



Continuity And Change In African Music And Dance: Standard And Standardization Motif In African Performance Art

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ABSTRACT

African music and dance are usually figured in abstraction by foreign interests as one unit of art work that cut across the entire African continent. Empirical survey, however reveal a multi cultural phenomena which is driven by life's experiences over time. The sum total of the experience's ultimately shapes the discernable cultural patterns and behaviours of each autonomous society. Music and dance are a living art forms, a store of the people's values and identity. It chronicles the people's philosophy and continually mediates as an interface between the obstructive and destructive construct of the over zealous in the society against established social and spiritual order. As a functional art, each society usually put in place adequate guide lines and principles which serve as checks and balance. As a self preservation criteria art critique is a critical element in African arts exposition, expression and essence. This serve to preserve its true form, obviate corruptive influences, sustains its integrity, and perpetuate the culture and well being of the society that own it.

Keywords:: Standard, Standardization, Music, Dance.

INTRODUCTION

Observers that are not well acquainted with African music and dance are often at a loss, as to why some genres of music continue to wax stronger rather wane and fall into oblivion in the face of foreign cultural pressures. Argue-ably some of these art forms have suffered neglect and are no longer popular. Several reasons and factors, accounts for the sliding fortunes of the once flourishing and admirable splendor that asterisked African performance art.

The adoption of western style of governance in several African nation states is seen as the prime factor behind the declining fortunes of African arts. The dislocation of traditional administrative, albeit cultural platforms which sufficed the custody and practice of African music and dance, greatly affected the patronage system, with glaring consequences. The structural and contextual imbalance that the dislocation of centuries of established socio-economic and spiritual hegemony created, was not without its regrettable setbacks in cultural terms. The setbacks not with-standing, music and dance, still enjoy patronage with unalloyed favour even in the face of new challenges.

Despite several contending foreign intrusions, occasioned by colonization and globalization, strong evidence of African cultural retentions in music and dance abound. Invariably, the African musical sensibility which at times appropriates in its semiotics, the aesthetics, the contextual, and sine aesthetics as contiguous to the understanding and appreciation and signification, fosters order and balance in African music performance. Therefore, some of the steading mechanisms can be found in the intrinsic dynamics which form the basis of the art forms. Dance and music in the African context are a functional component of the culture, traditions and social and political life of the people. In music and dance, corporal, ethics and doctrinal ordinances and policies are stored and preserved. It is a way of life to those that own it, and consequently, it is learnt as an aspect of culture. Mariam feels that 'music exists only in terms of social interaction and it is learned behavior...it involves the behavior of learned individuals and group of individuals'(41). This view can be said to also apply to dance. Of great importance to understanding the mechanics and mechanism for appropriating cultural

substance and relevance in society, is to view in perspective, the grammar of cultural construct and representation. Akpabot, reporting Tracy, observes that 'the word music' in Africa means 'vocal participation, the physical manipulation of instruments and the rhythmic or dance movements associated with dance'(41). Tracy's view show that music and dance, from an African horizon issues forth from the same cultural contemplation and therefore inseparably integrated.

In the days of the great African empires of Oyo, Mali, Ghana, Songhai and several others, the current forms of scholarship and learning were not known to the people. The need to preserve and pass-on to subsequent generations of Africans the reach repertoire of African literature was however not lost to the leaders. In the old Sene-gambia for instance a method of preservation of state records and affaires of state was devised. Traditional bards or poets and singers were trained to commit to memory important events in the life span of each ruler which served as official state records of event and activities essential to the development of state. The preservation of the records was not left to chance and at the individual's whims and caprices. The griot tradition was well developed and maintained by state apparatus and subsequently acquired royal approval as an appendage of the ruling class. In order to ensure accuracy and safety of records so committed to memory, festivals for the performance of the facts and records were organized regularly at the instance of the rulers. Such public ceremonies was attended by members of the public in order to hear and learn firsthand history of the community, state, and to correct records in the open were there is a memory lapse on the part of the performers.

The question some may want to ask is why is it so important that great care is maintained to enhance the preservation and safety of records in form of dance and music. It is important to establish here that African music and dance posses some intrinsic qualities which serves as a store of value, a chronicle of events and activities and as cultural tool of transformation among other values.

Control Mechanism in African Music and Dance

African societies are usually close knit, and as a cultural unit has remarkable qualities and ethnic identity that readily differentiate it from their neighbour's. In order not to be lost in the socio-cultural maze which, characterize most developing societies, it is significant that identity and integrity of the culture are maintained and retained within a matrix of doctrines which governs socio-cultural transactions within the community. Some of the measures and quality assurance mechanism are far reaching and enduring. They include tribal incisions on men, women and materials, symbolic designs, coded verbal anecdotes and whimsical epithets that sanctions or eulogies an action and others that condemns villainous activities in the community. Although the plastic art media serves as an avenue for cultural preservation, the performance art media, such as dance and music seemingly possess a greater potency in this regards. This is in greater part due to the ubiquitous and eclectic nature and character of music and dance.

Music and dance as part of an African art in motion, regulates and mediates its performance techniques in accordance to approved cultural and traditional etiquettes and bounds. Music and dance as cultural icons are usually presented and expressed in the verbal and non verbal modes. Each of these icons, whether at the verbal, non verbal or sonic levels possess and represents a cultural idea, symbolism albeit in its fleeting essence in latent heat and rigors that characterize African music and dance.

The levels of control and stabilization motif are present and realized in varied forms and dimensions. There are those that bear direct reference and comment on style and technique of performance and some that makes outright reference to artistic franchise and performer's integrity. Several of these corrective modes, are not seen or perceived as restraint on the performer in the least, as artistic liberty does not override community cultural integrity and the right to self preservation. Thus, the element of conformity and the vacuous issues in and of cultural salinity are closely related. Such stresses on cultural affluxes are usually not taken personal as they represent modal afflatus in cultural determinism.

Acquiring the Requisite Training and Skills

Perhaps, one of the greatest antitheses in cultural preservation in developing culture is the overthrow of orthodox learning mechanism in the cultural spheres. The presence and primacy and overflow of music and dance in an environment, do not confer the status and mastery of a master musician and dancer on the entire community even though they are bearers and carriers of that culture.

Reflectively, Nketia observes that ‘since African music is such an integral part of social and cultural life, as well as a functional element of traditional institutions, its history is bound to have a stylistic and social dimension. The factors that affects change, normative stability, differentiation, and the mechanism for the control and diffusion of innovation in music’ (97). Nketia’s and Dedie’s observation should not be glossed over without recourse to its diametric significance in cultural and ethnic mechanisms of retention and assimilations in cultural studies. That is, the need to see culture in terms of ‘cultural learning’ as a standard in cultural involvement has become rife and significant. The absence of the right framework and poor understanding and grasp of traditional concepts, in theory and practice are often the forebears of cultural defoliation and degradation.

This practice cannot readily be dissociated from activities of culture vendors in pursuit of quick monetary gains and publicity. Akpabot, gives us a clue, in cultural learning as a basis for cultural understanding and the right cultural technique in performance. “In non ritual poetry, the other level in which Ibibio poetry functions, the content of the poetry is designed to effect social control of the community and make them conform with the norms of the society. Here the style is more relaxed and there is more room for the poet/performer to improvise and comment on the life of the society. Where ritual poetry was tensed and concerned with ancestral deities and their effects on the life of the society, non ritualistic poetry is concerned with the morality of the community.(73). Contextual demarcations and the restricting clause can only be understood and observed by someone learned in that tradition. Agordoh observes that: The training of an African child starts right from the cradle by the mother rocking him, singing of nonsense syllables to him, the child being carried at the back of the mother to ceremonies, singing to the child, and through children games and stories with interludes of dancing and singing, playing of toy drums until he becomes perfect... through slow absorption and active participation; they have to rely on their eyes, ears and retentive memory... imitative expression and correction by others where this is volunteered.(29).

Retentions and Rejections

Critical remarks and observations on performance issues ranging from style, context, gift of oratory skills, dexterity in dance and the lack of it among others, are common feature in African music and dance. Thus, the village of Blimiple, near the river dividing Liberia from Ivory coast, is said to be famed for its critical code: If a band of performers comes to the town of Blimiple, and attempts to perform at the town’s square, but has no talent whatsoever, the towns chief, or the quarter chief, will tell them to go to the house of Woya(bad singer) and the town would have been informed to ignore these men because of their lack of musical quality’ (2). In the same vein: If there is a play and they discover that the performers are repeating and repeating; singing and music, (they will) say, let’s go before one of our elders houses, his name is Pindou (repetitious), (2). Keil, expresses ‘Tiv adverbs of motion analysis’ thus: Giriya, the traditional warrior dance should be danced quickly(ferefere), light on the feet(gende-gende)with strength(tsoghtsogh, and vigorously as a hen scratches the ground(sagher-sagher). Some men’s and all women’s dances should be danced smoothly, cool, like sleeping on a new mattress’(lugh-lugh), deep, steady, respectfully, as if pressing down the earth, (kindigh-kindigh), slowly, steadily, controlled(kule-kule), and carefully, soothingly, and persuasively(legh-legh). Whatever the dance being done, it should be executed perfectly, completely, clearly, without mistake (tsembele-tsembele), in an orderly manner (shanja-shanja) and in detail (vighe-vighe), (2). Similarly, (the author) observed among the people of Auchu in Nigeria, that when a dancer exhibits absolute dexterity, such words as ; olho-uso, is used as a mark of excellence and sign of encouragement, having perceived to have exhibited significant physical and cerebral execution of the dance. On the contrary, a bad dancer is greeted with the words; ogbe yagha yagha, meaning one whose dance is not organized.

What the excerpts above have clearly demonstrated is the presence of cultural benchmark which a good performer is expected to adhere to and execute in performance. A shoddy attempt to replicate same in performance will alter significantly the aesthetic ambience associated with it. Dexterity in performance skills are usually acquired over a period through painstaking process of careful observation, participation in formal or informal context in consonance with prevailing norms in a particular environment.

Music performance in Ashanti culture in Ghana attracted the attention of no less than the personality of king Osei Agyeman Prempeh I; who ‘took particular interest in the authenticity of music played at

his court by his musicians. He would react whenever he felt that something was not quite right or when an instrument was missing from an ensemble'. He was interested in reviving some of the musical styles of the court which were being forgotten for lack of suitable occasion for their performance. He reconstructed the old grand style of *keke* music...and in which him-self performed as the orchestral leader by playing a small decorated rattle from his throne. He did not want it to be said of him that during his reign certain musical traditions waned or were forgotten for lack of his encouragement'' . (98).

Akpabot observed similar attempt by the Ibibio clan in Nigeria to sustain traditional performance etiquette in their music; 'The difference between a good non-ritual poet and a bad one, lies in the ability to communicate. Non ritual poetry is spiced with humour, proverbs and even at times nonsense words which excite educate and amuse an audience. They in turn signify their appreciation by urging the performer on, if they like and understand what he is saying, or disapproval by shouting him down if they find him not capable enough''(76). A similar critical motif was recorded among performers of Ibibios extraction in Nigeria: 'the author (Akpabot) heard some remark among a group of musicians preparing for a performance...one of the gourd players arrived late and was told by the leader of the group that the number of musicians was complete. He insisted in joining the group and the leader chided him with the remark, go and play your *uta* horn with the Anang people'. On further investigation, was told that the Anang people were the finest *uta* players in the region and anyone who claim to be a good *uta* player was usually asked to go and compete with them'. (Akpabot 93).

In several instances concerns on music and dance ethics have gone beyond national boundary, owing largely to new technology and satellite viewing around the world. In similar light, Waterman observes that 'as with African music, African dance has been affected by social change. Popular music genres are usually associated with specific dances that combine aspects of African, European, Latin American, African American styles. Popular dances can sometimes assume heightened political significance as in the late 1990 when a dance called Mpouka, which originated from Coite d' Voire was banned by the Government of several neighbouring West African nations for being too sexually suggestive'(n.p). Outside the traditional performance arena that is usually space and time bound, modern technology and communication media has largely created a new perspective in performance dynamics that transcends national boundaries and cultural and ethnic stereotypes.

The significance of this development is multi dimensional in scope as well as being cross cultural in nature. That music and dance performance has, and still eliciting unsavory remarks as to the mental fort-rightness of musicians and dancers as portrayed in several information and entertainment media is quite worrisome. It is important to note that 'when a nation's music's declines due to corruption of the musical idiom, or wanes due to lack of patronage, the nation's future suffer deeply to the extent that values antithesis to the overall interest of the nation are established' (Makhu, p.154). This pandemic, close knit as it were is costumed in the most loathsome musical apparel to delude unsuspecting public. Music and dance peddled in the guise of social- cultural lure has however had dissenting voices tilted in condemnation of the new craze.

CONCLUSION

It is a popular view within the African continent and among circle of foreign scholars and others opportune to witness the dynamics of African arts in motion that what is witnessed in performance go beyond the narrow vision and scope usually associated with similar art forms elsewhere. This is because the music and dance is rooted in social cultural history, as a functional component of the people that own it. It is a template that contains the visions and aspirations of the people that own it. This template in ritual and non ritual context, unveils the most pertinent mysteries and cosmic progeny of the African people. Akrofi,(88) quotes Nketia as saying that; in a rapidly changing society such as Ghana where everyone is reaching out for new forms of expression in social life as well as in music, literature and art, the study of the African heritage of 'folk music'' is of particular importance, for it is in this idiom that African musical values developed over the ages are enshrined''. Every measured step and gesture that is made in performance is significant as it has its place and meaning in context in cultural relativity. Both the sound and the music instruments that reveal them in their splendor are emblematic in their own cultural context. The music and the dance, and the context, the visual art and the plastic art all work in a unified continuum in and as cultural compass of the African people.

Given the vast spectrum of cultural relics that reside in music and dance, it is not surprising that some corrective mechanism is usually put in place to protect the content, form and context of performance from being corrupted as much as possible. These measures come in the form of verbal comments, outright boycott of substandard performances, booing of incompetent performers, to being ostracized if the offending performer is a member of a guild or society within a community.

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