



Metaphysical Dimensions Of Dance Criticism In Ibibio Mbopo Dance And The Question Of Ontology, Identity And Cultural Meaning

Abstract

Dance criticism has traditionally focused on aesthetic value, choreographic structure, performance quality and socio-cultural relevance. However, the philosophical foundations that underlie dance as an art form have received comparatively limited attention, particularly within African performance traditions. This study examined the metaphysical dimensions of dance criticism using the Mbopo dance of the Ibibio people of Nigeria as a focal point. Drawing on concepts of ontology and identity, the paper investigated fundamental questions concerning the nature of dance, its mode of existence, and the criteria through which a dance retains its identity across different performances and historical periods. The study argued that Mbopo transcends its visible manifestations of movement, rhythm and bodily display to function as a repository of communal memory, cultural values and social philosophy. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the dance embodies ideals of womanhood, social responsibility, moral conduct and collective identity within Ibibio society. Through an examination of movement vocabulary, rhythmic structures, spatial organization, symbolism and audience reception, the paper demonstrated that the meaning of Mbopo is rooted not only in physical performance but also in the cultural consciousness that sustains it. The paper further contended that effective dance criticism must extend beyond descriptive and evaluative approaches to engage with the metaphysical questions embedded in performance. The study concluded that the metaphysical interpretation of Mbopo offers a productive framework for appreciating African dance traditions as dynamic expressions of both cultural heritage and philosophical thought.

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Introduction

Dance occupies a unique position among the performing arts because it communicates primarily through the expressive movement of the human body. Unlike literary texts, paintings, or sculptural works that may exist in tangible and enduring forms, dance manifests itself in performance and disappears once the event has ended. Its transient nature has continued to

challenge scholars, critics and philosophers who seek to understand not only what dance means, but also what exactly constitutes its existence. Dance according to Martha Graham is communication, "it springs from deep roots in human beings" (Britton 1963:93). For Edmund Leach, "the syntax of non-verbal 'language' must be a great deal simpler than that of spoken or written language" (1976:10). To this Valery adds

that "...the human body (in dance) speaks ...it conveys ever so much more than the eloquent, fast, elegant speaker" (Idamoyibo, 2003:67) With dance, every movement is indissolubly linked with an internalized mental representation or concept. Dance movements are influenced by the experiences of history, culture, environment, occupation and the people's aesthetic movement perception. These movements operate within certain accepted cultural norms peculiar to the traditional setup of the society. Questions concerning the nature of dance, its continuity across generations and the criteria by which it is identified have generated significant debates within aesthetics, performance studies and philosophy resulting to dance criticism.

Criticism is a systematic process of analysis and evaluation through which the strengths, limitations and meanings of a work are examined. Traditionally, dance criticism has concentrated on the evaluation of choreographic design, technical proficiency, aesthetic quality, musical accompaniment and audience reception. While these concerns remain fundamental to the appreciation of dance, they do not adequately address deeper philosophical questions regarding the nature of performance itself. Beyond visible movement and artistic execution lies a network of meanings connected to memory, identity, embodiment and cultural consciousness. This possibly informs Copeland's submission that "Good dance criticism is a multifaceted endeavour. It involves at a minimum description, interpretation, and value

judgement" (1997:11). Consequently, dance criticism requires a broader analytical framework capable of examining not only what is performed but also the underlying realities that give performance its significance.

Metaphysics, as a branch of philosophy, is concerned with the nature of existence, being, causality, study of ultimate reality, identity and the relationship between material and non-material phenomena provides a useful framework for such an inquiry. It explores questions relating to what it means for something to exist, how entities maintain their identity through change, and the relationship between physical manifestations and intangible realities. Applied to dance studies, metaphysical inquiry raises fundamental questions about the ontological status of dance. Is a dance merely the physical movement of performers in a particular moment? Does it exist in the choreographer's conception, in the bodies that enact it, in audience perception, or in the collective memory of a community? Similarly, how does a dance retain its identity despite alterations in performers, performance contexts, musical accompaniment or choreographic adaptation?

African dances are deeply embedded within the socio-cultural experiences of the communities that produce them. They embody histories, belief systems, moral codes, occupational experiences and philosophical worldviews that transcend the immediate act of performance. Consequently, the meaning of such dances cannot be fully

understood outside the cultural contexts that sustain them. Among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Mbopo dance occupies a significant position within the cultural landscape. Traditionally associated with the initiation and celebration of young maidens, the dance serves as a medium through which ideals of womanhood, dignity, social responsibility and communal values are publicly expressed (Ufford-Azorbo, 2012:98). The performance is not merely a display of rhythmic movement; it is a symbolic enactment of cultural expectations and collective identity. Every gesture, costume element, musical pattern and spatial arrangement contributes to a system of meanings recognized and interpreted by members of the community. The dance therefore exists simultaneously as artistic performance, cultural institution and symbolic text.

The continued relevance of Mbopo within contemporary cultural discourse raises important metaphysical questions concerning its existence and identity. Although performance styles may evolve and social conditions may change, Mbopo continues to be recognized as a distinct cultural expression. This persistence suggests that its identity is located in more than its observable movements. Rather, it resides within a complex interaction of bodily expression, communal memory, symbolic representation and cultural continuity. Understanding this relationship requires an approach to criticism that moves beyond descriptive evaluation toward philosophical interrogation. This study therefore examines the metaphysical dimensions

of dance criticism through an analysis of Mbopo dance. Specifically, it investigates the ontological status of the dance and the factors that sustain its identity across time and performance contexts.

Conceptual Clarifications of Dance and Dance Criticism

Dance is a performative art that employs the human body as its primary medium of expression through organized movement in time and space. Across cultures and historical periods, dance has served diverse functions including ritual observance, social interaction, entertainment, education, communication, healing, and the expression of emotions and ideas. Although definitions of dance vary according to cultural and disciplinary perspectives, most scholars agree that dance involves purposeful and rhythmically structured bodily movement intended to convey meaning or evoke responses.

Aristotle conceives dance as rhythmic movement capable of representing human actions, experiences and character (Safra 2003:935). This perspective underscores the representational capacity of dance as a medium through which aspects of human life may be interpreted and communicated. Dance is a fundamental means through which individuals express their responses to the world around them, using the body as an instrument of perception and expression. Dance is not merely physical activity but a meaningful artistic practice through which individuals and communities negotiate

their experiences and realities. Hawkins (1988:3) therefore concludes that, "Dance is one of man's oldest and most basic means of expression. Through the body, man senses and perceives the tensions and rhythms of the universe around him and using the body as his instrument, he expresses his feeling response to the universe". This is corroborated by Sachs who is of the opinion that dance is "an inherited predisposition" which means that dance is natural and instinctive (Thomas 1995:169). This possibly informs Laban's assertion that "attitude toward or control over a movement is not necessarily a conscious act that the mover decides to do. However, 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, 1996:146).

Within African societies, dance extends beyond aesthetic display to become an integral aspect of communal life. It functions as a cultural language through which values, beliefs, histories and social relationships are articulated and transmitted. African dance traditions are often inseparable from music, ritual, social institutions and communal participation. Consequently, dance is not merely an artistic event but a cultural phenomenon that embodies collective memory and social identity. The meaning of dance therefore emerges not only from movement itself but also from the cultural contexts that shape and sustain it. For Enekwe (1991:28), beauty in Nigerian dance lies in the combination of "purposiveness and high aesthetic concern, its

celebration and reflection of communal life...seeking to unite the dancer with the dance, its embodiment of collective beliefs ..." Beauty is central to the appreciation of African dance (Primus 1996:5) The typical African dancer remembers all others who had performed the same dances and why those dances were performed. Stories behind the creation of the dances are not as important as who danced it before, for whom and the consideration of the present performance of the dance is done according to laid down rules. The memory sense is, therefore, seen as the experience sense having to do with ancestral memorial connections. This is extremely significant in the appreciation of African dance performance because it is very functional in the spiritual well-being of the people according to their belief. Primus (1996:4) has availed us with a covering principle that ".... Dance without belief is without life". The belief of the people that dance was created by an ancestor, spirit or god counts in the epic memory sensory model of dance appreciation and in the main presentation of the dance. To emphasize on the extra-mundane function of dance through the Epic memory, Asante posits that its relatedness to spirituality, ethos, and empathy... sends felt signals to the community who own the dance" (1996:213). Even when the dance experiences some changes and modifications it is considered as a change in the master plan of presentation as creative additions and not creation itself. Africans value the renewal of experience and so creative innovations are tolerated if they

reinforce the ideology behind the original creation. This shows that the performers have a good memory and are faithful to the tradition and creative ingenuities and imagination of the ancestors. It is also a reiteration on the renewal of experience which is the rebirth of the society.

Mbopo dance exemplifies this understanding of dance as a cultural text. Traditionally performed within the context of maidenhood initiation and public presentation among the Ibibio people, the dance embodies social expectations relating to morality, femininity, dignity and communal belonging (Ufford, 1997:52). Its movement vocabulary, costume, music and performance conventions function as symbolic vehicles through which cultural ideals are expressed and reinforced. The interpretation of such meanings constitutes an important concern of dance criticism. Dance criticism may be understood as the systematic observation, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of dance performance. It involves more than expressing personal likes or dislikes; rather, it seeks to investigate how a dance communicates meaning, achieves artistic objectives and functions within its social and cultural environment. Through criticism, the dance performance is subjected to informed reflection that enables both practitioners and audiences to develop a deeper understanding of the work.

Dance criticism occupies a unique position because of the ephemeral nature of its subject matter. Unlike literary texts or visual artworks that remain available for repeated

examination, dance exists primarily in performance and often disappears once the event has concluded. This transitory quality presents challenges for critical analysis, requiring the critic to engage actively with movement, rhythm, spatial design, symbolism, performer-audience interaction and contextual meanings. Effective criticism therefore demands not only technical knowledge of dance but also sensitivity to the cultural and philosophical dimensions of performance.

The functions of dance criticism serve a descriptive function by documenting and preserving performance experiences that would otherwise disappear with time. Second, it performs an interpretative function by uncovering meanings embedded within movement, music, costume and performance conventions. Third, criticism fulfils an evaluative function through the assessment of artistic quality, technical competence and communicative effectiveness. Finally, criticism contributes to intellectual discourse by encouraging reflection on the cultural, social and philosophical implications of dance practice.

In African performance traditions, dance criticism assumes an additional responsibility of cultural interpretation. Since many indigenous dances embody communal histories, ethical values and cosmological beliefs, criticism must move beyond technical assessment to engage with the deeper meanings encoded within performance. Such an approach is particularly relevant to Mbopo dance, whose significance extends beyond choreography to encompass questions of identity,

cultural memory and social philosophy. It is within this broader critical framework that the present study situates its investigation of the metaphysical dimensions of Mbopo dance.

Metaphysics, Ontology and Identity in Dance Performance

Dance is often approached as a visible and aesthetic phenomenon, appreciated through movement, rhythm, technique and performance quality. However, beneath its physical manifestations lie deeper philosophical questions concerning existence, meaning and continuity. These questions belong to the domain of metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that investigates the fundamental nature of reality and seeks to explain the conditions under which things exist, persist and acquire meaning. Metaphysical inquiry is therefore concerned with concepts such as being, identity, causality, time, space and the relationship between material and immaterial realities. The relevance of metaphysics to dance emerges from the peculiar nature of performance itself. Unlike many artistic products that continue to exist in material form after their creation, dance is transient. It unfolds within a particular moment and disappears immediately after performance. Yet despite this apparent disappearance, dances remain recognizable across generations and continue to exert influence on individuals and communities. This raises important philosophical questions regarding the nature of dance and the basis of its continued existence.

Is dance merely a sequence of bodily movements performed in a given time and space, or does it exist beyond the immediate performance event? Does its existence reside in the choreographer's conception, the performer's body, the audience's perception, or in the collective memory of the community that sustains it?

Such questions fall within the scope of ontology; a major branch of metaphysics concerned with the study of being and existence. Ontology seeks to determine what kinds of entities exist and the conditions that define their existence. In dance studies, ontology examines the status of dance as an artistic entity and attempts to clarify what constitutes a dance work. Philosophical discussions on the ontology of dance often revolve around whether dance should be understood as a physical event, a mental construct, a cultural product, a symbolic system, or a combination of these dimensions. Within African performance traditions, the ontological status of dance cannot be separated from the cultural environment in which it exists. Dance functions not only as physical movement but also as a carrier of communal memory, social values and cultural identity. Its existence extends beyond the visible performance to encompass the beliefs, histories and collective experiences that give it meaning. Consequently, an African dance may be understood simultaneously as a performative event and as a repository of cultural knowledge transmitted across generations.

The Mbopo dance of the Ibibio people provides an illuminating example of this ontological complexity. At one level, Mbopo exists as a ceremonial performance characterized by specific movements, rhythms, costumes and performance conventions. At another level, it exists as a social institution associated with the preparation and public presentation of young maidens. Beyond these dimensions, the dance embodies a system of cultural values relating to morality, dignity, femininity, social responsibility and communal identity. Its existence therefore transcends the immediate actions of performers and extends into the cultural consciousness of the community. From this perspective, Mbopo may be regarded not merely as a dance performance but as a living cultural phenomenon whose meaning is continually renewed through performance and communal participation.

Questions of identity seek to explain how an entity remains recognizable despite the changes it undergoes over time. In dance studies, identity raises concern about the characteristics that make a dance what it is and distinguish it from other forms of performance. If costumes are modified, music rearranged or movement patterns adapted, does the dance remain the same? At what point does alteration become transformation? These questions are particularly significant in traditional performance cultures where dances are continually reinterpreted to meet changing social realities. The identity of a dance cannot be reduced solely to its external features. Rather, it

emerges from the interaction of movement vocabulary, performance conventions, symbolic meanings and cultural functions. A dance retains its identity not because every performance is identical to previous ones, but because certain core values, symbols and meanings remain recognizable to members of the community. Identity therefore involves continuity within change rather than absolute sameness.

In the context of Mbopo dance, identity is sustained through the preservation of its cultural purpose and symbolic significance. Although contemporary performances may differ from earlier forms in matters of costume design, staging techniques or musical accompaniment, the dance continues to be recognized because it retains its association with ideals of womanhood, social respectability and communal celebration. The continuity of these meanings enables Mbopo to maintain its distinctive identity despite inevitable adaptations across time and circumstance.

Another important metaphysical concern in dance performance is embodiment. Dance exists through the body, yet the body itself functions as more than a physical instrument of movement. It serves as a medium through which culture, memory and meaning are expressed. The performing body becomes a site where personal experience intersects with collective history. Through movement, dancers reproduce inherited knowledge, reaffirm cultural values and participate in the transmission of communal identity. The body thus acts as both a performer of culture and an archive of

cultural memory. This relationship between embodiment, ontology and identity has important implications for dance criticism. A critical approach limited to technical evaluation may fail to capture the deeper meanings embedded within performance. Metaphysical criticism, on the other hand, encourages an exploration of the ways in which dance embodies cultural knowledge, sustains communal identity and negotiates questions of existence and continuity. Such an approach is particularly valuable in the study of African dance traditions, where performance frequently functions as a bridge between the physical, social and symbolic dimensions of life.

Origin and Social Function of Mbopo Dance in Ibibio Cultural Context

Mbopo is one of the most prominent cultural institutions of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Traditionally, it is associated with the transition of young maidens into womanhood and their preparation for marriage and responsible participation in community life. Although the institution has undergone modifications in response to social change, its significance within Ibibio cultural history remains profound. Historically, Mbopo served as both a social and educational institution through which young women were prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood. The institution was founded on communal values that emphasized moral conduct, dignity, discipline, respect for elders, domestic competence and social responsibility. Participation in Mbopo was regarded as a mark of

honor not only for the maiden but also for her family, whose reputation was reflected in the conduct and accomplishments of their daughter. Beyond its role in preparing young women for marriage, Mbopo functioned as an important mechanism for social cohesion. It reinforced communal norms, strengthened family ties and provided a platform for the transmission of cultural values from one generation to another. Through songs, dances, storytelling, instruction and ceremonial performances, the institution contributed to the preservation of Ibibio cultural identity and collective memory.

Seclusion and Preparation of Maidens

One of the defining features of the traditional Mbopo institution was the period of seclusion undergone by selected maidens. During this period, the young women were temporarily withdrawn from ordinary social activities and placed under the supervision of experienced women within the community. The seclusion period served as an intensive programme of cultural education and personal development designed to prepare them for adulthood. Within the seclusion environment, the maidens received instruction in various aspects of Ibibio life. They were taught appropriate social conduct, domestic management, childcare, interpersonal relations and community expectations regarding womanhood. Instruction often included indigenous knowledge systems, traditional arts, crafts, songs and dances that were considered essential for preserving cultural continuity.

Symbolism of the Outing Ceremony

The climax of the Mbopo institution was the outing ceremony, a public event during which the maidens were formally presented to the community. This occasion combined elements of celebration, performance, recognition and social affirmation. It marked the successful completion of the training process and the symbolic transition from maidenhood to mature womanhood. The outing ceremony was characterized by elaborate displays of dance, music, costume and public pageantry. Every aspect of the event carried symbolic significance. The carefully decorated bodies of the maidens signified beauty, dignity and readiness for adult responsibilities. Their costumes, ornaments and adornments reflected cultural values associated with femininity, honour and social status.

Mbopo as Cultural Education

At its core, the Mbopo institution functioned as a system of indigenous cultural education. Long before the emergence of formal educational structures, African societies developed mechanisms for transmitting knowledge, values and social norms to younger generations. Mbopo constituted one such mechanism within Ibibio society. The institution facilitated the transmission of cultural knowledge through observation, participation and performance. Young women learned not only practical skills but also the philosophical foundations of communal life. Through songs, dances, proverbs, narratives and ceremonial practices, they acquired an understanding of

social responsibilities, ethical conduct and collective identity. Dance served as a particularly effective educational medium because it combined physical participation with symbolic communication. Through repeated rehearsal and performance, cultural values became embodied in movement. The body thus became a repository of knowledge through which social meanings were preserved and transmitted. What was learned intellectually was simultaneously reinforced physically and emotionally through performance.

Elements of Mbopo Dance as Vehicles of Cultural Meaning

The significance of Mbopo dance extends beyond its visible aesthetic qualities. Like many African dance traditions, its meaning is embedded in a complex interaction of movement, rhythm, space, costume, symbolism and audience participation. These elements function collectively to communicate cultural values and social ideals while simultaneously creating an artistic experience. Understanding these performative elements is essential for appreciating the deeper philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of the dance. The body, rhythm, space, costume and audience reception are not merely technical components of performance; they are vehicles through which cultural meanings are generated, transmitted and preserved.

The Body as Performance Text

The human body is the primary instrument of dance and the central medium through which Mbopo

communicates meaning. Unlike other artistic forms that depend on external materials for expression, dance relies upon the living body to create, sustain and transmit artistic experience. The body becomes both the subject and object of performance, simultaneously producing movement and embodying meaning. Within the traditional Mbopo institution, the body occupies a position of special significance. The maiden's body is carefully nurtured, adorned and presented as a visible representation of cultural ideals associated with beauty, dignity, health and social responsibility. Through movement, posture and gesture, the performer communicates values that extend beyond the immediate act of dancing. Every bodily action becomes a symbolic statement about identity and social belonging.

Rhythm and Musical Structure

Rhythm constitutes one of the most fundamental elements of dance and serves as the organizing principle of movement. In Mbopo dance, rhythm provides the framework within which bodily actions are coordinated and given expressive form. It establishes patterns of movement, regulates tempo and creates the dynamic flow that characterizes performance. African dance traditions are distinguished by their rich rhythmic complexity and their close relationship with music. In Mbopo dance, musical accompaniment functions as more than a background element; it serves as an active partner in performance. The interaction between movement and music creates a dialogue through which emotional, social and cultural meanings are communicated.

Drums, songs, hand clapping and other forms of musical accompaniment provide rhythmic structures that guide the dancers and sustain audience engagement.

Space and Movement Design

Dance unfolds within space, and the organization of movement within space contributes significantly to the communication of meaning. In Mbopo dance, spatial design involves the arrangement of performers, the pathways traced through movement and the relationships established between dancers, musicians and spectators. The movement patterns employed in Mbopo are carefully structured to create visual coherence and expressive impact. Circular formations, processional patterns and coordinated group movements often symbolize unity, continuity and communal solidarity. Spatial arrangements help direct audience attention and establish relationships between individual performers and the larger collective.

The dancer's movement through space also reflects cultural attitudes toward social interaction and communal participation. Rather than emphasizing individual display alone, many African dance forms prioritize collective engagement and harmonious interaction among performers. Mbopo exemplifies this tendency through choreographic structures that balance individual expression with communal identity. Movement design further contributes to the aesthetic quality of performance by creating visual patterns that enhance the audience's experience.

Through variations in direction, level, speed and energy, dancers transform physical space into a dynamic field of artistic expression. Space therefore becomes an active component of meaning rather than a passive setting for performance.

Costume, Ornamentation and Symbolism

Costume and ornamentation are essential aspects of Mbopo performance because they communicate social, cultural and symbolic meanings. The visual appearance of the dancers contributes significantly to audience interpretation and appreciation of the performance. Traditionally, Mbopo maidens are elaborately adorned with costumes, beads, body decorations and other forms of ornamentation that emphasize beauty, elegance and cultural identity. These visual elements function as symbols through which the community expresses its ideals concerning womanhood, dignity and social status. The careful attention devoted to costume preparation reflects the importance attached to the public presentation of the maiden.

Communication and Audience Reception

Communication lies at the heart of all performance traditions, and Mbopo dance is fundamentally a communicative act. Through movement, music, costume and symbolism, the dance conveys meanings that are understood and interpreted by members of the community. The performance therefore functions as a cultural dialogue between performers

and spectators. Unlike verbal forms of communication, dance relies primarily on non-verbal expressive systems. Gestures, postures, rhythmic patterns and spatial relationships operate as symbolic languages through which ideas and emotions are conveyed. Because these meanings emerge from shared cultural experiences, members of the community are often able to interpret the dance with considerable accuracy (Ufford, 1995:43).

Audience participation is an essential aspect of the communicative process. Spectators do not merely observe; they respond through applause, vocal encouragement, emotional engagement and other forms of participation. Their reactions contribute to the creation of meaning and influence the overall atmosphere of performance. The audience also functions as a custodian of cultural standards. Through their responses, spectators evaluate the effectiveness of the performance and affirm the values represented by the dance. Appreciation, praise and recognition serve as indicators of communal approval, while criticism signals departures from accepted norms.

Metaphysical Issues in Mbopo Dance Criticism

Dance criticism has traditionally concentrated on issues of form, technique, aesthetics and audience response. While these concerns remain important, they do not fully explain the deeper realities that underpin dance performance. Mbopo dance, like many African performance traditions, exists within a network of cultural meanings

that transcend its immediate physical manifestation. Beneath the visible dimensions of movement, rhythm and spectacle lie philosophical questions concerning existence, identity, continuity and embodiment. These questions place Mbopo within the domain of metaphysical inquiry and provide a broader framework for dance criticism.

The Ontological Status of Mbopo Dance

One of the central metaphysical questions in dance criticism concerns ontology, that is, the nature of being and existence. Applied to dance, ontology seeks to determine what exactly constitutes a dance work and where its existence may be located. Is a dance simply the bodily movements executed by performers during a particular event, or does its existence extend beyond the moment of performance? The question becomes particularly significant in relation to Mbopo dance. If the dance exists only in performance, then it ceases to exist once the performance ends. Yet Mbopo continues to be recognized, remembered and reproduced across generations. Its existence therefore appears to transcend the immediate performance event.

Several dimensions contribute to the ontological reality of Mbopo. First, the dance exists physically through the bodies of performers who actualize its movements in time and space. Second, it exists conceptually through the cultural knowledge preserved within the community. Third, it exists symbolically through the meanings

attached to its performance. Finally, it exists socially through communal recognition and acceptance. The ontological status of Mbopo therefore cannot be reduced to movement alone. The dance is simultaneously a physical event, a cultural institution, a symbolic system and a repository of collective memory. Its existence is sustained through the interaction of these dimensions. Each performance becomes an act of renewal through which the dance is brought into existence once again while remaining connected to previous enactments.

Identity and Continuity in Mbopo Dance

Closely related to ontology is the question of identity. Identity concerns the characteristics that make something what it is and enable it to remain recognizable despite change. In dance studies, questions of identity arise whenever a performance undergoes adaptation, reinterpretation or transformation. Traditional dances rarely remain static. Changes occur in performance venues, costumes, musical accompaniment, choreography and audience expectations. Mbopo dance has likewise experienced modifications resulting from social change, urbanization, religious influences and contemporary performance practices. Yet despite these changes, the dance continues to be identified as Mbopo.

Embodiment, Memory and Cultural Transmission

Another important metaphysical concern in Mbopo dance criticism is the relationship between embodiment and

memory. Dance exists through the body, yet the performing body is more than a biological instrument. It functions as a carrier of history, culture and collective experience. In Mbopo performance, the body becomes a medium through which cultural knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another (Ufford, 2004:82). Scholars have long argued that the body serves as a repository of memory and cultural knowledge. Connerton (1989:72) describes the body as “a storehouse of social memory”, while Tylor (2003:3) contends that embodied practice constitutes a distinct mode of knowing and transferring cultural memory. Similarly, Sklar (1991:8) emphasizes that “dance knowledge is embodied knowledge”, underscoring the role of the dancing body as a living archive of collective experience. From a phenomenological point of view, Merleau-Ponty (1962:146) further argues that the body is “our general medium for having a world”, suggesting that memory, identity, and culture are experienced and expressed through embodied action. The gestures, postures, movement qualities and performance conventions embodied by dancers are learned through participation in cultural processes. Through repeated practice and performance, the body acquires the ability to preserve and communicate meanings that might otherwise disappear. This process transforms the body into a repository of communal memory. Each performer inherits movement traditions developed by earlier generations and passes them on through performance. The body therefore serves as an archive in which

cultural experiences are stored and reproduced.

The audience also participates in this process of remembrance. Community members recognize familiar movements, symbols and performance conventions because they share a collective understanding of their significance. The appreciation of Mbopo is therefore dependent upon a network of memories that connect performers and spectators to a common cultural heritage.

Movement as Metaphysical Expression

Movement is the defining characteristic of dance, yet its significance extends beyond physical action. Within a metaphysical framework, movement may be understood as a mode of expressing realities that are not directly visible. Through movement, dancers communicate emotions, values, beliefs and experiences that cannot always be articulated through language. Mbopo dance illustrates this capacity of movement to function as metaphysical expression. The gestures, rhythms and bodily patterns employed in performance communicate ideas concerning social identity, moral conduct, communal belonging and cultural aspiration. These meanings are not physically present in the movements themselves but are conveyed through symbolic association and cultural interpretation.

Implications for Dance Criticism

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that Mbopo dance cannot be adequately understood through

conventional approaches that restrict criticism to technical execution, choreographic structure or aesthetic appeal. While these aspects remain important, they represent only part of the meaning embedded in the performance. A comprehensive criticism of Mbopo dance must extend beyond observable movement to include the cultural, philosophical and metaphysical dimensions that give the dance its significance within Ibibio society.

One major implication is the need to broaden the scope of dance criticism. Many critical frameworks inherited from Western aesthetic traditions emphasize formal elements such as movement vocabulary, spatial design, rhythm, balance and compositional structure. Although these analytical tools are useful, they may be insufficient when applied to African dances whose meanings are deeply embedded in communal values, spirituality, historical memory and social institutions. In the case of Mbopo, criticism that focuses exclusively on technique risks overlooking the cultural philosophy that informs the performance.

Dance criticism should therefore adopt a culturally grounded approach that takes into account the worldview from which a dance emerges. Mbopo is not merely an artistic display but also a social institution, a pedagogical process and a symbolic representation of communal ideals. Understanding the dance requires knowledge of the values associated with womanhood, morality, social responsibility and cultural continuity within Ibibio society. The

critic must be attentive to these underlying cultural contexts in order to produce interpretations that are both meaningful and accurate.

A second implication concerns the role of embodiment in performance analysis. As demonstrated earlier, the body in Mbopo functions as more than an instrument of movement. It serves as a repository of cultural memory and a medium through which inherited knowledge is transmitted across generations. Consequently, criticism should examine how the performing body embodies social meanings, cultural expectations and historical experiences. Such an approach moves criticism beyond the mere description of movement toward an understanding of the body as a site of cultural inscription and symbolic communication.

The metaphysical dimensions explored in this study further suggest that dance criticism should engage more deeply with philosophical inquiry. Questions concerning existence, identity, embodiment and meaning are not external to dance but are integral to understanding its nature. Dance is an ephemeral art form whose physical manifestations disappear almost as soon as they occur. Yet its meanings, memories and cultural effects often endure long after the performance has ended. The critic is therefore challenged to investigate not only what is seen on stage but also the invisible structures of meaning that sustain the performance.

Furthermore, African dance criticism should increasingly draw upon indigenous epistemologies and cultural philosophies. Too often, African performance traditions are interpreted

through theoretical models developed in cultural environments that differ significantly from those in which the dances originated. While cross-cultural theories can provide useful insights, they should not overshadow local systems of knowledge. Mbopo dance is rooted in Ibibio conceptions of community, morality, social identity and human development. Critical frameworks that emerge from these cultural realities are likely to produce richer and more nuanced interpretations than those imposed exclusively from outside traditions.

Another important implication relates to the preservation and documentation of African dance heritage. Critical engagement with performances such as Mbopo contributes not only to scholarly interpretation but also to the safeguarding of cultural knowledge. As processes of modernization, globalization and urbanization continue to reshape African societies, many traditional performance practices face the risk of transformation, marginalization or gradual disappearance. Dance criticism therefore assumes a broader cultural responsibility by providing analytical records that document the meanings, functions and philosophical foundations of these traditions. Through rigorous critical inquiry, scholars can help preserve aspects of cultural memory that might otherwise be lost, ensuring that future generations have access not only to descriptions of dance movements but also to the deeper systems of thought and value that underpin them. In this regard, criticism

becomes an important instrument for cultural continuity and heritage preservation.

The discussion of Mbopo also highlights the necessity for a more dialogic relationship between critics, performers and communities. Traditional approaches to criticism often position the critic as an external observer whose authority derives primarily from theoretical expertise and aesthetic judgment. However, dances that are deeply embedded within communal and cultural contexts require forms of criticism that engage with the perspectives of cultural custodians, performers and community members who possess experiential knowledge of the tradition. Such engagement enables the critic to access meanings that may not be immediately visible within the performance itself. It also encourages a more inclusive mode of knowledge production in which interpretation emerges through interaction between scholarly analysis and indigenous understanding. By acknowledging the voices of those who sustain and transmit the dance tradition, criticism can achieve greater cultural sensitivity, interpretive depth and contextual accuracy.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to dance criticism. The analysis of Mbopo requires insights from performance studies, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, aesthetics and history. No single discipline is sufficient to explain the complexity of the dance. An interdisciplinary perspective enables the

critic to appreciate the multiple layers of meaning embedded within performance and to account for both its artistic and cultural dimensions.

The implications of this study therefore extend beyond Mbopo dance itself. They point toward a broader reorientation of African dance criticism—one that recognizes dance as a complex cultural phenomenon involving aesthetics, philosophy, memory, identity and social meaning. Such an approach enriches critical discourse and provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the significance of African performance traditions in contemporary scholarship.

Conclusion

This article advances African dance criticism by demonstrating that Mbopo dance cannot be adequately understood through aesthetic, choreographic, or performance-based analysis alone. Its principal contribution lies in establishing a metaphysical framework for dance criticism that recognizes dance as a site where questions of being, identity, memory, and cultural continuity are enacted and negotiated. Through Mbopo, the study reveals that the significance of dance resides not merely in its observable movements but in the invisible cultural realities those movements embody and sustain. The research therefore challenges conventional critical approaches that privilege form over meaning and argues for a broader interpretive paradigm that integrates philosophical inquiry with performance analysis.

Beyond its contribution to Mbopo scholarship, the study opens new directions for African performance research by positioning indigenous dance traditions as legitimate sources of philosophical knowledge rather than simply objects of artistic evaluation. It proposes that African dance criticism should be grounded in the epistemologies and worldviews from which performances emerge, thereby enabling more culturally responsive and theoretically robust interpretations. The metaphysical perspective developed here provides a model that may be applied to other African dance traditions, offering fresh possibilities for examining how performance preserves communal memory, constructs identity, and sustains cultural existence in changing social contexts.

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