

A DISCOURSE OF THE MOVEMENT MOTIFS IN FISHERMAN DANCE OF THE EPE PEOPLE OF LAGOS STATE

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Abstract

Dance in Africa, specifically from Nigeria, has over time made tremendous impact in such areas like propagation of culture, projection of unity in diversity and promotion of cultural identity. With the global economic diversity, dance has provided an enabling environment and concrete platforms for its practitioners to explore the potentials embedded in the packaging and production of performances, thereby serving as a vital tool for socio-economic stability. The Fisherman Dance which is an occupational dance holds significant cultural and social importance among the Epe community, reflecting their traditions, values, and history. Through an analysis of movement motifs, this research aims to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in the choreography, exploring how gestures, rhythms, and spatial arrangements convey themes of livelihood, communal harmony, and spiritual beliefs. Through the adoption of cultural theory of dance and participant observation method of research, this paper carries out a socio-cultural engagement of the Fisherman dance of the Epe people of Lagos. The study elucidates the intricate relationship between movement motifs and cultural identity, highlighting the dance's role in preserving Epe heritage amidst modern influences. The findings contribute to broader discussions on dance ethnography and cultural sustainability, emphasizing the Fisherman Dance as a dynamic expression of local identity and resilience.

Keywords: Dance, Motifs, Fisherman, Epe People, Occupation

Introduction

Dance in African communities as part of the people's life is constantly involved in mimetic movements in daily activities. Dance is the rhythmic movement of the body in time and space to convey a message. Humans use dance in various ways such as in ritual worship, displaying an occupational movement, communication with higher forces or supreme deity, telling of stories, displaying emotional feelings, for keeping fit or as form of exercising and for pleasure. To a large extent also, dance has been employed as tool for curing some emotional

problems or physical ailments. By conceptualization, dance has been described from different perspectives by scholars in the fields of Performing Arts, Psychology, Human kinetics, medical sciences and Sociology. In Theatre, scholars like Ojuade (2002:56) describes dance as an “expression of human feelings, as a spectacle art, recreation, fitness, divine or social expression and representation of cultural norms or in a simple language; a human activity”. This definition sees dance as a phenomenon that exists within human activities. Yerima (2003:124) asserts that dance “is a form of language which sends messages from the dancer to the audience or sometimes the co-performer”. From the point of view of identity formation, Yerima (2003:125) affirms that dance

...represents the identity of the people. Through the body, dance uses the emphasis of areas of the body as metaphors and symbols. Specific parts of the body are used to reveal the history of the people, their occupational engagement and their environment. For example, if they live by the river, the shapes, angles, the costumes, the music and even their colors, become symbol which emerges from the river or sea.

The definitions above show clearly that dance is a form of expressive language of a people from which signs, symbols and movements can be interpreted and understood by the people. Dance is a reflection of the community or society that produces it. It explores the people's culture and the milieu in which it exists. This is basically because the instruments are true reflections of the indigenous cultural patterns or designs. Bakare (2002:1) maintains that “dance being a language expresses the geographical location, biological temperature, religious beliefs, and political peculiarities of the people that own it”. Milieu plays a vital role in any art form. In the case of dance, the milieu has much influence on the dance steps or movements, songs, instrument, costumes and make-ups. All these are representations that differentiate one indigenous dance from the other. The dance of the primitive man for instance, reflected a wide range of different situations and adventures as he danced his fears, hate and anger but with a difference as the dance is being regulated with the consciousness of his identity. Humans express emotions on what experiences they encounter just like a hunter in the bush, a fisherman in the river, and the forces of nature and that of the gods. Hawkins (1988:3) explains that “through his body, man perceives the tensions and the rhythms of the universe around him and using the body as his instrument, he expresses his feelings as well as responses to the universe”. Though dance exists in the physical body, i.e. it is the physical body that serves as the instrument for dance and it is the functionality of rhythm which exists in the psychology of the dancer that goes a long way to determine a good dancer. African dance has always been known to be the expression of emotion and experience; it is the situation at hand that determines the dance of the moment. This is why there are different dances for different occasions. Dance is not just for mere entertainment as it can aid socio-economic issues, political, developmental as well as cultural functions. Beyond these, dance

has become a full professional practice that is solely depended on for social and economic advancement. In line with this, the paper examines the Fishermen Dance, an occupational dance of the Epe, people of Lagos State and how it has been deployed to facilitate fishing advancement for both individual profession and the society at large.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural theory will be employed for the actualization of this study. The theory will be applied as it expressively embodies this study within the praxis of cultural expression, language and communication. However, the theoretical approaches to the study will examine a selected cultural practice that is embedded in fisherman dance of the Epe people.

Cultural Theory

Cultural theory is a method of studying cultural conflict. It makes a neo-Durkheimian synthesis around a dynamic concept of culture as simultaneously creating, sustaining and produced by institutions. This term has been applied to diverse attempts to conceptualize and understand the dynamics of culture. Historically these have involved arguments about the relationship between culture and nature, culture and society (including material social processes), the split between high and low culture, and the interplay between cultural tradition and cultural difference and diversity. Cultural theory has also been marked by an engagement with concepts which have often been taken to cover some of the same ground signified by the notion of culture itself. Prominent here have been the concepts of ideology and consciousness (particularly its collective forms).

Conceptualizing Movement Motifs in Dance

“Movement enables the body to be aware; with awareness itself being the summation of tactile sensations as the body perambulates within and through its immediate environment” (Nikos, 2018:10). In another view, Abbe (2010:6), “movement from time past has been a medium through which man primarily reveals his thoughts and ideas”. Its fundamental tenet is that emotional states within the body are reflected in movement patterns, and that altering one’s movement patterns can influence mental shifts that enhance well-being and personal development. However, Online HSC Dance (2024:1) explains that “motif is the earliest stage of development of a theme or composition; a movement starting point which gives the first element of form to the dance/work”. Movement motifs in dance are a fundamental aspect of choreography that plays a crucial role in shaping the overall aesthetic and thematic elements of a dance piece. When conceptualizing movement motifs, choreographers delve into the intricate details of movement vocabulary, seeking to develop a cohesive and meaningful choreographic language that communicates specific ideas, emotions, or narratives to the audience.

At its core, a movement motif is a recurring pattern of movement that serves as a building block for choreographic composition. These motifs often carry thematic significance and can be developed, repeated, varied, and even transformed throughout a dance piece to create coherence and continuity. By utilizing movement motifs, choreographers establish a sense of unity and structure within the choreography, allowing for the exploration and development of specific movement ideas or concepts. In conceptualizing movement motifs, choreographers draw inspiration from a variety of sources, including personal experiences, emotions, music, visual art, literature, or cultural traditions. They may also incorporate elements of improvisation, experimentation, and collaboration to explore different movement possibilities and push the boundaries of traditional choreographic conventions. Movement motifs can be used to convey a wide range of emotions, dynamics, and symbolic meanings within a dance piece. By carefully crafting and manipulating movement motifs, choreographers can create powerful visual metaphors, evoke specific moods or atmospheres, and guide the audience's perception and interpretation of the performance. Furthermore, movement motifs in dance serve as a means of storytelling, allowing choreographers to structure and sequence movements in a way that conveys a narrative or thematic arc. Through the repetition, development, and transformation of movement motifs, choreographers can guide the audience through a journey of exploration, transformation, conflict, resolution, or any other narrative arc they wish to explore.

The conceptualization of movement motifs in dance is a deeply nuanced and multifaceted process that requires creativity, intentionality, and artistic vision. By carefully crafting and manipulating movement motifs, choreographers can create choreographic works that are rich in meaning, emotion, and artistic expression, engaging both performers and audiences in a dynamic and immersive dance experience.

Perception of Fisherman Dance

The Fisherman Dance in Nigeria is a vibrant and culturally significant celebration that encapsulates the essence of various fishing festivals across the country. This captivating dance not only showcases the unique traditions and customs of fishing communities but also highlights the deep-rooted connection between the people and the bountiful waters that sustain them.

In Nigeria, fishing celebrations hold significant cultural importance and are deeply intertwined with the lives of the local communities. The tradition of the Fisherman Dance showcases the vibrancy and diversity of these celebrations. The dance incorporates various elements that symbolize the rich maritime heritage of Nigeria. The rhythmic movements of the dancers mimic the motions of casting nets, hauling in catches, and navigating the waters. This not only demonstrates the practical skills of fishing but also pays homage to the fishermen who rely on these skills for their livelihood. The synchronized footwork and

gestures depict the unity and cooperation required in the communal activity of fishing. Additionally, the costumes worn during the fisherman dance play a vital role in portraying the cultural identity and history of the fishing communities. Brightly colored fabrics, intricate patterns, and accessories such as fishing tools and marine symbols all contribute to the visual spectacle of the dance. These costumes are not merely for aesthetic purposes but serve as a visual narrative of the fishing traditions passed down through generations.

Music and percussion are integral components of the Fisherman Dance, creating an immersive experience that engages the senses of sight, sound, and movement. The rhythmic beats of drums and traditional instruments provide a dynamic soundtrack that drives the energy and tempo of the performance. This auditory element adds another layer of storytelling to the dance, evoking emotions and connecting the audience to the cultural significance of fishing in Nigeria. One of the remarkable aspects of the Fisherman Dance is its ability to incorporate a diverse range of fishing festivals from different regions of Nigeria. Each festival brings its own distinct practices, rituals, and folklore to the dance, creating a rich tapestry of cultural heritage and identity. From the colorful Masquerade Festival in the east to the lively Argungu Fishing Festival in the north, Argungu fishing festival is a way of life for the people of Kebbi State. The festival preserves tradition and promotes conservation. It began in 1934, when the Sultan of Sokoto visited Argungu, after many years of hostilities between the two neighbors and a fishing festival was organized in honour of the visiting monarch, this mark the end of century's old hostility between Sokoto Caliphate and Kebbi Kingdom. The festival quickly became a celebration of life and unity. According to Munzali (2007:3), "about 30,000 fishermen, and villagers, participate in a week-long traditional fishing competition, which includes other cultural events". Another fishing festival is Lake Efi Fishing Festival. It is a cultural festival of the Efi people performed at Efi Lake in Sabagreia, Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government of Bayelsa State in appreciation to the goddess of the river for a production annual fish harvest. Lake Efi Fishing Festival is an occasional festival that is celebrated once every seven years and as directed by the chief priest of Efi Lake. According to Ugo(2020:323), "Lake Efi is peculiar in many ways from other lakes in Bayelsa State". The fisherman dance is not merely a form of entertainment but a poignant tribute to the deep-rooted traditions and values that sustain fishing communities in Nigeria. By infusing different types of fishing festivals into this dance, participants celebrate their heritage, honor their ancestors, and reaffirm their collective identity. Through the rhythmic movements, vibrant costumes, and soul-stirring music, the fisherman dance becomes a living embodiment of Nigeria's diverse cultural tapestry and a testament to the enduring legacy of its fishermen.

Brief History of Epe Community of Lagos State

Epe is a prominent community located in Lagos State, Nigeria, with a rich history that dates back many centuries. Historically, Epe was founded by the Awori people, who are known for their expertise in fishing, trading, and farming. The Awori people have played a significant role in shaping the cultural, economic, and social development of Epe over the years. During the pre-colonial era, Epe served as a crucial trading hub for various goods, including seafood, agricultural products, and traditional crafts. The community's strategic location along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean made it an ideal spot for commercial activities and maritime trade. This facilitated interactions with traders from different parts of Africa and beyond, contributing to the cultural diversity of Epe.

With the arrival of European colonizers in the 19th century, Epe became a crucial point of contact for trade and diplomacy. The British established a presence in the region, which resulted in significant changes in the political and economic landscape of Epe. The colonial era brought new opportunities and challenges to the community, as traditional systems of governance were gradually integrated into the colonial administration. In the post-independence period, Epe witnessed rapid urbanization and infrastructural development, as Lagos State emerged as a center of commerce and governance in Nigeria. The community's proximity to Lagos City and its natural resources made it an attractive destination for investors and migrants looking for new opportunities. Today, Epe continues to thrive as a vibrant and culturally rich community, known for its bustling markets, traditional festivals, and warm hospitality. The people of Epe have managed to preserve their cultural heritage while embracing modernity and innovation in various aspects of life. Ultimately, Epe's history is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its people in the face of historical changes and challenges. The community's rich cultural heritage, combined with its strategic location and economic potential, makes it a unique and dynamic part of Lagos State's identity.

Movement Motifs in Epe Fisherman Dance

The Epe Fisherman Dance is a cultural expression deeply rooted in the socio-economic fabric of the Epe community in Nigeria. This traditional dance form serves as a symbolic representation of the livelihood, struggles, and triumphs of the local fishermen who rely on the waters for sustenance and economic activity. The movement motifs within the dance reflect the daily routines, challenges, and aspirations of the fishermen, translating their experiences into a physical language that communicates their connection to the natural environment and their community. The dance movements often mimic the actions of fishing, such as casting nets, hauling catches, and navigating the waters. These gestures are not just choreographic elements but carry significant meaning, illustrating the fishermen's labor, skill, and relationship with the sea. Through intricate footwork, gestures, and body movements, the

dancers embody the rhythms of the ocean, the strength of the fishermen, and the unity of the community. Beyond the practical aspects, the Epe Fisherman Dance holds cultural and spiritual significance for the community. It serves as a form of storytelling, passing down traditions, values, and collective memories from generation to generation. The intricate choreography, musical accompaniment, and communal participation create a sense of unity and identity among the performers and spectators, reinforcing a shared cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the dance reflects the socio-economic dynamics of the Epe community, highlighting the centrality of fishing in the local economy and the resilience of the fishermen in the face of challenges. By celebrating their occupation through artistic expression, the dancers not only honor their profession but also assert their presence, agency, and cultural pride in a rapidly changing world.

Significance of Epe Fisherman Dance

Within the Epe community in Nigeria, the Epe Fisherman Dance is a traditional cultural expression that is highly valued. This dance style has a rich historical background and represents the values, customs, and way of life of the nearby fishing community. The Epe Fisherman Dance significance in protecting and advancing the Epe people's cultural legacy is one of its main features. The history and traditions of the community are transmitted through this dance from one generation to the next, guaranteeing the Epe people's distinctive identity is maintained over time. The community's connection to the sea, its fishing activities, and the natural environment that supports them are all visually and artistically represented through dance. The Epe Fisherman Dance is a symbol of the people's tenacity, inventiveness and energy. It is a potent sign of cultural identity and legacy that captures the history, ideals, and goals of the community. The Epe people honor their past, enjoy their present, and encourage future generations to treasure and preserve their distinct cultural inheritance by conserving and presenting this ancient dance form.

Fisherman Dance as Socio-Economic and Cultural Expression

The art of the fisherman's dance represents a unique blend of socio-economic and cultural expressions that hold significant importance in many coastal communities around the world. This traditional dance form not only serves as a form of entertainment but also vividly captures the spirit of the sea and the livelihood of those whose lives are intricately woven with it. Socio-economically, the fisherman's dance reflects the deep connection between these communities and the ocean. It tells the story of a way of life where fishing is not just a means of sustenance but a cultural practice passed down through generations. The movements of the dance often mimic the actions of fishing, from casting the net to hauling in the catch, symbolizing the daily struggles and triumphs of those who rely on the sea for their livelihood.

Culturally, the fisherman's dance embodies the traditions, beliefs, and values of coastal communities. According to Onwuekwe (2015:177), dance is the “expression of the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values, of a particular culture. It is what is embedded in the culture that can be reflected in the dance of a community”. The rhythmic music and synchronized movements of the dancers bring people together, fostering a sense of community and shared identity. Through this dance form, stories of bravery, resilience, and unity are passed down from one generation to the next, preserving the rich heritage of maritime cultures. Moreover, the fisherman's dance serves as a form of artistic expression, allowing performers to showcase their skills, creativity, and passion for their craft. The elaborate costumes, intricate choreography, and lively music all contribute to the immersive experience that captivates audiences and transports them to the vibrant world of the sea. The fisherman's dance is much more than a mere performance; it is a living embodiment of the socio-economic and cultural fabric of coastal communities. By celebrating the traditions and values of the sea, this ancient art form continues to thrive, connecting people to their roots and honoring the enduring legacy of the fishermen who have shaped these communities for centuries.

Conclusion

The Epe fisherman dance is a complex statement of socioeconomic realities, cultural values, and communal identification that goes beyond a simple set of moves. This ancient dance style ensures that audiences both local and distant will continue to be moved by the stories of the Epe fisherman by capturing the spirit of their lives, hardships, and joys via its movement motifs. The discourse of the movement motifs in the fisherman dance of the Epe people of Lagos state provides a rich tapestry of socio-economic and cultural expression that is deeply rooted in the traditions and history of the community. The fisherman dance is also a form of storytelling, with each movement and gesture conveying a specific meaning or message. From the casting of the net to the hauling in of the catch, every step in the dance tells a story of hard work, perseverance, and the bounty of the sea. Through the intricate movements and gestures of the dance, we can see a reflection of the daily lives and struggles of the Epe fishermen, as well as their deep connection to the natural environment and the sea. The fisherman dance serves as a powerful form of cultural expression, allowing the Epe people to celebrate their heritage and traditions while also highlighting the importance of their livelihoods as fishermen. The movements of the dance convey a sense of unity and cooperation among the fishermen, as they work together to navigate the challenges of the sea and bring in their catch. Furthermore, the dance also serves as a form of economic expression, showcasing the importance of fishing to the local economy and the livelihoods of the Epe people. It is a way for the Epe people to pass down their cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, ensuring that their customs and values are preserved for years to come. Through the dance, one can see the skill and expertise of the fishermen as they deftly handle

their nets and boats, demonstrating the hard work and dedication required to make a living from the sea. Overall, the discourse of the movement motifs in the fisherman dance of the Epe people of Lagos state provides a fascinating insight into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the community. It highlights the resilience and strength of the Epe people, as well as their deep connection to their traditions and the natural environment. By preserving and celebrating this dance, one can ensure that the rich heritage of the Epe people continues to be passed down through generations, enriching the cultural tapestry of Lagos state.

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