Societal Perception and Implications of Contemporary Funeral Dance: A Study of Apams Undertakers' Funeral Dance

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Abstract

Dance as a communicative art form has diverse meanings, functions and interpretations depending on how it is used and its essence wherever it exists. This paper examines the socio-communicative essence of dance movements of funeral undertakers (Apams) towards interpreting what gave rise to such creative choreographic act and its intended functions. Objectively, it is clear that dance is an indispensible art form in most occasions in Nigeria and beyond. But its sociological implications are based on the societal values of the deceased, the economic status of the deceased's family and the societal assessments of the deceased's deeds, all these are what this paper sets out to resolve . In order to understand the societal perception of 'Apams Undertakers', content analysis was used as a research methodology to examine the implications of the 'Apams Undertakers' dance form, context and style during funerals. It could be established that the communicative essence of dance has made dance a socio-commercial venture in the sense that it is used during various occasions especially in funerals to showcase aesthetics instead of arousing empathy. It also increases the 'smiling to the bank' syndrome of those who use dance as a commercial tool in 'Apams Undertakers'. However, although the level of artistic aesthetics in 'Apams Undertakers' dance is commendable, their services should

be made to accommodate the poor. Nevertheless, the deceased can still be buried curried peacefully without unnecessary waste of resources during funerals. Conclusively, through interpretative and communicative values of the various dance movements by Apams Undertakers during funerals, people understand the social status of the person being buried (the deceased)

1. Introduction

The use of dance as a communicative tool exposes the intended message imbibed in the dance both for didactic purpose, entertainment and to lampoon the ruling class or ruled. Regrettable, dance is seen at some special occasions, as a mere form of money making and a 'painkiller', especially at weddings and funerals respectively. These perceptions about dance may be true. However, this paper also aims to analyze the socio- economic values attached to Apams undertakers' dance during funeral rites instead of empathy. It suffices to mention that in dance scholarship, no dance movement is a waste nor has it emerged out of mere assumptions; rather occasions, situations and events trigger off the creative impulse of a choreographer. Helen Thomas observes that:

> People at times think that dancers and choreographers perform wonderfully because they are professionals or skilful dancers. Beyond this, the smallest events which the dancers are called upon contribute and structure their dance style either to entertain, mock or celebrate the society. Dance as an art is a give and take performance. (24)

To understand any dance is to understand its potency, purpose and societal acceptability. Contemporary dance has gone beyond

strictly choreographed dance movements as in theatrical performance, to a serious business that requires the interpretative creativity of the person(s) that manages dance movements as a social venture.

Akas Nicholas maintains that;

> What makes dance widely acceptable is the contextualization of the movement. Besides that, dance at any level returns back to entertaining performance. (24)

KealiInohomoku as cited by Bettina Holzhausan concurs that;

> Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movement; the resulting phenomenon is recognized as dance both by the performer and observing members of a given group. (22)

The use of dance at any occasion presents critically the mood, feelings and ideology behind the gathering of such an occasion. At this point, behavioral situation of events motivates the dancers on how to subjectively thrill and attract the attention of the audience.

2. Funeral Dance and Societal Perception

The ability of man and the society at large to appreciate the use of dance in every occasion makes it a vital tool in communal life. This societal value of dance has made it an instrument for reawakening positive change and conscientization. David Leventhal observes that:

> The joy of every dance movement be it social, cultural or mixed, interpretative is not to thrill the audience only, rather to motivate the audience either to ask for more, imagine being a dancer or to probe the rationale behind the dance movement, and to use the dance as a reference point. (4)

Fatima M. Palmer adds that:

> Nigerians are passionately expressive in words and movement and make manifest their feelings and emotions through the celebration of birth, living and death. (29)

In Nigerian events or occasions, especially funerals, the use of dance determines the economic status of the deceased and that of his/her children. Based on societal assessment funeral in the Nigerian context is that which has the Apams Undertakers invited to display their aesthetically choreographed dance to the rhythm of music. The ability of the children of the deceased to invite, feed and pay the 'A'grade of the Apam Undertakers makes the funeral a societal one. Chinwendu Ikeugu, a retired teacher, in an interview, states that:

"If somebody thinks he/she has all it takes to give a befitting burial to a loved one, it can be measured through the person's ability to invite the Apam Magic dancers. But in a situation whereby one cannot afford the expenses, let the dead be buried peacefully".

3. Theoretical Framework

In the south-eastern part of Nigeria, funeral rites have been reshaped since 1992 by the introduction of Apam Funeral business, which centers on celebrating the economic status of both the deceased and their children. In the modernized and socio-aesthetic "Apamic" style of funeral, the mourners no longer cry nor do they need empathy much, rather the grand style of the funeral remains symbolic which portrays the following:

- The deceased lived a good life on mother earth.
- The "Apamic" aesthetic style in the funeral rites makes the deceased a societal figure.

- The deceased did not die but lives in spirit with his ancestors, and guards his household. Hence, the mourners should mourn no more but eat and dance in celebration.

Based on the above, this paper adopted the French Sociological Theory on funeral rites as its theoretical framework. The theory was developed by Robert Hertz who sees funeral rites and death as:

- Not being an instantaneous destruction to an individual life.
- A social event the starting point of a ceremonial process whereby the dead person becomes an ancestor.
- The initiation into a social afterlife, making it a kind of rebirth.

Hertz also observes that:

> The emotion caused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased and may even in certain cases be lacking. At the death of a politician, a priest or a chief, a true panic sweeps over the group and celebration comes up. On the contrary, the death of a stranger and a slave will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion or rituals as the case maybe. (76)

Malinowski, in his view about African funerals, as cited by Phyllis Palgi, posits:

> It is believed in African tradition that the burial of any dead soul is incomplete without a ceremonial rite of passage. It is this ceremony that welcomes the dead soul peacefully into the land of the ancestral world. (52)

The use of dance especially during funerals x-rays socio-environmental potency of the dance during its performative state. Ola Nesporora stated that 'Funeral dance practices are always closely related to attitudes towards death and conceptions of the

afterlife'' (175). Dance in funeral rites based on Africa cosmology has an interconnecting link between the living and dead. This is because Africans believes that the deceased level of deeds either good or bad determines how he/she would be mourned by the living or welcomed in the world of the ancestral fathers. Ola further maintained that ' Dance and celebration are indispensible in funeral rites, but what keeps the spirit of the deceased in peace in the ancestral world in his good deeds while bad deeds places the deceased spirit with stubborn spirits.(212) . Dance during funeral rites goes further to reunites the bereaved irrespective of their individual perception on the deceased and actions when he/she was alive. The sole aim of the bereaved here is just to give the dead a ceremonial burial. Exley Catherine observed that

> Though to lose someone is painful, touching and heartbreaking, the excitement to give the dead a befitting funeral through dance, music or rituals gives a temporary healing of hopefulness to the bereaved. (111)

It is based on the above ideologies that this paper centers its theoretical framework on the French Sociological Theory as its working metaphor.

3.1 Undertaking as a Social Business

The current perception of people about death and its funeral has gone beyond the symbolic "black and black" or the shading of tears, into a serious business. It is the business aspect of undertaking that makes people (like Sir Kevin Chukwumobi, M.D Apams Limited) to go into it as a source of livelihood. In many Igbo communities, the success of any funeral depends so much on the following;

- The status of people present
- The aesthetic setting of the arena

- The standard of the food and the dancing Apams undertakers. The socio-business style of dancing Apams undertakers attracts the audience attention, and makes the children of the deceased to be seen as rich and influential. The business aspect of the funeral rites (using Apams as a study) differentiates the price, style content, caskets and costume of the undertakers from the road side undertakers. This paper discovers that Apams Undertaking limited has various grades of undertakers, depending on the socio-economic status of the deceased and the pictorial impact they want to infuse in the mind-set of the audience.

Mike More explains that:

> Undertakers no longer have pity and respect for the dead body of the deceased, rather the economic instability of the nation has restructured and deemphasized the empathic attempt of mourning into a full aesthetic performance. On the part of the undertakers, they perform just to publicize their trade, get applauded and receive their required salaries. (204)

In agreement with Mike, Akas affirms that;

> The modernized undertakers and their performative styles deemphasized required emotions and encourage aesthetic commercialized funeral rites. (27)

It is the different grades of undertakers and their price tags especially in Apams that turn their performances during funerals into a must-watch act. This paper discovers also that the grade of Apams undertakers varies from A, B and C, from pure business perspective. The 'A' undertakers are strictly meant for the first class citizens who can afford all the monetary implications. The 'B' grade, is for the middle class (this type of people though financially stable but would not like to waste resources as in A

grade). At this point, the undertakers dance but not so elaborate and their costumes not extremely attractive. The 'C' grade is used by the commoners who always bargain the cost price of the commercialized casket and the undertakers performative skills. Based on the business nature of undertaking, while the mourners mourn, the managers of the undertakers smile home with more money.

3.2 The Origin of Apams Undertakers Limited

The Apam Dance was founded by Sir Kevin Chukwumobi, a pharmacist in 1992. According to the founder in an interview, the undertaking business came from his part-time business on ambulances. He was combining both his professional job as a pharmacist and the ambulance business. The ability of the founder to move into undertaking business fully, according to the company's public relations officer, Mr. Nwamadi (in an interview) shows that "the founder had worked in line with his profession but was not unfulfilled. As a result, he decided to try his second passion of business which is the undertaking business". He further said "The founder decided to add aesthetics, style and content to the funeral rite simply because of the following reasons

- To remind the mourners that death is inevitable; they should take heart.
- To conduct funeral rites in the south-eastern sense of orderliness
- To reawaken the consciousness of the masses beyond the mythic and myopic perception of corpses or ghosts

The company's public relations officer, Mr. Nwamadi, points out that from 1992 till date, the company has developed and spread massively to other parts of the country and he also noted emphatically that the business-Apams Undertakers Limited is still

a sole business of Sir Kelvin Chukwumobi, and the full meaning of APAMS is- Amuche Pharmacy and Medical Services.

3.3 Contextualization of Undertakers' Dance

In traditional funeral dance, all the processes are being carried out by the family of the deceased and the age grade. The family of the deceased use individualized dance movements to celebrate the passing on of their loved ones especially if the person(s) lived up to a satisfied age bracket between 80-200years of age. But in a situation whereby the deceased is so young or did not die a natural death, the dance movement showcases sorrow, disappointment and worries. At this point traditionally, it is a taboo for one to give such deceased person a befitting burial rather the spirit of the deceased is motivated spiritually to go after its killers.

The new Apamic Style preaches more of societal affluence than knowing the conditions surrounding ones death. The people's quest to be identified among those who can afford Apam Undertakers' gave rise to the socio- economic values of funeral rites. At this point aesthetics is been appreciated than understanding moral implications surrounding the death of the deceased. This paper strongly advocates that, though 'money making' is good, the Apams Undertakers should try to say no to some funerals especially if it has to do with young deaths.

3.4 Societal Perception and Implications of Apams Dance Movements

The Apams Undertakers' unique visionary ideology has really placed them as go-getters in the south eastern part of the country. According to the public relations officer, Mr. Nwamadi "it is the company's vision statement that differentiates it from other undertaking houses and makes ours most wanted and loved by

everybody". He further stated that their vision statements are as follows:

- The dead must be returned home in grand style to join the ancestral world.
- No matter their clients' financial status, Apams is ever ready to deliver.
- Let the undertaking services of Apams speak before their costumers and not amongst the staff.
- Every funeral rite is important and is taken seriously.

It is these few set goals of Apams Undertakers limited that makes them unique and acceptable among the masses in the south-eastern part of the country. The dance movements of Apams Undertakers are highly symbolic, aesthetic and communicative in nature. It is the aesthetic dance style of the undertakers that puts smiles on the faces of the mourners and attracts appreciation through the spray of money. Mr. Nwamadi states that "our style and choice of dance is always engineered by our customers' demands and wants". He further says that; "Our style of costumes and dance movements depend on the mood of the funeral- celebration or mourning". The semio-communicative dance style of Apams undertakers, which is the main thrust of this paper, is objectively classified as follows:

The mandate dance is the highest part of Apam dance movement. This dance movement simply portrays the economic status of both the deceased and his/her children. Here, the children of the deceased want to show off their affluence. As a result, the undertakers are mandated to costume themselves to suit the occasion. Their dance movement, symbolically, is in a slow pace, while the dancers are guided by police-like body guards.

The stylized slow movement simply shows that "the rich men in the society are not always in a hurry to achieve anything because they believe that their money can speak volumes for them, while

the police-like guards in the dance simply portrays the insecurity, fear of the unknown and unnecessary pleading for financial assistance, which the presence of the uniform men curbs.



The Mandate Dance Movement

The mean dance movement is addressed as the mourners' movement, especially when the deceased is very young. The dancer's movement and costumes represent the situation at hand perfectly. The non-rhythmic dance movement and the costume of the Apams undertakers remind the mourners here to be in a mourning mood and to pray for the dead. The iconic white sign on their caps simply shows that "it is the good deeds of the deceased that speaks for him/her both on earth and in the ancestral world."



Mean dance movement

The worrisome dance movement is another stylized Apams Undertaker's dance movement. This style of dance movement comes up especially when the story surrounding the deceased person is very sympathetic. Here, the sole aim of the undertakers is just to bury the dead while their stylized one-leg-to-the-right dance pattern simply shows "nobody can predict his time of death".



The Worrisome Dance Step

3.5 The Inter-Connect Dance Movement

Here, the Apams Undertakers do not make use of elaborate body movement, but rhythmic stylized matching movements. The sole aim of the dance movements is to awaken the masses' consciousness. Based on this, the use of semio- communicative movements in Apams funeral dance, in this paper, reveals that the dancers do not dance in vain, rather the socio-economic situations surrounding various funeral rites serve as their driving force.



Inter-connect dance movement

3.6 Costumes and Make Ups, Props and Instruments in Apams Undertakers Dance

The costumes of the undertakers during funerals depend solely on demand. This is because the situation, style and the type of guests that will attend the funeral determine the undertakers' costume style. Mr. Nwamadi, also in an interview, says "The type of cloth the deceased likes wearing when he/she was alive and the amount paid by the client can also influence the undertakers' costume during funeral". Simply put, the costume of Apam Undertakers at a funeral is designed to meet the socio-cultural situation of their clients at a particular time.

3.6.1. **Types of Caskets**

In Apams Undertakers limited, according to Mr. Nwamadi (in an interview) there are various types of caskets. Each of the caskets

has a name and price tag attached to it. In funeral, they all serve the same purpose of a coffin used in burying dead bodies, but in terms of capacity and quality, they vary. Examples of the caskets:

The Classic-Domb Casket: This is the highest among other caskets. It is used during the funeral of a highly-placed person in the society or what is termed a State Funeral. The classic-domb casket is very expensive.



Classic-Domb Casket



The Semi-Domb Casket: This is the second ranked casket, mainly for middle class citizens especially civil servants. The price is negotiable.



Executive casket

4. Conclusion

From the findings of this paper, the Apams funeral dance has contributed a lot in adding aesthetics and colour to burial ceremonies in the South-East, Nigeria, thereby giving the bereaved hopes to smile. Besides, in terms of its commercial value, it has increased the financial status of the owners and dancers alike, making the general public to appreciate the Apams Undertakers. This paper, based on the interpretative analysis of the societal perception of Apams funeral dance and its costumes, notes that beyond the aesthetic performances, all the dance movements center on socio-contextual implications surrounding the death of the deceased, the mood of the celebration and the peoples' opinion, thereby presenting Apams Undertakers as socio-communicators, and not just as mere entertainers.

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