

Performing Arts and Change Management in Syncretized African Performances: A Study of “Odiiche Dance”

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Abstract

African performances and tradition form important parts of literature in Africa. In fact, even in this 21st century, which is characterized by audio and digital recordings, the bulk of African performances are still not recorded. African performance, as generally known, is dependent on the performer(s) and audience. The audience, until recently, played an active role in traditional African performances. This was at a time when the performer(s) and the audience held the same belief and cultural system. In whichever way the performance manifested itself; in dance, music, drama, oral poetry recitals or folktales, the performers and the audience mostly merged as one and saw the performance as a communal activity and, therefore, did all there was to ensure its success. But recent developments, beginning with Euro-Christian advent, have served to distraught a once active audience into a modern passive one. The advent of the foreigners who introduced beliefs and cultural systems new to the African, has served to disrupt the African performance which had always been the main form of entertainment, education

and moral edification. Sad to say, as a result of this, African performances in its original rendition, have now metamorphosed into western classical performances. This trend cannot be reversed easily; however, it can be adapted to boost active participation in African performances. This paper examines those beliefs and cultural systems which have shattered the very foundations of African performances. The researchers therefore evaluated and analyzed these challenges through interview, case study and content analysis approaches of the qualitative research method. Most importantly, the paper focuses on the blending of both the European and African cultures for a positive change. It concludes that despite the changing nature of the performances, African performances still retains its taste and her audiences are still alive, hence, with the case study of the “Odiiche Dance”. It is also the recommendation of the researchers that African-centered courses be taught throughout the educational levels in such a way as to refute the thinking that only the uncivilized persons participate in African traditional performances.

Introduction

Africans have been entertaining themselves with dramatic performances before the coming of the white man. These performances include ritual activities at their places of worship which are today the re-enactments of the initial effort to relate with God by their ancestors. Other dramatic performances are masquerade performances, traditional music and dance, folklore sessions especially at moonlight nights, festivals, wrestling contests and outing ceremonies. All these aspects of their dramatic culture are not in line with the Eurocentric tradition. As a result, Europeans

and highly Europeanized Africans do not accept them as drama as a result of which they mean that Africa had no traditional drama prior to the arrival of the Europeans. This is untrue because so far the culture of a people satisfies the needs of the people, that culture is not only independent but also complete unto itself. Various peoples of the world have time of enjoying life in their cultural performances. Depending on the cultural performance, there are similarities and differences among them. By and by, a people have their spectacular performances for entertaining themselves. The performances are dramatic because they are planned and rehearsed for future dates, at agreed venues and performers put on costumes to mimic ideas and characters. Such performances, may include "praying, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs and so on, during which people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event.

Syncretism:

Syncretism is the combining of different beliefs, while blending practices of various schools of thought. It involves the merger and analogizing of several originally discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion, thus asserting an underlying unity and allowing for an inclusive approach to other faiths. Syncretism also occurs commonly in expressions of arts and culture (known as eclecticism) as well as politics (syncretic politics). The English word was first attested in the early 17th century, from Modern Latin *syncretismus*, drawing on Greek (*synkretismos*), meaning "Cretan federation". The Greek word occurs in Plutarch's first century AD essay on "Fraternal Love" in his *Moralia* (2.490b). He cites the example of the Cretans, who compromised and reconciled their differences and came together in alliance when

faced with external dangers. "And that is their so-called *Syncretism* (Union of Cretans). Syncretism tends to facilitate coexistence and unity between different cultures and world views (intercultural competence), a factor that has recommended it to rulers of multi-ethnic realms. Conversely, the rejection of syncretism, usually in the name of "piety" and "orthodoxy", may help to generate, bolster or authenticate a sense of uncompromised cultural unity in a well-defined minority or majority.

Cultural Syncretism:

Cultural syncretism is a concept that refers to the social processes by which the beliefs and practices of two unique cultures mix and create new cultural characteristics. These cultural beliefs and practices are exchanged through indirect and direct contact. Cultural syncretism is when an aspect of two or more distinct cultures blend together to create a new custom, idea, practice, or philosophy. Cultural syncretism can occur for many reasons, from immigration to military conquest to the marriages between groups, and results in a culture finding ways to blend new customs into their own. According to some authors, syncretism is often used to describe the product of the large-scale imposition of one alien culture, religion, or body of practices over another that is already present. Others such as Jerry Bentley, however, have argued that syncretism has also helped to create cultural compromise. It provides an opportunity to bring beliefs, values, and customs from one cultural tradition into contact with, and to engage different cultural traditions. Such a migration of ideas is generally successful only when there is a resonance between both traditions. While, as Bentley has argued,

“... there are numerous cases where expansive traditions have won popular support in foreign lands, this is not always so”.

Mediated imagery, such as television programs, radio broadcasts and Internet blogs, carry the beliefs and customs of the culture within which they originate with them. International travel and advanced communications technology encourage cultural syncretism as well. One positive impact of cultural syncretism is the discovery of new cultural characteristics. Critics of cultural syncretism fear it leads to the disappearance of unique cultural beliefs and assets. Some even suggest it is not mixing at all, but one culture dominating and erasing the existence of the other culture. A contemporary example of cultural syncretism is the popularity of hip-hop, which was originated in the Bronx in the early 1980s. A historical example of cultural syncretism is the way Christianity incorporated many of the dates and rituals the pagan religions and Christian missionaries encountered. Colonialism is a negative example of cultural syncretism. Cultures that isolate themselves by limiting outsiders and controlling media outlets are more resistant to cultural syncretism. The best cases of cultural syncretism are those where both parties benefit. However, all cultures comprise a variety of diffused and borrowed elements, a point Ralph Linton made in his ironic piece ‘One Hundred Per-Cent American’ (1937). Given this, ‘syncretism’ loses much of its descriptive precision and many have deprecated the utility of the term. It makes best sense in the context of functionalist theories of integrated social systems, or doctrines of cultural holism, that presuppose unified and bounded social or cultural units that, under certain conditions, can be conceived as merging to produce some level of syncretic formation. Syncretistic analysis, however, unavoidably raises problems of history and social change and thus sits uneasily alongside classic

functionalist theory. Ethno-historians and diffusionists concerned with population movements, migrations, invasions and colonial empires have used 'syncretic' to describe cultural and social systems that emerge from these various sorts of historical connections among different peoples. Thus, they found the term useful to describe the culture of African Americans, as a culture that blended elements of European and African traditions, hence, syncretism is a fundamental mechanism in the acculturative process undergone by New World Negroes.

Syncretism and African Performances:

The origins of traditional African performances could be traced from theories conceived as religious, mimetic or the storytelling. Theatrical performances in the African traditional parlance as noted by Nzewi:

... is drama, is dance, is music, is mime, is language, and even implicates visual plastic costume arts as consciously organized and exhibited representations. More often it is a combination of any or all of the above in a sequence of public performances which derive its unity from the consistency of its given themes. Traditional theatre, in its social setting, functioned as mass media for every given community. It documented cultural values and trends in oral tradition, and prescribes a cycle of performances. Traditional theatre expressed the socio-cosmological rationalizations of a community and manifested these in stylized modes and observances. Traditional theatre was an important part of the lifestyle and socio-religious systems of the community... (16).

The above quotation brings a holistically but more embracing idea of traditional African theatre. The concept presents traditional African performances as a corpus of artistic treasures whose ownership lies with the collective consciousness of the people. The dramatic quotient of the traditional societies is a reflection of their past, present and future. This reflection includes our problems, expectations in life, and attempts at solving life problems which are closely linked to our reality. These performances have their unique form of presentations which make it distinct from the borrowed European performances that are now practiced by contemporary African performers. Suffice it to observe that because this form of performances does not conform to the European concept of performance, and as such Eurocentric scholars have branded it as unauthentic; at best it is acknowledged as containing mere elements of theatrical performance. Brockett avers that:

...because Africa had little performances that resembled the theatrical forms they knew, Europeans, when they began to colonize Africa were convinced that it was devoid of theatre. Nevertheless, the continent was teeming with performance activities – ceremonies, festivals, religious rites, storytelling and various kinds of celebrations, all interwoven into the daily life of various African cultures (635).

Suffice it to say that, traditional African theatre combines secular and religious artistic traditions. Its authenticity as a structured performance before an audience is absolutely germane since it fulfils the sine-qua-non equation of theatrical performances encapsulating a performance, a space to perform and an audience.

African traditions include oral narratives (epics, legends, and explanatory tales), poetry (praise poetry, chants, and songs), and epigrams (proverbs, riddles, puns, and tongue twisters). Combined,

they served to link the past and the present, construct collective worldviews and identity, educate the youth, express political views, and provide entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. The production of African traditions often involved performances based on a participatory ethic. In many African societies, there are highly trained and esteemed custodians of African traditions known as 'griots', a word that acquired popularity in the United States following the 1977 airing of the acclaimed television miniseries *Roots*, based on the 1976 book in which Haley reputedly traced his African ancestry to a village in the Gambia with the help of a griot. From Thomas Hale's fascinating history, it was clear that griots had many other functions besides being genealogists. They were historians, advisers to rulers, patrons, and other members of society, spokespersons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters and translators, musicians, composers, teachers, exhorters, warriors, witnesses, praise-singers, and ceremony participants during naming, initiations, courtship, marriages, installations, and funerals.

Griots first emerged at least a thousand years ago; since then their role has changed, and so have interpretations of their history in the oral accounts themselves and in written accounts by locals and outsiders. In more recent times, the griots have taken advantage of twentieth-century technologies including radio, television, audiocassettes, and CDs to spread their knowledge to new audiences locally and globally. Also, many griot epics, such as the renowned *Epic of Sundiata*, about the legendary king of the Mali Empire, have been committed to print. While the literature has mostly discussed male griots, recent scholarship has demonstrated that there were female griots, or *griottes*, as Hale refers to them. The case of the griots demonstrates the intricate connections between orality and performance. As a medium for the construction, dissemination, and

consumption of ideas, performance in the forms of drama, music and dance were particularly important in African societies.

African performances being dated back to ancient times, include pantomimes, dance, drama, mask, shadow, and court theatres, heroic recitations, praise-poetry, and market comedy by itinerant troupes, which use, in various combinations and with different degrees of sophistication, role-playing, dialogue, mime, movement, dance, song, puppetry, costume, and scenic spectacle. In the late eighteenth century, African theatre entered a new era as contacts with Europe increased and European theatre motifs and practices were introduced, elements of which were creatively appropriated and used to further diversify African theatrical expression. Most important was the incorporation of scripted text and reorganization of theatrical space to separate performers and spectators. In Egypt, Ya'qub Sannu (1839–1912) founded modern Egyptian theatre with distinct European influences.

Also, the black township music theatre of South Africa combined the indigenous dramatic modes of storytelling (the isiZulu's *ingoma* or the isiXhosa's *ntsomi*) with Western choral and vaudeville forms to create a popular theatre, which from the 1930s became a powerful vehicle for anti-apartheid resistance. In West Africa, where European settler influence was negligible, new theatrical practices were largely developed through educational institutions. In the 1920s, there emerged in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria itinerant indigenous language theatre. By the mid-twentieth century, European influences had waned and Africa's vibrant theatre could be divided into distinct forms: literary, popular, and theatre for development, each with its own styles, aesthetics, themes, messages, languages, and audiences. Similarly, music as a mode of cultural production and communication underwent

significant changes over the centuries. As with theatre, different musical forms developed across the continent, depending on the performance contexts of location and audience, the nature of the performers (spontaneous groups, popular musicians, or specialized musicians), the instruments used (ranging from idiophones to membranophones including drums, aero phones, and chordophones), and their functions (whether entertainment, political, religious, and educational, work-related, or mnemonically to recall past events).

Dance not only included music, but was a complex interactive affair involving movement, theatre, sculpture, and religion, whose styles and organization served as social metaphors that communicated aesthetic preferences, issues of kinship, gender, status, and age. Different African societies influenced each other, and from the nineteenth century they began to feel European influences, not the least missionary attacks against African dance as "lewd" or "lascivious." In the course of the twentieth century, numerous old dances were reconfigured and recontextualized and new ones emerged. In the 1950s and 1960s, formal dance companies and national dance ensembles practicing traditional dance were created in many countries. In the meantime, new dances such as highlife and rhumba had emerged in Africa's rapidly expanding cities. All this demonstrates, argues Oforiwa, the continent's remarkable cultural flexibility, capability, and creativity. Many of the new music and dance styles were adapted from the African diaspora in the Americas. Rhumba, for example, was an Afro-Cuban dance genre created by slaves after emancipation in the 1880s. African music were exported to the Americas during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, where it was further developed and transformed.

As cultural contacts between Africa and the African diaspora grew from the late nineteenth-century, diaspora music from jazz, rhumba, and reggae, to pop music and hip hop, were re-exported back to Africa, where it was reappropriated and converted. In the twentieth century, African music and dance became a powerful medium to express Pan-African, cosmopolitan, and nationalist consciousness, in addition to performing gender, class, and religious ideas and identities. Although the African theatre have survived in spite of the intrusion of modern culture and theatre from outside Africa, she still holds her traditional treasure of "generation-to-generation" medium of entertainment. The special oral nature of the African people and their theatre elements embedded in "orature" have been the major thrust for the survival of traditional theatre, drama, culture, and history. Throwing more light on this, Omolola opines that:

In The Gambia and Senegal, the Wolof and the Mandinka (both are major ethnic groups in the sub-Saharan Africa) traditional artistes, for instance, do their performances in public. The uniqueness of their performance lies in mnemonic, body language, rituals, and audience participation. These characteristics permeate African traditional theatre and drama.

Traditional African theatrical performances have been a vehicle for social changes on the continent. Its relationship with the African world view and religious beliefs make it similar in some aspects to Greek or Hellenistic theatre.

In the modern time, where classroom education has inflicted foreign culture and ideas on different forms of entertainment in Africa, teachers encourage their students to experiment with both traditional and modern forms of theatre. Thus, African students read works of writers like William Shakespeare, act out scripted drama, and at the same time, or interchangeably, keep the tradition by engaging in traditional theatre during festivals and other special occasions. The blending often occurs, especially when performers target educated class of audience. Traditionally, most performers are not seen as writers. Rather, they are seen as repertoire or oral warehouse of verbal and body entertainers. Their role in reshaping their communities and in keeping the tradition alive makes them relevant in African theatre and drama. Although there are some differences between indigenous African theatre and Western theatre, as intimated above, the salient features of African traditional ceremonies are in keeping with the Western conception of theatre. It is not surprising therefore that post-colonial African theatre manifests itself as a blend of Western and indigenous theatre forms. For this reason most post-colonial African playwrights have sought to write back to Europe in a manner of exposing African modes of theatre, which were deliberately subverted by the West.

Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark have sought to resuscitate the "African splendours of the past" by rejuvenating and manipulating elements of African traditional indigenous performances, such as audience participation, song, dance and didacticism. John Pepper Clark's **Ozidi** found its roots in the Ijaw people's traditional oral narrative also called **Ozidi**. Though the narrative in its scripted form now exists in a heavily westernized society, it overtly bears African traditional performance modes: it

begins in the format of a folk tale, with spectators (audience) seated on the floor in a semi-circle thus creating a sense of a traditional village square as we watch the play on the modern stage.

The influence of traditional ritual is also apparent in the text, which requires that certain ceremonies must be observed before the play begins: seven virgins ought to come from the audience and offer libation to some guests who have appeared from the sea. The play, been a transcription of a traditional Ijaw saga originally performed over seven days to the accompaniment of music and dance testifies to the fact that Africans have always been theatrical without necessarily using the term **theatre** or consciously adhering to the Aristotelian format.

That Africans are inextricably related to song and rhythm is indicative of the fact that we have always been theatrical. Music in an African culture features all emotional states. When we mourn our deceased or bring back the spirit of the deceased to protect us, we share the burden and pleasure through music. According to Steve Biko, he noted that, "... even to date, tourists always watch with amazement the synchrony of music and action as Africans working at a road side use their picks and shovels with well-timed precision to the accompaniment of a background song"(43).

Culture is thus subject to change, transformation or reformation. Indeed, it is in this context that people talk about cultural re-awakening, revival and renaissance. Again Dzurgba (9) submits that:

 this idea of renaissance suggests that we should go into the past to study the ancient art, ideas, knowledge, skills, morality, custom, law, religious

beliefs, myths, ideologies, philosophies and literature in order to learn useful lessons from them. This will then give insight into how we can cope with contradictions arising from the adaptation of new ideas, beliefs, knowledge, skills, tools, goods and services. Thus culture, grows, expands, transforms, and reforms, and in the process of change, obsolete elements are discarded while other elements are lost without the people's intention (9).

In the light of the above, Kalu holds that “the retention of archaic, obsolete, useless or meaningless elements of culture hampers religious, social, economic, political, scientific and technological progress of the people” (25). Here, the concern is with harnessing the values inherent in our cultural essence that can impact meaningfully on the everyday life of the people.

‘Odiiche’ Dance of Owerri:

Odiiche dance as the name implies, is a traditional dance which is performed by the people of the people of Owerri community in the present Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State. The dance started in the year 1995, with its members drawn from the five villages of Owerri who were mostly young men and women (maidens). The dance is made up of instrumentalists, dancers and folklorist/singers, performing in the manner reminiscent of the Italian comedian dell’arte. The common denominator which they share with the Italian comedy dell’arte was hackneyed and stereotyped method of improvisation. These artistes mesmerized their audience through a well-articulated glottal resonance while simultaneously engaging them (audience) visually in good artistry performances. The centrality of their vocation was dependent on the

audience satisfaction and upliftment. Social edification was the central thrust of their vocation. In fact, the aesthetics of their artistic performance did not lie in good physical body displays and dance movements per se, but in their ability to retain audience attention through beautiful voices and skilful use of language.

According to Ononiwu Solomon in an interview, “it is important to stress that the Odiiche dance as well as other dance troupes in Owerri at the time, whether resident or occupational, were itinerant in nature”. They constitute very vibrant theatrical entertainers in the locality and its surrounding environs. They performed in the courts, public squares, market places, homes and even churches. As characteristic of African theatre, the initial **stage** arrangement of the Odiiche dance is **theatre in-the-round** (arena stage), in which case it allowed for full audience participation. **The theatrical arrangement in the syncretized performance** era of the dance differs a bit, as it allowed for **multi-staging**, in which case it could be performed on any kind of stage arrangement whether formal (proscenium, thrust, arena etc., where the audience sit comfortably in the auditorium to watch the performance) or informal (village/market square, school/church halls, fields etc.). The theatrical milieu of Odiiche dance is enriched with the plethora of scintillating **maiden and male dancers** who danced to the complete appreciation of their captive audience, unlike in the past where only the maidens were allowed to dance. In the past, the aesthetics of the dance lies somewhere below their abdominal region, **‘the waist’**, to be precise. Visually, one could capture the almost seductive movements/wriggling of these regions as they dance. Today, there is excessive use of all the body parts (depending on the choice of the performer) in executing the dance since postmodern performance allows the exhibition of free flow of dance movements and creative ingenuity in performers, though, it still

retains the centre base of the dance which it is known for (waist region). The dancers are also not limited only to performing the traditional **dance movements** has been produced by the instrumentalists, hence there are inclusions of various contemporary and modern dance steps like the break dance, galala, ajasco, alanta, even traditional dance movements from other tribes within Nigeria and Africa.

Costume is seen as “cloths worn by actors during a play”. It is also seen as “live scenery worn by an actor in a particular role in a particular play... it is the exterior reflection of the actor’s impersonation, which assumes that the person portrayed is someone other than the actor himself”. At the initial stage of the Odiiche dance, members of the group made their costumes themselves as was in the case with their instruments. The costumes they made were nicknames-mara suru (tie and wear). The costumes were a kind of George wrapper tied round the waist and a white T-shirt, singlet or sleeve shirt. Nowadays, due to the infiltration of various dance culture and creativity in concept and style, there have been a shift in the costume, from the usual george wrapper, white sleeve shirt, singlet or T-shirt, to a well-designed and creatively made costume for both male and female dancers and instrumentalist as well. As part of their costumes, the dancers put on flat footed dance shoes/snickers unlike how it used to be before. **Instrumentation** in Odiiche dance has its own modification too, as there are synchronized blending of both the African traditional instruments and the foreign/western instruments. For example, the use of the local ‘oja’(flute) is being exchanged with the foreign ‘mouth organ’, the multi rhythm local ‘ngelenge’(xylophone) is replaced with the piano keyboard. There is also the inclusion of some other foreign musical/sound equipment like the power amplifier, microphones, box speakers, etc. All these attributes could be seen among notable

performing cultural dance troupes within Owerri community and environs. Although there are innovative and creative inputs in the dance today, it still retains the scintillating cultural and traditional rhythmic flavour of which it is known for, and the audience members are particularly thrilled due to its contemporary state. These **African performances however, are also recorded** on video or radio cassette tapes, CDs, memory cards, etc. (which are products of western civilization) and are viewed or listened to at home, offices or places of relaxation by contemporary audience members.

Conclusion:

The western understanding of the African worldview differs from our perception of African worldview, because the African world is not static. It acquires sophistication with the developmental trend in the physical and metaphysical halves of the cosmos. Africa is growing with the rest of the world and cannot stop with the multicultural tenets and fragmentations of African syncretized performances. African theatre has a socio-historical placement and it is ideational in superstructure with a communalized aesthetic inheritance and a diversified functional attribute. Hence, the African syncretic agenda is a reclamation and redemptive mission to dismantle mono-archaic grand and master narratives and revive what used to be. So, there is need for the African theatre scholar to evolve African contemporary performance theories that will articulate the concepts of African performances and create enabling environment for its growing audience. However, as neo-traditionalism, there is need for African contemporary theatre to develop its own body of text as reference point and production guide for future practitioners. In line with this, Ola Rotimi posits that;

... what was missing from the communication system of traditional Africa was not the means for an effective impartation of knowledge, rather it was the means for more ‘permanent’ preservation of knowledge. To this extent, there is no need for Africa’s oral and symbolic arts to be eternally apologetic (77-80).

Consequently, syncretism as a theatrical movement in Africa is still vague, epileptic and isolated. The African Philosopher, Fine and Applied Artist and Architect have to a reasonable extent, entered the postmodern era with the rest of the world. The African Performing Artiste will not be left out.

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