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2022-09-16
Arts Research Africa (ARA)
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/35912

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54223/10539/35912

CULTURAL INTEGRATION FOR STATE IDENTITY IN NASARAWA STATE'S CHOREOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO NAFEST "DANCETURGY"

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This paper discusses the concept of "danceturgy" and its role in the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) in Nigeria. NAFEST aims to promote national unity and identity through the performance of Nigerian cultural heritage. The guidelines for participation in the festival emphasize the reflection of cultural peculiarities and the use of authentic dance stories. The danceturgy at NAFEST involves stage and DVD presentations, with specific criteria for judging. The text highlights the creative process of the Nasarawa State Performing Troupe (NSPT) in developing their dance entry for NAFEST 2009, including the study of the festival syllabus, conception of the story idea, assembling choreographic devices, rehearsals, and the final performance. It is suggested that the NSPT choreographic approach be adopted and modified to suit NAFEST danceturgy

Introduction

The multi-ethnic composition of Nigeria's population is overwhelming,[1] and managing ethnic and cultural diversity to attain national integration and unity has always been a focus of interest in the country (Edewor et al. 2014). The sheer fact of Nigeria's ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity led to the conception of the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) in 1970. NAFEST has the specific purpose of advancing national unity and identity through performance of the variegated aspects of the Nigerian cultural heritage. Consequently, the danceturgy of the festival is structured to promote this ideology, while its form and structure occur within "the cultural confines of the (Nigerian) State space" (Tume 2021a, 124). Artistes from the 36 states of Nigeria and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T.) are the main participants in the festival, obliged to key into the NAFEST ideology with their creativity (Tume 2021b).

The concept of danceturgy encapsulates the arrangement of the entire structure of any dance story. It is an adhesion of the bits and pieces of all the components which go into the theory and practice of dance choreography as a creative art. It is a form of storytelling through dance that unpacks, in choreographic terms, the socio-cultural interactions of human beings in everyday life. Danceturgy pays detailed attention to a dance story from diverse perspectives while also ensuring its accuracy in terms of setting, costumes, period, and movement vocabulary. The main features of danceturgy answer the 'why,' 'how,' and 'what' questions about dance as follows:

i. The concept – the main idea behind a dance story and what it seeks to achieve.
ii. The process – the method and approach deployed to generate the dance story.
iii. The product – the form and content of the dance story for meaning production.

The dance event at NAFEST is usually competitive, with the guidelines for participation clearly spelt out. As the pattern of the dance events of the festival evolved over the years, a well-defined structure of NAFEST danceturgy became evident. The form and structure of NAFEST danceturgy are informed by the guidelines for participation and the criteria for adjudicating the event over several years. NAFEST 2009 thus had the following guidelines for participation in the dance events:

- All entries must be original and reflective of the cultural peculiarities of the given State and F.C.T.
- Participating States and the F.C.T. are advised to research their cultural milieu to unearth relevant occupational traditional dance and music.
- The number of persons on stage at a particular time should not be more than sixteen persons excluding the instrumentalists.
- The duration for each performance should be between ten minutes minimum, and fifteen minutes maximum.
- The Festival Committee shall provide only a bare illuminated stage. States are therefore expected to construct appropriate props as well as provide costumes to reflect the background and mood of their dance. (NAFEST Handbook 2009, 26)

In recent years, NAFEST danceturgy has been split into two components, Stage Presentation and DVD Presentation. The Stage Presentation accounts for sixty per cent (60%) of the scores, and the DVD Presentation forty per cent (40%). Apart from live presentation of entries at the festival, participating states are expected to submit a ten-minute promotional documentary in DVD format of the dance earmarked for stage presentation. The adjudication criteria for the stage performance are listed as follows: originality, thematic relevance, creativity in content and presentation, choreography, instrumentation, stagecraft and design, stage management, showman-

ship/audience appeal, adherence to time, and costumes and make-up. The criteria for the DVD are scripting/narration, packaging/presentation/title/captions, picture resolution, audio-visual effects, and timing. The entries are judged by seasoned dance scholars and practitioners convened by the festival organisers every year.

The strict guidelines for NAFEST danceturgy emerged in the late 1990s when it became obvious that dances at NAFEST were mainly reflective of the dominant ethnic groups in each state. NAFEST organisers moved to discourage this because it resulted in the under-representation of minority groups and undermined the aim of the festival. NAFEST danceturgy encourages the dance theatre form, the telling of authentic stories featuring cultural dances that have evolved from the traditional festival arena to the contemporary stage or performance space. Dances performed at NAFEST can thus be considered modern or contemporary versions of their original traditional forms. The use of dance in this manner imbues it with the ability to treat topical issues, through the exploration of suitable multi-ethnic dance materials for holistic communication.



Figure 1: The Nasarawa State contingent celebrating with the Golden Gong prize, as the overall winner of NAFEST 2009, held at Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. Source: Researcher.

Nasarawa state has 30 ethnic groups and about 40 languages and dialects, and has therefore earned the apposite nickname "Mini Nigeria" (Tume 2019; Iyimoga 2011, 15). Since its inception in 1996, the Nasarawa State Performing Troupe (NSPT) has been an active participant in NAFEST. The troupe is administered by the Director of Arts and Culture, Head of the Performing Arts department, and Cultural Officers who are full-time employees of the state government. However, from time to time the Nasarawa State government engages the services of Artistic Consultants on an ad-hoc basis to carry out capacity building workshops for the troupe members and prepare them for competitions at festivals and carnivals. These Artistic Consultants range from academics to seasoned professionals and scholar-artistes. The consultants take members of the troupe through a series of theoretical and practical exercises to enrich their knowledge and hone their skills. Mallam Mohammed Egye, the Troupe Director from 1996 to 2018, elaborates thus:

> As far as NAFEST is concerned, the job is not for only the staff of the Arts Council. Every indigene of the State who is an artiste, wherever they may be, come back home for NAFEST. We also engage non-indigenes in the artistic field. That is the secret of our success; we do not depend on the members of the troupe alone for national or international festivals or competitions. Our success is as a result of sustained collaborative efforts. (Egye 2017)

Before participating in any festival, members of the Nasarawa State contingent are usually lodged in an artiste camp, far away from their homes. The camp period may last from two to four weeks, depending on the magnitude of the project involved. This is to encourage total concentration on the task ahead. At the artiste camp, dieticians and special cooks are engaged to ensure strict adherence to healthy diets fit for performers. Health workers are on standby to attend to any health hazards which may arise. The troupe also extends invitations to independent performers and private troupes in the various local governments of the state. The presence of all these people in the artiste camp fosters a balanced representation of the cultural stakeholders and good synergy for the project.

The Creative Process of *Bla Mbo* (2009)

Between the years 2007 and 2011, NSPT won the Best Overall State at NAFEST, a record yet to be broken. This indicates that Nasarawa State adhered to the stipulations

of the festival curriculum during those years. Naturally, there has been curiosity about what NSPT did, and how, to get things right at NAFEST. This segment of the article highlights the creative process of *Bla Mbo* which was the NPST dance entry at NAFEST 2009. The process of creating *Bla Mbo* is set out in the sections that follow.

In-Depth Study of the NAFEST Syllabus

The overall theme for NAFEST 2009 was "Culture and the Challenges of Our Time: Cultural Industries and Wealth Creation," while the competitive dance event was anchored by the theme of Occupational Indigenous Music and Dance. In line with the features of NAFEST danceturgy, the 2009 festival syllabus also placed a premium on thematic relevance, state identity, cultural integration, dance theatre form, limited cast, and short timeframe. To tackle the task, the team of consultants initially brainstormed the theme and agreed on the best way to interpret it in dance. For the *Bla Mbo* project, the team of consultants that worked with the troupe included Dr Chris Iyimoga, Prof Emman Dandaura, Prof Victor Dugga, Prof Musa Enna, Dr Reuben Embu, and Dr Arnold Udoka. Dr Udoka, a dance specialist who was Director of Dance at the National Troupe of Nigeria (NTN) at the time, led the choreographic team that produced *Bla Mbo* as the NSPT dance entry for NAFEST in 2009. Professor Dandaura, leader of the consultation team, had said that "with regard to our work as a consortium we are deliberate because we know that our duty is to represent the state; when there is an issue, we scan round to see which best expresses that particular issue" (Dandaura 2017). To create *Bla Mbo*, critical research was therefore conducted on the traditional occupational dances within the state while paying attention to their "traditional canons, body value, and significance to their host culture" (Udoka 2017).

Conception of the Story Idea

After a thorough study of the festival theme, the choreographer, Dr Arnold Udoka, generated a story idea to interpret it. More research was subsequently conducted into appropriate cultural materials to suit the story, and with the support of other members of the team, a decision was made on the best means, methods and materials to push the story. According to the choreographer:

> The theme inspired me to create. I also delved into my training in modern dance. Not contemporary dance, mind my choice of word; modern dance to create natural and abstracted movements. Because choreography is an art, you must have the ability to create movements that people can interpret in respect to their languages. (Udoka 2017)

In creating *Bla Mbo*, Udoka claims that he generated an allegory identifying a problem common to communities in Nasarawa State. Thus, the *Bla Mbo* tale is told with a plausible solution in the storyline.

Assembling the Choreographic Devices

Once the story was set, the team moved on to assemblage of the research results, with the aim of implementing them in performance. The appropriate movements and musical materials for each fragment of the story were identified. The dance was created in a workshop manner, whereby dance movements, music, songs, chants, props, make-up and costume ideas were sourced from artistes from different ethnic groups, until "the performance for all Nasarawa [was] achieved" (Egye 2017). Bearing in mind the NAFEST ideology, NSPT ensured that the dance piece reflected all the ethnic groups "either by way of costume, music, movements or props" (Egye 2017). Mrs Glorie Ashikeni, Head of the Performing Art department at the time, corrob-

orated this by noting that "whatever we cannot achieve with the movements, we supplement with the representation of costumes, songs, music, chants, props etc. Our dances are total theatre performances which are full of symbolic clues" (Ashikeni 2017). With this approach, the ethnic identity of the product is no less than that of the entire state.

Rehearsals, Modification and Preview

What started as an imaginary story was later woven into dance to show how the ethnic groups within Nasarawa State interrelate, while obeying the individual dance canons of the ethnic groups and giving them authentic representation. The choreographer took artistic initiative to deconstruct existing movements, make realistic improvisations, and synthesise the dance with the story idea. After the arrangement and rearrangement of the choreographic devices and their incorporation into the plot, the result was cleaned up during several rehearsal sessions, after which it was presented to the team of consultants for feedback.

The Product: *Bla Mbo* in Performance at NAFEST 2009

The piece starts with a group of women wearing Mada costumes gathered to carry out a cleansing and healing ritual to seek intervention from the gods, as hunger and starvation ravage the land. They enact the Arizeni healing ritual of the Alago people, as they march across the stage with feet-flicking movements in a slant floor pattern. Holding one another by the elbow, the women grunt rhythmically as they move elbow to elbow and foot to foot, while they count two-two steps forward on each movement and swing their bodies. They chant:

Mada chant:

Yah'lo yah yeka oh oh oh oh oh oh
Ywen gig yen nge – yah yekao
Mei mei sei ye dwoh, mei mei touh ye rhon
Oh rhina kaya rhe chun-oya
Nzar nge nche gyun nge ma nzwe gye ma-yalo

English Translation:

Oh my mother, my mother is no more
Oh my siblings, our mother has deserted us
The land is vast for us to farm, but the land is not fertile for farming
We must resolve to unite and work hard like in the days of King Kaya
If you have a hoe to farm, come with me

As the women march around the village in tears, they display empty pots to signify hunger. They fetch and throw sand in the air to illustrate the infertile soil. They wail:

Mada song:

Oh Nigeria ghou, oh Nasarawa gou!
Nfeh la the te'ma, gye ama nye te'gi su larin
Tih tih te sei she no ba ma
Doglo da lah te' ma
Mei mei kain ye te'ne dwoh

Da ma reh lah
Mmh! Mmh!! Mmh!!! Mmh!!!!
Mmh! Mmh!! Mmh!!! Mmh!!!!

English Transliteration:

Hear me, oh Nigeria, oh Nasarawa!
We are hungry in the midst of abundance
Are we going to fold our arms and pine away in penury?
Let us come together and cry to our ancestors for help
Let us harness the abundant resources in our land
Only then can development be assured
Yes, yes yes, oh yes, I agree!

The wailings of the women invoke the ancestral spirits/masquerades, and they come out in the form of the Odu masquerades of the Alago people to cleanse and appease mother earth. They perform several Gwandara Owa dance movements and squatting, jerking, and spinning acrobatic stunts. To signify an answer to the prayers of the people, the rains return, and two maidens wearing purple and yellow Koro costumes execute the body-vibrating Mighili movements as they revel in the refreshing showers. They sing:

Mighili song:

Evule eve kene yi – Evu evu
Evuve no nanu ze ku
Mona zapape tamiri
Anole kariye manila
Dogu pete gariye konye ha
Apyota nya iza shamayi tatata

English Translation:

Evu my mother said – Evu said
Evu said when I die
Place pawpaw on my grave
Let not Anon bird eat my grain because I'm poor
Let Anon bird eat the corn of the rich

Seizing the advantage of the rain and the refreshed soil, the people of the land intensify their hard work and determination to achieve economic success. Male dancers wearing the full Eggon hunters' costumes of shredded wine and white coloured skirts, and baboon-skin headgear, come on stage. They are also armed with their hunting bags, bows and arrows in readiness for a rewarding hunting expedition. They execute the Eggon movements to Gwandara music, while enacting how they hunt for game in the forest. The farmers also till the land, employing natural movements to detail the various activities involved in agriculture, such as land clearing, ridge-building, planting, weeding, and harvesting. They dance and sing:

Gwandara song:

Insubula ya lesa ba
Insubula inma su samu

English Translation:

He who works doesn't lack
He who seeks will surely find

Gbagyi song:

Shokola ga Nigeria kuma
Shokola ga Nigeria kuma
Shokola ga Nyazigayi kuma
Yonkum yibwa agiwe

English Translation:

God gave us Nigeria
God gave Nasarawa to us
God has blessed our land with different types of food
Come, let us work hard so we can celebrate

The benny-seed farmers who sport the white, blue, and wine-coloured traditional Afo costumes come on stage to cultivate their farmland. They execute the feet-shuffling Gbagyi Kabulu and the hand-fanning Bassa dance movements, while singing:

Gwandara song:

Yalo fa ya leyi ashama – Yamwa
Shama ne kanu gbe jhi yagi
Yalo fa ya leyi whan gada
Gada ne konu gbe jhin yagi

English Translation:

Come let us go cultivate yam, our main food crop
Yam, our food for growth and development
Come let us go and hunt animals in the bush
Hunting gives us food for growth and development

The bee farmers also dance in, wearing traditional woven garments in the Nasarawa colours. While executing the Owa dance movements, they drop benny seeds into their pots to attract bees. They dance out, and upon their return, they bring pots with which they scoop up the honey residue from the bees.

Following the resolute hard work of members of the community, fertility is restored to mother earth. The hunters find their quarry, the calabashes of the bee farmers brim with honey, and the benny-seed farmers harvest bountifully. During the celebration of the bumper harvest, members of the community present food crops and hunting games to the gods in appreciation, while refined processed goods such as shoes, belts, hats, and bottled honey, are packaged for barter and export trade. At this point, the farmers and hunters troop in, variously dancing in Gwandara, Afo, Odu, and Eggon movements to Gwandara music. As the festival peaks with the diverse cultural dances, the ancestral spirits show up, and humans and spirits become one in the dance of celebration.

Evidence of NAFEST Danceturgy Principles in *Bla Mbo*

Dance Theatre Form

Bla Mbo conforms to the tenets of the dance theatre form, as it narrates an entire story using the medium of dance. It tells the story of a land laid waste by famine as a result of drought. It illustrates the decisive actions that the people take to rescue their land from hunger and starvation, and it showcases the dynamics of the phases in a variety of occupations, with their challenges and prospects. It also demonstrates the gains to be made through the positive commitment and activity of the people.



Figure 2a. The ancestral spirits on a rescue mission to cleanse and restore the land. Source: Researcher.

Thematic relevance

The idea for *Bla Mbo* derives from the Ninzom phrase *Bla Mbo*, which means "End of poverty." The piece is an amalgam of the various occupational dances found among the different ethnic groups in the state. The occupational dances are woven around a story that details the transition from poverty to economic freedom. In so doing, the dance piece addresses the festival theme of "Culture and the Challenges of Our Time: Cultural Industries and Wealth Creation."



Figure 2b. The benny-seed farmers sifting the chaff off their farm produce. Source: Researcher.

State Identity

Bla Mbo thrives on the use of ethnographic aesthetics for cultural integration. The exploration of the diverse Nasarawa ethnic music and occupational dances in a single dance piece suggests and promotes an inclusive state identity. The NSPT choreographic model features the deft use of creative concepts, body movements, multi-rhythmic floor patterns, costume and make-up, music and instrumentation ensemble, cultural nuances and contexts, and props. All of these choreographic devices were sourced across the various ethnic groups in the state and deployed to build a state identity in the performance.



Figure 2c: The hunters hunting for game in the forest. Source: Researcher.

Limited Cast

The cast for the performance of *Bla Mbo* at NAFEST on 26th October, 2009, in Minna, Niger State, was as follows:

Wailing women:
Safaratu Amfani, Esther Inji, Charity Asegba, Elizabeth Akombo, Asabe Barki (deceased), Victoria Dalyop

Ancestral spirits:
David Tume, Agbo Abe (deceased), Adeka Mu'azu, Ado Adanu, Cletus Peter, John Tagwai, Auwal Ahmed, Babangida Onpoku, Dantani Magaji, Ode Baba

Mighili maidens:
Peace Elisha, Racheal Solomon

Hunters:
Silas Adagba, Ali Yakubu, Solomon Njigha, Salisu Ali

Bee farmers:
David Tume, Cletus Peter, Agbo Abe, Adeka Mu'azu, John Tagwai, Esther Inji, Victoria Dalyop, Elizabeth Akombo, Charity Asegba, Safaratu Amfani

Benny seed farmers:
Silas Adagba, Ali Yakubu, Solomon Njigha, Salisu Ali

Instrumentalists:
Peter Tatari, Ojukwu Adi, Abdulahi Abari, Tivlumun Antsa, Terseer Lijam, Haruna Sarki, Danjuma Baji, Timothy Bawa

To adhere to the sixteen-strong cast (excluding instrumentalists) criterion of the festival, some performers were made to play multiple roles in the performance.

Short timeframe

Bla Mbo in performance lasted for fourteen minutes, including the set-up and strike time. With that timing, the piece met the fifteen-minute maximum duration stipulated in the festival syllabus.

Conclusion

With its ideology and policies, NAFEST commits to uniting Nigeria through cultural performance. Its danceturgy is determined by the festival objectives, criteria of adjudication and guidelines for participation, and strongly informed by the themes of cultural integration and statehood that are at the crux of the festival philosophy. A review of the NAFEST syllabi for several editions of the festival reveals the principal features of its danceturgy to be thematic relevance, state identity, cultural integration, dance theatre form, limited cast, and short timeframe.

Nasarawa state has been successful in keying into the NAFEST philosophy, as evident in its creative outputs and achievements at NAFEST. A compositional analysis of *Bla Mbo* shows that the piece was specifically designed to suit the NAFEST ideology and festival theme for 2009. *Bla Mbo* was created through a highly intellectual process of robust intercultural conversations and collaborations. The choreographic approach adopted by the NSPT represented a skilful navigation of the complexities of cultural diversity in Nasarawa State, de-emphasising mono-ethnic identities and projecting state identity.

Sadly, understanding the NAFEST ideology and interpreting it in choreographic terms is still a general problem with most participating states at the festival. Also, the NSPT status at NAFEST has suffered a decline due to a lack of funding at the state level. Nevertheless, their legacy in the history of NAFEST is undeniable. Some states like Ekiti have keyed into the NSPT approach and continue to be outstanding at NAFEST and other national and international festivals. The experiment carried out by NSPT several years ago is an indication that more effort should be made to elaborate choreographic theories to advance the ideology of NAFEST. This study therefore recommends workshops to concentrate on the adoption and modification of the NSPT choreographic approach for NAFEST danceturgy.

Acknowledgements

This researcher was a member of the choreographic team that produced *Bla Mbo* in 2009. The paper borrows extensively from this experience.

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

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Notes

1. Nigeria has over three hundred ethnic groups and well above six hundred distinct languages and dialects. (Tume 2019, 2).