

FUNCTION AND AESTHETICS
IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN DANCES

The old view of "primitive" or "savage" African peoples whose dances can hardly be characterized as artistic -- i.e., imbued with aesthetic qualities -- is well documented. The following excerpts are only a few examples:

Savages are in many respects like children, and express their feelings in a similar manner, often executing wild dances without order and design (Scott, 1899:1).

... The dance of the savage has great significance... as an indication of his primitive religion ... (Grove, 1901:6).

Evident in these excerpts is the prejudice of the period of their statement -- the 19th and early 20th centuries. Later 20th century records, while they appear more restrained, reveal a subtle perpetuation of the ethnocentricism of the past. Excerpts from the writings of some 20th century writers on dance, especially African dance, confirm this:

These primitive, imitative dances are not originally planned to be watched by spectators, but only to control the actions of animals, spirits, gods, and enemies ... (Martin, 1967:78).

Although western dance is a setting for such activities as boy-meets-girl, it is primarily for aesthetic entertainment or recreational purposes. In traditional black African cultures by contrast, dance is less an "art" than a "craft" functionally entwined with multiple components of vitae curriculum (Hanna, 1965:48-55).

Aesthetics is not equally concerned with all kinds of dancing ... Only theatrical dancing is designed to provide the observer with an aesthetic experience (Cohen, 1962:19).

... the first step in studying dance in traditional society is to identify the functions it performs ... (Harper, 1976:148-163).

Implied in all the cited excerpts is the proposition that African dances are less-than-art, i.e., 'non-aesthetic', or done with no conscious aesthetic considerations, and are therefore, primarily 'functional'. This essay contains an argument that such a proposition places the cart before the horse: I suggest that traditional African dances serve functions only by virtue of their aesthetic worthiness.

Three assumptions appear to underlie the thinking of the writers mentioned above. They are these:

- (1) African dances do not appear to be created by any particular persons; i.e., choreographers, who label their dances in the European theatrical fashion.
- (2) African dances exist only to serve selected utilitarian purposes.
- (3) African dances lack form -- at least in the sense of western aesthetic criteria of art forms.

A critique of these pre-assumptions is the major subject of this essay.

Anonymity in the Creation of African Dances

An examination of the significance of myth in the creation of African dances is critical to the argument at hand -- that the dance creators' anonymity is by no means an indicator of aesthetic worthlessness of the dances. It will help to clarify not only the issue of the anonymous creators of traditional African dances, but also the issues of interrelationship between "beauty" and "utility" (function) in African dance, as well as the correlation between dance and overall culture if features of mediumship, possession, myth and dreaming are comprehended.

By myth in this context is understood to be the corpus of communal beliefs whose validity lies not so much in their 'rationality', but in their ability to explain, symbolically, the raison d'etre of the existence of the people whom they unite psychologically (Guerin, 1979:154-157). Such myths, as they relate to African dances, often provide clues to the dances' creation. Horton's report of Ekineba myth (1975), Courlander's collection of myths of Yoruba gods and heroes (1973), and this writer's report on Ogwein and Okwambebe masquerade dance myths (1977) are only a few cases in point. These writers appear to suggest that practically all Nigeria's ethnic groups have the belief that their grand dances (especially the more or less sacred masquerade dances), are possessions of supernatural beings; e.g., gods, goddesses, spirits -- beings who through the mediums they choose pass their dances on to the living community for perpetuation.

Quite often, the medium is one community figure in some strange encounter with these supernatural beings of either terrestrial or aquatic domain. Ekineba and Okwambebe myths are typical examples. But sometimes, the medium may be more than one community figure, as is the case in the Ogwein myth. And yet in other cases, as in Itsekiri masquerade dance myths and, indeed, the myth of the Yoruba sacred dances

as deduced from Courlander's account of the Yoruba creation myths, the particular mediums used by the gods are more obscure. It is left to us, then, to imagine that it is highly improbable that the entire membership of a community could have all been mediums.¹

Regarding the more secular forms of traditional African dances, identification of the creator or inventor of a particular dance is usually not a problem. But amazingly, this creator or inventor, despite recognition by the community, admits of his creation not so much as of his own doing as it is of the doing of some dancing, drumming, and singing muses "observed" in trance or dream -- indeed, in a strange encounter. The Egbelegbele Sei dance creator is a case in point.

In an interview in 1975 with the Egbelegbele Sei dance group of Amasoma, River State, Nigeria, the leader of the group told me that what I saw and heard of his group in dance and music was the result of a memorable experience in his life. He noted that on his way to farm one day, he "heard" (or appeared to hear) music from "somewhere" and, simultaneously, he "saw" (or appeared to see) "strange beings" of youthful age dancing and singing before him. Unless one wants to disbelieve him, one can only imagine that he was in a trance or he was daydreaming. Whatever the case, he experienced, he perceived something. An impression was made on him in the sensory retention of the performance of the "strange beings". And on returning home to Amasoma, he objectified this impression into what is now known as the Egbelegbele Sei dance. Thus, he made an expression of his impression. Here, then, is "dance as art" in the sense of Croce's remark that "art is an expression of impressions". (Croce, 1978:13)

This case is hardly different from that of the aforementioned sacred masquerade dances which are usually regarded by some non-African dance writers as unwieldy communal jamborees, the various dances of which cannot be attributed to any creator, and are more impromptu than designed. For example, it takes no great imagination to see that the sacred masquerade dances of the Itsekiris (despite the fact that their origin myths do not identify any particular creator) could not have been impromptu communal creations. The clearly distinctive character and pattern of the masquerade dances, set against the distinctive character and pattern of the simultaneous supportive dances of the chorus, cannot but leave the open-minded observer with the impression of a well-devised choreographic design of a "dance-within-a-dance", like a "play-within-a-play" in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Apportioning of separate roles for the actor-masked dancers and the supportive chorus dancers clearly tells of the input of some master-mind at some point in time. Thus, what is today Itsekiri masquerade dance heritage is a diffused survival of a creative mind's handiwork, and the survival has been possible only because of the continuing presence of creative minds willing to keep and improve upon heritage in the light of their particular circumstance at any one historical time. That Itsekiri masquerade dance myths do not identify their particular creators, therefore, is not sufficient grounds to attribute

to them communal-impromptu origination. Were it so, the presentation that we know today would have been chaotic, and not the orderly design that has changed and is changing with time and calibre of talents.

Herein lies the relevance of Keali'inohomoku's remarks (1980:83-97) that different cultures attach varying degrees of importance to recording names of the creators of their dances. The Itsekiris, like other African tribes, while venerating their creative dancers, do not attach importance to recording their names for history. Even in some of the more recent dance creations where accompanying songs might give clues to the creator of the dance, the significant thing for the community is the dance itself, not its creator. This fact is all the more evident when the dances are acclaimed as "beautiful" by spectators and dancers alike. The gifts of money that thrilled spectators come onto the arena (the dancing ground) to shower on the dancers (especially the more polished ones) and the dancers' own acclamation in the drawn-out responsorial shouts of "Hi----Iwo" (rather like "Hip, Hip----Hurrah!") are readily observable indications of the community's acceptance of the dance.

It is this communal acceptance and the circumstances surrounding the creation of a dance (an important factor which the accompanying music as instrumental sound and song text seeks to capture in mood and content) that combine to suggest to the community the appropriate context of -- in effect, the function of -- a dance. This underscores the interrelationship between "beauty" and "utility" in traditional African dances. In such a neat wedlock, extraneous considerations, such as the name of the creator of a dance or, indeed, the name of the dance by itself, is hardly of concern.

Little wonder then that traditional African dancers usually do not recall a dance by its name, but by its accompanying music that inspires and urges them to do the significant thing, the dance itself. How apt therefore the distinction which Dewey makes among title, subject-matter, and substance! "Titles merely identify objects, they are neither the subject-matter nor the substance of the objects", says Dewey (1980:111-112) in a similar vein as Croce who earlier had written that "from time to time we pass ... from the label to the thing ..." (1978:10).

Whether in the identification of the object through "label" or in the creation of the object, "the thing" (the dance), African dance myths are equally important, being more than mere fables and the very subjects (the ingredients of the theme) of the dance.

As such, African dance myths call to mind Dewey's proposition that "subject may be hardly more than a label -- it may be the subject-matter which as raw material entered into the new experience of the artist and found transformation (Dewey, 1980:111). Traditional African dances are transformations from mythic raw materials that are elements of the world-view of Africans. It is in this sense that

African dances are a reflection of culture (Biobaku, 1977:10), a microcosm of a macrocosm (Keali'inohomoku, 1974:99), and therefore functional (or utilitarian) and deriving their beauty from this functionality.

The "Utilitarian" Factor in Traditional African Dances

Germane to the argument here is the presumption that when dance is art, it is not prompted by utilitarian purposes. Implied here is one of the following aesthetic/philosophical viewpoints:

- (1) "Utility" and "aesthetics" are incompatible.
- (2) "Expression", when it is "artistic" or "aesthetic", is "self-expression" stripped from communal references.
- (3) "Pure art" belongs in the realm of "hedonism".

Insofar as all of these viewpoints are questionable, they cannot be valid grounds for holding that traditional African dances are "less-than-art".

Utility and Aesthetics

In obvious reference to the issue of "utility" and "aesthetics", Shahn, for instance, asks "... who again could dream of or devise a form so elegant as that of the chemical retort, except that need and use, and glass and glass-blowing all met to create form?" (Shahn, 1980:69). Arnheim, apparently elaborating on the issue, declares that "... function, far from being outside the aesthetic realm, is the very theme, the central subject matter of applied art" (1964:29).

Although traditional African dances, like all other dance forms, will more appropriately come under the so-called "Fine Arts" group, and not under the "Applied Arts" group, Arnheim's observation nevertheless holds here. For as Arnheim further noted, "Our reminder that applied art is representational art might help to break down the artificial barrier between designers and craftsmen on the one side and painters and sculptors on the other" (1964:29). Dewey stated the issue more succinctly when he wrote that: "... the potter shapes his clay to make a bowl useful for holding grain; but he makes it in a way so regulated by the series of perceptions that sum up the serial acts of making, that the bowl is marked by enduring grace and charm. The general situation remains the same in painting a picture or molding a bust" (1980:50).

"Expression" and "Self-Expression"

On "Expression" and "Self-expression", Langer refutes the notion that dance is "self-expression", noting that "it is imagined feeling that governs the dance, not real emotional conditions" (1953:177). Dewey, who commented on the same issue much earlier than Langer, observed not only that "self-expression" is a "peculiar aesthetic individualism born of the industrial alienation of western artists" (1980:9), but also that "the experiences that art intensifies and amplifies neither exist solely inside ourselves, nor do they consist of relations apart from matter" (1980:103). This explanation certainly buttresses the argument led in the discussion of the significance of myth in the creation of African dances, which is that mythic raw materials, as elements of culture, enter into the experiences of artists, and are reissued as art to the community.

"Pure Art" and "Hedonism"

In respect to aesthetic hedonism, which suggests that "pure" art is hedonistic in intent, Croce remarks critically that the doctrine "looks at any rate upon the aesthetic, if not upon all other activities, as a simple fact of feeling, and confounds the pleasurable expression, which is beautiful, with the simply pleasurable and all its other species" (1978:82).

What is pleasurable and so beautiful in African dances is their expressiveness, not any interest, hedonistic or otherwise, of the creators (known or unknown) of the dances. The creators rarely matter; it is the expressiveness, the beauty, of their creations that counts. The antithesis of this beauty is not "ugliness" in the ordinary sense, but total "inexpressiveness" of the dance. For in the expressive (the beautiful) dance, there is no ugliness. Thus, the seemingly horrendous masks in Yoruba egungun as well as Ibibio ekpo masquerade dancers are, within the context of aesthetic activity (i.e., the dance), expressive -- hence beautiful.

Besides the masks in themselves, the movements that an accomplished dancer introduces into the corpus of the known vocabulary of a dance on the spur of the moment are not necessarily antithetical to the established beautiful pattern. They are acclaimed as complementary, insofar as they are within the parameters of the established form. Thus, in traditional African dance forms, beauty is regenerative, and ugliness is only that which cannot be accommodated within the broad limits of even a regenerative approach to attainment of beauty.

"Form"

To bring the argument to a close, the assertion in some circles that traditional African dances lack form will now be considered. Shahn points out that:

... form is not just the intention of content, it is the embodiment of content. Form is based, first, upon a supposition, a theme. Form is, second, a marshalling of materials, the inert matter in which the theme is to be cast. Form is, third, a setting of boundaries, of limits, the whole extent of idea, but no more, an outer shape of idea. Form is, next, the relating of inner shapes to the outer limits, the initial establishing of harmonies ... Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content (1980:70).

So far, I have attempted to show that traditional African dances have themes, and that these themes are the very embodiment of materials marshalled from surrounding environment. It naturally follows that these materials combine with the themes to define the limits of the ideas of the themes. What is less clear, perhaps, is that form in African dance is the giving of external shape to content in such a manner as to make harmony felt. This aspect pertains to compositional structure. It refers to the relation of parts to whole, and the relation of the parts to themselves.

Many scholars have suggested that in any art form, an harmonious compositional structure exhibits variety, sequence, repetition, proportion and balance in the combination of its parts (See, for example, H'Doubler, 1955:11-21). National peculiarities apart, it cannot be truly asserted that traditional African dances lack these aesthetic characteristics of form. Further reference to aspects of Itsekiri masquerade dance festivals as observed in Ajimele and Koko in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria should help to bring the truth to light.

There are three performance periods during a festival — morning, afternoon, and evening, the evening section usually lasting longer and being better attended than either of the preceding sections because the highlight of a day's performance is always reserved for that section. The masquerades go by various names of supposed aquatic creatures. In sets of three (occasionally four), and by the order of their elegance as made evident in their masks and other costume paraphernalia, they take turns, in the course of the day, to appear for performance at the dance arena.

The prelude to the coming onto the arena of the masquerades is a setting of colorfully dressed chorus dancers facing into the arena in two parallel lines that terminate at the musicians' booth on the one end, and at the masquerades booth on the other end. The more able dancers, who as a rule break from the parallel lines onto the arena in sets that range from a pair to four pairs, are the focus of attraction until the arrival of the masquerades. Thrilled members

of the audience step onto the arena at appropriate climactic moments in dance and music to shower gifts of money on these dancers whose movements stand in contrast to those of the ensemble dancers on the fringe, the aforementioned parallel lines.

Apparent as overall design is a pattern of "dance-within-a-dance" and contrapuntal use of body parts -- the movements of the trunk that is thrown over bent knees appearing in sharp contrast to the flat-footed millipede-like drag of the feet. It is as if to compound this overall design that the masked actor-dancers soon take control of the arena with their own dance schema that consists of a prelude (an overture, so to speak), a grand opening group dance (Atuliwa), a suite of contrasting solo variations (Usorujó), and a concluding home-going dance (Ujoroli) that has the format of either "group/solo", or "group/solo/group" and culminates in the abandonment on the arena of the masquerades' hand props at the foot of the master-drummer.

Without belaboring the point, it should be apparent from this sketchy description that traditional African dances have harmonious structures, these structures evoking in their own unique way the so-called "aesthetic principles" or "criteria" of art forms. Beyond this fact, however, it should be noted in conclusion that "form", in traditional African dance, is not simply the external shape of content but, indeed, the meaning that content suggests. Thus, with regard to Nigerian dances, we might say that form is content, form is meaning, and this meaning is functionality in relation to the participants with whom form is bound in cultural transaction.

Felix O. Begho

NOTES

1. See Joann W. Keali'inohomoku's comment on John Martin's suggestion of "mass of art" by a community, in her article entitled 'An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance'.

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