INDIGENOUS/CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN QUDUS ONIKEKU'S NIGERIAN CONTEMPORARY DANCE WORKS

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Abstract

Dance, the movement of the body in time and space, is deployed for entertainment and communication purposes. This study, therefore, examines movement and expression in the dance performances of Qudus Onikeku, with a view to determining the structure, elements and influences. Maxine Sheets-Johnson's Phenomenology of Dance Qudus Onikeku of Qdance Company, who constantly engages cultural nuances in the creation of his works, was purposively selected. Three dance performances of the contemporary Nigerian choreographer were purposively selected based on the infusion of indigenous idioms in them. Performance analysis was done, with particular emphasis on Qaddish, while also making references to Rainmakers, SpiritChild, all choreographed by Onikeku. Spirituality, dynamics (force), music, chants, storytelling and audience participation are indigenous nuances that are predominant in the performances. Acrobatic movements echo the Igbo Atilogwu dance. Different spiritual practices are incorporated. There are substantial deployments of Bata dance styles: dynamics, body structure, and brisk movements. The infusion of Omele Bata as the dominant percussion intensifies the ambience of the performance alongside chants and poetic renditions. The music is mainly Nigerian drum compositions with some Western music accompaniments. The dominant dance movements are reminiscent of Tiv's Swange dance. The performances tell stories in different ways but hinge mainly on dance movements as a means of communication. The study shows that Nigerian contemporary dance performances, targeted at entertaining and communicating, deploy Nigerian cultural nuances fused with Western ideas.

Keywords: *Contemporary dance in Nigeria, Qudus Onikeku, Indigenous dance forms*

Introduction

It is significantly difficult to give absolutely definitive interpretations and analyses of Nigerian contemporary dance, especially the new waves of theatrical dance practices. Ambiguity shrouds the nomenclature accorded to dance creations in Nigeria. It further reveals the indistinctiveness of what Nigerian contemporary dance is or should be termed. This may be due to the eclectic nature of indigenous cultural dances that characterise several contemporary dance styles or the use of other theatrical elements to enhance the success of such dance creations.

Limited scholarly inquiries have been made concerning the subject of Nigerian contemporary dance due to ideological conflicts/concepts. The French Cultural Centre and other institutions like Goethe Institute amplify Western-oriented contemporary dance concepts rather than indigenously influenced dances.

Contemporary Dance

Defining contemporary dance poses so much debate based on the several diverse opinions and viewpoints of different researchers and practitioners alike. Kansese submits that "contemporary dance has refused to be formalised as it cannot be easily described or defined. The reason is that it has multiple dance styles which are usually decided by the individual dancer"(2024:380). Generally, contemporary dance is the dance of the moment. This, from an artistic point of view, does not capture the form and nature of contemporary dance in its totality. However, from the theatrical point of view, contemporary dance is, according to Carlson *et al*,

> …a visceral art form that is often considered to be abstract and avant-garde. It is distinguished from genres such as ballet, jazz, and folk dance. Developed to break the boundaries of traditional ballet technique and strictly narrative dance forms, contemporary dance explores qualities of movement and the mechanics of the human body. Composition often focuses less on formulaic options and more on conceptual and experiential structures. (2011:1)

Cooper Albright opines that "contemporary dance foregrounds a responsive dancing body, one that engages with and challenges static representations of gender, race, sexuality and physical ability, all the while acknowledging how deeply these ideologies influence our daily experience" (1997:xiii). This points to the fact that contemporary dance as a genre defies existing forms and positions about almost everything human and can be communicated through dance. It comes from the then-dominant genre, modern dance, but it flexes possibilities where movements, ideas, and experimentations are concerned. From another perspective, contemporary dance holds the status of art dance to the degree that it is distinguished from commercial or competitive dance.

Fundamentally, ballet was the theatrical dance in vogue in Europe around 1900, although it had been in existence long before then. The quest for a new form of dance that did not thrive on elaborate spectacle, wooden movement, pantomime, and storyline that was simply overwhelming was sought, in kicking against the rigidity and decorative insignificance of ballet.

Modern dance, which was the result of the quest, was a more narrative dance compared to what ballet offered. In quick reaction and further experiments on the trend of dance forms as exemplified by modern dance, contemporary dance became a sort of dance that further liberated dancers and choreographers alike in the search for new and more expressive forms. Therefore, according to Klein, "the narrative disappeared in favour of fragmented montage-like choreography: the linearity of narration broke apart into 'dance pieces'. Contemporary dance questioned and defeated existing concepts concerning the nature of movement in breaks, stills, stumbles, and falls" (2011:21).

Contemporary dance borrows so much from the techniques and basic ideas of modern dance, a dance genre that preceded contemporary dance; it also relies on classical music and jazz. Contemporary dance choreographies place much emphasis on the aesthetics of the body rather than the message, which makes it "rich in gesture, expression and affect" (Stevens and McKechnie, 2005:11) to fully extend meanings and understandings. Contemporary dance in its form is nonconformist, as it could be viewed as non-representational or representational, non-symbolic, or symbolic. According to the American Contemporary Dance Association,

contemporary dance is an art whose working material is the movement of humans. It does not have fixed or established movement patterns, but it is rather in a continuous search for new forms and dynamics. Therefore, its dancers make use of varied modern and classical dance techniques to train. It produces performances or shows in conventional and nonconventional stages (such as theatres or public and private places), having frequent dialogue with other aesthetic languages such as audiovisual technologies, visual or fine arts, lighting, architecture, music, circus, and others (www.conteporarydance.org: 2005).

Admittedly, contemporary dance was not as named as emphasised by Okoye (2014), but there was a notion that contemporary dance, at its formative stage, could have been an offshoot of the avant-gardist movement. Speaking against the then prevalent kind of dance, modern dance, Cohen posits that "many of the avant-garde choreographers believe that their innovation began as a reaction to the style of dramatic dance that began to take shape in the 1920s… the new concept of movement impetus heralded a period rich in movement" (1966: 212). This marked the period when much emphasis was on the movements of the body rather than what dance had to say. "The conviction that the subject of dance should be dancing. Rejecting the idea that a 'story' or even 'content' in the traditional sense is necessary to a dance work. Instead, they assert the independence of dance as pure movement, refusing to make it the handmaiden of drama or music or spectacle" (Cohen, 1966:211). The consequence of this was a new wave of experience that dance had never witnessed: seriousness, sparseness, awareness, and selective consciousness on a different level.

The Use of Body Images and Imagery in Contemporary Dance

The 'body image' is central to the practice of the dancer. Weiss (1999) writes, based on the postulations of Merleau-Ponty(1962), that the images formed by the body in dance, both for the dancer and the observer, are largely based on the roles and the subjectivity of cultural, sexual, racial, and social issues. She concludes that it is largely through the images created by the body that we situate our personified selves in a vast world that is constantly being shaped and reshaped in response to the changes that occur in the dancer's body as well as the bodies of co-dancers, the environment/society at large

which ultimately creates a wholesome picture but constantly subjected to change (Weiss, 1999).

Body images in dance are formed through constant interrelationships with the outside world, and thus no two body images are formed in the same way but are the result of the specific conditions of an individual's life experiences (Weiss, 1999). To be 'dependable,' the body image must be adaptable enough to incorporate changes occurring both inside and outside the body, while still seeking a certain 'equilibrium' that will provide the stability required not only for effective bodily movement, but also for a relatively unified perceptual experience.

From a traditional religious perspective, the body reacts to institutionalised principles and therefore acts and reacts in the same manner, having learnt that through the years of growing up. In this way, there is the irreverent and the revered: "The sacred embodies all that is good and pure, while the profane represents all that is harmful to the sacred, the common and impure. Objects categorised under the sacred are elevated in the eyes of society, while those categorised under the profane are lowered and despised" (Thomas, 2003:18). This shapes the man, the dancer, and reflects in his attitudinal reactions to what is being done. That, ultimately, is the consensual principle of societies. When a dancer dances, therefore, he merely communicates these principles in the most open or concealed manner to bring his audience into synergy with him, a myriad of his roots. Thomas further states that the human body is viewed as a microcosm of society, "upon which order, and symbolic values are imposed and in turn are rendered natural or non-social" (2003:19).

The Eclectic Integrities of African Traditional Dances

Dance in the pre-colonial era in Africa was a shared knowledge between the community and the individual (Udoka 2016). It was a form of social interaction between members of the community and the performer, which usually takes place in places like the king's palace, the marketplaces, the village squares, the shrines, etc. This social interaction among the people in the society was what Africans had before the formal performance style was introduced, where the audience had to be seated at one end of the stage and the performers at the other end. Debates have arisen over the years about whether

African dances were purely and solely religious acts or to what extent the dances were expressed as an art form that has aesthetic value. Europeans believed that what we had could not have been referred to as theatre because Africa had little performance that resembled the theatrical forms they knew, and often discarded our dances as inferior due to their lack of ability to fully grasp them, but with time, they had to learn to appreciate the African forms.

The expression 'African Dance' has many meanings as it may occur to individuals and groups involved. For Africa and Africans, dance was and is a major part of daily activities. Every aspect of African dance reflects, to a great extent, the ways of life of a particular group of people in a given settlement and location. African traditional dances involve every member of the community, irrespective of age and status. However, some may be exclusive as they may be for particular occasions, especially rituals. Acogny argues that "that is why in the beginning all dances were ritual, sacred. Our forebears gave expression in dance to all the important events in their lives. Far from entertainment, dance was a prayer…" (1994:11). This suggests that both work and play, for Africans, are integral parts of dance but with significant references to religious activities.

Dance in Africa easily gives a hint about its origin, that is, it gives a pointer as to what the dominant feature of the society that performs it is. It may be in the form of profession, geographical location, religious inclination, history, and ways of life. The Zulus of South Africa, for instance, easily show the fierceness and the professionalism of their men in their dances, and a bit of their history. The Fulani people of Northern Nigeria dance with their cattle rods in the depiction of their profession as herdsmen, while the *Ekombi* dance indicates the abundance of rivers and waters around them. Numerous examples easily depict this, and every dance is a representation of what obtains in each society. Harper opines that

> …habitual occupational and resting positions stretch the tendons of the legs, giving a facility for deep knee bends, which are a feature of dances. In the walk, the movements of progression are taken up in an exaggerated sway of the hips and extended buttocks and the elasticity of the bending and stretching movements of the knees. In the dances, the feet are placed firmly on the ground

> with confidence that reflects the familiarity of the peasant farmer with the earth he works (1970:70).

Phenomenology: An Approach to Dance

Phenomenology involves the portrayals of man and the world; as man lives amidst the world, as he encounters himself and the world distinctly and intensely, before any sort of reflection happens. The heart, or the direct consciousness of man, is what the phenomenologist seeks. Phenomenology aims to provide a descriptive technique that does not assume anything and does not alter the impact of the experience itself.

The body is a model that can be used to represent any bounded system. The body has a complicated structure. The function and relationship of its various parts provide a source of symbols or other complex structures (Douglas 1970). The research programmes established by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and advanced by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty have been heavily cited in dance scholarship since the 1960s to help explain various aspects of dance. Phenomenological methodologies have been used by dance scholars.

Husserl was motivated to create a science of phenomena that would shed light on how things appear to consciousness. Husserl believed that intentionality—the fundamental act of the mind reaching out to stimuli to translate them into its realm of meaningful experience—was responsible for the presentation of objects in consciousness. The specific perception we have at any given time won't ever exist again because intentionality is multifaceted and complex on a personal level. The meanings ascribed to things are not only singular and personal, but also flexible or plastic (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Husserl started out looking for 'essences' in consciousness as well as the independence and effectiveness of reason, but the outcome of his research was a phenomenology of the body because he discovered how much one's physical makeup tends to affect one's ability to reason.

The creation of experience and consciousness is a topic that phenomenology in philosophy is interested in. Phenomenology examines the conscious experience, including how things appear to us, how we experience them, and the implications that these experiences have for the meanings that those things have. When one

applies phenomenology to dance, according to Kaylo (2003), one 'brackets' as many of one's previous expectations and preconceptions as one can and instead concentrates on being receptive to direct experience—or on the appearances of the objects themselves, including how they appear.

Edmond Husserl was very interested in a theory that would help evaluate how things presented themselves to the conscious mind when he proposed phenomenology. In his frantic search, he was only able to discover a phenomenology of the body that was solely dependent on the body's constitution. Phenomenology thus lends credence to the notion that the individual body is subject to the interaction between the body and the world around it (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Serlin, 1986).

What appears in our world is determined by the body. J.J. Gibson (1979) expanded on this insight by considering human world characteristics to be related to the human body's capacities and skills obtained over time. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), experiences are embodied, and embodiment is defined as three ways in which the body presents itself to the world, which are innate structure, basic general skills, and cultural skills, among other things.

Being trained as a dancer today means being 'acculturated' into a world of interpretations and movement patterns. The commonplace dance experience remembers a feeling of 'beingness' for the present time and place sensation, by which one can decipher empathy in motion, find the body in a three-layered space, feel connectedness in time, and know unity with a bigger element, which people habitually recognise as significant otherworldly experience. Subsequently, dance is an optimal mechanism for exploring the epitome, and much emphasis has been placed on discussions about the body and its relevance as an indication of culture, as an emotional experience, and, all the more as of late, as the designer of the human psyche (Damasio et al., 1994; Desmond et al., 1997; Farnell et al., 1999).

Ideologies and Influences on Qudus Onikeku's Works

Qudus Onikeku can be seen as an exemplary model for present dancers of Nigerian origin looking to make it through their art. Dancers and choreographers alike may simply look at the attention to detail and the thoroughness of his approach to the ideas he seeks to express through his dance.

His works revel in both the ideas of the contemporary dance styles in absolute nonconformity and the indigenous Nigerian dance styles, and may be both an expression of a fusion or a treatment of these styles in their isolated forms. The contemporary dance style has a very long history, tracing it back to the founding fathers in the persons of Isadora Duncan and Rudolf Von Laban. The contemporary dance style follows a revolution against the ideals of classical ballet, hence providing a suitable platform for Duncan to abandon the corset shoes of the ballet and feature bare, relaxed feet while drawing inspiration from Greek relics in respect to the costume choice.

The three most dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria include the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, with several ethnic groups that fall neither here nor there. The role of dance in this is to function as both an artistic and a cultural representation of the ideals that make up each ethnic group, as the dance and structure of the dance contain much credible information that may be used to dissect what characterises a particular group of people.

Onikeku prioritises the use of Yoruba traditional idioms in conceptualising many of his works. He constantly explores the beliefs inherent in the Yoruba culture. African dances borrow from daily activities and ritual practices as content to communicate the nuances of the culture in which they are domiciled. Within this context, the Yoruba traditional system is very well woven and structured with a strong belief in the concept of the supernatural, bordering on rituals, reincarnation, the persistent communication between the living and the dead, the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen. These are very significantly echoed in the works of Onikeku and therefore give his works a very significant place in the microscopic lens of indigenous dance within his contemporary dance practices and creations. The years within the 1950s were the years of the Concert Party in Nigeria's theatrical traditions that suitably changed the phase and the manner in which theatrical performances were performed and perceived. This period featured Hubert Ogunde, one of Nigeria's prominent theatre practitioners, who dominated with his works, having distinctive features in performance. Although, according to Ebun Clark (1979), his performances and indeed the Yoruba theatre performances were thematically didactic as they projected morality to a very large extent. These performances were offshoots of traditional ritual performances and festivals.

Onikeku considers himself to be a defender of Nigerian culture, but he does so primarily from a contemporary standpoint. He claims that he does not sell Nigerian dance. He claims to be selling a contemporary culture, but he has roots in his traditional culture. While Onikeku claims to be representing Yoruba culture, he is representing Nigerian culture.

Indeed, as an artistic director and choreographer, through his business, Onikeku has made it his goal to highlight his Nigerian ancestry. As one of the few contemporary dance companies in Nigeria that publicly promotes Nigerian history as a cultural ambassador domestically and internationally from a contemporary perspective, he feels that his company, Qdance Company, embraces and overtly reflects a current Nigerian identity. He asserts that over time, he has garnered valuable qualities through practices. He also aspires to draw aesthetics from these various sources and apply them to a modern, metropolitan setting (www.qudusonikeku.com).

However, a confluence and conflict of choices permeate Qudus' works very strongly, and he may be seen as sauntering through each of these choices as he makes his artistic imprint: situating his work within a particular artistic umbrella may be a problem for most dance critics, who can be left uncertain of what his actual artistic blueprint is. Diversity of form and an eclectic approach might be a more relaxed way to categorise his work. Perhaps also, his work needs no categorisation and exists within the imaginative realm, fully formed and resting within the artistic subconscious of the creator.

Contemporary dance, as a dance form, is a cluster and fusion of different arts and dance styles; it is inevitable to see the traces of other dance forms like hip bounce, Capoeira, jujitsu, and established Western contemporary dance vocabularies in the works created by Onikeku, having trained in a west-oriented dance school.

Identity and Artistic Approach: Phenomenological Analysis of his works

In addition to expressing his Western dance training and exposure to Western artistic fields, Qudus Onikeku's dance style is very Nigerian-oriented, even though he also takes so much from his Western cultural orientation. He claims that he is especially driven by body memory rather than history, by the desire to connect with the audience before the desire to express something of the self, and as a result, he

constantly looked for ways to combine poetic attitudes with an African satirical and fictitious storytelling tradition, as in the griot tradition, combining both social history, collective memory, or collective amnesia with personal autobiography, as a critical launching pad in the process of myth re-creation. According to him, the dancer is always given the dramaturgical and choreographic freedom in the majority of his works, including group pieces, to present himself as himself while also pointing to something else. There is a limited amount of showmanship, but rather the responsibility of an interpreter and the humility of a messenger. The dancer also weans his audience from any right of criticism they might have of both his art and the message thereon through self-exposure and auto-derision, or self-fortification and self-proclamation.

Onikeku's contemporary dance style is eclectic, incorporating performing arts, technical theatre, and visual arts like Nigerian music and costumes, as well as Western modern dance, performance art (a conceptual art form that emerged from the visual arts), lighting design, and music, all of which are later influences as a result of their exposure and training as adults. They consistently express their African-ness as Nigerians, despite the incorporation of Western art forms, through themes based on inherited as well as socially acquired traditional Nigerian rituals and language, whereas their contemporary African experience is a reflection of their present encounters, i.e., personal lived experience as Nigerian urban artists.

Indigenous Cultural Elements in Onikeku's Works

The indigenous cultural elements in Qnikeku's works are evaluated based on some noticeable and identifiable cultural signposts that have been discussed earlier in this study. These are storytelling, chant, music and rhythm, spirituality, and dance movements.

Storytelling

Storytelling has always been an integral part of the communal communication system among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. Histories and cultural traditions have been passed down from generation to generation through this medium, and it was efficient and effective. Within the traditional system in the sustenance of cultural and traditional stories among communities in Africa and more specifically, Nigerians are carved out of the substance of human

experiences, battles with other lands and the components, development and movements, wars between realms, clashes over pastures and waterholes, grappling with the secrets of presence, death and the living. Tume opines that "it is a shared communal event where people congregate together, listening, and participating in accounts and stories of past deeds, beliefs, wisdom, counsel, morals, taboos, and myths" (2015:4).

Onikeku uses the Yoruba oral tradition of storytelling and poetic renditions in projecting and establishing his bias toward his preference for the Yoruba traditional system in some of his performances. In many ways, he echoes the ideology of the likes of Hubert Ogunde, who demonstrate the idea of 'Total Theatre' in their performances. Onikeku sees the generation of the aforementioned as an inspiration in producing his works in the manner which has been explained above. This is a tidy move in retaining and sustaining some of the cultural elements by contemporising how it is presented. Ideally, among the Yoruba people, the manner of poetic rendition comes in the form of chants and oriki, praise-singing. Storytelling is an embodied practice with the nuances of culture. Civallero opines that

> "oral tradition is based on memory, words, sound, and improvisation. It is a living, ancient art, enjoyed by children and old people, literate and illiterate alike. Some of their expressions can be understood by everybody –no matter their race or nationality- and, in this way, they can work as channels for integration and mutual understanding within plural societies. (2007:1)

Whether a dance should tell a story or not remains an argument within some academic quarters, but Onikeku tells his story so well in his dance performances. In *Qaddish*, he tells the story of his people, his father, his own story, and the place of his origin. Adopting the Western form of poetry rendition and a cultural situation of talking and eulogising the dead, he renders the interaction between him and his father as it is customary among the Yoruba people.

Onikeku typically calls on the dead in his rendition to reconnect with them. The call is obviously not for the dead to appear physically, but to appear in the form that is best possible. He describes the nature of the departed as "...flexible, kind: spirit, soul, and mind".

In the Yoruba cultural system, no one speaks ill of the dead. It is either one remains silent about the dead or sings the praise of him who has transposed from the physical to the supernatural. The transition to the afterworld is never complete until there is a completion of the ritual of burial.

Soyinka (1976) postulates that there is a cyclic reincarnation of the soul of man: when he dies, he reincarnates, and the departed soul comes back to life in the form of another being. The burial rites mark the completion of death and the commencement of rebirth. "The bridge and swing await through the infinite wave of breathing…" which suggests that no matter how long anyone enjoys the breath of existence, he/she ends up taking the last breath at a point which then ushers in the inevitable transition, "the bridge and swing" that takes the soul from one stage to the other.

Qudus Onikeku's philosophy suggests that human struggle persists only as long as life endures, and that conflicts among individuals arise primarily from the drive to survive and to coexist. Through dance, Onikeku explains the existential nature of man: man finds himself in a circle of beats, heartbeats, and memories, journeying through a world that has no defined satiable plan for man, who finds a problem in what used to be a satisfactory answer. Hence, his search for more questions, more problems, more answers, and more problems. They go round and round and round without an end to it.

Onikeku calls on young people to learn from the silence of the dead who used to be active. Children—the living—toil and strive for joy and perfection, hopes and dreams. However, there will be a time when the child will have no such grace. Hence, the importance of being attentive to the lessons of the dead and being guided for the future. In Onikeku's words, "He has not always been quiet."

Onikeku reminisces on life and talks about the present, future, the dead and the living, the spirits, mind, and soul through the arts—dance, drum, and other creative arts. He gives meaning to time, a factor that makes a difference between life and death. A factor that makes man transcend to a place beyond this world. He then encourages the children to struggle when they can because, in the end, a sense of action never disappears. He charges the world to be fair enough to let the children live without anger and hate. While he

explains that nobody lives forever, soon we'll all be gone to become the dead. It is an existential transition.

On the social front, when stories are told, there is the interplay between the storyteller and the listener. Each role is extremely important. As the storyteller reels out the events within the story with the most plausible words, the listener creates images of situations and doubles as the recorder of history.

Spirituality

Qaddish, created and performed by Qudus Onikeku, captures trance as an element in the creation of this work. Trance is typical of many traditional and orthodox religious practices: this invariably captures the Yoruba traditional system, which serves as one of the cores of Qudus Onikeku's choreographic pillars. A trance is a state of mind in which someone seems not to have conscious control over their thoughts or actions, but perceives, communicates, and responds to commands, perhaps in a very hazy manner, by factors that may have captured the being of that individual. In this state, the dancer's experience moves from struggle to calm to expressive, then back to unconscious. Hanna posits that "when a dancer is considered possessed, the boundaries between his human identity and the divine are wiped out. The piece highlights the little or no control that humans wield over natural, yet supernatural activities such as sleep and dream" (1987: 205).

Within the performance of *Qaddish*, Onikeku tries to merge the past with the present and the dead with the living by bringing all to a place at the same time. The eulogy about his father and his place of birth is by no means a mere rendition but a synergy of what he, his father and the city of Abeokuta represent.

The trance/transition element also features strongly in the performance for *Rainmaker,* which features the use of movement and music to transpose the mind of the audience from the immediate environment to the distant past. This was initially made emphatic by the opening remarks. Qudus stylishly lures the audience to the past with the use of a poetic rendition that situates them within the traditional trance practices, as evident in, for example, the Yemoja festival in Southwestern Nigeria.

The finger movements in the piece are presented as unconscious in contrast to the consciousness and intentionality of the Nigerian dance. The finger movements here show the dancers'

communication in the trance, yet physically present. His finger movements go further to represent the essence of his unconscious state. The movements as highlighted above may seem insignificant as they may have been done unconsciously, but the body naturally calls on the vocabulary it has amassed over time for communication, just as gestures in day-to-day communication.

Qadish in the Jewish religious enclave is a supplication for the dead, which does not forbid the mentioning of death when rendered. Qudus Onikeku's dance piece, *Qaddish*, is composed of movements from different Nigerian cultures; therefore, he uses different dances from different parts of the country to portray his emotions and journey through the past. Among the Yoruba traditional system and some other cultural circles, the role of the dead is as significant as that of those who are still alive. In this piece, strummed following Jewish liturgy and often described as a prayer for those in mourning, he pays tribute to the dead and celebrates the living, beginning with his father. The choreographer conveys his message to his audience through dance, music, and acting. The dead are revered based on the good deeds they may have had in the religious spectrum of relevant societies. Onikeku brings back the memory of the dead in *Qaddish*, which is a common practice in Africa and more specifically in Nigeria.

Dance Movements

Onikeku's *Qaddish* has elements of Nigerian dance, as in Nigerian dance, where, in communication, no part of the body is left out. The choreographer incorporates Bata dance, a popular traditional dance among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. It is a highly expressive and entertaining dance that is typically accompanied by music, songs, and chants. The Bata dance is associated with the Sango, the god of thunder and lightning, and is accompanied by the thunderous, rattling, and piercing sounds of Bata drums.

One of the dances prominent in the dance piece includes Swange. Swange is the traditional dance of the Tiv-speaking people of Nigeria's Benue state. Its origins can be traced back to the Tiv, Igala, and Idoma people. The drumming, singing, and dancing are accompanied by a loud sound made by a traditional horn (Al-Gaita), which blows in unison for as long as the drumming, singing, and dancing continue. Swange is performed throughout Tiv land and

wherever they live. It is a social dance with movements similar to oriental dance. Swange is a dance with fast, slow, rhythmic, and undulating movements that express youthfulness and vigour, earning it the nickname "boneless dance" by some. Both men and women dance it in unison.

It is important to note that the choreography and movements in *Qaddish* dwell heavily on floor movements with dancers either rolling themselves on the floor or seen in occasional squats, touching the floor with their hands as a result. There is a constant return/connection to the earth (ground) in this piece. This is culturally significant when situating the African within his reliance on what 'mother earth' can provide him. The soil is black, as is the African, which thus suggests richness, adequacy, and the power to recreate; all these being very important ideals of the African essence.

The energy in the *Qaddish* is semblance to African dance, but more specifically, the wrist and foot energy is similar to that in Bata, Ekombi, Atilogwu, as well as Swange dance. In these dances, there is great emphasis on the wrist and feet of the body. The dancer's hand especially moves in a motion that is very similar to the Ekombi dance. The crossed hand movement as seen at the beginning of the dance is in sharp similarity with the Atilogwu dance, where certain movements are done with their crosses exactly in that manner. There is a synergy between the hand and the feet. At some point, there is some chest movement that reminds us of the Igbo traditional dance, where the rapid movement of the chest forms the core and is an integral part of the dance.

Having said this, evident in the piece, *Rainmakers*, are allusions to dances from the Igbo and Yoruba tribes and some notable Badagry dances. One of the dances from the Igbo tribe involves the dancers taking a crouched position, with their legs bent inwards as if to sit on a stool. Their backs are notably sitting inwards as both arms are stretched out to the side. One arm, notably the right, is seen to take a slightly higher position in contrast to the other left arm, hence making for an asymmetrical position of the upper body from the head to the shoulders. These shoulders give the dance its most notable feature as it engages in a gingerly shimmer, as you would have a tambourine make when you wish to extract sound from it.

Here, what is extracted is the simple pleasure of dancing, as dancers are still in their crouched position, their hands asymmetrical to one another, and the shimmers of their upper bodies go into a 360-

degree rotation of the entire body. Their legs remain spread out, with just one leg (the left as seen in the choreography) moving the form of the dancer around as if to make a circle on the floor, with the right leg serving as the centre of the circle.

From the Badagry culture, we see the dancers open their arms out as if to express to a friend the sheer size of a ship, with each foot engaged in a gentle, three-count stamp on the floor (tip tip tap) as the entire body moves in a barely 60-degree rotational movement from left to right. In other instances, we see the presence of the contemporary dance style expressed in occasional spins and notable contemporary floor patterns.

It is sufficient to note that the Igbos refer to dancing as 'Egwu', which, when translated to English, could simply mean "play". Therefore, to the Igbo man, to dance is to "play". This embodies an innate ability for every human to truly enjoy dancing, either as a celebration or just for the fun of it. Here, dancing requires more grace, an effortless aura that projects a tranquil beauty, rather than the energetic enthusiasm of specific war dances. Dances like Atilogwu, however, combine a mixture of grace and energetic enthusiasm but still work within the Igbo's cultural consciousness that 'what is worth doing is worth doing well'. So if one is to dance, one has to do so to the utmost satisfaction of self.

The Badagry people are known for their active lives in their search for every available means of livelihood, which might include fishing, etcetera. All of these things naturally seep into their dancing, combining several thrusts of energetic routines that both engage the body of the dancers in its entirety and the audience's attention.

With the work primarily set in a rural part of the country, distorted paintings can be seen on the walls laid bare by lack of maintenance; thatched roofs surround the environment, illuminated by the green plants which capture the agricultural landscape of the African continent. This places into sharp contrast the symbolism of the rainmaker in this context, as for the farmers to enjoy a productive yield from their crops, they require water vis-à-vis the rains. The rainmaker, hence, through invocation and manoeuvring the atmospheric patterns, brings down the rain to wet the crops and make the land fit for further cultivation.

Metaphorically, the rainmakers here are the dancers in possession of the scientific techniques of dance and music, which

may bring down rain in the form of blessings. *Rainmaker* simply captures the idea that dance and indeed music are very powerful elements that drive the African quintessence of growth and cultural substance. With music and dance, the elements respond to an African with proper and meticulous detailing of what is being sung and danced.

The presence of body paintings on the faces and hands of the dancers suggests attention to a characteristic detail of Nigerians who are drawn to making carvings on their bodies as tribal identifications necessary for noting within a cultural or familial background. The use of African prints for trousers, which are worn by all the dancers, shows an appraisal of the African culture, abandoning the suits and ties consequent of Western civilisation.

In some of Qudus' works like *Qaddish* and *Rainmakers,* there is a deliberate fusion of Western musical instruments: Chellos, Jazz drum sets, and violin alongside indigenous musical instruments like the locally fabricated flute, *Omele bata,* and a host of others to accentuate the texture of his music in other to capture the heart of his listeners and audience and also to be acceptable to the different cultures he may encounter in his many dance performance tours.

Within the Nigerian context as a microcosm of the African situation, dance has been used for many reasons, performing an array of ritual functions in situations such as war, celebration of life and death, among others. The music has always followed suit, passed down through the oral tradition with each generation using this music as an expression of the salient qualities that characterise their era.

Conclusion

Globalisation continues to reshape indigenous and cultural nuances, and dance is no exception. Traditional forms are evolving into contemporary expressions, rendering resistance to such change largely futile.

Dancers and choreographers consciously and unconsciously borrow from existing dance idioms and practices to create new identities and the arguments resulting from these engagements. Therefore, dance scholars and practitioners should make efforts to blend with the current trends to allow and encourage the shifting paradigms of culture and dance. The desire of the dance practitioners may be to retain the cultural nuances for its sustainability in the face of the intercultural mingling, but one must not allow one's culture to

be left out of civilisation. In the first instance, existing cultures have been modified until we got to the point we are right now.

Qudus's generation and those that follow must pick these dances and decide for themselves what aspects of the dances speak to them and affect their lives and era going into the future. Whether or not they express these dances in their pristine state, thus maintaining their purity, is not the question: how they use these dances, however, to speak about what their generation is most passionate about without ridiculing the essence of the dance (an expression of culture) is a more germane area for discussion.

Scholars should actively promote emerging creative trends through rigorous documentation and critical review to ensure that these cultural nuances are adequately foregrounded in academic discourse.

Notes on Contributor

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