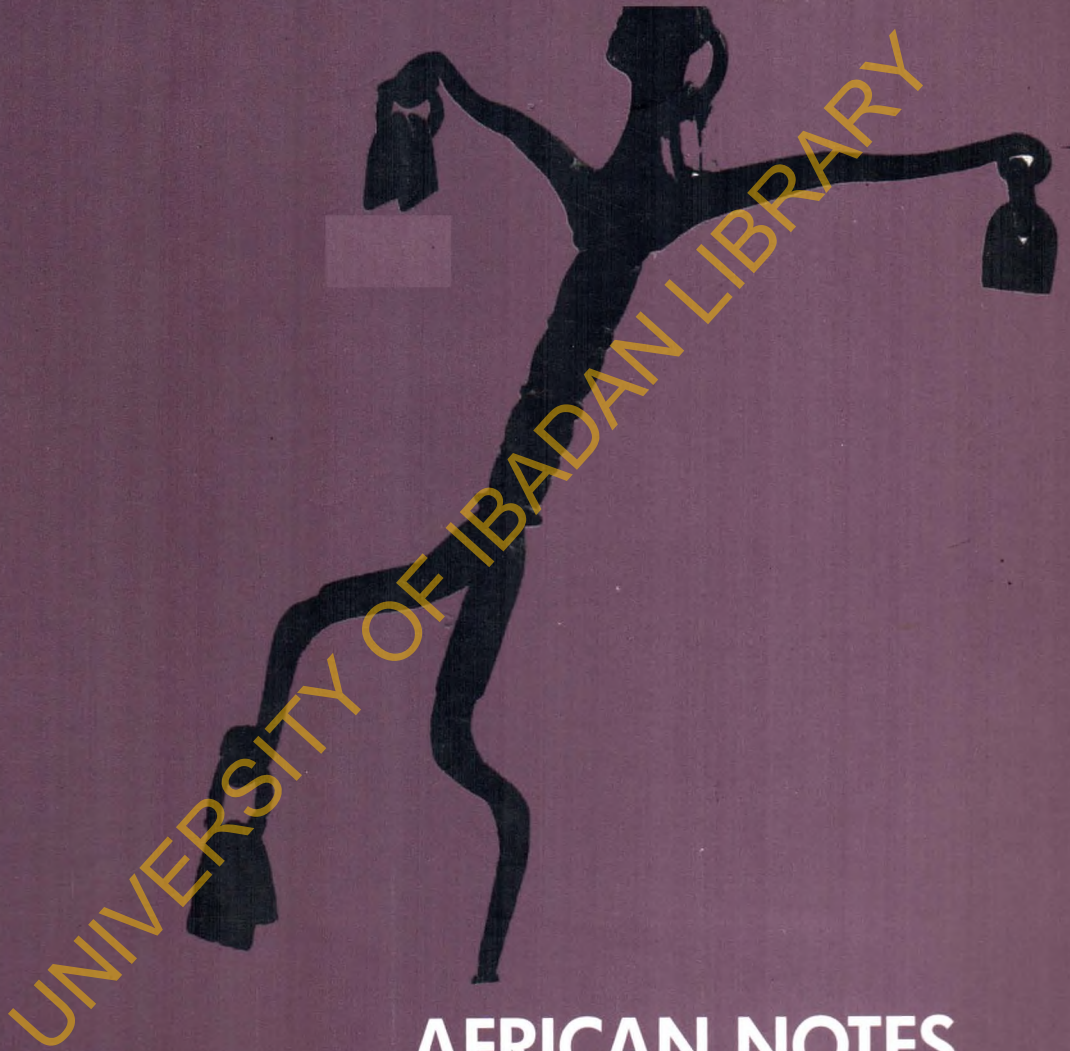


Volume 34, Nos.1&2, 2010

ISSN 0002-0087



AFRICAN NOTES

JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA

African Notes

JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

Vol. 34 nos. 1 & 2 2010

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African Notes is published annually in June (Rain Issue) and December (Harmattan Issue). Subscription rates: individuals — ₦1,000.00 a year; overseas — US\$25.00, £15.00 a year. These prices do not cover postage; an additional US\$8.00, £6.00 or ₦150.00 must be included, where necessary to cover second-class postage and handling.

All manuscripts should be submitted in CDs to the Editor, *African Notes*, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Manuscripts are to be typed double-spaced and proofread. All graphs, charts, maps, tables, illustrations drawings, etc. must be camera-

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Produced and printed by JOHN ARCHERS Publishers Limited,
GPO Box 339, Dugbe, Ibadan, Nigeria.

08034476916, 08058336156

Johnarchers@yahoo.co.uk
archers_books@hotmail.com

www.johnarchers.org.ng

Published October 2012

ISSN: 0002-0087

Editorial Comments

African Notes is still a unique forum for Africanist discourse and construct. The journal remains platform for expressing cultural ideas in intellectual context and it is still widespread all over the globe. It has ever been intellectual in scope and standard.

Nothing spectacular has changed in the house style of the journal. Even though there was a mix-up in the covers of about three past volumes, there has been a “welcome back” to the original conception of the cover with artistic representation of African symbolic artworks. This is notable in this current edition.

Logistics problems threatened regular and continuous “outing” and “outreach” of *African Notes* to our readers and subscribers alike. The Editorial Board wishes to impress on all that the problems have been solved and all the backlogs of *African Notes* are published with renewed vigour, vitality and heightened hope.

African Notes vol.35, nos 1 and 2, 2011 is already in press. The Editorial Board wishes to express gratitude to our readers and subscribers for their patience thus far. It is, indeed, a unique “welcome back”.

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Conceptualising African Dance Theatre in the Context of African Art and the Humanities

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Introduction and Definitions

Whilst it is true that drama reveals men in their various roles in society relative to one another, the dance indicates that:

- (1) In its more robust forms, it appears as a gregarious activity in group dances, or it advocates that ideal which goes beyond the elasticity of individual expression.
- (2) As a performative act, it relies on codes and concepts that are motorised in the joint consciousness of the performer and his metronomic promptings.
- (3) As an extra-verbal mode of expression, its scope exceeds normative ciphers of communication but lends itself to a more expansive articulation whereby the performer carries or leads an audience or participants along.

The group of non-western performances variously referred to as Ethnic dances (Murray,

1979); or Folk dances (Kurath, 1949); or Festivals (Cazeneuve, 1957; Bastide, 1958; Metraux, 1958; Malinowki, 1922; and Duvignaud, 1973) manifest both as elements of religion, ritual, sports or pastime. It is true that dance, or indeed performances of most kinds, create a borderline between art and religion but when taken as a vocation, the application of skill and customised innovation become an issue. This is because religious experience consists of both intuition and skill in various complementarities. Primitive or ancient communities have always adopted the dance as a structural anchor for liminal and ritual purposes. It is used to commemorate birth, circumcision, age-grade initiation, marriage, death, cultivation and harvest, chieftaincy rites, hunting, war, feasts, tidal and lunar movements, etc. (Murray, 1979; Sachs, 1937),

The advancement and epochs of civilisations have tended to strip the dance of its ritual purposes and showing greater proclivity, as a pastime,

towards entertainment, games and as an art often cultivated in choreographs. In this regard the collective signatures of nations and ethnic groups were lost and individuals began, like authors, to put their signatures on dance patterns and choreographic innovations. Thus emerged the idea of notations and personalised concepts. Beyond collective signatures, indigenous or stereotypical authenticity, in some cases, were lost and modern audiences began to savour new twists and ingenuous interpretation to what was originally localised patterns of expression. The development of theatre was similar. As the Dionysian festival aroused more interests, Thespis introduced a first actor. As it flourished even more Aeschylus and Sophocles introduced a second and third actor respectively. James Mooney observes about the ghost dance of American Indians both aspects of faith as well as that of historical awakening:

What tribe or nation has not had its golden age . . . when women were nymphs and dryads and men were gods and heroes? And when the race lies crushed beneath an alien yoke, how natural is the dream of a redeemer, an Arthur, who shall return from exile or awake from some long sleep to drive out the usurper and win back for his people what they have lost, The hope becomes a faith and the faith becomes the creed of priests and prophets, until the hero is a god and the dream a religion, looking to some great miracle of nature for its culmination and accomplishment. The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew Messiah, the Christian millennium, and the Hesunanim of the Indian Ghost dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope or longing common to all humanity [1965:1 as quoted in Royce, 1977:24]

It is clear in any festival that both the performer and the chorus or orchestra are mutually dependent. Many a time the performer goes through the experience with the audience and orchestra since he/she relies on communal

participation for approbation or disapproval. In fact, every performer acts with an audience in mind.

He thus interprets the drum rhythms and the mood of the audience as perfectly as he could. The musical prompting of a drummer or percussionist often helps in a maze of sub-conscious response to the polyrhythm of isolated body parts and the musical accompaniment. It is not uncommon that the performer wears rattles on the ankles or wrists to help co-ordinate the space-time-energy rhythm so that he/she can conserve energy over time. This is particularly significant in the older types of dance events, For instance, in the Gelede dance drama of the Yoruba, the dancer invokes his mentor with the measured stamping of the feet and voice modulation. Any uncoordinated movement or distraction may push the performer out of favour with his audience who rely on him for the invocation of the night as much as he relies on them for inspirational support.

In more modern renditions, dance is used as a method of inverse identity formation by parodying the identity of others. J.C. Mitchell (1956) in his famous study of Kalela dance of Zambia and Rhodesia reveals this tendency among nationalities whereby Kalela dancers praise their own Bisa tribe while satirising or lampooning other rival tribes such as the Ngonde, the Kasai, the Nsenga, the Cewa and the Ngoni in the same region. Terence Ranger, in his study of the *Beni Ngoma* or group dances in East Africa (1975) has also brought out the element of parody as a sub-identity and a counter-identity phenomenon. The point to stress here is that the dance and its context are mutually interactive in a way that is identity-specific. This reflects peculiar sociological phenomena in the growth patterns of society and the political configuration

and consciousness of its citizens. It is an avenue for the performance of citizenship. This not only subsists in the performance of personhood that instantiates notions of indigenous politicking, they include affirmations of cultural and representational practice, which reaffirms citizenship in the nomadic communities of urban areas. May Joseph puts her finger on the subject when she affirms that:

The focus here is on the expressive domains inhabited by citizens reinventing themselves according to prevalent notions of authentic citizenship, either popularly or officially defined, whether in the way one holds one's body, the music one consumes, or the kind of theater one produces (Joseph, 1999:4)

The final aspect is that as an extra-verbal mode of expression, the dance stretches the bounds of creativity in ways which words or writing cannot. It thus has a liberating effect on the psyche of its practitioners and its owners. For this reason, it is a proto-cultural, trans-cultural and a counter-cultural device in that what cannot be said can be danced and what cannot be ingested can be expressed in dance as a form of social behaviour.

Dance as a performative concept had always underlay the first fundamental response of faith and the hope of man's redemptive consciousness [Layiwola, 1996]. It is okay that Mooney has made a pan-cultural reference but I intend to narrow it down to our experience in West and East Africa. But before then, it is pertinent to adopt the affirmation, on the dance, of the Sufi mystic, Jalallu'ddin Rumi who, in the 13th century, wrote that 'whosoever knoweth the power of the dance, dwelleth in God'. This will seem to confer the powers of spectacle and creativity on the techniques of the dance. I shall, therefore, by way of a theoretical exposition on major patterns

in African dance studies attempt an analysis of spectacle and creativity in (i) Gelede and Obatala dance dramas of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and (ii) the dramaturgical experiment by the Tanzanian playwright Mukotani Ruyendo, in his play, *The Contest* [1977].

II. Theoretical Positions in African Dance Studies

A. Instances of Ritual Fusion or Condensation

(i) The famous Gelede dance drama of the Yoruba is well-known among communities in Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo. The major structure and plot of the dance drama follows the same general pattern in all of those communities. There is the Invocation, which is in two parts. First, the character *Tetede* sings and dances to prepare the ground for the arrival in the second scene of *Efe*, supposedly a larger, older mask always referred to as her 'husband'. In other words, the maskers are conceived as a *complementary* pair. *Tetede* dances and says prayers in the arena and the Gelede society joins in the dances to complement her efforts. She goes around to say prayers in the invocatory songs and the audience joins in the songs. The fact that the songs have been performed over generations establishes the tone and melody but the lyrics do change to reflect contemporary events and make up for topicality. This pattern ensures continuity since even the younger members learn the songs and the dance steps in the annual performances.

Sometimes, the society enacts Gelede for occasions that are considered important apart from the annual invocations. On each occasion the performance is always overnight and enacts the same structure or plot.

The second scene is the climax of the dance when Tetede and Efe, her 'husband' emerge into the arena. He hesitates for a while at the ritual archway, *Enu-ase* where he keeps his horsetail whisk constantly in motion and invokes blessings on the community. He also prays for the success of the overnight performance where wellbeing and happiness would be the lot of the performers and the community. Besides, he prays for the successful rendition of his own part. Without the proper invocation his dances may not be impressive. He may trip or fall or the performances may fall flat. If the dances do not succeed, ritual cleansing and spontaneous intuitive participation may not take place. Should any of these be the case, then catastrophe may befall the community. Hence, both the powers of good and evil are invoked and placated. One profoundly important fact here is that it affirms the collective citizenship and re-affirms the identity and integrity of group identity.

There is an added dimension in the Sâvé and Ketu versions whereby a young maiden clad in white might carry sacrificial elements on her head into the arena to placate the 'mothers' or witches. After a long session of invocation, the sacrifice is accepted as atonement and the maiden withdraws. Èfè is thus able to engage the arena in a prolonged, energetic dance punctuating his prayer session with the stamping of his feet and the rhythm of the *ikú* or rattles. Through this annual festival, men have danced to placate the 'mothers' of the community, not the 'fathers', since identity is surer through maternity of society from whom he seized power as a suzerain in the first place. By emphasising elements of gender balance, the rest of the Gelede cosmos, by sheer homeopathy, is deemed to have redeemed all acts of injustice among men and among gods. But the gender identity dialectic is still confused.

The notion of gender [im]balance in that metaphysical context unearths other paradigms of performance which underly concept formation in society. We may wish to ponder the extent to which such a ritual conceptualisation might purge evil or oppression in society by this empirical instance of gender empowerment. For instance, does Gelede conceptualisation (in the temporary instance of making men serve women), in symbolic *performance*, hope to bring about permanent restitution? If that is the case, will the concept of gender balance or womanism *per se* humanise the polity and modify our orientation for justice and equity in society? If the long-term goal of a ritual play is to substitute art for life or to impact on life through art, then we need to articulate a new methodology for its understanding. But the truth is that conceptually, the memory and conscience of the society is symbolised in an emergent transvestite dancer as the perfect fusion in male-female relations. Theoretically, therefore, equilibrium is temporarily restored in the psyche of the immediate community.

(ii) Another instance of ritual condensation and fusion is that exemplified in the Obatala festival dance in the traditional Yoruba town of Ede as narrated by Ulli Beier [1959: 13-14]. In the pantheon of Yoruba gods and godlings, Obatala is the creator of human forms; that placid, reverential agency of peace, preservation and wisdom. He creates the forms, which the Supreme Deity endows with the breath of life. Because the Supreme Deity is so holy as to be remote and abstract, Obatala is a distant reflection of Him. His devotees who are always clad in white are to symbolically emulate the purity and integrity of their divine mentor. In equal turn, the manifestation of the god is always

accompanied by an intense religious experience. The possession of an entranced devotee is the prelude to a ritual climax that reveals a calmness and placidity unparalleled in worship and in comportment. The god typifies all that is pure, plain and profound. His worshippers are expected to radiate that inner peace and a reinforced confidence that is ethereal, this being the ultimate goal of performance.

On the second day of the festival a sacred dance that dramatises the qualities of the god is enacted. It takes the form of a passion play wherein the suffering and the liberation of the god is demonstrated. There is no spoken dialogue. The entire action is sung and danced in less than ten minutes. The story is that of the clash between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The inner structure of the drama reveals that the personality of Obatala, the god of creation is ritually bifurcated, again, into two *complementary* halves; each half being a priest in his own right. The elder of the two is a priest known as Ajagemo who encapsulates the true personality of the god; the other, Olunwi, is his alter-ego, a ferocious 'junior'. These two complement aspects of the personality clash. Ajagemo, the elder, is taken prisoner. The king of the town intervenes on his behalf and pays a ransom. He is then, to the admiration of all, put on a horse and does a triumphal ride to the palace with all the townsfolk hailing him and appreciating his patience. The dance resolves the conflict whereby suffering and atonement is graphically demonstrated as the component of this god's as well as the elder's personality. As Beier puts it: "The ability to suffer and not retaliate is one of the virtues every Obatala worshipper must strive to possess". In a larger context the generation of conflict, climax and resolution is the basis of ritual as well as of

dramatic fusion. In each of the cited examples, the conflict emerges from the Manichean duplication of opposing forces, which are bound for an inexorable clash: the male and the female; husband wife; Ajagemo, the elder and Olunwi, the implacable junior. But the point of it all is the mythopoetic resolution, which reconciles two distinct contrarities.

B. An Instance of Ritual Disjunction

(iii) The dance or festival is here reduced to a ritual play whereby there is an open reversion to a polarised contest on the arena of public opinion. Issues are problematised and premised as artistic reflections. They are, therefore, played out and resolved by following an artistic *deja vu* or revelation. In other words objectivity is adopted and all resolutions are 'tested' as it is to allow for a natural, logical realisation of potentials in ideational space. At the end of the performance, the performers and participant-audience are split down the middle. The 'mutual' resolution on the basis of adopted opinions keeps the battle line, which bars each side from one another's space. Each member of the audience and the performers, both priest and communicant is forced to make a decision.

The Tanzanian playwright Mukotani Ruyendo has made a classic dance drama out of such a political event: the decision of a post-colonial or liberal community to be either capitalist and neo-colonial or communalist and welfarist. The nomenclatures here are approximations from the context of the play. Ruyendo draws upon the epic-heroic form of a diverse but related culture-cluster — the Bahima, Banyankole, Bakiga and Banyarwanda of western Uganda, the Bahaya of northwestern Tanzania. Rwanda and Burundi.

The play, appropriately titled *The Contest* (1977), draws on the folk traditions of those ancient communities to bring out the magical and the intensely rhythmic qualities of traditional theatre. The author believes that modern theatre is emptied of its vitality and vigour and that re-investing it with the poetic theatrical form of heroic recitation is desirable. This form is particularly popular with feats of adventure in war, cattle-raiding and hunting. The playwright imaginatively modifies this with the adaptation of the traditional chorus, which modulates and judges the tempo of action. The chorus also acts as the sacred wisdom and conscience of the community, which acts as the final arbiter over what is right or wrong.

In order to emphasise the conflict, there are only two heroes, named 1 and 2 and they both dance and do poetry recitation in alternate turns vying for the attention of a symbolic bride, Maendeleo, who is the index of value. Along with the chorus of participants, she shows admiration or disdain depending on the values a dancing suitor propagates in performance. The musicians, ululators and the audience jointly represent the conscience of the community. They thus become final arbiters when the choice of a winning hero is concluded at the end of the drama.

Each of the heroes adopts an ethnic or heroic group or postulation. This he expounds and defends against his/her rival. The concept of total theatre is unmistakable as each performer arraigns the music, dance, acting, mime, costume and decor to his/her advantage and the ethnic or ideological group he represents. In the end Maendeleo and the spectators make a choice with the drummer as a decisive *agent provocateur* along the channels of choice.

Even though the drama proclaims a winner, the society re-absorbs the loser in a 'great feast'

to which all participants; communicants and officiants alike are drawn. This point is most aptly summed up by the assertions of Claude Levi-Strauss in his analysis of the game and ritual and his mirror-image discussion of the congruence of the analytical and the dialectical. But an enunciation of this is better done in the third section of this paper where methodology is discussed.

Most indigenous performances of Africa, plain and simplistic as they often appear, tend to invoke ritual metaphor as one of their integral components. This might have been an attempt for art to constantly act as collective memory, as history and as culture repertory. These, hitherto, have been societies without the art of writing. Therefore, systems of metonymic and metaphoric codifications are always comprehensive and complex. Dance events often act as mnemonics and social conscience so that we 'do not forget', as it were, or that we are not overtaken by social amnesia. Each dance performance tells its own story. For instance, the ritualised dance at Ede described by Ulli Beier in 1959 takes only a few minutes, but its import subsumes centuries of experience. This is because the annual enactment commemorates the conflict at the founding of the town. There is always an archetypal clash between original settlers or autochthons and migrant settlers. More often, aborigines tend to lose out to second level settlers who might be invading with superior technology and weaponry. And when they disinherit aborigines, they lord it over the dispossessed with less than human sensitivity. Somehow, the maturity and priestly calm of the true owners of the land ultimately gets the better of the invader, even if only symbolically. Each dance event is thus a historical repertoire. It is no doubt a major reason that African dances do not lend themselves to easy,

linear notation methods so popular in the West. The search for a method of documentation must continue apace.

From the above, it follows the logic that the visual content of African performance events extends beyond the third dimension of space and matter. Nketia refers to this aspect of dancing as 'polyrhythmic' (1975) whilst Robert Farris Thompson. (1979) refers to the same phenomenon as 'multimetric' or dancing in multimeter. This infers, as I indicated above, that linear forms of notation as in Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh are not sufficiently representative for performances steeped in myth, ritual and collective history. Aesthetic concerns with linear, geometric forms often lead Ballet dancers to seek contention and primary reconciliation with the laws of gravity whilst creating the impression of extra-ordinary lightness (Murray, 1979: 48). But African dance steps depend on rhythmic patterns and puts premium on weight transfer and counterbalancing. Much like Indian dances, therefore, skills consist in extra-ordinary manipulation of definite muscles of the physiognomy, shoulder blades, the solar plexus, the torso and the tarsal and meta-tarsal. In Indian *Kathakali*, it is even carried further in isolating muscles of the eyes, neck and knuckles for definitive manipulation. There are symbolic notations and archetypal connotations for *Kathakali* as well. It thus means that the bulk of what is called ethnic dancing have a scheme of logic beyond their 3-dimensional representations.

III Methodology

The context of the discussion in this paper meant that apart from dramatic theories discernible from the circumstances of each performance or production, relevant anthropological and structuralist theories are

adopted after scholars like Tambiah (1979), Mitchell (1956); Royce (1980); Duvignaud (1973); Murray (1979); and practitioners like Tierou (1989) and Ajayi (1998).

There is a sense in which the structure of societies or nationalities replicates themselves in symbolic expression whilst expressions, fears and affectations of the individual represent themselves as intuition and skills. But there may be an intersection of the two where group dances depend on individualist professions as opposed to group identification. Group performances, excel in ideological pursuits whilst individualist professions manifest as skills. Performance analysis must, therefore, derive their structure from the totality of the purpose of the art as well as the role of the player in the particular craft.

Mitchell has shown in his documentation of *Kalela* that both the yearning of the group in furtherance of what may be joking inter-relationships between culture clusters and the skill of the individual coalesce in what has become a recognisable art form. This, as Jean Duvignaud affirms, is the capacity of groups or persons to create life out of sheer spectacle in their social or economic frameworks. They produce a theatre where their aesthetic experience satisfies the yearning for living beings to project their credibility and their expectancy in the forms they enact. Duvignaud observes that:

We do have to institute comparisons between various forms of spectacle, ranging from ancient dance contests and games played in traditional societies to the literary theatre and the football matches and sporting functions of today, which make their appeal to the same drives [Duvignaud, 1991].

Our logical derivative from here is that we are always confronted with two polarised kinds of spaces. The first is the myth created from a

dramatic show whilst the other is the reality over which that myth is built. One is a mirror image of the other. In other words, the one cannot exist without the other. But on a closer look we can do a more complex breakdown in which the two worlds produce the purification of desire, which we get from the aesthetic recreation of reality. Whether it is in the form of religion or in the form of sports, it problematises existence, relieves tensions and puts a more expansive, salutary effect on life. The result, though polarised, as we said earlier is the same with both the officiant or actor/dancers or the communicant/spectators.

The ability to create an aesthetic field temporarily foists a way of life, a world, on its creator. This product detaches man from the real world helping him to live above the trivia and drudgery of the factory or the minefields of Rhodesia, Zambia or South Africa. If we critically look at the *Beni* dances of Central and East Africa; the *Kalela* of Southern Africa (Mitchell, 1956) and, indeed, the competitive dance performances of West Africa, even the mere etymology of the word performance is reminiscent of the word 'play' or game. We may thus be led into the sociological fact that both the ritual play or drama and the game have very similar origins. Therefore, it may not be out of place to do an expression of both in the context of all we have discussed above. One scholar who had demonstrated a profound understanding of this phenomenon in both its history and sociological ramifications is the French structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss. Both drama and the game have their theoretical as well as their practical planes.

All games are made up of two or more parties and assume a set of simple or complex rules by which the games are played and victory or loss identified and proclaimed. Ritual or performance

is also 'played' out almost as a game but as a favoured, predictable instance of a game along certain lines and governed by rules and ethics. But unlike the game, there is a guaranteed outcome. In other words, it results into a certain kind of equilibrium between the two sides. Usually at the end, it conjoins opponents rather than pitching them as rivals. Mukotani Rugyendo's play, which is cited above, is thus an instance of a game transposed into ritual. This is because even though the Mungwes lose out to the Nkozis in the contest for the hand of the prized queen Maendeleo, they are encouraged to unite and bury their differences at the end of the game. The drummer, the uniting force proclaims:

We thank the Mungwes for having sent a contestant for our beautiful girl. And we now ask the son of the Mungwes to come like a man and shake the hand of the triumphant son of the Nkozi (p. 58).

Thereafter, a subtler musical instrument, the flute, plays the tune for the commencement of the great feast of unification.

It is clear, as Levi-Strauss [1960: 30, 32] affirms that in the end, games would appear to have a disjunctive effect because they end in the establishment of a difference between individual or group players who both came to the field of play on equal terms. They now become winners or losers. And to win a game is analogous to 'killing' an opponent, as Godini Darah testifies that among the Urhobos of Nigeria, a performer rivals an opponent to a fall [Darah, 1981]. Ritual conjoins in that it brings communion to erstwhile warring or opposing groups, who, in spite of all contingencies of value, are encouraged to see each other as children of the same source or origin. Both on the theoretical and practical levels, group performances have always added ideological punches to performances whilst cognitive and

effective skills constitute areas of individual application to performances.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this paper is to advocate a concept of analysis and notation, which takes into consideration ritual, religious and athletic issues which go beyond the third and fourth dimensions of space and matter. It is only in this regard that a holistic experience can be derived from African performance systems or repertory. One bold innovative but seminal experimentation that is being critically considered is that of the Ivorian dance teacher and analyst Alphonse Tierou in a book he calls *The Eternal Law of African Dance* (Harwood, 1992). What is not clear in his conceptualisation is whether his sculptural emphasis is on postural identifications as a means to an end or whether this is an end in itself. An added level of conceptualisation will be required to transcend his models from modules and symbolisms in the *Ouelou* language to more pan-African references based on extensive research. This paper recommends that identifiable postures should seek to be means to understanding sacred, metaphoric ends, which revalidates the structure of societies engendering or re-inventing particular performances.

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