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NEW SERIES • NO. 35 • JANUARY 1989

A Journal of
West African Studies



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Dance and Society in Mutual Interpretation: The Case of Nigeria

DELE OLAYIWOLA

Dance, conceived as a folk art, is the oldest of the arts. This lays claim to two reasons: first, that the expressive medium of the dance is the body of man, and that is the oldest tool that man possesses. Dance thus combines the expression with the means whereby expression finds an outlet. The second reason that establishes the primacy of the dance art in history is its classification with ritual drama in most ancient cultures. Cohen, for instance, observes that,

We cannot know precisely when man began to dance, but we may surmise that it was sometime in the dawn of prehistory . . . We can see one instance of the development with some clarity. The most widely accepted view of the origin of the Greek theatre traces it to the Dithyramb, a song and dance performance that was part of the spring festival of Dionysus. At first the celebration was wild and improvised, but in time it began to conform to the more set structure of ritual, using composed songs and dances. (Cohen, 1974: 1)

The Problem of Definition

Based on their own experience, some dance scholars have ventured definitions in the past (see Sachs 1937: Royce 1977). This paper does not seek to delimit in such a narrow acultural manner which seeks stereotypes or traces of universality. What we are concerned with here is the expressive characteristic of dance as a metalanguage. Whether dance occurs as mime, as parade, or as carnival, there is always the index of a dual goal in the conception and achievement of the dance. First is that it is conceived both as aesthetic as well as purposive action. In other words, beyond the flair and vagary, there is a utility.

The point of contention with which Sachs dealt and which has been justly highlighted by Royce is that speculative study would seek to make a definition as to whether it is only humans who do the dance or whether we cannot also describe what animals do as dance. This would

appear to be a problem which can only be solved by seeking boundaries and definition. (Sachs: 9, 10; Royce 3-4). It might be of interest to reproduce the quotations from Sachs as reprinted by Royce:

The birds . . . were long-legged creatures, tall almost as storks, and white and grey of feather; and the dance took place in the center of a broad, dry swamp . . . There were some hundreds of them, and their dance was in the manner of a quadrille, but in the matter of rhythm and grace excelling any quadrille that ever was. In groups of a score or more they advanced and retreated, lifting high their long legs and standing on their toes, now and then bowing gracefully to one another, now and then one pair encircling with prancing daintiness a group whose heads moved upwards and downwards and sideways in time to the stepping of the pair. At times they formed into one great prancing mass, with their long necks thrust upward; and the wide swaying of their backs was like unto the swaying of the sea. Then, suddenly, as in response to an imperative command, they would sway apart, some of them to rise in low, encircling flight, and some to stand as in little gossiping groups, and presently they would form in pairs or sets of pairs, and the prancing and the bowing, and advancing and retreating would begin all over again. (Quoted in Royce, 1977: 3-4).

And a second, even more graphic, definitely more contained situation: a group of some twenty mountain chickens of brilliant orange-yellow color, gathered together in a kind of dance characteristic of these beautiful birds. In the center one of the cocks executed the dance-like movement, as he hopped about the open place with wings extended and tail outspread. On the branches of the bushes round about, the others sat and expressed their admiration of the dancer with the strangest sounds. As soon as one cock was exhausted, he joined the spectators . . . and another took his place. (Quoted in Royce, 1977: 4).

Sachs was right in supposing this to be a problematic phenomenon within the definition of the dance. However the point to be reinforced is that though folk etymology often adapts language and its possibilities to the limits of imaginative narration, the definition of human language

needs to find some other arbitrary category to describe the phenomenon among animals which appear much like dance, but which, in actual fact, are some form of stylized action only interpretable in the sub-linguistic environment to birds or chimpanzees. The moment we realise that the 'dancing' of birds are outside the linguistic classification of human language category, the potential problem which Sachs identified would clear up. This point is further elaborated in aspects of what Edmund Leach discussed as 'The symbolic ordering of a man-made world: boundaries of social space and time':

One crucial point here is that our internal perception of the world around us is greatly influenced by the verbal categories which we use to describe it . . . I would like that this whole process of carving up the external world into named categories and then arranging the categories to suit our social convenience depends upon the fact that, although our ability to alter the external environment is limited, we have a virtually unrestricted capacity for playing games with the internalised version of the environment which we carry in our heads. (Leach 1976, 1983: 33, 36).

My contention remains that it is within human language to describe what those birds do in the two passages from Sachs as 'dance', but that if the birds were to speak, they will most likely call it by another name. An even more relevant point is that among humans, there could be a history of the dance, among animals such a logical, diachronic study is unthinkable — for their expressive acts are largely sub-conscious; or at the best para-conscious, for want of a better term.

The purpose of this essay is not to find a definition but to emphasize that dance, as a mode of social behaviour constitutes a form of language within the panorama of folk art and aesthetic. It is one of the ways by which imagination and language organise themselves to generate meaning. It is this mode of subtle patterning that will preoccupy us for much of the rest of this paper.

We will begin our analyses with the Kwagh-hir dance theatre of the Tiv. Both the account given by Edith Enem (1976) and the film recording done by Tunde Adeniji (n.d.) for the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan threw much light on the form as well as the content of Dance spectacle in Kwagh-hir as mediums of transmitting awareness not only of skilled movement of the legs and

arms but also of wit and discovery in folk commentary. In the film, the two mime spectacles are of great import. First the characters, dressed as men and women in raffia skirts dance with rhythmic waist movements and balanced metrical steps in the direction of the audience. They are at the end of a long rope which they pulled with great vigour to suggest that they are carting home a large haul. It is with the vigour and earnestness of an elephant hunter. But after a brief, effective suspense, the audience roared with laughter when they discovered, at their own expense, that the treasure at the end of the rope was nothing but a log of wood. There is also the scene of a boa hunter who after a deft jig and a lace work of the feet, gathers his bow and arrow and goes to hunt down a monster called Bughas. Each time he tries to shoot the beast, the latter charges at him and he falls backwards until the climax when in rapid charges he falls over and rolls endlessly backwards. In a later version of the film (Aig-Imokhuede, 1977), the beast actually catches up with the assailant and swallows him in stages so that we see the man struggling helplessly down the jaws of the monster.

The puppetry that forms part of the revue of dance, mime and drama sketches are equally vibrant and diverse in application. This versatility is most aptly described in Edith Enem's article (1976) on Kwagh-hir theatre. It is worthwhile to quote her at length:

The paraphernalia of Kwagh-hir are diverse in types and moral connotations. The puppets especially, are in different styles. Some are naturalistic, others grotesque and ridiculous, but all reflecting the moral prejudices and sanctions of the community. Historical awareness is shown in some puppets which represent events such as when the first motor bike was ridden in Gboko or the first policewoman emerged or when the modern dress styles of European design gained local acceptance.

The Tivs recall a time in the early political days when Kwagh-hir was prohibited as the satiric impulse of this theatre was exploited by opposing political factions to aggravate social strife. This again attests to the elastic structure of Kwagh-hir which is capable of accommodating new experiences in addition to the traditional repertoire. This resilience and the peoples passion for dance and drama which seems to thrive best on subjects that can be as commonplace as their drinking calabashes or the way a woman

ties her scarf, make for the continuing vitality of this folk art form.

The quality of actuality is often achieved by the literal representation of essential details of a situation presented. For example, in the vignette of the execution of an armed robbery by a firing squad, an actual shot is fired and at the same time the criminal's hand jerks suddenly and drops to one side. An ironic edge in that situation is painted by the presence of his helpless relations (presumably his parents) at his execution. In the master-drummer scene, the puppet is playing two drums with intense vigour and the music is unmistakably Tiv drumming. The mad man who is always beating his wife without respite is armed with a club which descends at intervals on the woman's head. (Enem 1976: 41:42).

There is absolutely no doubt from the above that the dance and the society are responsible, one for the other, and hold each other in mutual regard. Wit and satire as well as aesthetic recreation have become means by which society regulates its own pulses and thereby maintains balance for its own regeneration and survival. Because society and the dance share mutual regard, the performers and the audience are the same people and they engage in this 'ritual in order to transmit collective messages to' themselves (Leach, 1983: 45). In the passage quoted above, Enem recalls that the Kwagh-hir was banned from public performance because its satiric intent was used in political rivalry to precipitate social crises. In other words, the resources and symbols of dance could stir 'irrational' response in action and expansion. From its potential to transmit collective messages, it is thus at its best, a basic cosmology of social actions and interpretation. We would return to this later in our discussion on Gelede dance forms of the Yoruba.

There is an intensified phenomenon of the dance when it is used as a medium with which to enact cultural traits and culture heroes in history as well as in legends and myths. Conceived in this pattern, there is a heightened ethos achieved after an effect of ceremonial, festival or ritual purgation. A certain disciplined pattern of aesthetic ideal is thereby impressed upon the social tableau and the psyche of the community. This regulates the relationship of man and his world in a way that is impossible with precepts and edicts of the law. In other

words, these ancient societies have no mass of written rules of state penal agencies, yet maintain ethics better than modern societies with their sprawling urban centres. An example of such an enactment is one recorded by Ulli Beier in Ede, Western Nigeria.

The occasion is the annual celebration of the Obatala festival in the town. It must be recalled that Obatala is one of the white gods in the Yoruba pantheon. He combines wisdom with the highest principles of humane conscience. He is a suffering spirit and therefore the representation of ideal perseverance among culture heroes. For the same reason, he is the patriarch as well as the custodian of the infirm or the deformed, his co-sufferers. As an embodiment of purity, his devotees are clad always in white robes. At his festival, the climax is marked by a dance drama of deep fervour and emotion. It is the passion of Obatala; the suffering and purgation of a pure deity forced into the shackles of destiny. The same story has been told by Pierre Verger in his *Dieux d'Afrique*,¹ and has been dramatized by Zora Seljam in *The Story of Oxala*.² However, this is how Ulli Beier relates it:

The second day of the festival has a feature not unlike a passion play. There is no spoken dialogue but singing accompanies the performance and the entire action is danced. The story is of a fight between the Ajagemo [Obatala's priest] and another priest, bearing the title of Olunwi [presumably the priest of the fiery Sango]. Ajagemo is taken prisoner by Olunwi and carried off from the palace. The Oba, however, intervenes for his release. He pays ransom to Olunwi, and Ajagemo is liberated and allowed to return to the palace. The return gradually attains the qualities of a triumphal procession. The dancing of this simple story, as performed at Ede, takes only a few minutes. But it is intensely moving largely because of the qualities put into his part by Ajagemo. (Beir 1959: 14-15).

Even Ulli Beier speculates that "there must have been some historical event which gave rise to the scheme of the story. . ." (1959: 14). This thus reinforces my point that any essential dance must have a storyline, or it must be the expression of a certain motif in history, legend or the repertory of culture heroes. For the same reason, dance as both an aesthetic as well as a social medium is an accepted and institutionalized mode of behaviour.

The dance of Obatala's passion does not only remind his after-comers and heir of the binding duty that the dance incorporates as festival in the grace and qualities of a pure deity but also the fact that the dance enacts and confesses to those regenerative and supreme attributes of the nation in its march in and towards historical consummation.

It would appear in the light of the foregoing that there is an inherent tendency in folklore and folk craft to ritualize beyond mere action all truly great moments of time and history so that such ideals may be perpetuated in the memory of its beneficiaries. This, it is believed, will improve or refine their moral fibre and create a memorably lasting experience. This would seem to be the main preoccupation of another heightened dance form as described by Peggy Harper:

the Gelede is essentially a fertility cult which stresses the mystic powers of womanhood and together with the other masquerade cults underlies the structure of the society by mounting performances which voice moral precepts in repetitive poetic incantation and song, and express ideal social attitudes and qualities through dance and mimetic performance. (Harper 1970: 68).

The Gelede dance society annually celebrates the status of its dancers from the young and inexperienced to the elderly and adroit amateurs of the mask. Though it is an annual event that celebrates the qualities of ideal matriarchy (Beier 1958: Layiwola 1987: 30), there is a great deal of information update and community gossip in the lyrics of the dancers. The great mask of the night, *Efe*, is the embodiment of female supremacy and for this purpose, dramatized usually by the most experienced male dancers of the Gelede society. Being the highlight of the performance, *Efe*'s dance is complemented by a rich resource of history, legend, tales and anecdotes. He brings to the public the most recent of the *e*fe satirical songs of the year which become the memory and cultural store for the coming year. One of such topical events which Peggy Harper records at Ijio readily comes to mind:

All we've been doing so far has been fine
Now you've come with something else,

We suppose it belongs to the house owner
 As we have never heard it before,
 All those who remain on earth make traps for one another,
 Is it the war within a household
 That you call Ojukwu's war?
 No war is a small war,
 Let me enlighten you people:
 At the beginning of existence
 We fought the Dahomean war,
 Next we fought the war of vengeance
 The Ibariba war happened before my very eyes,
 The Fulani attack did not occur behind me.
 Next the whites came
 And fought against many of our foes
 The first politicians were cult leaders of our land,
 We fought against one another with vengeance for vengeance
 The period of confusion came when the *palm* and cock were in
 vogue
 That was when we started real trouble
 Kinsmen no longer listened to one another.
 (Harper 1970: 88)

The historical awareness which a song such as the one above generates is amazing. It not only documents the various wars within a century of our time, it contextualizes them within a catalogue of evils that have befallen the community and the nation. It is in this context that he places the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. It is not only stylistically convenient to make greater meaning and impact in this context, it is a coherent manner of enkindling the memory of the community. As a historical, mediating link therefore, the dancer's words are not out of place "Let me enlighten you people". He chooses a style that puts him as a witness before all the wars. The imagistic reference to the 'palm' and the 'cock' are to the symbols of two political parties in the middle of the political strife in Western Nigeria subsequent to Independence.

There is a lot more of contextual analysis we could conduct on the poetry and music of the occasion but our emphasis is to draw attention to the variety of the event as an index of social coding and interpretation. The dance is thus not only a show of physical dexterity and

alertness but equally the attending ideas, welfare or discomfort of the society that generates it. This is most precisely what Lucian of Samosata, the Roman analyst of the dance in the second century, refers to in these lines:

It is the dancer's profession to show forth human character and passion in all their variety; to depict love and anger, frenzy and grief each in its due measure . . . there is meaning in his movements, every gesture has its significance; and therein lies his chief excellence. (Quoted in Cohen 1974: 2)

The varieties in the movements go beyond mere physical expression and find dialectical counterpart in society's store of knowledge and experience. Spectators, by virtue of same, have their predilection for any facet of the performance in addition to the cathartic relief of ritual ceremony:

The Efe ceremony is of marked ritual significance to the community but spectators also attend the occasion to enjoy the entertainment offered by the performance of songs and dances. Certain aspects are popular with different people: some come to hear the incantations of the Efe masquerader . . . and watch the dancing of the masks, some to listen to the newly composed Efe songs and others to enjoy the 'jokes and riddles' at four O'clock [a.m.] So members of the audience come and go continuously. (Harper: 89).

Another striking feature of the Gelede is that it shares the mode of plastic representation with Kwagh-hir. In the wood carvings that are animated in the dance performances, there are motifs of cultural correspondence such as images of motor-bicycles, soldiers, representation of animals which bear striking similarities in portraiture despite the fact that the two art forms developed independently. What we can infer from this is that each sketch or representation has its storyline in the shared experience of the community. Some of the images and performances persist even when such stories are long forgotten. Depictions of excesses in manner or comportment are imaginative responses which seek to preserve certain structures of society as much as they seek to re-order and change them.

The fact that these performances are received each year with extravagant enthusiasm shows that they help the individual and the community to locate their bearing in the real world and help to distance for the purpose of impersonal analyses, the images of stereotypes and eccentricities located in the masks. If only for these reasons the dance, as a recent focus of research, has much in store for the understanding as well as the interpretation of society.

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Notes

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