

Review

Expressing indigenous knowledge through dance

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In many cases, indigenous knowledge has been orally passed from one generation to another. It encompasses the wisdom, knowledge and teachings of traditions to communities based on their social, economic, religious and political beliefs. The knowledge of indigenous and local communities is often embedded in a cosmology. These cosmologies are inextricably bound to ancestors, festivals and ancestral lands. To acquire indigenous knowledge, it may not be acquired by naturalistic trial and error, but through direct revelation and constant conversation with the people that own the various indigenous traditions. Therefore, this paper is aimed at using dance as an expressive tool in retaining indigenous knowledge.

Key word: Indigenous, festival, aesthetic.

INTRODUCTION

The major concern of dance history is to acknowledge the changes that have occurred with time. Therefore it requires the explanation of events, which have necessitated changes as understanding the history that gave sense to identity and continuity in our indigenous communities. To understand the potency of dance in our indigenous community, it becomes imperative to trace it from the three sources of origin which are emotional impulse and improvisation, the need by man to release psychic tension by means of rhythmic movement and also through ecstasy or magic. Ossie (1991: 2) is of the opinion that in early man's attempt to control and communicate with the forces around him, developed symbolic gestures and movements that expressed the way he felt to his supreme creator. This makes ritual one of the major sources of dance.

Arinze (2000: 23) states that dance is a language which expresses the geographical locations, biological temperament, religious beliefs, political and historical experiences of the people that own it". The evolution of dance as an art form that has its roots in the numerous indigenous festivals across the country has made our indigenous dance a total performance. A total performance in the sense; that it involves core aspect of traditional African theatre, starting from masquerade, mime, painting, costumes, folktales and dance. Like any other African art form, dance is not for aesthetic only; rather it commits individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community. Dance as an art is

interwoven around the fabrics of our indigenous communities especially based on their socio-political and economic experience.

Chris (2006: 23) states that 'dance' is the expression of life and living, such that no aspect of the people's life is lived without expressing its movement form. Dance in Africa is used to encode significant meanings that border directly on the totality aspects of people's life and their cultural identity. France (2001: 66) is of the opinion that: 'Dance has remained a vital and dynamic art form, because it has been allowed to thrive in our predominantly rural environment'.

According to Ossie (1991: 56), the great majority of Nigerians practiced their dances with minimal interference or hindrance from colonial authorities.

The study of the human body in communicating through dance movement has traditionally been located in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. According to Omofolabo (1998: 46), in the humanities where body motions in general are viewed as another form of physical exercise, dance studies in our indigenous societies focus on the physical and mental effects of body movements based on their communal existences.

Anthropologists view body movement in indigenous communities as human behavior encroached in the framework of culture and society, where dance is seen as a crucial tool in giving deeper insight in understanding human beings and their organization. David (2011: 23) explores the relationship of mind to body arguing that: In

dance the vehicle of aesthetic expression is in physical movement, so the importance of being clear about the relation of mind to body in dance depends on how mental things can be expressed physically through dance.

Dance art has always continued to gain acceptance as an independent per-formative art in our indigenous communities. Dance still remains a very powerful medium of communication both within theatre and in our indigenous communities. Its development over time has been linked to the human design to communicate innately. According to Igweonu (2002: 146), dance exists in every culture of the world. Its practice and functional values have direct bearing with the socio-aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of any given society.

It is important to note that the functions and roles that dance play in our indigenous communities directly affect the form and style of expression. Ugolo (2006: 47) states that the dance forms which can be identified in our indigenous communities can be seen through the purpose they serve, for instance the ritual, social, imitation festival and acrobatic. Dance displays are forms and styles of dance that relate to the functions that they serve in communities.

In Nigeria, dance exists in relationship with other art forms like music, costume, painting, sculpture, make-up and drama. Goines (2007: 221) states that they are so interwoven in Africa's work, play, social and religious activities that it is difficult to isolate any of these activities from their respective roles in the life of the people.

Dance has a cultural based ideology through which a particular cultural group interprets postures, attitudes and expressions which are well known by indigenes and culturally accepted by them. Simple (2001: 24) states that dance can be used to enhance the symbolic relationship in our indigenous societies, only when ethnocentrism and punitive postures, especially against Africans by the west are stopped. Dance as a functional socio-cultural root on the African model can play a part in multiculturalism.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: THE COGNITIVE OTHER

Indigenous knowledge can be broadly be defined as the knowledge that an indigenous community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. A number of terms are used interchangeably to refer to the concept of indigenous knowledge like traditional knowledge, technical knowledge and local knowledge. Indigenous knowledge as a concept has been over flogged in its importance and often it has been misused many a time as something inferior and not to be reckoned with, thereby making indigenous knowledge to be a down-graded form of knowledge. The primary aim of indigenous knowledge is to serve as a tool for cultural unification and sustainability, but the wrong conception of indigenous knowledge by some indigenes as mere

knowledge has placed communities in a state of quandary. Our reaction need not be presumptuous, unreasonable, wantonly unfocused and ungenerous. For such will only bring about un-productivity, we rather need to think deeply and engage ourselves in a serious, committed and realistic search to preserve our indigenous knowledge. The concept of indigenous knowledge evokes sensitivity and deep hostility, due to the fact that it is changed with emotional and historical overtones. It is understood from the lens through which it is viewed and the period of time in question. Ikechukwu (1999: 68) states that we have discovered some facts about indigenous knowledge and these have given us some insights, but there is real need for critical and constructive analysis of the concept due to the exigencies of the indigenous development and transition taking place in the world today.

Indigenous knowledge aims at making us live in high degree of freedom we can think of in our epoch. Bali (2002: 34) states that indigenous knowledge aim at producing a free spirit in the deepest sense: free, that is to say, from the fanaticism of religion, from the fanaticisms of science and from the fanaticism of social beliefs. In other words, we may say that the whole purpose of culture is to enable us to enjoy life with a consciousness that has been purged to mental rigidities.

Indigenous knowledge is use at rural and urban communities for decisions pertaining to food security, human and animal health, education, natural resources management and other vital activities. Nze (2002: 456) states that 'Indigenous knowledge is a key element of the social capital of the poor and constitutes their main asset in their efforts to gain control of their own lives'. Indigenous knowledge: is a growing field of inquiry, both nationally and internationally particularly for those interested in educational innovation.

Indigenous knowledge: reveals the wealth and richness of indigenous languages world views, teachings and experience, all of which have been systematically excluded from contemporary educational institutions and from Eurocentric Knowledge Systems. Through this act of intellectual self-determination in dance, drama, folktales and playwrighting, indigenous academics are developing new analyses and methodologies to decolonize themselves, their communities and their institutions. Saurt (2008: 4) is of the opinion that Eurocentric thought asserts that only Europeans can progress and that indigenous peoples are frozen in time, guided by knowledge system that reinforce the past and do not look toward the future.

Several strategies like play texts, dance-drama, poems, paintings, folktales and choreography, have been used to reinforce the myth that regions outside Europe contribute nothing to the development of humanities, arts, science and technology. These strategies have caused indigenous people to be viewed as backward and passive recipients of European knowledge. Indigenous knowledge

became invisible to Eurocentric knowledge, to its development theories and to its global science. Consequently, indigenous knowledge was captured and stored in a systematic way by Eurocentric educational systems.

Later indigenous scholars discovered that indigenous knowledge is far more than the binary opposite of western knowledge. According to Obi (2011: 234), as a concept, indigenous knowledge benchmarks the limitations of Eurocentric theory, its methodology, evidence and conclusions. Reconceptualizes the resilience and self-reliance of indigenous people, and underscores the importance of their own philosophies, heritages and educational processes.

Indigenous knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research and scholarship. Ken (2007: 27) states by animating the voices and experiences of the cognitive other and integrating them into the educational process, it creates a new balanced centre and a fresh vantage point from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies.

Indigenous knowledge by scholars and policy makers generated an explosive growth in the number of publications on the relevance of indigenous knowledge in a variety of policy sectors and academic disciplines. International policy makers developed principles and guidelines for protecting indigenous knowledge from predators meaning taking advantage of others and biopiracy. Indigenous knowledge and its pedagogies have generated a decolonizing and rethinking of education for indigence.

Today, the literature animates the fundamental theory and methods of indigenous knowledge as a means to accord its protection and to raise its social value and its status as a system of knowledge, while indigenous scholars generate the necessary intellectual space to create a conceptual and analytical framework for its development. Mark (2007: 17) states that all this activity has made indigenous education a highly contested terrain. The traditional Eurocentric view of indigenous peoples and their heritage as exotic objects that have nothing to do with science and progress now competes with a developing intellectual nexus of post colonial and post structural theories that underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge and languages.

EXPRESSING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE THROUGH DANCE: SOLIDER MASQUERADE DANCE OF ANYAMELUM AS PARADIGM

Anyamelum indigenes are known and appreciated for their rich cultural heritage. They are known to be majorly farmers and fishermen. The reason while farming and fishing stands as their major occupation is because they are from river line area. Their land is always soft and fertile during farming, while their river never dries even in

dry season.

These two occupations been their source of yearly income have helped in developing their economic standard. Anyamelum community is well known as the highest in producing cash crop in Anambra state. This has earned them several names like “Di ji community (the provider of other communities), Akaneme Azu (The hand that produces fish)” and so on.

In upholding cultural norms and values, Anyamelum community is the custodian of their indigenous knowledge. According to Daniel (2011: 17), he states that it is a must for parents to transfer their indigenous knowledge from themselves to their children, through test by moonlight stories, folktales, painting and otherwise.

The community is blessed with several indigenous cultures both in dance, costuming and make-up. But in all these indigenous culture, the one they appreciate most is solider masquerade dance. They are of the belief that solider masquerade dance gave their community a traceable origin. It is this dance according to Daniel (2011: 17) that “made the Whiteman to be scared of their community during colonization in Africa”.

Origin of soldier masquerade dance

The origin of this dance emerged from the name of the community Anyamelum meaning (war that made me). This Anyamelum according to history is believed to have fought a lot of wars during the period of their forefathers. In short, there is this believe that every Anyamelum son was born with sword and war-shade, to signify war-lords. They are ready to battle both human beings and spirits.

It is in their history that the strongest and the oldest man in their community fought tirelessly with a spirit with seven heads and seven legs continuously for seven days. After which he presented the seven heads of the spirit before the elders that made him “dike Agha - (strong man of war). When he died, he was immortalized in the community with a constant masquerade dance called solider dance. This solider masquerade dance is specially meant for the entire son’s of Anyamelum community, to showcase their bravely in protecting the entire communities in case of emergence or war. This particular indigenous knowledge has been right from the days of their fore-fathers till present day. This particular festival takes place ones in a year, especially during big occasion or if there is any August visitor in the community.

Costumes

All the costumes used in solider masquerade dance are real solider uniforms with boots, guns and water-cans. Seeing them at first sight, one might think they are soldiers. The essence of this costume is to portray them

as warlords and ever battle ready. This particular costume differentiates them from neighboring community indigenous culture. Though the costumes are soldier's uniforms, they are richly made to differentiate each of the dancer's financial status.

The rich ones among them differentiate their costume both in designs and styles to look like that of rank of major General in Military. The reason for such differentiation is to showcase their economic status which makes them superior over others in that community. Their boots are real soldier boots, while those who cannot afford real boots wear ordinary shoe. The top of their head mask as masquerades, there is big feathers on the head mask of each masquerade. These feathers semiotically serve as their head war shade against any flying bullet during war and they are highly fortified. They also have knives in their costumes, as a tool of their brevity which serves as an identification mark for any Anyamelum son as war-lords right from birth. The colour of the costume is green aside been military colour. It also symbolizes how fertile their community is and how recognizes they are in the western part of the country in producing cash crops. Their unique costume makes them outstanding among other indigenous cultures in their Local Government Area.

Make-up

In this dance festival, soldier masquerade dance make-up is highly indispensable. The use of make-up in this dance is believed to put the dancers imitating the real soldiers in the right frame of mind and action. Their faces are design to be grotesque in nature. In order to insert fear in the minds of the people who are not members of that masquerade cult.

The make-up for the costume is normally prepared hours before the real dance performance. The reason somehow sounds significant because it symbolizes their readiness before the arrival of their ancestral war-lords. They are of the belief that with the early make-up, it enables their ancestral spirits to fortify them before the dance, depending on individual dancer's "chi". The major instrument use in preparing the make-up is charcoal. The charcoal is gathered from firewood and grinded seven times by seven virgins. The seven times of grinding symbolizes: the seven times the strongest man in that community fought with the spirit and emerge victorious, while the seven virgin are allowed to grind the charcoal, with their virginity they fortify the potency of the charcoal more and more.

The charcoal is allowed to stay another seven days before the real date of celebration. The reason for the seven days over stay before the real performance is for spiritual purification. It is believed that their ancestral father's will use the make-up first for their own performance in their spirit realm, before it is used for the

real performance. The make-up is named "goodluck charcoal", with the motion that it aids them in conquering their enemies during war. The making of the make-up is hereditary. The family responsible for that is called family of virgins. The reason while the family of virgins is indispensable in preparing the make-up is because they are naturally beautiful and their ancestral father's made it so, so that through their beauty they will always bless and favor their community. This family is seen as mediator between the living and spirit world.

Initiation ceremony

This is stage of transition from childhood to adulthood. Once a woman gives birth to a male issue, automatically he is fully initiated into the soldier masquerade dance. The only thing that is symbolic with those to be initiated is their birthmark body design, which is seven sword marks in front of their chest. Once they have such body design, it portrays them as been worthy for the performance. Ikem (2009: 14) states that another symbolic thing among the sons of Anyamelum, they are always born at the seventh hour and they are carried for seven months only in their motherly womb, before they are delivered'. There is a bird called nnuu ogba ama - the bird that gives information that will announce the coming of an initiate into soldier masquerade dance. After the birds sound seven times the woman delivers peacefully. The birds are always seven in number to represent the seven villages that made up Anyamelum, while their sounds for seven times signifies a war-lord is about to be born; so both the mother and child will survive in the delivering. But when their sounds is below seven times and is a male child, it shows a sign of infertility on the woman which she must explain or die during delivering.

Props for the dance

The props for the dance are everyday props like guns, water-can, touch light, bags, charcoal and kola nut. These props portray the sign of a real soldier in a camp. All the props for the performance are seen as scared, so they are gathered and packed in room called Ukwu nso (the shrine) till the next celebration or occasion. The Ukwu nso is always guided with palm fronds for strong purification against any evil force.

Dance pattern

The dance movements here are same with that of military men in the barracks, especially during their parade. The dance movements during the performance are always a step forward showing that they are not afraid of their enemies and a step backward portraying no

matter what always remember to fall back and protect those at home. The drums in the dance play a major role in cue changing. First cue x-rays the solider dancers in parade ground, the second cue shows them in their battle line aiming at their enemies, while the last cue shows them trying to mine fighting with an enemy, but following the timing of the dance rhythm. The dance movements are well choreographed to resemble real soldiers in combat.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge is systemic, covering both what can be observed and what can be thought. It comprises the rural and the urban, the settled, original inhabitants and migrants. Solider masquerade dance is a core Nigerian culture that has distinguished the people of Anyamelum. The concept of indigenous knowledge is highly upheld in this community both in their dance movements and in its communicative essence. The knowledge of solider masquerade dance has attracted tourism in Anyamelum where both international and local researchers attend the festival every year for further studies. Thereby publicizing and documenting the igniting potency of the dance as a tool for cultural preservation.

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