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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DANCE AS EXPRESSION OF CULTURE IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

Oluwaseun Abiodun FABUSUYI

Department of Theatre Arts  
Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State  
shanf@yaboo.com

Peter Adeiza BELLO (Ph.D)

Department of Theatre Arts  
Redeemers' University, Ede, Osun State.  
Petrabell2000@yaboo.co.uk

**Abstract:** *The term culture is dance and dance is culture, cannot be over emphasized. The statement is a clear indication of the fact that dance performance especially among Africans is enshrouded in the ways of life of the people. Dance is no doubt an expression of culture in totality cutting across age long beliefs, folklores and traditional festivals and ceremonies of diverse kind. As a cultural element and an art form, the place of dance in the sociocultural development of the African society cannot be undermined. This is because; dance performance transcends all aspect and stages of the people's development, making great impact in all facets of their lives. The potentiality of dance as a veritable tool for development in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, this paper examines the significance of dance in culture and societal development with the application of descriptive research method. It highlights the great potentials of dance as a viable form of entertainment, expressive communication and source of tourism. Hence, the paper recommends strategies towards enhancing the potential viability of dance for meaningful sociocultural development in a bid to tackling the challenges of social and moral decadence in the Nigerian Society.*

**Keywords:** *Significance, Dance, Culture, Development.*

### Introduction

The place of dance in humane societies, especially African societies, cannot be over-emphasized; it permeates all aspect of life of the people. This is largely due to the role it plays in their religious, social, political and economic life. Its centrality can never be undermined within in Nigerian societies. Dance events such as marriage and burials are about the major events that provide recreation for people encumbered with work. It has a unifying force that provides a platform for social interaction in relaxed atmosphere. For clarification, dance is used in a generic term in this paper. This approach is informed by what we conceived as a dance in Nigeria where music is also implied when we talk about dance. Dance in Nigeria is a composite art. Dance is also examined as a sub-cultural sector.

There seems to be an aesthetical principle in operation in African cultures; namely the close intermingling, intertwining, interlocking, and inter-relationship of music, dance and drama in African tradition art. The African usually integrates music, dance and drama into everything they do. A typical African performance is usually an ensemble of many parts with the maximization of both the tangible and intangible aesthetics of the performance. Supporting the above notion, Omofolabo-Soyinka (1996) states that dance is multi-communication channel transmitting information not only through time and space but also kinetically, visually and through other human sensorial perception. She further illustrate dance through its movement patterns, kinetically conveys verbal information; music gets visually interpreted and in particular, many African plastic arts forms attain their full significance specifically through dance motion. Gory (187), Nketia (1974), Okwesa (1987), Ugolo (2005) all agreed that African concept of music, dance and drama are one and the same thing.

### The Significance of Dance in Nigeria

The role of dance in human societies generally and in African cultures cannot be over-emphasized, scholars, like Radcliff Brown, Evans Pritchard, France Rust, Magaretta, Goines, Judith Hanna, Peggy Harper, Kariamou Welsh Asante and others who have seriously looked at dance agreed that it plays certain general roles in all societies. Scholars, in order to give perspective to the study of dance have tried to formulate some functional typology for dance, some on a general level and others on a specific level. Among such scholars are Gertrude Kurath (1949), Anthony Shay (1971), Edith Enech (1976) and Felix Begho (1996). The attempt by Kurath is limited in its cross-cultural application, while that of Begho and Enech are Nigeria specific.

On the other, Anthony Shays' categorization of the roles and functions of dance in societies is at a more general level. Shay divide the roles and function of dance into six categories as follows;

Dance as a reflection and validation of social organization

Dance as a vehicle of secular and religious ritual expression

Dance as a social diversion of recreational activity

Dance as a Psychological outlet and release

Dance as a reflection of artistic values or as an aesthetic activity in itself, and

Dance as a reflection of economic subsistence pattern, or an economic activity.

The above categorization reveals that dance covers virtually all the different facet of society. It permeates the social, political, religious, psychological, economical and aesthetic aspect of the society. From the foregoing the functionality of dance in societies measures its centrality to these societies, especially Nigeria. Dance in Nigeria is the art closest to the people. It forms an integral part of the life of the people. Harper (1966:1), writing about Nigeria in particular, attest to this by saying that:

In the traditional societies of Nigeria, dance is an integral part of life. Dance movements are grounded in the physical circumstances, work habits and everyday movement of a people. The design of the dance, which involves a specific relationship between performers reflect social organizations and attitudes in a community.

Doris Green (1996:26) says "dance in Africa is seen as a way of life, a source of people and is associated with everyday activities such as birth, death, puberty, war, recreation, initiation and ritual. Dance is so vital in the everyday life of the people". Keita Fàdeba (1959: 20) says "unlike other forms of dance, Africa dance is detached from the lives of the people, but is a spontaneous emanation of the people". In a nutshell, dance keeps the Nigeria society going in its appeal to all strata of society as well as social classes. Dance no doubt, is very dynamic part of Nigerian performing arts culture and also an important part of indigenous Nigerian cultural traditions. At the level of definition dance as an art is culture dependent and what constitutes dance are dependent on social, cultural aesthetics, artistic and moral constraints. Among the

first category is the definition by Cambridge International Dictionary (1996:345) simply define dance "as to move the body and feet to music". Enekwe (1991:96) defines it as "essentially the response of the soul and the mind through the body to the ineludible power of music". From the above definition and the numerous others in this category, it shows that there are underlined commonalities that conceive dance as a human behavior, for expression, as means to an end and for communication.

On the other hand, a more profound definition of dance that captures cultures which is our major concern is by Hanna (1978:88) she says:

Dance is human behavior composed of purposefully, intentionally, rhythmical and culturally patterned movements and gestures, which are not motor activities (as define by specific societies). The motion having inherent value (88).

Given the above definition one can only join Akazue (2004:65) to say that dance "as an artistic expression,...is explored to entertain, educate and to pass information that are relevant to the growth and development of a particular society". Again a look at different views on dance will help us bring out the functions and the centrality of dance.

The Philosophers view that ecstatic, mystical and a form of worship that is intended to invite supernatural powers. Philosophers, the like of Ruth St. Dennis, see dance as a spiritual exercise in which the soul of man is elevated and his spirit is purged. They believe that dance is a potent instrument of worship and communication with the divine. They believe that the power of dance in religious practice lies in its multi-sensory, emotional and symbolic capacity to communicate. To them dance has magical and mystical values. The above give credence to the centrality of dance in the religious lives of the Nigerian people. If this point is properly harnessed in religious worship it will go a long way in enhancing spirituality among the people. The benefits thereof cannot be undermined in a society where the rate of crime is high.

Dance to the Psychologists is a different ball game. It is viewed against the background of the therapeutic qualities. They argued that the essential psychological functions of dance are preventing depression and discharging other psychic stresses (Lambo 1965). From this view, the therapeutic potency of dance is the healing of certain ailment psychic or physical cannot be quantified. In most European countries, the therapeutic

potency of dance has been explored with tremendous results. In Nigeria, this aspect has been left in the hands of the traditional people with no encouragement from the government. Examples are the the Igbe and the Iyayi societies of Nigeria. Bame (1991:41) attest to the therapeutic potency of dance in Africa. He says,

...the broad activity of dance in Africa is at once a psychological dose for replenishing happiness and joy as well as lessening grief and worry. There is no doubt this cathartic effect of dance, in the past as now, in some respects enabled Africans to cope with the demanding experiences of their existence, disease, hunger, death and many others stemming partly from the consequences intended and unintended, of colonial rule and racial suppression.

Another very role of dance in Nigeria societies is its cohesive nature/potency. Dance as we know does not occur on its own in African societies, it is always a part of an event such as burial, marriage and rites of passage etc. it is particularly in these events that you can see the cohesive role of dance. There is no activity in Nigeria that has a more cohesive role as dance. People of all status submit to it. For example, all the five Ebos (Quarters) in Asaba Delta State submit to the dance called *Egwu-Ota*. All the Quarters in Asaba observe dos and don'ts of *Egwu-Ota*. Its laws apply to all Asaba indigenes the same way, there are no exceptions for any Quarters in Asaba. The above example is a lens into other societies in Nigeria and in Africa.

Radcliffe Brown, Evans Pritchard and others all agreed that dancing being a social or collective activity, exerts some effects on the social groups as well as individual members of the group which engage in it. For example, in dancing, the individual participant are constrained by custom to conceal their idiosyncrasies and conform to social requirements of the dance; in so doing, they acquire some degree of social conformity necessary for harmonious social life.

The cohesive potential of dance is needed to move a people in the same direction to ensure peace, which is a prerequisite for development. In a country of great diversity in culture like Nigeria, dance is the language that knows no ethnic barrier. Moreover, it draws vitality on living Nigerian cultural traditions and expresses so well the identity and unity of African Culture. In the language of H'Doubler (1957) "the universal is realized in the individual" and Ben Tomoloju (1998:32) caps it

all with this remark "it is only the dancers who do not have their medium barricaded by codes".

The recreational role of dance can never be over-emphasized in a society like Nigeria. Even though the recreational function of most our dances was not deliberately designed from the beginning, overtime time it has been established. One could however categorise this as the latent roles. Latent roles or functions, according to Bame (1991:4), are the 'concealed not so obvious and unintended consequences which also help in the maintenance of the system'. He further explains that consequences which are deliberately sought are then manifest (functions). The occasion for dance no doubt calls for people to gather: this therefore brings people together in reunion to interact and sometimes fresh acquaintances are made. It affords people the opportunity to discuss political, social and topical matters over bottles of drinks. People ease off tension and relax forgetting their sorrows, at least for that moment. This potential of dance is an aspect to be explored in a country where tension is heightened by the deplorable condition of living; a country where stress, hardship, lack and insecurity are the order of the day. There is need for dance culture to be promoted among the people to ease off tension and aggression. Enekwe (1981:11) declares "dancing serves as vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of communion with each other. As a result, people are liberated from the bounds of individuality". We strongly recommend that dance culture should be revived and promoted in Nigeria to produce healthy people.

Lastly, the communication, educational and socialization potentials of dance are very interrelated and interdependent. The communicational values of dance are numerous. Many societies have documented their histories, conquests and defeats, beliefs and aspirations through dance. People have registered their collective identities through dance at local, national and international levels. It will not be too verbose to say that dance is a microcosm of culture. It reveals what is buried in the subconscious of a people, the not too obvious. As compact as traditional dances maybe, they are loaded for instructions, teaching, explanation and education on vital aspects of culture.

To support the above, Buckland (2001:1) says "dance has the prosperity to fore ground cultural memory as embodied practice by virtual of its predominantly

semiotic modes of transmission". In other words, the analysis of various communication elements embedded in traditional dances, in terms of movements, costumes, insignia, props, performance structure, musical instruments etc will reveal that it communicates a lot about a people. It reveals who they are, their beliefs, what they like, their aspirations and their personality etc. Abbe (2007) similar views that dance due to its non-verbal nature have the ability to document and bring to bear the history of a people and their culture". Emanating from the above views, dance has serve as alternative history, because a chunk of what is known today about a people is gotten from their dances. Even though the dances are no more the way they used to be, there are still traces of peoples past embedded in the dances that serves as a pointer to where the people are coming from, because dance takes on personality of the culture it belongs to. Okojie (1994) elucidates that 'the key to a people's character or personality can be found in their dance, music and folklore'.

Kealiinohomoku (1965:1) states that the dance of a culture of a society reveals many things about a people. According to her

All dances are ethnic...dance within a culture reveals a value system, the ideas as well as the norms. Dance reveals the aesthetics, it shows modal personality, and it express psychological range. Dance is an indicator of world view.

She further re-iterates in (1974) that;

Our dances is an expression of our institution. It shows the nature of interpersonal relationship and it reveals much about aesthetics and morals, some of these expressions are typical representatives of our universe and some are ideal expressions.

Through different dances, Africans educate their children. They learn the ways of the land, the values, the arts and the language etc. According to Green (1996:13) 'traditional African dance is integrated art of movement that is controlled by her music which is governed by her languages, its relationship to music and language distinguishes it from any other art form'. These qualities make African tradition dance unique.

On the other hand, the sociologists whose major concern is the study of the relationship between people living in groups, view dance as a profound social

experience. They say that dance is the only activity of all ages that both sexes participate in and therefore offers a unique opportunity for an analysis of education.. Ewhuadjapor (1996:4) defines socialization as the shaping of individual behavior through the training that the environment provides (via dance most especially). Socialization therefore, becomes an important function of the dance. Henna (1980:90) defines it as a 'process of cultural transmission by which an individual learns'. She further re-iterates that 'when socialization is consciously intended, dance may be used to intensify the oral instruction concerning the tribal standards of conduct'. Therefore, dance offers greater opportunity for socialization, whether consciously or unconsciously intended. Infact, many African dance form socialize participants to a variety of social behavior e.g. family obligations; inter personal friendship and solidarity religious, political status and occupational norms. The potential of dance in sustainable development cannot be over-emphasized as Thoraya (2010) rightly observes

In traditional African society's cultural sub-sectors such as dance, music, etc. has been used to develop the individual which invariably develop the whole. It has been used in the area of socialization and benefits of socialization are so numerous. It promotes healthy thinking, it stimulates creativity.

Again, dance communicate cultural values. Nettleford (1996: XI) says 'dance in Africa is a traditional source of communication'. Music and Dance do not employ what you may call non values or extraneous values, thus it is what Africans value that they incorporate into their art, especially music and dance. Africans use dance to portray values such as honesty, hard work, chastity, cooperation, hospitality and so on. Anikulapo (2007) note that 'African dance is a source of communication through which it is possible to demonstrate emotion sentiment and other reactions through movements'. Dance no doubt expresses the manifold hues of life through movement. Indianetzone (2007) commenting on the Indian folk dance describes 'it as a means of getting valuable information which can be more useful in understanding local cultures, legends, myths that are deeply rooted in culture, convictions and belief systems, which native people follow'. It concludes by saying that 'folk dances provide an important framework to understanding of social context of particular region in detail'.

Layiwola (1989), while discussing dance and society in mutual interpretation, observes that dance is not only a show of physical dexterity and alertness but equally attending ideas, welfare or discomfort of the society that generates it. He goes further to say that the varieties in the movement goes beyond mere physical expression and find dialectical counterparts in societies store of knowledge and experience. He concludes that dance, as recent focus of research has more in store, for the understanding, as well as the interpretation of a society. As it is often said, a work of art such as dance cannot be separated from general consciousness of the society. Akazue (2004:69) supports the above views by saying 'there is a dialectical relationship between art and the society; one cannot do without the other'. Art generally is a reflection of the society.

Dance as a source of income and tourist attraction. This paper will not be complete if the wonderful aspect of dance is not included. African dance has always and still commands attention not only from strangers but also from culture bearers. The beauty and the spectacle in these dances cannot be described. Is it the masquerade dances such as the *Igunnu* and the *Ebu* wonders of the Nupes and the Delta-Ibo tribes of Nigeria or the *Ikpekepegbe* female acrobatic dance of Edo State or the *Atilogwu* of the Igbos or the *Kalangu* dances of the Hausa tribes? Nigeria is blessed with a vast reservoir of traditional dances, which if properly harnessed will reflect the taste of a new Nigeria and will be a great source of income at local, national and international levels. Once the economic aspects of these dances are explored, many youths who have abandoned them for the hip-pop because of its economic values will return to them without delay. And when they return to it, they will eject their own zest and time into it and leave a mark that will be registered in the annals of Nigeria's creative traditions. It will represent their time which in a way is development.

From the foregoing, the ability of dance to reveal so much about a people cannot be over-emphasized. Dance as a gateway to people's culture; it has help in documenting the things that are buried in the subconscious of the people with evidences in studies like *Ikaki Tortoise* dance of the Kalabari people of Nigeria, the *Obitun* dance of the Ondo people in Nigeria: the *Gelede mask dances* of the Yoruba people of Ogun and Oyo States, Nigeria and *Karete and Ishioko dances* of the Edo people Nigeria. From the above observation of what dance and music has been used to do especially in

the human development. Dance a veritable formula for salvaging African cultures is instructive to understanding the philosophies behind our cultural practices. Since dances serves as a gateway to traditional cultures, there is need for stronger emphasis on African dance research and documentation. This is especially imperative in this era of globalization where people without a claim to a definite identity join the global move and get swallowed up by culture of the west.

### Interrelationship of Culture and Development

The significance of culture in development cannot be exhausted in any debate. Culture and development exist in mutual reciprocity. There is no doubt that there is a connection between both owing to the fact that both deal with people-they are human oriented. Development has it is often said connotes modernization, growth, progress and the concept of transformation from one stage to another. Development in all its facets economics, religious, human, social and political has dominated major debate in forums such as United Nations Population funds (UNFPA: 2010), new partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO:2009).

Even though, the (MDGS) of 2000 did not categorically highlight culture as a veritable tool in their development goals the (MDGS) of 2009-2012 have reorganized the role of culture in development and as such included in the MDGS strategies. They have come to term in this debate that culture cannot be tossed aside as irrelevant or as obstacle to development but rather as a basis for sustainable development. The most encouraging thing is as (Drani:2009) puts it, 'is the perception of culture as an essential dimension of the development process and not just as a tool to help achieve development result'.

Iyeh (2008) observe that one of the greatest problem of third world nations, including Nigeria, is the loss of knowledge of their traditions and cultural heritage. This is not unconnected with African experience of colonialism. It is a well-known fact that without good background, a people cannot attain a well meaningful development yet all nations of the world (including the so called "first world" nations) keep striving for increased development. The problem of not knowing the reason behind most of our traditions has led to our throwing them away and replacing them with

meaningless foreign cultures, which have trapped us in a web of confusion.

There are great consequences posed by this: first, a man who does not know the reason by he is doing a thing has nothing to offer posterity. Such a man is not educated and as such cannot impact positively his environment. For a sustainable development the role of education is of paramount importance. As clearly articulated by a UNESCO report in Thessaloniki in Greece (1997),

The goal of education is to make people wiser, more knowledgeable, better informed, ethical, responsible, critical and capable continuing to learn. Education also served society by providing a critical reflection on the world, its failings and injustices, and by promoting greater consciousness and awareness exploring new vision and concepts and inventing new techniques and tools...

Against this background, this paper will attempt to highlight the challenges facing cultures in development. Dance, a sub-cultural sector is used as a lens to other aspects of culture.

### **Challenges and Recommendation** **The Challenge of Misrepresentation and Interpretation of Our Culture e.g. Dance.**

Many African dances were misrepresented and misinterpreted by early missionary traders and writers who applied the word 'pagan' to our traditional dances because they did not understand the meaning of what they saw. In the colonial era and the coming of Christianity most of our classical dance forms suffered a major setback. For example, in Igboland, as reported by Onura Nzekwu (1960), Igbo dances lost the physical and moral support of some Igbo men and women who because of their education and position, regarded themselves as too civilized, too detribalized, and too modern to participate in primitive dances. This people with their European counterpart looked down on their heritage which they regarded as pagan, noisy and lacking in sophistication, if compared with, for example, imported waltz. They condemned the dances as requiring excessive energy to perform.

Some of the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of our cultural heritage has had and still has its toll on our development. We all prefer anything western to our

own. We run after anything imported which help the development of those societies. For example, we run after drugs by Forever Living, GNLD, Tianshi, etc. whereas there are drugs from some locally available plants which our local herb Doctors are trying to project. But since they are by local Herbal Doctors, they are regarded as inferior. Somebody may say our processing technology is inadequate; we are also quick to say that those ancient doctors have not been given adequate and needed encouragement to improve their technology. Therefore, it is our convictions that African scholars and researchers have a moral duty to systemize the knowledge of this cultural form, not only for the cultural bearer in particular, but also for other Africans and the world as a whole.

### **Illiteracy in the Knowledge of Our Cultural Heritage**

Following closely is the challenge of illiteracy in knowledge of our cultural heritage. It is not a fallacy to say that a people without a good knowledge of their background cannot attain a meaningful development. Meaningful development as a matter of urgency and immediacy is a must, if as a nation, we wish to attain our full potentials and find our place in the global move. Nigeria and indeed Africa have suffered great setbacks for despising the potentials of their cultural heritage that would have helped in meaningful development.

There is therefore need for the (re)-education of the people at all levels as recommended in the DESD of 2005 = 2004 by UNESCO. As Dacosta Adeyemo observed that 'culture is a construct' therefore culture reflects a value system. Thus, as it is often said a people's cultural identity is the spring board of their development effort. No doubt, heritage reflect values shared by society and through its heritage, society recognizes its identity and promote the above.

Cultural identity must be promote through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the re-education of the people is very necessary especially, in the area of appreciating our cultural values. Thoraya (2010) comment that "people are the product of their culture and its creator; as such they are not simple passive receivers but active agents who can reshape cultural values, norms and expression". Overson Shumba (2005) adds that 'indigenous communities' knowledge and values of their culture are particular relevant to education for suitable development'. The individual's attitude must change positively to promote sustainable development. The change and conviction must come from inside.

### **Non-Implementation of the Nigerian Cultural Policy**

Another challenge facing culture in development is non-implementation of Cultural Policies on Arts. The non-adherence of government to the recommendation of Cultural Policy is bane on development in this sub-cultural sector. What one may call partial implementation of this policy is an obstacle and which to an extent can be regarded as non-implementation. Arnold Udoka once said "the aim of any Cultural Policy is defeated once it is not been implemented". The cyclic call for Policy review on Cultural Policy is abysmal, because the Policy in question has not been tested. What meaningful result will one expect from a country that has less than three percent (3%) of its budget on culture? It is therefore recommended as a matter of urgency and immediacy that government should give proper attention to the Cultural Policy by adhering to the recommendations.

### **Lack of Adequate Funding**

This sub-cultural-sector suffers greatly for lack of funding. Investors do not see any need to invest in the sector. The government who is supposed to take the lead in the funding of the creative sector as it is in most European societies is failing in this regard. Funding by government and NGOs can increase the number of small dance groups and the range of dance performance. There should be travel grants provided for dancers, which we strongly believe will provide the chance for this dance guilds to entertain, challenge and delight new audiences. Most artistes waste away their talents due to financial constraints. There is a lot that one can achieve if there is money to use. The artistes mobilization is very meager and do not encourage growth in the sector.

We therefore recommend that sponsorship rights should be enshrined in the professionalization of the creative industries through effect strategies and funding structures. There should be support for cultural artistic interaction with all sectors of the societies.

### **Conclusion**

Dance is very significant aspect of the cultural activity of man in Africa. Dance was discussed during the Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77. At the colloquium, it is unanimously agreed that dance in Black Africa is a manifestation

albeit in condensed artistic form, of the social, political, religious, philosophical and aesthetic life of the people. Dance therefore deserve or patronage and study.

However, our advocacy is that this dynamic and composite art need better attention from all stakeholders in its survival as a dynamic tool for development. Dance cannot be undermined in any meaningful national progress, strategies and plans. That dance is a veritable tool or medium in Nigeria's restructuring process is not an exaggeration but only that the capacity and potentials of dance for development has not been explored adequately.

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