Environmental Dimensions of Creativity in Kinetic and Costume Construct Of Nyok Dance Theatre of the Efik People

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Abstract

Some historical vestiges point to creativity as product of some supernatural muses. Researchers across different fields studied causes and effects of creativity and came up with findings which point to creativity as being inspired by factors and elements the creator comes in contact with. There has been a lacuna in the consideration of environmental dimensions of creativity in the aspects of costume and body movement in Nyok dance theatre of the Efik people of Nigeria. This becomes the thrust of this paper. Through content analysis, participant observation, interviews and available literature, this writer arrives at findings which reveal that creativity in the arts is generally inspired by what the creator experiences through his senses in relation to his environment. Constructive environments support development and analysis of creative ideas and encourage experimental methods. The riverine area of the Efik people, coupled with the mangrove rain forest promotes divergent and abstract thinking which spur up sudden insights. These manifest in the swaying movement of the dance to capture the sea waves, bulbous costume representing the river and head dresses representing the trees which in the course of performance are creatively manipulated to capture the reaction of the trees to the waves. Nyok performance metamorphoses from ancient to modern. This shows that creativity can be improved upon through training. Social and environmental circumstances become subtle cues in the environment which form significant inspiration for creative output. This study serves as a launch-pad for further researches to the benefit of dance scholars, students and other art functionaries.

Introduction

The word “environment” readily brings to mind a host of considerations like the surroundings, conditions or influences of a particular setting on the lives of the people living within it. Environment could also be broken down into major sub-sections like the historical environment which influences creativity by giving access to pre-existing ideas that can help inspire and /or guide one to new ideas. There is also an environmental awareness which allows one to understand ideas in the environment that could proffer solution to problems faced in the environment. This aspect is commonly referenced as ‘imagination’, where one’s understanding of ideas presented in his or her environment become a great influence on him or her, regarding what to believe as a possibility or impossibility. It is also necessary to note that an environment which influences creativity should also be one in which failure is acceptable. In a nutshell, environmental influences act on the development of cognitive functioning which greatly aids creativity.

On the backdrop of the above analogies, environmental dimensions, therefore, recapture the physical and external factors like air, water, plant, and atmosphere and so on, which affect a set of people at a given time. In a generic sense, the natural environment of the Efik people, in focus, regarding this study will be an account of all living and non-living things found in their society and how these, affect creativity in their Nyok dance theatre.

Creativity which brings about skillful discoveries can be expressed in varied ways and forms depending on the environment and the people involved. In a study such as this, it is worthy of note that aesthetic orientation is used as a means of measuring the creativity of an individual. According to Sternberg (1999:57), a meta-analysis by Gregory Feist shows that creative people tend to be "more open to new experiences, less conventional and less conscientious, more self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, dominant, hostile and impulsive". Every creative person must be open to the opportunities provided by his environment. He must have an active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, he must be attentive to inner feelings, must have a preference for variety and intellectual curiousity. People who are not so availed are considered to be closed to experience. They tend to be conventional and traditional in their outlook and behavior.

Creativity is heavily influenced by everything around man. The three elements which readily come to mind in the consideration of creativity point, first and foremost, to a problem which needs to be solved. This initially spurs creative thinking. The second one is the right environment which encourages the solution and thirdly, the willingness of an individual to explore. The environment has a great role to play in creativity. Most times, the positive effect of environmental information which leads to creativity is taken for granted as they may be acquired naturally and therefore, freely. This does not contest the fact that exposure to certain occurrences in the environment which produces the creative artist, provokes imaginative insights. Creativity, in this sense becomes a skillful introduction or production of a novel idea of great value. This idea may be intangible or physical, but must be useful. Whatever creative effort is introduced to human existence is aimed at solving known or perceived problems, filling up deficient areas of life and knowledge by providing missing elements and the formulation of theories which may become bases for further researches and discoveries.

Scholars across fields of study have considered manifestations of creativity and some of their findings point to the environment as key factor of motivation considering the creator's contact therein. Worthy of mention is the proposition of 'geneplore' as a model through which creativity takes place in two phases "a generative phase where the individual constructs mental representations called pre-inventive structures and an exploratory phase where those structures are used to come up with creative ideas' (Ward, 1995:157). Furthermore, some evidence shows that when people use their imagination as a result of environmental influences, for the development of new ideas, there will be found in these ideas heavy structures which are predictable considering the environmental properties

existent in categories and concepts. These basically define the experience of the Efik people in the creation and performance of their Nyok dance theatre.

In contrast, Weisberg has argued in his book *Creativity: Beyond the Myth of Genius*, that "creativity only involves ordinary cognitive processes yielding extraordinary results" (1993:58). This assertion could well fit into another mole which theorises the creative process as being an inspiration that results from the individual's contact with his environment and the willpower in him which produces extraordinary results. He does not have to be a genius and so not inspired by some unseen forces but works on what he sees and where his imagination leads. Whatever theory is proposed, one gets to find out that the environment is a great motivator in any creative process which may result in the creation of poems, music, craft, dance and so on.

According to Ufford-Azorbo et al, in reference to Reid, "Art brings to context intangibles like creativity, imagination, elegance, power, aesthetic harmony and so on. It thrives within and derives from life to recreate life" (2009:119). Dance is a creative art which utilizes the human body in rhythmic movement through a well-defined time and space for entertainment and communication of felt ideas. It is a "phenomenon which gives itself to a pre-reflexive consciousness" (Sheets 1978:36). Art transforms reality through imaginative power, creating its form through an illusion (Ufford-Azorbo, 2011:17). The environment plays a significant role in the identification of dance cultures of different peoples. Primus has this to say about African dance which is also the experience in the Efik society. To her, African dance forms are "exceedingly controlled, having the power to project the gentle wind or the raging storm" (1996:5). In addition, Green quotes Fodeba thus "… unlike other forms of dance, African dance is not detached from the lives of the people, but is a spontaneous emanation of the people" (1996:16). The views of dance anthropologists like Kaeppler 1991, Sklar 1991, Novack 1990 and Grau 1993 have adopted a cultural relativist position and stressed that the body in movement and dance is not natural, but rather is socially constructed in concept and practice. They have demonstrated that dance is both aesthetic and social (Thomas 1995;170 in Ufford-Azorbo, 2011:22). In corroboration with the above assertion, Hawkins (1988:3) avers that "through the body, man senses and perceives the tensions and rhythms of the universe around him and using the body as his instrument, he expresses his feeling response to the universe". To this, Willis (1996:146) adds that "…the attitude which produces the movement quality is an aspect of behavior and can be considered a product of learning, metabolism, perception of the environment…". According to Enekwe (1991:24) Berger believes that "every dance tradition is related to a particular environment and historical development of one ethnic group or the other".

These postulations from great minds support the thrust of this discourse as regards environmental dimensions of creativity.

The Efik People

The Efik people live in Cross River State of the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. Theirs is a littoral environment. Their language is also known as Efik which belongs to the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo group of languages. They are said to have migrated from Arochukwu through Uruan in Akwa Ibom State to settle in Calabar and Creek town. Some of them are found in Uruan and some parts of the Cameroun. The most significant thing about them is that they reside mostly in riverine areas wherever they are settled. The literal translation of 'Efik' is oppressors. They were so called by their Uruan hosts as they were seen to be aggressive and oppressive. Aye, (2000: v) present the Efik people as occupants of the basins of lower Cross River and down to the Bakassi Peninsula in Cameroun, the Calabar river and down its tributaries- the kwa river, Akayafe and Eniong creeks. These are all riverine environments. The basic occupations of the Efik people are fishing and trading. They came into early contact with the Europeans not later than the 18th Century and have been influenced by the western culture in religion, trade and education. The political head of the Efik people is the Obong of Calabar and their highest political institution is the Ekpe fraternity. The region is blessed with a rich and diverse mosaic of ecological types represented with five ecological zones namely the mangrove rain forest and coastal vegetation, fresh swamp forest, lowland rain forest, derived savannah and montane. The Efik people have seven clans linked together by the Ekpe fraternity. Ekpe is an Efik word for leopard and the leopard symbol was chosen as they believed it to be the king of the forest and so adopt it as their highest political society (Ufford-Azorbo 2011:84).

The Nyok Dance Theatre

The Efik people perform this dance in commemoration of major events in their culture like the crowning of a king, marriages and so on. The word 'Nyok' suggests a rotund object. The dance is celebrative in nature with its origin traced to the water goddess 'Ndem' which is the tutelary deity of the Efik people. The dance is done by both males and females emphasizing flexibility and grace.

The kinetic representation of the dance has a lot of experimentation in locomotive, aerial and staccato movement vocabularies. This is done in consonance with different directions and levels of movement execution. The locomotive movements take the dancers from one place to another similar to running and at some points, at a signal from the leader, they all fall backwards flat on the ground or floor depending on the stage of performance which may be a proscenium or arena. Aerial movements are represented through jumps and skips in the air and the beauty of this dance is that irrespective of the number of dancers, rendition is done in unison. The staccato and sometimes static movements have to do with vibrations of shoulder blades or trunk. It also registers shuffling movements on the spot with the stress area on the wriggling of the trunk of the dancers. All the movements capture the littoral environment from the waves of the sea, reaction of trees around the body of water, turbulence and bliss, sea creatures and through to the transportation like native boat, speed boat, canoe, paddling movements and so on.

When locomotive movements are slowed down with paddling simulations, they represent the local canoe or boat but at some points, paddles are discarded and movements become faster like the speed boat. With shuffling movements come the simulations of some points where the speed boat is static to remove dirts and other stuff from the engine for free movement. Other times, there are movements which show the occupational techniques of fishing. The movements are accompanied with songs and instrumentation with the song-text re-enacting the environment, praising the water goddess and general concerns of the Efik people. The total impression of the dance movement is emphasis on lightness and balance which is readily appreciated by the audience.

Oral interviews with Ekpenyong Okon, Idorenyin Gabriel, Mayen Ette who are dancers and group leaders in Ekemini Nyok dance troupe, Nkongo Efik dance group and Etebom Odiong group respectively, reveal that the Akasi (worn round the waist) serves as the river and its movement in reaction to the dancers' steps capture the waves of the sea. The troupes are all resident in Calabar and all members are Efik people. They, however, mentioned that in contemporary times, the dance has become mostly an entertainment piece which could be performed by any ethnic group sharing same environmental experiences as the Efik people.

The writer has also discovered that the Nyok dance forms part of the practical experiences of dance students in tertiary institutions through her participant observation as a dance teacher. Some performances of the Nyok dance are done even without any of the performers having an Efik origin. This is possible because, having been popularized by the Efik people, training and practice makes representations quite appealing.

Costume Construct of the Nyok Dance Theatre

Costume for Efik dances, like those of other parts of Africa, are of varied shapes and forms. They span from the most exotic and elaborate to the smooth bare body. Some costumes are built in such a way that the dancer's body is covered from head to toe. Even the eyes are hidden behind nets made of straw. There are hundreds of combinations of cloth, wool, raffia, wood, metal, claws, teeth, bone or fur. Beads made of gold, coral, ivory and silver are used to beautify the dancer. Smiles and other facial expressions add to the beauty of the performances.

Costume for the Nyok dance is locally prepared by the Efik people using wool, velvet material, beads, feathers, raffia and bells. Bright colours are used in the costume formation to emphasize the celebrative nature of the dance. This makes it very elaborate and attractive. The dancers' necks are adorned with elaborate and colourful beads called *nkwa esit itong*. Across their shoulders they have coral beads called *anana ubok nkwa*, they also have *ekara itong* beads which are placed on a flare cape, *mbid itong* worn round the neck to drop on the shoulders with golden coloured trimmings. They have a combination of woolen trimmings on velvet materials to cover their arms and wrists called *Ekpaku ubok* and bells tied on the ankles called *nyod ukot*. Round their waists are bulbous constructions made out of cane called *akasi*. This is fully covered to the ankle with a long piece of cloth made skirt-like, called *mkpin*. The dancer fits into the middle of this construction

as if in a body of water. This rotund construction creates a floating impression. They also wear short blouses to cover the upper parts of their bodies before the beads are placed on them.

The dancers wear head dresses called *ibuot mbre*, decorated with bright colours with iron and cane frames, foam and velvety materials. This is made to have a beautifully designed base with decorative clothing which sits on the dancers' heads and four stem-like constructions with woolen finishing represent trees around the body of water. These make a beautiful picture simulating the littoral environment of the Efik people. These costumes are functional as they increase the entertainment value of the dance through colour, fabric and accessories. At some points in the performance, all the dancers remove their head dresses technically. These could be dropped on their sides while other movements continue. Other times, the head dresses are removed and held in both hands as they whirl round in movement execution. Such times, it is not only human movement that is considered. The movement pattern of the costumes and accessories in reaction to the dancers' technique create another very beautiful picture in performance. Below are pictures of the costume pieces;



Ibuot Mbre (Head Dress)



Itong Ofong/Ufuk Eba (Blouse)



Mbid Itong (Flared Cape)



Ekara Itong (Round Neck)



Nkwa Esit Itong (Neck Bead)



Anana Ubok Ekpaku Nkwa (Armless Bead)



Ekpaku Ubok (Arm Wrap)



Akasi (The Cane Mole for the Bulbous Shape)



Mkpin (Covering Cloth for Akasi)



Nyod Ukod (Leg Bangles or Bells)



A Cross Section of Nyok Dancers

Pictures: Courtesy of Theresa Odey, 2015 Seminar Presentation in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo – Nigeria.

Beauty in African dance is "primarily in the rhythmic action". It also embraces all elements involved in the production of the dance. Some like the anklet-bangles, hand rattles act with and within the rhythmic structure of the performance to confirm and enhance its dominance, the composure of the dancers, smiles where necessary, body decoration and props contribute to the overall beauty of the performance each in its own way. For Enekwe (1991:28), beauty in Nigerian dance lies in the combination of "purposiveness and high aesthetic concern, its celebration and reflection of communal life...seeking to unite the dancer with the dance, its embodiment of collective beliefs …".

Conclusion

In the construction of movements and costume for Nyok dance, one realizes that the Efik people are very creative and in touch with their environment. They spontaneously imagine alternatives to reality by capturing their natural environment in movement and costume. According to Markman (2009:45), "…counterfactual thinking is viewed as an example of everyday creative processes". It has been proposed that the creation of counterfactual alternatives to reality depends on similar cognitive processes to rational thought (Byrne 2005;46).

The Efik society gains strength from its closeness to nature and constant contact with ancestors. This encourages creativity. Their art is a function of enforcing their sense of identity and acts as a bond of unity amongst the people. The Nyok dance is found to have value as entertainment with ideological significance of environment and is also instrumental in ritual context with an aesthetic overtone.

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