

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHOREOGRAPHIC SIGNATURES  
IN THE PRODUCTION OF “A HARVEST OF DANCE” IN TWO  
DIFFERENT LOCATIONS**

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**Abstract**

The publication of dance librettos (dance scripts) was conceived to make available dance scripts written by one librettist to as many as possible choreographers that come across it for possible production and wider scholarship. Since this laudable effort started in Nigeria about a decade ago, we have had a libretto performed at different and distinct parts of the country. “A Harvest of Dance” by Ifure Ufford-Azorbo is one of such librettos that have been performed in two distinct settings in Nigeria, Uyo in the South-Southern Region and Ilorin in the North-Central. This paper seeks to analyse comparatively the different choreographic interpretations of the piece by these different choreographers and compare the moulds, approaches, templates and models of the two choreographers for it to earn them a choreographic signature on the work. Most times, the need to acknowledge objectivity in a choreographer’s interpretation of a libretto written by another choreographer is seen as a diversion, but this work emphasises that each choreographer is a visionary artist, with the professional right to interpret any work in his or her own unique style. It is also noted that this style is informed by the demands of the production setting. The participant observation method was used to explore the content analysis of the production factors and elements of the two works. Inferences were then drawn that will enrich the dance world in particular and theatre generally.

**Keywords:** Libretto, choreography, choreographic signature, performance

**Introduction**

Choreography is the art of creation and or an arrangement of dance designs for a purpose. The choreographer is often regarded as the author, creator and owner of his work in a way comparable to writers, playwrights, composers and painters. He is often inspired by one or more forces to create a particular dance piece. These forces could be drawn from nature (environment), music, story, picture, an occasion, human body or mere delight in experimentation in human movement in time and

### *A Comparative Analysis of the Choreographic Signatures*

space. Choreographers who are basically inclined to practise and have been in the field for a long time tend to tilt their creations to a particular style and are known for such styles or choreographic signature.

Choreography, in contemporary times is a powerful and prestigious discipline. Some choreographers are known to be masters of a particular dance style and others known for experimental works. The 21<sup>st</sup> century choreographer is credited with creative trust as one who puts the dance through an imaginative process. The choreographer is a 20<sup>th</sup> century creation as an artist and executive who evolved out of the need of the modern theatre. Some choreographers are very popular and influential, so much that the mere mention of their names in connection with productions will make audiences flock into the auditorium simply because of the conviction they already have about their works. That is based on their established choreographic signatures. Notably, names like Hubert Ogunde, Peter Badejo -OBE, Arnold Udoka, Folabo Ajayi-Soyinka, Rasaki Ojo Bakare and Chris Ugolo will ring bells in the ears of Nigeria's choreographic world.

The dance libretto is a written text, mostly in verse or in prose, of the complete, story/plot of a dance performance. (Tomassini, cited in Olalusi 2014, p. 3). It is the script for dance as we have plays for drama. Some choreographers are librettists who document their dance creations in a literary form. Others may just create without documentation, or pick up a script to choreograph. Sometimes choreographers can work on already existent traditional dance movements which are products of long evolution with series of innovation. These then form a part of the choreographer's choreographic vocabulary and signature too.

A choreographer, who sets out to recreate another person's dance piece acts like a director who picks up a play text and brings life into it. In doing this, the choreographer who works on another person's creative documentation becomes another creative artist who brings his or her own vision to play in the re-enactment of the already existing work. One of the benefits of having librettos published is to throw it open to other people for new creativity and possibly development. That is why Akinsipe, (2013 pp. vii-viii) suggests that;

The dance libretto also contains the stories written to suggest their choreographic forms or dance possibilities. Different choreographers can pick it up and come out with different interpretations. Each choreographer's work can then be notated as his own creative property.

He concluded that the outcome of the performance becomes the "creative property" of the choreographer. Thus if five different choreographers attempt interpreting the same work, they will come up with their own choreographic interpretations which will be credited to them as their own artistic property or choreographic signature.

**Choreographers and their Signatures: A Historical Perspective**

Ballet was a dance of the English courts with coded movements and strictures. This did not give freedom of expression to other choreographers and dancers and so there was a revolt. This revolt resulted in modern dance. Isadora Duncan, a prominent name in modern dance evolution is known for creation and execution of natural movements which to her allowed for freedom like swaying of trees and rolling waves of the sea. Ruth St. Denis believed music was to be visualized in order to produce dance movement. Rudolf Laban recorded body movements on paper; Emile Jacques-Dalcroze created a way to teach the co-ordination of music and body movement called Eurhythmics; Mary Wigman was concerned with self-expression and so brought in psychological and emotional approaches to creativity. She felt that dance should be movement alone so she composed dances without music. Martha Graham built her technique on the breathing cycle of the body and its principle of contraction and release with the belief that in inhaling, the body has an aerial quality of movement and in exhaling, the body drive has gone down and out in contraction.

In the Nigerian scene, Arnold Udoka is known for building dances into societal themes reflective of cultural practices and present day topical issues. He experiments on culture – flavoured movements with traditional musical accompaniment. Most of his works are narratives and a pure experiment on the management of music and dance in his ‘Drum ensemble’. Ojo Rasaki Bakare discusses mostly political issues like in his ‘The Voyage’ which speaks of Nigeria’s democratic and military rule. He classes this as an assemblage of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria featuring in his choreography. Chris Ugolo’s experiments with the modern dance concept - a merger of the western and Nigerian cultural milieu – are often well received. Some of his works locate the local cultural heritage like in his “Abame Wrestling Dance”.

**The Libretto “A Harvest of Dance”**

Theatre generally is a re-run of life’s transitions which we constantly return to in order to tap from the unchanging philosophical truths about mankind. Theatre and dance present those bits of human life which we want to see again either to enjoy them anew, reaffirm our beliefs or simply to understand. This becomes the thrust of “A Harvest of Dance”.

The libretto “A Harvest of Dance” written by one of the researchers of this work is a narrative dance theatre which uses dance to weave the stages of life in traditional societies. It is a statement to the fact that dance punctuates every stage of life of the African child. It is originally based on the traditional setting of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State. It is a composite creation which captures the dance culture of these people at a glance.

The librettist, an Ibibio narrative presents a setting where young people engage in moonlight plays, meet their life partners, report to parents, get their

### *A Comparative Analysis of the Choreographic Signatures*

approval and training and then are blessed by the gods, to marry. The librettist played on the 'Offiong' which is a moonlight mating dance. Here, young men and women engage in dances which reveal traditional plays of clapping of hands, strutting and hide and seek. Four girls and boys go into tug of war. They soon go into match making with the males showing prowess in winning the heart of the most beautiful female.

'Ebre' is a society of elderly women to train the chosen maiden in home, family and child care while the Ekpo and Ekong male and elderly dancers use acrobatic displays to train the husband to be in the demands of family life. The stage is set for the marriage ceremony and so, mother of the bride announces the marriage and gods who is comprised of Ekpo masquerade representing the ancestors and Ndem dancers representing the water spirits do a dance of cleansing, in order to get the arena set for the event.

Asian dancers take to the stage to welcome visitors and usher in the bride who does the Mbopo dance of the secluded maiden amidst cheers. The masquerade rushes in to give judgment on the suitability of the maiden for marriage after seclusion. He has white powder for approval and charcoal for disapproval. Our maiden is approved and the groom carries her shoulder high and is applauded. All dance out in joy.

#### **African Dance Structure in "A Harvest of Dance"**

Traditionally, Africans dance through every stage of growth. There is no dance for dance sake in Africa. Every event has a particular dance attached to it, be it naming ceremony, puberty rites, etc. unto burial ceremonies. The dances have a specific role to play in the event. According to Ojuade (2002, p. 53) the dances have a function or utility which cannot be altogether expressed in words but through the act of dancing itself. The movements exhibited are coloured with signification in relation to the producing culture. They speak of the ideals, temperament and values of the host culture. African dance serves a complex diversity of social purposes. According to Nettleford, (1996, p.xiv) it has "the richness of texture and multi-layered, multi-foci nature". It embodies and celebrates the African heritage. Africans dance purposefully. For Kwakwa, (1998, p.285) "traditional African dances do not occur in isolation. They often have a specific role within an event or a complex of events organized for a specific occasion".

In "A Harvest of Dance" the cultural heritage of the people is succinctly captured even in the different performances. Religion in every culture is one aspect of life which is manifested in their dances. The libretto reveals a continuous interaction between spiritual forces and that of their immediate community. Masquerade dances, a prominent and decisive feature in the libretto, are organised to re-enact the presence of the deities and ancestors. This possibly informs Idamoyibo's postulation that "dance is very essential in masking because it has a hypnotic effect

on the performers and the audience” (2003, p.69). McIntyre succinctly summarises the extra-mundane function of dance as:

A divine offering... Through paying homage to the forces that created life and themselves the African... reinforced their beliefs, and healed themselves not only physically but psychologically as well. (1996, p.136).

Dance is a functional aspect of a people’s occupation. It is seen as “the exclusive property of certain occupations” Primus (1996, p.5). Vocational dances provide entertainment for its members and at the same time test and encourage pre-requisites and favourable conditions of service. Foster (1997, p.67) rightly observes that “dances based on familiar activities such as sports or work rendered those activities strangely exciting”. Dance is used in the libretto under study to teach hunting skills and other masculine based occupations to the groom and feminine concerns to the bride.

African dances define the roles of individuals in the society and are also event specific. For instance, girls in seclusion in Ibibioland are taught the ‘mbopo’ dance which symbolises beauty and femininity. One gets carried away with the smooth and delicate foot patterns, the gentle tread of the feet on the ground, the deliberately controlled swing of the arms along curved paths, the slight tilt of the neck to the side and slightly downward cast of the eyes which are said to teach the girls how a virtuous woman should walk and behave. (Ufford-Azorbo 2013, p.30)

Dance in Africa functions in different age groups. Youths communicate vitality and vigour synonymous with their age bracket through movement rendition. Elders dance in dignified mellowness of old age which is clearly evident in their slow measured steps. All these feature in “A Harvest of Dance”.

The attitude which produces the movement quality is an aspect of behaviour and can be considered a product of learning, metabolism perception of the environment... Willis (1996, p.146). For Enekwe, (1991, p.24), every dance tradition is related to a particular environment and historical development of one ethnic group... or the other.

The libretto no doubt documents and articulates African structures and Nigerian culture in particular.

### **Comparative Analysis of Choreographic Signatures (Ilorin and Uyo Experiences)**

Several factors combine to give a choreographer a choreographic signature. Choreography being a creative art allows the choreographer to be unique in his/her work. No two choreographers think, create and arrange works the same way. Therefore, any approach or style employed by a choreographer is exceptional to him.

## *A Comparative Analysis of the Choreographic Signatures*

However some factors influence the choreographer's process. The analysis of the signatures of the two choreographers under study will therefore be carried out under the following factors:

### **Purpose of Production**

A good choreographer takes good cognisance of the purpose for which his work is meant to serve. This is the only way he can be relevant. This work, "A Harvest of Dance" was first choreographed by the librettist for the 2008 convocation ceremony of the University of Uyo, Uyo. Convocation is a graduation ceremony. It is a time devoted for relaxation and enjoyment. Therefore, the concentration of the Uyo choreographer was an assemblage of familiar movements of the people to entertain them. The major intention was to get members of the audience who came from different States of Nigeria, acquainted with the cultural performances of their host. The thematic structure which unifies all other aspects of production is marriage. This theme is relevant to the culture of the people which confirms adulthood through marriage.

The second performance of same libretto was done by the Performing Arts students of University of Ilorin group 10, 2013/2014 session for their final year project assessment tagged "PFA 499: Special Project". It is a full production dance theatre that carries 5 credit units. As a dance theatre therefore, it has to be realised principally through the use of dance movements with other theatrical elements such as costume, props, lighting, make-up, sound effect and music combined in realization of the story. The difference in the purposes of these productions has set the stage for different approaches and thus will lead to different signatures.

### **Choreographic Approach**

Choreographic approach is the several ways a choreographer may take in realising a dance composition (Akinsipe, 2000, p.202). In the actualisation of the performance at Uyo, the choreographer adopted a total theatre approach where dance, drama and music featured. All the dances had song and instrumental accompaniment while the mother's announcement introduced dialogue into the presentation. In the Ilorin performance, due to the realisation through the dance theatre medium, dialogue is not acceptable. All actions must be realised through pure communicative movements which was what the choreographer achieved to earn her a signature different from the choreographer at Uyo.

### **Choreographic Interpretation**

The choreographic interpretation/intention is what the choreographer set out to say with the performance. It is the personal message of the choreographer to the audience. Though this is usually derived and not different form to the theme of the librettist, it is a distinct stand of the choreographer on the work. It becomes another point to ascertain the choreographic signature because as the librettist has a message

the choreographer too must have one. This is what brings out different productions from the same script choreographed by two different choreographers.

The Ilorin choreographer of “A Harvest of Dance” had a different interpretation of the work though still retained the theme of marriage. The most obvious and pleasantly surprising difference seen in the Ilorin experience was the extensions of plot and furtherance of sub-themes. She made larger, the influence of the gods and their conflicting nature. This is because of the slightly different interpretation. Some things had to be added to complement this interpretation. While the first performance presented a holistic surrender to the power of the gods, the Ilorin experience upheld that persistence by man can throw over board the powers of the gods. This means that man has the power to turn the tide set up by the gods.

The plot of the Ilorin experience of “A Harvest of Dance” therefore went thus. The dance opened with the establishment of two separate and rival kingdoms of the goddess of fertility where a mother goes to seek for a child from the goddess of beauty who beautifies the child. In return for this favour the mother promised her daughter’s hand in marriage to the acolytes of both kingdoms.

The young beautiful girl goes out for a moonlight play but meets a lonely arena as her friends are not there. She is disillusioned but suddenly, the goddess of beauty visits and drills her in spectacular dance movements. She is excited as she receives a gift from the goddess. The goddess of fertility visits and also drills her in fertility dances and she rejoices, gets a gift and as the goddess leaves, she lapses back into loneliness. Her friends join in, to her excitement and they do games and traditional dances. The young men join them with warlike movements and there is a wrestling match to determine who marries the beautiful one. A winner emerges and dances with the chosen one as others leave. Here, the male shows his prowess by carrying and throwing the maiden round about him.

Mother gets elderly women to train the maiden and father gets elderly men to train the husband to be. The celebration is announced by maidens and visitors move in followed by the groom’s family. The bride’s family goes on stage. There are different group dances which are soon replaced by a nuptial dance by the bride and groom. This suddenly ceases as the two goddess appear and go into conflicting movements struggling for ownership of the maiden. The judgmental masquerade, painted black and white rushes in on stage and gives a disapproval mark which causes the collapse of the bride. The goddesses fight still for her soul until a juju priest intervenes causing the exit of the goddesses. He does not revive the girl, a suggestion that she is dead. There is general pandemonium.

The groom and his peers, fortified by the juju priest decide to go into the forest of dead and bring back the bride, on their way they meet with stumbling blocks; a mystical animal who destroys one of the five friends, two evil spirits who eliminate two more leaving the groom who persisted to the end and outsmarts the queen. There is another celebration scene and with the help of the forest goddess the

## *A Comparative Analysis of the Choreographic Signatures*

land is cleansed and the bride returns to life to marry the groom. This is approved by the masquerade amidst joy and general celebration.

### **The Choice of Movement**

The choreographer of the Uyo performance played on linking existing dances of the people to tell a coherent story while the Ilorin choreographer used popular and modern dances infused into the major dance vocabulary, the Ekombi dance which runs through the performance. The Ekombi dance of the Efik and Ibibio people was a major feature in the Uyo experience of “A Harvest of Dance” as it ushers in the extra-mundane beings who come to cleanse the arena for a successful outing. It is a majestic dance style exclusively for the royalty and deities in the host culture. But the Ilorin choreographer used it as a base for which other movements emanate for the emphatic representation of the host culture. As such, all characters in their performance did the Ekombi movement at different levels, vibrant for the youths, slow for elders and majestic for the spiritual beings.

Ekombi movements were used by everyone in the group in varying degrees. The young ones had fast and vibrant movements while the elderly ones went slow and humorous. The goddesses had majestic movements and fierce ones during their fight. At the end, both experiences communicated same theme through folk and contemporary movements.

### **The Use of Costumes, Props and Music/Musical Instruments**

Costume is one aspect of the theatre that dance relies on for the projection and enhancement of the understanding of its messages. The costume, when properly done, speaks for the dancers in terms of the culture and the setting of the performance. In the production of “A Harvest of Dance” in both locales under study, attempts were made to be realistic in the costuming of the dance to represent the culture of the Ibibio people as much as possible. This is a major point noted by the librettist in her post production speech after the performance in Ilorin; the librettist acknowledged and appreciated the effort of the production crew at “realizing the costumes of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State people on stage”.

In the same vein, the props and musical accompaniments were at both productions typical of the culture being represented. The choreographer at Uyo whose main aim is to showcase the culture of her people and the choreographer at Ilorin who is under examination to prove how much she can represent another culture on stage did their best in these areas. For example the crew at Ilorin ensured that they invited drummers from Akwa Ibom state to train their drummers in Ilorin and two were actually present at the performance. We can therefore say both productions as much as possible; agree in their use of costumes, props and music/musical instruments to present their messages.



### Conclusion

Before now, cutting through the decades, there has been several dance performances that are scripted but not published for others to lay hands upon to read or perform. That is why the laudable giant stride taken to publish dance librettos in the Nigerian theatre has begun to yield positive results. This is why a libretto written and published at Uyo is available to a choreographer at Ilorin, two distinct locales in Nigeria. The production of “A Harvest of Dance” in Ilorin strikes a chord considering the difference in cultural backgrounds. The choreographer of the Ilorin experience, Olomola Tolulope, the choreographer of the group, is a student of dance; she had not seen the first production but had the libretto.

The paper looked at different factors necessitated by the social and cultural changes of the place of performance that eventually influenced the changes made to the script, choice of movement and the overall messages in the different locales. It concludes that each choreographer had been able to do a great work to give the script their own independent interpretations and stamp a choreographic signature on their own creativity.

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*A Comparative Analysis of the Choreographic Signatures*

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