

## DANCE AS AN EXPRESSION OF A GHANAIAAN IDENTITY

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**ABSTRACT:** Dance is an important aspect of the everyday life of the Ghanaian. Dance is used by Ghanaians in many occasions right from birth to death. The Ghanaian dances in both happy and sad moment. In giving the Ghanaian an identity through dance, Ghanaians dance to local music and foreign music as well by making traditional moves. Some of the traditional dances in Ghana include Kpanlogo, Adowa, Borborbo, Kete, Agbadza and many others. This article is written based on desk information from libraries, published and a number of published articles and participant observations. With dance as a Ghanaian identity, most local dancers in Ghana usually dance with indigenous costumes including traditional wears such as Kente, smock and locally manufactured beads. Ghanaian dancers also usually dance to Ghanaian music played with local instruments such as Dondo, Atumpan, Gong-gong, Fontomfrom, Castanet and many others. More especially Ghanaian dancers who represent the country in international competitions usually use costumes which are made from the colours of the Ghanaian national flag.

**Keywords;** Adowa, borborbo, dance, Ghanaian, identity, Kete, Kpanlogo.

### I. Introduction

Ethnographers, sociologists, historians and archaeologist have not provided any evidence of a society or a tribe that was and is immune to dance. This shows that right from the beginning of the history of men, dance is an important and integral part of their lives. There are a lot of quotation by dance experts such as Mawere Opoku and others who have expressed how dance is an important activity in the life of the African and in this regard the Ghanaian. According to Mawere Opoku, life with its rhythms and cycles is dance, and dance is life" (Opoku, 1964; p 51). Hanna (2005) also continues to point out the significance of dance in the biological and evolutionary development of the human species.

### II. Methodology of the research

This research work was carried with qualitative methods comprising desk review. In the desk review, information from libraries, journals, articles and both published and unpublished theses were also resorted to. Participant observation was also used during performances by the Ghana Dance Ensemble and other Ghanaian ethnic groups to see how they portray, espoused and project the Ghanaian lifestyle and culture as part of their performances.

### III. Dance as an expression of a Ghanaian identity

Dance is an important aspect of the life of the Ghanaian right from birth to death. Dance has been given many definitions depending on whoever is coming forth with this definition. Radcliff Brown a renowned anthropologist defines music as a cultural practice and as a social ritual (Radcliffe-Brown 1994), whereby dance is seen as a means of aesthetic pleasure and a means for establishing ties and specific structure in the community. In the same way dance has been defined as a medium to express and manifest emotions through corporal movements since ancient times. In the ordinary day use and in common terms, I will also define dance as a steadily corporal bodily movement made through the expression of emotions in response to a rhythm been played.

The cultural set up of Ghanaians and for the purpose of this discussion Ghana is enmeshed and embedded with the artistic expression of dance in our cultural activities marked during festive occasions and occasions of ritual performances. The Ghanaian uses dance in so many ways depicting moments of sorrow as well as moments of happiness with different tempos as well as rhythms. A Ghanaian in expressing his/her

identity through dance may dance by communicating the purpose of the dance and the occasion of dance with mimes, movements and gestures. These gestures may make sense and meanings to those who are conversant and understand such gestures as a means of communication hence depicting the Ghanaian identity of being proverbial with words, sign, mimes and gesture. The dance movements of Ghanaians as an identity may differ from royalty, nobility and ordinary subjects or the common man.

Within Ghana, the art of dancing has provided boundary lines amongst the people of Ghana hence each ethnic group has its own form of dance and unique dancing skills to befit every occasion. For instance Adowa is common amongst the Akans, Kpatsa amongst the Adangbes, Agbadza amongst the Ewe, Kpanlogo amongst the Ga and many others.

All these forms of dance found amongst the various ethnic formations of Ghana are different from each other and also have their accompanying songs during the performance of these dances. The mode of dancing amongst the various ethnic groups in Ghana is a complete identity in them and for the composition of these ethnic groups. For instance, the Akans make use of their feet, hands, gestures and mimes in their dance whereas the Ewes also make good use of their upper body when dancing.

In this same vein, a gesture from an Akan dance may mean something different from an Adangbe dancer. With dance as a Ghanaian identity, most Ghanaian dancers along ethnic lines uses ethnic costumes such as Kente amongst the Akans and Batakari (smock) amongst the Mole-Dagbanis. Ghanaian dance performance which is traditional dance are always and usually performed by the use of traditional instruments such as Dondo, maracas, fontomfrom, castanet, Atumpan, Asafotwene, sticks and other drums made of materials such as wood, hides, skins, metals, bamboo and many other materials.

Per Radcliff (1994) definition of primitive dance, Ghana dancers also uses their art as an identity by expressing some of their oral tradition, histories and culture through the processes of their movements, gesture and mimes. Sometimes Ghanaian traditional dancers, uses the corporal bodily movements to express the occupation of their people, past events, sexuality, gender roles, values of their society and many others. These expressions may differ from one Ghanaian society or ethnic group to another.

Dance is an important and intrinsic Ghanaian identity making the Ghanaian dancer to display the philosophical and artistic nature of the Ghanaian as a unique identity at home and abroad. Traditional dance of the various ethnic groups in Ghana are always performed along traditional songs which also provide the indigenous Ghanaian with a unique identity. For instance, Adowa is performed with Akan songs whereas Kpanlogo is also performed with Ga song etcetera.

Dance as an artistic and philosophical tool at the disposal of the Ghanaian also distinguishes the Ghanaian from another African and the entire global citizenry. This distinction is through the boundary lines drawn and established by Ghanaian dances for centuries. These boundary lines are both symbolic and actual which can be subsumed into metaphysical boundaries. According to Bordieu (1998), boundaries are specific social spaces for people who possess certain identities in question. Depending on this explanation from Bordieu, the boundary lines created by Ghanaian dances as unique identities are through the gestures, movements, jumping and responses of the dance to music etcetera.

With dance as identity to the Ghanaian, dancers from Ghana in every competition may display a local move in the form of Adowa, Kete, Kpanlogo, Agbadza etcetera and display a costume traditionally made which is usually in Kente or smock. Local instruments may accompany such a Ghanaian dance depicting and giving a different identity from the other African or any non-African dance.

In distinguishing and giving a unique identity to the Ghanaian through dance, some Ghanaians also dance with mask. This is also done as a means of hiding the face of such individual from the public or from shyness. The participatory nature of Ghanaian dance also gives unique identity to the Ghanaian on how communalistic traditional Ghanaian societies are.

The creation of the Ghana Dance Ensemble in the 1960s was also a giant move by Ghana's first post colonial head of state to promote the Ghanaian identity through arts and culture. The Ghana Dance Ensemble in creating the Ghanaian identity through culture trained Ghanaian dancers in major Ghanaian dances as a means of consolidating the identity of various ethnic groups in Ghana. Members of the Ensemble also participate in many programs both home and abroad to showcase and outdoor the Ghanaian identity through dance. Within the membership of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the composition is made up of many Ghanaian ethnic group members but in the same way they can all perform the various dances of the different ethnic groups collectively. The purposes of making these different ethnic groups to work together in the arts and culture which the Ghana Dance Ensemble is part was the purpose of creating the post independence Ghanaian identity.

Dance as an expression of a Ghanaian identity is strongly and profusely manifested in the Apostolic, Pentecostal and Charismatic sect of the Christian religion in both Ghanaians at home and in the diaspora not forgetting the traditional religion adherents in Ghana. Dance to the Ghanaian is an aspect of the formative stage hence is profusely manifested in all occasions especially during religious and traditional rituals as well as festive occasions. Charismatic churches in Ghana with purely Ghanaian founders make use of dance is most of their

church auditorium which also demonstrate the relevance of dance in the life of a Ghanaian and for that matter as an important aspect of the Ghanaian identity.

The political campaigns of Ghanaian political parties as a major strategy cannot be smooth without dance, dances such as azonto and kangaroo have marked contentious election such as the 2008 elections (Ayetey, 2016). In his article entitled jumping like kangaroo, Ayetey demonstrated how dance has marked all political dispensations after colonialism starting right from post independence Ghana.

Political parties right from Ghana's first republic has made use of music artistes whose activities in the campaign trail stimulate and entice people into dancing. For instance, the 2008 election was carried out with electoral campaigns amidst music and dance. Artistes showing their dancing prowess in electioneering campaigns serve as sight attractions which help politicians to garner and canvass political votes for their political parties.

#### **The nature of Ghanaian dance depicting the true identity of the Ghanaian**

Ghanaian dances usually are full of gestures, signs and mimes. These acts depict the through Ghanaian dances which give unique identity to the Ghanaian. Traditional dances in Ghana in giving identity to the Ghanaian mostly require full energy. For instance, traditional Ghanaian dances such as Kpanlogo, Borborbor, Agbadza, Kpatsa and others require the dancer to display high level of energy with good facial expression.

Dance being an identity of the Ghanaian is witnessed right from beginning of the life of a Ghanaian till death. Once a Ghanaian child is born, the mother play music for such a child to sleep and in response to such music from the mother the child also makes movements in response which is a dance. At the naming ceremony of children in the traditional set up, elders of the family will dance to thank God almighty, the gods and the ancestors. In instances where such naming ceremonies are not done in the traditional set up but rather at church family members and friends will also dance.

Puberty celebrations and rituals are also important stages in the life of the Ghanaian where he or she display dance as identity. During puberty celebrations especially amongst girls such as Dipo, Bragro, Otofo and others, the celebrants were expected to dance to usher in their new life stage and development of adulthood.

In death, the Ghanaian also dances as in contemporary times most funerals especially amongst the Akans are graced with Kete and Adowa performances. Other ethnic groups in Ghana also display their traditional dance during funerals as a means of consoling the bereaved family and bidding farewell to the deceased.

In all these occasions where Ghanaians display their dancing prowess, such dancers are mostly in traditional attires or costumes displaying the true Ghanaian identity. Where these attires are not traditional ones, they are mostly made in Ghana for instance most funeral clothes and clothes meant for naming ceremonies and puberty celebrations or rituals.







Some traditional Ghanaian dancers displaying their dance movements and costumes in their ethnic colours



Pictures displaying dance as a Ghanaian identity



**Traditional Ghanaian instruments which accompany Ghanaian dance as a form of Ghanaian in identity**

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Dance has given an additional identity to the Ghanaian at home and around globe through the unique Ghanaian dance moves, the repertoire of dance and also instruments used through Ghanaian dances. Ghanaian dancers beside the traditional tribal costumes used at home also represent Ghana at international dance competitions in Ghanaian national colours such as red, yellow and green depicting the Ghanaian national flag. The local and traditional instruments used by Ghanaian dancers and the Ghanaian dance ensemble have given the Ghanaian dancer an identity that is unique to Ghanaians. Beads, ornaments and other dance costumes as well as regalia which are locally made are highly displayed by Ghanaian dancers during performances at home and also around the globe.

Traditional Ghanaian dance is usually an identity to the Ghanaian as it is always accompanied with music which is indigenous to the Ghanaian. Some of this music is ritual songs, war songs, religious or indigenous circular Ghanaian music with certain interludes of folk songs during storytelling and traditional drama.

#### V. References

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