

DANCE WITHOUT MUSIC: IS THE TALKING DRUM INDISPENSABLE IN AFRICAN PERFORMANCE?

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Abstract

Dance is the outward rhythmic expression of inner emotion that compliments a good rhythm and is performed within time and space. Although some dance scholars and performers, notable among who is Susanne Kircher, have tried to experiment with unaccompanied dance movements; the notion of dance without music appears to be the exception rather than the rule especially in African where the irresistible pull of the talking drum draws the young and old to the dance arena. Drums are the dominant musical instruments in African performances. The lead drum in any ensemble is the talking drum which is a melorhythmic instrument that dominates as a medium of communication. Ugoamaka dance has over the years utilized the dynamic abilities of the talking drum to enhance the overall impact of its performances. Using the qualitative method of field and library research, this paper studies the role of the talking drum in African music ensemble and the relationship between music and dance in African indigenous performances.

Introduction

There are opinions that dance can be performed without music and some experiments have been developed along such conceptions. These developments have however brought some questions to bear

on the various definitions of dance. The exponents of 'dance without music' hinge their arguments on the fact that one can move the body to the accompaniment of internal rhythms without hearing external rhythms. The advocates of this practice, are operating on the argument that dance is an independent art form devoid of other ancillaries. Susanne Kirchner a German is one of the key exponents of dance without music. Kirchner performs in total silence. Her performance consists of slow inch by inch movements in an excruciatingly deliberate manner. A typical act by Kirchner act begins with a static starting posture to a final resting position. After a brief pause she moves to another area of the stage and begins another delicate movement, totally deferent from the first one but at the same slow speed. Kirchner holds the view that "when one dances to music, it feels like there is a competition between music and dance". She believes that without music, the emphasis would be totally on dance, with both the performer and the audience giving full concentration to the performance. , (Par. 3).

The question however arises if dance can be involving, for both audience and performer without any accompanying music beats. The continent of Africa is a huge and multicultural geographical enclave. Africa consists of several countries with varied cultural dynamics. Many factors influence the African dance, and top among them is the diversity in culture. African dances tend to explain the lives and feelings of an African individual, a couple or an entire community. In other words dance reflects the happenings of its environment in Africa. It is usually classified on the basis of gender and deeply reinforces certain community structures like age, status, context and kinship. One wonders therefore, if African dance can be appreciated without musical accompaniment. Certain questions

become pertinent; Is dance without music obtainable in Africa? When not applied to a particular rhythm, can body movement be called dance from an African perspective?

The answer to these questions provide the pivot on which the argument of this paper rests. In African dance, it is usual though not mandatory for men to expend jumps and leaps while women dancers could perform crooked knee positions and bent body postures. It is also usual to have a group of dancers dancing in a circle with a drummer in the middle. African dances symbolize the social structure and traditional values of the people, The dance types help the African people to praise, criticize and even work with one another. The various dances heavily rely on music to propel the highly energetic and deftly executed movements,. In most African countries, music is an essential part of the people's daily life. The two basic and very important musical components in African culture are the human voice and the drums. It is true that some African ethnic dance forms, such as those of the Masai; do not use drums, but they stand as exceptions not the rule. in core African performances, the drum is practically indispensable. (Soyinka 113).

Thomas reports that In the western part of Africa, the drums known as *Djembe* symbolize the people's day-to-day life. The drum beats explain the mood of the tribal people and evokes emotions. The African attitude towards music is said to be "two dimensional", but some African cultures follow the "three against the two" beats of the drum. Drums always accompany them at every occasion in their lives (72). African dance includes cross-rhythms of the musical instruments along with total body movements. Different body parts are highlighted in different cultural performances. Fast vibrating movements of the legs are emphasized in the dance of the

Igbo of Nigeria such as Atiliogwu, Ihediegwu and Nkpokiti, whereas upper body movements with emphasis on shoulder and chest areas are essential movements in warrior dances. Dance is a performing art deeply woven into the social fabric of Africa and generally involving music and theatre, as well as rhythmic bodily movements. Due to the highly expressive attitudinal behavior of Africans, they tend to appreciate good music by moving the body to the rhythm. In Africa, it is believed that dance is born out of music (Primus 3). There may not be many lyrics in African dance but there are nonverbal clues and the lyrics are explained through the beats of the drums and intense humming and other such type of sounds.

Relationship Between Dance and Music.

Dance celebrates life. The life that is being celebrated is the life style of a people as permitted by their culture. To understand a dance is to understand the culture that gave birth to it. Within traditional African culture, the act of a dance is most often linked to the relationship or bond between spiritual forces and the community. Whether performed as a team dance or as a solo dance, the performances often nurture an inherent spiritual or expressive purpose and intention. African traditional dance has been linked to religious, social, educational and even therapeutic purposes. Rituals for healing, funeral rites, remembering victories of past warriors, celebrating fruitful harvests or work, marriages, rite of passage ceremonies, initiation rituals, defining authority and displaying sexual fertility are some of the many initiatives of rituals that have stemmed into African dance. Dance is seen as the rhythmic movement of the body performed in time and space (Bakare 2). By this definition, Bakare has related dance to music, because rhythm according to Olaniyan, is the forward movement of

music. It is an aspect of music comprising such elements as accent, meter, time and tempo in contrast with pitch sequence or tone combination. Rhythm is the whole feeling of movement in music with strong implication of both regularity and differentiation. Rhythm is central to African music, particularly drumming. It is essential to music as both practitioners and audience respond to the pull of music by dancing thereby ensuring the appropriateness of rhythm in whatever context it is used (9).

Music is defined as the arrangement of sound in a pattern that is pleasing to the ears. It is perceived as a universal language that enriches the soul. In the actual sense, music cuts across boundaries, borders, ages, races and cultures. Music reflects the mood and the creative imagination of the composer. It has the ability to compel the listener to behave in a particular manner, by arousing a certain feeling, mood or spirit in the individual. The marriage between dance and music is inseparable. Just as music is known to be an organized sound, likewise dance is said to be organized movement. Dance and music can inspire one another, since dance is the rhythmic movement of the body that is usually accompanied by music. In some cases, it is the music that inspires the creation of a movement; on other occasions, a particular movement can inspire the creation of a rhythm. But in most cases it is the music that inspires the dance and dance motivates the music. Dance is the outward expression of appreciation of good music. This implies that while dancing, the dancer bares his innermost emotion in public. Music is the food of the soul and dance is the expression of the mood of that particular soul. Cordial relationship exists between body movement and rhythm during performances in Africa. But music can equally mar a dance. When music is not well organized it can kill the spirit of the dance. Also if the music rhythm is not in

consonance with the mood of the dance; or the various sounds that make up the music are not harmoniously curdled, the dance can be jeopardized (Okafor 16-17).

The music that structures choreographed dance is usually conceptualized and created as sonic dance. In other words, the music aurally outlines the details and scenario of the dance. The entire dance presentation has the solo objective of exploring, extending and celebrating a culture's choreographic genius and cultural eurhythmics. The composer and the choreographer work in close collaboration when they are not presented in a single creative personality. Dance items would usually be sequentially presented in a formal other that agrees with the thematic sequences in the music form. There could be structured acrobatic and gymnastic displays like the type seen in the Igbo Nkpokiti dance. Like music, dance has its own rhythm. The rhythm of dance is the choreographed rhythmic body movement that narrates the musical line and choreographic details, both in dance steps and motions. Thus there is a well-rehearsed structural interdependence between the music structures/form and dance structure/form (Nzewi and Nzewi 74). In other words, dance-rhythm is the progressive and forward movement of dance with strong implications of both regularity and differentiation. Throughout history men have recognized the power of music and dance, and have used them to improve their lives in some ways. The children of Israel utilized the power of music and dance in the bible to pull down the walls of Jericho during battle (Joshua 6:1-21). Music and dance play significant roles in places of worship where healing miracles are performed. The pulsating rhythm of music coupled with body movements set fire in one's spirit, and draws down the atmosphere of miracle (as many call it) where all things are possible. The

interdependence of music and dance is well explored in African festivals. Music plays an essential role in propelling dances and that is why. Kinni-Olusonyin maintains that there can hardly be music without the corresponding dance..Even in the absence of musical instruments, Africans sing, clap hands, and tap their feet to produce music to accompany their movements (58). Dance is one major feature that often results from musical rendition. African music is not conceivable without dancing, neither African rhythm without drumming or the forms of African songs without antiphony (Hornbostel 52).

The Talking Drum

In African music the word drum is ascribed to any instrument that can be played upon to produce a resonating sound effect. These instruments include the slit drums, slit gongs or metal drums, earthen drums and the membrane drum. The slit drum is a one-piece musical instrument made of wood. A hollow resonating chamber is dug in the log to furnish two sounding lips. The construction of the resonating chamber may provide for two rectangular openings some distance apart, connected by the sounding lips. The shape of the opening resembles a dumbbell. The name “slit drum” comes from the slit that normally separates the two lips or sound shell that vibrate when struck to produced sound amplified by the resonating chamber. Slit gong or metal drum are metalophones. By this, they are classified as idiophones made of metal materials. A Slit gong has a flared base and tapers to an apex where a non vibrating handle is constructed. Gongs found in African culture are usually two halves of curved metal sheets that have been welded together along the longitudinal rims. Some large bells have lobed shapes, while others are conical. The cylindrical

bells are molded as a single unit. The single unit cylindrical species usually have clappers attached inside the apex. The earthen drum is also known as the clay drum or water pot drum. It is a large gourd of clay with an opening on top. It serves utilitarian functions and is used as a deep-toned traditional musical instrument. The traditional African membrane drum is made of wooden vessel with a skin covering the top. Membrane drum is a subtle musical instrument with prestigious social statuses. It has the spirit of communalism. Membrane drum can come in a pair or as a single form (Nzewi and Nzewi 87-92). African drums can be discussed musically as instruments that produce two or more primary tone levels.

Drums are used as singing or talking musical instruments in Africa. During the manufacturing process indigenous technology carefully selects designs that will produce the requisite sound for which purpose the drum is made. The drum talks when a rhythm structure is produced by the combination of primary and secondary tone levels. Drum, basically is a form of language stimulation and communication technology (Chukwu 7). In most cultures, drums are used in pairs of different sizes and thereby provide primary tone levels played by different performers in music assemble.

The sound of the talking drum is conceived in Africa as elevated (spiritual) or physical communion. It affects the mind in a manner that is physically therapeutic or, if programmed accordingly, induces mood excitation. The African talking drum produces healing sonic energy and also imbues and enriches spiritually. The sound of the talking drum summons the community to share cathartic somatic energy. The talking drum is an agent of social-spiritual communion. To submit to the spirit of the drum music is

to share harmonious company and feeling with other humans (Cole 23).

Misconception exists pertaining to the talking drum. Most people refer to it as a type of drum, particularly the type used by the Yoruba of Nigeria. Akpabot cleared the air when he explained that talking drums exist in all the cultures where drums are played, particularly in Africa. They come in various forms, shapes, and sizes and play very vital roles in music making. He goes further to say that the talking drum refers to the lead drum in every African society and culture and that though it may vary in shape and form, but its functions remain the same (87). Truly, the Yorubas epitomize the use of talking drums. The talking drum of the Yoruba is shaped like an hourglass and is known as a *dun-dun*. The drummer holds the *dun-dun* over his arm and strikes it with a curved, hammer-like stick. On the outside of the *dun-dun* are tightened leather cords which can be squeezed to control the pitch of the drumbeat. From Akpabot's explanation, it is obvious that a talking drum is recognized based on its role in a performance and not in physical attributes. The talking drum cuts across cultures. It is usually smaller than the bass drum in size to enable it produce the requisite sound that is often louder than the other drums. Any drum that plays the lead role in a performance is the talking drum. The conception that the talking drum is a particular musical instrument is an unfounded one. Just as the name implies the talking drum can talk. It can be used to convey messages. Ordinarily, the talking drum is a percussion to which people can rhythmically dance to, though in traditional society, it was also used as a means to convey messages to long and short distances.

The art of drumming is a skill that exposes the human rhythmic sense. It involves tapping the skin of the drum in a particular way to produce the required sound. Drumming is one of the major art forms in Africa. A drummer in the African musical context is a rhythmic personality. African drum ensembles have standard rhythms which they play. This is the most frequently played rhythm by the various instruments. Every African instrumentalist begins his apprenticeship by learning the standard rhythm played by different instruments. In Africa, instruments play in ensemble, with one instrument playing a pattern to establish a time line, while the other instruments play one after the other, depending on the rhythmic pattern assigned to them. In drumming one drum usually acts as the leader (talking drum), playing a variety of patterns while the secondary instruments play patterns having varying degrees of repetitiveness (Akpabot 452).

Ugoamaka Cultural Dance

Paul Nwankwo also known as Ezeugo revealed in an interview at Awgbu in may 2012, that the Ugo Amaka dance group started sometime in 1985 at Awgbu in Orumba north local government area of Anambra state in Nigeria. Ugo Amaka is an offshoot of Ogbagu night masquerade of the people of Awgbu. The Ogbagu night masquerade existed in the the 1950's in Awgbu. As a night masquerade Ogbagu performs only at night before initiated members only. Initiates were only male members of the community. As the performers of Ogbagu grew old and weak in age, the dance died a natural death. It was not until 1985 that Paul Nwankwo took it upon himself to resuscitate Ogbagu dance. Before Ogbagu dance phased out, the performers taught the people of Awa in Orumba north the technique and rudiments of the dance.

When the need to resuscitate Ogbagu dance in Awgbu came in 1985, Nwankwo invited the Awa people to help them particularly in the area of instrumentation. Before now the Awa people had taught the people of Umuoyiuka in Ufuma and others from Nanka both in Orumba North local government of Anambra state the skills of Ogbagu dance. According to Nwankwo, the people of Umuoyiuka still maintain the ancient tradition of the Ogbagu masquerade.

The revival of Ogbagu came with some measures of transformations in the dance. The name was changed from Ogbagu to Ugoamaka dance. As stated earlier, the Ogbagu performed only at night for initiated male audience. But after the revival, Ogbagu now known as Ugo-Amaka performs during the day time and even at night if the need arises and it performs for any type of audience. The costume and mask of the masquerades were changed from fierce looking masked figures to loving and friendly masked impersonations of river maidens. Ugoamaka dancers usually perform in pairs..The costumes were radically transformed for spectacular effects.. Based on Nwankwo's account the inspiration to make it very beautiful and colourful was gotten from the appearance of the Ijele masquerade. The Ijele which is regarded as the king masquerade in Igbo land because of its splendour is a symbol of wealth, beauty and royalty. Today Ugoamaka dance has performed in several places within Nigeria, rising to national acclaim. In 2005 the Ugoamaka dance group led the Anambra state contingent for the Abuja cultural carnival into the Eagle square Arena. Ugoamaka also represented Anambra state in the 2006 and 2007 cultural festivals.

Ugoamaka dance movement is characterized by turning, twisting, body vibrations and stooping. The whole body particularly the leg region is involved in the dance. Communication exists between the

talking drum and the dancers during performance. The essence of every rehearsal is to perfect this communication for better understanding. A good performance of Ugoamaka dance is a product of perfect communication that is born out of the close fellowship between both performers – the dancer’s maneuvering of the body to a rhythm and the drummer’s skilful act of tapping the drum to produce a resonating effect that aides dance movement – during performance. The introduction or ‘intro’ dance in Ugoamaka performance is done in a pair. The two masquerades perform a uniform dance.. The essence is to establish the identical beauty of the performers (the two masquerades). After the intro, the rest of the dance is alternated between the two dancers.

The talking drum plays a principal role in Ugoamaka performance. It is the talking drum that gives the dancers their dance and movement cues. Ugoamaka music has a general rhythm which serves as a reception into the main music that is to be danced. After the performance of a particular dance movement, the music falls back to the general rhythm. While the general rhythm is being played, the performers alternate positions – the one seated will mount the arena in preparation to dance while the one that just danced takes a seat - and prepares for the nest move. The one that performed takes a seat while the one seated comes up to perform. Apart from cueing the performers on what to do and when to dance, the talking drum journeys down the road with the dancers during performance highlighting each movement. This adds beauty and meaning to the overall impact of the performance. When accompanied by sound, dance movements are made more pronounced, exaggerated and somehow larger than life.

Each of the dance movements performed by the Ugoamaka dancers varies from the former. They have names such as Igba Ojije,

Cinema and Obata Okolu. When it is time for a particular dance movement, probably the Igba Ojije, the talking drum will inform both the dancer and fellow instrumentalists that what is coming next is the Igba Ojije. Once this happens, the dancer (masquerade) whose duty it is, to perform the Igba Ojije enters the arena. This communication is not verbal; it is spoken by the talking drum. Members of the Ugoamaka dance troupe understand the language of the talking drum. In Ugoamaka dance the talking drummer is usually a master drummer with years of experience. The drummer is so conversant with the music that when something is about to go wrong during performance he would sense it and use his drum to call the performer or other members of the troupe to order..

Conclusion

It will be hard to arrive at a universally accepted definition for dance because dance means different things to different people. To understand what dance means to a people, one must first understand the circumstances that gave rise to the dance. The meaning of dance is relative and not subjective. The word dance is vastly represented. To the likes of Kirchner who performs in total silence to no particular rhythm or sound of any kind, dance obviously means the movement of the body in time and space, without rhythmic accompaniment. Music is therefore a distraction from Kirchner's perspective. To understand her perspective of 'dance without music', one must first examine her guiding principles. Muir definitely does not share the same view with Kirchner as can be see in his submission which presents music as a unique phenomenon among the performing arts which has the potency to make one respond to it not only from the head and the heart, but also frequently from one or more of the feet (30). If

Muir's definition is anything to go by, it means that music particularly in Africa is inconclusive until there is a corresponding action to its rhythm. The attempt to dance without music would definitely seem unusual from an African perspective. The inextricable bond between dance and music in Africa is aptly captured in the age long adage that says, when a man dances to no apparent music, either along the road or in a market square, his drummers must definitely be somewhere in a nearby bush.

As a custodian of culture, African dance is greatly influenced by the changes in the culture of its community. The notion of dance without music may not be applicable to Africans. This is because African theatre is an encompassing institution. The various arts are interwoven into each other. Dance is not a separate entity and neither is music. Both are part of the whole complexity of African performances. Dance in Africa is spurred by music. African music has a divine appeal. It can pierce into the soul of a person, change his mood and compel him/her to behave in a particular manner. To separate dance from music is like separating a pregnant woman from the baby in her womb.

Every culture has its own approach to music and this is visibly manifested in their choice of instruments, methods of application and the end result that is produced.. In the music ensemble of various cultures, a particular kind of instrument plays the dominant role. In African music, the dominant instrument is the talking drum. Any of the African drums – membrane, metal, or slit drum – can talk because as argued by Nzewi, they can lead in a musical performance and also reproduce tones that are made by the human voice and melodies that capture the fundamental pitch equivalents of the tone levels (Chukwu 4). But during performance, only one drum is allowed to lead or depending on the kind of music or the

decision of the composers, the lead position can be alternated between two or more instruments. The nature of the music in most cases determines the drum that will lead the performance. The talking drum is more than just a musical percussion. Its role in African music goes beyond melody. It is a communication tool, both during performance and in the everyday life of the people. It is the symbolic representation of African music and the dominant instrument in African music ensemble. The instruments involved in Ugoamaka music include, the membrane drums, earthen drum (udu), metal drum (long gong), slit drum (ekwe), flute (oja), and maraca (oyo). All these are talking drums except for the flute and maraca. The flute is an aerophone instrument and not a drum but it can talk and lead in a music performance. African music instrument ensemble is dominated by the talking drum as seen in Ugoamaka dance. To dispense the talking drum from African performance is to annihilate African indigenous music concept and the technology of sound.

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