

DANCE AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN MODERN BENIN CULTURAL TROUPE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Cultural dance groups in Nigeria are mostly private businesses and ethnic-bound set to propagate their people's culture. Government-owned cultural outfits also abound in the country. There is the National Arts Theatre which houses the National Troupe of Nigeria while the thirty-six states of the country have their own Council for Arts and Culture meant to sustain, preserve and promote the people's rich cultural heritage through dance, music and other forms of traditional performances. This paper examines the influence of modernity as a social change factor on cultural dance groups in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria to determine how survival instincts have propelled traditional dance groups to creativity, thereby fostering and sustaining cultural identity and continuity. Two cultural groups are used for comparative analysis; their performances are examined to ascertain new dimensions infused into their works and their audience views on these changes. Literary and non-participant methodologies are applied in gathering data. Interviews are conducted with leaders and members of the two groups. Their performances, observed at social events serve indices for audience acceptance.

Introduction

The varied forms of dance which abound in our societies are expressions of how people live in each epoch. Some of these dances are constantly performed by cultural dance groups at social occasions outside their original context to meet modern entertainment needs. Preparing these forms in contemporary contexts “naturally imposes a number of constraints on their duration, scope and content, quality and modes of presentation” (Nketia 130). Meeting up with these realities thus requires creativity on the part of the cultural dance groups which sometimes create new forms or improve on existing ones by bringing imagination to fruition.

In line with the above, Edo, in his treatment of culture against the background of civilization, states that every generation changes its culture in

response to times and discoveries (“Concept of Culture” 6). By implication, cultural development is the response of life to changes in the society derived from new perception of things, aimed at making life either more appreciated or comfortable. In a more precise form, cultural development in Alonge’s view is a road map to societal development (qtd. in Babawale 5). Some factors stressed by Edo in another instance such as evolution, innovation/diffusion, and conformity necessitate cultural change and bring about growth, development, and cultural diversification (“Dynamics of Culture” 124-125).

As common with every society, modern Benin society is constantly responding to changes in its social strata which continue to alter taste and perception to life. The complexities arising from intercultural relation of cosmopolitan city continues to engage the minds of the owners of cultural dance groups whose bid to satisfy the yearnings for variety entertainment through imagination, observation and innovation keep afloat the cultural heritage of the people. These they do by bringing new dimensions of creativity into their performances. Thus, in upholding tradition, they leave their footsteps in the tides of times by performing dance and music that cut across cultures bearing in mind that the guest who constitute members of the audience at these events are of mixed cultures. Although the new forms are derivatives of the cultural nuances of the people, these cultural groups are set to erase the notion that African dance performances are monotonous and boring. By this act, they do not only re-invent tradition, they also add value to it thereby promoting the cultural heritage of the Benin people.

The need for this research thus arises from a personal experience of a cultural group’s performance at a social event where the group, despite the presence of various musicians, stole the entire show by their display. Those who had engaged other musicians could not help coming to watch this particular group’s performance. To them (audience), they were seeing such an awesome performance as they never envisaged a cultural dance group will be so captivating in their display. Against this background, this research examines the Edo Cultural Group International and Eki Theatre Troupe both in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria with a view to determine how they have managed their troupes by bringing innovation into their performances in response to change in taste and perception of the modern Benin society.

Cultural Dance Groups in Benin City

According to Awodiya, each society has its traditional and modern institutions managed by some persons in the community (73). Cultural dance groups as art managers, fall under the above categories as they help to perform, sustain and

develop the people's music and dance at each period in time. Traditionally referred to as *Otu no kui 'kuare*, cultural dance groups in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria are called several names depending on their owners. Notwithstanding, they are generally referred to as cultural groups or dance troupes which shall be interchangeably used in this paper.

The place of these groups in social gatherings in Benin City cannot be undermined as they continue to bring up new dimensions or improve on existing forms to remain relevant to modern life. They function at most occasions where their services are hired as musicians to provide music and dance for the celebrant and guests. They also entertain the guests by adding color to the event through the cultural display of music and especially dance to supplement the efforts of other musicians when necessary.

Dance troupes in Benin City are over 30 in number consisting of the State Troupe (Edo State Council for Arts and Culture Performing Troupe), Edobayokhae (oldest cultural group), Edo Cultural Group International, Inneh Theatre Troupe, Ediendo Theatre Troupe, Edo Theatre Troupe, Eki Theatre Troupe, and a host of others. Apart from the State Council for Arts and Culture which is government-owned, the rest of them are private-owned business outfits set to earn a living by reviving, preserving and propagating the cultural heritage of the Benin people through indigenous music and dance. This economic drive propels them to infuse variety and changes into their performances to attract constant and regular patronage.

These groups perform in all kinds of ceremonies by government, organizations, and individuals requiring entertainment in dance and music. The occasion they perform nonetheless, their performances can be viewed from two perspectives of when engaged to serve as co-musicians and when they are the sole entertainer. In the first instance they perform more dances serving more as interludes while in the second context their emphasis is more on providing music while spicing it up with spur-of-the-moment movements that cut across cultures for the cosmopolitan audience.

Cultural groups in Benin City travel across local, national, and international levels for cultural exchanges. This exposure coupled with the seemingly competitive atmosphere set by the large number of available groups is some of the factors responsible for the changes taking place in their performances. Each group tries to outshine the other by introducing unique features into their performances to make them continuously attractive.

Dancers in cultural groups are costumed to reflect the *Ugho* dancer. *Ugho* is a major social dance of the Benin people originated by the Oba's (King's) wives. The dressing is thus an identity construct for the traditional

Benin woman. As for instruments used by these groups, they consist of two major sets of drums such as *Emugie* (big drum with three medium sizes) and *Ema-Olokun* (Olokun drums – two small drums), gongs, gourd rattles. These descriptions are necessary at this point to enable us determine the innovation brought into their performances in a bid to manage their troupes to adjust to social realities.



Plates 1&2: Showing *Ugho* dancers in their complete attire and the traditional musical instruments used by every dance troupe in Benin
Source: The Researcher's personal holdings

Edo Cultural Group International

Edo Cultural Group International, apart from Edobayokhae, is the oldest serving private cultural dance group in Benin City founded on May 29th, 1966 by Late Chief S.O. Ogbodu. It was necessitated by an outstanding performance of a young man Agbonifo Enaruna (popularly called Idemudia) and his friend who were contracted by Chief Ogbodu to entertain his guests at an end of year party organized for his club. Their overwhelming performance propelled Chief Ogbodu to form the Edo Cultural Group with Agbonifo Enaruna and his other friends.

The group began with seven members but they are 21-28 in number presently. At its inception, its aim apart from entertaining and promoting the culture of the people was to breed and engage young dancers to carry on the cultural legacy of music and dance. Till date, the group's activities involve the three aspects of the performing arts which are music, dance, and drama presentations attracting a lot of attention by producing cultural music and dance ambassadors for the state. Prominent of these are high priest Osemwengie Ebohon, Agbonifo Enaruna, Abiomo Ogbewi, Jane Ekhaton, and Daniel Uwadiae. Also, several cultural groups have emerged from this group one of which is Inneh Theatre Troupe - one of the most outstanding and expensive cultural groups (presently) in Benin.

Edo Cultural Group International has performed at places like Benin Republic, Ethiopia, Algeria, Australia, England, and Russia for cultural display and exchanges. It has also performed at such national events as FESTAC 77 (Festival of African Arts and Culture held in Nigeria in 1977) and at National Festivals of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) where it represented the state and won gold medals severally. The idea for the formation of the State Troupe is said to have been spurred by this group and some of its members became pioneer staff.

Eki Theatre Troupe

Eki Theatre Troupe, alias *Osamweniyobo* (help comes from God), is one of the numerous indigenous cultural dance and music groups in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria. Founded in 2011 by Mrs. Martina Ilaide, the troupe currently has about 23 members made up of male and more of females which fall within the ages of 14 to 45/50 years old. Set up as a business outfit to perform the dance and music of the people, the Troupe in its five years of existence is turning into a formidable group by making waves with its unique performance and glamorous outlook. This is not surprising as the founder is a staff of Edo

State Council for Arts and Culture who had worked there for over twenty years. She is obviously infusing her widespread experiences into her private troupe.

Eki Theatre Troupe meets every Wednesday of the week to rehearse. They could also meet on a daily basis when there is an event that requires more rehearsals. They perform at all social occasions such as those listed above. Like most cultural dance groups in Benin City, the Troupe's major dances performed are the *Ugho* and the *Esakpaide* royal dances of the people. This is not to say they are limited only to these dances, they could perform other dances in and outside their culture based on demands.

The Troupe unlike most upcoming cultural dance group is always patronized (engaged). One of the major reasons for this is their attractive and captivating appearance and performances. They are almost sure to get another booking at each occasion they perform from members of the audience. Also, they do not have rigid booking fees but this is not to say they could go below certain amount.

Comparative Study of Change Management in Edo Cultural Group International and Eki Theatre Troupe Performances

From the foregoing, the new and innovative ideas infused in cultural dance group performances in Benin City is an offshoot of factors ranging from social, religious, political, economic and cultural changes and the need to satisfy the new audience. Our focus therefore in looking at how these groups have managed these changes to keep their relevance to the immediate society shall dwell on their dances with reference to movements created, nature of songs and instruments used, costume and make-up worn, props, and the general atmosphere created by their overall performance.

Beginning with the dance, these groups seldom perform the *Ugho* and *Esahpaide* dances at social events anymore except it is specifically demanded for. The nature of the engagements they attend often do not create room for such dances as the occasion is normally very rowdy with people moving all around trying to ensure the guests are satisfied and comfortable. In this wise, these two groups have brought in innovation through solo performances infused with traditional creative movements to charge the atmosphere and entertain guest while they await the celebrant to engage the floor by dancing. Also, backup singers often respond with creative spur-of-the-moment movements often initiated by one of the dancers in addition to earlier rehearsed dance packages.

The spontaneous movements are created and choreographed to meet the exigencies of the occasion especially when members of the audience yearn for more. As the lead singer create movements and patterns on the spot, other dancers respond in such a way that one could hardly notice error and lack of uniformity in their performances. This is not to say there are not moments of lack of uniformity in these performances, but the mistakes are sometimes seen as a matter of style by the enthusiastic audience except it is a very conspicuous one.

In addition to the above, the culture (s) of the client or celebrant engaging the cultural group can as well affect the style of performance by these groups. In marriage ceremony where the bride and bridegroom come from different cultures for instance, these cultural groups will emphasize these in the music and dance they perform. Most times, they sing songs that cut across the major ethnic groups in the country to satisfy the mixed audience.

With regards to innovative movements from the field observation carried out, Eki Theatre Troupe seems to be more dynamic than the Edo Cultural Group International. They are younger and are much more vibrant and captivating in performance. They have a unique performance which is a processional dance. This apart from their style of costume has distinguished them from other groups' performances. It is very colourful in nature, with varied, spontaneous, energetic and captivating movements, intricate or simple patterns depending on the sitting arrangements of guests. The processional dance serves to welcome guests and call their attention to what the group can offer. At the end of this performance, the stage is set for various displays which come in solos and groups.

Another aspect of dance innovation by both groups is a solo creative dance performed by a young female dancer who dresses in a skimpy costume patterned after the method of dressing by the youths. She explores with contemporary movements most of which are erotic in nature. This, apart from spicing up the general performance is targeted at the younger persons mostly in the audience reflecting the language they can easily understand.

As for songs, the groups go beyond the domain of indigenous folk songs to creating praise songs for specific occasions. Some of these praise songs are also created on the spur of the moment in honour of the celebrants or a specific member of the audience. They also sing songs that cut across the major ethnic groups in Nigeria to reach their unique audience. For the sake of being able to reach a larger audience, these cultural groups have added modern instruments to the traditional instruments listed above. First, they make use of sound systems like microphones, speakers, mixer etc. Eki Theatre

Troupe due to the challenges they have encountered with musicians at occasions have infused the use of guitar and, or piano into their performance to enhance their sound.

In addition to the traditional drums, a talking drum (*emele*) has been added to the instruments. The traditional owners of this instrument are the Yoruba ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is a unique instrument that can spur anyone to dance. A combination of these new equipment with traditional instruments coupled with good management, gives the performances by these two groups unexplainable uniqueness.



Plate. 3&4: Artistes in Eki Theatre Troupe playing *emele* (talking drum) and a guitar. Source: Researcher, field observation, Benin City, 31/1/2016

Costumes worn by these two groups also come with new dimensions. That of Edo Cultural Group International still maintains the normal style of tying wrapper from the chest down to the ankle. The innovation they have brought into their costume therefore, is in terms of material used and the colour. The usual costume for cultural dance groups in Benin is a red velvet wrapper although other colours could be used. Edo Cultural Groups have extended the variation to include lace, silk and other expensive and more colourful and attractive materials. While their men is consistent with the normal velvet or white wrapper tied from their waist down to their ankles.



Plate 5&6: Edo Cultural Groups International in their modern attire of lace and velvet materials, beads and creative head wig (*okuku*). Source: Researcher, field observation, Benin City, 26 &28/12/2015.



Plate 6&7: Drummers and a lead singer in their different colors of velvet wrappers.

Source: Researcher, field observation, Benin City, 26 &28/12/2015.

Again, Eki Theatre Troupe, in terms of costumes, is much more creative. Apart from the usual wrapper, the troupe has brought a more outstanding innovation into its dressing by making a long breast tub gown with bare shoulders to give the impression of the wrapper. This is more fitting and easier to wear, making obvious the physique of the dancers unlike the wrapper that conceals their body shape. These gowns are made to specific shapes of dancers and necessary precautions are taken to avoid embarrassments which sometimes come with the wrapper impeding movements when not properly tied or falling off the body. As for the men in the group, they either tie the usual wrapper, wear the troupe's t-shirt, or they

are dressed in personal wardrobe as they are normally stationed in a position, playing instruments and singing.

Some years back there was a pronouncement from the King's palace that cultural dance groups should desist from wearing the traditional royal head wig (okuku) in their performances. The reason behind this was that the Oba's (king's) wives and female members of the royal house are the original wearers of this wig that was being commonized by the society. The original head wig is round in shape with four pillars or strings, attached to the front, back and sides of the wig. This is very significant in Benin cosmology to represent the base on which the Benin society rests (Abbe 2014).



Plate 8: One of the many variations of *Okuku* with four pillars. See plate 1 above also

Source: Researcher personal holdings, Benin City, 2/2/2016.

Cultural groups have devised a way out of this pronouncement as the wearing of this wig completes the royal dressing of the Benin woman. Thus emerged one that carries the impression (shape and idea) of the original one but it is without the four pillars. This variation however, turned out to be very colourful. In this regard, some cultural groups have also experimented with tying head gear which was rejected by the audience and traditional Benin people who felt the change gave a different identity to the people.

The *Okuku* (Traditional wig) worn by Eki Theatre Troupe as observed, has a pillar at the front while that of Edo cultural group have none. These groups also have variations in the beads they wear to decorate their necks, hands, ears and head. These beads are more fanciful in nature. Also, necessity and response to environmental change have made some groups to introduce the use of shoes into their performance unlike the naturally barefooted method. While performers of the Edo Cultural Group still stick handkerchiefs to their wrappers or handle the gourd rattles as hand props when performing,

performers of the Eki Theatre Troupe either use two fanciful hand-fans to display or play with the gourd rattles too.



Plate 9, 10, 11, &12: Photo section of Eki Theatre Troupe in their costumes, *okuku*, beads, gourd rattles, hand fans, etc. Source: Researcher, field observation, Benin City, 12/12/2015 and 31/1/2016.

Audience Acceptance

In every business organization, costumers are as important as the products or services rendered, keeping producers in business. The essence of advertisement is to sensitize and draw the attention of the consumers to available services or products and when the consumers are not satisfied with the quality of a product, they do not hesitate to change direction. Hence, the role of the audience in the survival and continuous relevance of the entertainment industry is quite relevant as works of arts are created for appreciation and without audience, theatrical performances are not complete.

As earlier stated, private cultural dance groups in Benin City are set up for economic reasons. Like every other business, the owner of these groups sought ways to improve on their performances so as to attract more patronage. Both cultural groups here discussed are quite aware of the need to sustain

themselves in business hence they are open to suggestions and constructive criticisms that will improve on their art. An interaction with these two groups reveals that they are always on the lookout for things that catch the attention of the audience so as to infuse them into their performances. Eki theatre Troupe in this regard is much more dynamic as far as the innovation falls within the confines of the culture; they infuse it into their performance to add colour to tradition. Part of the motivation for their creativity is the need to have a distinct and unique identity in performance.

One of the major managerial strategies employed by both groups to capture their large audience is to have renditions that cut across ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds. This gives almost every member in the audience a sense of belonging as their minds are engaged in a pleasurable manner through the avenue created for their involvement and participation. From the interviews conducted on audience members at different occasions (Prof Aibueku, Mrs. Okunbor, Mrs. Eboigbe, Mr. Agbonifo, Mrs. Adagbonyi, benin city, 12th and 28th December, 2015), the responses were very positive. Majority of the respondents were enthused at the new dimensions brought into cultural dance and music forms. To some of them, the innovations are improvements and reassurances of cultural continuity.

As for the conservative audience members (which are minimal), these innovations are agents of cultural erosion meant to truncate original identity. The issue of originality they fail to note is however subject to context as has been captured earlier in Edo (2010:6) statement that “every generation develops its culture”. Every culture is in constant transition to produce new forms and the criticism by minority group on the new approaches does not prevent the innovation that is quite welcomed by majority who keeps engaging these groups. A continuous patronage is therefore a major sign of audience acceptance of these changes and criticisms by the minority group in the view of these dance troupes are as important as the acceptance by the majority as they serve as their checks and balances.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, change management in modern Benin cultural dance performance implicates growth and development, an act of experimentation that results into new forms or an improvement on the existing ones. The reception of innovation by audience members in these two cultural groups' performances is dependent on how appealing these changes are as the audience might not be aware of the processes of coupling a performance but

they know a good, new, and interesting one. Despite the difficulty involved in bringing innovative ideas to fruition, the artist from the perspective of this study, is dogged in bringing his art always to standard and making it relevant to the immediate society by infusing changes that audience can easily identify with thereby adding value to existing forms through innovation that enhances development and subsequent transformation.

Finally, cultural dance groups have always reflected and adjusted to the changes taking place in their environment, resulting into new forms of arts created. They are therefore, agents of cultural propagation and survival that should be encouraged by the society for the sustenance, propagation and continuity of the people's culture. Change in cultural dance groups performances in Benin therefore, is one of the ways of remaining extant and relevant to their society, an organizational and managerial approach to remaining in business.

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