

UNVEILING NIGERIAN CULTURAL NARRATIVES THROUGH DANCE: A TOOL FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Indigenous dances, when scholarly interpreted, have transcended the mere combination of aesthetic movements. It is rather a myopic misinterpretation as a mere “annual festival”, and to some people, just their village dance has made them enjoy various indigenous dances based on their aesthetic, pattern, and style, without considering their communicative potency. If translated, they stand as a tool for effective communication. The core interpretation placed on indigenous dance movement broadens the indigenes’ horizon of seeing the indigenous dance as reflective in the mirror of the social, religious, and economic status at the point the dance is being choreographed. This will enable indigenous people to view the dance as a communicative tool, a watchdog on their daily activities in the community, and a sustaining means for upholding communal moral beliefs. This paper, therefore, critically examines the EKPA DANCE of the EJAGHAM people in Akamkpa beyond its

mere dance movements, but as an indispensable communicative tool of the people's culture.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, National Identity, Unveiling, Cultural Narratives

Introduction

The primary concern of indigenous dance history is to acknowledge the changes that have occurred. It requires an explanation of events that have necessitated changes, as well as an understanding of the history that gave sense to identity and authority in our indigenous communities. To understand the potency of indigenous dance in our society, it becomes imperative to trace its origins to three key sources: emotion, impulse, and improvisation. These sources reflect the human need to release psychic tension through rhythmic movement, as well as the connection to ecstasy and magic. Enekwe, O. (1991). Opinion that: In early man's attempt to control and communicate with the force around him, he developed symbolic gestures and movements that expressed the way he felt to his supreme creator. This makes ritual one of the significant sources of dance. The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form is rooted in the numerous indigenous festivals across the country that have made the dance at total performance Ogbonna (2011) opines that our indigenous movement both in styles form are not done haphazardly, but rather, they are geared toward conveying the meaning and message of the festival. Indigenous dance, like any other African art form, is not for aesthetic use only. Instead, it commits individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community. Indigenous dance in traditional African societies is an expression of beliefs, attitudes, standards, and values of a particular culture. It is embedded in the culture, which can be reflected in the dance movements of a community. Onwuekwe, A.I (2009) believe that Indigenous dance can be an art form or recreation; it goes beyond the merely functional movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable, exciting, or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotion, mood, ideas, tell a story, or portray political or social needs. Indigenous dances in a core African setting are appreciated based on their communicative potency. It is the communicative ability of dance as a unique act in our indigenous community that gives the dance of any community a traceable origin, both in form, style, or content. Itaya opines

that: In choreographing contemporary indigenous dance style, the head dancer (choreographer) does not evolve dance steps from space or mere imagination. Instead, those choreographed dance movements, both in name, form, and style, are the embodiment of the socio-environment to be answered, while being entertained. indigenous dance, as earlier defined, is an indispensable tool toward communication and effective cultural identification. Indigenous dance also represents a physical instrument or symbol for ideas and thoughts that can serve as a more effective media than verbal language in revealing one's needs and desires. Kuper maintains that: Movement in dance becomes standardized and pattern symbol, where the members of a society may understand that these symbols are intended to represent experience and meaning to an individual's external and psychic world (238)

The Perception of Indigenous Dance Forms

Indigenous dance depicts lives in rhythms and cycles, values, aspiration, history, economic, conciliation and realities. Itaya states that: The traditional African dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people from where it emerge as dance steps. In traditional African dances, sometimes praise, criticize, or even work as a tool for social mobilization. Each dance type and style is distinct from one tribe to another due to cultural differences in melodic and movement styles. Most indigenous African forms exhibit the social pattern prevalent among tribes/regions, and those dance forms can be classified based on the following communicative sub-themes: The essence of codes in performance: the essence of code in performance is to aid in the practical understanding of the communicative code infused in the performance. It is the communicative potency of the codes in the dance performance that guides its essence beyond mere aesthetics, literary understanding, and stylized movements or actions into a serious analytical interpretative tool. The use of meaning-specified codes in dance performance motivates the spectators to understand the rise to the emergence of such codes, and it has been enabled in their sustainability. John White More, also states that: Codes are cultural derived signs that have been assigned meaning that the inhabitants of a given tribe or society understand. More also view cultural codes as rules or guidelines that govern the operation of a society and its culture base on their language; dress, manners, the arts, social strata and level of education.

Ekpa Cultural Dance of Ejagham People in Cross River

The creative analysis on indigenous dance performance especially Ekpa dance makes the meaning of the dance bare before the people that owns the dance, and also the foreigners/tourists that comes to watch the ceremonial event for creative understanding of the semiotics used in the Ekpa dance which makes it more communicative than a mere tool for cultural sustainability and development. The use of well interpreted semiotics symbols in Ekpa dance performance has really showcased the uniqueness of the dance both in its aesthetics, communication, quality, and cultural sustainability.

History of Ekpa Dance

Ekpa dance according to the history of Ejagham dated as far back as 1918. This dance was an all-female institution which many researchers represented that female variant of the men's Mgbe in Ejagham culture. This was so in the sense that it served as a disciplinary tool for women in particular who constitute and affront to the ideas of womanhood. Onor said: The dance major rule was socio-religious. It was used as an instrument for the purification of the community and propagation of the gods. In terms of potentiality or active physical, emotional and psychological crisis, for instance during the period of prevalent epidemic, famine, drought or any other mishap with fire consequence, the power of Ekpa was invoked to forestall or check its occurrence or spread as the case may be.

Ritual Nature

The dance is symbolic during its performance, it serves as a connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the death. This ritual is usually performed during the funeral rites of an elderly woman (Ekuh-Nne-Nkae Ekpa), The leader of the dance is fully costumed in beautiful traditional ornaments/Costumes, carrying an instrument on the right hand called "MORUER" to enable her to intercede with the ancestors of the land for peaceful celebration and she is closely followed by a group of young women of Ekpa dance called (Achi- Ekpa) carrying (Agun Ekpa) guns with various signs written on their faces. Their function is to protect and fortify the dancer that is carrying the (Achi Njom Ekpa) masquerade from any external charm from the strangers or visitors that are invited from various communities for the ceremony (Ntufam Agurimon). According to Ntukae

Lucy Ofuobi and Emilia Akorekpin Okena, in an interview, said that Ekpa dance had been a traditional cult for the women, and Mgbe or Ekpe is for their male counterpart. It is made to perform only on the death of the deceased and the ancestor in the union of the death, called (Akibansi), to give the departed person respect. Most of its activities typically occur at night. During its performance, the man is constrained to remain indoors throughout the operation. Indeed, any man who is not an initiate like Agurimon who proves to expose himself to the secret of Ekpa's activities runs the risk of becoming impotent for life. Onor concurred that: Members of the Ekpa dance typically run around the community nearly naked, with bare bodies, wearing short garments (MKPIN); with brandished guns and swords, they look so fierce and wild. The men are kept out of sight, but their presence is not forbidden in daylight. But after dark, no man shows his face; the women dance stark naked throughout the night.

Conclusion

The cultural semiotics and the interpretative essence of this indigenous dance have contributed to communicative understanding and cultural sustainability of the Ejagham tradition and its norms and values. The various down steps in our African indigenous dances especially that of Ekpa dance in Ejagham did not just emerge but, instead, it is carved into existence to give our traditions a traceable origin, sustenance of our cultural norms and to help expose the socio-environmental factors that can lead, to the creation of different dance movements. It is at this point that the Ejagham people of Akamkpa in Cross River State appreciate their Ekpa cultural dance, which serves as a window of communication through its movements, styles, and entertainment, and also as a guardian of community protection.

Recommendations

1. Integrating Nigerian traditional and contemporary dance forms into primary, secondary, and tertiary education curricula fosters early cultural literacy and identity formation.
2. Many indigenous dances are undocumented and at risk of extinction. A centralized, accessible repository would preserve, promote, and research Nigeria's diverse dance heritage.

3. Dance troupes rooted in local traditions can serve as cultural ambassadors and economic units, supporting sustainable development through tourism and employment.

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