REVIEW ARTICLE

EMERGENT ISSUES REGARDING 'AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE' AND 'AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY DANCE': A DISCOURSE ON THE CURRENT THEORY AND PRACTICE OF 'AFRICAN DANCE' CRITICISM AND CHOREOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

African traditional cultural dance performances have entered a dynamic new phase as a result of the influence of globalization on culture and conversely, the impact of culture on globalization. Kenya is not an exception. This situation leaves the following questions unanswered:

1. Are African musical arts headed for extinction in the near future?
2. Considering the fact that culture is a dynamic phenomenon, what strategies can be put in place so as to preserve the diverse Kenyan expressive cultures such as traditional music and dance for posterity?
3. What are the identifiable indigenous culture-specific characteristics that can be adapted and yet retain identities and styles akin to the prototype traditional dances?
4. What are the key issues to be considered by an 'African dance' critic, analyst and choreographer in Kenya today?

With the foregoing questions in mind, and other contextual ones that may arise the author go ahead to evaluate the nature and structure of 'African traditional dance' in modern times with a critical eye. The paper end by recommending a workable/practical choreography and dance criticism model for evaluation and documentation of contemporary culture-specific neo-traditional dances particularly in Kenya and generally in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Encyclopedia Britannica (2008) states that the most basic motive of dance is the physical expression of inner emotion. People – and even certain higher animals – often dance as a way of releasing powerful feelings such as sudden accesses of higher spirits, joy, impatience, or anger. With regard to people, the term dance basically refers to the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, with the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. In this regard, choreography refers to 'dance writing' and/or 'dance composition' where composition here refers to the navigation or connection of movement structures in space and time (Wikipedia, 2008). Although used mainly for dance, choreography is also used in stage combat (action or fight choreography) as in Karate shows; gymnastics, ice skating, cheerleading, show choirs, marching bands, cinematography, synchronized swimming, synchronized skating and many other activities involving human movement (ibid). Improvisation, that is, the practice of acting, singing, talking and reacting, of making and creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment; is of

prime importance in the task of dance choreography. More often, improvisation results into the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to act. This invention cycle occurs most effectively when the practitioner has a thorough intuitive and/or technical understanding of the necessary skills and concerns within the improvised domain. In the context of this paper the focal point/domain is the 'African dance.' It is noteworthy that skills of improvisation can apply to many different abilities or forms of communication and expression across all artistic, scientific, physical, cognitive, academic, and non-academic disciplines. For example, music, cooking, presenting a speech, sales, personal or romantic relationships, sports, flower arranging, martial arts, psychotherapy and much more. It is further observed that in Wikipedia (2008) that the primary use of dance notation is the documentation, analysis and reconstruction of choreography and dance forms or technical exercises. Many different forms of dance notation have been created but the three main systems used in Western culture are Labanotation (also known as Kinetography Laban), Benesh Movement notation and Sutton Dance writing. Another purpose of dance notation is the documentation and analysis of dance in dance ethnology (i.e. the scientific study and comparison of dances from different ethnic groups or cultures). Here the notation is not used to plan a new

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choreography but to document an existing dance. It is vital note that Dance notation systems developed for the description of European dances are often not applicable and not appropriate for the description of dances from other cultures, e.g. the polycentric dances of many African cultures, *where the movement of the body through space is less important and a great deal of the movements takes place inside the body. This means that the outward movements and gestures displayed by the dancers, in this case, are nothing else other than an expression of their inner-most feelings about their culture, music and occasion of the performance* (ibid). In response to this intricacy, attempts and suggestions have been made by ethnomusicologists and dance ethnologists to develop specific notation systems or variations and adaptations of the existing ones for purposes of describing and analyzing non-western dances. This paper is one of such attempts by the author.

Although linear and circular formations are manifest in most world dances, they are more prominent in the African context. It is arguable that this can be attributed to the common African belief system associated with spiral/cyclic worldview/philosophy of life; a concept closely related to re-incarnation as practiced in most African naming systems; where children are named after their fore parents. In this case, the spiritual expression is unconsciously expressed/reflected/replicated outwardly through respective African dance practices. It is possible that with time, this philosophy has actualized itself expressively through cyclic and linear dance phrase patterns that various African communities identify with unconsciously. Therefore, more African aesthetic value will accrue, if contemporary 'African dance' choreographers would be keen to exploit more of the linear and circular formations.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this paper is to formulate a critical artist's manual/guidelines for creating/choreographing, evaluating and criticizing 'African sensed' dances on the backdrop of traditional African dance theory and practice in the contemporary world. The author envisages that, if practiced, the guidelines will go a long way in sustaining Kenya's cultural dance heritage.

JUSTIFICATION

Dynamism of culture in the present world is, with time, becoming extremely intricate. Globalization is shrinking global boundaries so much that the world is gradually but really being reduced into a small global village. One major facilitator of fast transfer of information in a multi-media form is the internet. Here, the intra and inter-cultural music and live-dance transfer has become extremely simple - just a click of a mouse button! Furthermore, due to heavy cultural inter-borrowing and modern education systems, African cultural traditional dances are currently threatened in terms of distortion of their form, content and performance. This calls for the need for a new dispensation and/or approaches regarding 'African dance' criticism and choreography. In this paper, it suggested that for the 'African dance' to survive in the contemporary world, there is a need for critical evaluative strategies geared to instituting and nurturing 'African sensed

dances' - deeply rooted and informed by the traditional African dance theory and practice, and yet flexibly fitting in the ever changing culture-specific matrixes. This approach is justified in that, today, it is common knowledge that cultural animators/motivators, which earlier on, were crucial platforms for 'African dances' have been removed, shifted and/or modified by the new socio-economic necessities and realities in the modern world. On the other hand, Kenyan cultural dances are central to our identities and cultural heritage – one of the main beacons of our national development. On the basis of the foregoing discourse, the following are the author's suggested units of analysis and criticism for choreographers, dance and music teachers, and general dance critics that would help in sustaining Kenya's cultural heritage through 'African-sensed dance' practices and theories.

CHOREOGRAPHER'S/DANCE CRITIC'S UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

From the authors personal experience as a musicologist; music and dance adjudicator; music composer and arranger; and a lecturer in dance and choreography studies, the author of this paper has coalesced the following units of analysis and criticism in a form of a questionnaire. Seeking answers to the questions therein, with reference to specific dances, will go a long way in sustaining the momentum for choreographers by putting them on the right path to creating 'African sensed dances' in the contemporary setting. Furthermore, the manual is envisaged as a key tool of reference for music and dance critics in Kenya, Africa and elsewhere.

1. Does the dance have a specific theme that it sets out to develop and achieve? A dance theme refers to a dance phrase or dance patterns that constitute the form or the overall character of the dance or a section of the dance.

2. Is the dance development coherent and systematic? A dance should develop or grow in terms of dynamics with reference to different levels such as: energy, spirit, involvement, aesthetics, communication and expression, among others.

3. Does the dance have various sections? How are they connected? Connections between various sections should be logical, developmental, skillful and artistic.

4. Do the sections logically contribute to the build-up to certain climax(es) i.e. developmental maturity of the dance? This aspect is normally achieved through variation regarding the use of different energy levels i.e. the intensity of involvement; progression from simple formations and patterns to increasingly more complex ones; and significant tempo contrasts in adjacent sections.

5. If a climax exists in a dance, how can it be described? Is it characterized by completing a most complex and demanding structure; such as in some acrobatic dances? Such climaxes are accompanied by ululations, vocables, intensive stamping and clapping. Since the climax in a dance refers to the most exciting moment in the 'life' of a dance, it is arguable it can be marked among other features by a comparatively slower or faster tempo.

6. Does the dance have an anti-climax? If so how and where does it occur? This occurs when the climax

appears to be contrived other than logically developed; or does not exist at all probably due to lack of creativity.

7. Is the dance motivated/inspired by music? Is the music vocal, instrumental or both? The music should be supportive to the dance in terms of providing the basic rhythm and inspiration of various moods in line with the plot, story and theme of the dance.

8. Does the costume (if any), contribute or add to the quality or value of dance in terms of visual impact and enhancement and execution of movement? The costume should not hinder movement, violate environmental colors with which the derivative source (i.e. the owners of the dance) identifies with, or cause some sort of embarrassment.

9. Is variation apparent/clear in the dance in terms of gestures dance movements, actions etc. Is 'repetition' meaningful? In most African sensed dances, which in many instances are functional, there is 'repetition' but not repetition *per se* in that whenever there is repetition in any one of the contextual dance materials (i.e. body movements or music), other changes occur or are expected to occur physically and/or spiritually until the function of the dance is achieved.

10. Do the dance movements and steps amplify/interpret the message in the song/music lyrics (words/text) and/sounds? Most movements in African dances are quite symbolic. For instance in fertility/wedding dances e.g. in the *unyago* dances of the Digo people of Kenya, where body movements insinuate the aim of the ceremony.

11. Who are the participants? (Are they male, female, adults, boys, girls mixed?) Is there a cultural reason or otherwise of having a particular composition of dancers? Some dances are gender sensitive in terms of form, style and content.

12. Do the participants (dancers) perform the music as well? How does their involvement in music affect the quality of dance? While in some communities the dances in most cases double up as singers - especially in dances where songs with the character of short solo and response phrases are performed - in other communities singers and dancers are separated.

13. Is the stage use/space use appropriate/adequate? Is the distance between dancers of one sex or the other culturally informed?

14. Are movements creative, cultural, modified cultural, a mixture or misplaced?

15. Is vocal music (if any) based on only one language or more? If more why do you think it so happens? Any historical or cultural link?

16. Are movements easily/naturally flowing or mechanical in nature? To what extent is the movement style culturally informed or creatively choreographed? Some acrobatic dances are somehow culturally mechanical in nature.

17. Is there some kind of uniformity/non uniformity in the dancer's movements? Is the uniformity or non uniformity purposeful/meaningful/culturally accepted?

18. Is the dance having a leader? If there is one, is he or she effective? How? An effective leader is often articulate and has mastery of the dance music sequence and its relationship to the overall dance progression. Furthermore, the leader who appears to be in command of the dance troop through an overarching personality, posture, voice power and versatility in expression carries the day.

19. Does the dance communicate or fail to communicate a particular message? Why and how does it communicate or fail to communicate?

20. Does the dance have an entry or exit? How are they organized? Do they add value to the dance? The entry (if any) should definitely announce the stage presence of the dance by setting the mood and a pick-up tempo of the entire dance to be built on. The entry is analogous to announcing the birth of the baby ready to start growing. Most dances which start at a 'climactic level' end up losing momentum, warmth and direction hence displaying stunted growth. The exit on the other hand should serve as a convincing conclusion of the show. Therefore, enough energy should be spared and be manifest in sustaining the momentum and aesthetic flair of the dance convincingly through to the end.

21. What are the cultural symbols depicting the philosophy of life in the dance? How are they rendered? The symbols may be expressed through the design of costume, and their cultural/environmental colors, color of body paintings and shapes of patterns applied.

22. How is the magical/mystical/spiritual dimension expressed? This could be expressed by extraordinary jumps, leaps, degenerating into a trance, yelling suddenly, type of paint e.g. soot; manner of application and where it is applied.

23. What are the qualities of an effective dance choreographer in the 'African sensed dance' context? A skilled choreographer is one who understands or strives to understand the way of life of culture owners within which the dance is rooted. Any modifications/adaptations should not be tantamount to distortion).

24. How far does the dance identify with its cultural source in terms of style, costume and music? A good choreographer should have a proper and enough information so as to distinguish and note the differences between the dance in the cultural/natural setting and the dance in the stage/competition setting.

WAY FORWARD

1. Dance choreographers should, first and foremost research and understand the history and culture of dance owners before embarking on the excise. This approach will mitigate/pacify the choreographer's improvisation extremes. Research into cultural dance practices should take cognizance of dance as a humanistic cultural expression of people's feelings, aspirations, values and identities. Such research should entail/embrace a systematic investigation designed to develop and contribute to general knowledge regarding the rendition of specific cultural dance and music styles.

2. In the African context, choreography should be enhanced by photography and filming in order to keep clear record for further reference, authentication and objectivity regarding the crucial dance materials. Choreographers should take advantage of the modern technology and maximize on it.

3. Where necessary, short hand signs, especially those indicating motion and expression, from western dance notation symbols such as the Sutton dance writing and Labanotation, should be should be incorporated in the process of making notes about dances and creating dance scripts.

4. Choreographers should, as much as possible, be practical as opposed to being theoretical whenever they teach dance. They should personally practice contextual movements and use them for demonstration to the learning dancers. Where necessary, resource persons with mastery of respective dance techniques and background cultural information about respective dances.

5. The way in which the choreographer accumulates movement material depends on the tradition in which he/she works. In certain dance forms it may be simply a question of creating variations within a traditional pattern of movements. However, as earlier observed, the choreographer may not strictly follow the traditional structure and sequence of movements but should remain faithful to their characteristic styles, retaining the traditional quality of movement and not introducing steps or movements widely different from the ones perceived as original.

OPERATIONAL TERMS

Pattern: a repeated decorated design; a regular repeated form, order, or arrangement of shapes.

Climax: The key moment(s) - the most exciting point in a dance.

Formation: A developmental shape or structure of a dance. In a dance context, patterns are created by individual/independent structures within formations.

Cultural animators/motivators: Cultural functions such as initiation ceremonies and other rituals in which cultural dances were/are performed.

African-sensed dance: A dance that is informed by cultural traditional dance idiom and performance styles. In the context of this paper, this term is used to shade light on the fact that for a long time some scholars and dance practitioners have used the term 'African dance' as if the dance is a static phenomenon. In this paper, it is arguable that despite the current and future dynamism in 'African dance'; it is possible to sustain and give prominence to the African sense or style.

Polycentric dance: A dance that does not focus on very precise/strict body movement(s), space or center in a given performance. Most 'African dances' are polycentric in that the movement of the body through space is less important /less prominent and instead a great deal of the movements takes place inside the body- hence the involvement of many centers within the dancers body.

A dance phrase: A series of movements bound together by a physical impulse or line of energy and having a discernible beginning and end. A rough analogy can be made with the way a singer phrases a multiplicity of notes within a single breath.

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