



Original Article

THE ELASTIC NATURE OF KOKOMA DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Dance has been a veritable activity in any African community. This is because it carries along the basic relics of a people's cultural life. As a performance, it is a tool for sensitization, healing, entertainment and worship. Some dances are rigidly designed with some motifs that may not accept changes, while others allow for few changes in form and design. However, the ones that resist change fade away or become boring to the people, those that accept changes face the threat of erosion of basic nuances that build up the cultural identity of the people. The latter is essential in retaining the interest of the people even in Diasporas. These changes can only satisfy the people's desires when their identity is preserved and celebrated. Kokoma dance sustains ancestral rhythmic forms and body movements of the African designed to explore the flexible and alluring sensitive nature of his body. Kokoma dance is elastic and accommodates all forms of movements. However, these movements must be executed within the flow of a unique musical form called Kokoma.

Keywords: Dance, African Community, Cultural Identity, Performance, Sensitization, Healing, Entertainment, Worship

INTRODUCTION

Dance is regarded as the most popular socio-aesthetic activity amongst the Efik people of Cross River State, of Nigeria. Dance, is so vital that it is used in all traditional institutions of the people. The Ekpe, Akata, Idem, Nsibidi amongst others are examples of institutions built around the commanding effect of music and dance. In these dances, the human body executes movements that are aesthetically meaningful and which can be used to promote or critique existing traditional values and norms. Hanna maintains that "dance is so basic to human life when interwoven with other aspects of human life such as communication, religious belief and politics" (31).

Dance in African culture is so important that people cannot do without it. In Africa, people do not dance just because they enjoy it, rather their various dance movements represent some very important occasions in their lives. Every traditional dance is expressive of the people's feelings and desires. These expressions include those of birth, circumcision, marriage, planting, hunting, harvesting, coronations and death.

Corroborating the assertion that African dance is deeply rooted in the people's social structure, their natural peculiarities and temperament, Enekwe observes that "... African dance tends to involve social acts with legal significances and meanings, especially, when such arts are connected with marriage, birth and death" (37). African dance leads to auto- hypothesis and ecstasy, thus liberating participants from day to day experience of mind and body. Dance is all action and all embracing. The African sees dance as an avenue of showcasing his design in textile, craft, sound, music and sensibilities. Music is another very powerful force in the

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execution of dance furthers the discourse on the all-embracing nature of dance in the African continent. It is difficult to separate movement from music, costume and values. This view is shared by Kwabena Nketia in his study of African dance and music, as he maintains that *“one cannot really speak of dance in Africa without saying a few words about costume and music. In many cultures the master musician becomes a “vehicle in which the ancestor speaks to the living” (11).* Ikike Ufford avers that in Dance Enactments, the musical instruments communicate to the dancers who are able to decode the language of the instruments and use same to relate to Audience.... (79).

The effect of music on dance cannot be over emphasized. The musician is a delegated servant to the gods who dines and wines with the ancestral spirits through his music. In pure ritualistic dance in African context, music transforms the stage from being an ordinary stage to a sacred arena. Music is an effective medium to show satisfaction and appreciation. As such, it is rightly used to offer a justified guidance to African dance creation. Still in a bid to advance the postulation of the importance of music, H' Doubler opines that *“When a musical composition is used as the source of inspiration for a dance, its structure will necessarily affect the structure of the dance form related to it. At the same time, it arouses associative meanings and subjective responses” (43).*

Dance is the fastest method of releasing the energies required to exercise our dormant subconscious nature, and quicken the mortification of the flesh and allow the spiritual energy to be released. Dance and Music are sharing of thoughts and feelings. Man's experiences and feelings have the strong desire to record and symbolize his emotions and powers in order to communicate his thoughts. He uses dance with music to create not only for the mere pleasure of it, but for desires to share a vision, thought and aesthetic sensation to enable him beautify his world. Man finds everyday language insufficient to communicate his thoughts and feelings, so he takes all kinds of materials and builds, molds and transforms them, creating shapes and colors, textures, sounds and movements which become symbols of his joy and sorrow.

Every society has its own dancing culture. Dance often occurs at rites of passage when an individual passes from one societal role to another. This re-emphasizes the manifestation of dance in birth, initiation, graduation, marriage, succession to political office, and death. This may be marked social gatherings like festivals or ceremonies. Dance may also be a form of worship, a means of honoring ancestors, a way of propitiating the gods. Dance has been and still is an intricate part of the collective zeal and struggle of Africans in their society. Right from the ancient periods, dance was an instrumental element for instructing both the young and the old on morals and human dignity. Enekwe states;

Dance serves a 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 bonds of individuality... societies whose transitional values are still intact tend to value the cohesive or unifying effect of the dance (11).

Though Performances are rooted in traditional values and norms, Ufford regrets that these values are fading away by the effect of Modernization. He submits that *“... much of society's secret traditional institutions and philosophy have change as a result of modernity... (148)*

Some dances are sacred while others are social. The sacred involves those dances that are done by initiates and have special occasions. The social dances entail dances that are not limited by any measures. The secular dances are mostly used to express happiness, occupation and entertainment. Movements in this form dance show the elegance of culture and the being of the people (Ufford (486). The KOKOMA dance belongs to those dances with unlimited spree in performance. It accepts all beautiful movements, but within the strong rhythmic frame of the ensemble. This strong values of adaptability and movement variables necessitate the study of its elastic nature. Ufford summarizes that;

A typical traditional Nigeria Dance presentation gives opportunity for individual expression of thought and feelings in religion, economics, and social norms of the land (252).

HISTORY OF THE EFIK

The Eik people are found in the south-south geographical zone of Nigeria T.L Wole has noted that the Efik occupy *“the south Eastern corner of Cross River state” (I).* According to Aye (v) *“the people generally known as Efik and their kin folk today occupy the basins of the lower Cross River and down to the Bakassi peninsula. The Calabar River and down to its tributaries. The Kwa River, Akpayafe (Akpalkang) and the Eniong Creek. Nair (1972) records that the Efiks had occupied Calabar towards the end of the 7th Century”.* He concluded, therefore, that Calabar is the homeland of the Efik. The Efik are related to Annang, Ibibio, Oron, Biase, Akamkpa, Uruanand Eket People by a common ancestry.

Although the actual origins of the Efik people are unknown, oral traditional pre-views accounts of three stages in the history of Efik migration and settlement. There is an Igbo phase, an Ibibio phase and the drift coast. There are some Efik who advocate oriental origin of their people, claiming that they were living in Palestine or Egypt and had crossed the Sahara to Sudan from where they wandered into Nigeria. This is believed to be elaborated in some peculiar burial sites and ceremonies.

Although their economy was originally based on fishing and farming, the area quickly developed into a major trading center and remain so well into the early 1900s. Incoming European goods were traded for slaves, palm oil, and other local products. The Efik

Kings collected trading tax for societal development. Due to the influx of the Europeans into the Efik Kingdom, more white-collar jobs have become the focus. A powerful political bond exists amongst the Efik people through their secret societies such as Ekpe, Nsibidi, Idem and so on. As a people, they engage in cultural performance such as Abang, Ndem, and so on. An Efik man is blessed, naturally with the knowledge of dance and music, for these keep them fit for fishing and farming activities.

HISTORY OF KOKOMA DANCE

The Kokoma dance has no known history, but from the oral tradition, it is believed to have started with the creative nature of the farmers, who after farming go home to sing Kokoma music to ease their stress and tiredness. As this practice continued, they developed more groups who were trained to specialize in Kokoma music. These ones entertained the farmers and traders at every market day.

The Kokoma music is inspirational, and is composed within the highlife beat. Its pace is faster and dynamic. In the music, the xylophone (ikon) plays the melody, while the tri-drums (drums with tuned sound) produce the steel that propels the rhythm. People were free to dance anything, other than movements that fall within the context of the music. As the society grew, Kokoma music which accommodated any form of movement, became the source, where all current dance forms are seen and modified. ObongIwatt, the leader of Kokoma dance in Ibaku, Akpabuyo L.G.A of Cross River State of Nigeria submits that, Kokoma dance is indigenous and is not propelled by the influx of alien cultures. However, the Kokoma dance bridges all gaps between variations of dance forms in the society. He further explains the myth behind the name and form of the dance history. He avers that 'koko' means 'dear', 'my beloved' and the likes, while 'ma' means 'love'. Kokoma then means 'whatever Koko loves. This shows the flexible nature of Kokoma dance. Therefore, any movement loved by the audience, 'the people' is the pivot of creativity and expressiveness of the social life of the people. Kokoma dance is truly the convergent dance that integrates both the indigenous and foreign dance cultures in a unified ensemble.

PERFORMERS OF KOKOMA DANCE

The members or performers of Kokoma dance are drawn from all age brackets unconditionally. The dance helps to bridge the age bracket in the Efik society and provide a central grounds for sharing affinity and unified perception. During Kokoma dance, the crowd is immersed with the rhythmic gyration of the drums and xylophone. The conscious accelerated pace of the rhythms heightens the aesthetic frame of the human body and create an avenue for simulated grace and splendor.

PERFORMANCE

The Kokoma dance is a unique traditional dance display. The dance is driven by ineluctable sounds from the orchestra. The xylophone player starts with an introductory piece, as he masterly displays his skill on the instrument. At the end of the call by the xylophonist, a cantor initiates a song, while the xylophone takes over as the dancers advance onto the performance area. Most of their movements have to do with the wriggling of the waist, jumps and rolls, with accessioned gyration of the entire body. However, the composition of dance is elastic. Every dance movement can effectively fit into the framework of Kokoma dance. All movements are dispatched with grace and splendor. There are no harsh or forceful movements, the subtle movements are the bound on which the Kokoma dance is created.

MUSIC

The music of Kokoma is propelled by the lead drum called 'siko'. The 'siko' drum can masterly be used to enforce movement variety and dynamism. Every movement is backed up with a sound from the master drum revealing the nature (soft or subtle) of the action. The 'siko' is complimented by other instruments. These include:

- 1) xylophone (ikon)
- 2) rattle (nsak)
- 3) twin gong (akamkang)
- 4) Bass drum (eka ibid)
- 5) twin drum (ekomoiba)
- 6) slit drum (obodom)
- 7) woodblock (ntakrok)

The xylophone is basically designed to render melody of the songs used for the Kokoma dance. The woodblock maintains the timeline (whether fast or slow) of the music. However, the woodblock player works hand in hand with the lead drummer. This is because the lead drummer signals the pace of the dance while the woodblock sustains it for other instruments to flow in same direction. Other instruments play accompaniment roles.

An example of kokoma music is seen below:

Xylophone

AFO EDI OWO ORO!

Presto

The musical score for the Xylophone part is written in treble clef with a 12/8 time signature. It consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a 'Presto' tempo marking. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together in groups. There are several measures with rests, and the piece concludes with a double bar line.

Wood Blocks

AFO EDI OWO ORO!

Presto

The musical score for the Wood Blocks part is written on a single staff with a 12/8 time signature. It begins with a 'Presto' tempo marking and a '3' above the first measure, indicating a triplet. The music consists of a series of eighth notes, with some measures containing rests. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Rattle

AFO EDI OWO ORO!

Presto

12

6

9

12

Slit Drum

AFO EDI OWO ORO!

Presto

7

11

14

AFO EDI OWO ORO!

Presto

7

10

13

AFO EDI OWO ORO!



The resonant sounds are creatively used to inspire routine movements with fresh flow of energy and gait. It helps inspire the dancers during performance.

THE ELASTIC NATURE OF KOKOMA DANCE

The Kokoma dance is elastic in nature. This is because there is no drawn limitation to the influx of dance movements irrespective of their route and sustainability. These movements once used in the Kokoma music, become an important dance form in the komoma performance. The Kokoma dance is built around a strong musical frame. The Kokoma music is contemporary in nature. It is the reminiscent of the highlife beats but orchestrated with drum signifiers. The lead drum detects the pace of the dance and sustains the flow of the ensemble.

The Kokoma orchestra, consisting of various traditional instruments as mentioned above present the xylophone as lead instrument. It is the instrument which flows with the melodic sequence in the performance, while the orchestrated beats are anchored on the dexterity of the master drummer with regards to movement, varieties and action.

Commenting on the elastic nature of Kokoma dance, Joe Eko, a director of the University of Calabar Performing Company, attests that, Kokoma is flexible and easily integrative and has smooth marriage with all movements that are pleasant. The Kokoma dance evaluates the tensions in society and remain a source of showcasing the current form of celebrated movements in varied dances of the people. It does not hold on to the Efik body gestures alone but smoothly interrogates other cultural elements through movement of the body.

Margaret Edet, a choreographer with the university of Calabar Performing Troupe sums up that, Kokoma dance is not just a pool of variety of body movements across cultural societies but a composition of beautiful steps capable of lifting the spirits of the audience members. The spirit behind the Kokoma dance is bright, celebrative and inspirational. The dance is a piece of celebrated life and thought. That is why the costumes are always bright and colourful not sticky to particular cultural motifs. That is, the costume does not show any specific culture variation. Most costume are creatively designed to meet contemporary taste of the people. Attention is paid to excellence and design. In The University of Calabar Troupe, the Kokoma dance movements include:

- 1) Salsa movement
- 2) Rock and roll
- 3) Cha-cha
- 4) Soul train
- 5) Hip-hop
- 6) Disco
- 7) And others

According to her, the troupe makes use of native and indigenous movements such as Ekombi, Ekpe and Nsibidi, especially when creating movement dimensions in perspective. Lizzy Asuquo, a dance captain in the Cultural Centre Board Calabar says that Kokoma dance is limitless. It has no specific dance movements that could be assigned to it. Every movement responding to the Kokoma music automatically becomes the movements in Kokoma dance. With this, the Kokoma dance becomes so rich in movements, as the best movement from any given environment are mostly presented in a well fashioned manner. The spirit that flows in the music highs up the intensity of energy in the dance movement with flame and beam of smile on the faces of the dancers. The movements are gentle

and subtle, and are very feminine in nature. The gentle flow of the movement makes Kokomma one that touches the subconsciousness of the spectators.

From the above, one could see that Kokoma dance is elastic in nature. This elasticity is profoundly seen in the coalition of movements who naturally agree to work together beyond cultural barriers. These cultural barriers are broken as the best movements are given a template in the dance to flow together. It is also worthy of note that, the music remains static, unique and unchanging in form throughout the performance. But dance movements have no limits. The multiple dance movements make it appealing to the eyes of the audience. Kokoma dance becomes a piece where all body movements and gestures meet to please the eye.

MATERS ARISING

- 1) Despite the varieties of movements, the dance remains firm and not diminishing in form and contents. It keeps rebranding with new forms of movements within a consciously stereotype musical frame
- 2) The dance continues to have greater patronage than other traditional dances that are structured in a rigid form. Kokoma dance keeps being relevant to the society
- 3) Both men and women, young and old do the dance. It is not through initiation but committed zeal to show how flexible your body is.
- 4) The nature of the dance is to keep updating the cultural life the people.
- 5) It focuses more on beauty, aesthetic expressions than symbolic values and norms in cultural relics.
- 6) The structure of the dance is flexible and can also involve mastery of improvisational approaches and techniques.

CONCLUSION

The African sees dance as a total embodiment of his cultural sensibilities. Dance is not defined only by movement designed. The costumes, music and cultural expressions of values and norms are composite elements of the dance whole. Movement cannot be isolated from the rhythmic flow of the dance experience. Kokoma dance is a central force in providing a stage for cultural adaptability and unity. Kokoma dance cuts across the globe with the sole aim of satisfying the audience members. The movements have no limit but there is a unique specification of guiding the Kokoma music, where the dance movements are brought together as a common piece. This has made Kokoma dance relevant in all generations.

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