

## Review

# The impact of African traditional dance: Orósùn example

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**Orósùn in Ìdànrè, is observed to be a special traditional festival in Ondo State, Nigeria, which annually brings about positive changes in the lives of the people. The festival, which is richly endowed with dance and multifarious entertainment nuances largely, attracts people of various tones and shades because of its positive impact on them and the society at large on annual basis. In view of this, the study, through observatory method of research, believes that, if carefully harnessed, the therapeutic tendencies of dances in the festival are capable of facilitating various changes being envisaged in the society.**

**Key words:** Orosun diety, Idanreland (Nigeria), dance impact in African traditional festival, African traditional festival, Orosun festival in Idanre, traditional festivals in Idanre.

## INTRODUCTION

For effective communication, dance has been playing various roles that are functional in all the major manifestations of human endeavours. Indeed, dance has also helped in shaping and re-shaping the history of different cultures all over the world. Thus, it is easily regarded as a universal phenomenon, just like spoken word, or language. As one of the potent instruments/tools for communication and nation building, dance has been used as a symbol of oneness which thereby culminates into aiding societal and behavioural changes.

Justifying further the fact that dance could be taken as a universal language, is experienced in the primitive man. The latter, out of his daily actions and reactions to certain supernatural beings (gods, goddesses, deities, ancestors etc.), was believed to always be in control of some of the natural occurrences via the manipulation of this unique tool (dance). Since some of these occurrences were comprehensible to him, he had been able to develop them into his own kind of daily rituals. This perhaps explains why he was also able to capture many in various movements (dance) in order to express his emotions better. This perhaps explains the more reason why Enekwe (2001), cited Abbe (2007:3); opines that, "dance is always serious because it is religious in a self expressive and communicative sense and it is social, because it is an integrated part of his life. The above opinion further illustrates why in African traditional festivals, participants find solace in using dances to

express them better. By so doing, dance now forms a part of their existence, social interactions, co-existence and well-being. Instructively, dance does not exist in a vacuum. It reflects truthfully the society, which in turn creates own styles, codes, attitudes, mannerism and cultural traits in its entirety. From several communal activities, events, ceremonials, such as annual festivals, different dance movements are developed, out of which ideas, emotions and feelings are freely captured irrespective of people's background. Consequently, as the people respond; their desired changes thereby become a reality.

Moreover, this research would not only pre-occupy itself with traditional festivals in Nigeria, an examination of dance elements in festival, *Orósùn* which is celebrated annually in the month of May, shall receive a focal attention. What further informs our critical discourse revolves around the positive impact of dance on the people, who actively participate in this annual festival and more importantly is our concern to further showcase Ìdànrè land, her people, culture, as well as her natural heritage to the world for tourist attraction.

## TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS IN NIGERIA: A GLIMPSE

Festival can be said to be an event, usually and ordinarily staged by a local community that centers on some unique

aspects of that community. A festival can also be seen as a series of performance involving music, plays, dances, etc., usually organized annually or as agreed upon, where people of a particular community come together to dine and wine; in order to celebrate and share common tradition. Thus making festival an element that is enshrined in the African concept of theatre, in which experiences of the participants could also be shared “through acrobatics, puppetry, myths, rituals, legends, initiation ceremonies, festive dances and celebration, masquerading, circus drama of carnival, ancestral worship, and so on” (Adegbite, 2009:46).

According to Ogunba, (1978:3):

Traditional festivals are staged from time to time. In a town of modest size, say twenty thousand inhabitants, there may be as many as ten to fifteen festivals in a year's cycle of ceremonies. Such ceremonies are woven around diverse beings and physical phenomena ranging from powerful gods and goddesses to hill and water spirits and the generality of illustrious ancestors.

Because traditional African festivals are many, and are as old as the people, they are being celebrated in different ways and specified period of the year. Festivals can be broadly divided into three. They are: Festivals used to celebrate agricultural products and few examples of such festivals, especially in Nigeria are; new yam festival in Ondo, Èkiti, Imo State and many others. For instance, during the new yam festival, people come together to celebrate the new yields. Thus the new yams will be cooked during the festival and blessed by the king, before everyone in that society begins to eat in their different homes.

Another festival is celebrated in memory of some powerful and historical figures in a particular community, who had achieved and fought for that community and made history. Festivals are thereby organized annually to celebrate them. Examples of such festivals in some Western parts of Nigeria are: *Mòrèmí* festival in Ilé-Ife and Òffà, *Orósùn* in Ìdànrè, *Àiyéálá* of Ilàje, Òsun Òşogbo and many others.

Thirdly, historical festivals exist which, can also be organized in remembrance of a particular incident that happened in a community be it good or bad. Thus, the traditional African festival is the ...

only institution which has the framework which can coordinate virtually all the art forms of a community. Each important traditional festival lasts for a considerable time which may be three, seven, nine or sixteen days, a month or even three months. Each tends to have a story or myth to perform and each makes use of its own peculiar style in the dramatic realization of the story. In the process the arts of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing and several others are utilized.... Ogunba, (1978:5).

Meanwhile, in terms of artistry, demonstration of the aesthetic elements, importance and functions in relationship with the contemporary African environment festival often possesses elements of unity. That is why festival is also a medium of cultural, educational, inter-generational and communicational importance. With this, it is able to play an important role in the preservation of cultural heritage, transmission of knowledge and communal experiences as a people to future generations. As a result, annual celebration of festivals in African communities should not be seen as merely an annual congregation on street of urchins/jobless people. Rather, the people are proud to uphold their festival also as tool of cultural reconstruction, advancement and transmission of knowledge particularly to the younger generation.

Also, in traditional festivals, the people's culture can be seen clearly through their performances. Often, some of these are reflected in dances of different importance, which further lends credence to their cultural conditions in terms of living and identity. Thus, their fashion, make-up, tattooing, utensils and properties are freely displayed, just as their visual artistry in the carving of masks is freely exhibited especially during masquerade festivals. Festival therefore, serves as a forum through which the people's cultural heritage is vividly propagated. For instance, the artistry involved in the *Kwagh-hir* / puppetry performance of the Tiv people of North Central Nigeria, which has been variously discussed by scholars, further indicate that the skills of Africans are generously in display whenever they gather in festive enactments. Doki (2006:147-50), gives instances of these in such re-enactments, as *Ajikoko*, *Ortanmoug*, e.t.c; as found in *Kwagh-hir* festival. He recognizes their art and craft of hunting, display of talent, skill and creativity, dexterity, some of the few examples that typify the multi-expressiveness of African people during their festivals celebration.

Existing also among the Yoruba's of Western Nigeria are festivals that are rich, which can as well influence the world both artistically and in moral values and at the same time earn foreign exchange for the Nigerian nation as a whole. Traditional Yoruba societies are well organized and have often integrated traditional festivals, which are communal in nature and total in concept. Festivals have their inherent aesthetic structures, such as dances and songs which are linked with ancestors, historical figures and notable events in their societies.

Though, the holistic natures of African traditional festivals which are primarily of a high religious colouration, in reality, go beyond this to incorporate other significant elements. In all, the importance of dances in traditional African festivals is clearly highlighted.

## ÌDÀNRÈ LAND

Idanre, one of the notable towns in Ondo State, which is Rich in cultural, natural and historical heritage, is situated

within rocks/hills. It is about 30 km away from Akure, the State Capital of Ondo State. Ìdànrè, which is surrounded by hills, inhabits houses that are built in between the rocks with fertile land that is good for cultivation and rearing of domestic animals. Hence, farmers are always seen cultivating and clustering around those hills and more than 200 neighbouring villages. From these villages, farmers harvest different crops including fruits that are transported to different parts of the country. Ìdànrè is known to be one of the best singular producers of cocoa products in Ondo State, Nigeria. The town is also known to be home to predominantly agrarian people..., who are vast in cocoa and cotton productions, timber felling and skilful hunters who hunt animals for domestic and commercial purposes.

Ìdànrè land (a combination of different appellations like: Ufè Òkè, that depicts her connection with Ilé Ifè; Odode Idanre, Aládèè Ìdànrè and Atósin Ìdànrè) "is generous to hills and rocks", is blessed with suitable land and climate. Thus, she is referred to as "a goldmine for tourism..." (Obafusi, 2006)<sup>1</sup> and succinctly captured by Sir Gilbert Thomas Carter, September, 1894, that: "personally, I would rather spend a couple of months among these delightful mountains than at the Canary Island" (cited Okungbowa, 2006:28).

Numerous festivals and ceremonial activities abound in Ìdànrè which engage the people throughout the year, with few days at intervals, being observed as free days. However, the major festivals celebrated annually here includes: *Údèn (Iden)* that brings the sons and daughters of Ìdànrè home for festivity every December. Thus, it is only during this festival and "only time the Owá of Ìdànrè land wears the inherited Odùduwà crown, hand bangles, regalia and other paraphernalia of office" (Obafusi, 2006, as corroborated by Iyadunni Akinniyi<sup>2</sup>). Another festival is *Údèn*, which is annually celebrated to project the Mákánre (as Ìdànrè people equally referred to it) undiluted cultural heritage in costume, make-up, songs and dances to the whole world. *Ògún* festival on the other hand, ushers in cultivation season annually for bumper harvest in subsequent year. During the celebration of this festival, the Owá of Ìdànrè land usually dance and mix freely with his subjects, while the spirit of oneness is further rekindled. Also, *Orósùn* festival that is regarded as a "celebration of womanhood", as well as one of the historical figures in the town, is celebrated every Month of May, ([www.idanreland.org](http://www.idanreland.org)).

Apart from the few that are mentioned above, other festivals (*Odún*) includes: *Imolè*, *Babajì* and *Ìjesu* (yam festival). All these are generally celebrated by both the indigenes and non-indigenes alike.

## ORÓSÙN DEITY

*Orósùn*, otherwise known as Moremi was of the legends of Ìdànrè land. Despite her being a woman, she

performed different memorable works. Though, *Orósùn* had no surviving child, yet, she helped many women especially barren and those that are plagued with miscarriages. During her time, she pursued vigorously the art of checkmating all these with a lot of medicines and charms she possessed. She used to give medicinal herbs to the pregnant women and even to their children after delivery. This gesture earned her the nick name "*Òrósùn-fi-remo*," meaning: "someone who is in possession of camwood to rub/cure children' illness". By this, she was believed to be the mother of all even till the present day. Thus, when *Àwòrò* people are on their way or coming from the shrine during *Orósùn* festival; other worshippers will be chorusing "*Yere mio, yere mio, yere mi o*", that is: "my mother, my mother."

According to another version of the oral history, *Orósùn* came from Òkè Òya (Northern Nigeria) to Ile-lfe. Because of her beauty, men always sought for her hand in marriage. But *Orósùn* came to Ife and later said to be in love with Odùduwà - known and being pronounced by the people of Ìdànrè land as "Òghòduwà". It was however not certain whether their purported relationship later resulted to marriage or not. But at a time, she left Ile-lfe without the consent of any one, only to resurface and thereby lived briefly with Olófin at Utajà, where Olófin settled after the latter left Ilé Ifè. According to a high Chief in Ìdànrè- Agboola Akintan (2006)<sup>3</sup>, Utajà, was said to have been named Ufè Òkè by Olófin before it was eventually called Òkè Ìdànrè.

## DANCE IN ÒRÓSÙN FESTIVAL

Dance (in festivals) plays a significant role in the life of the people. It for instance creates an avenue for communication between the audience and the performers (participants), (Uche, 2007:99,100).

Dance, therefore serves as the necessary medium between members of a society since they receive close and continuous interactions with one another through festival and to get things done in the life of the people. In some traditional festivals, dance has become a therapeutic tool in which it requires that everyone that participates in certain festivals receives his/her blessing. In some cases, people may not know how to dance, but because of their active participation, people that get engrossed find themselves learning it with little or no difficulty. In this situation, dance is being done by all the people who gather together through celebration and their collective strength is rejuvenated, just as a new zest is injected for them to carry on as a people. Akinsipe (1999:89) corroborates that: "dance is done by everybody and used for everything in the African society, be it good or bad, gay or dull, big or small".

This further explains why dance plays a utilitarian role in social, political and religious events. To the people of Idanre community for instance, the impact of dance in

their festivals such as *Ùdèn*, *Ogún*, *Orósùn*, to mention a few, cannot be ignored, because there are solutions to people's problems during these festivals. For example, it is a general belief/observation during *Orósùn* festival that participants do experience fruitfulness in place of barrenness, success instead of failure/delay in marriage, etc.

It's often speculated that during *Orósùn* festival, people who participate in the dance receive blessings of various dimensions, which perhaps culminate into their desire changes, according to their belief. For instance, dancers/participants usually come into the arena in different lines, while different worshippers, in like manner dance in a file to usher in the chief worshippers like: *Àwòrò*, *Ògún*, *Sàngó*, *Òsanyìn*, *Babāji*, etc., from their different groups. With their instrumentalists, who will accomplish them to the shrine, the festival thereby gather a momentum that later begins the process of healing the sick, blessing the poor and downtrodden, etc. As the dancers file in, people will be praying and wishing them a fruitful year ahead. In the process, different kinds of gifts are shared among the worshippers.

In their dance steps, emphasis is always placed on the following parts; arm, feet, their backs with other parts of the body. Thus, when *Sango* dancers move in, with *bàtá* drums, their movement compliments the rhythm, while their arms receive much attention. During *Orósùn* festival, the simulation of fire from *Sango's* mouth for instance, to communicate his fiery nature, equally enhanced with staccato/jerky movements (legs and shoulder, front and backward at certain speed, depending on the mood and accomplished instrument/poetry rendition) which could only be provided by the agility of the dancer. This is done at the climax of the dance event of highly spiritual essence. Similarly related activities are carried out by other simulators of divinities like *Òsanyìn* and *Imolè* by dancers/worshippers who dance to reflect suggestive movements with the individual's two arms and knees slightly bent while the rest of the body move forward and backward in response to the accomplished rhythm as they danced.

From the fore going, dances are seen and are being used as the festival climaxes to crescendo and at that point, any participant who equally joins, will begin to experience some changes in his/her ailing body. At this point dance is assuming a cleansing role and also being used as accompaniment to the healing process, that may eventually takes place in the lives of those who actually need healing/deliverances. Hence, it is possible to discover shortly after the festival that as the people sing and dance, the malfunctioning of their bodies are rectified through the physical exertions involved via active participation. Through these, the participants experience emotional release, which then affect positively the ailing parts of the body of those who are sick to regain their normalcy. Thus, it is noted that: "if well conceived, dance has the capacity for spiritual edification, intellectual engagement, social cohesion and moral enrichment..."

Emoruwa (2006:102).

Interestingly, dance in *Orósùn* festival also initiate peaceful process amongst folks that have grudges against one and others. It unites people to further settle their differences. The festival also deals with criminal cases in the community (*Idànrè*) and brings about social justice among the people as *Orósùn* was believed to frown at every form of wickedness, evil and social vices. More so, their joy becomes inexplicable when they also re-unite with old friends and relatives, as they participate in collective activities.

The impact of communal dance is noted in traditional African festivals, in that it is always used along side rituals to appease gods, usher in good health, good harvest, prosperity and all forms of good luck in the years to come, so that throughout the preceding year the people could witness abundant prosperity in their businesses and enhance their well being. Bame (1999), cited (Iyeh and Aluede, 2007:226), sums it all in a rather definite way by describing African traditional festival as propitiatory, sacrificial and laudatory ceremonies by means of which Africa's ethnic groups acknowledge the blessings of the supreme Creator, the lesser deities and ancestral spirits, manifested in good health, good harvest and abundance of children. In this case *Orósùn* festival dance is relevant, because as a benevolent god, it is believed that she usually grants the people favours in their daily endeavours.

## CONCLUSION

In Africa, there abound several reasons to dancing as well as different modes, forms, content and context for people to engage in dance. Among these in traditional festivals are dances that are reserved and ritually-inclined forms for healings, prosperity, fruit of the womb, which further heightens their direct/indirect connectivity with the spirit and gods. Akunna (2008:1) casts an allusion on the potency of dance in African context that:

dance as a psychological form of human behaviour is speculated to help in conditioning the emotional state of individual members (of given societies), by helping to build their personal self-worth...., 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 work therefore observes in *Orósùn* festival that active participants/spectators, through dance, and who are sensitive to the prevailing moods during the festival, could secure the sympathy of the supernatural forces and in the process, meaningful changes which they may desire, occur, which often results in good living for the

people. Therefore, this research strongly submits that care must be taken by the participants whenever the festival is celebrated to always watch out for the moment when the dance is no longer for entertainment, but an aid to individual's desired changes.

Moreover, it is gratifying to observe that in every society, different dance forms exist, with their expressive tendencies for social interactions, cleansing, regeneration, reconstruction reenactment, inventions, integration, reintegration, and so on. It is equally worthy of note that in these forms are the roles and certain behavioural pattern of individuals, the status, sexes and groups within which such societies are duly encapsulated.

Conclusively, dance in this work has been considered to be an integral part of African lives, existence and its being creatively and meaningfully explored in various celebrated traditional festivals in African societies. For instance, Amankulor (1986) cited Akunna (2007:18), when admitting Goefrey Gorer's view, corroborates that in:

Africans dance, they dance for joy and they dance for grief they dance for love and dance for hate. They dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity. They dance for religion and dance to pass time.

If it is then observed in the traditional African societies that the people dance in order to bring prosperity upon themselves, in order to always attract positive changes, the impact of dance in the celebration of *Orósùn* annually, cannot be undermined.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. Tayo Obafusi, gives a graphical representation of Idànrè land in DVD documentary – "Idànrè: The Hillside Heritage", Lagos: A production of Generation African Media, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>. Iyádúnní Ākínníyì, our research assistant- On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, was granted an interview by Chief Sara, one of the prominent chiefs in Idànrèland. The interview centered on *Orósùn* and the latter's connection with Idànrè, Ilé-Ifè, Odùduwà and Esinmìrèn River/her sacrificial son. The research assistant- an erstwhile student of the Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin ,who majors in Dance, also an indigene of Idànrè, equally shared her direct experience with us in the course of this research, February/May, 2008.

Instructively, in the course of this research, we greatly find useful the input of our research assistant as contained in her unpublished Thesis titled: "Dance as an Aid to Societal Changes: A Review of Orósùn festival dance in Idànrè", submitted to the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin; in partial fulfillment of the award of the B.A (Hons.) Degree, May, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>. High Chief Agboola Akintan, shared this view with Tayo Obafusi in DVD documentary – "Idànrè:The Hillside Heritage" Lagos: A production of Generation African Media, 2006.

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