Communicating Themes via Dance Aesthetics and Kinaesthetics: NAFEST Dance in Focus

By

Daniel Kpodoh,
Institute of Arts and Culture,
University of PortHarcourt.
dankenhen@gmail.com
(+234)9052224589
&
Olalekan F. Olatunji,
Department of Theatre Arts,
University of Ìbàdàn.
lalekanolatunji1@gmail.com)
(+234)8160001873

Abstract

The place of dance as meta-language for communication between man and man cannot be overemphasized. However, beyond the artistic creation of bodily movements for self-expression, choreographers have taken conscious steps to create dances with meaning-passing undertones. Therefore, in communicating thematic concerns, choreographers engage various elements as meaning-passing techniques. Thus, this study examines the use of aesthetics and kinaesthetics as viable elements of infusing meaning into movements. This study engages Hans Robert Jauss' Reception theory, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sander Peirce's Semiotics, and the semiotic models of Kinesics and Proxemics as theoretical framework. It is a descriptive study which secured its data through keen observation of the dances performed at the occasion of the 34th National festival for Arts and Culture (NAFEST) hosted in Ekiti State in November 2021. In-depth interviews were also conducted with Dan Kpodoh, kinaesthetics practitioner, lead choreographer and lead researcher. Video recordings of the dancers were also collected and subjected to content analysis. Aesthetics perception served as a basic tool to trap audience attention while kinaesthetics as a complementary technique to present and magnify the messages in a unified perspective. The use of these techniques were captured in the floor patterns, movements, space, rhythm, and colour, in order to display the central idea of the dance choreography. Thus, the use of aesthetic and kinaesthetic techniques in the dances understudy is a deliberate effort to create a peculiar language of communication coupled with the certainty that the messages are well received.

Key Words: Dance Communication, Kinaesthetics, Aesthetics, Movement

Introduction

Fundamentally, dance is a creative endeavour. It is an artistic process which engages the body in lived space through rhythmic movements to make statements or serve therapeutic purposes. The essentiality of dance cannot be overemphasized as it is a basic occurrence which happens with the human body on display. It may vary from society to society, but universally, dance still bears similar functionality; as a vehicle which communicates feelings and messages from man-to-man. This communication (which is majorly non-verbal) is embedded in its basic elements such as movement, rhythm, music and space, wherein the messages are conveyed through visual codes which resonate and register in the minds of spectators who are either physically present or in cyberspace.

However, communication in dance does not end with body movements or plastic dance. Anyone can dance for different purposes, but certain factors like aesthetic quality become a quintessential element for proper dance communication. Communication in dance becomes potent when the movements are aesthetically arranged, coherently united and pleasing to the senses. It is against this background that this study pays special attention to the aesthetic and kinaesthetic qualities in the 2021 NAFEST dances as vehicles for conveying messages to a seated audience.

Conceptual Clarification

According to the Penguin dictionary, aesthetics deals basically with the nature of beauty and aesthetic taste and the principles concerning nature and beauty (20). It is "a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. It is more scientifically defined as the sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste" (Kisak).

Kinaesthetics on the other hand, develops its root from the Greek word *kinësis* (Kinesics) which denotes a systematic study of the relationship between bodily cues or movements. Kinaesthetics is the advanced form of kinesics by philosophizing beauty in movements. According to Wikipedia:

> Kinaesthetics (or kinesthetics, in American English) is the study of body motion, and of the perception (both conscious and unconscious) of one's own body motions. Kinesthesis is the learning of movements that an individual commonly performs. The individual must repeat the motions that they are trying to learn and perfect as many times for this to happen.

Methodology

This study engages the qualitative method of data gathering. It is a descriptive study which secured its data through participant observation of the opening and closing ceremony dances titled "Children of the rolling hills" and "I sing for Naija" respectively of the National Festival for Arts and Culture (NAFEST) competition hosted in Ekiti State between the 15th and 20th November, 2021. The opening and closing ceremony dances engaged a total of one thousand professional dancers from various backgrounds, with Dan Kpodoh and Femi Olufowobi as lead choreographers under the supervision of the chief choreographer, the Honourable commissioner for Arts and Culture Ekiti State, Professor Rasaki Ojo Bakare. This paper also secures in-depth interviews with the key choreographers understudy to provide firsthand documentations on the processes of creation, identify the creative undertones of the dances created and highlight the thematic concerns and messages communicated.

At the preparatory stage of rehearsals, the dancers were grouped into two (2) sects to allow effectiveness and to observe covid-19 protocols as the dancers were outnumbered for the small rehearsal spaces. The dancers were grouped into odd and even cells in Ikere-ekiti, Oye-ekiti. The dancers converged at Ado-ekiti from the 10th of November, 2021 to synchronize movements and merge cells.

Also, this study captures pictorial evidence and record of events at pre-production, performance observation at production and video recordings at post-production which were harmonized to complement the sources of primary data.

Towards a Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Hans Robert Jauss' Reception theory (1982), Ferdinand de Saussure (1906) and Charles Sander Peirce (1990) Semiotics, and the semiotic models of Kinesics and Proxemics. Semiotics is the study and science of signs. It is "the study of how signs are encoded and decoded as communicative instruments. Put differently, semiotics is the study (or investigation) of how meaning is communicated through sign system" (NOUN: 22). In the context of communication, anything could serve as a vehicle for message-passing. Such a thing (or things) could either be esoteric or generally known by a wide audience, as encoded paroles meant to be decoded by observers as codes. Code is explained as "the organization of signs as representation of information. It is a set of guidelines for converting information to representation. Hence, it can be referred to as a set of shared understanding of practices familiar to its users" (NOUN: 43). Therefore, language which is a mode of verbal communication is a form of code for message-passing. The world today is littered with several languages, as such language decoding becomes

peculiar to groups and geographical locations. In Nigeria as an illustration, there are over 250 indigenous languages for verbal communication spread across the numerous tribes. In this context an Igbo speaker might be frustrated in the bid to make sense of the communications of a Yoruba speaker except the Igbo speakers are familiar with the language (codes) of the Yoruba tribe. However, by an extension, code goes beyond the labyrinths of language and verbal communication. As the saying goes 'action speaks louder than voice', this encourages the possibilities of non-verbal communication. According to Hans and Hans (2015), "non-verbal communication is especially significant in intercultural situations. Research in communication suggests that many more feelings and intentions are sent and received non-verbally than verbally" (50). Basically, this extends the modes of semiotic system and communication into five (5); linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial.

Hence, this study identifies dance as an aesthetic code which makes its statements using movement and gestures (kinesics) in time and space (proxemics). Kinesics centres on communication of ideas, feelings and emotions through bodily gestures and signals while proxemics on the other hand centres on the use of space to communicate meaning (Castaňer et al., 2013: 1815). To put it succinctly, proxemics deals with how 'spacing' could communicate or pass information. The use of spacing during communication could not only create a sense of beauty but also send specific signals and various meanings such as comfort/discomfort, intimacy/distance and assertion of power to mention a few. As such, it implies the study of how information is stealthily carried through behavioural and structural spacing during formal and informal interactions (NOUN: 150). Therefore, this study highlights the essence of dance as an aesthetic activity equipped with meaning-passing tendencies coupled with the creative use of spatiality to create a bond with the audience to communicate meaning.

Dance Communication and the Dynamism of Language

Universally, language is a major tool for communication and expression, and it functions as an instrument for verbal communication and cultural identity from man-to-man. Every performing art form (drama, music and dance) conveys meaning, series of messages or themes to spectators or a seating audience. As dialogue is akin to drama and melodious oration is to music (both in the category of verbal communication), dance fashions out its mode of communicating message. Bannerman (2014) opinionates that communication in dance requires a degree of dynamism since the dancer is handicapped to engage verbal communication, thus, he resorts to 'metalanguage' –language beyond ordinary words (76). The dancer in the bid to perform his enterprise, uses his body as a 'tool' or 'instrument' for message-passing from himself to the audience who also receives the signals of the message

sent via the same medium (Guido et al., 2016: 5). In the same vein, Bakare (2004) sees it as the rhythmic movement of the body in time and space to make statements (3). However, communication in dance is not derived from mere body movement. If it could, then yoga, martial arts, gymnastics or any other activity that puts the body in a state of activity would have been eligible for the same category of functionality. Every body movement (in this case, dance) must have aesthetic value. It functions basically as an art which is created deliberately for an aesthetic purpose (Fraleigh, 1996: xv), to sustain audience attention through the multiple display of images and kinesics which are pleasant to human sight. Therefore, communication in dance is birthed through conscious attempts to trap the audience through what Guido et al. (2016) refers to as 'aesthetic perception'. He explains more intricately:

> Aesthetic perception will depend on whether movements are familiar to the observer... People like what they know…The aesthetic experience of dance can be considered as a communicative process: in its simplest form, the dancer/choreographer is the transmitter of the message, body movement provides the message itself, and the spectator is the receiver of the message (4-9).

From the foregoing, communication is made through aesthetic perception, that is, similar horizons, 'common vocabulary', or what Guido (2016) identifies as 'visual and motor familiarization' (9). Therefore, aesthetics is derived from the kinesics and images the dancer's body creates and the resonation of pictures in the minds of the audience is effective creative communication. Guido et al. (2016) corroborates this that "the aesthetic impact of dance (and perhaps all performing arts) is a result of successful message-passing between performer and spectator" (21).

As language is based on generally accepted codes of meaningful expression from man-to-man, "the meaning-nearing capacity of dance does not justify the view that dance is a language, but that nevertheless dance is structured like a language" (Bannerman, 2014: 78). Dance performs its meaning as it engages body movements and rhythm, which are duly presented in time and space as vehicles of expression and message communication.

Images and Messages in "Children of the Rolling Hills" and "I sing for Naija"

As earlier stated, dance is another medium of expression which engages non-verbal communication models. The opening and closing ceremony dance is a combination of various dances in proper timing. The opening ceremony dance ("Children of the Rolling Hills") which was performed on the occasion of the NAFEST official opening ceremony is

a combination of five (5) major dances which lasted for approximately 50 minutes. It combines an abstract dance, traditional dance, occupational dance, drum dance and a graduation dance. Each of these dances embodied signals which were transmitted through rhythmic movements, floor pattern, spatiality, colour, costume and music. Like Tume (2014) admits, these elements are usually imbued with the thematic preoccupations of any dance choreography (649). These elements as engaged in the dances understudy shall be examined below:

a. **Rhythm & Movement**: the first dance in the opening ceremony was an abstract dance displayed on a high degree of energy and subtle music. The movements were majorly expressionistic, targeted at building emotions and painting tangible pictures of the choreographer's intentions.



Fig 1.1 the historical narration of human movements



Fig 1.2 Obatala's creation through abstract evolution and the grand entry of Obatala

Kinaesthetics as a dance technique depends largely on the connection of bodies for communication. Like the cliché goes 'the more the merrier', kinaesthetics leverages on the availability of numerous dancers doing the same movements. It is a creative harmonization of body movements to produce unified kinesic response rather than having one person with body movements on display. With kinaesthetics, the picture is captured in the duplicity of similar movements. In the case of the NAFEST dances, where the dancers numbered up to a thousand, the aesthetic quality and meaning of the dances became magnified in perspective. Dances at the opening ceremony emphasizes the cultural and historical antecedence of the people represented in the dance through images and collective movements. As illustrated in the pictures above, the dancers were grouped into sects, while some collectively functioned as passage and receptacle for Obatala (the god of creation), who had been commissioned to establish the human race, some enacted the art and act of his creation for life to begin. It identifies heterogeneity (which could have been advantageous) in Nigeria as the major cause for disunity and national disintegration. The issues resulting from heterogeneity did not begin today. In the same vein, Tangban (2014) contributes further that, "Nigeria has been grappling with the problem of unity since independence. Since the civil war, crisis has been a recurring decimal in the country" (381). This has been a menace to national development and there have been predictions that heterogeneity, if not managed properly could be the bane of the country's destruction. Unfortunately, "Nigeria as a nation is still horrendously steeple chasing in the cesspit of total disunity, so much so that some analysts and political alarmists predicted that Nigeria as a nation will be no more by 2015. But 2015 has come, like the ides of March 'not gone'" (Vanguard). Therefore, this dance is targeted at retracing and connecting to the genesis of humanity using the symbolic display of Obatala's creation story to insinuate that every human irrespective of colour or ethnicity have similar backgrounds.



Fig 1.3 Dancers in synchronized body positions and cues

b. **Floor patterns and Spatiality**: Basically, ground/floor pattern is a major activity of the preparatory phase. Floor pattern in dance is akin to production philosophy or organic blocking in directing. This allows the choreographer(s) to properly map out the central idea of the dance which would eventually be broken into bits. As earlier stated, the NAFEST dances engaged close to a thousand professional dancers which were split across three (3) different locations. Therefore, to ensure coherence and facilitate uniformity, a floor pattern became necessary. Dan Kpodoh reveals that the floor pattern was a strategy which carried the blueprint of the central idea shared by the chief choreographer, and it was from the floor pattern the central idea, theme and sub-themes were broken into bits and movements (7 Dec 2021. Interview with Dan Kpodoh). Floor pattern is a working document (a draft or blueprint) which registers the entire dance concept on paper. However, since kinaesthetics is a creative technique that engages the multitude to function as one, it becomes necessary to duplicate the floor patterns to dancers at the different locations for the aesthetic effect of the kinaesthetic technique to become achievable. Hence, the lead choreographers imparted other dancers who then became instructors of the sub-teams through the Train-the-trainer technique, where dancers are trained to become instructors so as to train other dancers. These teams were created into odd and even cells which produced alternating movements which were eventually synchronized the moment the dancers united together from their separate locations. Spatiality on the other hand, refers to the use of space (proxemics). In these dances, the choreographers maintained a degree of intentionality with the use of space. First, the dancers were allowed to bond and interact closely with one another in order to present a single image and foster unity. Secondly, the distance between the performers and the audience in the performance arena is suggestive to send signals of beckoning to lure the spectators into the realities of unity hidden in the spatial environment they danced.



Fig 1.4 Linking the odd and even cells at a general rehearsal

c. **Costume and Colour**: these elements are aesthetic qualities effectively engaged to drive home the thematic concerns of the dances. Costume on one hand served as a non-verbal instrument of communication using varieties and colour. In the illustration below, the dancers gave an historical account of the ancients ("Children of the rolling hills") by creating a retrospect of their pre-historical occupations with links to modern times. The dances displayed a unification of interests amongst the ancients despite their different occupations as well as gave recommendations to the disunited contemporary society by proposing what it should represent. The use of costume and colour placed an emphasis on the fact that unity is indispensable to societal development. Unity has been agreed to be the "sublime pedestal on which Nigeria can be super structured to enable it make constructive march to nationhood and take its respectful place in the country of Nations" (Vanguard). In the words of Dan Kpodoh these dances sermonize and recommend that "no matter what you do, we are still one and there is unity in our diversities" (7 Dec 2021. Interview with Dan Kpodoh).



Fig 1.5 Pictures of the traditional dance



Fig 1.6 Pictures of the contemporary (graduation) dance

Costume played a significant role in highlighting various occupations and dispositions of the ancients and provided recommendations to the contemporary society in form of what looks like a graduation dance which celebrates the society as one which is opened to amelioration.

d. **Music**: in this context, music was basically engaged as an accompaniment to the dances. However, the choreographers deliberately allowed a smooth blend of the contemporary and traditional instruments to provide melody and complement for the dances. Songs were scarcely used except in the case of the closing ceremony dances ("I sing for Naija") where quite a number of songs were used to preach the

same sermon of unity as a quintessential requirement for any progressive and changed society.

Conclusion

Dance communicates and makes its own meaning. It is a dynamic non-verbal mode of message-passing which centres on communicating by engaging the elements of movement, rhythm, and music to send signals. However, beyond body movements, thematic communication in dance is achieved via conscious attempts to embellish the dance movements with synchronized cues, number and aesthetic quality. These factors as identified in the occasion of the NAFEST dances understudy were capable of setting thematic undertones in motion. Kinaesthetics presents an advanced and deliberate form of body movements. With kinaesthetics, messages sink faster, as dancers communicate singular objectives via beautiful unified images. The NAFEST dances were beautiful in all, but centred on communicating the essence and need for unity.

Biography

Daniel KPODOH[1], is a Principal Officer at the Institute of Arts and Culture, University of PortHarcourt.

Olalekan F. OLATUNJI[2], is a Postgraduate student at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan.

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