

Dance as Mental Therapeutic in the African Experience: Beyond the Speculation

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Abstract

Dance is an integral part of African life. Its very nature (model of performance, functions and aesthetics) whether in secular or ritual form makes it, perhaps, the most popular socio-aesthetic cultural institution and practice for facilitating both personal well-being and communal welfare; it is one art form which could be relevantly employed to suit various spiritual, psychological, economic, social and political needs. However, this complexity of the dance as a varied topic in the African experience has led to speculations and sweeping generalizations about its peculiar relevance. For instance, various published research by dance scholars reflect a number of "recurrent themes" intended as basic models for analyzing and interpreting the African dance culture. Among these, the topic of dance as "manifestation of the human unconscious background and or inner experience" is a crucial one. In this theme, dance as a psychological form of human behaviour is perceived to help in conditioning the emotional state of individual members (of given societies), by helping to build their personal self-worth. As such, the cathartic and therapeutic function of dance is linked to this behaviour, since certain experience of dance performance can help to purge negative feelings and emotion embedded in performers as well as spectators. This discourse highlights the theory and research that have attempted to investigate the use of dance as a medium of expression in psychotherapy. Precisely, it examines the speculations about its values in contributing to healthy emotional development. While it agrees with the idea of psycho-dynamics of dance as a mind-body interventions therapy in the African experience, it advocates a scientific-oriented approach towards understanding the nature of its therapeutic relationship to psychological medicine.

Introduction

The idea of the elements of body and mind, despite their divisions, as being constituents in man's psychic or spiritual nature as one entity is not new. For decades, varied scientific studies (such as Spencer, 1862; Freud, 1922; Pavlov, 1941; Frank, 1961; Hannells, 1976; Sargant, 1973; White, 1982) focusing on mental health in relation to physiological well-being have stressed this principle of organismic harmony in the integrative functioning and sustenance of the physical, ideological, mental/psychological and existential aspects of human life. This perspective suggests levels of conflicts and struggles of life against the background of daily life in all aspects of 'Being' and operating within this consciousness, as well as the necessity to constantly generate, harness, expend and or conserve energy, as that "fundamental basis of all things, as a state of being and the process of becoming" (Nobles, 1985: 100-118).

From earliest times, men and women have always sought to participate in the driving forces of the universe, in order to derive from them the capacity to advantageously modify and develop human life. Thus, the varied symbolic manifestations and artistic creativity of the universe lend credence to this philosophy, particularly in the African experience.

Functionality of Dance

As a pivotal medium of creativity, essential to all aspects of living, the African worldview defines and experiences the arts in practical and pragmatic terms, such that among other vital functions, Fagg (1990), an art critic, attests that "the arts in Africa are a vital part of the process of generating force" (123). Speaking specifically on the dance art form as that unique artistic medium which is in contact with all levels of African life, particularly the role it defines for itself in the area of need to sustain physical and emotional life, Fagg further collaborates:

There is a strong reason to believe that in tribal society, dancing, whether sacred or profane, is held to increase the life force of the participants; that a person in stylized movement is, ipso facto, generating force, which can moreover be physically passed on to others... (1990:123-124).

Fagg is not alone in having this viewpoint. Since the beginning of time, dance has often been perceived as being in touch with subjective intuitive influences which underscore larger psycho-social variables, sometimes with medical implications. For instance, Turner (1959:2) notes:

Feelings and emotions are part of all human beings and basic to expression.... In dance (the human person) strives to express him/herself through the medium of movement Dance is then the medium through which repressed powers are given freedom, motion and a sensed order.

Some twenty-two year earlier, Sachs (1937:4) had stated that:

The dance ... an ordered expression in motion of the exhilaration of the soul develops ... into the conscious effort to become a part of those powers ...which control our destinies It becomes a prophetic passion (summoning and dispelling the forces of nature ... while it assures sustenance, as creator, preserver, steward and guard.

While Duggan et al (1948) had also asserted:

No one can challenge the physiological values of (folk) dance. It affords excellent opportunities for the rhythmic exercise of the muscles, increased respiration and articulation, development of organic vigour and numerous desirable outcome of physical activity. In fact ... dance is a splendid medium for the achievement of the widely recognized fitness objectives of endurance, strength, flexibility, bodily control, including agility, coordination and balance, relaxation and morale (25-26).

The functioning of the dance in the aforementioned capacity is that which may have prompted the speculation both of its ability and value at providing potential force for healing. In Haanel's masterpiece, *The Master Key* (1980:34-35), the author explains that two great sources of human suffering are bodily disease and mental anxiety, and that health is the equilibrium derived in the process of maintenance of bodily tissues. As such, to achieve well being, knowledge on how to muster creative energies as a means of acquiring control over the body in a bid to preserve this process must be constantly sought and put into good use. To this end, he espouses these thoughts of Albert Shofield:

The power of mental therapeutics should be the subject of careful, special and scientific teaching...mental therapeutics may be directed by the patient him/herself to calming the mind in excitement by arousing feelings of joy, hope, faith and love; by suggesting motives for exertion, by regular mental work, by diverting the thoughts from the malady (in Haanel, 1980: 128).

Consequent upon this, medical scientists since the turn of the 20th century have begun to explore the role of the mind (conscious intelligence) and its application and or manifestations in psychological/spiritual mechanisms (via creative symbols) to transform energy for healing and growth processes (Samuels, 1971:391-395). As a result, the body of work which stress the limits of scientific medical (drug based/surgical healings) and the need to incorporate distinct forms of play activities in dominant "Western" treatment modality abound (see Kane, 1972:163-183; Dubbert, 2002: 526-547; Blumenthal et al, 2002: 569-589; Smith and Ruiz, 2002. 548-568; Wolman, 1978: 68-73; Folkins and Sime, 1981: 269-287). However, those studies that speculate on the ability of dance to control the "senses, vital life forces and triumph over the ego" via its constituent elements namely rhythm/pulse, balance and coordination, posture/alignment, breathing /self control (among others) is the main crux of this discussion. And though references will sometimes be made to other regions of the world to clarify issues, the main focus is the African experience of dance as 'mental therapeutic' and the

need for carefully guarded clinical research to ascertain its relevance to contemporary medical practice.

According to Spencer (1985:4), reiterating Backman (1952), the 'concrete' notion, as could be witnessed, that dancing may have some mental/emotional values dates back to the dancing epidemics of the middle ages, when the creative values of dance were spontaneously appropriated to provide relief from symptoms resulting from alkaloid poisoning from rye fungus, following harvest seasons in Europe. Since then, the cathartic function of dance in releasing pent-up emotions as a form of nervous energy as earlier suggested in Spencer (1862:234-5), has frequently been emphasized. Therefore, the conceptualizing of the dance as a safety mechanism for transferring emotional steam pre-shadowed Freud's concepts of the libido/life force and the harnessing of it to meet and solve the conflicts of life. For artistic creativity (in whatever form), but particularly those grounded in non-verbal, non-rational moulds or symbols, have access to human subconscious and is operative within this vital life force (Wolman, 1978:68-73). Both Freud and Jung taught that bringing certain emotional charged images to awareness through varied operative symbols impinged on cognitive experiences, alleviated neurotic and or psychotic symptoms, bordering on "tension, physical exhaustion, mental unrest and abnormal mental activities", and made a person's inner world whole:

Releasing an image from the conscious and bringing it to awareness seems to be a basic growth process in the inner world. The person who experiences such image is somehow changed by the experience. The person is completed, made whole. It's as if a piece of the person's growth has been found (Samuels, 1971: 391-395).

As stated above, but it bears repeating, it is speculated that "giving free vent to emotions", which caused an individual or a people some degree of mental anguish and suffering through a psychological mechanism leads to experiencing catharsis. And herein lay the basis for the cathartic theory of dance. Consequently, cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead(1928), Laban (1972), Sachs (1937), Hanna(1968), Langer(1953) to mention but a few, have lent their support to this view by providing specific examples of their perception of the notion of tension release in the dance experience. For instance, Mead (1928), in her study of Samoan children, reports that through their participation in dance performances, the children experience a release from their rigorous repression and subordination by adults in other spheres. This thus implies that the dance has potentialities for repressing delinquency, while promoting positive childhood development and acquisition of good character. For apart from serving as a form of healthy recreation and relaxation, dance helps to develop such qualities as social poise, independence and creativity and it can form the basis for acquiring personal/group integrity, loyalty, cooperation and friendship.

This is quite a fascinating assertion, especially when it is considered, in psychoanalytical discourse, that certain forms of mental disorders such as psychosis and neurosis have been attributed to "family intra-familial

relationships, especially in early childhood (Lorand, 1982: 65-67). Indeed, as has been expounded, the core of every neurosis is attributable to anxiety rooted in early childhood through adolescence, which bonded with aggression and guilt moulds behavioral patterns and breeds neurotic conflicts and symptoms in adult life. This may be why, in a general sense and as grounded in a major philosophy, children's theatre as a creative experience is that theatre which aims at "influencing the development of human kind ... by helping children become their unique selves" (Goldberg, 1974:1).

In her research on dance as a form of mental therapeutic in the African experience, Hanna (1968: 25-31) also stresses the proposition of dance as a safety valve for expressing dangerous impulses in a comparatively harmless way. Citing examples of maidens' puberty initiation rites dances, as well as maternity dances performed by married women of the Ubakala Community in Eastern Nigeria, she explained that women's constant rehearsals and practice of such dances helped to bring to control, major challenges of life's events, such as marriage and childbirth. Consequently, she viewed the maternity dances as functioning to achieve alternate catharsis, while the puberty dances established the psychic management function of the dance.

Again, this proposal represents a valuable means of ascertaining the functions of dance in the prevention of depression and discharge of other forms of psychic stress, especially with relation to the health of women in psychiatric medicine. For based on sociological observation, psychiatric medical research has established a higher prevalence of depressive disorders among women than in men. This development has been explained as the resultant effect of variables of hormonal changes in relation to various situations peculiar to women, like pregnancy, child delivery and child nursing, as well as other psycho-social stressors and behavioral indoctrination that affect womanhood. Hence, Oyewole (2003) identified pre-natal risk factors found to be statistically significant to psychiatric morbidity in puerperium in the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (UITH) Ilorin, Nigeria, as follows: marked anxiety symptom during pregnancy; poor social support; poor cordiality in social interaction; negative charges in marital relationship; condition of baby at birth (either stillborn or sick). Based on these thoughts, he recommended that a multi-disciplinary approach be incorporated into Nigerian public health policy so as to accommodate and tackle these psychological and social situations.

Significantly, a basic phenomenon of dance performances in Africa is the association they allow. In other words, meaningful participation in the dance affords individuals in any fraternal bond opportunities to relate to the potent forces that influence both personal and communal existence, in a bid to realizing an ordered existence as well as a fulfilling life. Usually, women and men (old and young) in associative relationship incorporated perceivable forms of their peculiar experiences in specific categories of dances as a natural technique in the elaborate structure of self-culture, either to facilitate a relaxed state of physical and psychological fitness, and or to derive social support and enhanced personal worth so as to advance their physical, psychological, social, economic and

political values and development. Instances include the Bori ritual dance of the Hausa's, the Mbira musical dance in southern Africa, as well as healing dances of the Samburu, Molo, Dinkas and Shiluko in Eastern Africa, among others.

Beyond doubt, the relationship between the building and release of tension in the cathartic theory in dance has been an issue of great concern among dance critics. An instance is the idea of the performance of dance in anticipation of its utility to alleviate crises or challenges, which, as has been argued in some quarters, pre-supposes an anticipation of crises in these spheres. This implies from the standpoint of mental health and depending on individual physiology, that the dance activities may actually aggravate the very stressors – anxiety, apprehension and depression – it initially set about to combat. In essence, except there is a very convincing evidence of shedding of fatigue and outward manifestation of emotional mental health, the cathartic theory may not be generally applicable.

Aside from this, Langer (1953) raises a further point concerning the relationship between emotion and dance by questioning the assumed direct expression of emotion in dance, in contrast to other forms of art, which express the image of emotion in a mood of detachment. Spencer (1985:7) bares her thought essentially as based on Western theatrical dance forms and sums it up thus:

.... (Sometimes) the dance creates an illusion of emotions that are not really felt, but imagined as in a novel or a play or a painting, and revealed through symbols. Rather than symptoms and thoughts of real emotions expressed through spontaneous gesture, one has symbols of perceived emotion, of will, conveyed by the artist through contrived gestures as he (or she) creates a virtual world (where the purgation occurs. (*italics mine*)

This assumption suggest that as in other art forms, the cathartic or healing technique in dance, could be utilized 'indirectly', in abreactive imitative forms, to initiate some degree of healing experience in individuals exposed to the force of dance in organized theatrical contexts. However, in our perception, it cannot be disputed that some specific forms of dance in the African experience, particularly those with overt spontaneous reactions, are not imitations or mirror image reflections of reality. Neither are they an escape from the burden of actuality as that expounded in Aristotle's cathartic theory of tragedy, where there occurs a mediation of reality: a mirror image reflection of some violations of basic norms to which an audience is exposed, then a relief to the painful emotions through catharsis while the real world order remains unaffected. In contrast, the therapeutic form of dance in the African experience seems to be an actual response or reaction to an unpleasant life experience. It is these manifest conditions and the purported control of them through creative expressions of the dance that accrue to the African dance experience psychic therapeutic values.

However, considering the newness of dance as an emerging academic field of study, there are still many gaps in our knowledge as to how, for instance, it functions beyond the speculation in altering states of consciousness and achieving

healthy personality development and stable emotions, in cases of mood disorders; where states of really intense emotional excitement, anger, fear, depression and other abnormal patterns of behavior that produce severe inhibitions and or chaotic conditions need to be broken up and a release from the symptoms experienced. From our discussions, it is evident that not much attention has been paid to the study and research in dance as a treatment and or healing strategy in contemporary Africa medical context, Nigeria inclusive, simply because of the reality of the lack of its utilisation and practice in this form. Instead, the competitive entertainment feature of the dance has been a subject of much delight. While the importance of the overt aesthetic/entertainment pleasure the dance experience gives cannot be overstated, such, however, must not be at the expense of its other creative functions.

Thus, it could be adopted as a strategic “physical and mechanistic” form of therapy in varied modalities aimed at enhancing meaningful life and health status in contemporary African society, as it functioned in traditional times as a form of folk medicine (Akunna, 2006; Sofowora, 1982:40-44). This means that there is the urgent need to investigate and evaluate scientifically, the methods, techniques and experimental materials, available in the exercise and presentation of dance therapy to project the psycho-dynamics of dance activities to significant medical practices. This creative exercise will no doubt go a long way to establish the efficacy of dance to bring about improvements in psychological variables - emotions/moods stability, quality of social relationship, cognitive functioning, cardio-vascular functioning, work and behaviour etc - in both normal and selected clinical populations

From the researches analyzed, dance as a mind/body interventions technique which can be creatively tailored to enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms, tends to fall within the broad model of bio-feedback practice – a cognitively oriented concept and a broad field of inquiry of “adoption and emotions”. Its ability and potentialities for encouraging, facilitating and improving self-expression, communication, socialization, self-confidence and relaxation, while expiating rage, guilt and other negative stressors make it worthy to be known as a self-regulating (coping) process, that facilitates adaptation with a person's personal and social environment. Little wonder, therefore, that the modern field of dance therapy developed as a means to help people express themselves and relate to others as created beings with needs.

In the African experience, psychologically based explanations of the therapeutic value of dance to mental/emotional health and the purported experienced feeling of well-being associated with the dance, through the discharge of negative emotions remain simplistic and largely under-developed. It is true, as has already been established in psychological medicine (and as grounded in emotional studies), that thoughts conducted through the autonomous nervous system which connects the mind with every cell of the body affect hormonal balance, blood flow, respiration and metabolism, and can of necessity produce a state in which diseases thrive. It is also true, as established in recent studies, that earlier erroneous beliefs that the autonomic nervous system

cannot be controlled is a fallacy, because control over the system can be learned by self-regulatory conscious effort, although research in this area of medicine is still on going.

The question this research raises is that, based on the principle of the modern dance, which is the “need to free the body for the fullest realizations of its own human capacities”, (Beiswanger, 1978: 319-26), how for instance can the dance as a mind-body regulatory therapy function in the control of specific bodily processes such as this? In this sense, it is highly relevant to adopt innovative and carefully controlled experimental dance therapy model. The model has to be such that will conduct basic tests on psychologically established clinical conditions, for instance, in hospitalized psychiatric patients. The models should involve tests of cognitive affections (mental ability and physical coordination), moods/emotion control, (personality development), creative freedom, improvisational skills and flexibility, (work behaviour), social tendencies (lack or presence of group interest and cooperation), before and after involvement in creative therapeutic dance activity. On the physiological level, improvements in respiratory, cardio-vascular functioning and motor skill functioning in senses of movement disturbances, are required to be tested and evaluated on a before and after basis, as well, in clinical established conditions. On a final note, it is imperative to state that it is best for individual research to tackle possible arrears of attention in adapting and evaluating qualities, techniques and skills of dance in therapies to condition and or re-condition the body and mind to attain a healthy state of stability.

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