

The Cultural Truth in Drum Dance Festival of Aboriginal People in Northwest Territories in Canada

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Abstract

Dance is one unique art whose cultural truth has been misinterpreted based on individualism, assumption, and scholarly perceptive thinking because of its major functionalities of identity and entertainment, thereby suppressing the core truth of originality and essence. Any dance's originality and essence make it culturally communicative, relevant, and diverse anywhere it is performed. The dance of any community tells its own story of who they are and how they emerged, but whether is generally acceptable by all and sundry becomes the sole purpose of this research using the drum dance of Aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories of Canada as a study. To justify claims or findings in this research, the study adopts the cultural consensus theory by Williams H. Batchelder (which states that people must communally understand and appreciate their culture with one tone before others would accept it). The study concludes that the potency of any dance must be fact-based on communally accepted truth on unaltered originality and essence, and not individualized ideology as mere identifying tools and entertaining amplifiers.

Keywords: Aboriginal people of Northwest territories, Canada, Cultural truth, Drum dance festival.

Introduction

Dance is an art that gives people a form of traceable origin and a documented way of writing or rewriting their history. It helps to unify the community irrespective of their ancestral origin, profession, and cultural heritage, thereby helping them to appreciate every beat of the dance performance. Egorov confirms that "The primary assignment of dance be it folk dance, Contemporary dance or indigenous dance is to successfully preserve the identity truth of the people and the development of cultural truth for further research and education" (276). Every dance is traceable to a culture. This is so given its ability to tell stories about people, their style of dressing, food, and worship. Akas Nicholas opined that; When it comes to core Indigenous dance performances with storytelling, entertainment is deemphasized, then the use of dance becomes highly ritual for imitates and pure born only" (45).

Indigenous dance has been misinterpreted to be a mere entertainment tool because of its aesthetic appeal, for instance, in the dance understudy Drum Dance of Aboriginal people of Canada, the natives enjoy only the rhythmic sound of the drums without understanding the socio-communicative message embedded in it. It is the ability to understand the communicative undertone in any Indigenous dance that gives it the required cultural identity. Asigbo observes that "The beauty of any dance is in the incomparable nature of the cultural truth, which always awakens people's curiosity to understand the emergence of such performances and how it is associated with them" (26). He further claims that to understand the cultural truth of any performance, what becomes remarkable is what Akas called the "OSPE." He argues that "every indigenous dance is an offspring of OSPE, where the truth is being told, interpreted, and evaluated" (Akas 56).

The use of OSPE (meaning, O-Originality, S-Space, P-Performance, and E-Evaluation) is what makes cultural truth in any dance unquestionable and undeniable amongst any community wherever it exists. Some indigenes doubt the potency of dance as a cultural truth indicator because "OSPE" in the dance context has been degraded to a mere assembly of performances for entertainment purposes only. Akas explains OSPE to mean; O- Originality, S- The Space, P- Performance, and E-Evaluation. He added that "The OSPE is the pointer of cultural truth in any dance if not that cultural dance performance remains social exhibition art for art sake only" (Akas 67).

Dance and the Quest for Originality

Indigenous dance has suffered misinterpretation when it comes to understanding its originality and what gave rise to its emergent. To participate in the originality of any Indigenous dance, it is good to seek the meaning of such performance from the cultural custodian. It is the custodians of indigenous performances especially in dance that will explain its originality based on form, style, gestures, drums, and costumes. This will aid the natives to understand and value their dance performance beyond aesthetics, Mr Paul Ikem (interviewed on the 3rd of March 2024) said.

The quest for Originality in Indigenous dances is to call home our children and indigenes to always remember where they are coming from before accepting others based on aesthetic influences "Mr. Hendy Ifems (interviewed on the 2nd of February 2024) opined that "Dance or any cultural performance remains relevant when its originality has never been altered". Some of the dances are gradually devaluing their originality because a lot of natives are not interested in seeking historical communicative messages in dance. It is based on these affirmations that dance based on the Originality quest survived what Akas refers to as the "Cultural identity Decaying Ulcer". In cultural identity decaying ulcer every performance struggle to overcome the originality issues based on the following;

1. **Who are the Originators?** This is where dances have lost their originality potencies because the survivors could not tell the story of how their performances started beyond the general slogan "It was our forefathers

hereditary, and it was handed over to us". This ulcerogenic response reduces Indigenous dances into serious problems without a definite redemption.

2. **Whose duty is to protect the dance's originality?** This is where Western education and exposure to an extent push supposed custodians of the true originality of indigenous dances into seeing it as something ritualistic (thereby forbidden) a mere waste of time to be associated with and mere outed cultural appropriation that should have ended its existence with the originators. It is on this myopic assumption that a lot of dances stopped existing or if still in existence their originality is being altered to something preferred suitable without any logical explanation.
3. **Who should tell the tales of the dance's performative styles?** The issue of getting people to tell the tales of their indigenous dances based on their performative styles has remained controversial. Some believed it should be left for the old parents to continue the tales, some believed if not properly documented no need to seek clarification and some believed there is no need for such research to be carried out if any of the survivors are still alive.

It is based on the above assumptions that Nwosu contends that "culture identity decaying Ulcer is a form disease that remains incurable in performance studies because dance has been reduced to entertaining tool based on body flexibility, Cultural aesthetics for brand recognition and derogatory perceptions on it as a mere native act" (39). The performative ideology of any dance becomes valued if its originality has never been altered, questioned, or tasked with barbaric.

Types of Cultural Beliefs in Dance Performance

Different types of cultural belief systems affect Indigenous performance. Those beliefs are.

1. The Individual Belief

This is the type of belief system where everyone describes its indigenous dances or performances based on individual beliefs it was just our village performance, I was told that our forefathers performed it and it is an ordinary performance. This type of belief system does not want to look beyond the little they usually assume they know and can be shaken if attacked by the external forces of "Religion or Education" (then automatically every little thing they know will be erased). They are always passive and ready to switch over to trending issues.

2. The Professional Belief

It is the belief system that affects the cultural truth in our indigenous dances because of education and Western exposure. This type of believer at times thinks that everything about culture should not be wasted time upon because education and inventions have better benefits to achieve than mere/outed cultural performance. To them, cultural performance is an exercise tool for their parents to be entertained or keep the community engaged. They always

encourage their aged parents to do it in order to stay healthy, strong, and good-looking.

3. The Religious Belief

This is where the Western religion has seen, tagged, or reduced core cultural truth in the originality of Indigenous dance traditions into some barbaric, devilish, and punishable by hellfire. They believed that the partakers in such cultural traditions and practices should be tagged outcasts or reaccepted back into Christendom through baptism only. They do not want to be identified with such performance nor do their children be initiated. They attack anyone who asks this question "What is the cultural truth of indigenous dance performance that makes an identity for anyone".

4. The Dynamic Belief

This is where younger generations do not see anything interesting, engaging, and meaningful in dances. To them, such performances cannot ignite burning desires based on new dance trends and traditions, so they emphasize more on art for art's sake rather than cultural communicative arts for sustainability, interpretation, and understanding. These hinder the growth of cultural truth in traditional performances.

The Signifiers that Help to Maintain Cultural Truth in Dance

The cultural truth of every culture lies in the notable signifying objects beyond general knowledge or perception. This signifying tool helps to tell the unadulterated stories of the community performances wherever they exist. Akas Nicholas as cited by Judith Umeh affirms that "Cultural Signifiers in dance is one technique tool indigenes use in passing the ageless cultural truth in performance based on histories and beliefs. The cultural truths embedded in the signifiers make the indigenous cultural performances communicative, interrogating, and effective" (16). Roland Stamper further explains that "To understand the essence of signifiers as an object of cultural truth the signifiers must be interpreted based on the physical representation of something it signifiers and the ability to give the signifying tool's interpretation based on its usage at the point of creation and not generalized meanings" (2). Therefore, the signifying objects of cultural truth in the drum dance of Aboriginal People in the Northwest Territories of Canada are as follows.

1. Drums

This is the first signifier holding the cultural truth in the dance. The shape and style of the drum are different from the ideal general drum. Drum during the performance cease to be ordinary drums but rather a tool that remains in the aboriginal people of Northwest Territories, how their forefathers struggled to survive during the political victimization period in Canada. The making of this drum is done by a particular person(s) based on experience and being a member of the performing group for a long period. The shape of the drum is a circle with an opening at the back which shows that "once the drum has been

played it reminds them that they must be united to protect their lands as owners of the land and not them belonging to the land”.



Plate 1: The Drum used during the dance

2. Gestures

Every culture indeed has its style and unique way of performance, but the uniqueness ceases to be perceived from the sight of assumptions into a more communicative way of passing information if effectively interpreted. The essence of the interpretation of cultural dance gestures is to understand what gave rise to the origin of the movement, whether it is based on religion, profession, wars, victimization, or marginalization. To accept the gestures used in any dance performance (especially in the dance under study Drum Dance of Aboriginal people in Northwest Territories in Canada) the people must be able to tell their own stories as reflected in the cultural dance gestures.



Plate 2: Dance Movement of the Drum Dance

3. Reactions

This is the ability of the owners of the performance to be able to accept the dance and the cultural truth embedded in it, as their own true culture and not an act forced on them due to colonialism or cultural adoption. The reactions of the indigenes wherever they see the signifying potency of the dance, will always be an identification of who they are and where they are from.



Plate 3: The audience's reactions while watching the Drum Dance Performances

Who Are Aboriginal People in Canada: Brief History

Based on the Government of Canada platform, Indigenous people occupied North America for thousands of years before European explorers first arrived on the eastern shores of the continent in the 11th century. These newcomers (Europeans) were Norse explorers and settlers, moving ever westward from Scandinavia to Iceland and Greenland and eventually to the island of Newfoundland. There they founded North America's first European colony at L' Anse aux Meadows. Although this colony was short-lived, it marked the beginning of European exploration and migration that would radically change the lives of the North American Indigenous People of Canada.



Plate 4: First Nation person in Cultural Costume (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)



Plate 5: Metis persons in cultural costume (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)



Plate 6: Inuit persons in cultural costumes (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)

The Origin of Drum Dance

This is a unique cultural dance festival among the Aboriginal people of Canada (popularly known as the Indigenous people of Canada). According to Mr. Edward Oudzi (interviewed on the 29th of April 2024 and also a popular drum maker of the drum dance), drum dance came into existence as an ageless tradition from the days of their forefathers to the present day. He said, “Drum dance was a celebration dance for their forefathers who were notable hunters”. They used the drum dance to

celebrate their consecutive season and ask their gods to give them more great seasons ahead. Edward Oudzi said "One notable hunter was in the forest hunting and trying to be very careful not to be attacked by the bear during the hunting experience at one point he was so tired and needed to rest when he saw an unknown man coming out of the forest. He wanted to run thinking it was a bear. But the unknown stranger told him not to run, rather he came in peace. The unknown stranger told him that he was going to teach him a drum dance, which he would use to celebrate the successful hunting period, any other great celebration, and to seek good things from gods who protect them and the land."

He goes further "Before the encounter with the Stranger, the Aboriginal people do their drumming with the beating of two stones together to produce rhythmic sound for body movement, but the coming of the stranger officially introduced the type of drums used for drum dance". "The stranger came with the original drum, but refused to give it to the hunter then, but rather agreed he will teach him how to make it. " It was at that moment that the Drum Dance of the Indigenous People of Canada was birthed.

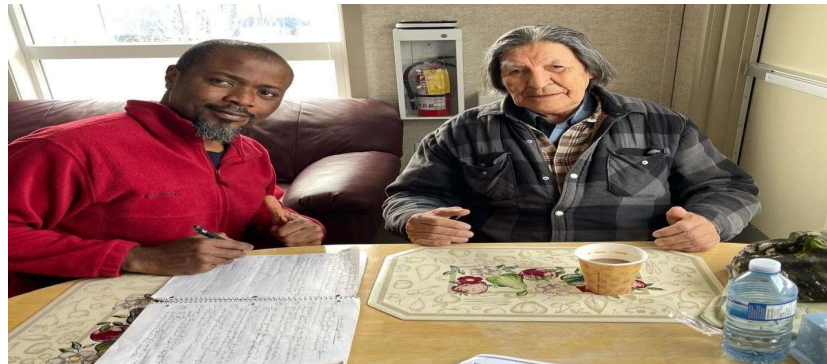


Plate 7: The Picture of Mr. Edward Oudzi and the Researcher Dr. Nicholas Chielotam Akas during the Interview



Edward Oudzi: The Master Drum Maker for Drum Dance in Norman Wells Sahtu

Dance Movement

The dance movement of the hunters is very symbolic and always done with a three-step movement. The three-step movements of the hunters before targeting their prey simply mean they want to inform their three notable ancestral fathers in hunting to guide them. These symbolic three dance movements are performed as one step in front which means the first ancestral spirit should go ahead and remove any danger stopping their prey from coming their way. The second step is done sideways which means the second ancestral father should not allow any other prey to attack their sighted prey except their gun. The last step is backward which means the last ancestral father should allow them to take the meats home successfully and celebrate without any attack by unforeseen animals.

Polar Bear Dance Movement

This is a symbolic dance movement in the Northwest Territories of Canada. This dance movement signifies the gentle approach of the hunters while targeting their prey. The polar bear is believed to be very gentle and calculative while hunting for prey during the winter, its calmness lures the prey closer to him. The hunters are expected to follow in the same footsteps while hunting for long hours in the forest. It is a myth that the ability of any hunter to be calm, patient, and calculative is like a polar bear, making the hunter go home with the biggest meat. The hunters use the polar bear movement to also showcase their various hunting styles and how they kill their prey.



Plate 8: The Pictorial of the Polar Bear. (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)



Pictorial of dance dancers doing polar bear dance movement

1. Circle Dance

This dance movement centres on the tragic experience of their forefathers in the hands of the colonial masters. The colonial masters took their lands, crude oil, rape their women and their children sent to missionary schools were marginalized by the missionaries. This act by the colonial masters left a seriously traumatic experience in the lives of the Indigenous of Canada, thereby making their current generation conscious of their territories with the adage that 'They belong to the land and not the land belonging to them'. The circle dance movement has been performed in a circular form reminding the natives to always protect their territories against intruders who might want to suppress them again. The dance movement is also done with an excessive display of strength and scary looks they are ready to defend their territories with their last blood.



Plate 9: The pictorials of dancers in circular movements
(<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)

2. Throwing of Hands Movements

This dance movement portrays the total rejection of Western ideology, civilization,

and education, in which the colonial masters criticized their indigenous language/tradition and called them barbaric and mundane. This act from the colonial masters affected their forefathers who could not speak English except their indigenous language. The throwing of hand movement shows that their indigenous culture comes first in everything they are doing while the Western culture is secondary. The dancers' continuous throwing of the hand movement signifiers also that in everything they are doing an indigenous person must be considered first in any job before accepting the foreigners whom they see as the agent of evil colonization. The throwing of hand movement by the ladies also showcased that they rejected feeding their husbands with Westernized food rather than their core native food which their forefathers taught them.



Plate 10: The dancers doing throwing of hand movement (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-> photo retrieved on April 20 2024)

Song

The songs used in Drum- -Dance portrays the various stages of suffering their forefather passed through in protecting their land. The songs are metaphorical when listened to explain the beginning of the struggles of the Indigenous

People of Canada. The singing of the songs is done solemnly to always put the natives in the right reflective mood. The singer is expected to be extremely emotional while singing the song, the inability of the singer not to be emotional shows he or she has offended the gods of the land, and they must be appeased. The songs always centre on the following: a) Pain- The humiliation their forefathers passed through in the hands of the colonial master. b) Struggles- The various stages their forefathers passed through to uphold their indigenous traditions and language. C) Remembrance- To honour those who lost their lives while defending their culture. This is why the songs of drum dance are seen as sacred.

The Drum

This is an iconic tool of hope and awareness. The drum is key to awakening the consciousness of the indigenous people of Canada to always seek for their rights anywhere they are in Canada. The drum is designed specially and has a special stick for beating the drum. The design of the drum is in a semi-circular form which portrays that no indigenous person should give up on anything he/she is doing. It also shows an indigenous person must seek the truth culturally irrespective of where he/she is working and the indigenous language must always be the first. The special stick was designed from dried bones of animals killed by the hunters. The symbol of the stick is to always remind the indigenes that their main occupation is hunting before any other profession, so they must always uphold that.



Plate 11: The pictorial of the semi-circular drum (<https://www.alamy.com-stock-photo> retrieved on April 20 2024)

- A. The stick for the drums, simply signifies boldness and fearlessness in all their endeavours



Plate 12: The pictorial of the semi-circular drum and the stick.
(<https://www.alamy.com>- stock-photo retrieved on April 20 2024)

- B. The drummers are always holding the cultural truth embedded in the drumming based on originality, where the indigenous people of Northwest Territories are reminded that united, they continue to win every battle.



Plate 13: The pictorial of the drummer's drumming. (<https://www.alamy.com>- stock- photo retrieved on April 20 2024)

Conclusion

The essence of any indigenous dance performance is to understand and appreciate what gave rise to the performance based on interpretation and semiotic analysis of

the use of symbols and instruments. The indigenous performance tells the stories of the originators and how they manage to sustain their culture to date. Dance as an art form remains indispensable in giving the natives a traceable origin anywhere, they found themselves, especially aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories of Canada. It has become obvious scholarly-wise that their indigenous drum dance centres mostly on whom they are and what they believe in culturally wise. Therefore, it is important to note that before any indigenous dance would be generalized as entertainment, first of all, the custodians of the performance should be consulted to understand and appreciate the meaningful cultural truth embedded.

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