



AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE AND THE CURRENT GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Africa is a continent blessed with a variety of rich traditional practices including her dances, ranging from mild, complex, to exotic dances which are also punctuated by her array of musical instruments. This paper takes a cursory look at few of these Nigerian, especially Igbo dances and how they had impacted on exporting rich traditions of African culture and on her economy. It equally takes a survey on how imported culture from the Western world had dismally eroded her culture and traditions including her dances thereby depriving Africa of her cherished identity. The paper concludes by proposing some recommendations on how to re-establish African identity in tandem with the current educational challenges which include among others the establishment and inclusion of cultural education in the school curricula at all levels of education, and the need to educate our church leaders to the fact that not all traditional practices are heathenish.

Keywords: Development of Dance; African Dance in Retrospect; Problems and Challenges of African Traditional Dance in the Face of Current Global Education.

INTRODUCTION

Global education, which seemingly is a product of globalization, over a decade now has become a term synonymous with academics and development throughout the world. Various scholars and authorities in various ways have defined global education as a process which enables people to understand the links between their own lives and those of people throughout the world. It aims to develop skills, attitudes and values to bring about more just and sustainable world. (www.globaled.org.nz/about/globaled).

According to Michael Sperling, global education, as a distinct construct from globalization does what higher education has traditionally aimed to do: extend student's awareness of the world in which they live by opening them to the diverse heritage of human thought, action, and creativity. Global education places particular emphasis on the changes in communication and relationships among people throughout the world, highlighting such issues as human conflict, economic systems, human rights and social justice, human commonality and diversity, literatures and cultures and the impact of technological revolution.

Continuing further on this discourse, he observes that while it continues to depend on the traditional branches of specialist knowledge, global education seeks to weaken the boundaries between disciplines and encourages emphasis on what interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies can bring to the understanding and solution of human problems.

Global education can summarily be seen as having access to and accepting the cultural and educational norms and practices of every other society with a view to harnessing its potentials in order to enhance ones educational practices. This activity when carried out by every nation under the globe ensures transfer of knowledge among nations thereby bringing worlds educational activities under one umbrella. In a nutshell, we see the world through the eyes of each other. The very means of achieving this feat is communication which has been enhanced by development in IT.

One important vehicle for global unification which must not be overlooked is arts and culture. Arts described by the New Western Dictionary (p.52) as “the use of imagination to make things of aesthetic significance; the technique involved”. Lexicon International publishers, New York (1995) also defines culture thus- the training and development of the mind; the refinement of taste and manners acquired by such training, the social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestations, etc that characterize a society.

This writer is not in any way biased to view music as the king, the exponent, the fore-bearer and the vanguard of 'the art'. Musical practice dates back to creation which is associated with sounds, sounds made by every object that was created; flow of the tide, rumble of seas and thunders, echoes of the valleys, chirping of birds and other sounds made by animals and other created objects are all associated with creation and every sound is usually associated with music. “The word music comes from the Greek *mousike* and this word is in itself derived from *mousa*, “muse” and hence was applied to all branches of art over which the Muses were supposed to preside” (Encyclopedia Britannica 1985:491).

If every other art disciplines are governed by the Muses, then the above argument is therefore proved to be undisputable. The New Age Encyclopedia (1980:373) also sees music as the art of sound. The Term is derived from the Greek *musike*, which originally connoted poetry and later the entirety of the arts supported by the nine muses.

The center of this discourse is dance but reference to music was necessary because of its relevance to dance. Hardly can there be any dance impulse without music supplying the required rhythm. So dance is inextricably tied to music.

Dance has been defined in various ways by different authorities as “the art of dancing; a series of set movements to music, either alone or with a partner or partners (New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language 1985:243). New English Dictionary and Thesaurus defines dance thus: “to move rhythmically, especially to music; to skip or leap lightly”, whereas Chambers 20th Century Dictionary (1983:315) sees it as “to move with measured steps, especially to music; to spring”.

However defined, the art of dancing is that of moving the body in a rhythmical way, usually to music, to express an emotion or idea, to narrate a story, or simply to take delight in the movement itself. Dance may even have been the first means of communication (The New Encyclopedia Britannica 1985:986).

DEVELOPMENT OF DANCE

Dance development is a process that has evolved over a long period of time in every nation of the world. Though the initial concept of dance was the rhythmical movement of the body for pleasures and as means of expressing happy feelings, over the ages, their usage in appeasing and in offering supplication to the gods evolved it into broader application, thus ushering it into religious dimension. There were temple dancers in the East while in the West, dancers put their art at the service of religion in great cathedrals and churches

The major development of the art is recorded in the aspect of its social standing. The Romans incorporated dance in their plays and spectacles. In recognition of its social accomplishments, daughters of the nobility received dancing lessons. Dance, because of its physical appeal, lends itself to erotic purposes and has been practiced to this end by both sexes. Dance continued to evolve itself from religious to social applications from antiquities to the modern days. Historically it had been used in the courts under social environments, and till today there has been various types.

The Western world have not only fully developed their dances but have made indepth theoretical studies of the forms, melodies, harmonic structures, tones and other theoretical frameworks of their folk music and dances, and use same in creating entirely different instrumental and choral music, thereby answering the patriotic call on nationalism. Some typical example of these dances include allemande, bergomask, bouree, branle, canaries, chaconne and passacaglia, courante, dump, gavote, hay, jig, minuette, passamezo, passapied, pavan and galliard, rigaudon, saraband, volta. Other dances which have supplied conventional models for instrumental compositions are minuet, English country dance, cotillion and ecossaise, waltz, quadrille, polka, schottische, mazurks and barn dance. (Oxford Dictionary of music: 181).

We do encounter these names as short movements in the piano works of many Western composers without much inference to their meanings and functions. No wonder most Africans compose music today, imitating their styles and using names like mazurkas, waltz, minuet and such appellation that are derived from Western dances. What happens to African dances? How do we hoist our cultures and heritages to the international scenes if we

continue to emulate the Western world? While some works of people like Anthony Okelo, Akin Euba, Meki Nzewi and few others have tried to capture African characteristic features, much is still needed from composers to make the desired impact. For volume and lack of space, this piece deliberately avoided delving into the more recent development of pop dance like reggae, rumba, samba, fox-trot, tango, hip-hop, disco, calypso etc.

AFRICAN DANCE IN RETROSPECT

Dance in Africa was not conceived as a means of physical and mental exercise as did the Athenians but served several other purposes. Africans depend generally on their physical strengths for their livelihood. These include tilling the ground for farming, excavating and moulding the earth to build houses, felling trees with axes and matches, breaking woods from planks and getting firewood, etc. Infact, every activity of an African is energy demanding. Even their rest hours, moonlight plays and social entertainments are characterized by activities that are energy sapping such as wrestling, sack race, skating etc. Since every activity of an African is energy-related, she does not see dance as primarily a means of exercising the body. To her it is a complementary of her everyday activities except that this is comprehensively rhythmically coordinated. However in the modern Africa, dance conveys more than its initial concept especially in its communication and social roles which contribute to the economic growth of its owners. This study is necessary because dance is suffering neglect which if nothing is done will lead to its extinction. Bakare and Mans (2003:215) observe that “The once vibrant, useful and artistically unique dance art of the African people(s) has been so reduced in impact *and relevance that it is fast approaching extinction*”.

In Africa, music and dance are inseparable. In every dance these is a structured form of accompaniment to which the dance takes its rhythm. Musical instruments of different types most often provide the required accompaniment while in some aesthetic variations, rhythmic body sounds like clapping, stamping of feet and slapping of hands against the chest, stomach or the sides provide the musical accompaniment. African musical instruments that provide structured accompaniments to dance has been classified into aerophones, chordophones, idiophones and membranophones (Nketia (1974: 69-107); Akpabot (1998:18).

While the above stands clear and comprehensive, there are however other classification of African musical instruments by different authorities, but the important thing is that their characteristics are usually pointers to the function the instruments perform which are reflected in the culture of the societies that produce them.

Rhythmically, African dances are known to be complex both in instrumentation and in dance steps. The complexity exists due to certain characteristics African music generally possesses like cross rhythm (inter-rhythm, Nzewi 1997), polyrhythm, syncopation leading to confusing pulse marks, etc. But no matter how complex it may appear to a foreigner, it is still simple to the owners whose everyday activities are characterized by a gradual and inadvertent acquisition of the art.

One thing peculiar to African dance which cannot easily be overlooked is her costuming. The costumes which may be exotic, mild or simple however are designed to depict the mood and nature of the event the dance is representing. Body make-ups and paintings form part of costumes.

Dance is an external response to music and though Africans can listen to and enjoy contemplative music, they very much believe in and develop music that can be articulated in bodily movements. Nketia (1974:206) observed that: *“For the African, the musical experience is by and large an emotional one: sounds, however beautiful are meaningless if they do not offer this experience or contribute to the expressive quality of a performance”*.

Africa has a variety of dances which are as many as the number of villages and clans in Africa. Every village has a number of dances which can easily appeal to every spectator irrespective of creed or cultural background. Dance is a strong medium of communication because through it the beliefs, behaviours, temperaments and general characteristics of a community are easily studied. One can easily tell the tribe of a dancer by watching his dance. In Nigeria for instance, you can identify Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Tiv, or Fulani people by watching their dances. This is because every culture has a particular part of the body that she emphasizes which gives his identity away, in addition to other factors.

Igbo, tribe in the Southeast, Nigeria, has variety of dances ranging from hot, mild to royal ones. However, factors that determine the nature of dance depend on the group that performs it – male, female, young, or old. Female dances are usually slow and graceful making much use of swaying of hips or twisting of the trunks, while in hot female dances which are usually done by young girls the hips can be shaken in controlled momentum with the instrument providing hot rhythms that go with hips movement. Breasts are also shaken seductively with the feet taking calculated forward and backward movements. These dances include Abigbo, Nkwa umu agbogho, Egedede, Egwu amala, Ikorodo, etc. Elderly men usually involve in royal dances like Ufie, Ijele, Akwunehenyi dance etc. These dances require less bodily movements, moving either feet in every quarter beat which can be doubled in hot rhythms.

Igbo dances that are mostly talked about and which people defy every odds to watch are usually taken by young men. These dances are usually hot, fast, acrobatic, superbly choreographed and energy demanding. One of such dances is the popular Atilogwu dance. Atilogwu dance is a popular dance among the Igbos of Nigeria. It was practiced by various communities in Igbo but promoted beyond the shores by Umunze and Ezeagu communities. Their major exposure to the international scene was during FESTAC '77 and thereafter, there was hardly any important government function they were not invited. They equally toured virtually all parts of the world, attracting huge revenues to the country. We all know how the oil boom in Nigeria has affected development of other revenue generating sectors negatively. The dance itself was characterized by different movements, hot rhythm with massive acrobatic displays climaxing in the dancers building structures with themselves to the extent that people start asking “is there charm in it”, which means “*etinyelu ya ogwu?*” Atilogwu is the language used to write it as it sounds when spoken fast. That is how the name was originated.

The Atilogwu became the most talked about traditional dance in Nigeria. The style, sequence and eloquent movements of the

dancers thrilled spectators who wondered whether there was magic in the dance. Newspapers, Reporters and Commentators reported the dance in different ways. Their pictures were used for both post-cards and Christmas greeting cards. Any occasion that was not ended with Atilogwu was regarded as unsuccessful (Okafor 1998:11).

The question is, where is the Atilogwu dance today? Our youths have left our traditional practices including her dances in pursuit of white-collar jobs and in the course, have gradually jettisoned their cultural practices only to emulate and imbibe the Western practices. With the world as a global village, it is time Africans realized that they have a lot to offer to the world.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE IN THE FACE OF CURRENT GLOBAL EDUCATION

It had been observed above how the Western dances have been promoted by the owners to the extent of incorporating, infusing and adapting traditional elements of their folk songs and dance in creating entirely new music of classical nature. It is therefore surprising that Africa with her abundant traditional musical resources has not done enough in this regard. Nzewi (1997:12) observed that: “Modern African has recklessly abandoned its human essence and culture values while gobbling up the modern-publicity-hoisted, glamorous allure of Western thought and life styles”.

With regards to the above observation it is therefore necessary for us Africans to come home and help our own cultural values and practices instead of imitating the Western world.

The crave of African youths to lean more on Western music and dances pose another threat to African music. It may not be right to blame Western civilization for this as every nation needs to develop and learn new things from other nations but the fact is that it is not advisable for any nation to throw away her cultural and moral values in the course of imbibing new knowledge. According to Okafor (2005) “when a community abandons its own music in favour of another, it is in danger of thinking, behaving, feeling and eventually being like the community that is parent to its adopted music (p. 274).”

No wonder one sees our youths taking dangerous drugs, sagging their trousers, moving, gesticulating and dancing on the streets in a yuppie manner imitating what they watch Americans do on their television sets and internet.

Our national mass media like the television, radio, etc are not helping matters either. They take much delight in playing and telecasting foreign pop music and dances to the detriment of African traditional ones. This will not help our youths who are expected to be the fore-bearers of the art to appreciate and fully practice their own art.

There is equally the problem of having a properly recording and mass-production of major traditional dances for use locally and for export abroad. It will help not only in showcasing our rich traditional dance heritage but also provide materials for learners, students and researchers in African traditional dances. It will also help in infiltrating the Western culture with our values and practices as theirs have done on our cultures. Global education requires

that nations can exchange and learn other people's cultures and values through IT and other media, in order to appreciate and practice them.

Problems of acceptance by the Western world who most often think themselves semi-gods and perfect masters need be considered. Would there be the tendency for them to view African practices as degenerate, immoral (due to certain costuming) and barbaric? Well, global education has to correct these superficial but erroneous beliefs of theirs. History has it that civilization started in Africa anyway.

It is equally important to consider the problems of continuity. Due to the mad rush for white-collar jobs, rural-urban migration poses serious challenges to learning and practicing traditional music and dance which the countryside, due to its quiet, serene and less-activity nature freely provides.

A major problem of African traditional dances meeting with the global educational needs is that of notation. Although among the Western world, notation of dance steps has not been easy, but in Africa it becomes more problematic with the various African musical instruments especially the ones with definite pitches due to various scale types that can be derived from them which are not usually uniform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Olisaeke (2011) had observed elsewhere that

We have seen the positive and negative sides of globalization in African culture and noticed with dismay that Africa may lose so much of her cultural practices if nothing is done by both Africans and Western world as partners in order to salvage the trend. African indigenous musical practices need to be sustained at all cost in the face of globalization (p. 320).

So far we have discovered that Africa is a continent imbued with a lot of human and natural resources including her dances. African beliefs and cultures have to be respected by the Western world and the only way to make them respect it is to make them appreciate it. It is very obvious that one does not appreciate what he does not understand. Global education has provided the opportunity for one to sit in his parlour and study other parts of the world. This piece has been able to x-ray a particular Africa art – the dance as a good means of showcasing African values to the outside world for variety of benefits. It has been seen that dance, apart from relieving mental and emotional stress could equally provide a source of avenues for national economic growth through income generation. Benefits of dance cannot be over stressed, and some of them have been consciously but not directly reflected in the above discussion. Since global education aims at opening up channels of communication in order to access easily cultural and educational practices of every nation from anywhere, it is a golden opportunity for Africa to package her cultural values in such a manner as to attract appreciation from the foreign countries of the world. It is expected that if the dances are appreciated, there is the possibility you might travel to China or America and see Atilogwu or any other Africa popular dance being performed by them without direct coaching from an African. With that, their perception of Africa will change tremendously.

In order to achieve this, the following recommendations are proffered:

- * Our youths should be encouraged to come together and form dance troupes. Such dance troupes should be sponsored by government. In the alternative our arts and cultural centers should be made to rise up to the challenges in order to ensure continuity.
- * The dances should be properly recorded, mass-produced and aired or telecasted regularly in the digital satellite radios and televisions.
- * African music education programmes should be given more support in our institutions of learning. It is surprising that if you visit our departments of music in the universities and colleges of education, you will see pianos, clarinets, trumpets, violins etc. in large numbers but may not see any African instrument. If they are there at all, very scanty with the membranes of the drums torn. This is not good for the growth of African ethnomusicology. How then can we extricate ourselves from Western enslavement?
- * African ethnomusicologists should as a matter of urgency discover a common and generally accepted theories, scales and harmonic structures that will give a definitive position to African music. This will go a long way to giving African music its identity instead of depending largely on Western music education. Highlighting on this earlier, Adeogun (2006) once observed that; A balanced music education programme in Nigeria should therefore not depend on any foreign musical theory and practice, as is currently the case. This will never enable the country to achieve genuine mental emancipation in the modern world (p. 108)".

This observation has given us a serious concern because we cannot continue to depend on foreign educational practices as if we have non ourselves. Any nation that has language and culture should have educational policies and practices peculiar to it and different from the others.

We have passed the stage where musical policies have to be dictated from abroad by individuals who are not directly affected by such policies and, therefore have nothing at stakes. (Omibiyi-Obidike 2002:19)

- * More improvements should be made in discovering how the numerous dances of Africa be notated. Effort of people like Meki Nzewi etc are commended but other Africa theorists should rise up to the challenges. Continuing, Omibiyi Obidike (2002:19) observed that
It is high time Nigeria art musicians assume the rightful position of leadership in identifying the structural elements of Nigerian and African music, their form and styles, influence from abroad and within and other relevant issues germane to the development of the idiom.
- * African art composers should endeavourer to capture traditional idioms in their classical music compositions instead of writing in an entirely Western style.

“In music, thought and compositional techniques, musical educators and practitioners should not allow themselves to be misdirected or scamped by the Euro-American music tradition (Nzewi 1988:17).”

- * African music theorists and critics should equally make effort at promoting their contemporaries' efforts in order to encourage them and upcoming musicologists. This they can do by not only criticizing their works but also pointing out and promoting significant and outstanding positive contributions in their works that will help the growth of musicology just as people like Akin Euba (1993) and Joshua Uzoigwe (1992) have done.
- * It is equally important to introduce cultural education in our institutions of learning so as to let the citizens imbibe the values of appreciating and promoting their cultures.
- * Church leaders usually have the belief that certain cultural practices negate the faith of their followers. This should be corrected. Let them realize that Christian religion was only introduced to help develop our system not to annihilate it. We shall continue to uphold our cultural practices that are ethical.

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