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Dance in the Yorùbá Family Rites of Birth, Marriage and Death.

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Abstract

Birth, marriage and death are three vital rites ofc passages occurring within a family setting in the Yorùbá land. They are life celebrations which bring members of a Yorùbá family together. The Yorùbá social life is closely guided by religious beliefs, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between the sacred and the profane. Dance occupies an important position in their family celebrations, in religions and communal experiences, and as a form of recreation. Sacred or profane, however, dance plays a most significant role in the life of the people. The reasons for dance are as diverse as the social occurrence. Rites of passage are rituals that mark an individual's transition from one set of socially identified circumstances to another. This paper therefore examines the important roles of dance in three rites of passages in the Yorùbá land hoping, in the process, that the significance of dance in the life of a people can be determined. The paper concludes among others that dance as it occurs during rites of passage functions mainly as means of bringing the extended family together in the celebration of a happy or sad occasion. Dance functions as a reciprocal gesture between children and their parents; while parents honour their children at birth and at their weddings; children in turn honour their parents at death.

Key words: Dance Rite of passage, Yoruba family, Family celebrations

Introduction

The Yorùbá, a linguistic and tribal ethnic group, inhabit most of Ọ̀yọ́, Ògùn, Òǹdó, Ọ̀ṣun, Lagos and Kwara states of Nigeria. They all speak the Yorùbá language with dialectic variations. Yorùbá people share a long history of cultural tradition. Common to all Yorùbá people is the belief in Odùduwà as the founding father of the tribe. According to their mythology, the Almighty God called *Olódùmarè* sent Odùduwà to the world with a chicken and some sand. Odùduwà descended on a chain, and with the help of the chicken, spread dry land on the existing waters. The place Odùduwà first founded was called Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the city all recognize as the Yorùbá ancestral home. Odùduwà had sixteen sons each of whom he gave/beaded crown and asked to go and found other settlements. The princes found other settlements and ruled over them. From them, other towns were founded (Akinjogbin Unpublished, 1980: 5-6).

Over the years, the Yorùbá people have survived as an agricultural group. The cu1ture operates under a patriarchal polygamous system in which a man can marry more than one wife. The situation became necessary through the demand for more hands on the farm. As an agricultural society, the Yorùbá people depended on manual labour for increased crop productivity. Many wives therefore ensured many children and more hands on the farm (Ademuwagun,1965:244).

The Yorùbá family is an extended family system made up of all relatives called Ẹbí. The Ẹbí includes grand-parents and great grand-parent, uncles, aunts, and cousins many generations removed as far as one can trace. In the true traditional setting, the family lives in a household Agbo'lé headed by the oldest male who is called Baálé. He is respected by all members of the Ẹbí including their wives and children.

Rites are sets of formal religious ceremonial procedures undertaken and accepted by a group of people or community as a way of doing things. The entire Yorùbá people's lives are shrouded in series of rites especially of birth, marriage and death. (Abioje 2014:11) posits that:

> The funeral rites the Yorùbá perform when grand old people (and adults, generally speaking) die, clearly indicate their belief in life after death. The rites include bathing of the corpse, laying the corpse in state in fine clothes, burring the dead with various articles considered useful on the way and in the spiritual world of the dead.

The Yorùbá social life is closely guided by religious beliefs involving a lot of rites, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between the sacred and the profane. Sacred or profane, however, dance plays a most significant role in the life of the people. The reasons for dance are as diverse as social occurrence. Harper (1970:71) confirms these social functions when she observes:

> …It is therefore not surprising to find dance as a medium of expression for all levels of the society on occasions of ritual and social significance, and as the most popular form of recreation and entertainment.

Ugolo (2014: 234) also corroborates;

> Dance is particularly necessary and serves as an integral part of community life which takes on many social functions that are sometimes closely connected with customs and rites. Indeed for some people, dance is the main means of social organization.

Therefore, a house-warming party becomes an avenue for social gathering during which friends and well-wishers dance. Festivals in the Yorùbá culture are closely related to the religious beliefs of the people and dance becomes a medium of worship, thanksgiving and propitiation. On Festival occasions, dance brings all the members of the community together. Occasions which bring the Yorùbá extended family together are closely related to rites of passage, especially birth, marriage and death.

Dance as a cultural phenomenon:

Dance in most African communities plays important role in their culture. It has long been well-known that;

> In the life of primitive people, nothing approaches the dance in significance. It is not mere past-time, but a very serious activity. It is not a sin but a sacred act. It is not mere at or 'display' divorced from the other institutions of society; on the contrary, it is the very basis of survival of the social system in that it contributes significantly to the fulfillment of all society's needs (Rust 1969: 11).

The Yorùbá culture, like other cultures in Nigeria, has a long history and dance has remained an intrinsic part of the culture. Dance is a behaviour within the framework of culture and society. It is "combined inextricably with virtually infinite number of other kinds of behavior" because "dance is culture and culture is dance, and dance is society and society is dance" (Merriam 1974: 9-26). An understanding of a cultural social setting will lead to a better understanding of dance in a culture, just like an understanding of dance can lead to an understanding of why people behave the way they do. Birth, marriage and death examined in this paper are three vital rites of passage occurring within a family setting. They are life celebrations which bring members of a Yorùbá family together. Rites of passage are rituals that mark an individual's transition from one set of socially identified circumstances to another (Plog and Bates 1976: 230). These occasions include birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood and death.

Dance celebrating birth

Children are very important in the life of the Yorùbá people. They join religious cults in search of children; and much care is taken to protect the lives of the children they already have. The care and anxiety become understandable in a culture which had developed over many centuries without such Western facilities as hospitals and senior citizens homes. Child-parental care is a reciprocal phenomenon in the Yorùbá culture. Children are culturally obligated to take care of their parents when they become too old to take care of themselves. Until the British colonial administrators introduced medical facilities in the nineteenth century, medical care was undertaken by divination priest who are also herbalists.

Furthermore, the increase and continuation of the clan are assured by having children. The arrival of a child into a family is therefore, celebrated with much feasting and dancing. Immediately a child is born, its father sends words to the men in his extended family and to his other male friends and neighbours. That evening, a celebration party called *Ìdáwó Ìdùnnú*, (celebration of joy) is held. Only men are allowed in an *Ìdáwó* party which usually features a night long consumption of liquor especially palm wine, dancing and jokes. Meanwhile the women in the household are expected to busy themselves waiting on the new mother and child.

From the first day until the seventh or ninth day (depending on the sex of the baby), the couple entertains friends and well-wishers with kolanuts, palm wine, and light refreshments. Guests always come bearing gifts of money and children's clothes for the baby. If the baby was a girl, the naming ceremony was held on the seventh day; if it was a boy, it was held on the ninth day. In recent times, most babies are named on the eighth day irrespective of the sex.

The Yorùbá extended family has been broken up in recent years by the need to get salary paying jobs and the flourishing businesses in the big cities. A baby born to any member of the extended family thus becomes a reason for all the other members to come together from wherever they have moved to join their kin in the celebration of the birth of the baby. The naming ceremony day is called *ijọ́-ìkómọ-jáde* (the day of presentation of the child to the public). For the first time since its birth, the baby is called by a name. There are no limits to how many names a child is given. Some children have as much as ten names; others may have as few as three. No matter how few or how many, however, every child is given an *oriki* a praise name with which a child is called only by close relatives, whenever they want to praise the child or coax him or her to do some jobs around the house or run an errand. The choice of a permanent name, with which the child will be generally known, rests on the child's father, its grandfather, or great grandfather if any of the later is still alive.

The naming ceremony itself is done very early in the morning before sunrise, and it is called *ìsọmọ l'órúkọ*. All the elders of the extended family of the child's father, both men and women, come together to give the new baby a name. Depending on the family tradition, members of the child's mother's family may also be present at a naming ceremony. Some people even invite friends and neighbours to witness the ceremony. Needed for the ritual are a bowl of cold water, honey, salt, sugarcane (in recent times, sugar has been substituted), kolanuts, bitter kola, alligator pepper, and palm oil. Other items may be added depending on the *orò-ilé* (family tradition). These items are all food products with significant functions and properties. Honey and sugar-cane, for example, are sweet. With a drop of those on the tongue of the new baby, the prayer is that the life of the child may be filled with such sweetness. Bitter kola has a very bitter taste, but on drinking after, the bitterness gives way to a sweet taste. This is significant in that life is not always sweet and easy. If, however, the child meets with some bitterness of life, may the end of the experience turn into joy. Bitter kola also signifies long life. Palm oil and salt are the most important ingredients in Yorùbá cooking; the prayer accompanying these items asks that the child may have the essential spices of life. Palm oil also signifies calm. Oil poured over boiling water is supposed to calm the bubbles. May the child's life be full of calmness. Kolanut is very important to all rituals in Yorùbáland. It is used for *Ifá* divination, to entertain guests, shared between two people as a sign of friendship, and as part of every sacrifice. On this occasion, the kolanut is used as a symbol to fight evil. Water is a symbol for survival: the baby survived in water (albumen) for nine months while inside its mother; its life on earth is also dependent on water because it is a survival necessity. Thus, a drop of water is also administered on the baby's tongue. This ritual completed, the elders get up in turn, give the baby a name, and put some money in the water.

Names given to a baby are usually carefully thought out and relate to the circumstances surrounding its birth. If a child is born shortly after the death of its grandparents it is believed that the diseased has reincarnated, returning to their clan. A baby boy born after the death of his grandfather is named Babátúndé (father has returned). A baby girl born after the death of her grandmother is named Ìyábọ̀dé or Yétúndé (mother has returned). If a man dies shortly before his wife gives birth to a baby boy, such a child is named Babárìndé (father has come right back). Yéwándé is a name given to a baby girl born to a man whose mother died when he himself was still a child. Death in a woman's family does not affect the name given to her children since children belong to their father. Other names allude to chieftaincy titles in the family or recent incidences in the family just before the child was born. With conversion to Islam and Christianity, children's names have also alluded to the faith of the parents. In the past, names alluded to the traditional religion the parents belonged to.

In the evening of the naming ceremony, members of the family and invited guests attend a celebration dance feast. Guests at the early morning ceremony are usually fed with *àkàrà* (pancake made from beans). The evening guests are fed with a variety of food and liquor as they dance. In the past, dancing was usually done to music. They are mainly for entertainment. The evening dance party provides the opportunity for the women of the household to dance, not only in celebration of the birth of the baby, but for the pleasure of their husbands. It is one of the few occasions when the men show their love and affection for their wives in public. As the women dance, their husbands put money on their foreheads. A dance party of this type usually takes place in the courtyard of the family compound. Chairs and tables are arranged in a circle. At one end of the circle is the band stand which provides the dance music. While people eat and drink, others join the dance group that is always in the arena. Although men and women dance together in the arena, the women do more of the dancing on such occasions as this. Sometimes during a dance party, women dance together in a group and their husbands come into the arena to give them money. Before the end of the party, which usually goes on until about four o'clock in the morning, the mother of the baby is invited to dance in the arena. After a short solo performance, she is joined by other women who honour her by dancing with her. Before her dance is over, the men folks would come into the arena and give her money, immediately leaving the arena after.

The musicians also take advantage of the session. As soon as the money starts coming in, the band leader, who usually does his homework thoroughly with regards to the praise names of the celebrants, and the rich people in the party, starts to sing the praise of the people in the party. Such praise songs usually earn some results; after the people in the arena give money to the celebrant, the musicians also get some attention. Some musicians even prefer not to charge a fee for their services knowing that they could make more money on the spot.

In this way, dance functions not only as a celebration, but also as a means of distributing wealth. Dance becomes a vehicle for women to elicit the public show of affection from their husbands and members of their husband's extended family. Some of the women dance in a group to each of the seated old men in the crowd who must honour them by giving money, no matter how small. If the child is the couple's first born or the first son after a number of daughters, the mother may invite her friends and co-wives to join in buying uniform materials made into *bùbá* and *ìró*. Baby boys are very important to Yorùbá men because it is through them that the man's family name grows. Girls are usually lost to other families through marriage. From the day the baby is born until forty days after, both mother and child are waited on hand and foot. The fortieth day is called *ìjáde* (outing ceremony). At this time, the woman may finally go out of the family compound to conduct her affairs as before the birth of her baby. The woman and her child, dressed in their best outfits, go out visiting most of the people who had visited them since the baby was, born. With her baby on her back, the woman visits friends and her own relatives. From then on, the child's socialization as a member of the Yorùbá tribe begins. Dance becomes an important aspect of his or her childhood life, because every time the mother dances with the baby on her back, the vibration of her body rhythm becomes transmitted to the child.

Dance celebrating marriage

With variations from place to place, there are three ceremonies involving dance before the wedding day itself. Marriage is the process through which procreation is legalized in most human societies. In the Yorùbá culture, the arrangements necessary to effect the marriage between a man and a woman are commenced as soon as a potential spouse is known. The first ritual is called *Mímọ̀ àna* (a formal introduction between the, two families concerned). Previous arrangements are made for the family of the bride-groom- to-be to go to the family of the bride-to-be for a formal proposal of marriage:

> There are two ways: if the father of a girl has promised to give his daughter in marriage, all that was done was to fix a day when the formal introduction would be... If there was no such promise, the boy or his father or mother must do some spade work, otherwise the gift of palmwine and kolanuts would be rejected… (Oguntuyi 1979: 17).

The nature of the gift depends on the local tradition of the area. At this meeting, the man's family make their intentions known, adding that they have found out all that needed to be known about the girl's family, and would the girl's family do the same and let them know if they would have their son as a son-in-law. Marriage in the Yorùbá culture occurs between two families and such a union, it is hoped, should last forever. To make such a permanent commitment, therefore, a thorough investigation is made with regards to physical or mental illness, or incidents of unacceptable social behavior that may be detrimental to the union. Before the introduction ritual is over, the family of the bride-groom-to-be dance for their in-laws-to-be in hopeful anticipation of a favourable answer.

The second ritual is called *Ìdúpẹ́* (thanksgiving). After the girl's family members have done, their own ground work and are satisfied with their findings, a message of proposal acceptance is sent to the man's family. In the past, and this still happens in different forms today, the *Ifá* oracle was consulted to find out if the union between the two families would be successful. If the findings were favourable, then, the proposal was accepted.
On the appointed days the man's family return to their in-law-to-be's family with a few gifts. Ìdúpẹ́ is a show of gratitude for the favourable acceptance of the proposal of marriage. The rituals involved are punctuated with periods of praise songs, composed by the man's family for their future wife. Women from, the man's household make it a point of duty to learn the girl's family *oríkì* (praise name). As they sing the girl's praise they dance. The betrothal and wedding dates are usually discussed during an Ìdúpẹ́ ceremony. The dowry and other bride-price needed before the girl can officially be married to the man are also fixed on this occasion.

The third ritual occurs shortly before the wedding. This is called *Ìdána* (betrothal ceremony). In some areas of Yorùbáland, the betrothal ceremony is supervised by the women from each of the two families who will engage in negotiating the bridal price. If the man's relatives believe that they cannot meet the demands of the girl's relatives, they bring some of the articles demanded only in fewer numbers hoping that one of their women have a strong enough bargaining skill to persuade the girl's family to accept what they have been able to afford. The bride-price usually includes the dowry (money); the latest styles in *Aṣọ Òkè* (expensive hand-woven clothes); and ether women's wearing apparels; specific numbers of food items like yams, palm oil, kolanuts, bitter kola, salt, honey, and alligator pepper, palm wine and imported liquor. The expensive wearing apparels are to ensure that the young girl after marriage will have decent clothes to wear. In a polygamous situation, a man may hesitate before he showers one of his several wives with gifts. The demand for clothing before marriage gives the girl an opportunity to get as much as she wants from a man without the fear of getting the other wives jealous. The food items are shared among every member of the girl's family. As members receive their share, they say prayers for the girl’s happiness in her new home.

Usually, young wives of the bridegroom-to-be's relatives carry all bride-price items in brass trays. The man's family members present form a procession about a quarter of a mile away from the girl's house where many of her own relatives wait to receive the visitors. The bride-groom-to-be does not follow the procession since his relatives must negotiate at this stage. He usually stays in someone's house in the neighbourhood waiting to be sent for when all arrangements have been completed. The bride-to-be is also kept in one room where she is attended by her friends and young wives from her extended family. The procession formed approaches the girl's house singing and dancing. The dancers' voices and their clapping provide the music. On arriving at the girl's house, the door is found locked. The visitors will have to answer some crucial questions before they are allowed to come into the house. Questions may include what the praise name of the girl they are hoping to marry is? What are her parents' family histories? Could they recite some of the praise names of her two parents' families? When the bride-to-be is from a different part of Yorùbáland from the man, the guests must learn to speak in the dialect of girl's area. This way, the hosts are convinced that the guests have done their homework and are genuinely interested in adding the girl to their family.

As the door opens, the guests burst out singing and dancing until they are seated. To them, this is a step towards getting what they want. Then the bargaining begins. If after examining all the items brought the girl's relatives they accept the gifts, more singing and dancing is done for the successful crossing of yet another huddle. With some of the liquor brought, libation is poured to the ancestors of the two families who could not be present. Prayers ask that the union of the two families be fruitful. Then the guests demand to see their wife. Three girls have been dressed almost identically for this ritual, and their heads and faces are covered so they are not recognized by the guests. One of these - usually the third girl, is the bride-to-be. The relatives of the bride-groom-to-be must know the essential features of their wife. Most of them would have seen the girl during the introduction and thanksgiving ceremonies. However, most of the people present may never have seen her. When each girl is presented, those of the guests who have memorized some important features and walking mannerisms of the bride-to-be will lead the protest against those of the girls who are not the future wives of their family. From experience, at this little betrothal game, most people know that the first two girls are almost always sent to tease the guests.

At the departure of the second girl, the guests begin to sing and dance in anticipation of the appearance of the third girl who is usually the young wife-to-be. Most of the guests who have had the opportunity to meet the girl lead songs describing some of her features. These songs thus become the guide in looking for features in the third girl that will assure them that she is indeed the girl they have been waiting to see. The atmosphere is always jovial as the girl is unveiled. She is applauded and seated. Older women from the man's family pamper her, wiping non-existing sweat from her forehead, fanning her with handmade fan's, and leading songs in her praise. The bride groom tobe who has been waiting in nervous anticipation; is now sent for to join the bride-to-be. The ritual which follows resembles the naming ceremony described earlier, in that the honey, salt, kolanuts, bitter-kola, and alligator peppers are used as symbols to say prayers for the couple. After this, the couple is as good as married because the wedding day only marks the arrival of the girl to her home; however, the girl does not go to her husband's house until the wedding proper is conducted.

The wedding day is called *Ijọ́ ìgbéyàwó*. Wedding feasts are organized at the homes of both the bride and the bride-groom. The feasting and dancing usually start on the eve of the wedding and continue intermittently until long after midnight on the day of the wedding. Wedding feasts are very expensive. Whereas a child is too young to know the ceremonies that go into its naming ceremony, a wedding becomes the occasion when a person can enjoy all the celebration that goes with the rituals. Dance bands are engaged to supply popular music, and dancing involved in wedding celebration knows no limits. Hundreds of people are invited and are fed to their hearts' content. Sometimes, more than one band is invited by each family. On arrival at her new home, she is welcomed by dancing women. A man must not be in the house when his bride arrives. As soon as the music accompanying the bridal party is heard at a distance, the bride groom must go into hiding at a neighobour's house. It is a taboo for a man to see his bride coming into his house. This is why the Yorùbá have the saying: “Ẹni à ń gbé‘yàwó bọ̀ wá bá kìí na‘rùn" (The person whose bride is being brought must never peep to see). In the past, the wedding day marks the first time the bride steps foot into the man's house. The man did the entire courtship visitation, and it was a sign of bad home training for a girl to visit a man before marriage. In some areas, the girl might even be labeled as promiscuous. This strict rule ensured that the girl remained a virgin until after her wedding.

Before the bride steps foot in the gate, her feet are washed in a ceremonious manner to cleanse her of any bad luck she may be bringing into her new home. The wedding day is very important to a girl. Generally marriage in the Yorùbá culture, it is a celebration of a happy occasion.

Dance to Celebrate Death

Under normal circumstances everyone is expected to live long, old age starting at about fifty years. Any death occurring before this age, especially where the deceased did not have children is regarded as a death to be mourned. Such death is not celebrated with dance. Where a person lives until old age, the celebration is a way of giving thanks for long life and for the opportunity granted the deceased to live behind children who can now continue life where he or she had ended it. In most of Yorùbáland, people believe that after death, the soul rises to another level where life continues.
People who die young, especially some special class of babies, are believed to go to the third place of rest. These children are called *Àbíkú* (reincarnated children). Some deceased people are believed to reincarnate and be born again by one of the members of their family. The Yorùbá also believe that the soul of the dead ascends to the position of other òrìsàs (gods) where they can now look down on their people. Thus, dance celebrates the attainment of this higher hierarchy by the deceased these souls are represented by the

Egúngún (masquerades) who are said to come back to the world to judge the living.

Furthermore, dance at a funeral becomes an opportunity for the children of the deceased to honour their parent. Dance functions as reciprocity between parents and children. When a child is born, the parents dance in its honour. Most of the expenses of a child's wedding are borne by his or her parents. Now is the time for the children to honour their parents for all they have received from them over the years. This is one other reason why the Yorùbá value children. Death becomes an occasion for one's children to honour one. Funeral rites are different from place to place, but dance always becomes an important part of the rituals. There was usually a period of mourning which lasted forty days. After the funeral rites are over, the family of the deceased organizes a funeral party to which a band, like that employed for a child's naming ceremony celebration or a wedding feast, is invited to play. Dance at a funeral party is as elaborate as dancing in celebration of birth or wedding. Just like on the other two occasions children and members of the deceased's family are given money when they dance. And like the other two occasions, death is an occasion which brings all family members together.

In general the tropical condition of the weather in Yorùbáland allows for dance performance in the open air. All the rites of passage described so far are celebrated with dance feasts arranged outside under the night moonlight and the stars. Because of the expanse of space such setting provides, dance style is always free employing a generous use of space. Dance movements are close to the ground, the giver of life. The body is inclined in a slanting manner forward, and the loose dress style of the people has become a part of their dance performance. Men and women dance holding a panel of their wrapper or garments. Improvisation is freely used within the recognized steps. Aesthetics is mainly judged by how well each individual has been able to interpret the beats of the drums and how freely they are able to move. Dancers get closer to the ground in free abandonment when they have warmed up to the music.

Conclusion

Viewing dance from functional perspective in this paper has allowed us to examine dance in relation to the totality of the culture. Our conclusion is that dance as it occurs during rites of passage in the Yorùbáland functions mainly as means of bringing the extended family together in the celebration of a happy or sad occasion. It also functions as a reciprocal gesture between children and their parents; while parents honour their children at birth and at their weddings; children in turn honour their parents at death. Dance during a betrothal ceremony becomes a non-verbal body language to be recognized by members of a bride-groom's party. Through the study of the movement mannerisms of a bride-to-be her future family can tell her apart from other girls even when their faces are covered. Dance creates occasions for public boasting among men as is seen during an Ìdáwó party when a child is born to a man; it creates an opportunity for women to elicit a public show of affection from their husbands; and an opportunity for a young wife-to-be to demand for gifts without the fear of arousing the jealousy of other co-wives. On a different level, dance functions in the distribution of wealth in the society. It also provides an opportunity for friends and well-wishers to join in other people's celebrations.

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