

THE BODY AND TOPOS (SPACE): CASE STUDY OF A NIGERIAN DANCE (ABAME WRESTLING DANCE OF IGBIDE PEOPLE)

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Introduction: The African universe and space is endowed with sensitivity and spirituality. This is adequately captured in the dance expressions of the African people. Infact the Nigerian does not make any distinction between the physical and metaphysical, natural and supernatural. Therefore relationships are established between humans, and men and gods quite easily. In the traditional Nigerian aesthetic perception, space is defined as a living object and it is so treated in its art forms and other expressions. As Adedeji and Ekwazi (1988:70) points out, "in the traditional sense the stage implies more man a physical environment. It is an effective - affective platform in which there is no physical distance between the performer and the audience. This concept and view are the issues that we shall attempt to explore in the Abame wrestling dance festival of Igbide people in Delta State of Nigeria.

Abame wrestling dance festival: This festival which Chris Ugolo is researching in the field from 1993 has been chosen because of the significant changes that have occurred as a result of changes in its use of space. This festival is usually performed between March and April of every three years. The three year gap is to give enough period of time for people to mature enough to participate, since it involves age calculation for one to qualify. There are performance 5 areas in use hereunder.

(1) Footpath leading to the community fish pond: The space here is a grassy footpath that leads to the community fish pond. In the festival season, the grasses are dried up and this gives room enough for movements that are associated with traditional wrestling.

(2) Market square of Igbide community: The market square is a rectangular shaped space. It is sandy and the king and council of Elders sit on one side and the audiences occupy three sides with a wide space in between. The dances move into the centre of the arena and perform facing the king. The formation is a semi circle and solos and group dancing takes place inside.

(3) Streets and route leading to the shrine (Attawha). Here the dance performance is processional and goes through the streets with the audience following from behind and at the sides. As the dance moves along the streets, a Priest is in front of the dancers sweeping away evil forces that can affect the dancers.

(4) Eru primary school playground: The arrangement is a rectangular shape; council of Elders and invited dignitaries seated under the canopies on one side and the audience standing on three sides, while the performance takes place in the middle.

(5) Family compound: Here the individuals dance before family members. It is usually a solo performance although family members may join in the performance occasionally to give support.

Conclusion: In Abame wrestling dance the use of space overtime has been necessitated by certain factors. The footpath leading to the fish pond was used for purposes of proximity to the site of activity (fish harvesting). The market square was used for two reasons; it is generally believed that spirits and ancestors visit the market regularly and even hold meetings there. The ancestors who come to the performance in spirit form therefore become witnesses to the performance/initiation rites which give spiritual authenticity/validity to the political act of initiating the future leaders of the community. The streets and routes used are also said to be inhabited by spiritual forces which may be positive or negative in nature. Hence, the Priest has to sweep through it as dancers process through to the village shrine at the fish pond site. The family compounds house the individual family gods/shrines and performance before family members and gods is also an affirmation of ones new position in the community. In all, it is the power that a community attaches to a given space that makes it a significant venue/space of performance and because in Nigeria space is conceived of as both metaphysical and physical, natural and supernatural the body is used in dance in line with the above conception and definition. Thus the body is used in a highly mobile way, just as the spirits are considered to be omnipresent and therefore cannot be confined to a particular place/space.

Works Cited

Adedeji, J. A. and Ekwazi H., **Nigerian Theatre: The Dynamics of Movement**, Ibadan: Caltop Publications Nig. Ltd. 1988