encourages him to move on. The reason why the chief priest who is the lead dancer in the ritual dance needs fortification from another chief priest is to enhance his charms more, to get the moral support and also to be guided on the rules and regulations surrounding the sacred forest. The second chief priest is believed to be the oldest and understands the language of the spirit more. For this fortification to be strong, valued and respected, it must be done in the shrine of the oldest chief priest. It is in this shrine that the chief priest is being costumed by the oldest priest, who hands over a staff to him.

The essence of the staff in the dance is to serve as symbol of authority and also to serve as a supporting tool to the chief priest especially when he is tired. It is also believed that the road that leads to the sacred forest is not a smooth one based on the fact that the

chief priest needs the staff. All these items used by the chief priest during the performance are very communicative in nature. The masquerades are also part of the performance. There are two types of masquerade in this performance; Iduanyaike and Iduu police. The Iduanyaike is believed to appear during initiation ceremony, this masquerade Iduanyaike is believed to be the mouth piece of the gods during initiation. It is through the masquerade that the gods communicate their intentions to the initiates, while the red cap on the masquerade head symbolizes supreme authority to the gods in upholding their culture, maintaining peace and also ambassadors of truth till death. This masquerade appears only in dry season just to portray its sacredness. The Iduu police serve as peace make during the performance.

The Flutist

The flutist in the dance gives the cues and motivates the dancers while dancing on stage. It is the flutist that accompanies the chief priest into the forest for the ritual dance. The flutist leads the dancers into the arena for the performance and the flutist motivates dancers during performance and also reminds them of cues from one movement to another. The flutist body is designed with white nzu (native chalk) which presents him as the chief priest servant, well-fortified for the great task ahead before, during and after the Iduu dance performance.

The Drummers

The drummers in this festival are young men and well trained in the act of drumming during the performance. The reason for the training in act of drumming is because the indigenes of Akpo community believed that once the drummers can drum well it will now motivate their ancestral father to bless them more than they expected. The creativity cum perfection amongst the drummers motivates their ancestral fathers to bless their indigenes, dancers and the drummers themselves. The perfect modulations in the drumming during Iduu dance performance make the drumming very interesting.



The drummers of Iduu dance performance

The Audience

Everybody is allowed to partake in this dance both indigenes and foreigners, but women are not allowed to partake in dance or even watch the performance. The reason for not allowing women to partake in the dance is that it is believed that once they watch the dance they will no longer see their menstrual cycle and any pregnant woman that watches the dance will give birth to a monkey.

Also if a woman mistakenly meets them on road, she must pass through their left hand side in order to avoid dis-charming their charms. Aside women been banned from partaking, every other person is allowed to dance with the dancers and take pictures in case of foreigners carrying out any research on the dance.

Dance style

The type of dance style here is always fast, in circular form and also in a straight line. All these forms in this dance style are symbolic and communicative in nature. The dance style is meant for young men of Akpo community between the ages of 25-35 years. It is believed that at this age the young are still energetic and can use their strength to defend their community in case of any unforeseen circumstances. They always dance to portray themselves as warriors, great farmers and hunters, who are always ready to provide and defend their family and the entire community large. During the dance itself the dances exhibit different skills to portray themselves as beyond mere mortal to human demi-gods who have fortified themselves by their ancestral fathers before the real performance. The fast movement during the dance performance simply portrays that the young men of Akpo community are smart and ready to withstand any obstacle. This they do by climbing a tree without rope, they are not lazy people and also great as warriors cum hunters.



Iduu dancers performing

The circular dance movement portrays that united they stand and divided they fall as a community. One standing ageless rule which this circular dance style portrays among the Iduu dancers is that, for one to be member he must have a clean mind where his fellow brother is and he must be ready to be his brother's keeper and also must be ready to share whatever he has no matter how little especially when he discovers that his brother is in need and needs help. Whoever is not ready to obey this and decides to dance the great Iduu dance, will die while performing the dance. So whenever this circular dance movement or style is been performed during their performance, it always remind the dancers what they believed is right from the days of their fore fathers till date. The straight line movement in the dance presents the dancers as warriors and always ready to defend their community. The brevity of each dancer is fully portrayed in their individualized stylized form of dancing, here the Iduu dancers are expected to display their various individual skills that qualifies

them as warriors and always ready to defend their community. It is believed that from the various individualized stylized dance movement determines the strength and skill of been true warriors in Akpo community which they claim to be. Aside the dancer's, initiates into the dance but on their full costumes are allowed to display their own warrior dance style. They also believed that once you are a young man from Akpo community and initiated into Iduu dance whether on costume or not he is always fortified.

Conclusion

The interpretative essence of semiotics in indigenous dance has contributed in communicative understanding of our indigenous dance movements. The various dance movement in indigenous dance especially that of Iduu dance performance did not just emerge rather it came into existence to give the community a traceable origin, sustain their culture and expose the socio-environmental factors that lead to the creation of dance movement. It is at this point that Akpo community in Aguata will appreciate their dance Iduu dance performance as a culture that communicates through its dance movements and not as a mere annual festival that they long to witness as form of relaxation and entertainment. Conclusively, the interpretative analysis on Iduu dance performance based on its form, style and content has really taken the dance beyond mere aesthetic appreciation only.

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