CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN NIGERIA: THE EMERGENT FORM OF ALAJOTA COMPANY

Rudolph Kansese

ABSTRACT

It is easy to identify Nigerian traditional dance through its form, structure and style. Components of the dance such as concept, movement, music, costume and props are integrated and help to interpret one another thereby making the form easy to assess. Contemporary dance on the other hand cannot be identified as a particular form; since it fluctuates with every choreographer and with every dance created. This is why it is often difficult for contemporary dance to be appreciated and accepted by indigenes as an art form like conventional dances. In order to assess and comprehend contemporary dance, this paper investigates the emergent form of Alajota Dance Company. Two dance performances by the company are analysed; these are “Yuogoslaver” and “Naked Home.” These dances are observed both on the live stage as well as on video. Evidence gathered shows that the emergent form of Alajota Dance Company is dependent on three major factors; Nigerian traditional dance themes, personal dance creativity and Western or foreign dance features. Christopher Emmanuel and Oluranti as choreographers in the Company depend highly on indigenous dance and traditional motifs to compose dances which are personal to their experiences and exposures. Western or foreign features such as exotic dance styles, synthetic music and stage technology extends further the creative will of the choreographers.

Introduction

It not easy to tell when dance actually began; however, judging from its nature, one could state that dance is as old as man. The reason for this position is that dance has always depended on movement of the human body in space and time. In addition to this, dance can as well be considered as actual movement of the body. According to Olomu (27) and Akunna (15) dance is essentially a human engagement. Hanna corroborates this point by expressing that dancing is a “human behaviour” (3). Benson gives a more detailed view by stating that “dance consists of human movement and comes from our innate capacities and impulses to move, to express, to organise, to relate, and to communicate. These basic instincts are apparent throughout history in
a great variety of dance styles and forms” (1).

In investigating the origin of Nigerian dance, it is always important to stress the behaviour of the Nigerian man in traditional context. This brings to the fore his various engagements which Harper highlights as ritual, social, political, occupational, historical, educational, recreational and entertainment (6-7). Dances are composed and executed to reflect these attributes which in turn replicate the ways of life of the people. These are the traditional dances of the people; they are codified and indigenes identify with them whenever they are performed. It is important to point out that a number of traditional dances such as the ritual performances are copied by humans from deities or mystical beings such as the “Ikaki tortoise masquerade” from Kalabiri in Rivers State of Nigeria (Horton 481); and so may not directly reflect their instinctive behaviour. However, the execution still takes into consideration human behaviour as factor.

In Lange’s observation of dance as a human experience, he notes that the release of psychic tension, ecstasy or magic, emotional impulse and improvisation (19) influence dance movement. The idea of emotional impulse and improvisation is more appropriate to the concept and practice of contemporary dance. According to Smith, dancers “attempt to explore the natural energy and emotions of their bodies to produce dances which are often very personal” (par. 1). In the case of the conception of Nigerian contemporary dance, choreographers “draw on traditional material as an inspiration and springboard for the creation” of these personal dance structures (Harper 293). Choreographers are equally being inspired by European cultural ideas. In this case Nigerian contemporary dance is sometimes seen as a mixture of different ideas; both indigenous and exotic. According to Akasue, contemporary is the “fusion of dances from different cultures to make one whole” (69). Hubert Ogunde as the doyen of contemporary dance in Nigeria is known for his combination of different dance patterns since the 1940s. In one of his (Ogunde’s) performances Ebun Clark (quoted by Ahmed Yerima) witness an introduction of “tap dance into the African ‘Batakoto’” by Ogunde in one of his performances (30). Ahmed Yerima adds that the fisherman dance by Ogunde is a “hybrid of various dance steps strung together into a pattern of fast pace and rhythm, from the tradition of the ‘Egun’ and Badagry dances, with the fisherman’s professional props, with gyrations from almost all cultural experiences in Nigeria” (30).
Works of early playwrights such as A Dance of the Forests, The Lion and the Jewel, Kongi’s Harvest, The Road by Wole Soyinka, Langbodo by Wale Ogunyemi, The Gods are Not to Blame by Ola Rotimi and a host of other early plays produced on stage created avenues for Nigerian choreographers to start experimenting with the new direction of dance. They began to choreograph dances to extend the thematic thrust of these dramas. The dances were dependent mainly on indigenous movements.

The Guild of Nigerian Dancers (GOND) has been instrumental in promoting dance in Nigeria since 1996. A number indigenous choreographers have been delving into contemporary dance practice and creating different contemporary dance titles, examples are provided by Emoruwa as: Felix Emoruwa’s Rebirth (1997) and Echoes from a Graveyard (1999); Victor Eze’s Nsibidi (1998); Segun Adefila’s Osusu-Owo (2000); Arnold Udoka’s Together as One (2003) (104). Various theatre practitioners and choreographers who encouraged contemporary dance productions on the platform of their companies include Chuk Mike’s Pec Repertory, Fred Aghbayegbe’s Ajo Productions, Ben Tomoloju’s Kaakaki, Felix Okolo’s Tempo Productions, Bassey Effiong’s Anansa Playhouse, Bassey Edet Ekpeyong’s Awana Playhouse, Steve James’ Ivory Ambassadors Dance Company, Sola Fosudo’s Centre Stage Productions, Felix Emoruwa’s Pitch Productions, Muyiwa Oshinaike’s Ebony Culture Club and Israel Ebo’s Fezi Productions. Even the Universities such as Ibadan, Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and Companies such as Ori Olokun Theatre and Unibadan Masque adopted contemporary dance in their productions.

Muyiwa Oshinaike had a remarkable contribution in the development of the genre in Nigeria especially in the 1980s. His rare contemporary dance skill made the likes of Chuk Mike and Felix Okolo to invite him to choreograph dance for their companies. Perhaps Muyiwa Oshinaike was about the major source of influence for most of the Contemporary Dance Companies and theatre practitioners mentioned above. His dance production The Passionate Mission was performed in different universities in Nigeria.

Felix Okolo can be regarded as the most innovative choreographer and theatre practitioner among his contemporaries especially with his productions like “Irara Alegbe, Mekunu Melody, Aruku-Shanka, The Walking Stick” (Emoruwa 106). He was able to garner enough support and sponsorship from institutions such as Alliance Française – Lagos, Geothe Institut, Guarantee Trust
The growth of contemporary dance in Nigeria has been linked with the perennial support and sponsorship provided by private institutions such as Alliance Française, French Cultural Centre, Culturesfrance, French Embassy, German Cultural Centre and Goethe Institut. Notable is the workshop organised by the French Cultural Centre in Lagos where Claude Brumachon with his assistance Benjamin Larmache were invited to impart on Nigerian choreographers and dancers European, especially the French contemporary dance concept in 1994. The workshop had in attendance about three hundred dancers, but only seven out the lot were selected at the end of the workshop to participate in the “artist-in-residence programme at the Centre Choreographique National de Nantes” in France in 1995 (Genevier 50). The seven successful dancers were Abel Utuedor, Faith Benson, Abubakar Usman, Esther Olaniyan (now married to Abubkar Usman), Adebayo Liadi, Bayo Ogunrinade and Christopher Abdul Onibasa (now Christopher Emmanuel Onibasa) (Itsewah 26).

These dancers went on tour in West Africa and France in 1996 with a dance choreographed by Claude Brumachon titled “When the gods go crying”. The knowledge gathered from the experience became a turning point for Christopher Emmanuel’s dance career. Before the workshop, he was essentially a traditional professional dancer. His tutelage under Claude Brumachon exposed him to the contemporary dance technique. His first contemporary dance effort titled Earth was produced in 1997.

The essence of this paper is to discuss the emergent contemporary dance form of Alajota Dance Company. The two dances under review are Yougoslaver choreographed by Christopher Emmanuel and Naked Home choreographed by his wife Oluranti who has over the years adopted the Alajota dance technique which Christopher refer to as eclectic idioms; meaning that the Alajota dance is a melange of different genres of performing arts and various movements. The two dances are appraised with the view to appreciating the Alajota dance as an emergent form of dance in Nigeria.
The Yougoslaver Dance

Yougoslaver is coined from the name of a former country called Yugoslavia in South-Eastern Europe. This country was twice ravaged by war; World War II of 1918 to 1945 and political and ethnic conflicts of 1991 Rusinow (1). Christopher’s decision for such a title to his dance is aimed at reflecting the numerous problems that accompany war situations which he specifically highlighted as slavery. Although the outcome of war on a factual note goes beyond the case of slavery, Christopher is rather interested in stressing the issue of slavery or slaver for the purpose of his creation.

His creative use of Yugoslavia is to achieve a functional goal. Yougoslaver is a compound word divided into three syllables: ‘You—Go—Slaver’. This is seen as a revolutionary cry or protest against slavers or slave owners who bring a lot of hardship and misery on their victims. Such victims who had endured years of deprivation and oppression are unanimous in fighting for their right by ousting the slave masters with their protest.

It is essential to state here that Christopher’s drift is connotative and metaphorical. It has a universal implication of condemning all kinds of oppression and subjugation. However, he narrows it down to the Nigerian milieu in order to promote indigenous Nigerian dance expressions.

The performance begins on a note of prayer with the choreographer as the lead dancer kneeling down in supplication. He is seen alone on stage with a bata drum. After the prayer he begins to play the drum with his hands. The playing gradually increases in tempo until it reaches fever pitch with his body riddling in spasmodic alacrity. The relationship between the dancer and the drum after the shuddering expression of the body becomes a cordial one as he carries along the drum in his dance and occasionally playing it.
Figure 1: Christopher uses the drum to extend movement (Video: “Yougoslaver” 2007)

Even when another dancer joins the lead dancer on stage in solo dance, the drum is seen as a temporary appendage of the lead dancer who intermittently engages the other dancer in contact improvisation. This is purely an interactive experience between the two dancers. Most of the movements are slow and relaxing until the drum is disengaged from the body. This marks the end of a segment and the subsequent introduction of another with the light increasing in intensity.

With the amplification of the light the contact improvisation continues momentarily until the stage is divided into three segments where dances are separately accomplished in silence (no music). Up stage centre are three dancers connected with slow synchronised movement which they occasionally interrupt with clapping in an arc position. Another dancer who is adjacent the three dancers is seen holding onto two ropes hanging down from the top. His steady movement of pushing up on his toes and relaxing gives an impression of torture. Mid stage is the lead dancer Christopher who does his solo dance sometimes slowly and at times swiftly. He maintains various movement positions from being on his feet and lying on the stage floor. All dancers later, abandoning their individual solo or unit movements converge and dance in uniformity to synthesised music for some time before dancing to silence.
Movement executed by dancers, whether to music or silence is mostly swift, fast and energetic. It mainly reminds one of the popular break dance of the 1980’s and 1990s. However, break dancing is said to have been extracted from bata movements made popular by the legendary Sango. Incidentally, a set of the bata dance is accomplished by two dancers on two low swinging stools.

Theatrical elements are used to induce meaning as well as to create effect. In the case of costume, overcoats are mainly worn by the dancers with the intention of emphasising on the mafia characterisation which is depicted here as the object of persecution. The choreographer consolidates on this visual costume expression with the conventional mafia code of silence. This is particularly experienced as the dancers in their garments dance to a note of silence. Silence is otherwise known as *omerta* in the mafia parlance. It is a weapon which the criminals use to ply their trade. The choreographer’s adoption of silence is to interpret the intensity of their criminal activities.
The dancers later take their costumes off; that is the overcoats and trousers. This is interpreted as a mark of clamping down on mafia through a revolution by the oppressed and eventually obtaining liberation.

Light is used to enhance mood and to establish situations or settings. For instance light is made to pass through a mat material bound with strings. A performer at intervals dances behind the mat with light glowing behind him. This produces a screened pictorial view of the dancer whose costume has been partially made transparent by the light. A dancer standing or sitting in front of the screened light when all the other lights are off appear as silhouette. The light effect created by the use of gobo on stage left depicts a detention camp where victims are tortured. Ropes used in suspending victims in midair are also found here. Dancers perform with these ropes to interpret torturing experiences.

The **Naked Home Dance**

Naked Home is a dance about the vulnerability of a home which is expected to be a safe abode radiating love and assurance for its occupants. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The focus is on the man who abandons his responsibility as a parent and allows his home to be
open to several dangers. The transparency of the hut used in the dance has a metaphorical undertone; it represents the nakedness and vulnerability of the home.

![Image of transparent hut]

**Figure 4: The transparent hut depicts vulnerability of the home. (Video: “Naked Home” 2007)**

The dance opens with three dancers standing in triangular shape with their two hands locked behind them and ropes tied to their necks which link the three of them. They appear as victims of slavery but they are actually in one bond of acquaintanship. Still maintaining this union they begin to bend low slowly from the knees with the torso tilted forward. The dancers suddenly break into a fast paced movement with the legs still in their crouched position until they collapse on their left sides. They gradually get up to their feet and move into a fast rhythmic dance with their legs darting out in each direction; right leg to the right and left to the left continuously to the accompaniment of live bata drumming.

After this energetic movement, the dancers, slowly calming down have their legs astride and bent a little. Then tilting to the right they have their right hands freed and the left hands freed by moving left. With their hands completely free the dancers in synchronism jump up and moving
right and left before moving into deliberate contact improvisation. They maintain this until the rope is disengaged from their necks. They continue to move in synchronism until they are joined by the choreographer (lead dancer) who has been in a squatting posture from the start of the dance.

The choreographer ensures that most of the dances are well synchronised and are influenced by traditional indigenous movements especially the bata dance styles. A sentence of the bata dance is exhibited without the accompaniment of the bata drums but instrumental music played on the keyboard.

![Figure 5: Executing a sentence of the bata movement. (Video: "Naked Home" 2007)](image)

The body is submitted to a range of movements from motion on the feet to the body collapsing to make contact with the ground. Various movements done on the feet include: body twist on the ground and in mid air; turning the hands from the shoulder joints, running on the spot by raising the legs and arms high, torso contraction and release, hopping and criss-crossing legs, stamping and flapping the arms. Movements executed with direct contact with the ground comprise of rowing, swimming, spinning and gliding on the buttocks and rolling on the floor.

All these movements are done simultaneously by the dancers; however some dancers in
solo demonstration, one after the other display acrobatic stunts and strenuous movements. An example of such is when a dancer jumps high up and lands on both knees with a clatter. Another case is the adoption of the bori dance style of the Hausa people where a performer in a state of trance repeatedly jumps up high and lands on his rump. The weight of the torso is here felt in the rump as it comes in contact with the stage floor. The performer in *Naked Home* in applying the right technique always ensures that at the point of landing he shares a great part of this body weight between the legs and the buttocks so as to reduce the impact on the spine and the torso in order to prevent possible injury to the spine.

![Figure 6: A dancer landing on his rump (Video: “Naked Home” 2007)](image)

Naked Home is loaded with vigorous dance exhibitions however; the choreographer makes an attempt at characterisation with the aim of stressing her concept of the *Naked Home*. It is important to state that this moment of dramatic expression is done with individual dancer doing solo movements. Different lines of characterisation are emphasised here: the feminine role who assumes the character of a mother; the masculine role who at some point represents father and at another moment representing a child. The father who has taken over the home and leaving the family outside in the cold is seen doing energetic dances; an expression of his machismo and
domineering ego.

The obvious statement the choreographer is making here is that man is responsible for the dangers the home undergo. He has not used the advantage of his masculinity to protect the home but instead has made it naked and vulnerable. The solution therein, as proposed by the choreographer is to awaken the amazonic spirit in the woman so as to check on the excesses of the man. She succeeds at this by holding man into captivity. This is demonstrated with the noose tied around the neck of the male dancer and then flogging him to comatose. Her final victory comes with the pouring of water on him in order to calm down his restive spirit and excessive physical agility.

Figure 7: Pouring water on male dancer (Video: "Naked Home" 2007)

Performance Comparison of Yougoslver and Naked Home

African or Nigerian dance movements are essentially adopted in the dances. In spite of the fact that contemporary dance in Nigeria sometimes accommodates exotic movements, choreographers of the Alajota Dance Company are very conscious of their African identity. The choreographers rely more on the expressive modes of the traditional bata dance movements.
Although, the traditional bata is not literally done, it is obvious that the language of the dancers’ bodies is mostly in compliance with the bata movement nuance. One can observe subsets of the traditional bata movements in the two dances.

Yougoslaver and Naked Home have their individual story lines which guide the choreographers through the dances. Although, the story lines are not as vivid in the dance-drama format, they still have their logical expressions which are experienced intensely through dramatic movements. The plot of each dance is disjointed; nevertheless the sequences are well coordinated so that no part is done in complete isolation from the dominant theme of the dance.

Christopher, as the leader of the Alajota Dance Troup believes in the significance of natural phenomena such as the current of air and lightning to his dance composition. The rhythms of the dances created are inspired by these phenomena. For instance, movement that is mostly vigorous and exerting is inspired by rapid nature of lightning and whirlwind. Fast pace movements are executed in both dances; especially bata dance style with rapid footfalls and swift hand movements. The legendary Sango who is regarded as the deity of thunder and lightning is the patron of the bata dance form. He is a major source of inspiration to the Alajota dance performances. On the other hand, movement that is less exertive is informed by soft and gentle breeze called zephyr. Examples of slow and soft movements abound in the two productions.

Dancers in the two productions engage in various movements ranging from aerial movement where they leap into the air to downward or sinking movement where their bodies become recumbent on the floor. They are seen to roll, spin on the floor. Dancers also drag and rub themselves on the stage floor, surge forward and backward, jump off the floor and back. Their cordial relationship with the earth in the execution of different movements indicates that they are ever willing to succumb to gravity especially after brief defiant leaps in the air.

Contact improvisation is a common factor in the two productions. It usually involves two dancers interacting with each other. The interaction is carried out as dancers touch and rub their bodies against each other and assuming different positions. Movements that appear dangerous or stunts are also accomplished by two collaborative dancers. The success of the contact improvisation depends on the trust each dancer has for the other in order to prevent accidents. In other words, each dancer knows how to manipulate his or her movement in order to
accommodate the other dancer.

The creation of music is essentially traditional. However, it does not follow a stereotyped traditional order. That is to say, it is not played in its linear traditional order. Phrases of bata music for instance are sometimes played but never the full melody. Traditional rhythm is frequently manipulated to suit choreographic creations. Christopher’s mastery over different traditional instruments gives him the leeway to create music for the two dances. He plays a number of traditional musical instruments such as ‘oja’- which is an Igbo flute, ‘eputu’- a hunter’s flute by the Yorubas, and ‘gaita’- a kind of bagpipe played in Northern Nigeria. Apart from these wind instruments he also plays different kinds of indigenous talking drums and drums generally. All traditional instruments played to accompany the dance are usually done live.

Music is also created on the compact disc with the traditional instruments played by the musicians in the Company. Even when the keyboard is used to generate the required music and sound, it maintains its traditional signature. Such musical composition is signalised by overtones of the Yoruba melodic culture.

Music is not created with the intension of interpreting dances as it is the case with conventional performances. In other words, most of the dance movements in Yougoslayer and Naked Home do not conform to the music played. Instead of the music to complement the dances; what is observed mostly is more like a rebellion of music against the dances. Both dances are seen to be independent of the music played, which means that the dance can stand on its own without musical accompaniment.

Silence is at times devised in the dances in order to give room for different musical sounds which are created right there on stage as the dancers make progress. The body at this point becomes an instrument with dual function; that of dance and instrumentation. A number of rhythms are produced by clapping, smacking the body with palms, and producing squeaky melodic sound by distorting the passage of air with the finger placed on the narrowly opened lips. There are also vocal interjections as well as singing. Additional sounds are produced when the body of dancers land frequently on stage and when a dancer lashes at the drum with irregular pulsation. Silence is also employed in the dances to intensify mood. Such silence encourages the audience to reflect more on that section of the dance for comprehension since it reflects thought.
The use of costume in the dances has four ends; to interpret role, to use for atypical purpose and to extend movement. In *Yougoslaver* the overcoats are worn by the dancers to declare the presence of the mafia and its object of brutality. Suit is the main costume worn by the dancers in *Naked Home*. The purpose of this is to give the theme of 'home insecurity' expressed in the dance a universal appeal; owing to the fact that suit is commonly worn by people across the globe. However, costume is also used for atypical purpose; that is, its application does not conform to the choreographers’ idiomatic or dance custom. The dancers’ movement pattern or body language is African. This means that the dances do not necessarily need interpretative costumes to succeed.

Costumes are also used to extend dancers’ movement. Here, they fondle and play around with costumes. In *Yougoslaver*, the dancers have to remove their overcoats, leaving them on the stage floor. A dancer then plays around with the costumes; sometimes biting them, hopping on them, rolling on them and spreading them around on the stage. Generally, he interacts with the costumes to do different kinds movements. The choreographer playing a feminine role in *Naked Home* adapts her long fabric into multiple uses. It is first utilised as a long garment draped over her body before it is transformed into a skipping rope. It is also tied round the waist of two dancers to link them as one. The same cloth is used to create wave effect to characterise a turbulent river. Costume is put into more functional use in *Yougoslaver* when the dancers removed their belts and trousers from their waists. They then pull the trousers on the ground and at the same time flogging the trousers as they pull along. This action is significant as it characterises the torturing of the oppressed by the mafia.

Sets in the dances are not constructed as conventional fixed structures; rather, they are made functional to serve other purposes such as props and characters. They are also used by dancers to extend and create additional movements. For instance in *Yougoslaver*, up stage left of the proscenium performing area are robes tied to rails. Behind the robes is a mat material and light is made to pass through its cavities. This obviously is a set. The robes are sometimes used as support when dancers held onto them to keep them afloat. A conga drum is also utilised as set, prop, and even a musical instrument. In *Naked Home* the cage as set is used to characterise a home. A dancer occasionally is seen dancing in the cage and moving it around.
Conclusion

The emergent contemporary dance form in Nigeria as formulated by the Alajota Dance Company demonstrates the interplay of three major elements; these are indigenous dance phrases (and idioms), exotic dance concepts and personal creative dance expressions. The dance movements are highly dependent on traditional dance expressions; especially the bata dance. There is however no attempt at performing any traditional dance in its full literal format. Exotic dance concepts such as foreign technology are applied in order to influence the indigenous dance styles. Both the indigenous dance steps and exotic dance ideas are coordinated by the choreographers’ personal creative will. Finally, both dances are created with the view to passing information to the audience. In this regard, audience are not expected to enjoy the aesthetics of body movement alone, but also the beauty of thought expressed in the dances.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Rudolph Kansese is currently a Ph.D student in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He teaches dance, choreography and children’s theatre in the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State in Nigeria.