
Challenges of Teaching Practice-Based Dance Art in Nigeria: The Department of Theatre and Media Arts, FUOYE Model

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Abstract

Dance is a symbolic art form that transcends the overall aesthetics of the body to the cultural essence of a people. It has continued to develop beyond being a cultural activity, to fulfilling other needs in the society, including economic, socio-political, educational, physical, psychological, and religious desires. The rate of development in dance genres/forms and choreographic styles globally is quite intriguing and a herculean task to the contemporary dancer and choreographer in Nigeria, especially in the area of producing quality dancers and choreographers from Nigeria's institutions of higher learning, through a well crafted curriculum and training. This article, therefore, examines the challenges that confront dance studies in Nigeria through a qualitative study, which includes participant observation in the collection of data while drawing from extant literature. The study argues that there is a noticeable gap between dance theory and praxis which appear to have mired the growth and development of dance education in the country. It uses the experience of the Federal University, Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE), to concretise its argument for a synergy of efforts by both formally-trained and non-formally trained professionals to be involved in the teaching and learning of dance in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The paper recommends that dance should be seen as a practical discipline wherein emphasis would be on the practical aspects. There is also the need to integrate the non-formally educated practitioners into the academic system where professionally trained and educated dance educators are lacking.

Keywords: Dance, Aesthetics, Curriculum, Choreographer, Cultural essence, FUOYE

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Introduction

Dance reveals the psychological, physical, social, economic, political and spiritual importance of every society. It contributes to the wellbeing of an individual as well as the society in question. To the individual, dance creates opportunities for self employment when it becomes a profession, and therefore contributes to the advancement and/or development of the society in question if adequate attention is paid to it. According to HôDoubler:

If a child in every school from his entrance until his graduation from high school or college were given the opportunity to experience dance as a creative art, and if his dancing kept pace with him developing physical, mental and spiritual needs, the enrichment of his adult life might reach beyond any result we can now contemplate. (27)

HôDoubler's assertion above is an indication that dance is very important in human lives and this is as a result of its therapeutic potentialities ó capacity to meet physical, mental and spiritual needs of individuals. Although its origin remains obscure as it is not certain when it became a human endeavour apart from the archaeological findings in the cave paintings in Egypt, India and elsewhere. The antiquity of dance is alluded to when Peterson R. Anya opines that ódance has been called the oldest of arts, it is perhaps equally true that it is older than arts. The human body making patterns in time and space is what makes the dance unique among the arts and perhaps explains its antiquityö (3).

As one of the earliest art forms, dance has continued to struggle for relevance and acceptance in the league of other performative genres such as drama and music. Although it is an ephemeral art, it is essentially a part of humankind's existence. Dance transcends the overall aesthetics of the body to the cultural essence of a people which has exited right from Palaeolithic times. Dance as an art form is deeply rooted in human activities. In traditional African societies, dance is used to mark important

events such as birth, death, rites of passage among others and occurs during numerous initiation ceremonies such as puberty rites, initiation into manhood, coronation or exaltation into an office to name a few. In contemporary times, human activities and/or phenomena are abstracted into movement and gestures to achieve a desired dance piece. This also means that dance as an intangible cultural heritage has advanced globally from being considered as mere entertainment to the point of being used to address socio-economic, political and religious challenges. The world is in a continuous flux and societies are always contributing to make things work, thereby guaranteeing quality assurance in every sphere of human endeavour (Onyemuchara 93). As societies change, other aspects of the life of the people are also affected positively or negatively (dance inclusive). The pace of change in dance is a positive development as the new forms will contribute meaningfully to the advancement of dance genre and bring about the desired result. Robert W. Nicholls in Bakare asserts that:

As life in modern society becomes increasingly technical, the need for increased participation in effective and aesthetic areas becomes apparent. Dance as a functional socio-cultural root in the African *or European* model could play a part in a cross effective renaissance (41, italics mine).

Dance especially in Nigeria has been found wanting in this revival crusade in view of Nicholls submission; a situation that has hindered the capacity to address significant and/or salient issues through theme-based movements and gestures. To Monye, òdance serves religious, economic, political and social needs of a peopleö (106). If dance has the capacity to contribute to the economic and social needs of a nation as captured here, as serve the above purposes for which it is meant to achieve it will be continuously relegated to the background or misconstrued. The question remains why it has not advanced pedagogically especially in Nigerian institutions of higher learning? Of what importance is

practice/practical to theory in dance teaching or training? Why are there fewer student majors in dance than in other areas in the arts of the theatre such as directing, management, acting, media, costume and make-up to name a few? Is dance all about choreography and performance? These and many other salient questions stare us in the face, begging for sincere answers. This article advocates for a more functional approach to the study of dance which has become important because of the dearth of dance teachers and lecturers qualified enough both in theory and practice to steer this ship of academic endeavour; produce dance graduates from Nigerian institutions of higher learning to take up positions of leadership in the future.

The Social Attitude to Dance

Dance is regarded as performance. Its incorporation of movements and gestures, mime, drama, music, chants, acrobatics, among others, makes it the *beautiful bride* that has not been accorded adequate respect and honour. Understanding and teaching dance afford one the opportunity to explore the art form in its widest sense. This includes, having more people who could recreate from available themes and concepts which hitherto is lacking in our institutions of higher learning due to the dearth of practice-oriented scholars. The Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti has been chosen as a model because of its structure and method of training its dance students. The success of the training can be measured by the applause of host agencies that dance students are posted for the three-month industrial attachments. This study was motivated by questions raised by two helpless/hapless students. The reason for choosing these two words is not in any way derogative but that which deserves some form of clarification. The choice of using helpless is that, they are unable to defend themselves or cannot do much without help; the second being hapless is that they are unlucky or ill-fated to face this challenge.

The first question came through social media (facebook chat) where Miss X sounded her frustration about her inability to pursue a practice-based PhD programme in dance and choreography in any of the Nigerian universities. The second

question was posed by an undergraduate student of dance at FUOYE who enquired about career opportunities in dance. The crux of the matter is that, dance has never been given its rightful place in Nigeria. This is because, society has refused to accord the dance practitioner adequate respect in that they are branded non-serious, what the Igbo call *Efulefu* (a word used for non-serious minded individuals) and what Ebun Clark recorded as *Alarinjo* pertaining to the Yoruba of the South-Western Nigeria (Clark 4). The impression about dancers is that they are tramps, vagabond good-for-nothing dancers and drop outs (Ugolo 211; Essien in Oko-Offoboche 111). These aforementioned issues have continued to hunt the Nigerian dancer and practitioner, especially students who shy away from the practice and or study so as not to be branded with such derogatory remarks. Although the government is the largest employer of dancers in Nigeria, dance development has continued to remain lethargic due to negligence unlike other spheres such as science and technology. This is more so because establishments of the State Arts Councils or Cultural Centres, the National Troupe of Nigeria (NTN), and other government agencies have dancers on their payroll yet much attention has not been paid to dance apart from using it as entertainment especially when important guests visit government officials or those in positions of political authority. Apart from serving as a symbol of cultural heritage in the Art Councils/Cultural Centres across the length and breadth of Nigeria, government as a stakeholder has continued to pay lip-service to the deep potentials of dance in our society. Government's insensitivity, notwithstanding the dance creators and practitioners have not also lived above board in making meaningful comments with dance through creating theme-based dances that could address important issues in Nigeria. It is in this regard that Bakare and Onyemuchara claim that opportunity for its acceptance especially within the elite culture that controls the political and economic machineries of the nation abound (17).

The Impact of the Attitude

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of literary publications in Nigerian dance by dance scholars. Prior to this time, publications

in dance were by non-Nigerians who were anthropologists and looked at dance from the anthropological perspective. Dance was yet to become a distinct discipline in the Nigerian educational system as it was merely an adjunct in the curriculum of departments of theatre arts, performing arts or creative arts of institutions of higher learning. While discussing 'Dance Pedagogy in Nigeria,' Ugolo asserts that 'there is no full-fledged department of dance where the subject can be studied fully as an art form' (211). So much has been said about the problems of dance by scholars (Ugolo 211 & 219; Essien in Oko-offoboche 110 & 111; Onyemuchara 96). In spite of their suggestions in respect of addressing the challenges of dance studies in Nigeria, not much has been achieved in ameliorating these challenges. Apart from those mentioned by the scholars, there are still other challenges that are confronting dance practice and teaching in Nigeria. Following is a discussion of some of them.

Career Choice

To an average Nigerian, everybody can dance. We dance during different ceremonies, festivals and rituals, etc. In fact dance is a part of our life. If that is so, why would anyone choose to study what everyone knows and can do? Quite strange! It is rare to find a prospective Nigerian undergraduate who opted to study Theatre Arts and even among those admitted to the Department of Theatre Arts, very few of them choose dance as their area of specialization. A sizable number of students in Departments of Theatre Arts in Nigerian universities found themselves in such department out of desperation. When admission is secured, one dare not report at home that he/she has been offered admission to study Theatre Arts. But for cut-off mark that saw student who initially applied to study Law, English, Mass Communication and even the sciences being diverted to Theatre Arts, there would not have been students in dance. Scholars in Theatre and Theatre Arts graduates have always narrated how they found themselves in theatre during the 1980s and 1990s. The story is changing lately and thanks to the emergence of Nollywood which is giving the teens the hope of emerging as stars especially in the area of acting, filmmaking,

costume, directing, etc., a breakthrough that dance is grappling with. Suffice to state that most of those who got admitted into the universities to study Theatre Arts and ended up in dance had some prior experience in dance before they were admitted. Prominent among these groups are those from the Arts Councils and private dance troupes. This is attested to by most of the Theatre graduates who supposedly specialize in dance today. A situation where a department graduates two (2) or three (3) students out of twenty five (25) or thirty (30) students is really pathetic and calls for an urgent attention.

Dance Studios

A studio is a building or room where artistic works are created or displayed. It is the artiste's workshop. A dance studio, therefore, is a building where dance experiments are carried out in form of rehearsals with such facilities as dance mats, wall mirror, bars for ballet training to mention a few. This is a salient challenge to the numerous problems of dance practice and teaching in Nigeria. Ugolo (2007) and Essien (1996) had stated that the lack of dance studios in Nigerian tertiary institutions where dance is studied as an aspect of theatre/performing arts is a major setback to the development of dance in Nigeria. It is disheartening to note that even after their observation; little or nothing had been done to address the ugly situation. Observations are meant to be applied and enforced and not to be hidden in books and dumped on the shelves. The need for the call for conferences is targeted towards making the society better by addressing salient societal issues. This is also the reason behind the release of communiqués after conferences. Whenever the National Universities Commission (NUC) sends out its accreditation team, there are usually make-shift venues occasionally stage-managed during accreditation only to be jettisoned after the two or three days visit of the accreditation team. If the department passes accreditation, this therefore suggests that all is well and there is no need for advancement or providing the needful to support the department for an effective and efficient programme. In such departments, most dance practices or rehearsals are done in classrooms, basket or volley ball courts, under trees in total disregard of the health

implications that it portend for the students and the dance educators. Furthermore, the rehearsals are held in the full glare of students and lecturers of other departments. Where these studios/laboratories exist, they are just a mockery of a standard dance studio which invariably makes the acquisition of requisite skill and techniques in dance practice problematic. Continuing, Ugolo records that even in the professional settings of the art councils or cultural centres, private dance companies and the National Troupe of Nigeria National Theatre, requisite studio facilities do not really exist. Essien corroborates this position when he queries "how can the body be developed when there are no dance studios for rehearsals, no good, comfortable working conditions and environment, training equipment and other facilities...." (111).

The State of Dance Teaching

As stated earlier, dance has never been taught as a separate course of study. It has always been part of the Department of Theatre, Performing Arts, Creative Arts and other of such names. Gbemisola writes that "in the Nigerian university system, starting with the University of Ibadan which floated the first school of drama in 1963, dance has existed as a subject/course/specialization within Theatre Arts, Dramatic Arts, Creative Arts, Performing Arts, English and Literary studies, African Studies, Cultural Studies and so on" (19). Writing about the state of dance studies in Nigeria, Ugolo noted that "of the three areas of study that make the performing/theatre arts, dance is the least developed especially in the area of curriculum" (213). This position has invariably made dance a "weeping child" in the department of theatre arts/performing arts of several universities due to its nature and poor acceptability in the Nigerian polity. It is often used to "spice" drama and music productions/performances; because dance is perceived as mere spectacle to enhance performances in drama and music.

Within the first year and second year in the Department of Theatre Arts/Performing Arts/Creative Arts across Nigerian universities, dance is usually a general course for the entire students and does not exceed more than three courses before

specialization at the three hundred and four hundred level where they are expected to choose their area of specialization. During this four-year duration of theatre/performing/creative arts programmes, not more than six (6) dance courses are available to students including the final year practical dance project for those who specialize in dance. It is noteworthy that even in this dire circumstances, some of the lecturers that handle these classes barely engage the students in practical works where they personally teach them or supervise them outside the conventional classroom interaction.

Cronyism

Another challenge that has stalled the growth of dance studies and practice especially in Nigeria's tertiary institutions is cronyism, which detrimental to efficiency and technical know-how. Most institutions hire dance teachers who are not qualified in the area of practice. Rather, jobs are deliberately offered regardless of qualifications. As persons deficient in imparting knowledge in dance continue to operate in the field, dance practice will continue to decline. Bakare succinctly captures this when he asserts that 'the greatest problem confronting the art of dance and choreography in Nigeria today is teaching' (VI). This is what Essien, quoted in Oko-Offoboche, calls an act or practice of 'placing the square pegs in round holes' (112). The challenge to have good teachers that will impart dance knowledge on the students will invariably breed mediocrity on the side of the students. This is usually the case when the wrong person is favoured in place of the right one. It should be noted that cronyism is not peculiar to dance but that which has bedevilled virtually every strata of the Nigerian system.

Tackling the Problems Head on: The FUOYE Model

The Federal University, Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE) is one of the nine (9) universities established by the Federal government under President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's administration in 2011. The school is located in Oye, a township about 45 minutes drive from Ado-Ekiti, the capital of Ekiti State. The institution has produced its first set of graduates with the Department of Theatre and Media Arts

recording about 26 graduates. The Department of Theatre and Media Arts is one of the few departments in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences that started the academic programmes of the university in 2011 before the demerger in 2016 when it fell under the Faculty Arts.

Upon assumption of office doubling as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Head of Department of Theatre and Media Arts in 2011, Prof Bakare Ojo Rasaki restructured the programme of the department particularly dance and transformed it into a practice-based academic discipline. Sixty percent (60%) of the courses are practice-based while the remaining forty percent (40%) is theoretically based. The rationale for this decision according to him (Bakare) is for the programme to equip the students with the skills for professional dance experience while not also undermining the academic aspects of the field of dance. As one of the key programmes of the department, the dance programme is structured to equip the students with basic techniques on movement execution, improvisation, and processes of dance creation, contemporary dance skills, nature and forms of dances of Nigeria and Africa and dance vocabularies.

The non-availability of a dance studio at the beginning necessitated the every morning rehearsals which start at 6:30am and ends at 8:00am to enable the students attend classes. Today, the department has not less than thirty (30) students that specialize in dance and choreography with about twelve (12) students as dance minors. While \neg major \emptyset implies specialization, \neg minor \emptyset on the other hand suggests a partial specialization. In this case, a student might have a passion for dance and participate in rehearsals; he/she might decide to edit one or two courses in some of the dance courses in the department from 300 which is the period of specialization to 400 levels. In any case, this is not compulsory. Conversely, the dance major students must compulsorily participate in rehearsals and pass all dance courses to be able to graduate. The FUOYE dance programme is based on three innovative ideas that underpin its practice-based approach. The following is a discussion of them.

Recruitment of Professional drummers

A drummer is one who plays the drum, but a professional drummer is one who makes a living out of playing it. The department has two professional drummers in the employ of the university as music instructors, drummers and demonstrators. They assist in the teaching of musical instruments (both traditional and western) during dance rehearsals and also perform with the students during performances. This is inevitable because dance and music are inseparable especially in the African context. This is a welcome development as students that wish to major in music theatre have the opportunity to learn from professionals who are readily available to feed them from their wealth of experience. Apart from the Universities of Calabar and Port Harcourt, very few Departments of Theatre/ Performing/ Creative Arts have deployed the idea of employing resident drummers. This is an idea worthy of emulation as it will go a long way in alleviating the challenge of dance practice in our schools and invariably enhance creativity and competence since music and dance are inseparable.

Dance Lecturers

A dance lecturer is one who trains and educates students on dance, thereby developing them in their career choice. There are three dance lecturers in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts of the University who incidentally started their careers in the arts councils or cultural centres and the National Troupe of Nigeria and have several years of practical dance experience. A professor of dance that had stints with Hubert Ogunde, Jimmy Aliu and the former Ondo State Council for Arts and Culture as a drummer and dance artiste. A lecturer II who had stints with the Abia State Council for Arts and Culture, African Kreative Dance Company and the National Troupe of Nigeria as dancer and choreographer. The assistant lecturer who worked with several private companies and the Nasarawa State Council for Arts and Culture is the third. Both the lecturer II and assistant lecturer are pursuing their Ph.D degrees in dance and performance studies in other Nigerian Universities. With this calibre of lecturers, it means that practice and theory are harmonized and the students are not short-changed in focusing only on theory without paying attention.

This is an innovation worthy of emulation by other dance programmes that lack such manpower. If dance must attain the level expected of it in Nigeria, it should be such individuals with technical know-how that should be at the saddle of training dance students. Where this is not possible, efforts should be made to employ pragmatic dancers to serve as demonstrators in dance workshops coordinated by dance lecturers who might not be practically equipped. With such an arrangement, dance students will be adequately prepared to face the challenge of dance practice professionally.

Students' Dance Training Programme at FUOYE

In the 1980s, there were ample opportunities for students to be trained by expatriate dance educators that were employed to train students both in practice and theory. At the University of Ibadan was Peggy Harper, the University of Calabar had Ovielle Johnson while Georgina Gore was at the University of Ilorin. Despite these efforts a lacuna between practice and theory exists in dance teaching in Nigerian universities that needs to be addressed. It is in an effort to bridge this gap that the dance programme of FUOYE is designed. The programme is structured in a way that the students have ample time to attend to other programme requirements in and outside the department. As noted earlier, dance rehearsals run between 6:30 am and 8am before the commencement of theory classes. The students are required to attend this rehearsal with the three dance lecturers even when the university is almost non-residential. During drama rehearsals, the dance segment of the drama rehearsal is allotted a period which the students also utilize for dance training. Furthermore, theatre workshop which is a course always ascribed to drama in most theatre/performing arts departments in Nigeria, is also extended to dance where the students especially those that intend to specialize in dance also have their fair share of the total experience using dance as a pivot. The reason for this is that all students must be involved in all the rehearsals, and this has positively impacted the programme in terms of performance. For instance, in one of their dance

performances packaged in honour of the visiting accreditation team in August 2015, Gbenga Igbinleye, a professor of language of the Federal University Lokoja, eulogized the students after the performance in these words:

The hallmark of a good dance performance is being able to involve all body part in the enactment. Choreography is practical and seamless; the ease of rendition is engaging and involve the audience in an otherwise difficult and complete act as if it is an everyday common place performance. Every successful dance elicits and evokes feelings of elation, fulfilment and satisfaction, but it does not immediately show the discipline and practice that had gone into the preparation. All your performance tonight shows discipline, tutorship, learning and uncommon passionate commitment to excellence. The dexterity of your drummers is worthy of adulation and celebration.

(Recorded speech)

This breathtaking comment by Igbinleye actually suggests that the students and lecturers are working towards the common goal of excellence in dance practice. The fact still remains that the reward of hard work is usually celebration. This feat has also informed the institution's approval to construct a state-of-the-art theatre complex that houses all the arms of the theatre arts programme.

Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES)

Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) is a programme designed to prepare and expose students of tertiary institutions comprising of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education/agriculture/technology to acquire necessary skills needed

for the industrial work situations which will confront them upon graduation. The scheme was established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1973 to be operated by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF). It has the National University Commission (NUC), National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), employers of labour and participating institutions as the coordinating bodies. Its purpose was to solve the problem of lack of adequate practical skills by Nigerian graduates of tertiary institution for employment in industries (www.itf-nigeria.com). Like those in the Engineering, Medical Sciences, Agriculture, Science Education, Technology, Pure and Applied Sciences and Environmental Sciences. The Department of Theatre and Media Arts also sends her students on Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). This is to enable them acquire requisite skills during the three-month internship programme.

The programme runs from the second semester of third year vacation to the first week of resumption in their fourth/final year of the programme. It is reasoned that by this time, the students must have decided on their areas of specialization. It is on the basis of their area of specialization that the department decides on where to deploy them for the internship. For instance, those that wish to major in media arts are sent to media houses (radio and television stations), advertising agencies and cognate organizations while those in performance are sent to the arts councils/cultural centres and privately owned theatre companies. During the period of internship popularly called Industrial Attachment (IT), lecturers from the department visit the students in their places of internship to assess their performance. While on internship the student trainees are exposed to experiences which would readily help them to negotiate some of the challenges they may face upon graduation. The internship is of such importance in the programme that the experience the student acquires therefrom is the subject of his/her final year research project.

Conclusion

The lacuna between theoretical and practice-based teaching in dance studies in most Nigerian universities remains a major

challenge to proficient and effective dance education in Nigeria. To produce quality dancers and choreographers is a hard nut to crack due to the poor background in dance scholarship and practice in Nigeria. Although the FUOYE is striving to address these challenges through the restructuring of the theatre and media arts programme, there is still room for improvement if dance must contribute to sustainable development in Nigeria. Government, on its part should strive to correct the inadequacies identified in this study as challenges to dance development through its relevant agencies tertiary institutions in order to take dance to an enviable height. These includes, among others, the construction of befitting dance studios, employment of qualified personnel that will effectively handle the teaching of dance in the institutions, a more robust internship programme where students from other departments can also participate and benefit like their counterparts in Engineering, Medical Sciences, Agriculture, Science Education, Technology, Pure and applied Sciences and Environmental Sciences for adequate practical skills preparatory for employment in the cultural industries in Nigeria and beyond. Also, dance scholars and practitioners have a role to play in uplifting dance beyond its present status. Efforts should be made by dance educators to give dance students maximum attention by assisting them to nurture and develop their creative ideas, practicing and rehearsing with them as they look up to us for motivation. Being available and accessible will create an environment of learning by example for the students.

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