

THE SECULARIZATION OF AFRICAN RITUAL DANCE: OHOGHO DANCE OF THE BENIN PEOPLE AS A PARADIGM

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Abstract

Change as a dynamic phenomenon is constant in reflecting the present situation of things. It either alters an existing form or brings about a fresh one. When the latter is the case, the former may either go into extinction as it becomes (in most cases) an outdated form which appeals mostly to the generation that experienced it. But when change is an alteration of an existing form, it tends to revive and sustain it by appealing to the sensibilities of both the old and new generations. Most traditional African dances have experienced a lot of changes due to interactions with other cultures which result (mostly) from colonization, and have consequently gone into extinction for lack of constant performance. The ritual dances are the most endangered form due to context criteria, newfound religions and lack of adequate documentation. The best method of documenting African dances lies in constant performance. Thus, the need to secularize some of these ritualized dances to save and preserve them for posterity. This approach however does not prevent the dances from serving their original ritual purposes when the need arises. This paper examines the Ohogho ritual dance as a form that can be secularized for entertainment to ensure its preservation and continuity.

Introduction

Dance as a non-verbal form of expression is a common feature in all societies both traditional and modern, occurring in most celebrations to serve one purpose or the other. It thus follows

that dance is a universal art form. "Its origin might be lost in antiquity"(Royce 3)but this may justify the fact that it is the oldest form of all arts as the movement of the human body in time and space has always been a portrayal and manifestation of man and his activities thereby reflecting the total of the doings of a people. This line of thought perhaps prompted Lange to state that man in expressing his innermost thoughts to his supreme creator resorted to the nonverbal means of codification - dance. Hence he sums up dance as "the art of expressing the sentiments of the mind, or passions...."(5).

Does dance in present society serve such purposes as before? Is it still a manifestation of life? Of course, dance in modern society, especially in Africa, does not occur in the nature it did during precolonial times, but it is still employed in today's society to portray man and his activities hence its occurrence at both social and sacred ceremonies just like the old times. The difference between both societies' usage of dance lies mostly in the focus of life in each of these epochs. In precolonial times, emphasis was on a sacred form of life where man was more conscious of supernatural forces.

Dance therefore as a means of expression and communication is realized through the human body (the only instrument) and movement thus becomes its language of expression which carries the intention of the dancer (Abbe 6). Bakare reacting to the fact that dance is calculated motions of the body states that it is the "rhythmic movement of the human body in time and space to make a statement" (2). The indication of Bakare's statement is that dance exists solely in performance, codifying the norms and values of a people in and through movements.

Explaining the significance of African Dance, Ediri (122) refers to it as a "well from which various shades of historical experiences can be drawn."It is a cultural product that captures the essence of a people. Hence dance transcends what meets the eye as its meaning goes beyond the general one, too, in most cases, having

specific meanings. This is because every dance has a focus and function. And Mcfee notes that the understanding of a particular dance presupposes the understanding of the traditions from which it emanates (112).

Determining the nature of dance therefore will require the understanding of the purpose of such dance, for a dance is the aim and focus which determine a large extent the physical efforts put into the realization of the dance. Ugolo calls this notion the "attitudes and intentions that underlie African dance" (127). The purpose (intention), he reiterates, gives birth to the attitude that is manipulated to give birth to a new form. The nature of dance implicates its essence, the examination of its characteristics and qualities. Dance as a non-verbal means of communication is transient leaving its audience with a spectacular impression. This ephemeral nature calls for the need to constantly and continuously perform it.

Dance thus far is established as the movement of the human body, a channel of communication, an expression and act of life that projects the human body, the movement it makes, the music it responds to and the meaning it conveys which, Ugolo (1998) opined, needs clarity and precision." And Bakare (2019) sees it as a medium of communication that easily lends itself to mobilization efforts through awareness creation and dissemination of information (64) and it can only be expressed through the act of dancing Ojuade (2) which is performance.

Dance serves the different needs of individuals and communities. These needs could be culture and individual-based attesting to the fact that the purpose of dance varies for different cultures. The purpose is the intention and motivation behind the movements created and the ordering of the movement, arrangement of dancers in space (floor pattern), employment of songs and instrumentation as well as the general organization of the dance. Dance is thus a deliberate and conscious effort.

The purpose of dance as noted by Monyeh could be for entertainment, enlightenment or religious reasons. The various functions notwithstanding every dance serves two basic functions of sacred and secular forms in African societies. The sacred dances are religious and ritualistic. They are a means of worship employed by man to reverence and relate with supernatural forces. These are found in various festivals and ritual ceremonies honouring and imploring one god or the other to bequeath their blessings on the land and the people.

Sacred dances are serious, having specific participants; specific simple, stylized and symbolic steps; specific rhythm and pattern, performed for religious worship, burial ceremonies, ancestral deification etc. That is, they are not performed outside their specified contexts. Also, there are other sacred dances whose movements are very fast and sometimes complex. Their secluded nature makes it impossible for a larger audience to watch or know the importance of such dances.

The secular dances on the other hand are social and entertainment-based, they are performed mostly for larger audiences in marriages, birth/naming ceremonies, coronations, installations, and festivals, although sacred dances can still occur as part of ritual procedures in the above-listed. Social dances as cultural activities may involve every member of the family, set or community; they are less serious in content and form, having a celebratory nature. The dances are free in style and rhythm having neither fixed form nor format in terms of the movements involved and the patterns unlike the sacred dances which movements, patterns, costumes and makeup can be altered or enhanced to heighten entertainment need any time.

History and Performance of Ohogho Dance



Plate 1: Ohogho dancers (University Students) at the Theatre Hall, University of Benin in 2017. Courtesy: The Researcher

The Benin people are a major ethnic group in Edo State of Nigeria, situated in the Southern part of the country. The state has distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups whose ancestry is traced to the ancient Benin Kingdom. These people form the Great Benin Empire which has waned and succumbed to social changes that have affected all nations of the world. The Benin Empire spanned several centuries and recorded great achievements in religious, cultural and socio-political (governmental) spheres that it was likened to a major European city (Osagie, 13).

The Benins have a strong cultural identification base which has survived various upheavals the people have experienced. A most prominent cultural heritage by which the people are known is the Benin arts and crafts (Benin bronzes), lots of ceremonial activities like festivals, dances and songs commemorating past memorable events. These patterns of learned behaviour are transmitted from one generation to the other distinguishing them from other people's culture.

The origin of the Ohogho dance is lost in antiquity. The accounts that abound in tradition seem to contradict each other to some extent. The first source holds that the dance originated during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great c1440-1473AD when a certain

witchdoctor (Eriase) from Ugboko-Numagbae in Orhionmwon Local Government of Edo State was said to have gone to the bush on *Eken* day to acquire more spiritual powers. *Eken* Day in Benin is a rest day for human beings and a day of activity for the spirits. No one in the kingdom goes to the farm or market on this day and returns the same.

As Eriase wanders in the thick forest, he came across spirits performing some rites of which the Ohogho dance was one. He hid in a corner to prevent being seen while he watched the fascinating dance performance. The spirits soon perceived the presence of a human being in their midst (*agbonwiakpuma*). They searched around them and soon found Eriase and brought him to their midst. He was taught the dance and was asked to go home and teach his fellow human beings after which he would return to the spirit world in three months. On getting home, he narrated his experience in the bush to his people and taught them the dance. His people were amazed at the discovery and encounter Eriase had in the bush. Three months later, Eriase died. The second version states that the dance originated during the reign of Oba Orhogbua c1550-1578AD through a hunter who encountered some spirits singing and dancing while performing rites in the bush. He was caught and detained by them (spirits) in the forest for seven days before he was released to go back to his people and teach them the dance.

Whatever the origin, Ohogho dance exists among the Benin people as a religious cult dance belonging to physicians (ebo or obo group). It consists of strong senior members of the Eroghae and the Eghele age groups. The Eroghae in traditional Benin society is strong and energetic male youths in the community who are between the ages of 15-30 years. They perform menial jobs for the community. On the other hand, the Eghele (30-50 years old) are soldiers of the community in charge of the general security of the villages and towns. They also specialized in building, farming, hunting and trading for the community (Aisien 136). The age grade system in Benin was very organized and formidable before

colonization. But, Benin's interaction with the British, like in most parts of Nigeria, has left a most debilitating dislocation in a once organized society.

Ohogho dance is a protective dance meant to ward off evil, epidemics, wars as well as general calamities from the land. It is traditionally a male dance which, according to some opinions, is performed to worship the Ovia god (the Ovia River). It is also sometimes performed during second burial ceremonies and at the Eho festival (Aisien 86). An eho festival is a yearly event where the ancestors of the Benins are feasted (Aisien 183). The dance is performed by the Ogba community in Oredo Local Government Area and the people of Ugboko-Numagbae in Orhionmwon Local Government Areas of Edo State (Aisien 167).

Dancers in the Ohogho dance are called *Igbohogho*. In its original context, the dancers, prior to performance, are said to undergo fortification and sanctification rituals (a common occurrence with ritual ceremonies) to ensure a successful performance. Ohogho performance often begins with the entrance of the dancers as led by the lead dancer who carries a wooden receptacle (Ukpabo) containing ritual objects and burning leaves on his head. He dances straight to the centre of the performance area and drops the burning receptacle on the ground, thereafter he joins the dancers who have formed a circle around the object in the middle.

Movements in the dance are strong, energetic and warlike typifying the nature of warriors and the native doctors that prepare them for war. It thus requires agility, strength and vigour. In the revolving circular floor pattern, dancers perform various movements ranging from stepping, stamping, sharp and spontaneous turns, kneeling, bending, hopping, jumping, spinning, and forward and backward movements. There is a general uniformity of motion, and the mood is intense having the aura of worship and team spirit.

Each movement is associated with a particular song that is repeated, and there are several brief lyric songs in the dance. There is an entrance as well as an exit song in the dance. The songs and movements of the dance are intertwined and the music and instrumentation are supplied by dancers while dancing. The instruments are made up of voice, gong and gourd rattles, no drums. The duration of the dance could be between 5 and 20 minutes depending on the enthusiasm, strength and vigour of the dancers and the choreography. At the end of the performance, the carrier (Omukpabo) again leads out bearing the receptacle on his head. This description is practically the same as the secularized form except that the receptacle containing the ritual object is not included in its performance. Also, females can dance in its secular form as opposed to the "all-male affair" of the ritualized form.

Songs in Ohogho dance are not limited to the list below:

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| a. | Igbohogo ni re
Ima mie nor ma mwon ode
Ito bo mwen hen ode owa

Erhinmwin ghi bi bio de | Ohogho dancers have come
None to show me the way
I know the way to my house by
myself
Spirits do not miss their way |
| b. | Aiyo, eee, aiyo ebo o,

Aiyo eee, eee o, eee o e | You do not dare, you do not dare
charm
You do not dare. |
| c. | Akha mwen n'owina o
Ugha mwan mwen ghi vbo
Ghe he vbe zierhan
Ugha ya so ne rie gumwen o

Ugha mwan mwen ghi vbo
Ghe he vbe zierhan
Ughe re 3x | My Akha of Owina (Guild)
Where is my axe
look at it at the base of a tree
when you have finished tearing
with it, return it to me
Where is my axe
Look at it at the base of a tree
Look at it 3x |

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| d. | Ugbe kogho,
Obokpa erhinmwin gbe ghe

E e e, obokpa erhinmwin gbe ghe | In kogho farm
Spirit dance dance in one
direction

Spirit dance dance in one
direction |
| e. | Ima mie no tio khue mwen gu mwen ko

E e e okhue ri'Udo | I cannot find anyone to
call my okhue for me
Ohhh, Okhue has gone to
Udo |
| f. | Irio Ologho ooo
Ogho gho'ren gbo de o ehi o

Ogbo de, ogbo de, ehi o 4x | I am going to Ologhooo
Brand of firewood with
fire block <u>s</u> the way, my
guardian angel

It has blocked the way, it
has blocked the way, my
guardian angel |
| g. | Oghe mwen | Whoever is looking at
me |
| h. | Lele mwen gha rie, oghe mwen | Should follow me home,
whoever |

Ohogho costume is red skirt and top (*ebuluku vbo vbi'ewu*). While the major prop is Ukhunmwun, a small wooden bowl meant to ward off evil, others are musical instruments used as hand props.

Secularization of Ohogho Ritual Dances



Plate 2: Some members of Secularized Ohogho dancers during the Oba Ewuare II Coronation Procession in 2016. Courtesy: The researcher.

Secularization is the act of converting something, especially from religious use to secular (general) use. Dance secularization in this context refers to the transformation of dance from its ritual to social context. Kafewo in the year 2006 had expressed fear over the erosion of African and indeed Nigerian cult dances when he stated that “...in the next few years, the next generations may only read about our dance performances” (273). This statement was made from his observation of how the various cult (ritual) dances in Nigeria using the northern part of the country as an example were being downplayed due to the influence of Christianity and Islam on African indigenous religions. Also, Bakare in the same year, noted that for any Nigerian traditional dance to survive it has to be “adapted to the new changes occasioned by contacts with other parts of the world, otherwise it risk(sic) abandonment and consequently death” (71).

The above statements by Ojo Rasaki Bakare, a dance and theatre scholar, dancer and choreographer of no mean repute and

late Kafewo, a Theatre Arts Scholar (in Nigeria) were made seventeen years ago. The import of their comments is the need to secularise traditional African dances to preserve them against extinction. Obviously, any form that refuses to submit to the whims and caprices of change will certainly meet its Waterloo in oblivion. In proffering a solution to the above concerns, Bakare recommends context criteria as a determinant factor to state under what circumstances a traditional dance can be altered and what traditional dance should be altered (65). The inability to distinguish these two contexts, he stressed, could cause a rift. He argued further that it would be a dream to think of a continuous existence of original traditional dances in a fast-changing Nigeria. He stressed the above line of thought in the detailed quotation below:

Perhaps we should ask: In Nigeria where foreign religions are gaining converts daily and the majority of those who refuse to be converted are not ready to give their attention to some gods that demand (sic) kola nuts, palm oil and blood, how many worshippers of the traditional religion to which most of our traditional dances are central will remain in the twenty-second century? With the rate at which Nigerians are abandoning rural life in preference for the cities where they get integrated into a 'new' culture for political, economic and social reasons, how much of these dances will a Nigerian born in the twenty-second century know in their original forms? With the desire to acquire modern technology at all costs, how many of our traditional instruments which are, of course, very essential to our traditional dance will Nigerians of the twenty-second century still be playing? If we are therefore realistic about preserving our traditional dances for the future generation, we must be sensitive to the dynamic nature of our modern society and then accept that the only realistic method of preservation is by making these dances to be always relevant to the temperament and sensibilities of the contemporary society through adaptations, recreations and

hybridization of the techniques presently used by most contemporary Nigerian choreographers (72-73)

From the above explanation, the secularization of African ritual dance is quite apt and requires the efforts of the contemporary choreographer who is a creative artist, bridging the gap between two worlds (old/new) by harnessing traditional materials as raw materials to evolve new forms. This will not only ensure survival, but it will also as well encourage continuity by the constant performance of the form. This is culture – a progressional phenomenon; a way of life of a people in any given time and place organized out of past experiences and adapted to present circumstances (72). Culture, he stressed, changes as people strive to meet new challenges of living. Although we are born into it, it is not static, it responds to time. Culture may not necessarily be a return to the custom of the past but it could be the custom of the present being given birth to by the customs of the past. This is to meet with a present challenge as well as give birth to its own for future use. It is thus expedient and natural for dance to change as the people's ways of life alter, or else it becomes irrelevant to the people. Dance is a reflection and reaction to people's ways of life.

As earlier noted, Ohogho ritual dance is a cult dance performed only by initiates. The songs, movements, and chants are sacred to the ceremony. Although the need for secularization has downplayed the sacredness of the form, the content of the form such as songs, chants and movements still holds its aura of intense worship among the dancers. Ohogho dance maintains a strict revolving circle when performed in a ritual context. This can be expanded to include more intricate patterns associated with secular forms of dance. The major alteration the dance has outside its ritual context is the removal of the receptacle containing the burning ritual objects, and the variation of floor patterns from the strictly circular form to other intricate patterns. The movements remain the same depending on the choice of the choreographer, the pattern to

a large extent is still much circular, except for a few serpentine patterns which are often infused at the point of exit.

When secularized as it gradually is, it can still serve both sacred and entertainment needs depending on the context of the performance. When serving a sacred function, it can maintain its standard of keeping strictly to the rule. On the other hand, the entertainment function of the dance makes room for innovation in terms of varying the movements, floor patterns and the costume involved. In any case, dance occurs in present-day society as a form of entertainment but retains its usual nature of having the receptacle at the centre of the performance.



Plate 3: Some members of Secularized Ohogho dancers (dressed in red) with the researcher during Oba Ewuare II Coronation in 2016.

Courtesy: The researcher

Conclusion

Dance is a significant and enduring cultural heritage. Apart from serving as a means of documentation and preservation of history, it is as well an expressive and entertaining mode that features in ceremonies of life that need to be marked with one form

of dance or the other. As there exist no tangible means of documenting African dances like their Western counterparts, a lot of its dances (especially the ones with ritual connotations) are constantly exposed to the dangers of extinction.

So far, the best method of preserving dances lies in their constant and continuous performance. But some African ritual dances that abound due to context criteria negate this "constant" performance nature. The situation is further worsened by the influence of various external religions which question the foundation on which these dances stand. The various technological advancements also, which have so much exposed the African child to Western culture, have not, so to speak, favoured these dances. To salvage an endangered culture, the form and content of some of the African ritual dances (like the Ohogho) could be altered, not necessarily to erase an old form but rather to make it relevant to the present for continuity.

To secularize African ritual dance is to make it a social form that is accessible to a larger audience. That is, taken it beyond the confines of its original purpose by extending it to serve entertainment functions as well. This is because most sacred dances, to some extent, restrict and or determine their audience, but the secular forms make room for a wider audience as they serve entertainment needs. Why do we need to secularize these ritual dances especially those already being faced with extinction? Several factors are responsible, but the primary factor is the fact that the beliefs that underlie some of these forms are no longer tenable, thereby undermining the strength and vigour they once had. This in turn affects their continuity. In its ritual context, these dances can only serve a few people. Of course, that is why they are a ritual form. But when secularized, they serve a wider audience as their performance at public events promotes cultural history.

Dances in Benin fall within the two basic categories of sacred and secular forms as mentioned above. Most of the sacred dances and songs are peculiar to a ceremony and are not performed

outside their original contexts. However, this strict stance has begun to yield to the pressures of current cultural realities as some of these dances with ritual backgrounds have either yielded completely to secularization or are now serving both secular and religious functions depending on the context. The Eghughuagba dance of the Benin people is one such dance which have been completely stripped of its ritual forms it now serves purely entertainment function. While *Ohogho* dance which is the subject matter of this discourse is one of the sacred dances which now serve both sacred and secular functions. This paper proposes that being an energetic dance with varied movements, this dance should be expanded in terms of its choreography for entertainment. This will encourage its patronage as well as continuous survival. The secularization of Ohogho dance is thus a response to new desires and behaviours.

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