

NUDITY, MORALITY AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT: A STUDY OF “WOMEN OF HOPE” DANCE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Nudity in African performance is perceived by some as something barbaric, taboo and mundane that need not be discussed at all or seen by children. Some African parents believe that colonization has really put an end to any form of nudity, no matter the message or reasons surrounding it. But nudity existed in Africa of pre-colonial era in cultural activities. The research questions in this article are: What is the symbolic essence of nudity in dance? What are the factors that give rise to such nudity in the dance and are there cultural implications of nudity in the dance? When these questions are answered, the audience will understand that indigenous African choreographers do not choreograph in abstraction; rather their environment contributes to their working metaphor. Based on the objective of this paper, the essence of nudity in the dance, “Women of Hope”, is of great potency. This is so because it is a means used by women in the dance to express themselves on how they are being raped, robbed, and brutalized by unknown men in the community. The study discovers that, ironically, the communicative potency of nudity in the dance is for caution and signal for total revenge. From the finding, in Igbo cosmology, women are taken serious whenever they decide to do extra-ordinary things as going nude. The use of nudity in this dance is highly semio-communicative when interpreted beyond its moral potency. In order to understand the communicative potency imbedded in the dance, content analysis would be used as qualitative research methodology towards interpreting and understanding the choreographers’ motivation. In conclusion, nudity in its exposed form should not be ruled out totally as something barbaric; rather people should try to understand the reasons behind such exposure so that understanding the message in the dance as an expressive act can be accomplished.

Introduction

In African cosmology, nudity based on its sociological undertone is highly symbolic and represents situations and actions at any given time. To Africans, nudity is not all about sexuality; rather each form of nudity is motivated by a

particular action, ideology or environmental situations. For instance, in core rural villages in Africa, children growing up, both boys and girls are allowed to be totally nude while playing, because it is believed in Africa that they are still young, innocent and totally ignorant of any negative emotional feelings or sexual urges. But ironically any child seen covering him/herself at tender age is tagged a spoilt child. On the part of the mothers when they start aging they always expose their bodies especially their breasts. This symbolically portrays how many children they have given birth to. It also portrays at times that they were not wayward before and after they were married and, also, that their breasts are a source of living to all her children, hence none of them should disobey her or regard her as mere old woman. Manning Conrad observed that “nudity in some circles and some societies is completely divorced from sexual overtones. It may have no significant meaning in itself or it may indicate such diverse conditions as poverty, humility and commonly even a state of sacredness and holiness” (24).

The socio-communicative potency of nudity in cultural settings really shows that some environmental actions, mythical belief system or opinions contributed to various levels of nudity: half nudity or full nudity as the case might be. Half nudity can be in various forms for both male and female in our present society. For the girls, only bra on, while for the male totally bare-chested with or without singlet. Some of the environmental factors that might cause such nudity are as follows:

- a. It might be caused by hot weather.
- b. It might also be caused by over familiarity based on brothers and sisters or cousins.
- c. Or in a situation whereby some person or persons are grieving over death of relation, protesting over something or to showcase not being guilty of any accusation (as Yoruba’s do at times).

This paper argues that nudity, in all its ramifications, is far beyond immorality, poor home training and poor fashion trend use. Research has shown from social nudists that, nudity has both health, environmental and physical implications depending on how it is been utilized. So it will be totally bad to place nudity side by side with immorality without knowing the ideal reason or reasons surrounding each form of nudity. For instance, Manning clearly states the positive functions of nudity:

- a. Nudity provides more effective and natural vitamin D and Calcium balance.
- b. Nudity reduces the effect of stress, decreases blood pressure and decreases rising heart rate.

- c. Nudity reduces male infertility, impotence and nodular prostatic enlargement with resultant urinary tract obstruction.

Pauls suggests that “nudity should not only be judged on superficial level whenever it is seen, rather people should learn to ask question, observe and study reasons surrounding such nudity before making myopic generalizations that the person is totally uncultured” (29).

History has it that the nudity of a man as represented by artists in their paintings and carved works portrays man as a higher animal amongst other animals especially apes. The various paintings of nudity of man symbolically represent the innermost being of every man beyond mere clothing. At times, especially amongst artists, the totality of man exposed in nudity reveals his/her trunk shape, emotional reactions and responses to situations or shocks. Henry has observed that “any artist that enjoys expressing himself through nudity of man, simply, alerts man as a being whose self-actualization is inborn and not in the external clothing of make belief” (34).

For some creative works of art, the medium of expression especially when it has to do with nudity has been misinterpreted and called mundane art on the basis of morality. Morality has made some to reject creative art works and going to theatre to watch dance performances which will lead them to hell fire or affect their faith as Christians. It is important to note that this paper is not disputing the fact that some art works are highly obscene before its viewers and buyers. Rather the problem of this paper is to correct the myopic perception placed on nudity as a medium of expression in any art work. Towards the conclusion and recommendation as part of this paper, the reader will understand that the researcher advocates viewers deemphasizing their limited mind-set and valuing the reflective communicative essence imbedded in that medium of expression.

Nudity, Morality and Change Management

Metre Chirag defines change management as ‘the systematic approach and application of knowledge, tools or form towards a better or more efficient process in improving the life of the people’ (5). But based on this paper, the essence of nudity and morality in dance performance is not barbaric or absurd rather what matters and make them acceptable in the society is the communicative undertone imbedded in them. It is the communicative undertone imbedded in change management using nudity and morality as a choreographic tool presents them as a sensitizing mirror seeking for ills in the society to redress especially the once that are gender sensitive. For change management to be useful in any performative art it must be identifiable,

acceptable and adaptable based on Kotter John transformative model of change as cited by Metre which are: a) establishing a sense of urgency; b) creating a vision: c) empowering the people to act on the vision. The aforementioned sociologically justifies the potency of nudity and morality using the selected study “Women of hope” dance performance.

Morality: An Overview

The development of any society, community, organization and human being centres mainly on their moral belief and perception. It is their believed ideology that socially unifies the aforementioned in action, mission and vision statements towards upholding and actualizing any set goal. But non-conformity to a structural and nurtured moral belief system de-emphasizes any set principle. According to Hoffman:

Morality is the welfare and rights of others, especially when they conflict with one’s own interest to make choice between doing good or bad. The person’s ability to emerge successfully from these two emotional struggles makes him/her a moral sensitive being. (qtd. in Lisa 9)

The essence of morality wherever it exists is for it to stand as a guiding force and principle in making our daily choices. Man as a being is believed to be a higher animal among other animals because of his moral ability, sustainability and actualization based on logical and critical reasoning. But in this paper the aim is to observe, interpret and understand the moral justification in some nudist works, especially dance. At this point, nudity in dance based on cultural and moral justification is beyond biblical opinion of sin; rather in this context it is highly communicative and has a piece of information to pass across to the audience. Akas maintains that:

Nudity in creative art be it in dance, costume, poetry and fine art, should not be easily ruled out as an obscene object. Rather what matters or should be appreciated immediately is the subjective meaning imbedded in the art and not the objective perception based on individualised ideology due to engulfing effect of colonization of Africans. (46)

Aside the pains and regrets of colonization that at times de-values our cultural essence, it is very important to state subjectively in this paper that all action, belief and performances in African setting has a moral justification. It is the communicative moral justification in African performances that automatically

explains what gave rise to their emergence and their sociological usefulness whenever they existed. Akas Emenike (in an interview) stated that:

Communities should not be easily commended especially whenever their festivals look absurd or expressionistic in nature when placed side by side with the westernized festivals or performances; rather let the watchword and thematic essence be placed on the moral justification and the essence of its existence. With this, people can understand that any stylised performance be it nudity or otherwise does not exist in a vacuum.

Based on the above, every stylized performance in African setting or in Igbo cosmology has a traceable root. It is the traceability of such performance that justifies its moral implications. Nicholas Akas observes that:

Man as a being does not act out of mere assumption or provocation; rather the development experience he has passed through in life affects his perception or opinion towards certain views and actualisation of things or action. This consciously makes him store those actions in a domain called 'moral judgement' which at times helps him to determine whether to be or not. (24)

The effectiveness of morality in this paper goes beyond mere understanding of holy or sacredness on any works of art rather serve as tool for artistic creative justification.

The Sociological Implication of Nudity in Dance Performance as a Choreographic Style

Dance is unique art form that has several means of communication based on the choreographer's choreographic style. It is choreographic style of any choreographer that positively showcases the information they want to pass across to the viewing audience. In dance scholarship, the use of body movements and its communicative essence has gone far beyond entertainment for it is an expressionistic tool that portrays the innermost intentions of the following: Choreographer (the creator) – the dancer (the interpreter) and the audience (the social critics), all these are what every choreographer strives to achieve on stage with the dancer's body and choreographic medium.

Research has it that nudity as a choreographic style is barely used by some of the contemporary choreographers due to its obscenity before the

viewing audiences and their myopic moral justification of always seeing such expressionistic choreographers and dancers as corrupt people who need not to be associated with especially their children. But according to Amaka Nmezi (an indigenous choreographer in Egbeada in Ada community Imo in an interview)

It is the inability of parents to see, appreciate and understand dancers as communicators and not mediocrities irrespective of their form and style of expression that ironically forces such parents to see dance at professional level for their children as waste of time, resources, energy and manpower.

The use of nudity as a choreographic style, in any dance socially wise, is for emphatic purpose depending on the choreographer's metaphoric foresight. Based on this, the existence of nudity in dance performance should be looked at subjectively and not objectively as this paper strongly argues. The sociological essence of nudity as a choreographic style in dance is far beyond the Christian moral justification of sin and hell fire; rather in this paper, subjectively, nudity is used communicatively especially when it has to do with humanity – the society – aspirations/expectations and governance. The choreographer, in order to stress the essence of the aforementioned, will stylize his dancers in nudity form towards achieving the following:

- a. To awaken people's consciousness through the obscene body movements on stage and
- b. To help the viewing audience to know the reason behind the obscene movements and what the choreographer aimed to achieve with it.

Kaepler maintains that:

In order to understand the use of nudity in dance, the movements must be grammatical, they must be able to view the immediate environment or society at large and present their worries bare before them. The nudity as a style in dance examines the nothingness of man's existences in world in which he lives and struggles to survive. (118)

The effectiveness of nudity as a choreographic style both culturally, professionally and socially presents the innermost feelings of a depressed man in his society. Scholarly wise at this point man no longer hide his feelings; rather he expresses them the way they are and not the way they ought to be. Arieti maintains that "nudity was a natural and normal part of life. People are

not nude when things are moving fine for them, but people's nudity are always noticed when environment and conditions are longer favourable to them" (qtd. in Ankrah 206). The semiotic use of nudity as a choreographic style by some choreographers depicts the following:

1. State of Emergency
2. Man's inhumanity to fellow man
3. Victimization of women
4. To demand for urgent attention on some topical issues
5. As sign of purification against any taboo.

This is what the use of nudity in dance stands for. It is not misleading anybody especially Christians (believers). Wadestone strongly observed that "there is no sin in nudity itself, but if a person uses the nudity for lustful or immoral purposes, he has misused it and this constitutes a sin. But when it is used for teaching morals, the bible does not speak against nudity nor does it teach that the body is shameful "(qtd. in Ankrah 267). Logically, the sociology of nudity in dance interpretatively presents the uncertainty of man's expectations in his daily activities.

Nudity versus Morality

The success of any work of art especially in dance performance and choreography centres mainly on the morals behind its creations. It is the core level of morals in any choreographed dance movements that purposefully guides the choreographer towards setting a goal and work hard towards achieving it through body movement. At this point, the choreographer does not create movements out of mere assumptions; rather it is the de-valued moral belief system of the masses motivates the creative impulse of a choreographer towards creating a dance movement. The objective of every dance movement is to educate and not entirely for entertainment as it is wrongly misinterpreted always by non-dance scholars. But, in order to achieve the desired objective, the choreographer has the creative licence to use any available communicative medium and style in passing the intended message across to the viewing audience. Ifeanyi stated that "dance is a free expressive art and its medium of expression is as free as the art itself" (24).

The essence of moral justification of nudity as a communicative medium or style is based mainly on the ability of the choreographer to portray the following:

- a. To give reason for selecting such a choreographic style as an expressive medium.

- b. To explain the various nudity semiotic movements and take those movements to people that owns it for easy understanding and appreciation.
- c. To make the audience understand that the choreographer mirrors its immediate environment and present them the way they are.

Nudity and morality are highly interwoven in any artistic work especially in dance choreography. Nudity in dance as a style always serves as x-raying, interpreting and projecting the intended thoughts, ideology and observation of the creative artist be it musician, choreographer, fine artist and playwrights. The subjective aim of any choreographer using nudity as a choreographic style is to unmask the hidden truth in man's existence in his immediate environment. For instance, it is the nudity of a man that portrays his inner body structure, showcases how smooth and how rough he/her body structures is and also the places that need adjustments will be adjusted too. The same is applicable in dance creation and performance using nudity as its communicative medium. Here the choreographer uses the dancer's body as an 'operating theatre' where he dissects the governing and governed, present his flaws, broken promises and other various social misconducts. The moral justification of the use of nudity at this point, presents pressing situation the way it is and how it affects the masses and also demand for a possible solution where and when necessary.

Based on morals, the choreographer should always be perceived and appreciated based on the thematic content of his dance movements, its creation and its actualization and not to be christened on the ideology of sin and hell fire. Akas observes that 'The choreographer is a social crusader and his medium of expression should be adored too as a communicator and not as a sinner or moral degrader' (24). Erpolat maintains that, 'Nudity in dance can only be subversive when the naked body is used to question and expose the development of evil on the society through the dancers' body. (206). The semiotic interpretative essence of nudity and morality in dance is for self-acknowledgement and power. Self-acknowledgement helps to ask critical questions when and where necessary, while power gives the viewing audience drive to seek for positive change or look towards observing the change. This work adopts Sarah M.C. Kenncy internalized theory on nudity. This theory centres on man's inner thought towards nudity against the generalized perception of nudity being an obscene action. She said "the positive use of nudity is not a sin; rather its wrong use against its existence is highly questionable and must be sued" (24).

Conquet also believes that “what controls everybody be it artist, normal person and the society at large is the inner self and not outside self” (34). She also reaffirmed that ‘in human existence the inner self is the magic fuel while the outside self helps the fire to burn faster’ (34) Symbolically, the fuel based on the thrust of this paper simply shows what motivates the creative impulse of artists, while the medium of expression serves as an interpreting tools (the fire).

In this paper, the internalized theory as the theoretical framework will help in understanding positive essence of nudity and morality in the dance performance called “Women of Hope”. The core subjective aim of this theoretical framework is to advocate that the medium of expression in any work of art especially through nudity should be viewed wisely, interpretatively and appreciatively beyond immorality, sin and hell fire as the case may be for Christians. Every art work lover and social critics should first of all understand what triggers the inner self of an artist which he/she externalized through the chosen medium. If this can be achieved, one will begin to understand that happenings, situations and observations inspire the creative artist to always put on his thinking cap and work towards proffering possible solution.

The Synopsis of “Women of Hope”

This is a contemporary dance-drama choreographed by Alfred Okoye. It is a command performance requested by one of the new generation churches in Lagos state during their church Women’s Day. The dance through its semiotic movement mirrors the various experiences women pass through because of tradition, societal norms and religious beliefs. The mirroring of women experience x-rayed in the dance portrays how a woman was sentenced to death for cheating on her husband and abandoned her children to her husband to look after them for six hours. Serious and painful women experiences are portrayed through symbolic choreographic movements. The choreographer is able to showcase men beating their wives and calling them all sort of names for going against the societal norms and shouting out what the woman should not do no matter the pressure. Based on the high level of humiliation the women in the dance revolt seriously through their nudity dance style and call for fair hearing. It is the moral justification behind their nudity dance style using the dances body as a medium that makes the dance a communicative tool. According to Alfred Okoye (the choreographer in an interview)

A lot of evil meted out in some public places especially churches, communities and in our society can never be ignored or considered common.

So, that is why I chose nudity as choreographic corrective tool. He also said that he saying the raw truth (using nudity) and also to awaken the women consciousness in seeking for fair hearing and judgement.

Analyses of “Women of Hope”

Before the analysis, it is important to note that the dance itself is a ten-minute dance-drama on stage, highly energetic from the beginning to the end. It is the use of symbolic body movement under three sub-themes that presents the communicative essence of the dance. It is the categorization of the sub-themes through Bretchian style of performance on stage using sign post that presents the various ideologies of each scene and the expected actions of the dancers on stage. The sub-themes of the dance performance are as follows; the victim, the judgement and the revolt.

The Victim

The dance movement here varies from slow beat to high beat; each of these beats is symbolically important. Before the dance, a solo performer dances onto the stage with two sign-posts. On one sign-post one reads *the hotel* while on the other one reads *the victim*. After the proper positioning of the sign-posts she dances out of the stage. Immediately a woman is seen dancing to a very romantic beat and moving towards the hotel sign-post with her boyfriend. One thing very symbolic about these two lovebirds is the inscription on their both backs. The woman’s own reads: “I’m married, but full of regrets”; while the guy’s own reads: “I’m here to hear you out, you have my shoulder to lean on”. So the slow beats continue which showcases them as two love birds. At a point, the sounds of the drum change to a more fearful sound and on a very high tone, which shows sign of danger. Immediately the sound is heard a man is seen dancing to show sign of anger, disappointment and with a knife on the intention of killing his wife for committing an abomination. But at the back of the man’s costume is boldly written: “Yes, men are guilty of this offence, but it is forbidden for a woman to try such”. The choreographer creatively showcases how the husband beats up the man and sends him out of the hotel room while he (the husband) choreographically drags the wife to the sign-post written “The victim”; there he threatens to send her back to her parents.

2. The Judgement

This is another symbolic scene in the dance based on the inscriptions at the back of the judges. On the costume of judges is written: “Any offence committed by a woman in marriage should be straight divorce”. The woman is

brought in before judges to give reasons why she is cheating on her husband. Inside the court, other women with their various husbands are present to witness the court scene. One major symbolic action in this court scene is through the choreographer's style of using tempo through drums to portray his actions in the court. For instance, if the victim husband is talking, the whole environment will be calm and quiet through the slow beat of the drums and mimetic movement of the people inside the court room. But if his wife (the victims) wants to talk, the tempo of drums will go high which simply means she is not allowed to talk; rather she is guilty and nothing more. This particular action symbolically repeated itself three times in the dance-drama until the Chief Judge passes his judgement that the man is allowed to re-marry another wife, while on the side of the woman she should leave her ex-husband's house immediately and go back to her parent's house or now enjoy her freedom with her boyfriend. The unfair judgement gave rise to the nudity revolt of the women in the dance.

The Revolt

This is where the choreographer presents his style of nudity revolt with moral justification. In an interview with the Alfred Okoye (the choreographer), he said that the nudity revolt here by the women is a moral lesson for fair hearing which stands on the following:

1. Women are human beings and should be treated fairly.
2. Whenever a woman airs she must be heard out before crucifying her.
3. Our men are always right in their immoral behaviours while women are always scapegoats.
4. Our total nudity on this ground is for moral justice to be done or we will use our breast to lay curse on men.
5. Oh! "Women of Hope" let the obscene nature of our nudity, morally wise fight for our just course.

Conclusion

The core of this paper is to refute the misconception of people about art works, especially when it has to do with nudity. The use of nudity in creative works should and will not be interpreted literally; rather its positivism towards change should serve as the moral yardstick in judging them. "Women of Hope" is used as a medium in mirroring various harmful traditional norms that are inhumane to women and their human rights. The choreographer therefore uses nudity as a choreographic style to expose them, present women's reactions in such situations and proffer the way forward which is peaceful

resolution rather than a gender struggle. Based on this, choreographers and other creative artists become agents of societal transformation and reformation, through their creative ingenuity and unique expressive medium.

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