

## Dance, Marriage and Culture: The Ososo Marriage Punitive Dance Paradigm

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### Introduction

Dance, culture and marriage have a tapestry of relationship and dependability. The inviolability in their relationships cannot be quantified. In culture, dance and marriage are provided with soothing environment to strive and survive and vice-versa. In other words, culture is the substratum for the survival of an African marriage. The place of dance in marriage and culture has been a subject identifiable to the Africans. On like among the Westerners where dance is employed in marriage as an element of entertainment, the Africans use dance as a vital ingredient for the survival of marriage and, in particular the society. This article takes a look at the cultural imperatives of dance in marriage and the way the Ososo people deploy it to maintain and sustain marriage culture and relationships. The methodology for data gathering includes; interviews, non-participant and observatory primary method and for the secondary; related books, journal and, magazines were used. Added to the above is the adoption of the theory, Socio-spatial Action Code System (SACS) of dance for the analysis of our findings. The results are that marriage among the Ososo people is held sacrosanct; the society is responsible for and to every marriage, thus the need to protect it from being abused with the use of dance. Dance here then becomes an antidote to reverse a curse in marriage and a reprimand to the individual defaulter, which is the husband.

### Dance and Culture

Dance is a product of culture. That explains why knowledge of a people's dance is knowledge of their history and world – view. In a single question – what do you dance? Duggan, Schlottman and Rutledge (1948, p.18) write that it reveals other questions like. “How do you worship? How do you rear and educate your children? What battles have you waged and won? What plaques have you suffered? How do you play? What do you grow and eat?” And, we add, how do you maintain a marriage? This suffices to say that a single dance is an embodiment of culture. Culture therefore speaks through dance. Robert (2002, p.116) concludes that, “culture can be understood as the text of our lives, the ultimately coherent pattern of beliefs acts, responses and artefacts that we produce and comprehend every day” Ososo dance gives positive projection into the culture of their society through the involvement of cultural products in the body of the dancer as tools of performance.

Akunna (1999, p.20) observes that:

Human body in dance induces feelings and alludes to reality, when it is artfully and meaningfully utilized as a trained living instrument. Thus, the general appeal and meaning of dances in African societies lie in the physical manipulation or handling of dancers' bodies gracefully, artfully and harmoniously to express the ideas of the African culture.

The vital information provided here by Akunna is that dance communicates African culture. In a related view, Dosumu (2005, p.34) writes that dance uses the human body to communicate. According to her, "it is in form of non-verbal language that involves the use of the human body through gestures and movement to pass information or for communication." As a non-verbal art, dance finds its expression in culture which is tangible and intangible. The Africans use dance as a cultural tool for expression. Dance does not take place in Africa without a reason. Bakare (2005, pp.85-86) affirms this view and states that:

As an art, dance communicates the culture of those who own it. It then follows that it communicates every facets of our live since our culture is the vehicle through which the African mode of living was transmitted. Their achievement in technology, commerce, trade and warfare, their behavioural pattern had belief systems, their moral values and historical experiences, their mode of occupation and geographical environment...

Dance finds its utility in all activities of mankind and all aspects of culture and because they live together, dance is developed as culture to address issues. Suffices it to say, people who lived together for a long time have set and collective ways of doing things which are regarded as culture. To corroborate the above, Orhunger (2003, p.71) quoting Ukeje B. O. (1986) states:

Culture may be defined as a fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetics objects method of thinking, customs and institution into which each member of the society is born. It includes the way each individual makes a living, the

music he plays, celebrations or festivals, modes of communication and transportation. It covers everything and embraces the things he values and appreciates.

This definition is all embracing. It covers both the tangible and in-tangible epicentre of Ososo cultural values. In like manner, Omotoye (2007, p.332) quoting Akinwale, sees culture as:

The totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenge of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to their social, political, aesthetics and religious norms and models of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.

Culture is the stool on which dance, marriage and other vital activities of human life seat on to articulate lucidly their imperatives and functions. For example, the Ososo dance (known as *Ishimi*) is a statement of their way of life and it is used by the society to differentiate them from their neighbours in other societies. *Ishimi* in Ososo parlance simply means movement of the body and it is used as a suffix to any dance nomenclature.

### **Ososo People and Worldview**

The Ososo people in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State have a long history of migration. The town has four communities and they migrated from one source, ancient Benin kingdom, settling and resettling in almost the same land mass. These four communities according to Chief Otaru in an interview are *Ani*, *Egbetua*, *Okhe* and *Ikpenu*. The *Ikpenu* and *Ani* communities came through the place called “*Uniamhe*”, that is the River Niger bank of present day Ajaokuta/Okene axis. Others like *Egbetua* and *Okhe* communities of Ososo came through Okpella, and Makeke routes. In her contact with these towns, Ososo must have been influenced by their cultures and lifestyle as reflected in the similarity of dance and marriage performances.

To maintain constant contact between the four migrating communities, during this exodus, they devised various means of communication. They communicated with one another through the use of signs, symbols, insignia and other means: smoke, bush or grass tying, tree felling, stones and woods arrangements, ululation and these have now been incorporated into their dance culture. To preserve and articulate the migratory centripetal signs and symbols, and historical antecedent, dance was evolved been a powerful medium of expression.

To the Ososo people, life is a complete entity. It is good and peaceful. An understanding amongst the people is maintained through effective communication. This is their worldview and it is what informs the need for constant communication. The living, the dead and the unborn are constantly united by this belief system. As Oba Obaitan Adoloro (the king of Ososo) puts it, the dead, the living and the unborn are constantly united in dance, that is, the past, present and future are brought together in the “*Ishimi-Ujo*” (the people and masquerade dance). The ancestor (the past) in masquerade form, blesses the living (the dancers), with the unborn (the future). This is also done mostly according to Chief Ajayi Ubuoro, in an interview, during the *Unehe* festival when the masquerades move from homestead to homestead blessing, admonishing, warning the wrong and warding off evil spirits from the society. This belief in the unity of the living and the dead is introduced into marriage dance whether for entertainment or punitive purposes.

### **Semiotics in Culture and Dance Conceptualised**

Semiotics as a method is preponderantly utilized in dance and in particular, theatre for communication. Doki (2006, p.57) affirms that:

Within the spheres of theatrical exhibition, signification is of primordial importance and relevance. The quantum of action, dialogue and the entire process of communication in theatre thrive majorly on signs and signification. The sign on stage is therefore fixed by theatrical conventions and given situations, condition and contexts.

Semiotics in dance however, considers the ability of the human body to send out signals, codes and symbols through movements and other dance paraphernalia regarded as non-verbal expressions. Communication occurs when these signals, codes and symbols are interpreted and understood and evolves a feedback. On the other hand, semiotics and communication is a system, as Ajayi (1998, p.11) puts it, quoting, Keir Elam, “equally concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication i.e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged.” She then came up with a concept of the signified and the signifier “the signified is a concept, an emotion, an object or an event concretized ‘materially’ by the signifier which is the visual image of the body in motion.” Furthermore, Okoye (2006, p.49)’s analysis of semiotics as a process of interaction between the encoder and the decoder, performer and audience, through the process of signification is significant here. According to him, there are three forms of relationship of signifier to signify. These are iconic, indexical and symbolic. In relation to an object, the iconic possess likeness, the indexical shares some connection, while the symbolic sign are conventional.

Our interest in one of the Ososo marriage dance forms is drawn from their display of objects in dance

which we have identified as semiotic materials for analyzing the properties, content and context of their dances. We shall apply the socio-spatial Action Code System (SCAS) dance theory when we come to interrogate the signs and symbols identified in the marriage punitive dance of Ososo. Semiotics takes a central place in Ososo culture. It could be found in most of the socio-cultural activities of the Ososo: in the birth and naming of a child, initiation into the various age-grades, marriages, worship, transportation, ownership of a property and in many other occasions. That explains why it is vividly used in the dance in focus as we shall learn later. As it were, culture, according to the people, is “*Ijijime ehvori*” that is things done and accepted by the society. But, there seems to be no particular word to define semiotics. However, ‘*Amah*’ or ‘*Amih*’ or ‘*Apah*’ which means ‘sign’ or ‘symbol’ in Ososo are used in relation to semiotics. Therefore, semiotics to the Ososo is simply a sign or a symbol. Hence the sayings, “*Ameh-Evesho*” – sign of God, “*Amih-Ununi*” – sign of cold, “*Amih-Uburu*” – boundary sign, “*Amih-Ikuegbegbe*” – sign of solidarity and so on.

*Amah* is used for communication in Ososo culture. For example, “*irezu*” the tying of grass or tree branches on bush paths is a sign of direction, also of warning. Similarly “*Ebe*” (leaf) could be placed continuously on a bush path as a sign of direction when two persons have agreed on the particular type of leaf. “*Ireti*” the folding into a circle of grass or cloth which is ordinarily meant for support or to wedge a load on the head, becomes a sign of direction when placed on a bush path. It is a sign of peace when placed on a door post. “*Esee*” (stone) is used to create boundary between farmlands. “*Itshe*” – a kind of warning charm (e.g. cloth, iron, calabash, broom, pot, etc.) when placed on any property is a sign of warning to an intending intruder. This is also referred to as “*Irenese*” – sign of ownership, “*Eewo*” (smoke) is a sign of direction, “*Otobobo*” (*corn cob*) when placed on the farm path is information by a farmer or hunter to another that he/she has returned home.

*Amah* as sign of recognition also, finds itself in “*ema-bvaro*” (facial or tribal marks), “*ema-bvegbe*” (body marks) and “*ema-bvowa*” (house signs). The use of *ema-bvaro* usually short, single, horizontal or vertical begins with the birth and naming of a child, to give it social identification. The shape and sizes of facial marks given in Ososo are akin to those of Okene, Ogori, Okpella, Makeke, Lampese, Auchi, Igarra, Benin, Ondo and the environ.

*Emabvegbe* is usually given as a body marks by the traditionalist, grand-parents or parents. It could be for protection or to ward - off evil spirits or to prevent a child who belongs to the “spirit world”, (“*Ogbanje*”, “*Abiku*”, “*Emere*”) from “returning” or dying. *Emabvegbe* is also a mark or code of recognition to a cult group and so on. Furthermore, *ema-bvowa* are those signs, insignias that distinguish the house of an important person, like an *Odafe* (king) *Oru ovie* (chief) *Obo* (native doctor) etc. from those of ordinary subjects. Some of the items in use include: feathers, chalk, palm front or leaf, cloth, carved objects and so on. According to His Royal Highness, Anslem, the *Olososo* of Ososo in an interview, these elements play imaginative interpretation and facilitate an understanding of the socio-cultural features, forms, functions and meanings of Ososo traditional life.

### Ososo Marriage and Semiotics

The Ososo philosophy of life is further strengthened by the marriage system. A mistake in marriage affects not just the couple, but the society in general. That explains why one marriage is for all and all are for one marriage. A collapse in marriage, it is believed, distorts the orderliness and flow of life. Thus the *obviko* or *obvhiko*, maiden rite in which a girl is made to go through the lessons and spirit of marital life was instituted by the society to put marriage in proper perspective and the *ishimi -olorho*, the marriage punitive dance for a husband, was also instituted to checkmate his assault on the wife.

Among the Ososo people, marriage (*Ikpovbiko* or *Ikposa*) is held sacrosanct. It is traditional and a means of “*Ijetaro*” (continuity) and “*Ikwegbegbe*” (solidarity) among the four Ososo communities. As we have in most African countries, it takes the involvement of both families of the man and women to contract a marriage. Semiotics plays a crucial role in marriage and evident in the exchange of gifts items, sharing of food (“*Eneere*”) and drinks (“*Ato*”) and of course dancing (*Ishimi*). Marriage dissolution also involves the issuance of semiotic materials like; leaves, corn cob, empty calabash etc. In spite of modernization, when three leaves are enveloped and sent to a wife in a distant town or city, it indicates that she should move out of the husband’s home and is hereby divorced. Further still, when a corn cob or calabash is taken to a couple it is to ask them why a child has not been given to the family. Furthermore, the carrying of a he-goat on the shoulders by a husband in *Ishimi Olorho*, speaks punishment or reprimand. The aforementioned semiotic interaction, according to Chief Michael Irefu in an interview, ventilates the power of non-verbal communication in Ososo culture. He also points out that a gift of a he-goat to a wife’s mother by a husband at the birth of the first male child signifies gratitude and reference. This attitude and ideological use of sign and symbols among the Ososo people is reflective even more in their dances. This is not farfetched because dance to the people is a purveyor and transmitter of culture.

#### The Ososo Ishimi-Olorho

*Ishimi-Olorho* (the erring husband punitive and corrective dance). It is a socio-cultural and socio-ritual cleansing dance as identified by the symbolic use of a life he-goat being carried on the shoulders or tied to the

backed by one of the dancers, who is the reprimand husband undergoing punishment and spiritual cleansing. The man takes the dance around the society in a socio-spatial means using the social space (SS 1) designated for the dance performance as an evidence of seeking the forgiveness of the society. By spiritual space (SS 2) the dancer must go through some designated routes of performance to register his apology to the spirits i.e. ancestors, gods, *ekpodo* elderly women of the society. According to Pa. Ayo Kare, an indigene of Ososo, in an interview at Ikpenna, when a husband divorced his wife with *izunu* (a curse), never to re-marry her, if the husband so wishes to re-marry the same woman he must perform the goat-backing or carrying, dancing and cleansing ritual known as *igwugwe* in Ososo parlance. During the performance, his age-grade members use “*Operi*” (*Atori, Ore* in Yoruba, *Bulala* in Hausa ... and whip in English) on the man.



**A Graphic Illustration of an *Ishimi-Olorho***

An interrogation of the dance implies that a goat is known to be stubborn. It goes astray without telling its owner, the whip is usually the weapon used on it. In this dance iconic signs are applied, the man is the goat, and the whip, the society and the route of the dance performance, a correction. The likeness is derived from the society's recognition of them as traditional semiotics. The man, just like the goat, needs the whip (the society), to come back to his senses before his wife returns to him. It is believed that his action negates the sacrosanct position of marriage in the society. Therefore, he must dance round the town to seek forgiveness. This attitude serves to prevent men from taking undue advantage of the women in the Ososo society.

### **Conclusion**

This study acknowledges the inviolability of dance as an expression of life and the primordial means of check and balance known to the Africans. Therefore, continuous and sustain research interest into this genre of theatre is imperative to unearth and bring to the fore those hidden forms and models of dance in our traditional societies. The Ososo marriage dance model has artistic, academic, religious and socio-political themes inherent in traditional African dances. These themes developed from a historical consciousness on the practicability of dance as organic instrument of change and continuity. This form of dance shows clearly the treatment of social themes, marriage in particular. The dance should be promoted in order to cement the existing social relationship in the society and the promotion of a lasting marital engagement.

The Federal Government, Edo State in particular, should take it upon itself to do more studies on Ososo dances so as to bring other hidden dances to limelight for people, particularly tourists, as this will enable us to keep abreast with and appreciate part of the cultural endowment of Nigeria. They should be developed, preserved and propagated as well by the various tiers of government.

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