

Dance As A Tool For Creating Democratic Consciousness in The Masses: Azulu Dance Performance As A Example

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Abstract

The essence of democratic consciousness in Nigeria has been the order of the day whereby the masses both in urban and rural areas are meant to understand, interpret and appreciate the valuable of democracy. The misconception of some citizens in seeing democratic system of government as a Garden of Eden for selected few or an avenue for tribalism and a means for self-satisfaction for others has become the problematic essence of this paper, which must be resolved. An ideal democratic system of government believes in professionalism, justice, proper management of funds and perfect transparency. But from findings, people are not bold enough to indicate whenever they feel depressed, de-humanized or marginalized, because of fear of victimization. So dance in this paper serves as the inter-connecting rod between the leader and the led. Through constructive communicative dance movements, the dancers and the dance will praise or lampoon the ruling class and awake consciousness among the masses to either fight for their rights or forever remain silent. In order to achieve the interpretative essence of democratic government in Nigeria, content analysis of Azulu Dance performance would be carried out as an example towards achieving the required consciousness in protecting the rights of the people and enthroning good governance.

Introduction

The use of dance as an indispensable art form in theatre has always served as a social tool for change, propaganda and motivation in various forms. Dance, based on its sociological potency, is used in our present society communicatively to sensitize and mobilize the marginalized groups, especially those who have been denied public hearing or conventional forms of media to fight for their rights and seek for the real truth. Hansel NdumbeEyoh opines that in using dance for society education, the dance performance thus only serves a catalytic function intended to stimulate critical consciousness". (57)

In contemporary society, dance serves a multiple dimensional purpose in any environment, society or community wherever it exists, especially when well-choreographed and interpreted communicatively to pass information on society's democratic issues, health issues and religious issues. Each dance performance when choreographed well shows that the choreographer does not assume its choreographic inspiration from mere thoughts or imagination, rather the environment where he/she leaves serves as a creative working tool. In this regard, Akas Nicholas states that;

The sociological potency of any dance when choreographed shows the various functions of the dance. Some of dances based on the choreographers motivating metaphors portray spiritual, political and social functions, while others based on semiotic interpretation on their style, form and names serve as mere entertainment. (64)

In contemporary dance analysis, its performative state is always posed with the questions of what is the communicative value of the dance?, when did the dance started?, where was the semiotics movements in dance introduced and performed, and why was such symbolic movements introduced. If all these are perfectly x-rayed and understood during dance performance by the audience or indigenes, then it will help impact in them the basic fact that dance performances are far beyond mere aesthetics. Akas maintains that 'It is the performative communicative essence of dance both in its costume, make-up, style, form and chants that differentiate socio-corrective essence in contemporary dance from any other performance.(24)

Based on the thrust of this paper, dance and its movement serves as a corrective and reawakening consciousness tool in the mindsets of the public in any democratic system of the government, because dance scholars use it as a reflective tool to mirror ruling class and their various achievements before, during and after campaigns. Frank Kens stated that 'Dance and its universal use is seen as a reflective tool that attracts and draws the attention of the masses to any political system of government through a communicative impulse through movement to always have a meditative rethink". (24)

The core essence of every dance performance when choreographed well is to pass meaningful information, entertainment or serve as a watchdog. When these are critically found in the dance, automatically, it becomes a

corrective tool. Akas also affirms that ‘dance in its totality has gone beyond mere trial and error for amateurs, rather, its human faced form has made it a unique tool for source of cultural identification, source of unifying tool and source of political interpretation’’. (34)

Democracy: An Overview

The sole objective of true democracy in any society, community, or nation, is the basic rights and freedom of the masses to decide between good and bad, to choose who will rule and who will not rule and the right to vote in and out any weak government. The masses right to decide for free and fair election during elections makes the masses highly indispensable in democratic system of government. Olatunji Felix maintains that ‘democracy caters for the views of those in opposition with due respect as those in opposition today might be in the majority tomorrow in order to get the consent of the people. (20)

Democratic government all over the globe aims significantly at the expression of thoughts, opinions and ideas from the masses either to be treated fine or revolting positively for a change. On the contrary, the masses struggle day and night for their voices to be heard and for the ruling class to keep to their promises. Walter Idada observes that ‘democracy in the African context means the ability of few people to effectively take control of the powers and authorities of governance with or without the choice of those they represent’’. (24) Vanhanem as cited by Walter further stated that “In order for democracy to be meaningful it must be characterized or underlined by the principles of openness, representation, accountability, transparency, protection and preservation of individual or group rights. (29)

Democracy gives the masses the ideal right and freedom to participate in decision of their own country and by so doing, they contribute towards national stability and development. The issues of contributing towards national stability in democracy in African traditional society starts right from various family units where everybody is mandated to do good in order to protect his/her family name and lineage from being wrongly identified. The objective of democracy is to serve the people at any given time irrespective of their tribe, religion and profession, but problematically what we have in our current democracy in the opposite of the set goals where corruption, civilian authoritarianism, economic and infrastructural decay has eaten deep into the mindset of rulers against the ruled. Then the worrisome questions are: Who are the ideal leaders? Do selfless and servant leaders exist? And Do we still have ideal leaders who can still keep to sweet endless promises during and after elections? All these questions can be answered perfectly, if the ensemble of theatre is fully utilized as a reflective before the ruling class, their ruling style and level of stewardship. Femi Osofisan as cited by Iyama Chijioke suggests that;

The expectations for us as theatre practitioners are immense... We had come to agree that the theatre should be part of the struggle of our country and our continent for political and economic emancipation. (60)

The purpose of communicative use of dance, music and drama in democratic government is to remind the ruling class that they are being watched. So they need serious redress in their abuse of power and always to do the needful especially in the lives of the poor masses that voted them into office. Ray Kroc believes in equal power distribution in democratic government. So he sees government leadership as an organizational standpoint which involves the redistribution of authority and power between managers and employee to provide employee involvement in the process of decision making. (24). To further portray how democratic leadership or government should be, Kroc also presented advantages and disadvantages of democratic leadership or government. The advantages of democratic government according to Kroc are as follows: it aids in resolution of complex problems, it gives room for good business fit.., it gives room for public opinion, it gives room for creative environment, it helps in self realization and actualization with public funds. Disadvantages of democratic government according to Kroc are as follows: it always presents signs of uncertainty among the ruling class, the ruling class spends more time in self-satisfaction than serving the masses, it creates room for unnecessary lies, fake promises and unfulfilling of already made promises, and it gives room for dictatorship as a leader. The democratic system of government will always be right or admirable if its negative side is worked upon towards achieving a perfect synergy between the ruling, the ruled and power control and distribution

Dance and its Socio-environmental Effectiveness in Democratic Government

The effective use of dance has been misinterpreted a lot by some unenlightened masses, thereby raising a lot of rhetorical questions on the effectiveness of dance as a socio- corrective tool and its positive effect on the ignorant and poor masses who seek for change. But dance in its totality emerges from the societal problems that serve as its choreographic style and the choreographers’ inspirational tool. The core aim of every dance performance professionally is to take the problems of the masses closer to them to see, think, appreciate understand and suggest the

possible ways forward. However, in order to make the masses understand more the didactic potency in dance, choreographed and performed dances should be exhibited in a more relaxed, entertaining and aesthetically-semiotic dance movement. The socio-environmental effectiveness of dance helps to play down on the masses psyche especially when they are being insulted, dehumanized and rendered hopeless in the hands of the ruling class whom they believe so much in to always speak their minds. So in situations like this, dance movements when well-choreographed serve as “social whip” that motivates the ruling class to change for good and project the interest of the masses that voted them in, while on side of the masses based on the possible way forward they are reassured that all hope is not lost.

The way the playwright mirrors the society and presents the way forward verbally, is exactly how choreographer uses the dancer’s body to mirror the society, dissect its problems logically and present the way forward to the anxious masses either for the ruling class to change peacefully or being voted out of government. The socio-environmental effectiveness of dance in democratic system of government interpretatively shows that no dance performance both in its style, form and content emerges in abstraction. Rather environmental problems such as lack of water, bad roads, unemployment and barbaric customs and traditions serve as its icon signs. Akas maintains that;

Highly semiotic dance performance before the ruling class is a mere form of relaxation, fundraising format and artistic display only. But to the choreographer and dancer’s body is a tool to awaken the dying consciousness of the ruled either to accept the ruling class ideology or ask questions necessary. (24)

Cultural Values of Dance in Democratic Government

Akas states that “The value of dance in society is in its cultural ability and not in its aesthetic performance” (24). It is the cultural values imbedded in democratic system of government that unites various tribes to accept democracy as government of the people, for the people and by the people which is designed to serve the interest of the public not for private purpose. But, at times, the selfish interest of the rulers towards the ruled makes them to de-emphasize the sacred maxim of “all before self” and start working towards satisfying themselves, children, immediate and extended family thereby becoming tribalistic and forgetting the promises they made. This is exactly what dance as an x-raying tool tends to expose, correct and suggest way forward. Dance as a symbolic connective tool culturally serves as a “T-junction” where everybody unites irrespective of one’s beliefs, religion and profession to plan on how to achieve a certain goal through conscious or unconscious discussions while watching any performance. It is those discussions that culturally appraise any democratic system of government especially based on the person’s family background, education, profession and how he has truly represented the image of his own people that voted him into office. In African cosmology, names of families, family background and good reputation matter a lot, because it speaks well of the person and how his ancestral fathers have favoured the family or disfavoured the family. The cultural values in dance present the usefulness of dance in any democratic government in following ways: dance as a reflector, dance as a motivator, dance as a psyche stimulator, and dance as a self-appraisal tool.

All these qualities make dance a cultural bond which helps the indigenes or citizens to know when to react for positive change or just remain mere passive observers in any democratic government.

Synopsis of Azulu Dance Performance

This dance was choreographed by Mr Patrick Okoye. It was a departmental performance, performed by 3rd Year student of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies (2012/2013) in the course titled THA 391 (Choreography and Dance Performance). Azulu Dance Performance mirrors the various ills in the present Nigerian democratic system of government: where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, where employment is strictly given on personal recommendations, the unemployed youths are allowed to kill and rob as their source of living, unnecessary increase in items in the market, bribery and corruption by our police officers who are supposed to protect the citizens and also misuse public funds.

The choreographer was able to showcase all these using highly semio-communicative movement of the dancers’ body to actualize his intention to masses in order to reawaken their conscious mind set. In order to understand the communicative essence of the dance more, this paper will run a content analysis on some selected dance movements of Azulu performance in order to understand how effective the dance mirrored the present Nigeria.

Analysis of Azulu Dance Performance towards Democratic Consciousness in the Masses

The interpretative analysis on selected movements in dance was based solely on the pictorial analysis of the dance, which symbolically exposes the reason the dance (Azulu) was chosen for this study. This paper therefore was seriously scoped by the researcher to project the misdeeds of the ruling class and how it affected the masses. According to the Choreographer Patrick Okoye, he said that;

The dance though entertaining and interesting to watch, its communicative potency before the ideal targeted people will either make them ask positive questions, have a rethink and seek for suggestions or go back to the drawing board and protest to know how it all started and then seek for a redress (Interview).

Based on the above perception of the choreographer, what matters in professional dancing is not the aesthetic attitude of dancers, but the thematic essence of the dance performance when dated or compared side by side with current environmental, social, domestic, religious and democratic problems. The body of the dancer and the dance becomes the antagonizing tool, while the choreographer becomes the master planner towards self-actualization, self-realization and determination. The semiotic dance movements in the dance and its communicative analysis are as follows:

The Fuel Crisis Issues

The dance movements here symbolically portray the suffering of the poor masses during fuel crisis. During the fuel crisis the poor masses find it very difficult to buy fuel for the cars and generators, thereby making them to either struggle while buying fuel to resort to black market or vandalize fuel pipes. This struggle to get fuel by all means have really killed a lot of innocent citizens of this country, while some have been arrested by the government and forgotten in jail for years without any form of judgment or being granted bail. The choreographer uses these three symbolic semiotic movements to showcase the type of Nigerian citizen that exists during any fuel crisis in the country. These people from their various roles in the dance interpret their various functions and whom they represent. Those people are: the desperate fuel attendant, politician drivers, and the angry masses.

The Desperate Fuel Attendant

From the symbolic dance movement of the fuel attendant, it is obviously stated that the period of fuel crisis is the best period for them. It is seen as the best because they only attend to their costumers based on who bribes them or one on one personal relationship with their old costumers, family members or house neighbours. Some of the fuel attendants during fuel crisis they ironically say “May God bless Federal Government for this great blessing”. This automatically turns unforeseen circumstance of the poor masses to source of living in the mindset of the fuel attendants and thereby making them to hide the available fuel if one refuse to agree to their terms. This paper therefore agitates that in situations like this nobody is superior; everybody should be treated equally and the poor should de-emphasise the concept of “get it by all means” and accept the axiom that slow and steady wins the race.

The Politicians’ Drivers

This set of people was represented by a particular dancer who was in suit throughout the performance. They are always seen as special citizens and demi-gods during the fuel crisis. They are fondly called the “Oga boys”. So once they enter any fuel station they will be treated first ignoring others who might be there before them. To show the corrupt attitude of the politicians’ drivers and their boss at times, they are always ready to pay any amount for fuel to be reserved for them. They are always ready to breach protocols all in the name of various “official number plate’s number and they are ready to intimidate the poor masses with their security men and women in case they want to revolt. So the issue of struggle for fuel during the fuel crisis is not meant for this set of people and their bosses. The increase in fuel price does not affect them, because they can afford any price and at times give money to the fuel attendants to seal the relationship for future purposes.

The Poor Masses

The set of dancers was wearing a symbolic red coloured costume. This symbolic colour red semiotically shows that the poor masses are always ready to do anything to survive during fuel crisis. They pass through pains during the crisis and suffer a lot of inconveniences as a result of lack of fuel.

Increase Food Items

The unnecessary rise and fall of the dollar in the Nigeria Stock Market has really affected the price of goods, attitude of sellers to their customers and led to unplanned abstinence by some citizens in the country because they cannot afford three square meals. From the pictorial interpretation of the choreographic movement, it simply shows the

present Nigeria sellers are ready to fight or abuse their costumers for pricing their food items below the cost price. This at times, might result into serious exchange of words or fight as the case may be, while the customers on their side cannot just accept any price given to them, based on the following reasons: that government does not consider their feelings before increasing price of goods and services, that if they decide to buy everything they see in market based on the existing price, training children will be a problem, and that the government is just using them as slaves, to actualize their selfish desires, while they and their children enjoy on daily basis

All these aforementioned reasons contributed to constant disagreement between the market sellers and their customers as choreographed in this dance.



Plate 1(left): The market seller and her customer arguing over price increase in food item
 Plate 2(right): A scuffle between the seller and the customer over disagreement in price

Bribery and Corruption among Nigeria Police

The choreographer through the semiotic communicative movement of the dancers portrays the various corrupt practices carried out by the present Nigeria police officers who are supposed to guide and protect the citizens. The pictorial actions of the police officers in this paper portray the negative side of them, which include bribery, victimization and unlawful arrest of citizens whom they are supposed to protect. At times from the semiotic analysis of the movements, whoever agrees to their terms is seen as a better citizen, while those who argue or want to know their offences and defend their rights are delayed for hours or arrested. Also the symbolic movement of the dancers in police uniform shows that the Nigeria police officers are ready to work, but the Federal Government fails to give them the necessary allowances such as hospital, house, school allowance for their children and risk allowances. So the best solution is to extort money from the citizens they are to protect to regain what they claim to have lost in the hands of the government. Due to lack of adequate allowance, they always leave citizens to their various fates whenever they are being attacked by armed robbers claiming they can't risk their lives to protect others. This paper therefore poses the question of what are the possible ways forward to return sanity to the Nigerian police and how will the government take care of the welfare of the Nigerian police to enable them do their job effectively.

Plate 3: Unlawful arrest by policemen of the citizens Plate 4: Jubilations by the policeman after unlawful bribery



Unemployment

The high level of unemployment due to government's poor attitude to provide employment for the youths, have really turned some of them into robbers, cultist or dupers. The youth as shown in the picture below, decides through their

symbolic communicative body movements and weapons in their hands, assume that since government is not providing any job for them, they all decided to rob citizens especially those in official positions in their community or the rich ones among them. This action by the youth shows that “a hungry man is an angry man” so they can do anything to survive. In order to instill fear on their victims as shown in the picture below, they make use of weapons to pass message of serious business to their victims whenever they visit. At times they might not want to kill or harm their victims but in a situation where they feel stubborn, refuse them entrance to their houses or wants to unveil their masked faces that are when those weapons will be used on them. The next question is, how do those robbers as portrayed in the dance get their weapons? At times they might buy it, at times desperate police officers who want to make money lend it to them and while some of them are supported by the rich citizens or even government officials. All these dehumanize the youths of today, who are supposed to be well trained, informed and prepared to be good leaders of tomorrow.



Plate 5: Unemployed youths trying to take laws into their hands through armed robbery

Conclusion

From the findings of this article, dance as a societal watchdog remains highly indispensable. The use of dance today especially in its semiotic communicative movement has gone beyond the aesthetic. The modern choreographers are like the Prophets in the Bible through their dancers who visualized things before they happen, analyze them before it happens and proffer possible solutions. The essence of this paper is to reawaken the consciousness mind of the masses to re-appraise the government to know whether they kept to all their political promises or not, but in situation whereby they refuse to keep their promises the best option is would not be violence, but to vote them out during the next election and vote the good ones in. The communicative essence of Azulu Dance performance in this paper is to remind the masses that what matters in every government is when some percentages of their promises are achievable and not beautiful ideas in an imaginary island. When such is avoided our country Nigeria will be rated among the best in the world in all its ramifications.

Recommendations

1. Choreographers should choreograph communicative movements that will mirror current issues in the society.
2. The masses should develop the habit of going to the theatre to watch meaningful life performance like dance, and avoid seeing it as waste of time.
3. The government should see dancers as communicators who will be useful in passing their aims and objectives to the masses, not using them as there entertainers during occasions or events only.
4. This article recommends finally that Nigerian dance scholars should write more on the usefulness of dance in democratic system of government to enable the masses explore its usefulness during crisis.

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