Prospects and Sustainability of Therapeutic Dance Art in African Postmodern Theatre Practice

Nwosu, Emeka, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts
Imo State University, Owerri,
Imo State, Nigeria
Phone: +234(0)8033247370
E-mail: nwosuemekah@yahoo.com

Abstract
Dance in Africa is a non-verbal communication art that has remained indispensable for the expression of life across the globe. Beyond its entertainment value and potentials to commemorate the beauty and splendour of the society that houses it, dance has been used therapeutically to articulate the sociological, cultural, religious and political life of the people. Dance as variously performed in Africa, either as ceremonial, social, religious event or healing therapy have been means for individual and communal revival and recapitulation of the African worldview for cognitive mental and physical well-being. Consequently, both traditional and modern societies house dances with these potentials. However, the problem of this study is the underutilization of therapeutic dances in a postmodern society characterized by technological innovations and syncretized culture. The objectives of the study include revival of interest in dances that possess diverse therapeutic effects, stifled by colonialism and evangelization of Africa. The paper also examines the place of therapeutic dance in the postmodern society. Qualitative research method was adopted and analysis revealed that therapeutic dance art, despite fragmented and multicultural nature of the postmodern society, has a place in African postmodern theatre.

Introduction
African theatre is a total theatre that is known for its tripartite nature. Hence, it comprises the traditional, modern and recently the postmodern theatre. Dance is one of the popular genres of African theatre which is as old as the human society. Despite its entertainment values alongside other performing arts of music and drama, dance has for centuries been used as a healing art. Dance is among the genres that have transited with the African theatre. However, some of the
traditional therapeutic dances lost their therapeutic potency and merely entertain the audience. The focus of modern dance toed the line of these changes and focused on entertainment. Similarly, African postmodern theatre has not shown much interest in the therapeutic dance art. Contrarily, revival of interest in the therapeutic dance art has been on since the late nineteen fifties. Hence, around 1950s Marian Chace, an American dancer and choreographer developed dance as therapy and as an extension of western medicine. Here, dances were used psychotherapeutically to help hospital patients improve on their cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural and physical conditions. Though modern African dance have not been utilized along this dimension, it has produced even without a premonition far reaching physical and spiritual well-being for its consumers. This is based on the fact that African dances have large repository of therapeutic functions that assuage one’s thirst for spirituality and aesthetics. Part of the impediment against the development of therapeutic dance art has been the ill-conceived acceptance and speculation of dance art in Africa as pure entertainment, even by African academics.

The claim that dance is therapeutic is premised on the argument that the body and mind are related and that movement has a symbolic utility that explores cognitive processes and that sharing in the dancer’s creativity and performative content, the audience formulates experiments or experiences diverse ways of life, since by the coming together of the body, mind and spirit, “the mind is entertained, and the merriment that goes with the ceremonies takes care of the body.” This pastiche and meta-narrative performative approach of dance is not peculiar to Western dance only, but also apply to African postmodern dance. Hence; Canice Chukwuma Nwosu affirms that; “There are also African performances that possess characteristics of postmodernism, in their themes, structure and performative techniques” (2). In his appropriation of postmodernism for the evolution of African postmodernism, Nwosu posits that; Afro postmodernism is therefore Africa’s contemporary but multicultural theatre that queries imposed truths and manifests Africa’s new socio-cultural and politico-economic constructs (32).

African postmodernism reinforces this functionality of African art. Before any African dance is created and performed, there is always a purpose for it. Thus, dance can be used for sustainability of social and cultural norms including using dance as therapy in the influence of fertility, birth, sickness, renewal, reconciliation, bonds and relationships and to more severe cases of handling Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). Dance performances communicate emotions, build a sense of identity by laundering image during celebration of rites of passage, as well as codifying the bonds between members of a community and to a larger extent their cosmology and worldview.

Even though, modern African dances assume to be socially and ceremonially based; hence, most cultural and arts centres are concerned more with producing dance as entertainment than therapy. This eventually leads to the dwindling nature of therapeutic dance during African modernism. Apart from therapeutic dance the dance culture generally was affected by the literariness of African modernism. Therefore, Political leaders, captains of industries and other individuals patronize dance for entertainment purposes. It is this one-dimensional view of the gains and uses of dance that prevents this multifunctional theatre form from performing its dual functions. Thus, the demands and taste of the audience, artistic style and audience patronage of the modern theatre failed to sustain the therapeutic function of dance. This in turn has also affected dance as a full-fledged profession art that can raise the economic and health fortunes of the continent. African dance as therapy can become an export product and national
development sustainability measure if fully utilized. It can be taken beyond its present utilitarian traditional value, making use of the body to titilate the audience, and practiced in places such as mental health rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, medical and educational environments, and day care settings as obtained in other regions. It is not that African dance lack the potential to serve the needs of its immediate environment, however, there is the need to take it beyond the entertainment level through the postmodern performative culture and utilize it for professional therapy to heal the society and make it safe and stable.

Therefore, this paper provides and examines the role of dance in strengthening health (body, mind and spirit), and shaping identity and unity within the African postmodern set-up. It is significant to look at dance in Africa as medicinal or utilitarian, and based upon intention, which means that some sort of therapeutic contributions is felt and shared within this medium far beyond some other forms of art.

Dance Theatre in Africa: Concept and Worldview

Dance art just like theatre is believed to have existed with the beginning of man and rooted deeply in festivals, folkloric tales and religious rituals. These essentially communicated the people’s divergent feeling and expression of emotions in a cosmology identifying humans, their environment and forces that are above. As noted by Meki Nzewi, “dance is stylized and structured movement in time-space” and “a significant or figurative mode of communicating or promoting dramatic intention.” (433 - 434). Dances in Africa are used to explore man’s immediate response to life and communal aggregation and as catalyst for enlivening the bonds between the members. It is speculated that man in his bid to understand more his environment consciously and unconsciously digressed into the performance arts, which dance is part of, in exploring themes through body and movement and mediated on some of the intriguing problems, roles and needs plaguing him. The functionality of dance in the theatre as observed by Duruaku is that it “provided the cosmological, sociological and religious explanations of the life of a given community; thereby reinforcing communal relationships” (180).

Africans use dance as an instrument of body, mind and spirit cognitions, such that it rejuvenates the individual. Accordingly, Gorer states that; “Africans dance. They dance for joy, and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time” (213).

The foregoing observation shows that dance illustrate the people’s corporate existence in an environment where everything is celebrated. The event attaches no segregation between dancers and spectators as the onlookers have a time when they join the dance, each member performing his whole individual feelings and experiences or that of the collective task. The merging of performance and audience, and space, aids the aestheticism of African dance. It is seen as a medium through which people have another look at their history, their past and as a way of forging ahead in the new future. More than ever, their values about cultural identity, polity, religion and society are evaluated and their emerging desire re-established.

African dance continues to stand intact despite the prolificacy discovered during the slave trade movement and contemporary time. Though western culture and dance continue to permeate the world, African dances have remained unruffled and are performed in all countries of the world for their distinctness and peculiar utilitarian effects and psychological cognitions. The importance of dance art as theatre of life and as tool for the expression of the individual and the communal becomes evident in how Africans that were enslaved and are migrants to other lands have used dance to articulate and assemble their cultural traditions and unite with their
cherished homeland. Because Africa is ethnically and culturally the most diverse planet on earth, its dances though elucidating similar motifs, have entirely disparate history, language, song, background, and intention.

Gates and Appiah state that the Yoruba dancers and drummers of Nigeria, for example, “express communal desires, values, and collective creativity” as ‘dances are often segregated by gender, reinforcing gender roles in children and other community structures such as kinship, age and status are also often reinforced.” (556) In Lunda of Zambia young girls are confined months in seclusion practicing for their coming of age ritual. Gates and Appiah further state that; “boys show off their stamina in highly energetic dances, providing a means of judging physical health” (556). There are dances that identify what being male or female portends and some restriction about interaction. Sometimes there is the coming together of the young genders for the purpose of elucidating how they charm each other.

Welsh notes also that; “dances celebrate the passage from childhood to adulthood or spiritual worship” (21). In Nigeria especially are abundance of festival rites of passage and coming of age dances that are performed to celebrate the ascendance of certain communal and cultural age line of their young men and women. The Iwa-akwa festival theatre of the people of Obowo and environs is spontaneous dance art a feature. Through the heroes dancing, those who have marked manhood, process of child delivery, training and growth to adulthood are communicated and the roles members of community performed individually and or collectively are idealized. As they codify their state of mind, some pungent themes as glory, fulfillment and hope, including stronger ties with community are expressed. Other examples of coming of age dances are the Nkim Nkat maiden dance of the Calabar people in Cross River State, and Obitun dance performance of the Ondo people. Examples could equally be cited with the Ijeleghe dances of some Uromi teenagers and Mkpokiti and Atilogwu dances by young Igbo males. They artistically illustrate the discipline and agility that are expected of these growing youths.

The worship of ancestors in Africa plays dominant theme(s) in dances. An assemblage of festivals such as the “Owu”, “Okorosha”, “Odo”, “Ine”, “Ekpe” and “Mmanwu” of the Nigerian Igbo are found traces of folk dance and art which launder the peoples bonding with their ancestors. Duruaku states that; “the traditional African revered his heroic ancestors and worshipped deities. Since they were not visible, their presence was concretised in masquerades.” (176) The Yoruba Egungun ancestral society, Guegblin dance of the Ivory Coast, the Shape, Shangana Tonga, and the Swazi of southern Africa provide instances of how dancers through pantomime, by the embodiment of animal and spirit mediums, convey thoughts and emotions through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions.

Hence, the exploration of a particular relationship with these gods is enacted through masquerading and as such, dances of this nature are often discovered to be integrative and conciliatory of a cosmic worldview. It does have also other benefits, one of which is fulfilling ones longing for completeness, of the mind, body and spirit exasperated by despair and disease. For example, the Ahore in Orisa-Nla dance of the Yoruba is performed for the god of purity in an effort to sacrifice and get the attention of the spiritual. In funeral dance theatre, death triumphs for those who experienced the trauma and mourning as it is welcomed as the inevitability of life and a sure way of communing with departed ancestors. Dances of this function are mostly known to be fast, sometimes slow and rigorous in rhythm and movement. The calm but hallowed demeanor of old age and the slow pace movement characterize the dance steps of Ijo Agba and Ewo dance of the Yoruba.
African dance, far beyond entertainment provides a sort of moral house for the young and the old on social values and mores, for example appreciation, since the hand of gods are seen in every success the community achieved in a farming cycle or hunting expedition or victory over calamity or war. The plot of African dance contains a story which may be on any issue and that is why it has remained socially and culturally viable more than dances of other cultures that show off, especially Europe and Latin America, the relationships existing between the dancers and their abilities. Whereas the former would condemn public touch by the opposite sex during dance, the latter displayed affection with a touch and an embrace, unless in the first instance there is a message to communicate.

Dance to the African is a language of many activities: life, agriculture, religion, politics, love and marriage, tradition and society, and health; for when put to great use, it heals the sick soul and body. Both sexes often depict in dance procreative actions while they may perform leaps suggesting the raising of crops and its bounteous harvest.

Politically, dances especially in Nigeria have been tailored towards the establishment of authority and power such as was manifestly enacted in Tiridada dance of Northern Nigeria and the Obirenjowu of South-West. While they seem to represent members of the hoi-polloi the dance is done by the age class. On this note dance has been realized to meet the needs and changes occasioned by political factors on the society as Tierou observes that:

Because it has more power than gesture, more eloquence than word, more richness than writing and because it expresses the most profound experiences of human beings, dance is a complete and self-sufficient language. It is the expression of life and of its permanent emotions of joy, love, sadness, hope, and without emotion there is no African Dance (86).

In observing the cultural role of dance in restoring the people’s identical values through her study of the Ine festival of the Aniocha people, Mokwunyei notes:

The dance featured in the mobile performances are in free style and are fast-moving to accompany demonstrations and gesticulations that depict various aspects of Aniocha life, admired, hated or taken for granted; the good, the bad and the ugly (89).

Dance could be used to show the progression of time of birth and death in such ceremonial rituals as the Mbira dance of Zimbabwe, the Igogo of Owo Yoruba, in which an affirmation of the people’s belief system is made, even as young men dance over the grave of the dead at burial amidst heavy stomping of feet packing the earth, respectively. Dance of this use explores African spirituality. The whole essence of African dance is as informed by Malone thus; “Dances teach social patterns and values and help people work, mature, praise or criticize members of the community while celebrating festivals and funerals, competing, reciting history, proverbs and poetry; and to encounter gods” (9).

However, colonialism and its consequent liberalism on African dance has broadened its transformation into new social contexts just as its modernization introduced some innovations and continuity to the whole media of movement and subject. Modern dance is mostly now operated as companies by individuals, private artistic bodies and governments. They are the Ori Olokun Company of Ife, Nigeria, the National Dance Company of Senegal and Zimbabwe, respectively, and the National Troupe of Nigeria and cultural arts centers located in the states, to mention a few, where dances are performed for government functionaries, private sectors
and individuals. Dance competitions have been the bane of the companies particularly those organized by government. The popular boat regattas and water play dances of the Niger Delta people of Bayelsa and Delta states, and others tell of the economic occupation of their communities which are predominantly fishing and rowing. It is important to note that these dances express tradition and commitment to maintenance of national unity, identity and cultural heritage. It should properly also be mentioned that they are performed now as a kind of exchange performances in most countries of the world.

**Therapeutic Roles and Functions of Dance Art in Africa**

- Dance is communication and has a great role to play in addressing human, social, religious and political questions therefore dancers and spectators benefit a lot when it is being performed. The therapeutic role of dance in many parts of Africa highlights the place of life in African society. Dance as healing therapy has increasingly addressed people’s sense of physical, psychological, cultural and political security and raised their level of consciousness to needs of safety and continuity. In essence it has interpreted for Africans their individual and collective responsibility and relationships to laid down precepts with each other and the divine.

- Dances of social ceremonies, rite of passage, rituals and ancestor worship have helped bond the people together, removing all figments of loneliness and isolation for the elderly and raised the environment to a meeting point between the living and the spiritual by providing social interaction, expression and cognitive exercise.

- Through body cognition and movement dances can bring the full restoration of a battered mind and help heal poor body image. Serious disorders and diseases are healed when the past and present are recalled through dance symbolism. Intense drumming and rhythmic body jerks woven around a story engage the ailing patient whose disabilities are well taken care of, and affording the community a link with the spirit world where problems confronting them are evaluated. Dances of national unity and cohesion can launder this objective too.

- African dances help the mentally retarded to improve their body image, social skills, sensory coordination and motor skills, as well as promote communication. The dance aspect of Bori, belonging to the Hausa of northern Nigeria, solves this problem. Women undergoing mental trauma and illness are taken to a shrine where through dance and song they regain their sanity. The three-month ceremony is needed for the therapy of these women. This possession dance is central to the belief that the restriction existing between the worshipped and the worshipper would be disabled. Duruaku observes that; “the theatre’s ability to suspend all worries of life for the period it lasts’ makes sense in this kind of dance in which ‘the mind is entertained, and the merriment that goes with the ceremonies takes care of the body.’” (181) In his study of Bori, Horn noticed that the performance is for curative reason. “The cult is thus primarily concerned with the healing and prevention of illness” (186). Adelugba claims however that Bori dance “is also an occasion for self-display and a mechanism for expressing or suppressing rivalry between co-wives and strains and stresses in the marital relationship” (206) by the Bori women.
• Some African religious dances, like the one mentioned above, that are practiced in Tiv Nigeria, and Kung Suan of Botswana and Mhondoro spirit dance among the Shona of Zimbabwe are therapeutic rituals directed towards the fighting of disease and death.

• Depression as a matter of fact can be combated with dance as therapy so as to reduce the stresses of life, anxiety and as a way of building relationships and strengthening them. Through it one learns experiences and control, builds confidence and have new inspirations to learn.

• Dances have therapeutic uses beyond performance for it aids the expression of one’s emotions. For example, an expectant mother may be propped to dance in expectation of a successful birth delivery and growth, stage by stage of her child. When this is done it is said to reduce anxiety, improve relaxation technique and confidence to endure labour and manage parenting. Often times, dances performed in local African communities served this purpose.

• It further intensifies confidence against adversities and hope. The Moribayasa dance of the Malinke in Guinea shows how a woman triumphs over despair and calamity. Old, ragged clothes are used and as the woman dances, she is followed by musicians, singing and dancing, circling the villagers many times. Her old cloth is buried and she puts on a new one suggesting her victory and hope of a better future, as the old is buried, possibly at the cross-roads or, as revealed by Keita, “under a mango tree.” (50)

• African dance can be used further to confront destructive behaviours, chart course for new ways and to discover the symbolism underlying some erratic actions and behaviours. Since it is communication, it does aid articulacy, both verbal and non-verbal, giving vistas for pleasure and an enhanced mood for participation in extra-curricular activities. When put to function, it builds self-awareness especially for those who have problem of sight and are impaired.

• Many dances result in profitable friendship, courtship, harvest and fertility. Others are performed in order to build courage and might on the battlefield such that it depicted what happened there, the wild and violent. The dances as have been mentioned earlier have different history, language and purpose but bear common themes.

**Sustaining Dance Art as Healing Therapy in African Postmodern Theatre Practice**

Cultural dynamics is the major factor affecting sustainability of the therapeutic potentials of the dance art in Africa. The transition from traditional, through modernism to postmodernism has affected societal values as well as taste and demand of the audience. Thus, dance practitioners are guided by the emergent culture that places emphasis on the entertainment values of dance because postmodern audience appears to be more interested in the entertainment aspect of dance- hence the decline in its therapeutic aspect. Sustainability is a development discourse that appraises the contributions of economic, social, and environmental factors to meet the requirements of the present without obstructing the ability of future generations to achieve their own needs. It is an equitable and balanced opportunity by nations and their populations to address their present and future well-being to take care of: security, health, participation, cultural identity and a healthy environment for existing and future citizenry. Therapeutic dance still has a place in this postmodern era for the self-sustainability process of any nation. However, the challenge has been that the present-day socio-cultural equity imbalance has compromised the search for this.
Musa, affirms this paradigm shift in the people’s worldview when he says that, the challenges being faced by some traditional religious festival theatres in Nigeria is because their ritualistic contents no longer appeal to the postmodern audience. Most of these festivals appropriately have therapeutic dance intentions hence Musa’s observation is not about the need to draw attention than the glaring problem of sustainability. Examples of such performances include “the … Agemo festival, Ojude Oba festival, Eyo masquerade festival, Ogun festival and Osun festival in south-western Nigeria, Argungu fishing festival and Durba festival in Northern Nigeria and Ekpe festival in the south-south” (21-22). Furthermore, Musa points out that “some of these festivals have also lost other relevant cultural values of problem solving, protection against war, blessings…” (22).

There is no doubt that the ritualistic potentials of African dance were influenced by colonialism, evangelization of Africa and subsequently Pentecostalism. Mono-cultural tendencies of modernism provided support for this trend However, postmodernism counters this attempt on westernizing Africa through its meta-narrative technique pastiche and multicultural tendencies that accommodates aspects of any culture and recognizes “the other” in “the other”. According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after world war II (1939-45) when the effects on western morale of the first world war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of over-population (203).

The Nigerian situation today is similar to if not worse than the situation recounted above that ushered in the postmodern art. Thus, these conditions that necessitated postmodernism are not far from today’s conditions in Africa especially Nigeria; they are relative and therefore demands urgent therapeutic attention through therapeutic dance. Abrams and Harpham conclude that:

Postmodernism involves not only a continuation sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to over throw the elitism of modernist “high art” by recourse for models to the “mass culture” in film, television, newspaper cartoons, popular music and dance (203).

Abrams and Harpham in the above quotation lays out the methodological approach for the Nigerian postmodern choreographer and dancer to sustain therapeutic dance art within the postmodern theatre practice era in Nigeria. Even though postmodernism is Western in origin, other regions and disciplines can appropriate its methodological approaches for transforming “the elitism of modernist “high art”. Canice Chukwuma Nwosu in his appropriation of postmodernism for African theatre practice posits that:

Postmodernism is a periodization concept that does not know any regional, sub-regional, ethnic or professional barriers. It could be adopted by Asia, Africa, philosophy, Architecture etc, so long as its tenets tally with the purpose and conventions of the milieu, performance or profession appropriating it. Postmodernism indicates departure and growth and simply means “beyond modernism” (143).
Hence, to sustain therapeutic dance art, we have to transcend modernism and its segregationally tendencies. It is obvious that postmodern sensibilities among Nigerian dancers are backward, in slumber and snoring. Therefore, we need the dancer, choreographer and dance to wake up the nation through postmodern dances. According to Nwosu, we need postmodern dances that; “… adopt postmodern presentational techniques that can assault the audience. Like critical realism postmodern critique is “red in tooth and claw.” Thus, postmodern dances with performative techniques of postmodernism have potentials to awaken consciousness of the audience through: Interpretations of the subject of the dances and other roles of therapeutic dance listed before. The postmodern approach can help change the wrong notion of most African governments occasioned by the influence of Eurocentric foreign researchers that led to establishment of arts centers that export and perform the dances as pure-entertainment. Hence, dances are organized to entertain visitors and officials of government and captains of industries and for academic need while messages of the dance that communicated therapeutic functions are dwarfed.

Conclusion

The study has shown that therapeutic dance art has prospects in postmodern theatre practice in Nigeria. The study also proves that the therapeutic dance art can be sustained in African postmodern theatre practice. Therefore, for the postmodern dance to sustain the therapeutic functions of dance, it must transcend providing an avenue for appraising social structures, norms, morals and traditions and revive its purgative potentials achieved through religious and ritualistic processes. Religiously, dance is used to connect with the divine who release their favours, blessings, healing and protection on man; the solemnity of some religious and ritualistic dances is inadvertently very therapeutic. The dances of passage help initiate to demonstrate communal pride, identity and work toward the development of the community. It liberates men and women from shackles of life, creates a sense of belonging and acceptance for the elderly and help people express their emotions.

Thus, the therapeutic role of dance cannot be more emphasized when considered from the point of contemporary dangers confronting it in Africa. Dances are no longer enjoying their roles as obtained traditionally before the changes that came with colonialism and religion. They have been transformed to the level in which it no longer serves the need of confidence building and improvement of self-image through dance ritual displays. Festivals that patronize most of the dances are fast disappearing and being modernized to meet present needs occasioned by materialism and globalization and not considering the future. The Maltina Dance Show and other television reality dance shows in Nigeria, for example, are for entertainment than as therapy. They incorporate western dance elements into the indigenous art forms. They may have healing elements though, but the goal has not been directed towards achieving that. Musa comments that:

Almost all these indigenous traditional festivals and theatres are still in existence today. However, the dynamics, the elaborate performance forms and the often-deep contextual metaphors, the efficacy of ritual blessings and my tho-historical reflections, and so on, have all naturally gone into the winds of cultural change as dictated or partly caused by the new religions (Christianity and Islam) and western education (21).
Dance proves to be an incisive tool for social, political, economic and religious rebirth. If it is for wealth, dance will also be alive to the needs of consumers. Dance heals the sick body and soul. It restores man’s identity and bonds, rejuvenating him in the process. It defines the people’s history and ensures that their security and continuity are not violated.

Dance remains an effective artistic communication art therefore; schools of dance should be opened by African countries to train students and manpower that are capable of utilizing dance for therapeutic gains. It can be made an export product and national development sustainability measure and practiced in places such as mental health rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, medical and educational environments and day care settings as obtained in other lands. It is not that African dance does not serve the need of its immediate environment, there is the need to take it beyond the patronage that it enjoys presently by making it respond to present and future African development goals.

Works Cited


