Wilberforce Island Review Volume 21, N0 1, March, 2023

The Choreographic Drift of Christopher Emmanuel's Contemporary Dance: An Interview

Rudolph **KANSESE**

Abstract

Nigerian dance, be it traditional or neo-traditional has always demonstrated concrete aspects of the Nigerian culture which make the average Nigerian man to identify with it. This clearly reveals that Nigerian dance is indigenous and communally owned by the Nigerian people. Surprisingly, the designation of the name 'Nigeria' does not always make the dance an indigenous or communal property of the Nigerian people. This is exactly the case of Nigerian contemporary dance as it is not entirely owned by the Nigerian people. Nigerian contemporary dance sharply breaks away from this obvious representation of culture and concentrates on individual dance philosophy, perception and bodily movement. Where traditional and neo-traditional dances are communal based dances, Nigerian contemporary dance is individualistic (unconventional, independent, free). The choreographer/performer is not constrained to express national culture literally but his personal culture which may be a combination of several influences to portray mostly non-literal and sometimes literal movements. Christopher Emmanuel, the founder and choreographer of the 'Alajota Dance Company' in this interview talks about several issues that are responsible for the institution of his brand of Nigerian contemporary dance. In spite of being influenced by several elements, in addition to exotic dance trends, foreign culture and technology, Christopher Emmanuel is always conscious of his Nigerian background, and this consciousness is always reflected in the dances choreographed. Nigerian dance has always been identified by outright demonstration of indigenous culture and values. This, however is not always the case, as a dance can still be described as Nigerian without being faithfully indigenous, but with the choreographer's philosophical dance drift, which may have conscious indigenous dance idioms.

Keywords: Choreographic drift, Contemporary dance, Nigerian culture, literal movement.

Introduction

Contemporary dance is difficult to define because of its unconventional characteristics which make it different from conventional dances. It is not like traditional, hip hop,

ballet or other dances that conform to accepted communal standards or principles. These conventional dances are rightly owned by the people or community from where the dances emanates. These people have rights over the dances by protecting them as communal properties. This is not the case with contemporary dance which, most of the time transcends the identity, culture and even dance concepts of the performer. Philippe Noisette, through Aranyani Bhargav reveals that contemporary dance does not have boundaries (par. 3), which means that there cannot be a broad-based definition for the dance. It does not have a particular expressive technique, but choreographers and dancers rather have the liberty of making use of different dance techniques or even dance styles such as modern, postmodern, hip-hop, jazz, classical and other dance genres and possible expressive modes. There is obviously no limit to what a particular choreographer can include in the composition of his/her dance.

According to the online version of the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus, the word contemporary is described by the following synonyms: present, current, existent, extant, instant, present-day, todayish up-to-date, abreast, au courant, down-to-date, red-hot, up, up-to-the-minute https://www.merriam-webstar.com/thesaurus. In Dictionary.com, Douglass Harper traced the word 'contemporary' to the 1630s, from Medieval Latin spelt *contemporarius,* to mean: *of time*. In Latin, *con-* means 'with,' while *temporarius* means 'of time.' It is from 1866 that contemporary began to be referred to as 'modern' or what Cambridge Dictionary describes as 'existing now.'

The term began to appear in the arts, especially in dance when certain dancers revolted against the tenets of classical ballet. Two of these artistes mentioned by Treva Bedinghaus are Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller (par. 5). After these artistes, we can mention the likes of Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham. Although, these artistes are generally regarded as modern dancers, they are however seen as trailblazers in the emergence of the contemporary dance genre; where the artistes make effort to free themselves from the rules of ballet in order to promote personal dance philosophies. Such is the case with Christopher Emmanuel who (like the mentioned above) made effort to break away from the stereotyped Nigerian dance form to a rather personalised style.

Emmanuel, who happens to be the major choreographer in the Alajota Dance Company, like other African contemporary choreographers hereby, promotes his own perception of contemporary dance in the interview below. The Nigerian born Christopher

Emmanuel was formerly called: Christopher Abdul Yisa Onibasa. His love for dance started as a very young boy under the inspiration of his mother, who was a dancer and his father who was a traditional drummer. Under the tutelage of his parents as well as Hubert Ogunde, Jimoh Aliyu, Doyin Adejobi, Wale Ogunyemi, MurainaOyelami, Gbenga Shonuga and Moses Adejumo Olaiya (as Baba Sala) he became well established in Nigerian traditional dances, especially the 'bata' dance. It was after he had immersed himself in different shades of Nigerian and African dances that he began to launch his notion of contemporary dance genre. This interview was conducted by the researcher.

The Interview Segment with Christopher Emmanuel

The intention of this interview is to appreciate the contemporary drift of a Nigerian contemporary dance artiste, Christopher Emmanuel, who has made it clear that his dance has a mixture of various aesthetics which can be indigenous and distant.

Interviewer: What is contemporary dance to you?

Christopher: Contemporary dance is a freer and more natural medium of dance expression. So regardless of age, stature, figure, once you are influenced by the modern technology, signs and so on which informs your medium of dance, you are a contemporary dancer. You have to withdraw prudently from the stereotyped idiom of the traditional dance, so as to forge a new form of dance. Even from the traditional idioms you can forge a creative style from there.

Interviewer: What kind of dance do you do?

Christopher: In my troupe, we do a wide range of repertoire.

Interviewer: Do you have a dance technique?

Christopher: Yes, it is called "eclectic idioms."

Interviewer: What do you mean by eclectic idioms?

Christopher: What I mean here is the amalgamation of various idioms of art in promotion of the terpsichorean art. You talk about dance, music, poetry, etc, all combined. This is what I call the poly-idioms in the art in terpsichorean fashion. I use this idea to create my own form of dance expression. I see dance as a combination of so many forms. If you observe the nexus of the dancer who happens to be the interpreter of

everyday happenings in the world, the nexus itself which is the body is a form of complicated network of different parts such as the head, the brain, the arms, the legs and other parts, they all make the body extremely complicated. The body, in the act of dance now attempts to interpret the day-to-day happenings in the world which are associated with so many forms such as the trees, water, air, sand. I try to create movements out of these forms or elements or to represent nature in movement. So, I study the way nature itself dances to create my contemporary dance. This I believe is the philosophy of dance. Our forefathers who created so many traditional dance idioms which we inherited actually observed nature via which they conceived and created their forms of dance in relation to their individual society, community, culture and tradition. The world today is a global village through the innovations of science and technology. We can still rely on the method our forefathers adopted to create dances which I am presently doing; that is by using natural phenomenon. Now, if I want to demonstrate an aeroplane in dance, how do I go about it? The first question is my perception of an aeroplane; you know, the size, the weight, how it takes off from the tarmac, the passengers and so on. How do I interpret everything about the aeroplane through dance on stage without using stage properties? The concentration is therefore on the body through the experience of nature. This is important to me. I appreciate things happening in the Western world and the entire universe at large. So many dance idioms can be created from different events which I use to execute my dance. These form part of my technique which I refer to as 'eclectic idioms'.

Interviewer: Your dance movements are often fast. How did you come about such speed?

Christopher: To answer your +question, we can reflect on my earlier explanation of nature. Now let's look at two terms; 'in vivo' and 'in vitro'. 'In vivo' means actions occurring within the body system while 'in vitro' are actions that occur outside the human body. In dance I try to relate what happens outside the body that is in my observation of the natural

phenomenon to what I can devise with my body. I try to imitate nature like the speed of the wind, the whirlwind, zephyr and lightning. I am influenced by the characteristics of these winds and lightening to execute my body movement. You know that actions of these winds are fast while others are slow, and then the fast action of lightening! I am influenced by nature for speed.

Interviewer: How do you begin a new creation?

Christopher: First you do what is called limber up, then meditate on what you intend to do, then you get inspiration from the muse of dance; that is Terpsichore. Then you think about the particular genre of what you want to achieve; absurd, abstract, impressionism, realism, naturalism, symbolism, existentialism and so on. Whichever is your genre, you work on it. You can find a style that goes with it, you can borrow from your traditional forms, you can imitate other movements or any idiomatical pattern or symmetrical pattern of what you want to achieve. You can create a new form of dance. You have to be a great philosopher to be a unique contemporary dancer.

Interviewer: What is the relevance of philosophy to your dance creation?

Christopher: Philosophy has to do with deep thinking, like when you meditate. This is integrated with the corporeal which is the body or what you call the motor sense. The combination of the two will give us psycho-motor. In contemporary, you cannot base performance on the physical aspect alone; to do this is like when you say 'all muscle but no brain'. You have to blend physical movement with the mind. You just don't fling your body about anyhow or fling your head anyhow or without a purpose. That was not how I was taught.

Interviewer: Do you always tell stories with your work?

Christopher: Of course. We are human beings, we are not sculptors, and we are not robots. We are living in a meaningful world, so I do tell stories. But in some cases, one can tell a meaningless story that is, if the work is based

on existentialism; which states that man as an artist is free to do whatever he wants to do in a creative form. So, if I want to do a work to ridicule the Government that has not provided the basic needs for the people but only meaningless promises, all I need to do is to create meaningless movement to ridicule them or do a satirical dance. Movements must however not always be meaningless otherwise such will be described as ataxia, which is the loss of full control of the body movement.

Interviewer: How do you compose your dance?

Christopher: I pray a lot; this is my major source of inspiration. God is the first dancer in heaven or earth. So, we are all imitating Him; God is the first dancer. He is the One that inspires me, sometimes in my dream, I receive lecture in my dream. Sometimes I reflect on realism; that is on societal happenings like political events, social economic issues – they all influence and inform me. Sometimes, I get informed by what is called auto-suggestion. This is when you do something without being aware of it. This is different from extemporisation or improvisation. Auto-suggestion occurs in the subconscious. I also create dance from the street. This is very important to me. To ignore the street is to be isolated, that you don't know what is going on in the street. I may have an idea about a dance and develop it by going to the street to learn more.

Interviewer: How do you come about the topic or theme to your dance, does it come from the dance or the dance comes from the theme?

Christopher: Sometimes it might be from the theme or its theme may come from the dancing.

Interviewer: **How long does it take?**

Christopher: It can take days or months. I am one choreographer that is insatiable with creativity. I put my work to hypothesis; that is subjecting it to argument before putting it on stage. So, I am not always in a hurry but take my time to prepare. I do stage rehearsals before going on stage to execute the dance.

Interviewer: What do you consider as more important: the story of the dance or just movement?

Christopher: If it is the movement of the dance then it is meaningless. I think it is the story.

Interviewer: Do you think your audience always understand your story?

Christopher: The language of dancing is ambiguous, it is complex. The complexity in dance makes it difficult for the public to comprehend especially when it involves a lot of abstract movements.

Interviewer: Is it possible to perform the same dance twice exactly in the same manner?

Christopher: Dance is a dynamic art. A dance cannot be performed exactly the same way in another day. A work is always subject to changes. We human beings are always changing via growth, attitude, emotion, all these affect the work. Even the weather changes, nature changes. All these will affect or inform the dancing.

Interviewer: Do you always understand your movement? Have you ever wondered about how a particular movement came about?

Christopher: It occurs sometimes, not frequently though, may be through auto-suggestion when an act takes place within you and controls you to do something which you yourself may not be aware of. It must have happened before you become aware of it. This takes you to the realm of sub-consciousness or unconsciousness. You know most of the time; we base our work on the consciousness, forgetting that we still have the realm of the subconscious or unconsciousness. So, when movement erupts from this realm it controls the dancer or choreographer.

Interviewer: How important is breath to your dance?

Christopher: Breath is important to every dancer. When a dancer inhales breath, it has to be in proportion to the movement he or she executes on stage. It is

not advisable to be breathing heavily when doing heavy movement. When you breathe in, you can store enough breath to execute movements. Breath, as a matter of fact is part of you as a dancer and the dance itself. The dancer himself is made up of the elements: water, air, sand, and fire. The air you take in through the nasal cavity to the lungs plays an important biological function to affect the dance that takes place inside before it comes outside for the audience to see. So without the air dance cannot take place. This is related to aerobics. There are times that you incorporate aerobic movements or aerobic idioms into your movement so as to recuperate on stage. The more you take in air the more you recover quickly. It adds to your energy.

Interviewer: Do you use improvisation to create?

Christopher: Yes. Improvisation gives room for corporeal extemporisation. I sometimes allow my dancers to move freely in order for them to express themselves in their own fashion. One can even get inspired by their movement.

Interviewer: Do you see yourself as an artist that is ever and always ready to perform not minding how short the time is for preparation?

Christopher: No, I don't work like that. I always rehearse before going for performance. I practice a lot. You know one has to practice to be perfect. I just have to rehearse. I don't believe so much in dance extemporisation. Such can be used during workshops or experimentation.

Interviewer: Do you always have meaningful movements?

Christopher: I will use my book 'Dancing Troubadour' to answer that question. I had to write Dancing Troubadour just as if developing movement with the pen. I am writing via the foot walk to create floor patterns. I write to show that when we are on stage we just don't throw our bodies around meaninglessly.

Interviewer: Do you depend on music to create dance?

Christopher: No! The music does not dictate to me. Dance is a separate entity on its own. Music too is a separate entity on its own, theatre is also an entity. We can integrate all of them but not one dictating to the other. Music does not inspire me. I don't work like that. But sometimes you may create mental images from the song you listen to; this does not take total control of you. Music only functions as accompaniment and stimulant. Even dance itself has its own sound; every movement is accompanied with sound. What is music? Music simply means a combination of sounds agreeable to the ear. So, if I can combine my movements neatly, the sounds that accompany those movements are combined neatly too. Which means those sounds will form what is called euphony. I often go to the studio to compose my music to complement my dance creation. The message of the dance is important and not the music, so it is not right to depend on music to interpret dance.

Interviewer: How do you create your music?

Christopher: It is not in the stereotyped fashion or fixed in the conventional form. I have different ways of creating music; sometimes I use the body beat, sometimes I create music simultaneously with the dance right there on stage, sometimes I use recorded music, but I prefer live music in my dance especially traditional music over Western music.

Interviewer: Do you use costume to interpret your dance?

Christopher: Contemporary is all about departing from the stereotyped idiom. Lacing your dance to the traditional costume means that one has not departed from the stereotyped idiom. This does not mean that costuming is not important. I see the costume I use as integral to my contemporary dance. It has its mode of expression and helps to pass the message in the dance. Costume must not be elegant so as to subdue or overwhelm the core motive of the interpretation which is the dancing. The dancing is the paramount interpretation. I do pay attention to costume but not too much of it, meaning that I don't exaggerate it or use flamboyant

costume. Sometimes it could be jean, open chest, wearing of shoes or bare feet, knickers, no makeup because the natural facial expression is there to do the makeup.

Interviewer: How do you design your light?

Christopher: I design most of the light. I always draft the technical data of my work. The significance of the light, the colour of the light, the focus, I can mix light in space; what you call aerodynamics, which is the blending of different colours of light to create harmony. Talking about colours, we have red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, with the black and white colours in the centre. You can mix the primary and the secondary to give you tertiary colours. Since I am philosophically inclined I often relate these colours to emotion and create intensity on stage. Sometimes I use clear or dark or grey and silhouette on stage – to create light effect. Sometimes I use gobo on stage. Gobo is a metal that is cut into different shapes; different forms. When light passes through them, they project different impressions of shapes on set. I usually harmonise the plotting of my light with music so that the audience can simultaneously feel the effect of the light and the music. In the absence of light and effect I can still do my dance.

Interviewer: Is emotion important to you?

Christopher: To me it is important, that is the part of the media by which the story is told. How do you make the audience to purge catharsis? The audience purge catharsis via the emotion based on ground scale tragedy or ground scale or hue of melancholy the dance expresses. So, dancing does not mean you should abandon all these aesthetics or qualities. The feelings have to be well expressed; the audience too must feel it and empathise with the dance. If the action takes place on stage the reaction takes place in the audience, which means you are communicating, that means you are not useless on stage.

Interviewer: I thank you immensely sir, for your time.

Emmanuel: Thank you too.

Summary and Conclusion

Contemporary dance to Christopher is a mismatch of various ideas which include dance, music, poetry, philosophy and the like. The conglomeration of these concepts is what informs his technique which he calls 'eclectic idioms.' He is of the view that dance should not be limited to dancing alone but should include as many concepts as possible as long as the main objective of the performance is adequately promoted. Western technological developments are also experienced.

The applications of these various ideas are coordinated by Christopher's experience and understanding of nature. The effect of nature on the body, to Christopher, is what centrally influences his dance creation. He compares his nature influence to the experience of the forefathers who he said were equally influenced by natural phenomena to institute traditional dances. So, whereas the forefathers were influenced by nature to compose traditional dances, he is also influenced by the same nature to create his own brand of contemporary dance which has a Nigerian identity; what I refer to as: Nigerian Contemporary Dance. Nigerian Contemporary Dance to me is a redefinition of Nigerian dance in the perception of the choreographer.

We are all aware of the impact of the contemporary world which we are all benefitting from. The advantages include technological development, advancement in Information Communication Technology (ICT), the globalisation of the world. The influx of foreign cultures has changed our view of life and how we carry on with our daily activities. This means that we are no longer homogeneous in our lifestyles as initially designed by tradition, but now heterogeneous due to the coming of external culture. People are influenced by the euphoria of this new culture to continue to exist without losing the Nigerian identity. It is in the same vein that Christopher is influenced by foreign technology and culture to express his Nigerian dance which to him must not be done devoid of meaning or direction, but must promote some kind of philosophy. The Nigerian Contemporary Chorographer like himself is therefore a philosopher who explores various elements such as nature, culture, sociology, religion, technology and other material and immaterial influences to communicate logically through the plasticity of the body.

Works Cited

Bhargav, Aranyani "What is contemporary dance?" *The Hindu*, 5 Sep. 2013 http://www.thehindu.com.

Bedinghaus, Treva. What is contemporary dance? *Thoughtco*, 16 Apr. 2018, http://www.thoughtco.com./arts-music-recreation-4132958.

"Cambridge Dictionary." *Contemporary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionar/english.

Harper, Douglass. "Contemporary." *Dictionary.com.*7 Nov. 2110http://dictinary.com.

"Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus." *Contemporary*. Merriam-Webster Incorporated, https://www.merriam-webstar.com/thesaurus

About the Contributors

Dr. Steve Ibuomo **LARRY** is an Associate Professor in the Department of History and Diplomacy, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State. Contacts- Phone: 08030745300, Email: stevelarry88@yahoo.com.

Dr. Samuel Jackson **UDO** is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State. His research area of interest includes Applied Music and Ethnomusicology. Contacts-Tel: 08035803931 Email: samuel.udo@uat.edu.ng, samueludo65.su@gmail.com.

Mishael C. **NWAIWU**, PhD is an African and African-American Literature scholar and researcher. He lectures at the Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Contacts- +2348038968407, Email drmishaelnwaiwu@gmail.com.

Dr. Nnanake **EKEKE** is a lecturer in the Department of Performing Arts at the Akwa Ibom State University. His area of research is Applied Theatre. Contacts- Phone: 07061515145 and 08023649685, Email: dorannanake@gmail.com.

Tuesday **EMMANUEL** JR., PhD is of the Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Otuoke. His area of research is on Gender and Development Studies. Contact- emmanueltuesdayjunior@gmail.com.

Steve James **ITSEWAH**, fta, PhD is a lecturer with the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State. Contact-08023522522, steve.itsewah@arts.fulafia.edu.ng.

Musiliat Ozavize **USMAN-UMAR**, is a lecturer with the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, with interest in Dramatic Theories and Criticism. Contacts-07039682028, ize4eva@gmail.com.

Esther **GBADEN**, PhD, is an Associate Professor and presently Head of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University of Lafia. She has over thirty (30) academic publications in recognized journals. Contacts- 08032069559, mrsestheragbaden@gmail.com.

Ezuwobomude Emmanuel **EWEKE**, PhD, is of the Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Otuoke. His research interests intersect around African History, Historiography, as well as Maritime and Environmental Studies. Contact: ewekeee@fuotuoke.edu.ng.

Dr. Justina Aniefiok **JAMES**, is an Associate Professor. She teaches in the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Contacts- Phone: 08028443835, 08104705089, Email: Justinajames@uniuyo.edu.ng.

Dr. Lucy Michael **ISEYEN** is a lecturer in the Department of Performing Arts at Akwa Ibom State University. She is currently the Head, Department of Performing Arts at Akwa Ibom State University. Contacts- Phone: 08021066914, Email: arch.luciano@yahoo.com.

Sunday Peter **UMANAH**, fta, is of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo. His areas of research interest include Space Management, Audience Engineering and Theatre Entrepreneurship. Contacts- Phone: 09060203562, 08027604979, Email: andikanumanah@gmail.com.

Kenneth Efakponana **ENI** is a Professor of Theatre Arts at the Niger Delta University. He is a theatre critic, a specialist in Theatre Technology, Director and Choreographer. Contacts- +2348035018396, enikenneth@gmail.com.

Ernest Jackson **WERIDONGHAN** teaches in the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University. His research interest is African Drama Aesthetics, Theatre Technology and Sociology of Drama. Contacts- +2348140062088, ernestw4all@gmail.com.

Augustine **ENENCHE** teaches in University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. He is currently a Doctorate (PhD) student in Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria. His specialty is Criminology and Security Studies. His area of interest is the Police, Illicit Market and Financial Crime. Contacts- (+234) 8036045982, enenchea@unijos.edu.ng.

Dr. Ben-Fred **OHIA** is a Senior Lecturer at the Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt. Contacts- Phone: +2347062947849, +2348135087207, +2349078892171, +2349127000450, Email: ben-fred.ohia@ust.edu.ng.

Ebifaghe Owei **FAWEI**, PhD is a Lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Her area of research interest is in Drama and Gender Studies. Contacts- ebifaghe.ogoh@uat.edu.ng, ebiwhite2come@gmail.com.

Sarkinnoma Yahaya **SABO**, PhD lectures in the Department of Sociology at the Nasarawa State University, Keffi. Contacts- (+234) 8036497276, Yahayanomas@nsuk.edu.ng.

Ojo Emmanuel **AROGBOKUN** is a lecturer in the Department of Economics at the Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State. Contacts- (+234) 8149503779, arogbokune@fceiwo.edu.ng.

Oluwatoyin **OLOKODANA-JAMES PhD** is a lecturer in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. Contacts- Tel: 08023427172, 08094314417, Email: olokodanajames@gmail.com/olokodanajames@yahoo.com.

Ebi **ITUBO** is a graduate student in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Niger Delta University.

Ogaga **OKUYADE** is a Professor. He teaches in the Department of English and Literary Studies at the Niger Delta University. Contacts: +2348035422428, evba25@gmail.com, gagokus@yahoo.com

Charles C. **FEGHABO, PhD** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Niger Delta University.

Rudolph **KANSESE**, **PhD** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University. He is a specialist in Dance, Choreography and Creative Dramatics and currently the Acting Head. Contacts- 07031281984, rkansese@yahoo.com.