

Dance and Theater; Heritage and Identity of African Peoples

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Abstract:

Dance is consider as one of the expressive and performative arts that humans have practiced in both the past and present. The manifestations of dance have appeared in various forms and functions, some of which are spiritual and ritualistic, linked to religion and worship practices, while others have a social function, and some serve as an artistic and aesthetic expression through which individuals seek relaxation, pleasure, and escape from the burdens of daily life.

In this article, we aim to shed light on the art of dance in Africa, which has deeply ingrained itself in the souls and bodies of its people, becoming an artistic and social phenomenon that is essential to their way of life.

Keywords:Dance art; African society; physical performance

1-Introduction:

Art stands as one of the most vital and pleasurable expressions through which humans convey the depths of their inner emotions and thoughts—emotions that words alone cannot fully express. These emotions are instead translated into tangible forms that resonate with an individual's spirit, artistic talent, and aesthetic sensibilities. Historically, poets would describe and articulate the world around them, expressing the complex feelings stirred within, including longing, vengeance, war, and sorrow, across various themes. Poetry, often regarded as their anthology, preserved every aspect of their existence, big and small. Through it, they conveyed their customs, traditions, and heritage, thereby safeguarding their identity while embodying their culture and modes of social interaction and coexistence.

Long before recorded history, in pre-Christian eras, early humans communicated their experiences—whether in worship, adventure, hunting, or warfare—through the images and sculptures carved into caves and rocks. These carvings continue to unveil the life of early humans through modern excavations and discoveries of artifacts and skeletal remains. Additionally, dance was a significant tradition that expressed their hunting adventures and ritualized celebratory moments, where scenes were symbolically re-enacted through artistic and dramatic performances. These practices gradually became intertwined with religious ceremonies, eventually playing a pivotal role in the development of theatrical art in ancient Greece. Dance and religious rituals performed before temples evolved into choral dialogues, with the audience chanting hymns in a ceremonial and celebratory environment.

In light of this, when discussing art, which has evolved

in various forms to express beauty, joy, and to release repressed emotions—whether through religious rites or social customs—we aim, in this article, to explore the multifaceted art of dance. Dance, considered one of the most significant forms of performative art, has served various functions, including religious, cultural, and celebratory roles. Africa, in particular, has earned global recognition for its rich and diverse dance traditions, both individual and collective, which have evolved into deeply rooted customs and an integral part of its cultural identity. These practices not only define the cultural identity of specific tribes and regions but also serve as a medium for understanding the social fabric of African societies. To explore the artistic and social dimensions manifested in African dance, we will address the following research questions: What conceptual foundation underlies dance as an embodied aesthetic expression? How is African dance regarded as a deeply rooted cultural practice, reflective of the continent's identity across diverse environmental and social contexts? What are the artistic and social functions fulfilled by dance within African societies?

2-Research:

3-Dance Art: Defining the Concept:

Linguistically, according to IbnManzur, "Dance (al-raqs) and its variant form (al-raqasan) refer to rapid movement. In 'al-Tahdhib,' it denotes a specific type of swift movement, derived from the verb 'raqs' (to dance). A person who frequently dances is described as 'raqqas'... The act of dancing involves movements of both rising and falling.**As Abou baker** said: " that dance encompasses any form of movement, whether upward or downward, or repetitive motions,..” (MANZUR, 1997).ei; all the actions that include movements such as walking, the animal movements performed for mating or to display dominance. All such movements fall under the

broader definition of dance.

In its formal usage, the term dance has evolved, corresponding to the variety of its forms and methods. The Robert Dictionary defines it as "a series of expressive body movements performed to a rhythm, often accompanied by music." (Alphonse, 1992) Dance is a universal, human, artistic, and social activity present throughout history and across cultures. It originated as a communal practice, with various forms representing expressions of religion, celebration, and agricultural activities such as planting and harvesting. Dance also serves to express joy and happiness during festive seasons and special occasions (Al-Bukhari, 2022). Therefore, dance is a form of physical performance art that relies heavily on movement. The specific form, purpose, and meaning of a dance, however, vary depending on the social circumstances and occasions in which it occurs. The goals and motivations behind the dance—along with the accompanying body movements—determine the dance's meaning, form, and expressive intent.

"It is through art that humans discovered a true means of amplifying their strength and enriching their lives. The frenzied dances of tribes before hunting acted to boost the tribe's sense of power; the war chants and battle cries truly galvanized the warriors' resolve and determination. Likewise, the precise rituals of religious ceremonies strengthened the communal social experience for every member of the tribe." (Fisher, 1973) Thus, the events and circumstances that human societies face directly influence the specific movements, dances, and rituals performed. These activities primarily rely on physical expression, accompanied by rhythmic beats and expressive vocalizations that integrate with the performance.

4-Arts and Dance in Africa:.

The African continent, like other regions of the world, possesses a rich history across various domains, much of which remains unexplored, especially in the realm of the arts. "African art, like the arts of other nations, encompasses various forms such as poetry, dance, and music, among

others. The African people have developed numerous arts and crafts, with a unique style in wood carving, metalwork, and sculpture..." (Kourbandi, 2019) Thus, we observe that African societies have evolved culturally, adapting to the changing dynamics of life, despite enduring a dark historical period marked by colonialism, racial discrimination, slavery, and other forms of oppression. However, This history did not, hinder their efforts to preserve their ancient heritage, customs, and rituals. Dance, in particular, has been an essential part of daily life, accompanying both joyful and sorrowful moments.

The African people have also embraced sophisticated art forms, adopting techniques and characteristics from Western culture, such as theater, festivals, and popular performances. Dance and choreography, in particular, evolved into dynamic and performative arts that require constant training, significant effort, physical fitness, and suitable body types—much like the rigorous preparation seen in ballet, circus performances, and competitive dance forms such as breakdancing and contemporary hip-hop. These dance forms blend both African and Western cultural influences. G. Gorer, in his book *Africa Dances*, writes about the people of West Africa: "They dance in joy as well as in sorrow; they dance in love as well as in hate. They dance to attract wealth as well as to dispel misfortune. They dance as part of religious rituals as well as to pass the time..." (Ali Mazrui, 1935) This underscores the integral role of dance in their lives, an omnipresent companion in all circumstances, providing not just enjoyment but also a means of emotional release and spiritual cleansing. In various states of dance, the performers transcend conscious awareness, reaching a state of ecstasy or connecting with their gods as part of their religious practices.

African dance has distinctive qualities that set it apart from other cultures, drawing inspiration from nature, the African wilderness, and the mysteries within it. These movements were deeply influenced by ancestral customs passed down through generations. African dance characterized by

strength, masculinity, vitality, and a sense of dynamic power and resistance. For them, dance is a potent form of magic, transforming the body into fluid, steel-like movements that defy gravity and the laws of physics. At times, they leap into the air, their movements slowing, and their bodies contorting as if they have been reshape (Primus, 1994). These movements, executed by African dancers, distinguish their art from others, both within and outside of Africa. The exception, however, lies in modern dance schools in America and Europe, where dance techniques have merged to create hybrid forms with new and evolving aesthetic dimensions.

5-Aesthetic and Sociological Functions of African Dance:

Art has always been intrinsically connect to history, society, and civilization, preserving the history, customs, and traditions of peoples through its various forms. "Art has always been a necessity, and it is essential to recognize that when we study art, we are engaging with a unique and fascinating phenomenon..." (Fisher E. , 1998).Cultural anthropology studies have helped explain many of the phenomena experienced by ancient societies through the arts they practiced, including theater, dance, and song, which often expressed themes such as spiritual release, religious rites, and social interaction. In African dance, each movement conveys a particular emotion, a psychological state, a dramatic representation, or a function tied to the community. Hippolyta Taine, in his exploration of the relationship between art and its external contexts, emphasized that art and literature are intertwine with the race, environment, and time in which they were create. He sought to apply a scientific approach to art, stressing the importance of understanding the context, moral climate, customs, and prevailing mentality of the society in order to comprehend the cultural and creative phenomena of each community (Heinich, 2011). In Africa, dance served as a narrative tool, capturing and recounting the details of their lives, passed down through generations.

5.1Social Expressions of African Dance:

In African society, dance is not merely an aesthetic expression,

artistic enjoyment, or a form of entertainment for leisure among individuals; it is a sacred phenomenon that transcends these basic concepts. The history of Africa spans over 3,000 years, during which scholars have documented dance from its earliest forms. Dance has been regarded as a communal and traditional activity, marking both private and public events.

For example, new births, deaths, funerals, weddings, and coronations all serve as expressions of daily life in African societies (House, 2010). Consequently, it is difficult to imagine Africa without envisioning dance, as it is deeply integrated into every aspect of their interactions and daily existence. Dance has become a true reflection of their cultural values and serves as a symbol of their identities across all regions of the continent. While theater symbolizes Greek art, reflecting their beliefs, religious celebrations, and festivities for harvest and fertility, dance is the emblem of African cultures, narrating their worldviews, myths, and stories. As a Zimbabwean proverb aptly states: "If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing." (p, 2021)

For those of us engaged with African societies, the images of dance and song performed by both children and adults at various events often come to mind. In cultural and sporting activities, the importance of dance as a sacred art form becomes evident. It is akin to a vital need for the body, whether expressed spiritually or traditionally, where dances carry various interpretations and act as a form of communication between African peoples. These dances connect and strengthen their bonds across communities.

The techniques and artistry of African dance are diverse, depending on the social realities each community faces. Dances are distinguished by their themes and social functions, with changes in masks, costumes, and movement styles reflecting the specific issues addressed. For instance, dances celebrating the earth and agriculture highlight the African people's deep respect for the land. During harvests or times of bountiful production, communities gather to perform collective dances in a joyful, festive

atmosphere (House, 2010). Additionally, dance symbolizes new births and good health, as well as death, and honors the spirits of ancestors, who are believed to protect the community. This form of dance is deeply rooted in their mythical and spiritual beliefs, wherein elders are revered for their wisdom and blessings.

Dance is also an essential social phenomenon in marriage rituals, which unfold in distinct stages. These stages begin with the initial meeting between families, followed by expressions of gratitude and appreciation. The engagement ceremony includes singing and dancing, with various styles performed throughout. One example of this dance culture is found in the Yoruba community in Nigeria (Hussein, 2021).

Dance also represents the unity and cohesion of society; it is an essential aspect of all areas of life. In Nigerian communities, it is regarded as the most important ritual associated with religion, where the priest or priestess takes the role of the principal dancer, performing symbolic gestures to invoke protection from the gods or spirits that guard them (Harper, 1969). Dance, in these communities, is organized and supervised by those with wisdom and religious authority, ensuring conformity to the customs and traditions that represent the laws of the clan—laws that cannot be transgressed. From this, we understand that the primary functions of African dance are often connected to religion, cultural practices, and popular traditions, reflecting the community's lived experience.

5-2. Psychological and Spiritual Expressions of African Dance:

As an art form, dance can validate theories from modern psychological studies, which argue that artists express their repressed emotions, feelings, and sensations through their art. In this context, dance becomes a means of emotional release and a form of expression for the soul and inner consciousness. "Art is the only realm in which the power of ideas is preserved to this day. In art, the tortured human being, driven by desires, can achieve something akin to fulfillment..." (Noel, 1997) Thus, African

dance fulfills a spiritual role, providing individuals with a way to release internal energies and restore balance. "Dance is a fiery expression of vitality and intense emotion; it is a release of internal tension that harms both the spirit and the body." (Shertah, 2014) In this sense, dance becomes a tool for spiritual healing from the negative energies that take hold after traumatic or tragic life events. This is similar to the psychological concept of sublimation, in which the dancer channels accumulated repressed emotions into creative movements, influencing the psyche and the audience alike.

The best way to describe African dance, which expresses the spirit, is through its deep ties to religion, magic, superstition, and mythology, as part of a popular culture with a mystical and spiritual character. These practices have contributed to the development of religious rituals and ceremonies, which blend song and individual and collective dances (Hanafi, 2010). Religious rituals, particularly in Africa, have always been connected to various art forms, especially dance. "Witches and priests..."

Religion closely mirrors the work of creative artists, as art, in this context, serves as a function of worship or atonement for sins. This becomes evident when observing Sufi groups dancing in their temples, swaying and spinning, expressing the numerous hardships their ascetic ancestors endured. Through these performances, they seek to draw closer to God and atone for their sins by engaging in self-inflicted suffering in hopes of achieving divine favor and forgiveness. (Read, 1998)

In Nigeria, the Obakula clan performs theatrical dances called "Nkwa," which serve both social and psychological functions. These dances help them cope with past traumatic experiences, such as wars or the loss of loved ones. By participating in these dances, they engage in an alternative form of emotional release, allowing them to distract and exhaust themselves in a healthy manner, which helps to relieve their emotional distress (Alphonse, 1992). Much of the spiritual dance found in Africa, particularly in regions close to the north, is deeply tied to religious beliefs. These dances

are often led by priests or elders, and groups like the Sufi brotherhood—primarily following Islam—are examples of this.

The link between dance, theater, and spiritual expression dates back to the origins of Greek theater, which evolved from early human dances expressing religious and spiritual ecstasy. These dances were often combined with exuberant celebrations during the harvest, with participants wearing special costumes and masks for such rituals and ceremonies.

Purely kinetic dance functions as a natural release of excess energy from the dancer. This artistic performance also brings joy to spectators. The rhythm of the dance, alongside the organized movements, channels energy and relieves fatigue. The spontaneous, unconscious movements of the body are transformed into organized, conscious actions, accompanied by clapping, synchronized steps, waist movements, and facial expressions (Luxona, 2012). that align with each gesture. Through this process, the heart, body, and soul achieve harmony and reconciliation. "In fact, the union between the spiritual and the physical is evident in all arts, originally linked to the sacred and the divine. Dance is likely the first art form where this union between the religious and the aesthetic is most clearly manifested in primitive human expression... The sacred elements in dance are evident in celestial dances, the dance of death, and acts of spiritual purification." (Saeed, 2017)

Thus, the mystical and spiritual dimensions of rituals and ceremonies significantly shape human behavior, influencing not just their spiritual practices but also even the most mundane aspects of daily life. And The art related to beauty is perhaps the most profound practice that engages the inner senses, translating them into the external world that the individual inhabits.

6. Conclusion:

The discussion of the African individual, their environment, beliefs, culture, and arts presents a culture that is both clear and enigmatic, deep

yet superficial, ritualistic, poetic, and filled with wonder. Its spirituality is derived from the wilderness, its relationships, and its mysteries. The language of art in African societies is unique; only they, deeply rooted in their ancient heritage, understand it. This is equally true of their art forms, particularly dance, movement, and physical performance—serving as their spiritual nourishment, their method of expressing both internal and external realities, and what their hearts harbor. It is their preferred form of self-expression and a means of affirming their rich, African identity.

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