

Dance as a Vehicle of Communication in the Tiv Kwagh-Hir Theater

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of dance as a vehicle of communication in the Tiv Kwagh-hir puppet theatre. The paper looked at what the Kwagh-hir is, the use or function of music, dance and the other arts in it. The paper emphasises that neither dance (nor any of the arts involved) can stand alone in the performance of the Kwagh-hir because in the Tiv culture, there is no much distinction between music and dance. The conclusion is that dance is the major vehicle of communication that gives life, sustains interest and makes a success of the aims and objectives of, particularly, the modern Kwagh-hir theatre.

Keywords: Dance, Communication, Kwagh-hir Theatre, Puppet Theatre

1. Introduction

The *Kwagh-hir* has been described as an art, an activity, a festival, and an event. Hagher (2003) has successfully argued that the *Kwagh-hir* is a form of African theatre in the sense that it provides secular entertainment, education, and socialization through the enactment of the past and contemporary events, by performers using puppets and masquerades. *Kwagh-hir* is a popular puppet theatre of the Tivs in Benue State, of Nigeria. Adeyemi, (2006:3) describes puppetry as an art form, which makes use of animated objects in its performance.

There is no doubt that a typical African (Nigerian) festival or theatre is a fusion of some all the performing arts and the visual arts; music, dance, drama, mime pantomime, poetry, costume display, masks, and so on. The *Kwagh-hir* perfectly falls into this category. It is indeed a combination of many art forms;

- a. Story telling art
- b. Poetry
- c. Puppetry art
- d. Music art
- e. Dance art
- f. Dramatisation art (Hagher, 2003:48)

The performance practice of music, dance and drama in the traditional African/Nigerian society can be said to be that of a total theatre because it is holistic in nature. The performing arts freely enjoy the company of one another so much that when one is being performed the others are significantly present and well articulated too (Akinsipe, 2013). However in different traditional theatre or festival one form connects the others. It may be chants, or drama, music or dance though the end product appears well blended. In the case of the *Kwagh-hir* dance, it seems to be the major medium of expression.

The use of dance as a vehicle of communication has been of interest to scholars and the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre provides a good example for the dance as communication phenomenon. The integrative nature of theatre and its component parts is conspicuous in the integration of music and dance in the *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre. It has been well observed that music functions to bring out dance (Hagher, 2003:66). In the same way, costume props, acting, miming, fine arts, sculpturing, all combine inseparably to make the *Kwagh-hir* a typical Nigerian theatre.

However, the modern *Kwagh-hir*, that is, *Kwagh-hir* in the form as it is performed nowadays, is a combination of storytelling, poetry and dance. In other words, one can say the modern *Kwagh-hir* is the art of telling stories or interpreting poetry in dance. Thus dance has become the vehicle of passing across the message of *Kwagh-hir* theatre.

It is not surprising therefore that in Tiv language there is a distinction between *amar a Kwagh-hir* which refers to the “*Kwagh-hir* dance”, and *Inumbei Kwagh-hir* which refers to “the *Kwagh-hir* play”. This means that the *Kwagh-hir* is also regarded in the community as a dance theatre and, like any other dance theatre, employs other arts like the use of gestures, music, make-up, costume, fine arts to communicate.

The focus in this paper therefore is on the use, role and function of dance within the *Kwagh-hir* theatre. The paper also briefly examines what the *Kwagh-hir* is and concludes that dance is the major vehicle of communication that gives life, sustains interest and makes a success of the aims and objectives of the *Kwagh-hir* theatre.

The Tiv *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

It is important to locate the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* theatre in the history and in the tradition of the community. The origin of the *Kwagh-hir* can be said to be in three phases. Foremost, the *Kwagh-hir* is rooted in the storytelling tradition of the Tiv people. Storytelling in Tiv land was done with the storyteller using symbols, costumes and props in enacting his stories. Not only these, the storyteller acts out, mimes and dances to give life to his acts as well (Hagher, 2003:51). The elaborate and character representations inherent in the Tiv traditional storytelling culture is, no doubt, one of the influential origins of the Tiv puppetry theatre tradition.

Other factors that may have given birth to the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* are as a result of different protests and revolts. In the Tiv traditional belief, the world inhabitants are of three main characters; the spirits, human beings and animals. The spirits are identified as the *adzov* or *ijov* who are unseen mates of the living who in everything they do, reside with and act like the humans. We also have the *Mbatsav*, who are believed to be human beings with extraordinary or “spiritual” powers of *Tsav* which they acquire and manipulate to their own advantage, and almost always, at the expense of other human beings. The *Mbatsav*, therefore are the wicked (evil or dangerous) people of the society like witches, sorcerers and wizards.

The need to curb and check the activities and wrong doings of the *Mbatsav* in the Tiv land had led to series of protests and revolts from the “*Hoyo cult*” in the first decade of the 19th century, the *Ijov* cult movement” of 1912, the *Haakaa* in 1929 and the *Nyambuan* of 1939. The first form of protest was against spiritual oppression while the second one was a reflection of human, political (colonial/post colonial) and religious oppression. This was most evident in the *Haakaa* and *Nyambuan* revolts.

The strong belief and the fear of *Mbatstav* in the Tiv people made governance difficult for the colonial masters. It also hindered the conversion of most of the Tiv people to Christianity. This was why the colonial masters and the missionaries combined in the *Haakaa* to launch an attack on the *Mbatsav* to “liberate the Tiv from the props of fear of the *Mbatsav* as well as help the missionaries in converting the Tivs that were “freed”, to Christianity. (Hagher, 2003:36)

One of the things the colonial masters did was to demand for the artefacts of *Tasv* from the people suspected to have them. However, this only led the clever people to quickly improvise various artefacts at a massive and speedy rate in order not to part with the real idols. This gave rise to making of fake ones and this had important consequences for the later development of puppetry for the theatrical tradition in Tiv land. (Hagher, 2003:38).

Another revolt that has direct linkage to and influence on the *Kwagh-hir* is the *Nyambuan* of 1939. It was both a revolt against the *Tsav* and the British administration. It involves a kind of drama in which all the political forces were attacked. In their dramatic enactments, they not only ridiculed the unholy alliance of the missionaries and the colonial agents but, exposed the disorder of an imposed alien rule. The drama of protest was followed by a resolution not to pay any taxes to the white man. (Hagher, 2003:41).

The colonial administrators did not take kindly to this refusal to pay taxes that spread all through Tiv land. The *Nyambuan* revolt was crushed with utter brutality and this then forced the dramatists (revolters) to go underground. When the modern *Kwagh-hir* began about two decades later the dramatic enactment of people impersonating other human beings as well as speech and dialogue were absent. This must have been due to the brutal experience of the 1939. Therefore, instead of the realistic actor, a marionette was created and instead of speech dialogue were songs and gestures. This probably marks the beginning of weaving the stories in dance and creating new dances to reflect peculiar historical epochs which are believed to be a natural desire of the Tivs (Iorapuu, 2007:35).

This is exactly how the modern *Kwagh-hir* is practised today. In 1960 and 1963 when there was another revolt against government repressions in Tiv land, the protesters were dressed in costumes similar to those worn by the *Kwagh-hir* players. The “rioters” also called themselves *adzov*, similar to the *adzov* shown in the *Kwagh-hir* (Hagher, 2003:109). When a combined team of police and Nigerian Army officers eventually disbanded the rioters in 1964, the *Kwagh-hir* art form emerged shortly after, using songs, dances and puppetry as its chief means of communication. It is thus “the introduction of the Puppet into the story telling and poetic and dance traditions that began the modern *Kwagh-hir*. Hagher (2003:107).

By the early 70s in Nigeria when the festivals of Arts began as a form of re-uniting the country after the civil war, and different states were encouraged to come out with their dances and arts, the *Kwagh-hir* which soon became the trade mark of Benue state emerged from the Tiv land and later featured at FESTAC '77. Since then, several groups have emerged and the *Kwagh-hir* had been used to educate, entertain and instruct audiences all over the world. Lyndersay (2008:356) asserts that the Ibibio and the Tiv puppets in Nigeria are used to "illustrate current and historical events, as well as incorrect behaviour, minority opinions, ignorant indigenes, obnoxious foreigners, simpletons or fools, and other aspects considered undesirable in the society".

Even though there are traces of puppet dances in the Hausa culture in Nigeria in the past, only the Tiv people have a living puppetry tradition in the region today. In fact, there are many established *Kwagh-hir* groups numbering over four hundred who are said to have members between forty and one hundred in their troupe (Hagher, 2003:18).

2. Kwagh-hir Performance Structure

The performance of *Kwagh-hir* takes place in an open arena, which can be divided into four, consisting of, the main performing area, the chorus' stand, backstage (from where the manipulators sometimes perform), and the audience area. The audience sit or stand in a semi-circle round the main performing area from where they, sometimes, emerge to be part of the main performance especially singing as the chorus themselves.

There are basically two types of performances, the one by the manipulated puppets (the wooden puppets and bigger carved images in form of different animals that are manipulated through strings and or rods), and the animated puppets which are inhabited by human beings. In latter category we have, the masquerades and other masks representing different animals. The masquerades are mainly of two types. Those that represent the spirits (*Ijor*) and those that represents animals (*Inyam*). For the *Ijor* the more fearful they look the better and the more they receive credits but the *inyam* is expected to be *icheen* (smart) and full of *fefa* (speed).

There is also a narrator in the *Kwagh-hir* theatre, who may also use mask or not, who links the manipulated 'scenes' with the animated 'scenes'. The performance is usually preceded by an opening glee in which all players participate followed by the storytelling or introduction of the play. The *Kwagh-Hir puppets* are usually presented on a portable booth platform. The puppets are mounted on them and manipulated from underneath the booth through rods, strings and fetals. Different stories are told, ranging from historical to the contemporary. There are many plays used to ridicule the white man and others as social

criticism. The performance usually lasts a whole night beginning from around 7:00 p.m. (Enem, 1981:249).

3. Dance in the Tiv *Kwagh-hir*

It is worthy of note that the modern *Kwagh-hir*, which emerged as the art form and is practised today, de-emphasises dialogue because of the 'brutality with which the *Nyambuan* cult dramatists were suppressed by the combined efforts of the missionaries and the colonial government. Since the *Kwagh-hir* did not emphasise speech or dialogue, music and dance became the most used media of communication. But a careful study of the *Kwagh-hir* reveals that dance is actually the visual and also the physical medium of communication, while music provides the audio accomplishments.

Dance has been defined variously by different people according to their orientation, discipline and area of specialization (i.e., artists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc). Different types of definitions also apply to different kinds of dances depending on their types, purpose or functions. But, generally, dance is defined 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, 1984:6)

From the above definition, one can conclude that movement is paramount to dance because dance is movement and movement is dance. However, there are two main types of movement, hence two types of dance. Laban (1972:72) posits that man moves in order to satisfy a need. He aims by his movement at something of value to him. It is easy to perceive the aim of a person's movement if it is directed to some tangible object. Yet, there also exist intangible values that inspire dance. This means there are purposeful or conscious movements or dances and un-purposeful or unconscious movements or dances. The question therefore is: what kinds of movement constitute conscious and unconscious movements? Edwards (1984:5) provides an answer;

The fact that dance is an art form immediately distinguishes it from unconscious movements of the body. An art implies a plan, or at least a conscious purpose. This does not mean that every movement details is planned necessarily but that, to be a dance, it must have a conscious purpose...properly speaking, therefore dance is conscious both planned and purposeful.

Therefore, soldiers marching, the bees moving or the waves of the sea cannot be described as dance because dance is not just any patterned rhythmic movement. Rather, it is an art which is said to be an imitation and expression. To be dance it has to be a patterned

action that imitates nature or human actions or thoughts, express emotion or personal ideas. (Copeland and Cohen, 1983:1-2).

If we consider all the above definitions of dance, then we can say categorically that dance is a major medium of communication in the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* because all the movements of the puppets in the *Kwagh-hir* theatre are purposeful. These movements, no doubt, are made by the manipulators, to express ideas, tell different stories and entertain audiences as well.

Furthermore, dance is also defined as “a superior type of movement elevated above human existence” (Londale, 1981:11). The puppets’ movements in the *Kwagh-hir* theatre fall under this definition, in that they are usually exaggerated and above natural or normal human movements. They are made to do many Tiv traditional and modern dances, as well as acts such as performing surgical operation on a pregnant woman to deliver her of a baby. We also have scenes of soldiers executing armed robbers. All these stylised movements qualify as dance because they serve a great purpose and they are the means through which the messages of the *Kwagh-hir* are passed across to the audience.

In the classification of African dances, the puppet theatre is identified as one of the eleven major classes of Nigerian dances. It is described as “a spectacular dance with [a] fully developed puppet show”, (Enem, 1975:71). Therefore, the *Kwagh-hir* as a puppet theatre is automatically a dance theatre. Being a dance theatre presupposes that dance plays the prominent role in the actualization of its objectives as music does in the opera and dialogue in drama.

4. Dance as Characterisation and Communication

The animal masquerade enactment of the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* dance can be used to exemplify the phenomenon of dance as the chief medium of communication in the puppet theatre. This is because:

All animal masquerades appear alike. There might be little variations in size or colour but generally a spectator to the *Kwagh-hir* who keeps hearing the names of different physical structures might be disappointed. *The prime attraction and accepted aesthetic is the consideration of the different dance movements as significant characterization.* Thus if attention is focused on the dance pattern and the song, one would observe significant character individualization from the different names of what appears to be the same animal (Hagher, 2003:169) (emphasis is mine).

Thus, the *Aku Gyang* animal masquerade, described as being murderous, is expected to dance wildly and to react to the song rhythm of *gyang, gyan gyan* with sudden jerks

forward (Hagher, 2003:172). The *Kwagh-hir* animal masquerades obviously depend heavily on dance to communicate in the Tiv theatre.

In the same vein, dances constitute the paramount vehicle of communication in the *Adzov* spirit masquerades enactment of the *Kwagh-hir*. In the *Ijov ta hindi*, (the revolting *Ijov*). The masquerades is expected “to clap its hands as it dances rounds the arena...*This ijov is judged by its energetic dancing* and its ability to clap its hands rhythmically. Considering its bulk, the clapping is a great feat. (Hagher, 2003:177) (emphasis is mine).

From all the above, one can see that the *Kwagh-hir* theatre at all levels of its performances (puppetry, Animal Masquerades as well as the Spirit Masquerades) depends largely on the use of dance to enhance its communication.

5. Conclusion

It has been established that dance is the major strength of communication in the modern Tiv *Kwagh-hir* theatre. It is dance that gives life and form to the theatre. If the dances are removed, for example the theatre is likely to become meaningless.

The modern Tiv *Kwagh-hir* has therefore, survived and remained functional and relevant up till today because it relies heavily on and uses dance, which is a significant part of the people’s lives: their religion, culture and psychology. This is in turn used to inform, educate, instruct, mobilise, and encourage them to support or revolt against a cause, as it happened in the past, and to document, remind the people of the past and create a means of livelihood as well as entertain them in the present.

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