

RETHINKING CHOREOGRAPHIC IDIOMS IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE OF IMO STATE COUNCIL FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

Chris Nwaru, Ph.D

*Department of Theatre Arts,
Imo State University, Owerri
Email: chrisnwaru@yahoo.com.*

Abstract

Indigenous dance performances are windows to a people's way of life and its performance especially in African. It reflects sociological and environmental realities of a particular period. The Imo State Council for Arts and Culture popularly referred to as the 'Omenimo' troupe, charged with preservation of performative culture of Imo State have witnessed contemporary challenges stemming from the perceived 'stagnant' choreographic idioms in her performances. This research observed that choreographic idioms in 'Omenimo' performances do not fill the aesthetic vacuum of the contemporary nature of today's audiences. However, using the formalist theory and observation methodology, the findings of this paper suggests, among others, the blend of contemporary aesthetic idioms into the choreographic and performative philosophies of the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture (ISCAC). Also, adopting formalist consciousness will aid 'Omenimo' troupe towards creating new dance forms that will be at par with societal realities and dynamics, increase their dance and movement vocabularies and performances, as well as add to her image boost in Owerri and its environs.

Keywords: Rethinking, Choreographic Idioms, Contemporary, Performance.

Introduction

Dance art in Africa was a part and parcel of rituals and festivals and was used in the worship of one god or another by individuals and communities, making supplications for good health, wealth, children and peace in the society. There are also dances that were created for entertainment and recreation. The Imo State Council for Arts and Culture is saddled with the responsibility of preserving the indigenous dances. Perhaps, for the reason of traditional dance preservation, the Imo Arts Council may not have taken time to re-create or restructure these dances to suit the contemporary audience of today. Most of the 'Omenimo' dance repertoires were performed almost in the same form and style since they were created. There is need to work on the choreographic idioms so as to suit the contemporary audience, hence this paper. It seems fine to begin with the introduction of the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture.

Imo State Council for Arts and Culture

Currently, the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture is a parastatal under the Ministry of Community Government Council, Culture and Traditional Affairs in Imo State (formally the Ministry of Information and Culture). The Council is organized in six departments, namely: Personnel Management, Performing Arts (also known as Omenimo Troupe), Research/Planning/Documentation, Finance and Supplies, Visual Arts and Museum Services and Marketing. The 'Omenimo' theatre troupe was established essentially as a state troupe to serve and project the image of Imo State locally and internationally. It is the cultural window of the state. More importantly, it carries out researches on traditional Igbo dance and music art forms with a view to repackaging and documenting them for the future. Later, the troupe went into money-making ventures for the Council as a way of cushioning the effects of government's unsteady subventions. The two types of performance, in which the 'Omenimo' theatre troupe engages are: command performed and contracted performance.

The council has, in many ways, contributed to the promotion and growth of tourism, arts, culture and entertainment in Nigeria. Its presentation organ, the 'Omenimo' troupe, comprising 'Omenino' dance, 'Omenimo' band, 'Omenimo' drama and 'Oluimo' (the choir), is one of the famous performing troupes in Nigeria. The Omemimo troupe has highly talented artistes in drama, dance and music. The department remains busy throughout the year, entertaining state visitors and honouring their contracted engagements. The Council has, in many ways, contributed to the promotion and growth of tourism and art/culture/entertainment in Nigeria.

The head of dance section of the 'Omenimo' theatre is also the choreographer. He is a designer and creator of dances. His work, therefore, is analogous to that of the playwright or composer. He stages all the dances and creates traditional dance pieces, incidental or dramatic dances for musical comedy or other theatrical forms. He conducts rehearsals and makes research into different dances from various cultural groups. He auditions dancers and supervises all activities in the dance unit and reports to the head of performing arts. The choreographer's duty, among others, is to research, repackage and document traditional dances from different communities for the future. However, the researcher observed that most of the dances in 'Omenimo' has remain in almost the same form as they were created and performing the dances in that form (as they were created) is so boring for the contemporary audience of this present period.

Form in Omenimo Dances

Form is made manifest in the creation and arrangement of dance performance and the relationship between them is often responsible for the effect of the performance on audiences. For example, 'Omenimo' dance may differ from other Arts Councils' dance in form, content, structure, narrative, and staging. The analysis of form in 'Omenimo' dance is not about the distinctions between the positions advanced by formalist and anti-formalist scholars, instead this paper looks at 'Form without Formalism' (Lovender and

Predock-Linnell, 2001). A brief distinction (between Form and Formalism) can be made along the lines of Bohdan Dziemidock's explanation:

As an art movement, artistic formalism may be defined as a theory according to which the value of a work of art qua artwork-its artistic value- is constituted exclusively (radical version) or primarily (moderate version) by its formal aspects. Its 'meaning' or its (conceptual, cognitive, material, etc.) 'content' has no important consequences for its value. Hence, only the formal aspects should be considered as criteria of artistic excellence (Dziemidock, 1993, p. 185).

In the art movement of formalism, from 1940s until the late 1960s (Tekiner, 2006), ideas about form, design or structure are the main concerns for arts but its relationship to content is widely disputed. One influential argument is that the form of an art work is taken to be the same as its content, thereby shutting off further inquiry into its meaning. This sentiment by Roger Fry and Clive Bell (Early 20th century formalists) was echoed years later by Clement Greenberg (1961, p. 39), perhaps one of the most influential voices in formalism who argues that 'content in art must become 'strictly optical' and 'be dissolved completely into form'. In 'Omenimo', form is looked at differently from the artistic tradition of 'formalism' in the form of movement designs which can be experienced by viewers as 'clear and coherent designs with meaningful content'. The above imperatives have nothing to do with artistic formalism, for even works seeking to situate themselves outside of, or in direct opposition to that tradition will possess some form or another (Lovender and Predock-Linnell, 2001).

Basically, *form* is 'the variety of a thing, the arrangement of parts in the whole, especially (in this case), in a work of art and the final shape it takes' (Hornby, 2000, p.466). In dance, form entails the placement of the parts of a dance into 'some order, some planned relationship which can be repeatable' (Nadal, 1978, p.78). This suggests that form in dance is the manner of presentation characteristic of the art form or activity. It is influenced by the practice in choreography and changes according to different historical periods, societies and individual ideologies. Julius Porney argues that an artist in such settings 'strives for immortal recognition by creating something that will live after him' (Porney, 1978, p.159). Therefore, each cultural art produces new forms. For dance to be meaningful, it must have a recognizable form. According to Smith-Autard:

A whole is made from a number of 'components and the dance composer's components include: each dancer's body as an instrument which has volume, shape and the capacity for action; movement which has physical properties of time, weight, and flow -- the interaction of which determines the form and style of the action; space, which can be shaped by movement; the relationships that the body can make with other things or people (2010, p. 41).

The choreographer's aim is to communicate an idea and not a mere arrangement of movements and patterns. The idea is enveloped in the form; it is the overall shape, system, unity, and mode of being. The viewer may not remember each and every movement, but will come away with an impression of the whole. The Imo State Council for Arts and Culture for which the 'Omenimo' dance was created sees form as the combination of all the elements that make up the performance, such as movement, music, props, costume, makeup, character and gesture; but the issue is that this form has remained 'static' to the extent that the 'Omenimo' regular audience members are knowledgeable of the dance movements and their order of appearance during the 'Omenimo' dance presentation.

Nwaru and Abakporo advised that:

The choreographers of indigenous dances should break out from the pre-colonial ideologies of composing indigenous dances. The traditional society is far more different from the postmodern world. Indeed, these dances failed because they have not been able to adjust to the changing times from its pre-colonial origins. Trying to perform these indigenous dances according to pre-colonial dictates or ideologies will further relegate the traditional dance forms. It is, therefore, necessary for traditional dance forms to break out of their mythic and pre-colonial ideologies and upgrade to fit into contemporary taste in performance (2017, p. 287).

The dances in contemporary times should make its statement through an admixture of contemporary inputs in the choreographic and movement patterns while remaining traditional. In other words, indigenous dances can borrow and indigenize these threatening alien movements irrespective of its origin (African, Western or Oriental) to revive its aesthetic appeal while remaining functional in contemporary Nigeria. Therefore, both the choreographer and dancer must go back to the studios and learn the movement, choreographic and aesthetic patterns of other dance forms and seek ways to indigenize and utilize them in indigenous dances to restore the aesthetic aplomb of indigenous dancing in Nigeria.

Concerning 'form' the recreation of some Igbo indigenous dances such as *Nkwa-Umuagboho* and *Iri-Agha* from their archetype to contemporary versions (in my opinion) has not demonstrated substantive changes in form, medium and style of presentation during Omenimo's performances.

Choreographic Idioms in Contemporary Performance

For many years, African scholars and choreographers have attempted to define contemporary African dance. Adedayo Liadi states that contemporary African dance is a 're-structuring of our indigenous African dance and bringing it into a contemporary framework through research, without being misled' (Gilbert Douglas et al 2006, p.105).

Rasaki-Ojo Bakare indicates that the term ‘contemporary choreographer’ implies the existence of traditional choreographers (Bakare, 2006) and suggests that the choreographer uses dances that exist in his cultural environment as raw materials to express his creative thoughts. But the most important argument for this paper is the need to re-structure some traditional dances in Imo Arts Council that will fit-in in the contemporary period. On this issue, Douglas, states that for an African choreographer, tradition is the basis from which to start, and to move on from in exploring a new direction for contemporary dance (Gilbert Douglas *et al*, 2006).

Most of the contemporary practice in African dance grew out of custom and ritual. In Nigeria, contemporary dances showcase different themes and are used in various ways, depending on the purpose of the production or the occasion of the performance. Some are used to tackle injustices and political situations, others are used for commercial purposes or religious worship or can be linked to traditional dances that have been re-choreographed for social functions and entertainment such as *Ori* dance (2003) by Adedayo Laidi (Okoye, 2013).

It is important for ‘Omenimo’ choreographers and dancers to know that modification of our traditional dances is not new. In other African countries like Tanzania, dance continues to contribute to society; however, as dance adapts to new desires and behaviours, its forms are modified, and essential stylistic elements continue to persist. Hanna observes that in Tanzania:

Modifications in dance occur even in those villages which have resisted change and where substantive culture change has been slight. Sacred dances are now often held at different times than they used to be, for example, on western or national holidays so that some of the key participants who work or attend schools in towns can attend (1973, p.171).

Bakare (2006) comments that traditional dances usually performed outside their original contexts such as the village square or shrine in Nigeria are now staged in modern theatre buildings. The fusion of old and new is a recurring phenomenon across every sphere of life in Africa and it is no surprise that contemporary dances on the continent accommodate and reflect on these. People continue to be acquainted with old and new values through African dance;

Bakare (2006) has identified two schools of thought in the field of Nigerian dance: the Relativist School and the Advocators of Change. Within the Relativist School, dance practitioners, scholars and social commentators exhibit a patriotic passion to protect what is African, and endorse the current state of Nigerian dance as being unadulterated by significant influences from western styles. The practitioners here are represented by

traditional choreographers who, according to Bakare, are ‘largely engaged in spiritual activities, although they find time to create for reasons that are purely social but even this was still tied, to a large extent, to the world view of the society’ (2006, p. 66). Conversely, those who espouse the Advocators of Change line of thought are called ‘moderns’ and are otherwise known as ‘contemporary choreographers’. Such practitioner (Chukwuma Okoye; Adedayo Laidi) is not ‘overtly engaged in spiritual efficacy but uses the dances that exist in his cultural background as raw materials and establishes linguistic property to express his purely creative thoughts’ (Bakare, 2006, p.66).

These two schools are important and necessary in preserving the history of dance as well as advancing the art of dance; yet they remain sources of divided (and unresolved) opinion on contemporary Nigerian dance. Those who support the Relativist School consider contemporary choreographers in Nigeria alienated Africans, ignorant and potentially destructive of the people’s culture because they are threatening the preservation and survival of traditional Nigerian dance. Perhaps, aiming to justify the fusion of foreign and indigenous dance movements in his choreography, Ahmed Yerima of the Relativist School, in ‘Dance Survival and Preservation in Nigerian Societies’, declares:

Another threat to the survival of traditional dance was that modern or city musicians and dancers wanted to tamper with the originality of the traditional dances. The dance steps of serious or ritual dances were diffused into suggestive sexual gesticulations.... Such attempts often distort or destroy the essence of the Africaness in traditional dances (Yerima, 2003, p.219).

Although Yerima’s declaration contains some elements of truth, however, the Advocators of Change, who perform in contemporary Nigerian dances, challenge the relativist theorists. According to Okoye (2013), they are self-appointed defenders of ‘culture’ who find it impossible to imagine authenticity as anything but hermetic, and who also believe that contemporary thought is nothing other than cultural betrayal and the triumph of western cultural hegemony. Supporting his position with an old Igbo proverb, Okoye asserts:

My ‘authentic’ ancestors prized knowledge so highly that an Igbo proverb avers that the person who travels the most is often the most knowledgeable because he acquires knowledge from everywhere and returns home to nourish the existing fount of communal wisdom, not displace or deplete it. (2013, p. 2).

This paper is based on the view that the Imo Arts Council traditional dances should not be displaced or depleted but should be re-structured to accommodate the contemporary audience. This view is supported by some contemporary African choreographers such as

Gilbert Douglas, from Zimbabwe, who opines that ‘Traditional dances play a vital role in determining the direction of present-day dance in Africa. For an African choreographer, tradition is the starting point in the exploration of contemporary dance’ (Douglas et al, 2006, p.104).

Reginald Danster from South Africa, while speaking about the role of traditional dance in his choreographic experience, asserts ‘If I do contemporary dance, it must be influenced by my traditional dance. If I don’t comply with that people will ask, ‘What are you trying to do?’ (Danster, 2006, p.108). One of the most celebrated contemporary choreographers in Nigeria, Adedayo Liadi, who researches and experiments with indigenous dance forms for materials for new dances, narrates his experience:

To be able to create a contemporary African dance means you have to think of your culture and tradition. I continued researching for a new body language generally. Lucky for me, I was able to discover something new to show the Nigerian audiences but still retaining my culture. (Laidi, 2006, p.105).

Liadi emphasises the role of research in creating a new dance form similar to the one that will be developed in this study. Perhaps, one of the problems facing some contemporary Nigerian choreographers is the lack of proper research. As Bakare puts it:

A misunderstanding of this commitment and responsibility [to research, adaptation and development] has unduly exposed the Nigerian contemporary choreographer to scornful treatment and comments by scholars and cultural workers who are sympathetic to the relativist theory (2006, p. 66).

This lack of commitment and responsibility has led to the misrepresentation of some choreographic works as cultural facts. This paper aims to correct this by contributing to knowledge of Nigerian dances through reinterpretations of the traditional dances within the Imo Arts Council repertoire as a prototype for the continuing development and interpretation of indigenous Nigerian and African dances.

Conclusion

The researcher would like to end this paper by arguing that the contemporary ‘Omenimo’ choreographers cannot afford to reject changes that have been effective in transforming the ritual contexts of some of the dances which are now performed in purely social or theatrical contexts, and not in shrines or for the veneration of deities in ritual situations. Bakare (2006, p.73) also acknowledges that ‘cultural practices do change and must, by necessity, change as this is the essence of development’. Sustainable development cannot occur without some changes, although Nigerian dancers and choreographers need not forget their roots.

The researcher stands on the middle ground or balanced view or position between the two schools of thought and argues that the way of life of a people in any given time or place is organised out of past experiences and adapted to present circumstances. The researcher's position in this paper is that Imo Arts Council choreographers should bridge the gap or create a continuum between the past and the present. They should possess the skills necessary for the inevitable adaptation, re-interpretation and hybridisation of Nigerian /African dances to contemporary circumstances and needs for staging performance without forcing the traditional dances to lose their identity.

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