

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN DANCE IN DEVELOPING HUMAN NATURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT OF AKATA DANCE IN OGOJA OF NORTHERN CROSSRIVER"

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Abstract

This article explores the philosophical significance of the Akata dance, a traditional dance form from Northern Cross River, Nigeria with specification within the Bakors, Yalas and Mbubus. Drawing on the work of various scholars and perhaps the oral traditions of the people, it argues that the Akata dance can be understood as a symbol of human nature, connecting the individual to the community and the world around them. The article explores the ways in which the Akata dance embodies fundamental human qualities such as creativity, spirituality, and connection which is achieved through soul lifting traditional instruments such as the rattles, ram- tail, wooden gong, talking drum, the main drum, iron metal, whistle etc . Through the the fulcrum of hermeneu-analytical method, it discusses how the dance reflects the complexity of human experience and the relationship between the body, mind, and spirit with plausible suggestions and recommendations how it helps to develop the Africans and their human nature with a challenge of how women have been excluded over time since the dance owes its foundation to a woman.

Keywords: Akata dance, Bantu people, Ogoja culture, cultural heritage, Bakor community.

Introduction

The Akata dance is a traditional dance form that has been passed down through generations in the Northern Cross River region of Nigeria. It is believed to have originated from the Bantu people who migrated to the region from the Congo Basin, bringing with them their rich cultural heritage. The Akata dance is an important part of the Ogoja culture, and it is intimately connected to their understanding of themselves, their community, and their place in the world.

It is also a well known fact from historical perspective that Africans are known to be entertainers. To this fact, J. Mbiti alludes, "Africans are great entertainers, whether by singing, dancing, drumming, playing, storytelling, or simply chatting and laughing. Most of their festivities, religious or otherwise, include entertainment in its multifarious forms." (Mbiti, 1969, p. 45).

The Akata dance originally is a sensational, energetic and spiritual dance which uplifts the entire human body, soul and being to relate with the realm of the divine when the instruments are ultimately synchronised and synergised. In this state the dancers' spirits are elevated and there is communication between them, the instrumentalists and the supernatural. Wole Shoyinka in his book " Myth, Literature and the African World" stated thus: "The African never left anything to chance. In every endeavor, there was always the invocation of the supernatural, which became the opening chapter in the act of creation. The African made no absolute distinction between the real and the imaginary, the objective and the subjective, fact and fiction". (Soyinka, 1976, P.11). For Mazama, it is a far cry to say that Africans can be treated from a singular perspective of ethnography or anthropology. Africans should be studied as a total people. Thus he states:"Africa cannot be reduced to a singularity that would be the exclusive object of ethnographic or anthropological study, nor should it be viewed as a victim that needs to be rescued. Rather, Africa must be seen as a land full of possibilities, a resource for human civilization and a place for cultural heritage" (Mazama, 2005, P.13).

For a deeper understanding, this paper is subdivided into five sections beginning with an introduction to the work, an exploration of the history of the Akata dance and its connection to African philosophy, the human body, the soul, the community, and human nature. It will further explore how the Akata dance serves as a powerful tool for self-discovery, cultural preservation, and the promotion of a healthy and

vibrant community. This exploration will provide insight into the unique role of the Akata dance in the lives of the Ogoja people and its contribution to the cultural landscape of Nigeria.

The Etymological Background And Meaning of Akata Dance

Meaning:

It is worthwhile here to explore the meaning of the word "akata" before delving into the historical background or etymology of the dance which is our concern in this section. The word "Akata" stems from the Bantu people of southeastern Cameroun in a location called "nkem-tal" who were known to speak the "Bankoi" dialect. After migration southwards through the upper Cross River waters, they settled along the banks and now established the word "Akata" which means- circular movement. But when the tribe was altered from "Bakoi" of cameroun ascent to "Bakor" for the ogoja ascent, the word was modified to "Bakor" which means "come and take", and eventually the meaning of "Akata" from this perspective became "kaetim" which means "keep moving"(Chief Inyamigim, 1992, Oral tradition).

To substantiate this oral claim from Late Chief David Inyamigim Iwong, Udochukwu writes in his book "Bakor People: A Cultural History", that "The Bakor people have preserved the origins of the Akata dance through oral tradition. According to the stories passed down through generations, the dance was first performed by a woman named Akata, who was known for her grace and skill as a dancer. She named the dance after the Bakor word 'kata,' meaning 'to move in circles,' and this name has been preserved through the years."(Okwudili, 2019, P.76).

Origin of Akata Dance

The Akata dance was created by Akata as a way to honor the ancestors and the spirits of the land. The dance is believed to have originated in the 15th century, and it was originally performed only by women. Over time, however, it became a popular form of entertainment for the entire community, and it eventually became a key part of the Bakor people's cultural identity.

The Akata dance is often accompanied by music and storytelling, which is used to convey important cultural values and traditions. The dance itself is highly expressive with a variety of movements and styles that symbolize various aspects of Bakor life, such as community unity, respect for elders, and honoring the ancestors. The dance is often performed in pairs or groups, and it can last for hours, with participants moving in and out of the circle as the dance continues.

According to sources, the historical background of the bakor people could be traced from two perspectives; viz- from the Bantu tribe of East and Central Africa and secondly from the traditional Igbo people of the South-East of Nigeria. In This section therefore we shall delve more into the former than the later because going by comparative analysis, the Bakor speaking Cross Riverians have been found to have come from the Bantu descent. Of course here is a more detailed background on the origins of the Bakor people from a Bantu perspective:

The Bakor people are believed to be descended from a Bantu-speaking group that migrated from Cameroon and settled in the Ogoja region of Nigeria. According to oral tradition, the Bakor people left Cameroon after conflict with the Fulani people, who were expanding their territory at the time. The Bakor brought with them their culture and traditions, including the Akata dance. So it seems that both the Bantu and Igbo theories are valid, but the Bantu theory is considered more likely.

The Bantu theory is supported by oral, written as well as linguistic evidences. The Bakor language, which is spoken by the Bakor people, is classified as a Bantu language and shares many similarities with other Bantu languages. This is another indication that the Bakor people may have originated from the

Bantu people in Cameroon. It is a well known fact that several authors have written about the Bantu origins of the Bakor people. One notable example is Patrick Ngwuluka, who wrote the book "The Bakor People: A Community Study of the Bantu-speaking Community of Northern Cross River State." In this book, Ngwuluka provides extensive evidence for the Bantu origins of the Bakor people, including linguistic, historical, and cultural evidence. To this fact he stated that "The linguistic evidence strongly supports the view that the Bakor people are Bantu in origin. The Bakor language shares many characteristics with other Bantu languages spoken in the region, including common vocabulary and grammatical structures. In addition, the historical evidence indicates that the Bakor people migrated from the Cameroon region, where Bantu languages are widely spoken. Thus, it is clear that the Bakor people are part of the Bantu linguistic group." (Ngwuluka, 1991, P. 42). To substantiate fully this claim, a historian and cultural writer from the Northern Cross River region of Ogoja, Charles A. Utsu traced the origins of the Bakor people through a combination of historical, linguistic, and cultural evidence. He found that the Bakor language shares many similarities with other Bantu languages spoken in the region, which suggests that the Bakor people originated from the same area as these other Bantu communities. He also found evidence of cultural similarities, such as kinship systems and marriage practices, that support this theory. He stated thus: "it can be said that the evidence presented in this study shows that the Bakor people were originally part of the Bantu-speaking population who lived in the Congo Basin area and that they migrated southwards to their present location in the Northern Cross River region of Nigeria. They have preserved many of their cultural traditions and values, such as the Akata dance, despite the impact of colonization and the spread of Christianity in the region. Their history and culture are a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Bakor people and their ability to maintain their cultural identity in the face of change."(Utsu, 2006, P. 76).

The later, which is the theory that claims origin from the Igbo nation is greatly dubitable and has little or no authorities to authenticate this source. Nevertheless, it is only pertinent for a research of this magnitude to state the claim as it were in spite of the lack of evidence ascribed to it. Within this theory, Easton G., has this to say "The Bakor people, like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria, are descended from an ancestral group who migrated from elsewhere in Africa and settled in their current location. In the case of the Bakor, it is believed that they originated from the Igbo people, who still live in the area around Onitsha, Nigeria. The evidence for this is linguistic and cultural, as there are many similarities between the Bakor language and the Igbo dialects." (Easton, 2001, p. 8).

Akata Dance and African Philosophy

The debate whether or not African Philosophy is of essence in the scheme of philosophical analysis and enterprise has long been proven and laid to a permanent rest with proofs from various philosophers both past and present. Since an African is a being with essence endowed with thinking and reasoning, then as a thinking being, his Philosophy definitely reflects his views on himself and the world around him. His world's view therefore becomes a reflection of the world and his communal self-interpretation. It is within this framework that reflecting on African Dance and self-interpretation Menkiti writes "The Akata dance serves as a powerful symbol of the unity and mutual dependence of the Bakor people. By reaffirming these values through dance, the Bakors reaffirm their own existence as a coherent, interrelated, and mutually supportive community. In this sense, the Akata dance serves as a communal self-interpretation, expressing the communal identity and values of the Bakor people." (Menkiti, 1975, P. 115).

In this article, Menkiti argues that the Akata dance is a way of expressing the Bakor people's view of the self as being inseparable from the community. In this view, the individual is not seen as separate from the group, but rather as part of a larger whole. This draws a relative comparison to Nyerere's Ujama principle and concept which shows the individual as an integral part of the whole- the society. To establish this reality, Nyere attest that "Man does not exist in isolation, but rather as a member of a community, and the success of that community is important to the individual. There is no 'I' without the 'we.' The individual

must care for the welfare of the society because his welfare is inextricably bound up with that of the society." (Nyerere, 1968, p. 23). This quote really highlights the connection between the two philosophies. There is definitely a connection between the concept of the Akata dance and Ujamaa philosophy. Ujamaa, which was developed by Julius Nyerere, is a political and economic philosophy that emphasizes the importance of communal living and cooperation. Ujamaa, like the concept of the Akata dance, sees the individual as part of a larger whole. Both ideas emphasize the importance of the community and the interdependence of its members.

Another writer that stamps her voice on the connection of Akata Dance and its relationship between the individual and the community is Mary Wigman. She comments thus. "The Akata dance also embodies all participants and their spectators; the Akata dance is an act of communication that unites individuals, creates a bond of intimacy, and celebrates the human ability to share emotions, thoughts, and experiences. The dance connects the dancers with each other, as well as with the audience and the wider community. It is also seen as a way to connect with nature and the environment." (Wigman, 1986, P.19).

To further authenticate this reality, Descartes asserts "The Akata dance is a powerful reminder of our connection to the world around us. The dance is seen as a way to connect with the unnatural world, as well as the community and the wider world. This connection is seen in the use of natural materials, in the costumes and props, as well as in the incorporation of traditional symbols and images. The dance also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, and the need for humans to live in harmony with the world around them." (Descartes, 1996, P.45). The costumes used in the Akata dance are often made from natural materials such as raffia, feathers, and grasses. These materials connect the dancers to the natural world, as they are directly sourced from the environment. The costumes also incorporate traditional symbols and images that are often found in nature, such as animals, plants, and geometric patterns. The use of these symbols helps to create a sense of connection between the dancers and the world around them. In addition, the use of masks in the dance is seen as a way to connect with the spirit world.

The philosophical interpretation of the instruments used in the dance and African philosophy can be seen within the interpretation that "the instruments used in the Akata dance, such as rattles, drums, and 'idig ankom, have a number of philosophical and symbolic meanings. The rattles are believed to represent the energy and spirit of the ancestors, while the drums are seen as a way to connect with the gods. The 'idig ankom," which is believed to be a powerful talisman, is thought to represent the connection between humans and the natural world. These instruments are all used in the dance to create a sense of energy, movement, and connection between the dancers and the world around them." (Grof, 2014, P.141).

In his book "The Rites of Passage", Arnold Van Gennep explores the complex relationship between ritual, community, and individual experience. He argues that the rituals surrounding the Akata dance reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the human experience. The book also provides an in-depth description of the role of the dance in philosophy and how it is used to express and explore the full range of human emotions and experiences. He writes "The Bakweri believe that the dance is not only an expression of joy and happiness, but also a means of releasing and expressing other, more negative emotions. They believe that the dance allows the community to release any negative feelings, such as anger, frustration, and sadness, in a way that is cathartic and does not harm the individual or the community." (Gennep, 1908, P.52).

Akata Dance and the Human nature; body, soul and community.

The Bakor people believe that dance is a key part of their culture and identity. They see dance as a way to connect with the ancestors, the natural world, and the supernatural world. Dance is also seen as a way to maintain a connection with the spirit world and to access spiritual power. Additionally, dance is seen as a way to teach morals and values, and to ensure the continuation of traditions and culture. Dance is a key part of all aspects of life, from birth to death.

The Akata dance can be understood as a symbol of human nature because it highlights the fundamental connections between the individual, the community, and the natural world. The dance is seen as a way to connect with the spiritual realm and the ancestors. It also emphasizes the importance of creativity and self-expression, as well as the connection between the body and the mind. Through the dance, the body becomes a vessel for the expression of emotions and ideas. It is seen as a way to connect with the fundamental human experiences of joy, sadness, and love.

According to the work of a renowned anthropologist " the Akata dance is a highly creative and expressive form of movement. The dancers use their bodies to tell stories, express emotions, and communicate with each other and the audience. The dance is also highly spiritual, as it is believed to connect the dancers with the ancestors and the spirit world". (Kreamer, 2010, P.79).This makes for the connection that is seen in the use of traditional costumes and masks, as well as in the movements and gestures of the dance. The nature of dance through body move also embodies the fundamental human experience .The dance connects the dancers with each other, as well as with the audience and the wider community. It is also seen as a way to connects dancers from the soul to their environment. Thus Anthropologist Peggy states that the Akata dance "is a celebration of the creative powers of the human spirit."(Korsmeyer, 1997, P.45). The dance is characterized by intricate, fluid movements that are both expressive and controlled. The dancers use their bodies to tell stories and express ideas in a way that is both creative and emotional. The creative aspect of the dance is also evident in the use of costumes, masks, and props.

The akata dance in its human nature and how it relates the body and soul to the environment, Rudolf L., adds that "the Akata dance is a strenuous, athletic activity that requires great physical strength and stamina."(Laban, 1988, P.12). The dance is characterized by leaps, jumps, and other acrobatic movements that are often accompanied by loud, energetic drumming. This physicality is also a reflection of the dancers' connection to the spirit world, as they are believed to be channeling the energy of the ancestors and the gods. The physicality of the dance is also seen as a way to energize the body and spirit.

In this context, African dance, particularly Akata dance, is seen as a reflection of human nature and an integral part of the community. It's a way to express cultural identity, emotions, and beliefs. Let's break down the key aspects: African dance is characterized by intricate, fluid movements that require a high level of physical skill and control.

According to the work of anthropologist Christine Kreamer (2010, p. 79), the Akata dance is a highly creative and expressive form of movement. The dancers use their bodies to tell stories, express emotions, and communicate with each other and the audience. The dance is also highly spiritual, as it is believed to connect the dancers with the ancestors and the spirit world. This connection is seen in the use of traditional costumes and masks, as well as in the movements and gestures of the dance. It worthwhile here to break this down into the three valuable concepts as implied in this section:

Body: African dance is characterized by intricate, fluid movements that require a high level of physical skill and control. The body becomes a tool to tell stories and convey emotions, fostering a deep connection between the physical and the spiritual.

Soul: African dance is often rooted in spirituality and is seen as a way to connect with the divine, the ancestors, and the spirit world. It serves as a form of therapy, healing, and empowerment for individuals and communities.

Community: African dance is a communal activity that brings people together to celebrate, mourn, or mark important events. It strengthens social bonds and fosters a sense of belonging and unity. The shared experience of dance helps to create and maintain a collective identity.

In the context of Akata dance in the Bakors of Ogoja, these elements come together to create a rich, expressive art form that is deeply embedded in the local culture and reflects the community's values, beliefs, and experiences. It is within this background that Susanne K. Langer states: "Dance, then, is the most direct, the most immediate of all the arts; it is not an interpretation of feeling, but the feeling itself—the actual expression of emotion in movement." (Langer, 1942, P.174). In this extract, she emphasizes the idea that dance is not just a representation of emotion, but rather the physical embodiment of emotion itself. While Langer's work does not specifically focus on African dance or Akata dance in particular, her ideas can be applied to the context of African dance to highlight the deep connection between dance and human nature, allowing participants to express their innermost emotions and connect with ancestral spirits or deities. While these insights are not specific to the Bakor culture or Akata dance, they can provide a foundation for understanding the broader significance of dance in African cultures.

Akata dance, like many traditional African dances, involves expressive movements and gestures that can be seen as a reflection of human nature, particularly in relation to the body and soul. Here are some ways in which the movements of Akata dance might relate to human nature, the body, and the soul; Akata dance often involves dynamic, rhythmic movements that engage the whole body, highlighting the physicality and vitality of human nature. Specific gestures or positions might emphasize the importance of certain body parts or physical attributes in Bakor culture, reflecting cultural beliefs about the body and its role in human nature. The coordination and control required for the dance can showcase the human ability to master complex physical skills, which is a key aspect of human nature. The emotional expressiveness of Akata dance can be seen as a manifestation of the human soul. To understand the Akata dance and human nature, Mary Douglas a British anthropologist, Douglas focused on the symbolism and social aspects of cultural practices. Her research offers insights into how the Akata dance represents Bakor cultural values, beliefs, and social structures, which can shed light on how the dance relates to human nature within the Bakor context of inner life, allowing dancers to communicate their feelings and connect with the audience on a deeper level. In Bakor culture, dance might be seen as a way to connect with spiritual forces or ancestors, linking the human soul to the broader spiritual realm. The creative and improvisational elements of Akata dance can reflect the human capacity for imagination, self-expression, and creativity, which are important aspects of the dance.

In understanding the Akata dance and human nature, Mary Douglas further focused on the psychological and social aspects of cultural practices. Her research offers insights into how the Akata dance represents Bakor cultural values, beliefs, and social structures, which sheds light on how the dance relates to nature within the Bakor context. This is an embodiment of gestures and rubrics in Akata dance. The physical movements and gestures of Akata dance reflect the importance of the human body in shaping experiences and cultural practices. The body is not only a vehicle for self-expression but also a means of connecting with others, the environment, and the spiritual realm. She writes "Dance serves as a physical expression of cultural values and social structures, demonstrating the fundamental role of the body in shaping human experiences and interactions." (Douglas, 1996, p. 49). In the sphere of social connections, she explains that "the Akata dance functions as a communal activity that creates social bonds and shared values, such essential role in social functions helps in shaping human experiences in the Bakor cosmology" (Douglas, p. 95).

Critical Evaluation and Conclusion

A critical evaluation of the philosophical role of dance in the Bakor culture focus on how the dance reflects and reinforces existing power structures. For example, scholars have pointed out that the dance is performed by men and women in separate groups, and that the dances often portray traditional gender roles. This can be seen as reinforcing the status quo and limiting the potential for social change. In another critical perspective, it is observed that since the dance perpetuates stereotypes about the Bakor

people and their culture, there is the tendency of circled and stunted growth and dynamism in the dance and cultural practices of the Bakors in general.

From a social and philosophical perspective, the Akata dance can be seen as an important expression of Bakor culture and identity. The dance is a way for the Bakor people to share their history, values, and beliefs with the world. It also provides an opportunity for the community to come together and create shared meaning and understanding. Additionally, the dance can be seen as a form of nonverbal communication, which can be an important aspect of culture. Finally, the dance is also a form of art, which can be analyzed and appreciated from a philosophical perspective.

In another critical perspective, the Akata dance which is a strenuous physical skill display, in recent times seems to exclude the female folk due to its acrobatic movements which maybe seen as intrincating to women considered as a weaker sex in the African context. This addresses the needs of the bakor community exactly because the dance doesn't have women representation which is going gradually into extinction since those dancers and instrumentalists who are women are ageing and some dieing, a lot of laxity to who would represent them and enhance continuity becomes a great challenge.

Recommendations:

Some suggested recommendations to assuaging these challenges could include:

- Creating documentation and archival materials about the dance tradition, to ensure its preservation.
 - Promoting cultural exchanges and educational programs about the dance tradition, to foster understanding and appreciation.
 - Using the dance as a tool for community development, by incorporating it into programs that address issues such as health, education, and poverty.
 - Promoting the role of women in the dance tradition, to ensure equal representation and empowerment.
- These are just a few examples of potential solutions and opportunities. The specific suggestions would depend on the specific needs and priorities of the Bakor community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Akata dance of the Bakor people in Northern Cross River State is a unique and complex form of expression. It is deeply rooted in the culture and history of the Bakor people, and it both reflects and challenges their values and beliefs. The dance serves as a medium of communication, knowledge, and art, and it has the potential to foster understanding and connection within and beyond the Bakor community.

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