

INDIGENOUS DANCE AS A MEDIUM FOR PARTICIPATORY LEARNING: A STUDY OF 'A DANCE INTO MANHOOD' AS A PARADIGM

Nicholas Chielotam Akas
Theatre Arts Department
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
nicho_carrygo@yahoo.com

Abstract

In traditional African setting, indigenous dance is an integral part of life. It is linked with the worldview of the society in which it is produced. In its real sense, indigenous dance as an art form transforms images, ideas, thoughts and feelings into movement sequence that are personally and socially significant. The communicative potency of some indigenous dances towards participatory learning aids in achieving balance of knowledge, skills and attitudes among the indigenes. Some of these indigenous dances at this stage become indispensable tools in enthroning community sensitization, education and reformation. This paper, therefore, looks at indigenous dance as a medium for participatory learning using *A Dance into Manhood* as a paradigm.

Introduction

The major concern of indigenous dance history is to acknowledge the changes that have occurred with time. Therefore, it requires the explanation of events that have necessitated these changes and an understanding of the very history that gave sense to identity and continuity in our indigenous communities. To understand the potency of indigenous dance in our local community, it becomes imperative to trace its origins from the three sources namely, emotional, impulse and improvisation. There is a need by humans to release psychic tension by means of rhythmic movement and also through ecstasy or magic. This has, perhaps, prompted Ossie Enekwe to conclude that the early man, in an attempt to control, and communicate, with the forces around him, developed symbolic gestures and movements that expressed the way he felt to his supreme creator. This makes ritual one of the major sources of dance. (24).

The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form that has its roots in the numerous indigenous festivals across the country has made our indigenous dance a total performance. A total performance, in the sense that it, involves core aspects of traditional African theatre, starting from masquerade, mime, painting, costumes, folktales and dance. Like any other African art form, indigenous dance is not meant for aesthetic purposes only; rather it deploys individuals as tools for projecting the norms and values of their community. Akas Nicholas states that “indigenous dance as an art is interwoven around the fabrics of our indigenous communities especially based on their socio-political, economic and religious experience.” (34).

Indigenous dance as an art has always continued to gain acceptance as an independent performative art in our indigenous communities. It still remains a very powerful medium of communication both within theatre and in our indigenous communities. Its development over time has been linked to humans' desire to communicate innately. According to Igweonu Kenechukwu "indigenous dance exists in every culture of the world. Its practice and functional values have direct bearing with the socio-aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of any given society". (146)

Indigenous dance in traditional African societies is the expression of beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance movement of a community. Onwuekwe argues that "indigenous dance can be an art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the merely function movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable, exciting or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotions, mood, ideas, tell a story or portrays political and social needs." (178)

In Africa, each indigenous dance has a context, a story within the performance. The context is the meaning of a particular indigenous dance. Whether it is a ritual dance or ceremonial dance, the context of the indigenous dance is most important because it guides the dance on the tempos, the mood and even the images and metaphors. Nicholas states that "the meaning of indigenous dance should be interpreted in its context, that context denoted not only historical, social or cultural context which are extrinsic. But also as an intrinsic context that exists as intention on the part of dance." (27)

An Overview of Participatory Learning

Participatory learning is an approach for learning about, and engaging with, communities. It combines an ever-growing toolkit of participatory and visual methods with natural interviewing technique which is intended to facilitate process of collective analysis and learning. Sarah Thomas states that:

Participatory learning approach has been used traditionally with rural communities in the developing world. There it has been found extremely effective in tapping into the unique perspectives of the rural poor, helping to unlock their ideas not only on the nature and cause of the issues that affect them, but also on realistic solutions. (10)

Participatory learning in our indigenous community enables the indigenes to share their perceptions, prioritize and appraise issues from their knowledge of indigenous traditions. It also enables the indigenous to participate regardless of their age, ethnicity or literally capabilities towards achieving perfect sensization. The beauty of indigenous dance towards participatory learning is in its combination of purpose and high aesthetic concern, its celebrations and reflection of communal life and virtue. While A Dance into Manhood is being used here to approach participatory learning it will significant to observe how other approaches outside dance may be used to engage participatory learning in a community. These are enumerated below.

Approaches in participatory learning in the community

1. Maps

Mapping activities are often used as introductory activities. They allow the community to show and talk about how they see the area where they live, the resources/ facilities available and what is important to them in their environment. The maps enable the non-indigene to understand more about the community in which they are.

Time lines

Time lines are a type of diagram that helps to record changes in a community/household/life of a community member over time. They are a way of noting the important historical markers and milestones of a community or individuals, giving a wider historical context to issues being discussed.

Transect walks

Transect walks are a type of mapping activity, but they involve actually walking across an area with a community member/group of community members, observing, asking questions and listening as you go. This information is then represented visually in a transect sketch/diagram.

2. Approach Members Constructively

This method is very important in participatory learning in our community. Here every member of the community needs to know their contributions are appreciated during the course of the learning. This motivates the member of the community not to see themselves as inferior but rather as important agents towards achieving the community's set goal.

3. Brain Storming

Here the member of the community is asked to think of any idea that comes to mind and list all the ideas without evaluation or judgment. The quantity not the quality is what matters. These ideas are discussed positively towards the growth and development of the community.

4. Folk Songs

Folk songs are used as a learning process in participatory learning. Here the people are asked to sing a song, after which its didactic essence is positively explained to them. Folk song at this point goes beyond moonlight tales only for relaxation rather as a corrective medium towards community sensitization.

5. Dance

The participants are asked to choreograph a dance to stand as a remembering tool towards already discussed issue. The dance must be choreographed in such a way it will reflect the existing problem in the community and at the end proffer a solution to them. The dance movements are semiotically choreographed to portray the communicative essence of dance towards achieving a positive change. It is necessary investigate how A Dance into Manhood can act as a watchdog for the community.

‘A Dance into Manhood’ as a tool for participatory learning.

A brief insight into ‘A Dance into Manhood’

This is an indigenous dance among the people of Amandugba in Imo State. The dance centers on transition into adulthood among the youths in that community based on their customs and traditions. The dance is solely meant for youths between the age limit of 20-34 years old. The reason for such age limit is that, it is believed that those who partake in dance at this age receive more blessings and successful future from their ancestral spirits. In Amandugba community, for any youth to be fully initiated into a “Dance into manhood” he must possess the following: a good character, not of Osu family and must be a member of notable age grade. These qualities help in selecting only those who are real indigenes and are fully qualified to be initiated into the dance. A dance into manhood is very symbolic both in its movement, form, style and content because of its uniqueness in teaching, sensitizing and informing the youths of Amandugba on the need to be a full initiate into the dance. *A Dance into Manhood* helps in checking initiates’ attitudes and behaviours in the community. During the initiation ceremony, those whose future are bad, unpredictable and confused, will be re-adjusted by the gods to be suitable for them. In Amandugba, in recent times this dance stands as a watchdog in the lives of the youths.

An Analysis of the three symbolic dance movements towards participatory learning in 'A Dance into Manhood'

Abughi m onye nbianbia (I am not a visitor)

The dance movement here is very symbolic and communicative to the spectators of the performance. The dance movement is performed with both legs, but on a slow beat. The reason for the slow beat during the dance performance is that, it is believed that every true son of Amundugba community must be familiar with the dance steps of this particular dance. This particular dance movement, according to their cultural belief, can only be taught by the gods of their land to only true male indigenes of the community right in their mother's womb, while those born out of wedlock must learn the dance steps. The real indigenes, while doing the slow movement dance must dance around a circular form. Such circular movement simply portrays unity, peace and also stands as a strong oath for the youths to use their strength in defending their community. At a point in this circular movement the youngest amongst them all steps into the middle of the circle kneeling down and with his face up calls on their 'chi' to intervene on their futures. Once such prayer is made everyone will all be in a trance. It is believed that once they are in a trance the gods are turn around their future from bad to good, poor to wealth, death to life and pains to constant joy. They are expected to be in that trance for one hour, once the trace is completed, they will all shout 'Long live the gods of our land for turning our future from worst to better'. At this point the tempo of the drum will witness a gradual increase while everyone will dance out in jubilation.

2. *Odumije* (My Guardian)

This dance step is performed with one leg down and one leg up. This is based on its semiotic communicative potency. It is used to caution Amundugba indigenes in Diaspora to be very careful while sending and investing in outside economies. The one leg up movement signifies the fact that 'no matter where they are, no matter how successful they are and no matter their investments, they should always remember they are mere visitors in that particular land, so they should always remember their community.' The one leg up dance pattern, also teaches them that an investment outside their community can be destroyed at any given time.

The other leg down signifies *Aku rue ulo okowaa onye kpara ya* (when wealth gets home it declares its rightful owner). This encourages the indigenes to invest more at home than outside. Whatever they invest at home becomes more enduring and more secured than those invested outside. To analyze the contextual essence of this dance pattern through the dancers' body, the dancers have attained the expertise, and are now dexterous, to stand on one leg up and one leg down for forty-five minutes while performing on stage. This dance movement till date stands as a tool for a rethink in the minds of the Amundugba Diaspora wealthy.

***Uzo anyi meghe* (Let out doors open)**

The dance movements here are free-styled based on individual creative ingenuity. This dance movement is seen as a means of asking their ancestral fathers to bless their business, family and children and to give them more favour. It is at this point in the dance that non-indigenes can join the indigenes in celebration. "A Dance into manhood" has really aided in teaching the younger generation in their community the essence of being a member of the dance when they get to the age of initiation.

Conclusion

In indigenous African setting, the act of a dance is most often linked to the relationship or bond between spiritual forces and the community. When performed as a team or as a solo dance, the performance would always nurture an inherent spiritual or expressive purpose and intention. Indigenous African dance has been used to achieve religious, social, educational and even therapeutic purposes. Participatory learning in Amundugba community using their indigenous dance (A Dance into Manhood) has made them to re-appreciate the dance beyond mere entertainment but rather to re-appreciate it as a guiding metaphor towards upholding their culture. Conclusively, indigenous dance as a medium for participatory learning using a dance into manhood as a paradigm has remained as indispensable tool towards cultural sustainability and preservation in Amandugba.

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