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Symbols in traditional dance: A study of Nkwanwite dance

ABSTRACT. The use of iconic symbols during traditional performances (dance) has remained an indispensable tool. The major problem facing the use of signifying symbols during performances is because they are seen as mere performative enhancer. These assumptions might be generally accepted, but in core dance scholarship it can be argued for or against, but this paper stands against its wrong perceived nature as mere performative enhancer. The aim of this paper is to interpret some of the signifying symbols used in dance in order to understanding their socio-cultural essence. This paper would analyze the signifying symbols used in Nkwanwite traditional dance for the following reasons: (a) To acknowledge the use of cultural symbols as part of people's mythology belief. (b) To interpret, analyze and document the signifying symbols as a socio-communicative tool. (c) To give each of the signifying symbols relevance and interpretation in dance. In order to achieve this Sense Making Theory would be used as theoretical frame work to interrogate the essence of the signifying symbols. Findings show that, due to lack of interpretation and documentation on the use of signifying symbols in dance. It is gradually going into extinction as mere props. The paper concludes that non dance scholars should cherish and appreciate the use of symbols in dance as communicative tool.

KEYWORDS: dance, Nkwanwite, tradition, symbols

Introduction

Dance as an art uses non-verbal forms to communicate with its audience. The non-verbal forms always come in the form of gestures, movements and symbols. In non-verbal communication using a signifying symbol, rhythm and movement are of great essence. The use of communicative signifying symbols in traditional dances tells us the situation of events at a particular time, what gave rise to situation and proffer the possible way in resolving the situation. Akas Nicholas emphasized this when he observed that "In dance the use of signifying symbols in traditional dance are not static, it changes because its thematic potency always centers on communal mythological" (Nicholas & Prisca, 2020).

Dania Aspasia (2015, p. 34) concurred with this, signifying codes are a form of knowledge representation which retains the characteristics of

things or behaviors that are directly observable in the environment (e.g. trees, animals and people).

The use of signifying symbols in dance makes it symbolic language tool for communication. The level of the symbolic language exhibited in dance using signifying symbols cut across barriers of language and culture making it a universal tool for communication irrespective of tribes, religion, tradition and profession. Roxy Levy (2014, p. 46) maintains that; "Dance is among the unique art that through its style and form, unities people during performance, to watch and share their experiences, thereby helping them to deemphasize personalized issues to promote culture".

The essence of signifying symbols in dance brings the people closer to their various dances on the bases of seeing it beyond mere annual festivals and use of signifying symbols as mere artifacts Akas (2015, p. 22) suggested that: "The movement pattern of symbols during performances are usually influenced by cultural barriers in order to under the essence of the performance".

The dancer uses his body movement/signifying symbols to externalized the choreographer's inner most emotion and reproduce it before an audience in order for them to understand the originality of the existing dance in form, styles, contextualization and otherwise.

Rosemarie Samaeritter (2009, p. 55) further see Akas above that:

For the dancer's body to communicate effectively using signifying symbols, it must undergo series of training, formation and adaption in order to enhance the communicative cum interpretative essence in dance movement. The dance steps are well crafted within the signifying symbols during dance festivals, in such a way that it will make a positive statement before the live audience.

The above simply show the communicative essence of any dance lies in the context, so choreographers should always go for that and not aesthetics only.

Theoretical framework

All analysis in this paper is anchored on Sense Making Theory by Brenda Dervin (2003) Sense Making Theory helps to examine the communicative value in any creative work of art, be it dance, music, printings and drawing. It gives the artist that sense of belonging that at the stage of creation every idea matters, especially when utilized positively. Brenda Dervin as cited by foreman Dervin (2003, p. 23) opines that:

The use of sense making theory while analyzing cultural symbols pays explicit attention to the “hows” of communication that occurs at every level of performance that helps us not only to understand the performance, but rather to intervene, change and improve the potency.

Naresh Kumar Agarwal (2017, p. 66) observed that: “Sense Making Theory is all about trying to reconcile apparent differences and polarities without wishing away the difference, but reorganizing them as important”.

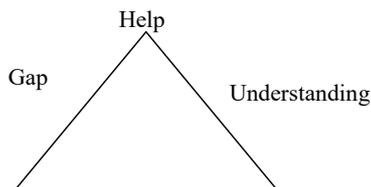
The above assertion shows that no cultural symbols exist in abstraction; rather the environmental factors give rise to its existence and substance. The essence of any symbols used in traditional dances is to pass the required information across, but in a situation whereby the intended message is not achieved, it automatically becomes ordinary props. Brenda Dervin (2003, p. 45) states that:

Be it in music, dance, symbols, play analysis and costume analysis the sole aim of any creative work is to bridge the gap of complex or multiple misinterpretations placed on content analysis of performance rather than aiming to assist individuals and community to make sense in the usage of cultural symbols beyond generalized assumption.

This paper adopted this theory (because of Brenda’s ideology that every performance must be valued, understood and interpreted) in order to give the iconic symbols used in the dance understudy (Nkwanwite) sense of belonging and socio-cultural values. Dervin (2003, p. 234–245) maintained that:

If the communicative gaps in the use of symbols are not well analyzed, interpreted and documented. The required essence (communication) becomes mere art for art sake only.

Dervin (2003, p. 200) further stated that every cultural symbol used in performance or literary work must be appreciated by the evidence from its point of pictorial diagram.



The socio-cultural values of signifying symbols

Akas (2015, p. 12) posits that “though symbols are beautifying in the eyes, its usage before the choreographer automatically becomes a corrective instrument”. Uji Charles (2014, p. 13) concurred that: “People should always look beyond aesthetic cultural attachment in the use of symbols: rather what should be is the interpretative utilization before the ideal audience”.

For any signifying symbols in dance to be identified and appreciated, it must always perform the following cultural values:

1. It always stands as a corrective tool, this is where the choreographer contextualized every dance movement to tell a story.
2. It stands as a watch dog, here with aid of contextualized dances the audience will able to assess their rulers while the rulers will assess the ruled to know whether they are still acceptable or not especially in keeping political promises.
3. It stands as historic referral for proper documentation especially in oral traditions, through this our culture especially dance will not go into extinction.
4. It aids in cultural identification, a man without a traceable origin, automatically becomes a ghost. So with dance sociologically helps to portray where people come from culturally irrespective their status, religion and profession.

Perspectives on signifying symbols in traditional dances

The use of signifying symbols in dance is gradually been misinterpreted as artistic enhancement or indigenous tool for performative display. This assumption which is based on generalized perception is true and acceptable, but in this paper it goes beyond that. Therefore in dance, for any signifying symbols to be culturally acceptable as communicative tool, it must undergo four due processes such as:

1. What gave rise to the emergent of the symbols; simply put what matters most is the interpretative essence of the performance in order to understand the intended message and avoid myopic generalization.
2. The effectiveness of symbols beyond its assumed usage, it is true that most symbols are very attractive in nature, but what is of the

essence is the communicative use of the symbols either to correct or lampoon the society.

3. The communal belief system on the symbols. In traditional dances, none emerge as mere aesthetic display or body flexibility, rather any iconic symbol used is been anchored on a particular myth e.g. (Monkeys are sacred animal in Awka Anambra State Nigeria, at the sighting of such iconic statue in dance show the god are present).
4. The socio-cultural essence of the symbols in solving situation of things in the community, at this point dance automatically becomes a corrective tool.

Signifying symbols vary in their usage but what should be the basic perception of any choreographer is its sociological function. It is the sociological perspective attached to the use of symbols in traditional dances that reawaken people's consciousness to begin to value the use of symbols in dance as a communicative tool. Akas (2015, p. 34) affirms that:

The use of signifying symbols must be made sacrosanct for the initiate only because they are the ones who understand and uphold the cosmological ideology imbedded in them as cultural signifier, identifier and sustainability.

The essence of symbol in this paper becomes didactic rather than entertaining.

The origin of Nkwanwite dance

This dance centers on women and their various experiences in their matrimonial home. The dance started in 1905, a woman called Mrs. Udu Ibeh, who was believed to be the first woman to perform this great and ageless dance in Afikpo community. Mrs. Udu Ibeh in the interview said she played a symbolic role in this dance, because she was the first woman to get married at the age of eleven in Afikpo community. So because of her inexperience in what marital life is all about, she suffered a lot in the hands of her husband, her husband used to beat her every day because she was not good in sex, she did not know how to wash her husband's clothes and she was not good in cooking. So because of all these, her husband beat her claiming he wanted his wife to be strong, sexually active and caring. In another interview Mrs. Julian Uruh, corroborated, "the beating was so much on Mrs. Udu Ibeh that as a child, she ran back to her parents for help. But her

parents would return her back that same night to her husband telling her that in marriage, parents are not allowed to interfere. On several occasions, Mrs Udu Ibeh was disgraced in public by her husband for forgetting to call him the pet name he loves which was “di m oma”(my beloved husband) . Mrs. Ejem O. another community woman interview said; ‘It was recorded that each time she forgot to call him the pet name, her husband would flog her with any available stick around. Mrs. Udu Ibeh was highly maltreated in the hands of her husband who was fourth five years older than her”. Her husband on his part was a drunk, a womanizer and a chain smoker. On several occasions, the husband would be so drunk that he would end up inside a gutter, at times her neighbors would call her and say that ‘your drunk and good for nothing husband has chosen his comfortable place again as usual, go and carry him”. Mrs. Julian Uruh still in an interview explained, “if Ibeh sleeps inside gutter till the next day, he would kill his wife the next day”. So each time she hears her husband was inside a gutter, she rushed out to save her husband. So one fateful day, according to Mrs. Ibeh, she was trying to carry her husband who was heavy both in size and body structure, when she had a dislocation and was taken to a midwife for treatment. It was in the house of the mid-wife under serious pains that she started crying and singing. Her crying and singing was narrating her ugly experiences in the hands of her husband, starting from the first day till that particular moment. She said in one of her songs that “marriage has a sweet and bitter taste; it is the duty of a woman to accept both tastes for peace to reign”. It was her cries of lamentation that originated Nkwanwite dance in Afikpo till date. Nkwanwite dance performance in Afikpo bases its origin and communicative potency on some metaphoric guide such as (songs, egg, objects and costumes), serving as a reflective pointer and as a reminder in the mind-set of any woman in Afikpo that wants to get married.

Nkwanwite dance performance

Initiation Ceremony

The initiation ceremony into Nkwanwite dance performance is of great essence. It is strictly meant for young ladies between the ages of 20–34 years. The reason for this age is because it is believed that at this age bracket, any young lady in Afikpo is supposed to be in a relationship and/or preparing to get married. So once any lady in Afikpo is to the earlier mentioned, she will be fully initiated into the dance. During the initiation

ceremony, there is no sign of ritual of any kind, rather the body of dancers determines whether they will be initiated into the dance or not. The bodies of the dancers remain highly indispensable symbolically because they help to determine whether the young men who will come to watch the dance will be attracted, and afterwards seek for any of the ladies' hand in marriage. According to Mrs Ibeh; 'what makes a good dancer and a full initiate in this dance is the ability of the dancer to take care of her body. It is believed that once she can achieve that, she will look charmingly attractive in the eyes of young men who will be searching for their future wives during the performance'. In order to achieve the required body configuration to be a member, the selected young ladies to be initiated will be assembled together in a compound fenced round which symbolically is called Ngkachi Umunwaanyi (protector of the ladies). The essence of this symbolic fence (ngkachi umunwaanyi) is to protect the outside world from seeing the ladies until the D-day. Inside this compound, the initiates would be taught a lot of things like:

- a) how to seduce their husbands;
- b) how to feed their husbands and children;
- c) how to take care of their mothers-in-law;
- d) how to avoid being a gossip subject;
- e) how to manage in the time of lack in the family;
- f) how to take care of themselves and still be in good shape before and after giving birth.

Mma ugoebe nwaada remains a symbolic woman during the initiation because during her days as a young lady and a full member of Nkwanwite, she kept all the rules and regulations guiding the initiates then. She had up to eight suitors all asking for her hand in marriage, and there was a general saying that 'whenever she is dancing, all the men watching her performance would be carried away to empty their pockets on her'. So during the initiation, she makes sure that the initiates are very attractive, charming and beautiful for the young men who will be watching their performance. It is a belief that any initiate who has gotten to the age of marriage and keeps the rules and regulations guiding the dance must surely get her future husband from the young men who are watching the performance. During the full initiation into the dance of Nkwanwite, the initiates always appear in three symbolic dance line formation:

- a) the sampling formation;
- b) the bravery formation;
- c) the readiness formation.

All these formations are communicative in nature more especially in exposing the different stages Nkwanwite initiates pass through before becoming full initiates. The communicative potency of this formation is as follows:

The Sampling Formation



Figure 1. A cross section of maidens on the sampling formation

This Sampling formation is dotingly called the formation of queens. This formation is solely meant for maidens who are complete women and have all it takes to make their various would-be husbands' remain forever faithful to them. The idea of being complete women is that the maidens are virgins who will get impregnated on their first sexual intercourse with their would-be husbands. The special gift from their 'chi' to those who maintain their virginity before becoming initiates into the dance is a male child. The male child serves as a proof of faithfulness of the woman before getting married to her husband. At this point, the initiates are told to always be attractive to their husbands before, during and after child bearing, because once they stop being attractive, their husbands will have the necessary justifications to cheat on them. They are also advised to always ex-

pose those attractive parts of their body like their stomach, breasts, waist, laps and hair, because once all these are well kept too, their husbands will forever remain faithful to them. It is at this point that the initiates are fully educated and informed on what it takes to be a wife both in child bearing, looking attractive to their husbands and also knowing how to encourage, motivate and sustain the family during agonizing moments.

The Bravery Formation



Figure 2. A cross section of maidens on bravery formation

This can be interpreted as the moment of tribulations in the various families the women will be married into. The initiates are here reminded that marriage is not a bed of roses, rather at times, the taste differs like:

- a) some marriages are sweet sweet sweet;
- b) some marriages are bitter sweet bitter;
- c) some marriages are bitter bitter bitter;
- d) some marriages are neither sweet nor bitter.

But whichever situation they meet in their marriages, all they need to do is to give unswerving support to their husbands and guide their children. The bravery formation fortifies and presents the various realities of life to the initiates by telling them that depending solely on their husbands will at times warrant dehumanization, starvation, and make the woman a 'non-locomotive engine' before the eyes of her husband's mother in-law and her

husband's siblings, thereby relegating the woman to the adage of 'oriaku' (A woman born to enjoy). So in order for the initiates to maintain their respects in their husbands' house, they must contribute positively at home.

The Readiness Formation



Figure 3. A cross section of maidens on readiness formation

The body communicative potency of initiates here presents them as being fully trained, informed and equipped on how to take care of the house, their husband and their children. Also, it means the initiates are fully prepared for marriage and any man that marries them at this point marries forever to breakthrough and open doors. The semiotic- interpretative gift that follows the initiates at this point is always showcased whenever they spread their hands during performance which implies—'we are a blessing to any man that marries us and remains faithful to us'. The initiates at this point are seen as full initiates and are officially welcomed into Nkwawite dance performance.

Music

The use of the music called Akwa Oyiri in Nkwawite dance performance is of symbolic essence, because the thematic strength of the song centers on reminding any married woman in Afikpo the disadvantages of

being a barren woman. According to the thematic analysis of the music, any married woman in Afikpo that is not pregnant nine months after her wedding or that has stayed years in the marriage without any child is always seen as a she-he and cannot be associated with.

The husband of the barren woman or wife is free to marry another wife once it is confirmed that the barren woman fondly addressed as 'she-he' who give birth to a child, or she will be asked to go back to her parents. The music semiotically portrays the various sufferings barren women go through in their husband's house in Afikpo. These include the following:

1. She will not be allowed to cook for her husband, because it is a belief in Afikpo that once a barren woman cooks for her husband, he will not be able to impregnate any woman again should he decide to re-marry.
2. She is not allowed to send the children of her co-wife on an errand, because it is believed that sending the children on an errand blocks the favour that will follow the child when he/she gets married in the future.
3. She is not allowed to stay in the same room with her husband, rather she is subjected to a thatch house, the reason for subjecting her to this symbolic thatch house is to remind her that she is not yet a full woman.
4. The barren woman is also subjected to constant cries which are full of rhetorical questions for her 'chi'. The symbolic essence of the cries of the barren woman is to beckon on her 'chi' to remember her and give her own child.

Aside the suffering of the barren woman stated in the song Akwa-oyiri, the theme of the song for effective interpretative understanding is divided into three symbolic sub-headings such as.

Akwa Oyiri na chi ya (The cry of the barren woman to her God)

The woman is expected to ask the gods of fertility in Afikpo why she is still barren while others are giving birth in numbers. According to Mrs. ibeh in an interview, it is of their mythological belief in Afikpo that once the barren woman can cry well, she might touch the heart of the 'god of fertility' and she will start bearing children. In order to achieve this effectively, the woman is expected to do three symbolic things like; be totally faithful, avoid envying those who have children and their children and to be always submissive to her husband.



Figure 4. This dance movement symbolically represents akwa Oyiri na chi ya

Akwa Oyiri bere di ya (The cry of the barren woman to her husband)

This is another symbolic action in the dance. The barren woman is expected to cry to appeal to the heart of her husband not to marry another woman, not to rule out her chances of giving birth completely and not to address her as she-he again. At this point, Oyiri (the barren woman) is advised to always do everything humanly possible in putting a smile on her husband's face.



Figure 5. This movement represents Akwa Oyiri Bere Di ya

Dance Movement

The dance movement here is very symbolic, communicative and of great semiotic essence. The semiotic interpretation of the dance movement lies in the symbolic communicative formation of the dancers on stage. It is the symbolic communicative formation of the advanced women dancers that portrays the message of the dance to the audience, that dancer being advanced women and not young ladies is of symbolic essence. It is believed that these women dancing are real women and they all gave birth in their various husband's houses exactly nine months after their marriage and all their first issues are all males. So they are seen as complete women and not 'she-he' (barren woman). Another effective essence why women are the only dancers is because it shows strength of women irrespective of their age, to prove their fertility and also to prove their readiness to give birth to more children if age permits them. The communicative semiotic essence in the dance is divided into three symbolic dance formations such as:

Aka ije oyiri

This dance movement based on its symbolic interpretative essence centers on women of Afikpo especially the married ones. It exposes the negative effects of been barren for years after marriage and not being able to conceive in the first nine months after marriage as the tradition demands. It is of great belief in Afikpo, based on the interpretation of the dance movement, that any barren woman in the community is yet to be accepted by her husband, her husband's siblings and husband's kinsmen based on the fact that anything can happen to the fate of the woman. The use of the tale of a black horse as a prop during the dance movement is of great significance. The black horse tale symbolizes the uncertainty in the married life of the barren woman in the community. The symbolic hand movement with the black horse tale during the dance reminds barren women of the following:

1. Husband has the right to return her back to her parents.
2. Husband can still keep her as a wife but totally ignore having any sexual intercourse with her.
3. Husband can still keep her while he remarries.
4. On no account is she allowed to send the child of the favored wife on any errand. All these can be witnessed with the symbolic throwing of hands by the women with the tail of the black horse in their hands during the dance movement.

Oyiri nnoo

This dance movement is highly symbolic and communicative in nature. The symbolic, communicative and interpretative potency of the dance movement centers on the following; the two women, black horse tail and the white handkerchief. This dance movement communicatively portrays the total acceptance of any married woman in Afikpo community in her husband's community. The total acceptance is always effectively based on the mutual understanding between her and whatever she meets in her husband's house. The following portrays the yardstick for measuring total acceptance in oyiri-nnoo dance movement formation. Those yardsticks are as follows:



Figure 6. This dance step symbolizes Oyiri Nnoo

The black horse tail

The use of the black horse tail as props during the dance is very symbolic. It is symbolic because its communicative essence reminds the co-wives the consequences of disobeying the eldest wife. The black horse

tail, based on its interpretation, stands for the following punishment from their husband if they disobey the eldest wife. These punishments are as follows:



1. Total isolation.
2. Rejection of their food by their husband.
3. Lack of favors from the husband.
4. Denial of the disobeying wife's children from seeing their father.
5. Returning the bride price paid if the situation gets worse.

The black horse tail also reminds the wives that the sole aim of their husband marrying them is for peaceful co-existence and nothing more

The Iconic Significance of Performance Arena

The performance arena for the dance Nkwanwite is an open space arena. The use of the open space arena is very symbolic in the dance. The open space arena for the performance reminds every married woman in Afikpo community that she was married into her husband's house without having any foresight on how her husband's kinsmen, siblings, parents or friends will accept her. It is now left for the woman to exhibit good characters that will give her a firm stand in the community she is married into. The symbolic interpretation of the open arena during the performance shows the following things a man has in mind before marrying his wife. Those things are:

- a) wants his wife to be a motivator;
- b) wants his wife to be a master planner;
- c) wants his wife to be an achiever;
- d) wants his wife to be a goal-getter.

These are symbolic meanings placed on the open performance space which any woman married into the community is expected to fulfill throughout her stay in her husband's house. The performance arena transcends from being a mere venue to a serious reflective space for married women in Afikpo community that's helps them imbibe and continues in good character in their homes.

The Costume

The required costume for the dance is George wrapper, white blouse, neck beads, hand beads and a head tie; all these costume symbolically mark a sign of powerful transition from spinsterhood into to motherhood. It is believed that this dance portrays motherhood and fruitfulness for women who are ready to sacrifice everything they have in order to provide for their husbands and their children. The costume of this dance reminds every single young lady in Afikpo community that before her husband buys all these expensive costumes for her, she must be fruitful, caring and totally submissive to her husband. It is also important to note that the women of Afikpo community judge how peacefully a woman lives with her husband based on how expensive she dresses for any occasion and how beautiful and smart she looks in any occasion. All the costumes used in Nkwanwite dance performance are very expensive, so the ability of any woman to afford them portrays how much her husband loves and cherishes her.



Figure 7. A cross-section of symbolic costume of Nkwanwite dance

The Instrument

The instruments used during this performance are very symbolic as each instrument performs a particular function during the performance. The use of these specified instruments asides giving cues to the dancers on stage passes meaningful information to the women and audience. These instruments are as follows:



Figure 8. A cross-section of Nkwanwite instrumentalists and their symbolic instruments

a. *Ikpali*

This is a cemented stone, beaten with a pestle. It is used to remind every married woman in Afikpo community that the key to their husbands' heart is good food. The ability of the woman to cook well will help her to hold her husband's love and care. But in a situation whereby a woman cannot cook well, she stands the chance of losing her husband to the hands of another woman who can cook better than her. It is an abomination for a married woman to allow her house help to cook for her husband, because it is believed that if maids cook better than their madams, there is a very good reason that the husbands will fall victim to the maids' charm. So to avoid any married woman losing her husband, she tries her best to be a good cook.

b. *Udu*

The use of udu as an instrument in this context is of importance. The udu stands as the man, while the instrument used in beating it stands as the woman. The symbolic interpretation placed on the udu is to remind the women that it is their duty to be supportive, understanding and motivating to their husbands, because the more they protect and support their husbands, the more the husbands will live long for them; but if they start nagging and comparing their husbands with other men, they will end up losing them. So the best way to protect their husbands from premature death is by guiding them exactly the way the udu is been beaten during the performance.

c. *The Bottle*

The essence of the bottle as an instrument is to remind especially newly married couples the dark side of marriage if they start listening to gossips, or cheating and lying to each other. These will automatically destroy their marriage. The bottle as an instrument symbolically can stay for years but if there is a crack, it can be thrown out. That is exactly how long and sweet any marriage can last if there are no intruders. So based on the symbolic long-lasting life span of any bottle when compared semiotically with marriage, married couples should try as much as possible to avoid anything, human, actions or places that would serve as cracks on the wall of their marriages. The use of the bottle as an instrument at this point stands as the walls of marriage while the instrument used in beating it stands as the dangerous “soldier ants” fighting seriously to destroy the walls.

Conclusion

From findings of this paper, signifying symbols is an indispensable tool in any traditional performance in Nigeria and beyond. What should always be the working metaphor of any choreographer is to make use of communicative iconic symbols to avoid myopic misinterpretation. At this point if possible, the choreographer should always alert the audience before and after production that beyond the mere props used by the dancers there is an interpretative undertone in them. It is through these undertones that dance (especially Nkwanite) will be appreciated as having didactic values. Dance scholars should therefore put more effort in analyzing, documenting and preserving symbolic cultural symbols before they are been misinterpreted as mere performance cultural enhancer.

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