THE DIALECTICS OF BATA DANCE
AND ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Dance in Africa, specifically from Nigeria, has over the years made tremendous impact in such areas like propagation of culture, projection of unity in diversity and promotion of the idea of National identity. With the global rejuvenation and economic diversity, dance has provided an enabling environment and concrete platforms for its practitioners to explore the potentials embedded in the packaging and production of dance performances, thereby serving as a vital tool for economic stability. Despite its relegation to the background as a mere form of entertainment, African dance has provided immense benefits to practitioners. Through the adoption of Performance Aesthetics theory of Dance and Participant Observation method of research, this paper carries out a dialectical engagement of the roles of dance in general perspective, with a close reference to the Bata dance of the Yoruba, for the purpose of identifying the various dimensions by which the dance has helped in projecting both the Yoruba ethnic and the Nigerian National identities. Findings reveal that Bata Dance performance has grown beyond its Yoruba ethnic enclave to becoming a global brand that is studied by non-Africans and the Africans in Diaspora therefore creating a viable socio-economic platform and global acceptance for the dance and its practitioners.

KEYWORDS: Bata, Dance, Yoruba, Sango, Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Dance in African communities as part of the people’s life is constantly involved in mimetic movements in daily activities. Humans use dance in various ways such as ritual worship, communication with higher forces or supreme deity, telling of stories, displaying emotional feelings, to keep fit or as form of exercising and for pleasure. To a large extent also, dance has been deployed as cure to some emotional problems or physical ailment. By conceptualization, dance has been described from different perspectives by scholars in the fields of performing arts, psychology, human kinetics, medical sciences and sociology. In the special field of Theatre, scholars like Ojuade (2006) describe it as an expression of human feelings, as a spectacle art, recreation, fitness, divine or social expression and representation of cultural mores or in a simple language, a human activity” (56). This definition sees dance as a phenomenon that exists within human activities. Moving forward, Yerima (2007) asserts that dance “is a form of language which sends messages from the dancer to the audience or sometimes the co-performer (124)”. From the point of view of identity formation, Yerima affirms that dance:
represents the identity of the people. Through the body, dance uses the emphasis of areas of the body as metaphors and symbols. Specific parts of the body are used to reveal the history of the people, their occupational engagement and their environment. For example, if they live by the river, the shapes, angles, the costumes, the music and even their colours, become symbol which emerges from the river or sea (125).

The definitions above show clearly that dance is a form of expressive language of a people from which signs, symbols and movements can be interpreted and understood by the people.

Dance is a reflection of the community or society that owns it. It explores the people’s culture and the milieu in which it exists. This is basically because the instruments are true reflections of the indigenous cultural patterns or designs. Bakare (2002) maintains that “dance being a language expresses the geographical location, biological temperature, religious beliefs, and political peculiarities of the people that own it”. Milieu plays a vital role in any art form. In the case of dance, the milieu has much influence on the dance steps or movements, songs, instrument, costumes and make-ups. All these are representations that differentiate one indigenous dance from the other. The dance of the primitive man reflected a wide range of different situations and adventures as he danced his fears; hate and anger but with a difference as the dance is being regulated with the consciousness of his identity. Humans express emotions on what experiences they encounter just like a hunter in the bush, a fisherman in the river, and the forces of nature and that of the gods. Alma Hawkins (1988) explains that “through his body man perceives the tensions and the rhythms of the universe around him and using the body as his instrument, he expresses his feelings as well as responses to the universe”.

Though dance exists in the physical body and it is the functionality of rhythm which exists in the psychology of the dancer that goes a long way to determine a good dancer. African dance has always been known to be the expression of emotion and experience; it is the situation at hand that determines the dance of the moment. This is why there are different dances for different occasions. Dance is not just for mere entertainment as it can aid socio-economic issues, political, developmental as well as cultural functions. In line with this, the paper examines the Bata professional dance of the Yoruba and how it has been deployed to facilitate socio-economic advancement for both individual practitioner and the society at large.

BATA DANCE PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS

According to Bode Osanyin (1996), “the foundation of Bata in Nigeria is more of mythological and even religious than factual history”. He believes that, Bata is attributed to Sango. It is one of those music fabricated for the worship of certain gods or Orishas. Bata is dedicated entirely to Sango, the god of thunder and lightning. However the Bata dance has intimate association with Sango and Egungun because the three are inseparable. In view of this Ojuade Olasunkanmi (2002) says that “Sango loves Bata so much that when he is eating his best meal and the sound of Bata music comes incidentally, he would abandon the meal and prefer to dance”.

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Those who dance Bata try to emulate his personality by using their feet, hands and shoulders. The cognitive energy of Bata dance, its flashes and dashes complemented by the thundering, rattling and piercing sounds of Bata drums criss-crossing pay tribute to Sango. Fatai Ojuade (1996) explains that “Sango in his lifetime was a warrior, and anytime he wants to go to war, he liked dancing to rigorous music in preparation for war”. It was as if the Bata rhythms put him in tune for war. He revealed that Sango used to call for a drum (music) that could stimulate him and suit his purpose. At the initial stage, Gangan (talking drum) was brought for him to dance to, but he rejected it, for it was too slow. Also, Dundun was brought, but failed the test too. It was only Bata that satisfied his demands in the end, with Omele ako playing the lead role. He was highly moved and danced to his satisfaction. That was how he accepted Bata as his accompaniment to date, for it suited with his fiery and tempestuous nature.

Subsequently, Bata dance is described as a dance for entertainment in the society. Undoubtedly, Bata dance shows a preponderance of the evidenced African rhythm, emotional sympathy through persistent repetition of form and sound. “It revives the splendid and robust dance which the other dances in Yoruba land lack”, says Chief Akintoye Adewale (aka Baba Oyo, 2014). Every performing member of a Bata dancing troupe is usually actively involved in creating meanings that are vital in the dance sequence. These movements as well as sequence always carry a particular meaning that is associated with them and communicate their intentions to the onlooker. Bata music and dance also act as vehicles for promoting dramatic intentions. The movements are essential and they are what make the difference between it and several richly diverse and extremely complex area of the Yoruba dance that are known more than anything. It emphasizes form more than content and makes no thematic reference to the other dance tradition. The myth of the black body is made busy by the general creativity in the dance. The appeal of the Bata display comes from the exploit the dancers, their dexterity and ingenuity to make acrobatic displays. In Bata dance, music still plays the most important part as it is required to punctuate the movements.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF BATA DANCE

Bata dance as a vital tool can be used as a machinery for socio cultural integration in order to aid economic stability through the organization of festivals as well as carnivals. According to Ahmed Yerima (2003): “the second world black and African festival of arts and culture, FESTAC 77 was the last big festival organized in Nigeria which celebrated the culture of the black race”. In such festivals like this different styles of dance and costume, songs among others are performed by groups or teams from diverse part of the world. The Yoruba over the years have been tremendous with their popular Bata dance. The dance which serve as social integration and socialization both to the Yoruba and lovers of dance home and abroad has been a land mark achievement for the Yoruba. Though it started as a ritual dance but it is now very much functional and acceptable in our social functions in this contemporary period. Each display of Bata dance is an experience because it refreshes and reforms itself with intricate movements, acrobatics, costumes and songs among others.. In essence, one will say Bata dance is a cultural heritage of the Yorubas.. It makes many belong to a troupe within the western region no matter the tribe they belong to and justifying this Sobalolu Olalekan (2005) submits that “it is not only the Yorubas or those from Bata lineage that dance to its rhythms, some are talented, others learn while some can
acquire it”. This is observed in preparation for a festival where children, youth and adult (male and female) come together for dance rehearsal where a final selection is done for those that will partake in the festival dance.

The Nigerian educators should make dance function again as vital experience in the life of people. It is their responsibility to utilize dance in their teachings. Bata dance can be used to educate people on any issue be it moral, self-development among others. Supporting this view Peter Badejo (2004) makes reference to an interesting scene in Ake dance. The situation in Ake dance teaches a moral lesson for bed. Thus, the scene is to teach moral and also serve the purpose of reformation. The method of reformation here might be questionable, to some it might seem more like harassment but the role which dance can play in educating people and reforming the society are the points made here. Dance workshops can be carried out especially in the area of health so as to empower citizens where interactions can be incorporated into dance. With all these in mind, on how dance can be used in educating people, educators can even realize that what they need concerning teaching method is intelligence stimulation of self activity.

Bata dance that has to do with culture can also be referred to traditional or ethnic dance. According to Chris Ugolo (1995) “show me your dance and I will tell you where you come from”. However the comment implies that dance is culture and culture is dance. Cultural dance as we know expresses a way of life, beliefs, attitude of people living within a homogenous community. The people of that community are familiar with the dance steps, movement and in some instances the spectators participate formally or spontaneously in the performance. In supporting this Emem Obonguko (2005) says “dance in performance with the traditional society is regarded as communal activity”. The dance belong to a community and anyone watching the performance observes some aspect of the people’s culture embedded in the dance such as mode of dressing, occupation, myth, legend, language, way of life, etc. Supporting this view Ahmed Yerima (2003) says “dance can be used to express cultural heritage, whether older or new to the foreign spectator to a level where colours to costumes worn by the dancers, the facial expression, images and shapes of the dancer become recognizable aspect of a cultural identity”.

There has been a great change in recent past because many people now earn a living through dance and this is not an exception for Bata dance. More emphasis has been placed using Bata dance solely for entertainment as it now features in many government organized function and ceremony. Bata dance is also used during coronation as well as presidential receptions to entertain the audience. Akinsipe Felix (2002) further explains that “the audience in many cases enjoyed, had great fun and relaxation after watching a dance performance”.

The notion that dances have economic potentials both to a dancer and the troupe owner and community applies to Bata dance. History has it that Bata dancers going from place to place for performance were given money as this happen to be sources of revenue to such troupe. Bata dance also provides employment for both old and new. The old still enjoy playing the drums of Bata dance while the young engage themselves in the dance. Bata dance has the power to command attention. It has a lot of admirers and fans from places far and near. During its performance, these people gather together as spectators and audience. Bata dance thereby boost inter communal relations and also serve as tourist attraction to the community hosting the performance.

According to Peggy Harper (1967) “the theatrical audience pays to be entertained to experience a heightening of their perception or to be taken out of themselves in delight at a fresh
presentation”. In this regard dance function as source of revenue of which Bata dance is not an exemption. This revenue can either be internal or external. Since theatre is serious business in the world, it also means that dance as a branch of the theatre can be regarded as serious business. People now pay good amount of money to be a member of a troupe and people also pay for dance performances without feeling that their money has been wasted. Revenue, be it either internal or external is very essential in the dance profession. Government or private organizations or individuals might also own a troupe. Revenue is of great importance in developing countries such as Nigeria and dancers like every other professional have a place to stand. For a troupe to succeed it has to be marketed and proper financial management has to be considered so as not to lose one’s ground. The prices of performances are not stable and in most cases it is determined by the audience.

Explaining further, Sobalolu Olalekan (2005) considered the fact that “the gate fee for secondary school students differs from that of the adult or working class audience”. Management should try as much possible to energize the group and inject new life into its performances. Troupes should be encouraged to participate in festivals, carnivals and competitions within and outside the country as this will serve as the challenges that will enhance the development of their performances. Supporting this Emem Ogbonkugo (2005) submits that “competitions make room for new ideas and competition”. While explaining further, Bakare Ojo Rasaki (2000) maintains that “the level of success attained by the troupe is facilitated by the level of exposure and interaction the troupe and its artists have acquired through their constant performance trips both within and outside Nigeria”.

Bata dance being a cultural heritage of the Yoruba can also serve as a source of tourist attraction which exposes the norms and values of the Yoruba culture. This culture can be myths or legends amongst others. In this regard, it is packaged very well and delivered as a tourism venture. Audience from different parts of the world is now expected to come for such tourism and pay some stipulated amount of money. Explaining further Emem Ogbonkugo (2005) submits that “when people pay for dance or dance performance, they are paying for super entertainment and a tourist attraction”.

Tourism is a business that grows fast and a vital aspect of income to a community or to the nation at large. Bata dance when it is being performed or organized at a particular month in a community such as in Ile-Ife would serve as a tourist attraction. This would be publicized on the different media platforms and different caliber of people would be present within the duration of the performance to view the different performances. The performances may last for three (3) days or one (1) week depending on the organizers. In such festivals like this funds are generated both to the dancers, for the troupe and the organizers as well as government of the nation.

Bata dance can also serve as cure for ailment. The religious attachment and the fierce outward expression help any dancer of Bata to put the joints of the body at work. The heartbeat of a Bata dancer can be assured of a maximum work rate due to the level of agility and strength that is required in the dance performance.
CONCLUSION

In countries that have gone through political strife, government have sponsored dance as a means of creating bonds between the disparate groups in the society. In our contemporary Nigerian society where power tussle and ethnic division are the order of the day, dance has the power, capacity as well as the pedigree to help reform the minds of people towards one another and help propagate unity in the country Nigeria. But unfortunately, dance has been one of the neglected arts that could have been a universally accepted language which can cut across ethnic backgrounds. It is the art that binds us together and expresses our culture. It also enhances the preservation and survival of our cultural heritage within the communities in Nigeria.

Dance is a serious profession viable for economic stability and can strengthen ethnic diversity. Obviously African dance can be proved as having social significance and economic potentials which the Yoruba Bata dance is a typical example. When dance is utilized properly and positioned appropriately in the society, it would help the citizens and the nation at large in terms of economic stability, growth and development. Dance has a lot to offer to any nation that appreciates the art as it can bring about economic stability, break barrier of ethnic differences and promote the spirit of togetherness amongst citizens in Nigeria and beyond.

REFERENCE


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