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Ebira Rambo Dance: A Selling Point For The Popularization Of Ebira Culture And National Identity

Adeiza Peter BELLO

Department of Theatre Arts

College of Humanities, Redeemer's University

Redemption Camp, Km 46, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway,

Mowe, Ogun State.

Email: petrabell2000@yahoo.co.uk

Tell: 07033959275, 07055895394

ABSTRACT

Amidst the imperative efforts and activities by every given culture to meet the demands of global development in all facets of life, dance naturally comes handy as a potent vehicle to project the cultural identity of every given people in the face of constant change. In Nigeria, dance as an expressive element of cultural transmission has constantly witnessed phases of rejuvenation and innovative recreation to preserve, sustain and popularize the values they represent. This paper therefore explore the dance forms of Ebira people otherwise known as Anebira Tao and the emergence of the Ebira-Rambo dance style phenomenal with which the Ebira cultural image and choreographic artistry gained popularity. This paper's research approach is based on participant observation method which involve investigative mode of data gathering by means of participation and face to face interaction with respondents within the scope of the research, to draw first hand information. Among other findings, we discover that the choreographic synthesis of Ebira dance movements innovated by the Rambo Dancers has not only provided a distinctive and unified model of Ebira dance performance artistry but has given Ebira cultural identity a facelift on the echelon of indigenous Nigeria popular cultures.

Keywords: Ebira-Rambo, Dance style/synthesis, Phenomenal,

Cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

Dance performance art is an integral part of every given culture and it has remained a transcending element of cultural enactment, transmission and identity especially among Africans. Dance permeates all manner of African rituals, ceremonies and social celebrations. Ugolo affirms that "In Nigeria, the evolution of dance as an art form has its roots in the numerous traditional festivals across the country" (41). In most cases, while dance functions as an expressive symbol or representation of a mythical belief, folklore, history or cumulative experiences, it also serves as a means to meet the emotional and entertainment quest of individual and groups of people during the festivals. In the same vein, Harper reiterates:

A dance usually fulfils several functions simultaneously, with a main, overt function and several subsidiary functions which may be explicit expressions or implicit reflections of the structure of the society and way of life. The multiplicity of functions is often reflected in the variety of occasions the dance is performed (44).

This implies that the context of any given performance influences the dance movement and the expressive mode of the dancers in terms of pace, energy supply, gestures, design, formation and use of space. In the same light, Bakare stresses that dance is usually a reflection of the ways of life and experiences of a people. He avers that "...the factors which determine how indigenous choreographers create include geographical environment, occupational activities, religious beliefs, biological temperament and the type of musical instruments available" (77). This in essence proves that dance remains a handy element for cultural identification

and could without words unravel a thousand year's history and experiences of a people. Beyond this, dance could be a unifying element and a propelling force for positive change. Furthermore, dance is a dynamic art; which can be likened to an elastic substance that could metamorphose in form, pace and pattern with every passing phase.

In Nigeria, while some of the indigenous dances are still maintaining their original form because of their ritual value, some others have passed through series of modification in tune with emerging modern trends. However, modification or innovation infused into the performance of any given cultural dance form is not meant to negate it's significance or symbolic value but rather helps to give the dance and the culture it represents a facelift in the face of modernity. In most cases these recreated cultural dances are usually a gap bridging melting pot developed from the amalgamation of indigenous and foreign elements.

Beside the creation of Nigeria Councils for Arts and Culture in all the composite states of the country to harvest and harness the numerous Nigeria's indigenous dances, many other cultural institutions and individual performers have also contributed immensely to the popularization of these dances. For instance, the communities of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria are not left out in the constant process of rejuvenating and recreating contemporary versions of their indigenous dances to meet the taste of a heterogeneous audience and to enhance the image of their given cultures. For instance, the emergence of several modern forms of the Yoruba Bata dance by Choreographers like Peter Badejo and a host of others has not only placed Bata on the echelon of international modern African dance but has provided a resource for contemporary African and non African Performing Artistes. Likewise, the spectacular Swange social dance of the Tiv people has left an indelible mark in the hearts of numerous international audiences. It is

an entertainment dance created from the earlier existing forms of the Tiv dance movements to give birth to a modernized frontline cultural dance with which the Tiv is to be identified. According to Iyortange Igoil "The Swange music and dance style was created in the town of Gboko between 1957 and 1958 by one Mr. Jerry Ugba" (52-530). He explained that Swange was developed from the very simple improvisational dance steps of the Tiv and has metamorphosed into a spectacular and complex undulating movement patterns that have gained international admiration and repute. Other rejuvenated cultural dances like the Atilogwu dance from the Eastern part of the country, Korotso dance from the core North, Ekombi dance from the South-South region and the Ebira-Rambo dance from the central part of Kogi State has also left or indelible a mark on the sands of indigenous African dance choreography in modern context. These dances were created to preserve and project Nigeria's cultural values for posterity. Also, the dances plays relevant role in the process of creating and sustaining a positive national image in the face of constant change and before the world at large.

Dance and Performance Culture among the Ebiras (Anebira)

Among the Ebira (Anebira) also known as *Anebira-Tao* of central part of the present day Kogi State in central Nigeria dance is called *Eze*. Primarily, dance is regarded as synonymous with musical performance, festive celebrations and every form of excitement. This is one major reason it does not exist on it's own but comes in a juxtaposed celebration package meant to meet the quest of religious, ceremonial or social purposes. Dance as an art form exist within packages of contextual performances known as *Aahee* (play/performance) or *Eche* meaning festival which usually provides the platform for *Aahee* performances within which the dances of the people are displayed. One major characteristic of a typical Ebira (Anebira) performance is the juxtaposition of songs (*Ahe*), drumbeat (*Isohu*) and dance (*Eze*). Therefore, the major players in any given

indigenous Ebira (Anebira) performance include the singers, dancers and drummers. Usually, the singers equally double as dancers. Generally, the word *Omaahe* which means player or performer is used to refer to all categories of performing artistes. However, dancers are distinctively called *Onyeze* or *Eneze* while singers are called *Ojaahe* and the drummers or instrumentalists are known as *Onisohu* or *Onokanga*.

Primarily, Ebiras dance performance among the Ebira is usually spontaneous and improvisational. That is, individual is responsible for his or her movement transition, patterning and stylization as inspired or motivated by the drumbeat in complement to the singing. Every dancer in the course of performance would usually patterns his or her movements based on the rudiment of the dance steps associated to the context of performance and dictates of the drumbeat and songs. However individual expressions, stylizations and transitions depend on the state of mind, creative ability and experiences of the dancer. On the other hand, there are instances where dancers would team in groups to outwit one another at the festival arena or performance square.

Though music has no distinct name as dance (Eze) in Ebira language yet it is the live wire of dance and performances, *Aahue*. That is, there is no dance without music within the context of traditional Ebira culture. In other words, there is an entwining existence of singing, drumming and dancing in any given performance, be it social ceremony or ritual in the performance culture of Ebira. The Ebira usually refers to music as *Aahee* (Performance or play) which means that performance is synonymous to music. It forms the bedrock upon which dance exist. The other representation of music mentioned earlier is *Isohu* meaning 'sound producing instrument' or a particular dance igniting sound. *Ahe* which means song is also used to represent music among the Ebiras because singing meaning *aheoyiji* is central to every performance.

There is hardly any category of dance performance that will not start with singing. In fact, dance is usually the end product or a physical reaction to the sound of drumbeat and singing. To the Ebira, dance is a spontaneous response to satisfy one's emotion as well as meeting various forms of social and religious quest as soon as the sound of the Drum (*Okanga*) is heard. Songs and drumbeat play a central role in the art of dancing among the Ebira because singing and drumming creates the atmospheric aura, ignites the reactive emotion, and sets mood and control the pace of the dancer. The drummer plays a very vital role here as they determine the height of excitement and influence the performing artists and participating audiences alike with their dexterous and captivating rhythms. They control the tempo, and duration of a performance; thus, the dancer beyond reflex reaction depends on the motivation of the singer and drummer to ignite his or her creativity in successive movement transition.

During ceremonies and festivals, one can hardly differentiate between the major players and audiences as everyone participates in the singing and improvisational dance. The streaming audiences are usually motivated by the creative prowess of the drummers, lead singer and the chorus as well as the festive aura to join any group of performers on procession round a town or at a stationed performance arena, the *Orere*.

Performance contexts

The ritual and social categories and contexts of performance within which dance plays significant role include the masquerade theatre festivals comprising *Ekuechi* and *Echeane*, new yam festival known as *Echeori*, funeral ritual theatre comprising of *Ogugu*, *Arigede* and *Onyimiruweyi* performances, Hunters' ritual performance known as *Ahee Obe/ Uru*, Occupational dance performance known as *Ozomeche*, the dusk to dawn musical dance concert called *Unehe*. The genre of performances peculiar to *Unehe* includes *Okono*, *Ichekene* and *Ikede*. Naming ceremony (*Ireyiozi*)

and marriage ceremony (*Oneeoyinyi*) are also very important performance avenue within which dance play central role. Hence, the dance types of Ebira people are usually identified as part of a given festival or ceremony within which they are functional. In other word, they are named after their associated context of performance and some are named after a given type of drumbeat or musical ensemble. Therefore, the name of every given Ebira dance is usually in compound form composed of the word dance (Eze) and the context of performance such as *eze-echeori*, *eze-arigede*, *eze-ikede*, *eze-ogugu*, *eze-ozomeche*.

Ebira Dance

Indigenous Ebira dances can be grouped into three categories namely ritual, occupational and socio-entertainment types. Apart from the context of performance by which the dances are symbolically identified, each of the three categories of dance forms mentioned can also be typified in terms of pace, dynamics (energy level) and movement patterns. Thus the two identifiable movement pattern associated with Ebira dances include (1) the graceful dance movement pattern; this pattern is characterized by the slow and cautious stepping of the feet and wiping motion of the hands, (2) the energetic dance movement pattern; this category is characterized by fast forward thrusting and swift turning of the torso, fast paced striding and stamping of the feet and dexterous swinging and swaying of the hands. While the characteristics of the socio-entertainment dance can be linked to the graceful dance movement pattern, the ritual and occupational dance forms share the characteristics associated to both the graceful and energetic dance movement patterns. Usually, the determinant factor for any given category of movement revolves around the context of performance, song pattern as well as the tempo set by the master drummer.

Ebira Entertainment Dances

The Ebira socio-entertainment dance category include the following dance forms; *Okono* dance form (*Eze-Okono*), *Ichekene* dance form (*Eze-Ichekene*) and *Ikede* dance form (*Eze-Ikede*). *Okono*, *Ichekene* and *Ikede* dance forms belong to the family of Ebira socio-entertainment dances. The major difference between the trios are in the instruments used the structure of performance. *Okono* dance form is the oldest of the social dance family in which a pair of smooth stones are struck against each other to create rhythm to complement or accompany the singing and to set the pace for the dance movement. *Okono* dance performance is associated with leisure; it is utilized by farmers to unwind after a day's work. The dance movement is characterized by foot stamping, intervals of swift turning and variation of graceful forward and backward thrust of the dancer's torso in a curved frame posture.

Ichekene dance is a contemporary of *Okono* and both share similar characteristics in terms of movement. However, *Ichekene* dance involves communal participation of women and youngsters alike. The musical instruments used in the performance are also differ from that of *Okono* dance. *Ichekene* musical instrument ensemble is composed of a specially made square shaped layer of bamboo sticks strapped together with an enclosed pea-like seeds which produces the sound when shaken known as *Ichekene*, talking drum known as *Ugogonyi* and a pair of gong known as *Use*.

Ikede dance form is a rejuvenated form of *Ichekene* performance which employs the use a complete drum ensemble/orchestra comprising a master drum known as *Okanga Obanyi* or *Iritu*, a snare drum known as *Ijabana* or *Obene*, talking drum called *Ugogonyi*, rattles which is referred to as *Aiha* and a pair of gong known as *Use*. The composition of *Ikede* dance movements portrays grace, elegance, poise, confidence and pride. The rudiments of the steps is usually a reflection of an all season Ebira popular

greeting known as *Tangwao* meaning 'be watchful, be careful or be cautious' it is also short formed as *Tao* and *Ngwao*. The slow and steady gliding of the dancer's feet with an impression of being cautious and confident and forward staring motion of the hands that seems to path or chart a way also accommodates eclectic innovation sourced from day to day happenings and what is in vogue. *Ikede* performance can be classified as an indigenous musical-dance concert involving various competitive performers which include singer dancers, instrumentalists and participant audience.

The rudiment of *Okono*, *Ichekene* and *Ikede* dance movement patterns reflect grace, beauty, elegance, confidence and pride which unravels in the gliding movement of the dancer's feet in an on the spot swag and intermittent transition of graceful forward motion with the forward thrust and swaying of the hands successively. As earlier mentioned, the composition and variation of the dance movement patterns can be analyzed in line with the hilly and rocky topography of the peoples habitation which must have informed the concept behind the coinage of Ebira popular greeting *Tangwao* which when translated to English, simply imply 'watch your steps, be watchful, careful or cautious'.

Ebira Occupational Dance

Ozomeche occupational dance is characterized by symbolic and pantomimic movements that portray the primary occupations of the Ebira. It is usually displayed to depict Ebira traditional fabric making by the women and the process of farming by the men.

Ebira hunters' dance known as *Aahee-Obe* is an occupational dance form that enacts both the art of game hunting and art of war. Similar to *Ozomeche* dance movements, the dance movements of *Aahee-Obe* are characterized by variations of symbolic and pantomimic displays that show cases the prowess of the Ebira archers and act of valour, strength, determination and hard work.

Ebira Ritual Dances

Aahee-Obe dance: Apart from being an occupational dance, *Aahee-Obe* is also regarded as a ritual dance performance because it involves the mystic practices of hunters and it is usually performed during the naming, coronation or funeral ceremonies of a hunter.

Anuva dance derived its name from the *Anuva* drum; a goat herd skin covered pot drum with an earthenware base. Ododo states that '*Anuva* drum is usually played with some metal rattles on fingers and wrists'. (213). *Anuva* dance is characterized by energetic manipulation of the limb, chest cavity, feet stamping and gliding, travelling motion and swift turning at intervals. It is usually performed during Echeane masquerade festival celebrated annually in honour of Ebira women and during ceremonial occasions such as coronation.

Echeori dance is usually performed during *Echeori* new yam festival celebrated among the Ihima and Eganyi communities of Ebiraland in reverence of *Ori* which Ododo described as "spirit being or nature spirit created by God to intercede between man and Himself" (96). The dance pattern is characterized by very fast dexterous motion of the torso with constant foot stamping stride. While the left hand sways the sphere, the right hand holds unto an upward raised *Okaha* (fabric weaving beater) with a stripe of white cloth at the apex.

Ogugu, *Arigede* and *Onyimiruweyi* dances are all funeral ritual connected performances. However, *Ogugu* dance is usually performed during the funeral of an aged Ebira man. The performance is highly electrifying aura with the presence of masquerade and dancers that are usually embroiled in a dexterous motion with a high level of agile expressions as they process in a cluster and staccato trend that transit into circular formation characterized by a multiple count speed and intermittent shuffle.

On the other hand, *Arigede* and *Onyimiruweyi* dances are

usually performed in honour of an aged Ebira woman and the duo is not associated with the male gender or masquerade except for the male drummers. The major players include a lead female singer and female chorus who double as dancers. The streaming audience also joins in dancing which usually starts in a subtle pattern that gradually transforms into an electrifying climax characterized by dexterous masculine dance movements displayed by the women performers.

Emergence of Ebira-Rambo Dance

The Ebira-Rambo dance is a neo-traditional dance that possesses modern choreographic features. In other words, Rambo dance is a choreographic synchrony and stylization of the various dance steps of Ebira people primarily created for the purpose of recreation, amusement or entertainment. The dance style is an offshoot of the usual habit of Ebira dancers teaming up to skillfully outwits one another as part of the climaxing excitement in every given cultural performance irrespective of the context. Here, each group would choreograph their dance movement and display in uniformity as they fuse their artistic skill, innovation and experiences into play. Hence, the Rambo dancers are a group of Ebira professional cultural dance group peculiar for their modern design of Ebira dance steps.

The Ebira-Rambo dancers like the *Eche-Ozoku ozomeche* dance group; (a group of female occupational dancers that specializes on the dance enactment and display of Ebira traditional woven fabric) were instrumental to the popularization of Ebira dance culture at the national and international level. Ebira-Rambo dance group is composed of very skillful Ebira dancers who were capable of interplaying traditional folklore with innovation and influences drawn from other cultures. The Ebira-Rambo dancers who simply refer to themselves as *Onyeze oziete Anebira* meaning Anebira cultural dancers came, to the lime light in the late 1960s when they

began to represent the Ebira. They made a landmark achievement with the spectacular display of a rejuvenated and well choreographed fusion of Ebira dance steps across the country and even beyond the borders of Nigeria such as Australia, France and South Korea. Ebira-Rambo dance soon became famous and took on a cultural identity that an average Ebira would want to be associated with. The name Ebira-Rambo dancers came into existence during one of such national dance occasion whereby a name to identify the group from Ebira land was demanded by the organizers and royal guests of the Sokoto caliphate at the time. Rambo an abbreviation of Irambo which happens to be the cognomen of the lead dancer by the name Jimoh Egugu, famous as an indomitable wrestler and a skillful dancer came handy, catchy and sellable. Among the pioneer members of the group were the initiator and choreographer of the group by the name Ibrahim Ahutu, a well travelled skillful drummer, Jimoh Egugu (Rambo or Irambo) the lead dancer, Salihu Otueze, Adayi Okomanyi, Adayi Ekundayo, Jimoh Odende, Inda Agidi, Adayi Suberu, Saliu Osivave, Onokanga Onuvoha, Momoh Okasime and Bakare Sule (Amana).

Every member of the troupe beyond being good dancers also sings and plays the drum skillfully. According to the group spokesman, they feel fulfilled to have been a part of the effort to popularize Ebira cultural identity beyond the abode of Ebira land and Nigeria. Rambo dance became a phenomenal used to refer to any given Ebira stylized dance performance fashioned after the Ebira-Rambo dance group style of choreographic movement. Hence, the Ebira-Rambo dancers were able to set the pace for the emergence of the latter generations professional dance groups that started applying the Ebira-Rambo dancers' choreographic technique across Ebiraland.

Ebira-Rambo Dance Concept/ Stylization

Ebira-Rambo stylized dance movement is rooted in Ebira

indigenous dance and musical performance cultures. It is composed of sequence of cohesive fusion of punctuated dance movements sourced from the Ebira social, occupational and ritual dance forms. The formation usually follows the traditional processional pattern that intermittently or alternately transit from straight line to zigzag, arc and circular shuffle. The dance interpretational pace is set or controlled by the dancers' collection of repeated call and response folksongs and the drummers' intermittent punctuations and shuffled variation.

The major innovation employed by the Ebira-Rambo dancers include (i) De-contextualized performance; this imply that the movements were sourced and harvested (detached) from the numerous context of performance such as the symbolic annual traditional festivals within which they exist. (ii) Creating a line between dancers and audience; unlike in a typical traditional African dance performed during a festival that is characterized by the communality of artiste-audience participation, Ebira-Rambo dance adopted the modern convention of performing before a non-participant audience. (iii) De-emphasizing individualism and emphasizing team play: the Ebira-Rambo dance style is characterized by the downplay of individual improvisation while emphasis is focused on balance and unity in the movement patterns and formations of the dancers. (iv) Symbolic application or use of costume and accessories: as professional dancers: Ebira-Rambo dancers uses specially made costumes that distinguished them from others. In other words, Ebira-Rambo special costumes and accessories functionally constitute part of the characteristics by which they are usually identified. (v) Stylized drumbeat: Ebira-Rambo dancers do not rely on improvised beat but specially created drum beats with the desired punctuations suitable for their choreographic dance movements and sequence.

Characteristic Feature of Ebira-Rambo Dance

The dance design as earlier mentioned is a recreated fusion of series of Ebira dance steps into what can be called a neo-Ebira dance style. It is a standardized dance performance that tends to obey the basic elements of design which include balance, communicative picturization, movement precision, transition, appropriate dynamics and floor pattern. The dancers also tend to maintain a great deal of symmetrical and asymmetrical design appropriately as they progress in accordance to the principle of line, mass and coherence to create aesthetic appeal.

Primarily, music plays a central role in the process of dance and choreography. Thus, Rambo dance style relies heavily of music comprising of series of short call and response folksongs and drum rhythm. Unlike in a typical contextual Ebira performance characterized by singing countless songs, dance is the central emphasis here with the complement of series of short functional call-response songs to set the pace. The drummers, led by the master drummer, plays very vital role of helping the dancers to sustain the aura of performance with their skilful beat sequence of proverbial and rhetorical phrases upon which the dancers transit from one interpretative form to another.

Costume, accessories and props plays important role in a typical Anebira performance as they are usually employed to boost the tradition, concept and principles guiding a given performance. The costumes usually worn by Ebira-Rambo dancers is a colourful Ebira traditional fabric made replica of *Ekuechi* (masquerade) festival associated costumes which include an exaggerated hand submerging long sleeve top on an extremely wide trousers with a narrow ankle known as *Aruchi Odo* or *Echaka* that allows a wide range of movements. Other alternating costumes used by the Rambo dancers include a traditional sari cloth wrapped around the body as a garment known as *Ita Ohara* and a smart sleeveless top known as

Akempe or *Okuvoteiza*. The accessories include a raffia made or red long cap beautified with feathers and cowries known as *Aja*, *Amuohuto* or *onyiutoirezi* which the Yoruba's called *abetiaja*, *Ubobo*, turban, amulets and beads. The major prop Rambo dancers uses is (*Omu*) animal tail whisk or (*Upepe*) a raffia or palm frond made hand fan.

CONCLUSION

Change is an inevitable phenomenal that usually permeate every spheres of life, especially the cultural life of a people. Dance is one cultural element with which the experiences of a people is documented and preserved as well as conveying and projecting new influences, innovation and transformation from one generation to another. Ebira-Rambo dance style represents the renaissance of Ebira dance performance culture in a changing world. The Ebira-Rambo dancers' innovation of a neo-Ebira choreographic dance form has not only helped to preserve and Ebira dances for posterity but have rejuvenated the dance steps in line with the trends in the world of cultural dance entertainment. The phenomenal of Rambo dance style beyond traditional taboos has created a universal frontline identity upon which the Ebiras can sail to project their resourceful and creative values as a people in a changing world.

Note

The information in this paper relies heavily on data derived from personal research carried out as part of a Master of Arts degree thesis on the professionalization of Anebira dance culture in 2006.

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