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Review

Nigerian dances and cultural diplomacy

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Dances are generally taken as cultural material for entertainment with no other values. In this paper, the writers have carefully examined a number of other ways Nigerian dances have been employed in the contemporary times. The paper has argued that Nigerian dances can be used for much more than entertainment and concluded that already, Nigerian dances have been used successfully for cultural diplomacy in a number of nations and as such this should be upheld.

Keywords: Dance, culture, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

At the end of FESTAC 1977 when all the black people all over the world converged in Lagos Nigeria, they showcased their culture to the world, most especially in dances, these presentations were entertaining and very educative. The Nigerian government found this experience worthwhile and directed the creation of arts councils in each state of the federation and charged them with the responsibility of: promoting and preservation of culture of the various states. The councils started off on a good footing. In recent times, however, others have observed that some arts council have gone astray especially in the dances exhibited by them (Bony Unogwu, Interview, Oct. 2nd 2012). There has been a great departure from the original intent. Though culture is not static, this writer feels there has

been so much adulteration in the way Nigerian dances are packaged in recent times, yet this is outside the interest of this paper. To confirm the assertion that Nigerian dances could be used for cultural diplomacy, the writer intends to embark on a research looking at journals, past recordings of dance presentations during national festivals of arts and culture organised by the ministry responsible for culture through the national councils for arts and culture which is the coordinating body for all the state arts councils. According to Chief Femi Fani-Kayode, over the years, our cultures have been viewed largely by the international community as typifying only dance and entertainment. Some even see it as obscene displays that celebrate nudity and of no value to human and national development. It is against this background that NAFEST was conceived to serve as a veritable instrument for showcasing the best of our cultures: skills and prowess in various forms of the art, and espousing the values of same. It is expected that this focus will be captured in the various activities and

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Figure 1. Picture showing a cultural dance

performances during NAFEST by the 36 states of the Federation and the FCT. (15) NAFEST has been espousing the values of the various art forms of Nigeria within and outside the country since its inception. This paper intends to discuss these art forms especially dance and as it may affect our cultural diplomacy and proffer solutions that if adopted will help the abnormalities in the area. But to start with, let us briefly discuss the major concepts in this work: dance, culture, and diplomacy.

Dance

Dance, patterned and rhythmic bodily movements, usually performed to music serve as a form of communication or expression. Human beings express themselves naturally through movement. Dance is the transformation of ordinary functional and expressive movement into extraordinary movement for extraordinary purposes; even a common movement such as walking is performed in dance in a patterned way, perhaps in circles or to a special rhythm, and it occurs in a special context.

Dance may involve a fixed vocabulary of movements that have no meaning in themselves, as in much of ballet and European folk dance, or pantomime. Symbolic gestures may also be used in dance as in many Asian dance forms. Peoples of different cultures dance differently and for varying purposes; their varied forms of dance can reveal much about their way of life.

It is believed that when a child is born, the first day, as the child cries and moves his body when he breathes the fresh air on earth, he or she is doing movements that could be choreographed into dance movements by adults. With this movement a child does at birth in mind, we can define dance as an art of expressing ones inner feelings through movements.

Dance is therefore not just the expression of happiness but also an expression of sadness. As in the case of a new born, it is an expression of shock and anguish of displacement from a secured mother's womb into this wide world. We can therefore say that in Africa, dance is used to interpret the total way of life of an African, from birth, through life and unto death.

That is why we have dance movements for naming ceremonies, puberty dance, initiation into adulthood dance steps, social and occupational dances such as

hunters dance, fishermen dance, farmers dance, and war dances to mention but a few. We also have dances for marriage ceremonies and of course there are dances for burial ceremonies that mark the end of life.

This dance forms, from birth through initiation, social, occupation and unto death therefore form what we can call the dance circle of an African life.

Culture

Culture, in anthropology is the patterns of behavior and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share. Culture distinguishes one human group from others. It also distinguishes humans from other animals. A people's culture includes their beliefs, rules of behavior, language, rituals, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems.

Culture is the most important concept in anthropology (the study of all aspects of human life, past and present). Anthropologists commonly use the term *culture* to refer to a society or group in which many or all people live and think in the same ways. Likewise, any group of people who share a common culture—and in particular, common rules of behavior and a basic form of social organization—constitutes a society. Thus, the terms *culture* and *society* are somewhat interchangeable. However, while many animals live in societies, such as herds of elk or packs of wild dogs, only humans have culture. (Adefuye, www.nigeriavillagesquare.com).

Adefuye further asserts that, 'culture developed together with the evolution of the human species, *Homo sapiens*, and is closely related to human biology'. The ability of people to have culture comes in large part from their physical features: having big, complex brains; an upright posture; free hands that can grasp and manipulate small objects; and a vocal tract that can produce and articulate a wide range of sounds. These distinctively human physical features began to develop in African ancestors of humans more than four million years ago. The earliest physical evidence of culture is crude stone tools produced in East Africa over two million years ago (Alagoa, 96).

In other words, culture can be described as the total way of a people, within a given community. These ways include their manners and attitudes. Example, in Nigeria, a young lady who comes to greet an elder must genuflect otherwise it is considered bad manners. In like manner, a young boy must bow before elders when he greets. In Yoruba land, the requirement is that the younger person must completely prostrate.

Culture is influenced by change in the cause of human migration with time. This brings us to the fact that culture is not static; it moves with time and the ability of human beings to conquer their environment that shapes

their manners and attitudes. This is exemplified in language culture of the people. Language culture keeps developing and incorporating new terms that it acquires from larger-language groups. Example, English, Latin, Portuguese, French etc have come to a point of language fusion in so much so that it becomes almost impossible to speak any one of these languages, without delving into the others. In Africa, and indeed Nigeria, Hausa language is fast becoming a dominant language to the extent that Hausa words are found in quite a number of other Nigerian languages. For instance, the Tiv word for market was '*Ijough*' but now all Tiv people refer to market as '*Kasuwa*'.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy refers to practices and institutions by which nations conduct their relations with one another. Originally, the English term *diplomats* referred to the care and evaluation of official papers or archives, many of which were treaties. In the 18th century diplomatic documents increasingly meant those pertaining to international relations, and the term *diplomatic corps* was used to signify the body of ambassadors, envoys, and officials attached to foreign missions. In 1796 the British philosopher Edmund Burke castigated the French for their "double diplomacy" during the Napoleonic Wars; since then the term *diplomacy* has been associated with international politics and foreign policy.

Dance and the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST)

The history of the Festival actually started with the staging of the first Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos in 1970 as a cultural event designed to bring the then 12 states together, after the Civil war, in a celebrative mood with a view to assist in cementing relationships among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The maiden edition was so successful that the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon directed that it should be an annual event with the motive of using it as a unity forum.

OBJECTIVES

The National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) has over the years evolved as the creativity fair that unites the nation through the various manifestations of the rich and diverse cultures of Nigeria. Serving as a veritable index for cultural exchange and marketing. NAFEST continues to be a forum for talent exposition, indigenous skills display and harnessing for contemporary usage as

well as a beacon for tourism development in Nigeria.

The objectives of the Festival include creating:

- An avenue for talent hunt.
- An avenue to display creativity, exchange of ideas, skills and technique acquisition and development.
- An avenue for promoting our much cherished value of common understanding, peace, love and national unity.
- An avenue for celebrating the best of our collective heritage.

And since inception to date the National Festival of Arts and Culture has contributed in an unquantifiable measure in promoting peace and unity in Nigeria.

Participation: Participation is drawn from the 36 States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, (FCT), Relevant Non-Governmental Organizations, schools, institutions of higher learning as well as International Agencies. It is this large participation from all nooks and crannies of the country that makes the annual festival a truly national affair that fosters national unity, greater understanding and co-operation.

Hosting of NAFEST

Towards maintaining its main objectives of promoting national unity, the hosting right of NAFEST rotates round the States of the Federation, informed by the availability of facilities and the receptiveness of the Government and people of the State. We have of recent witnessed large contingents of artist(e)s and participants with almost all the States in attendance. Table 1 shows the year, venue and theme of NAFEST over the years. (Source: NAFEST 2006 Programme, (that did not hold (p.23).

It could be noticed that the first four editions of NAFEST were consciously or unconsciously devoted to dance and music as evidenced by the theme in Lagos 1970, Ibadan 1971, Kaduna 1972 and Kaduna/Lagos 1974. In 1988 when Lagos hosted NAFEST for the second time, the theme was still Dance. This shows that through NAFEST, Nigeria has duly prepared herself for using her dance heritage for national pursuits of unification, peace, and trade. It is with this background which had served the country as a rehearsal avenue that Nigeria has gone into diplomatic sphere with dance as cultural diplomacy.

Dance as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy

Apart from treaties and other political actions that constitute diplomacy, such as economic decisions and even military, another very potent diplomatic vehicle is cultural diplomacy (Olusanya 136). Professor Ade Adefuye defines cultural diplomacy as, 'a form of diplomacy that places emphasis on cultural

understanding as a basis for dialogue and trust'(http://nigeriavillagesquaer.com). According to Adefuye, today cultural diplomacy is practised alongside other generic forms.

The act of cultural diplomacy has grown to become a global industry with legal foundations and comprehensive set of conventions epitomized by Vienna Conventions on consular and diplomatic relations. Many governments enshrined the approach to cultural diplomacy within a foreign policy document and appoint a Foreign Minister to lead its implementation. Nigeria has a cultural policy. An important aspect of the Foreign Policy is operated within the framework of its strong cultural foundation. Cultural Diplomacy is seen as a soft power approach and has become increasingly recognised as a means of resolving conflicts, end wars, settle disputes, build sustainable relationships between countries, strengthen economic ties and respect for human rights. Nigerias preoccupation with Wes Africa's integration, African Unity, and strong links with Diaspora can be easily explained by the Nigerian concept of being our brother's keeper.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, in prescribing cultural diplomacy highlights the necessary ingredients that this diplomatic venture brings into diplomacy.

Recognition: First of all, it brings about recognition. Each party recognises the distinct cultural dynamics of the other. This recognition affords equal human rights on equal terms.

Understanding: The parties gain understanding of the traditions, history, language and general way of life that is pertinent to the engaging party. This does not necessarily mean that all aspects of foreign culture must be accepted. The concept here is merely to be understood.

Dialogue: Cultural diplomacy respects the traditional communication requirement of listeners vs. Speakers. This entails that while the other person is speaking; others should listen. In dance terms, this means while the other party is presenting her performance, the other party watches and thinks about the intricacies. After the presentations, dialogue is opened where comparisons and analysis are made. This brings out possible areas of cooperation between nations. Sometimes this dialogue is held with the aid of an interpreter. This logically leads to cultural exchanges.

Cultural Exchanges: This plays a critical role on the cultural diplomacy of a government. It seeks to develop cultural understanding between citizens of different countries. In the United States, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US department of State sponsors in whole or in part many exchange programs, such as the Fulbright Program and the International Visitor Leadership Program. Nigeria is already doing this but it is not yet formalised. For instance, when in the year 20..., the Benue State Council

Table 1. Themes of NAFEST over the years

YEAR	VENUE	THEME
1970	Lagos	Dance
1971	Ibadan	Dance
1972	Kaduna	Dance
1974	Kaduna/Lagos	Dance and Music
1982	Port-Harcourt	Visual Arts
1983	Maiduguri	Literary Arts
1988	Lagos	Dance
1989	Bauchi	Culture and National Economic Recovery
1990	Kaduna	Promotion of Crafts and National Culture Documentation.
1992	Abuja	Culture and Democracy
1994	Calabar	African Fashion and Textiles
1995	Abeokuta	The Art of Metal Technology in Nigeria
1996	Jos	Marketing Nigeria's Culture Through Crafts.
1997	Abuja	Culture and the Art of Communication
1999	Abuja	The Past in the Future: Culture and Development in the New Millennium
2002	Port-Harcourt	Celebrating the Culture of Peace and Dialogue
2003	Owerri	Nigeria, our People, our Art, our Heritage
2004	Kaduna	Using Culture to Build the Nation
2005	Abeokuta	Culture As A Tool For National Reforms
2006	Bayelsa	Culture, Job Creation and Youth Empowerment.

for Arts and Culture (BSCAC) toured Mexico, it resulted in Mexico sending an artist, a female choreographer, by name Mary Carmel to visit with and learn from BSCAC for a period of twelve months. Apart from learning from the arts council, working hand in hand, the the Director, BSCAC, in person of Richard Tsevende. On her part, she taught the group dances of the Chinese, Mexican, India, and Japanese. These steps, the group has kept in their repertoire and perform them up till today. Whenever there is a visitor to Benue State from the oriental countries, BSCSC trills them with their own steps to their surprise. It was during this visit that the Government of Benue and Mexico saw the need for the troupe to visit Mexico again. This second visit resulted into the two countries signing an agreement for the development of a wild part in Kyogen, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. After this, the troupe was again invited to Mexico for the third time to attend the Gwuanagwato International Festival, 2007.

This exchange was and is still mutually beneficial to both countries. It served as a catalyst for cooperation between individuals and organisations in Mexico and Nigeria that is still vibrant.

Through cultural exchanges such as dance, nations are brought to appreciate their differences and common interests. It is this importance of culture that has informed all diplomatic entities to incorporate cultural specialists on the list of their corps.

Cultural dance performances open up salient areas such as belief systems or world view which in turn explains why nationalities take certain decisions of which country to relate with and what relationship it should be and the extent of mutuality that the relationship should attract. It exposes countries to cultural aesthetics of one another which is generally brought about by mode of costuming and make up.

Cultural dance is a good diplomatic instrument. It speaks volumes during performances as it conveys the message through music, movements and the attendant gestures and facial expressions. Seeing the potentials and power of dance as a export product capable of cementing relationships with other countries, in an interaction with the NEXIN Bank chief executive, Mr. Robert Orya, a veteran or seasoned banker of repute, he opines that, cultural dance is an exportable commodity just like other solid products but the advantage of cultural export is that it intricately communicates with the importing community in unique cultural idioms that also entertains. The relaxed environment of the entertainment medium therefore becomes a good avenue for other decisions. He made reference to the likes of Michael Jackson who became a world figure through dance and music that is typically American. He became the most known individual in the whole world. With his music, he negotiated for peace between nations; he brought hope to war torn regions and hunger

Table 2. Diplomatic engagements of dances from the troupes' repertoire.

July 1980	Unima World Congress and Pupperty Festival in Washington USA
July 1980	Northern Nigeria Exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Stuttgart, West Germany
July 1981	Music Festival in Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom.
Aug. 1981	Indigenous People's Theatre Association Festival in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
1983	World Music Festival, London
1984	Kwagh-hir toured Britain, France and Italy at the instance of the Commonwealth Institute.
1985	Performed again in France at the invitation of the French Government. Kwagh-hir also came first at the Rogoda Festival, Moscow, Russia the same year.
July/Aug. 1992	Universal Exposition, Seville, Spain.
1997	OAU Plan African Music Festival, Congo Brazzaville
1997	3 rd Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST '97) in Ghana.
Aug. 1990	The Troupe performed in Libya on the invitation of that country.
2000	The Troupe also performed in Libya for the second time on the invitation of that country.
2001	Kwagh-hir performed in France at the instance of the French Government.
2006	India
2006	Venezuela 2006
2007	Canada, Quebec and Ottawa, Toronto, London and Niagra Falls
2008	Cuba – Invitation by Cuban Government
2008	Mexico – Invitation by Mexican Government
2008	South Korea – Invitation by Korean Government
2009	Canada – Invitation by Canadian Government
2009	Jerusalem – Invitation by the Israeli Government (August 20-28)
2010	Golf Tournament – Otukpo Golf and Country Club of Benue State Vs Achimota Golf Club of Ghana.
2010	France, Paris
2010	United States of America, Atlanta (August 2010)
2012	Malaysia, Kota-Kinabalu
2012	South Korea, Yeosu

stricken refugees.

Cases of dance in Nigerian diplomatic missions

Benue State, like any other state in the country has been actively involved in carrying out the mandate of cultural diplomacy as expected of all ministries of cultures in the country and their parastatals such as the arts councils. Here, we have tried to take a panoramic view of what the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture has been doing in this area since the eighties. From the year 1980 to 2010, the council has been engaged internationally for varying diplomatic reasons. Table 2 shows some of these diplomatic engagements of dances from the troupes' repertoire.

Selectively, we shall now briefly look at some of these engagements and their possible contributions as cultural diplomacy.

London, Commonwealth Institute, 1983.

This was organised by the Commonwealth Institute in

conjunction with the British Council and titled World Music Festival. It was a one-month long fiesta which was held within the premises of the Commonwealth Institute, London. Nigeria was one of the countries invited for the festival. The British had this idea of re-uniting their former colonies through this forum. Even though they could not accommodate all of their former colonies because of their large number. The objective of the festival was however to:

- Acquaint member states of the entertainment culture of each other.
- Entertain people within and around the London environs

This exercise provided a good market for the music industry world-wide. BSCAC was even test-recorded as a pre-requirement for the festival on compact disc by manufacturers of the compact disc system, which launched its presence soon after the festival. For this recording BSCAC was paid five thousand pounds.

Performances were scheduled in two major places: an indoor theatre and an open air arena. Every day, people converged at these two venues to watch performances from countries. Each session of the events, was chaired by a prominent citizen of Britain. Symposias were also

organised. The press was heavily present, representing the interest of their various organisations national interests. It is, as expected, that after this festival, some of the commonwealth states that participated, maintained their contacts and cultural collaboration in many ways. Like already stated, this is a clear avenue that binds the member nations together.

Spain, Seville 1992

This was a world trade mission, an exposition of trade potentialities of the different nations, despite their political leanings. Countries from the North, South, East and West were all represented. The economy was the main focus. The fair was meant to pave way for the economy of the state.

Nigeria took Benue State troupe to this event. For the BSCAC, it was quite an experience in that for the very first time, blacks from South Pacific, (Papua, New Guinea) were performing along side with the Benue troupe.

A close interaction with this blacks revealed that they were the last slaves that were on board to United States when the slave trade abolition was announced. The Slave Merchants had to find a nearby island to abandon them, thus they are a black nation in the middle of whites.

Cuba 2008

It was the Cuban government that invited the Benue State troupe to visit. This was the period when Fidel Castro handed over power to his brother when he was indisposed. The Benue contingent performed at the ancient city of Cuba along with local Cuban theatre troupes. All the places visited were pre-arranged by the Cuban authorities.

It was not very clear why the government had invited Nigeria, but one suspects there was a political undertone since all the venues were filled to capacity. The performances provided some kind of relaxation to the nation that was obviously tensed up, probably as a result of Fidel Castro's indisposition as was alleged.

Israel, Jerusalem 2009

This was a trip to celebrate Nigeria day in Israel. The invitation came from the Nigerian Embassy there.

Members of Nollywood were also invited. During the occasion, the Nollywood team talked about the Nigerian Film Industry while the Benue State Council talked about Benue people, their dances and movement. It is on record that the Benue State Swange dance, has being the first dance that brought out the Mayo of Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem to dance publicly, along with the troupe.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that use of dance in cultural diplomacy is a very potent tool in inter-national relations. In addition to that, dance disseminates correct political information about our country.

However, we also need to employ our dances to portray our way of life and our natural characteristics to others in such a manner as to overcome the banner of ignorance and prejudice that has hitherto prevented our country from being correctly perceived abroad. This is cultural diplomacy.

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