



ISSN 2315-6317

Vol. 3, 2016

# **DANCE JOURNAL OF NIGERIA**



A publication of the  
**Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria**

**June, 2016**

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Journal of the Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON).

Volume 3, June 2016

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ISSN 2315-6317

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June 2016

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# Mixing fun with serious business towards a democratic society in Femi Osofisan's Yungba-Yungba and the dance contest

Dance Journal of Nigeria (DANJON)  
Vol. 3: pp 74-80, 2016.  
A Publication of  
Association of Dance Scholars and  
Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON)

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### Abstract

*In most African societies, the process of democracy is marred by nepotism, favouritism, which are the reasons why credible leaders are not installed in position of authority. This paper examines the use of Dance in Femi Osofisan's Yungba-Yungba and the dance contest as a tool for achieving egalitarianism, true democracy and the progressive change our society has been clamouring for. Analytical and descriptive research methodologies are employed in interrogating this work. Arising from the above, our findings amongst others reveal that dance; a non-verbal communicative art is a tool that can be adapted to resolving knotty issues in a crisis laden society. The paper concludes that dance is fun but is serious business in exacerbating true democracy. It is therefore recommended that dance as an art should be promoted and made an integral part of academic curriculum in our institutions of higher learning for the training of future leaders.*

**Key words:** Democracy, Dance, academic curriculum, training

**D**ance is described as "the art of moving the body in a rhythmical way, to express an emotion or idea, to narrate a story, or simply to take delight in the movement itself". (Edwards, 1984, p. 6). This definition already captures the intricacies of dance as both a serious and entertaining endeavour. Dance, following a pattern of steps is usually displayed in various styles and methods amongst which are; hop, skip, trip, sway, whirl, pirouette and many more makes it

fun. This is because it is an art that is usually explored to relax and shake off all kinds of tension that must have accumulated in man as a result of his involvement in barrage of chores.

Beyond the fun-laden trait of dance, it has proved to be an art that requires tremendous amount of training, skilful display of energy and discipline, which is qualities that any sane society would expect their leaders to imbibe to be able to manage the democratic process of their society. Ostensibly, this is what Femi Osofisan tries to put across in his play, *Yungba-yungba and the dance contest* (1993, pp.24-5), in the dialogue of Ayoka who enthuses that:

Our foremothers, skilful dancers and musicians themselves saw at once how fun could be mixed with serious business. They knew tremendous amount of training, and energy, and self-discipline it takes for anyone to win our championship, and they knew these were also the qualities needed for responsible leadership!

The statement above underscores the fact that, discipline, which is one of the feature traits in a dancer, is a quality that should be the trademark in all democratic process; a quality that a leader should possess and religiously demonstrate. The ability of dance to transform human character was captured by Akinsipe (1999, p. 41) when he submits that "dance alone, if well focused, can be used to realize all the government's objectives of the primary education. This is because dance is both a physical and emotional activity, it therefore, influences the character". In this paper therefore, we examine sociology of dance, in our literary analysis of dance as fun, as a process, a passage and a tool of change in true democratic process as contained in Femi Osofisan's play; *Yungba-yungba and the dance contest*.

### Conceptual Framework

Some concepts and terms feature consistently in this paper that we strongly opined should be explained as they are used in the context of this work. They include; Democracy, dance, academic curriculum and training.

*Democracy* is a concept that bothers on ruling. Richard M. Pious in his review in the *Encarta* (2009) defines democracy as a political process "a system in which the people of a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish." It went further to explain how democracy is seen in the contemporary time. He sees it as how "supreme authority is exercised for the most part by representatives elected by popular suffrage. The representatives may be supplanted by the electorate according to the legal procedures of recall and referendum, and they are, at least in principle, responsible to the electorate." In the context of this work, we adopt the definition that democracy is exercised for the most part by representative elected by popular suffrage.

On *Dance*, Zussane Youngerman in her contribution to the art of dance in *Encarta* (2009) submits that

Dance can be art, ritual, or recreation. It goes beyond the functional purposes of the movements used in work or athletics in order to express emotions, moods, or ideas; tell a story; serve religious, political, economic, or social needs; or simply be an experience that is pleasurable, exciting, or aesthetically valuable.

This sounds interesting. Isn't it? It is interesting because it captures the entirety of the art of dance. Hence we adopt it as how we want to use dance in this work. In this work therefore, we looked at dance as fun, story teller and a valuable tool in democratic process.

*Academic curriculum* is the content of a course taught in an institution or the holistic component of a subject that is to be taught. Because the concept is mostly used in academic institution, it became convenient to wear the appellation academic curriculum.

*Training:* No one can achieve perfection without having a formal training. Just as this is applicable to all arts that require skilful displays, it is also a process that is required in training dancers towards reaching the state of perfection in his/her dance art carrier. We examine this in the play that we have selected for this paper with a view to see how essential training is and how it has been used as precursor to excel in contest. Therefore, we explain what training is so that we can understand its importance to our daily activities and how we adopt it in the context of this work.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Alan Watts (1915-1973), an English philosopher, in underscoring the potency of dance as an art states that: "The only way to make sense out of a change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance." When analysed, one would realise that Watts is not oblivious of the fact that change is inevitable rather he highlights the process that could be followed to make change possible. This he says is to 'join the dance.' Dance here is seen as a veritable instrument in the process of effecting change and attaining true democracy.

Another dance scholar Mata Hari (1876-1917), a Dutch, in one of his contributions describe dance as "a poem of which each movement is a word." Although, dance is said to be a non-verbal communicative art, yet it communicates. Which is what Peick (2005, p.1) confirms that: "Dance communication play an important role in our interaction with others." This underlines the fact that dance, even though is a non-verbal communicative art promotes robust interactions amongst people of the same race, creed and cultural affinity. Dance, when juxtaposed with the process of development of a baby, gives a clearer picture that dance is a process that exacerbates development and accentuates true democratic process. This Osofisan highlights in *Yungba-yungba and the dance context*. In the same way Fredrick Nietzsche (1844-1900) a German philosopher, poet and classical philologist in his earlier postulation highlights that: "He who would lean to fly must first lean to stand, and walk, and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying." This calls our attention to the fact that every action requires a process, the processes that are deeply seated in the art of dance. To dance entails that one must learn to stand, walk and run. Dance therefore is an important art in human endeavours.

## **Dance as Fun and Serious Business toward a Democratic Society: A Textual Analysis of Osofisan's *Yungba-yungba and the Dance Context***

There is no doubting the fact that dance is fun but that notwithstanding, it is a serious business that has been used to attain egalitarianism in most African societies. It has been employed as a method to appoint leaders or to measure the level of competence or manliness of participants in many dance competitions. Adeoye explores this in his play; *The Killers* (2009, p.1). In the opening prologue, he highlights how dance is employed as a tool during the celebration of an annual independence competition in WAZOBIA country. During the said competition, Adeoye submits that: "Nine radiant

dancers swing to the tune of the anthem...Through choreographed movements; they sing and dance to the song of "we must match on." Dance here is used in a forum to herald a joyous moment.

We have been told tales of dance competitions that are organized to select suitors for maidens or wife for kings. If dance is not a serious business, it will not be used as a process in many of the important events in which dance have been employed. The African society weaves their live experiences into dance whether it is joyous or sad. Itsewah, (2014, p. 149) citing Snipe (1994) affirms this when he says dance enables the Africans "to give meaning and context to their greatest joys, hopes, frustrations, fear and sorrow". In the same vein Osofisan in the play under examination employs dance as a tool to democratically select a youth leader; a female who is to be representing the youth in the community of Baale in *Yungba-yungba and the dance contest*.

### **Synopsis of the Play**

*Yungba-Yungba and the dance contest* is a play that epitomizes the corrupt and sit-tight syndrome disposition of African leaders on a position that is supposed to be rotated or occupied for a statutory period. Iyeneri, the priestess of the land refuses to quit as the priestess having spent ten years on the post, which she is to spend one year. The position of the priestess is a statutory one for the maiden of the land who should represent the female gender at the court of the Baale. This is the position that Iyeneri refuses to abdicate. The maiden of the land decides to confront Iyeneri who has remained powerful and uncompromising, relishing on excuses that when she accepted to occupy the position there was no one who was ready to face the turbulent situation in which the community was.

However, maidens of the land decided that for Iyeneri to continue to occupy that position is to limit contributions of female youths to matters in the community. This leads to the formation of a group called Yungba-yungba, led by Ayoka. Iyeneri sensing the tornadoes of the resilience of the determined maidens decide to employ all kinds of means to dislocate them. The secret of her diabolical plan is leaked to Ayoka, who blows her wicked plans in the open. Iyeneri accepts her guilt, like a villain turn hero she takes a bow and passed on to the great beyond. The dance competition is held and thereafter it becomes part of real life.

### **Dance as Fun**

Nothing in life can be done with fulfilment and satisfaction when fun is absent. In fact, Martha Graham in one of her sayings submits that: "Dance is the hidden language of the soul of the body. Anything that is fun laden exacerbates energy; it enhances one's accomplishment of genuine effort. It is to be noted that the concept of fun as a fuel for accomplishment of camaraderie-ship in human activities has been on since time immemorial, since the time that our forefathers have been celebrating various types of festivals. The fun, which our forefathers inject into the festivals make it inviting, scintillating and crowd pulling. This is eulogised in the submission of Ayoka thus:

Our foremothers! Let us give praises to these ancestors we love so often to malign! You know our foremothers who started this festival, they loved their fun but they were also thinking women and they decided to mingle their fun with their other serious needs (*Yugba Yugba and the Dance Context*, p.24).

### **Dance as Serious Business**

The fact that dance is fun does not foreclose that it is not a serious business. Due to the fact that dance is a serious business, it manifest as the raw material to attaining egalitarianism and probity. The seriousness of the art manifest in very rigorous process of different kinds of movements that are employed in the process of putting the various dance steps together. Sweat that dancers discharge also attest to the seriousness of the art. The serious nature of dance as a serious business Osofisan underscore in the dialogue below:

#### **Ayoka**

I say, as our foremothers dance, so did they also remember the welfare of their community...our foremothers, skilful dancers and musician themselves, saw at once how fun could be mixed with serious business (YY&DC p.24).

Dance, undoubtedly is a serious business.

### **Dance as a Disciplined Art**

Discipline is an order of control. It is the ability to exercise control and maintain decorum even in the face of provocation. It could also be to have control over one's lifestyle. Dance being a rigorous art, requires a lot of perseverance and self-control. This is because to learn various dancing steps require patience, whereas patience in itself is discipline. To exacerbate true democratic process, a lot of discipline is required. This is underscored in *Yungba-yungba and the dance contest* where one of the requirements for winning the dance competition that is used to select youth leader is self-discipline. The dialogue is reproduced hereunder: "...and self-discipline it takes for anyone to win our championship, and they knew these were also qualities needed for responsible leadership. So in place of elections, they chose the dance" (YY&DC, p.25). Dance here is employed as alternative process to conducting an election to select community representative because of the discipline quality that is found in the art.

### **Dance as a political tool for the selection of leaders**

In Africa, process of selecting leaders is usually laden with problems, chaos and in most cases marred by violence, which is the reason why credible leaders are not put in position of authority. And when they are elected under an incredible circumstance, they arrogate power to themselves thinking that they are the only one who has the magic wand to solving all societal issues. A replica of that selfish position is recapped below:

#### **Iyeneri**

What nonsense! Too long! When peace and harmony endure in a household, only the foolish elder gives deadline!

This statement, which Iyeneri uttered, presents the position of many of our leaders in Africa. African leaders, after tasting the sweetness of power, in spite of the fact that they are aware that the position they are occupying has tenure, and must be relinquished at the end of tenure for another to fill, would go ahead to use all unpleasant and diabolical means to perpetrate themselves on the position.

In *Yungba-yungba and the dance contest*, Osofisan leads us to how dance can be used as a tool in the face of democratic turbulence. He shows us how selection of a female youth who represents her colleagues in the court of the Baale is done using the process of a dance competition thus: "So in place of elections, they chose the dance! And every year therefore, whoever won the context became at the same time our political head, leader of the younger women, and companion of Iyalaja." On the important role of dance in the political affairs of Africans, Akinsipe (2002, p.200) submits;

Politically, dance has been used extensively in the traditional African society to create peace and maintain order. The potentials of dance are carefully harnessed to govern any given society. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that dance is one of the many ways by which the African society is organized and governed. It plays a vital role in reaching out to the various classes of the society for any communal activity or ceremony.

### **Dance as a Promoter of Harmonious Relationship**

There is a popular saying that two people cannot work together, unless they are friends. Perhaps, because dance is fun, it brings people of different affinities together to co-exist in a harmonious way for the achievement of peaceful co-habitation. Young women in *Yungba-yungba* demonstrate this. When the young women folks in *Yungba-yungba* found that things are not done the way it ought to be, they formed a group that decide to champion the course of change with a view to promoting harmonious co-existence as evidence in the dialogue below:

#### **Ayoka**

...For we want to move and we shall move! We younger women, we believe we can change things here, turn things around and we are going to! That is why we formed the *Yungba-yungba* (YY&DC, p. 31)

### **Conclusion**

Through this study, we have been exposed to how dance had and can still be used as a conduit to reaching an enduring democratic platform, which ordinarily legal or even spiritual process may not find achievable. We have found that although dance can be fun, it is a serious business. We have presented in a stark manner the fact that dance is a language; it is a communicator even though its output is non-verbal. We have seen dance as a fountain, a raw material that has served as precursor to attaining many feats. Even though a lot of complexities have trail the African dances, which was the reason for the very many arguments, amongst which describe African dances as not codified, not notated, therefore, cannot be regarded as a serious art. One fact remains; dance is a veritable tool in the path towards democratic change. Nigeria has tried a number of approaches to attain true democracy; most of them have failed hence the need to look in the direction of dance as the new approach towards achieving change become apt. People may see it as fun, but in the approach is seated in the wisdom that can transform a hopeless situation to a hopeful one.

African dance is the root of Africans, jettisoning it for other cultural dance is like cowing the better part of African. We must do everything to sustain it for the future of generation yet unborn.

Therefore, in its rawness, the flavour, content and the ethical value African dance must be maintained for the sustenance of Africans ethical values.

There have been lots of proliferation and bastardisation of African dances, keeping its values in its realness will be the pride of its enduring legacy.

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