

## Ajáǵẹ̀rẹ̀ Èjìòkú: Dance as Self-assurance in Human Social Formation

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### Abstract

This paper aims to reinforce the benefits of dance in human social formation. It argues that natural recreation (dance) has helped man to overcome inhibitions and dangerous situations in his environment. The study therefore argues that dance is a crucial element in human culture, and a builder of confidence. The paper from a pragmatic point of view uses the folkloric allegory of *Ajáǵẹ̀rẹ̀ Èjìòkú* (a prolific dancer of Èjìòkú-Ibadan) in ascertaining dance as a panacea for survival. Conclusively, it proposes to look at dance in relation to human culture emphasizing the interrelatedness of dance and music; dance as social inclusion, dance as a healthy attitude and dance as idiom of statement making in a society. Data for the paper comprises of primary sources such as oral evidence, archival materials, and secondary sources like books, journal articles and other documentary materials.

### Introduction

The folkloric narrative that makes the background of this paper tells the adventure of a skillful dancer that has become a colloquial saying in the Yorùbá

parlance till date. The story, told in a traditional style of tale by moon light recreation custom is intended to teach listeners remarkable lessons. According to the raconteur, the story happened during the gloomy period in the history of Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria: the “*arara*” civil war of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that ravaged a good part of Yorùbá land. What is widespread at that period says the narrator, is the unremitting ruthlessness of warlords and brigands in looting, vandalizing and taking people forcefully into servitude.

On one occasion of the incessant marauding moves of these warlords, began the narrator, the slave hunters arrived at a village called *Èjìòkú*, a suburb of Ibadan. On this fateful day, the village was viciously raided. Many people were killed, and many (men, women and children) taken into captivity. However, as merciless and cold-blooded as the actions of the intruders were, one man eluded the abysmal acts of these marauders. The man, a very talented dancer, plotted his escape ingeniously with his creative ability – dance.

Usually, says the narrator, the warlords and their squad go about with a set of drummers who through their provoking the drum’s tempo set the pace for the cold-bloodedness of the slave hunters. However, on this historic day, this skillful dancer, apparently unruffled, was exceedingly resolute and un-intimidated. As the warlords approached with their drummers; swiftly, says the raconteur, the man jumped into the midst of the intruders and danced so dexterously to the beat of the drums. The reaction of the dancer which was very much unexpected startled the marauders.

At first, they were dumbfounded, and later, the amazement turned to amusement. Surely, no one expected such a show, at least, not from someone who was about to be incarcerated, says the storyteller. Apparently, the warlords had never encountered such deft and clever

exhibition of a solo performance ever before. Consequently, the man became the centre of attraction and with this great display; the warlords became so mesmerized and so rapt to the extent that, they joined in the ovation. Without doubt, the entertainment got them carried away and completely overwhelmed. For the warlords, the man's dance steps and mesmerizing moves were out of the ordinary.

Anyway, continues the storyteller, the performance of the man was well appreciated; he was applauded and for this, he was given the appellation *Ajágèrèrè* - a word coined from his dance steps and charming moves which is likened to the way a cock displays when he is about to mate with a chicken. The man in full consciousness of the fact that he had completely captured the minds of his assailants became more confident; and then, went on(dancing) from one end to the other making use of the available space. On realizing that he had set a comfortable room between himself and his assailants; suddenly, he jumped at the opportunity, he had a rapid dialogue with his legs. This sudden move transfixed the assailants, they were utterly perplexed, says the narrator. However, by the time they (slave hunters) regain their consciousness, the man was far gone. Amazingly, they did not give the evading man a chase; rather, they erupted into a thunderous laughter. While some were rolling on the floor laughing, some others were simply spellbound; and so, the man escaped. But then, what became the colloquial saying in the Yorùbá folkloric narratives about the exploits of the skillful dancer till date was a repeat performance of the earlier thrilling incident. Same war situation with its entire hazardous intent is still the background of the second encounter of the same dancer with the slave hunters.

Our man the skillful dancer, says the narrator, again found himself in a precarious situation; but, this time around, it was on his farm. There were no drums, no spectacle; but,

the most astonishing thing is that almost at once, the marauders identified this gifted dancer. At any rate, in his usual manner, the man did not panic, he greeted the slave hunters warmly, and offered them some portions out of the yam he was roasting, says the narrator. Meanwhile, as they settled down to eat the yam, one of the slave hunters asked him: *sékii se iwoni Ajágèrèrè Èjìòkú tófijó gbararè silè lójósì nì* (aren't you the skillful Èjìòkú dancer who danced himself into freedom the other time?) And the man answered in affirmation: *èmináàni* (oh yes, it is me). And then, another of the slave hunters asked: *njé owa le è jó bí itàtijó bí?* (Do you still have the deftness of the old time?). At once, the man answered: *bèjèni mo tilè timò njóju tàtijó lo* (yes, I am even a better dancer now). And he was given the floor. Again, he started dancing and at the same time muttering a danceable beat saying: *nísinnísìn nánkó, nísinnísìn nánkó* (literarily, it translates: now and now and now and now). Doing so, he dances backwards until he disappeared into thin air. Again he escaped; and this is how he gained his appellation: *Ajágèrèrè* that became a colloquial saying in the Yorùbá social formation till date.

### Dance as an Alluring Art

Ability to dance is an admirable and appreciative skill among human-beings. It is what Peggy Harper (1967) describes as, a strong resistance to outer pressures or suffering of inner psychological pressures. It mesmerizes and fascinates its audience, a veracity that is eloquent in the narrative of *Ajágèrèrè Èjìòkú*

Apparently, the anecdote of the skillful dancer recounted in the foregoing is an affirmation of the hypnotic power of dance. Dance, a natural gift of nature to man is said to be alluring and enchanting; it is an art that builds confidence. This observation lends credence to Slide (1977) declaration:

Every time we fear something, and then prove that we can overcome our fear, we add something to our psychic bank account. Many people fear at first to move away from the wall of a hall and launch into space. They can, however, try things out in a corner in a small space until brave enough to take a little journey, or join a group doing similar things. ... when you dance in front of a crowd, you begin to build comfortable armour around yourself and may find yourself infused with new courage and start shooting into space in quite a dynamic way. (27).

By the same token, Enekwe (1991) also strengthens the power of dance to transfix or hypnotize its audience in his avowal that, “dance leads to autohypnosis and ecstasy, thus, liberating participants from day-to-day experiences of mind and body”. Participants here are inclusive of both the dancer and the viewers. Moreover, in support of the ongoing argument, Peter Bádéjọ (OBE) an accomplished dancer and a scholar emphasizes the way dance helps in self-reassurance:

Dance helps in self-belief. It is known to be a means of setting into motion the required hormone that alerts and ignites the bodily senses to action in a performing space. It indeed promotes confidence. Often, I am surprised at the audacity and flaunt of some of my dance students during dance practical classes. Some of who are naturally

reserved and socially shy at first encounter turned out to be enchanting when they get on the stage after a couple of meetings. Actually in dance, the sensory neuron that carries signals combines thinking, feeling, sensing and doing. And this is what spurs self-belief. (Personal communication with Peter Badejo, 2nd Dec. 2016)

Evidently, it is along the lines such as the above mentioned that natural art, dance builds up confidence. It has a strong effect on physiological and psychological alertness of the human mind. This remark is corroborated by Elliott (1998) in his observation: “dance has a combining effect of the benefits of physical exercise with heightened sensory awareness, cognitive function, creativity, inter-personal contact and emotional expression” (253). Surely, the alertness of the sensory organs as a result of constant physical exercise can facilitate a spontaneous reaction to situations and the response that ensues often happens unconsciously. Therefore, dance undoubtedly helps in acquisition of confidence which leads to boldness, expression of self, and sensitivity to potential dangers. It was this natural spontaneity to immediate ominous environmental hazard that helped the skillful dancer *Ajágèrèrè Èjìòkú* not once but twice in the story told above. In furtherance, according to some participants in the reality T.V show tagged: ‘America got Talent’ on Sky cable T.V hosted by the popular talent hunting judge, Simon Cowell; where talented individuals are discovered also lends credence to the fact that dance as a talent is a confidence builder and life saver. Often in the show, different tales of how dance has helped in overcoming inhibition and social upheaval are told by different participants. Of particular reference is the poignant

admission of a former Nigerian student of Loyola College who was involved in an airplane disaster that happened about 7 years ago in Nigeria. The girl, who came on the show as a participant, (American Got Talent) tells how dance and music had been instrumental to her survival, rehabilitation and resurgence from what she called 'cold hands of death'. Undoubtedly, dance in this way has proven to be a natural therapeutic strategy.

Dance enhances cognitive development. It has been proven also that dance helps to improve mood (Rosler et al, 2002). And for Newman-Bluestein & Hill (2010), dance steps and movement in a space, "becomes a medium of connection and empathy when language and cognition have failed. Relating this remark to the short story in the above mentioned no amount of pleading or appeals by *Ajágèrèrè Èjìòkú* would have placated his assailants. But then, his dance prowess came handy as a negotiating tool that aided and saved him from pending disaster.

Dancing skills no doubt has endeared many skillful dancers to important people; kings, chiefs and other important personalities in human society. Among the Yorùbá for instance, ability to dance is well appreciated. There is a performance called '*Ijó Oge*' (dance of beauties) in the traditional Yorùbá formation; especially, among the Ondo people. In this dance, beautiful girls of nuptial age engage in a dance competition yearly. In this competition, the best dancer among competing beauties becomes the wife of the king or sometimes gets different prizes as rewards for their dexterity. Moreover, the statement of a popular Yorùbá film actor who is well known for his dance ability also sustains the benefit of dance. According to him: "a talented artist must also be a good dancer; a performer who lacks the ability to dance is not seen as a complete actor. When you are called for an audition in the days of the traditional travelling theatre, one who has the ability to dance well surely gets a place

before the one who does not have such talent" (Personal communication with Musiliu Dasofunjo, Nov. 2016).

### Dance as Social Inclusion

Dance is flexible, open and constantly sprouting. Optimally, it is a natural recreation that brings healing and pleasure to all participants (audience and performer). Generally, being an active dancer has the double advantage of mental alertness and general wellbeing among many other things that it helps to accomplish. To this effect, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes physical activity such as dance as a universal remedy for preventing some heart related issues. WHO (2010), therefore declares, "Physical activity dance plays a key role, as the principal determinant in energy expenditure, in preventing obesity."

According to WHO, physical inactivity and unhealthy eating are the two main components of health problems such as, obesity, diabetes, cancers, high blood pressure and host of others. The dynamic qualities in dance can be deployed as an antidote to checkmate these health problems. A rapid body sways to rhythmic sound which may be, either heavy or light, undoubtedly helps to keep body weight and thus, promotes health and wellbeing of the populace. Dance is a universal form of cultural expression that is uniquely placed to promote physical ability, social interaction, creative and emotional expression (Enekwe, 1991). In a report made available by England Public Health Services, dance has been observed as an appealing art that helps healthy attitudes. It is said to be a remarkable performance that plays a critical role in changing attitudes such as, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuses and other social menace among teenagers (Department of Public Health report, & 2004; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c).

In an earlier observation, Kim and

Kin (2007) had posited that dance is an excellent way of improving moods and enhancement of feelings of wellbeing. Dance therefore is an art of which the basic material is the movement of body in space and time. It makes use of space, small or wide and it involves specific use of energy. According to Harper (1967:5) “indulging in dance, especially, a dance that is done with the progression of steps balances the body”. Dance clearly can be apt to the prevention of falls; especially, for older people and more than that, it is a way to be active and engage socially with other people. As revealed by Health Development Agency (1999) report, engaging in dance is critical to older people’s wellbeing and mental alertness. Dance through gentle chair-based rocking, or long gentle and slow dances has been identified as particularly effective at engaging inactive and older people (Department of Health, 2009). Without a doubt, through dance, lively interactive ways, healthy lifestyles, self-esteem, to mention but a few, humanity can develop fundamentally.

Dance is expressive, affirmative, and optimistic. It plays a big key role in uplifting the culture of a community. A professional dancer and former member of the Nigeria National Troupe, Isioma Anthony attests to the fact of dance as an expression of optimism in this way:

From personal experiences especially during the troupe’s tour (Nigeria national Troup), I can indeed say that dance makes bold. Where ever and whenever one engages in dance either at the rehearsals or during real performance, one becomes more confident, and energetic. In fact, one could almost be over-confident. Often, when you are told or when you watch your moves and audacity on video clips, you begin to wonder how

you are able to attain such expertise.

(Personal communication with Mr. Isioma Anthony, Nov. 2016)

### **Dance in School’s Curriculum**

Dance is well acknowledged to be effective at engaging and motivating human-beings, for this reason, countries like England, America have recognized dance as one of the range of activities through which the key concept of physical education can be conveyed. Hence, dance is introduced at all levels of education; from primary to secondary. Dance is also taught in performing arts departments of Colleges and Universities and as a single subject in community dance classes. In the above-mentioned countries, dance curriculum reflects major ideas and challenges that face individual and society. With a well thought out and well-developed dance curriculum put in place, the dimension surely adds a richness and relevance to learning, and to human development. The dimension surely helps in the grooming of the youths, hence, the development of the future of these\_ countries. Certainly, a student that is exposed to value basic things about life such as dance right from the tender age (primary school) will be creative, progressive, resourceful, and audacious.

The nature of dance, combining as it does the elements of physicality, creativity and performance; means, it can be used as a medium of building young minds with selections of attention-grabbing learning experiences. Compelling learning experiences according to United Kingdom’s department of Public Health is reputed to:

- Give learner a sense of autonomy, including the ability to think critically,

take responsibilities and manage risks.

- Offer opportunities for corporation and collaboration.
- Broadens horizons and raises aspirations and helps to step into comfort zone.
- Gives the performer a clear sense of action, relating to what he needs to know, understand and act out.

(Report of the Department of Health, 2004)

In measuring the positive impact of dance among young people in developed countries, United Kingdom for instance, it has been observed that there is a statistically significant increase in self esteem (Department of Public Health, 2011). In corroboration of the foregoing, Agbeleye - a dance instructor in a private primary school in Lekki Lagos, says participating in dance class:

...promotes a sense of self-worth among our students. In recent times, we noticed that our pupils have displayed a great resilience; our students have demonstrated more and more a positive attitude which has not only improved their academic records, but also, their health wellbeing” (Personal communication with Moses Agbeleye, November, 2016).

Definitely, going by all the previous reports and observations by dance instructors in schools, professional dancers interviewed in the course of this paper and

extant literatures consulted; evidently, dance gives the body the required strength and stimulation, and, it also ensures that the brain has the necessary constituent for development.

### **Intolerance to Dance**

It is quite unfortunate that other than some privately owned primary and secondary schools and some universities that offer dance studies in Nigeria, dance as a study is not getting the significant attention that the developed countries placed on it. There are no community dance classes; and, even where dance is being studied in the universities, they are not given prompt and adequate attention that is given to other studies like, Medicine, Architecture, Agricultural sciences or even some arts and social sciences courses like Law, Economics, Educations and so on and so forth.

The most disheartening reality is the lack of credit given to dance studies even within dramatic or performing arts. No student will be confident to say s/he is studying dance; rather the popular saying is “I am in African Studies” or “I am studying Theatre Arts or “Dramatic arts. Perhaps, it was this lack of credit that led to the change of Dance Studies as an arm of studies in the Institute of African Studies, Ibadan, which was the only institution in Nigeria that had Dance Studies as an arm of performance studies first and now to the crowd pulling Cultural and Media Studies.

### **Conclusion**

I will conclude this paper with the anecdote of *Ajógèrèrè Èjìòkú* who escaped being taken into slavery as a result of his dance dexterity. With the short story, dance is portrayed as self-confidence builder. In the process, I try to amplify dance as a medium of connection and empathy when it is obvious that verbal communication will fail. Apparently, the communicative power of dance was what

*Ajógèrèrè Èjìòkú* exploited to facilitate his escape not once, but twice. Moreover, the health benefit of natural recreation dance, which is deemed very significant, is referenced in this paper. In this world where human beings have become increasingly agitated, being active through dance performances could serve as a medium of alleviating some of the problems that bedevils the human mind.

As observed by Coaten (2011), dementia syndrome is fast becoming one of the most significant social and economic problems with around 820,000 people with the condition in UK. In Cohen's remarks, undertaking dance as a form of exercise can help to stabilize the mind and eliminate life-threatening diseases. As a result of weighty problems that threaten to subdue human-beings, cases of madness, forgetfulness and many more life intimidating conditions has become rampant in this world. Definitely, if a similar study as carried out in England is carried in many other countries of the world, especially in the continent of Africa, the outcome of the study will be shocking. The paper therefore advocates that dance should be given significant attention in schools' curriculum and social interaction in our society. Going to the gym to work out may be burdensome sometimes, but, engaging in dance has proved to be intriguing even though it may look so ordinary. The expediency of dance as a panacea to life threatening situations has been observed by different researchers and in their findings the submission that dance is phenomenal to human survival and social therapy is strongly amplified.

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Moses Agbeleye, a primary school dance instructor at The Star Montessori Nursery and Primary School, Lekki, Ajah, Lagos. During the end of year and prize giving day ceremony of the school on 14<sup>th</sup>, July (2017).

## Notes

Peter Bádéjo (OBE) granted an interview to this essayist at his residence in Osogbo on 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 2016.

Harper Peggy, a South African dance teacher and choreographer who taught and practiced dance in Nigerian universities in the 1960s.