

Dance and ethics in the traditional african philosophy essay



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Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at various functions of dance in the Traditional African Society, especially its use for interpreting ideas such as ethics of (“ Twene Kîµse”) festival.

2. 1 Dance and Ethics in the Traditional African Context

Dance as a tool for perpetuating some simple ethics of the social values within the Ghanaian society has received some attention over the years. For example, an adowa[1]dancer begs his or her drummers to play a good rhythm for him or her to dance and thus seeks permission from the gods, elders and drummers before dancing.[2]By this, I am referring to simple gestures that portray a sense of respect and acknowledgement in the society. Dance is one of the effective tools for communication and nation building. These help in ensuring good behavioral change in the community. [3]According to AbíÃ°bölä (2001), the term “ ethics” as stated in the introductory section of this thesis are grouped into four areas;

Normative ethics – the basis and justification of moral rules and principles

Meta ethics – the meaning of moral terms

Applied ethics – the nature, content and application of specific moral guidelines

Descriptive ethics – accounts of how people actually behave in situations requiring moral action

Abí°bölä points out that, contemporary thinking on ethics in African philosophy is concerned with normative and descriptive ethics. In justification to this, he argues that many African philosophers on the topic of ethics raise the question of the position of African ethics. The question is, do these ethics come out of religious doctrines (normative ethics), or are they results of reason (descriptive ethics). Ethics, as defined in the introduction of this thesis connote good human behavior in relation to other humans in a society. This is without the inclusion of a supernatural being or religion. It is humane, for every individual in a society to adopt positive characters to live peacefully in and out of the community without any religious intuition. On the other hand, the traditional African, by nature, is a religious being whose daily affairs are based on his or her relationship with divinities (God, gods, and or ancestral spirits, etc.). Therefore, the understanding of ethics (which are found in the traditional beliefs and customs) will not depart from religion. The ' faith', ' trust', and ' fear' for the divinity by the traditional African makes him or her submissive to the laid down rules and regulations of the community.

In this contemporary era, many will perhaps appreciate the relevance of ethics, which is communicated through dance. Though, dance as a traditional activity, has suffered adulteration through the passing on from generation to generation, its usage in modern choreography with all the theatrical elements like sound, light, projections, costumes and make-ups, props and other technicalities makes it more educational and applicable to formal education.

Realistically, some ethics in the traditional African context may not be applicable to the modern or contemporary society due to technological advancement, modernization, religious beliefs and disbeliefs and formal education. However, the attempt to use Ghanaian traditional dances creatively will shed light on old but yet beneficial traditional values. For example, the original benefit derived from the Dipo ceremony, may have lost its relevance to the Dangme girl today, because formal education has taken up some responsibility of the dipo rite. This is where choreography as a tool, can be used to promote some ethical values of the dipo rite and also serve as a preservative measure for the dipo dance as well.

Some ceremonial dances positively affect the moral lives of people within the society when their themes are geared towards the endorsement of good conduct. The bragoro and dipo ceremonies and dance of the Dangme of Ghana is a typical example. Adinku (1994) notes that, dance for social ceremonies such as the dipo is restricted to girls in their puberty stage because the norms demand that, they must undergo initiation to inculcate in them the values of womanhood, and prepare them physically and emotionally to face their feminine responsibilities with confidence.[4]The performance of dipo and bragoro[5]help to simplify some of the ethical and moral lessons acquired in the entire ceremonies. The adowa dance of the Akan portrays some ethics. For example, a dancer may humbly plead with his or her drummers to play a good music as he or she dances by bowing and putting the right hand in the left hand, showing respect. The dancer bows to reverence a king in state and waves his right hand to greet and welcome spectators. These examples suggest that some dances are

indicators and tools for bringing about ethical behaviors in the society.

Dance as a non-verbal form of communication transcends ethnic and racial boundaries with fewer limitations.[6]

Dance is fun, healing, joy, freedom, love, meditation, dynamic, an expression, emotional, magic and real and because of these qualities, it draws people's attention when it is performed to an audience. These audiences are then exposed to and affected by the above irresistible qualities, thus, influenced by the symbolic movements carefully selected and used by the dancer or performer to express an emotional state.[7] This thesis uses the power of dance to address the findings of my research, which is the influence of the " Twene Kîµse" festival on the practice of ethics.

2. 2 The Relationship between Dance and Ethics

Like ethical practices of the traditional African society, dance is one of the oldest traditions of man performed in all social gatherings such as festivals, naming ceremonies, funerals, puberty rites, and enstoolment and disstoolment of traditional leaders, because it graces every occasion in the life-circle of people. Within the life cycle of these people are their ethics and according to Nii-Yartey, a renowned Ghanaian choreographer, " in Africa, dance serves as an index to the value systems that enable the community to interpret and express the various events of life." [8] Some of these events of life manifest the community's reaction to areas such as work, to food and shelter, social and economic conditions, religious beliefs and disbeliefs, moments of joy and sadness. All these are captured in the dances of communities, thus, the Africans' way of life in totality is reflected in his or her dance.

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To most Africans, dance is a habit formation, thus, one develops the interest and ability to dance as one participates in events associated with dance. He or she becomes familiar with the requirements and values of the dance, because the dos and don'ts of each dances learnt are also congruent to societal norms. For example, a fonfon from, [9] nagila and adowa dancer, during state functions, will pay homage by bowing to the king, requesting for permission to dance. In the same way in our society, an Ashanti man will remove one of his footwear, lower the cloth on his left shoulder and bow to greet or shake hands with an Ashanti King. Furthermore, an \$kyerlme will lower his cloth to the waist level, slightly place his right foot forward while stepping on the tail-end of his sandals before pouring libation. One is introduced to the societal moral requirements which form the ethical practices and principles of society as he or she studies through participation. Therefore, it is assumed that one becomes morally upright based on ones level of participation in dance, and his or her responds to its requirements. Morality is not ours originally, but learnt through socialization in the community. Hence, as the African grows, he or she learns through this habit formation to choose to do what is right from wrong. This is so because, to be morally right is not an in-born trait, but acquired with the choices one makes. One, consequently, bears the cost of the good or bad he or she purchases.

One of the most important principles of the African is the family system – the interdependency of the African. Thus, the challenge of one person is the challenge of all. This is not different in their dance performances. One does not 'perform' in isolation because there will be no one to drum, sing, or hail the dancer and these are predominant in the African dance performance.

Dancers mostly perform in groups at social functions, and admirers may hail them by clapping or walking into the dancing ring and fixing a coin on the forehead of the dancer. Gyekye (1996) opines that, “ the African is by nature a social being oriented towards others in a community of persons.

Community life directly involves a person in social and moral roles, responsibilities, obligations and commitments that must be fulfilled.” The Ghanaian is identified as a community member and therefore, seeks to uphold the values inherent in these obligations. These social obligations are the moral standards which sum up the ethics of the community. What Gyekye says is not different from the direction of this study because, the concern of the social being to live in an environment of peace, prepares him or her to adhere to ethical practices and principles of the community for posterity. Some of these ethical practices and principles can be found in the traditional dances and the festival activities of the African, while others are found in the day-to-day activities of people in the community, exist in isolation and therefore, are getting diminished. With changes that have occurred in our ethical life due to modernization, perhaps dance, through the medium of choreography can capture the essence of some of these values and bring them to attention of this contemporary community.

The African lives for his community and Anthony Egan confirms this by his statement that “ If the foundation of African ethics is in the notion of humanness, what is to be a person, ubuntu sees this humanness as personhood in the community: a person is a person through other people.”

This confirms the earlier point raised that no one lives in isolation in the African system: a person life because others live; therefore, his or her

activities affect the progress of the society. In light of the above, therefore, there is no doubt that the distinctive features which help recognize the African people are their cultural practices, social activities and values, religious and traditional beliefs, and principally their dance and musical traditions.

2.3 The Meaning of Ethics and Its Relevance to this Study

In order to situate this research work within the context of ethics, some assertions by philosophical scholars such as Gyekye, Mbiti, Kant and others will be considered.

According to Gyekye (1987), the Ghanaian equivalent word for ethics is suban. He explains that,

“ ethics” may be translated as suban ho nimdee or suban ho adwendwen, studies or reflections on character, a rendition which, in stressing the notion of character, agrees with the Akan conception of morality and hence can correctly be used, sometimes with an additional word or words to reflect modern usage, as the Akan equivalent for the word “ ethics”. [10]

In his contention, suban is so vital and for this reason, it is given a central place in the Ghanaian moral language and thought that it may be considered as summing up the whole idea of morality. For example, an Akan will say, “ He has no character” (onni suban) instead of, “ He has no morals.” That is, onni suban is mostly used if a person is describing the negative moral status of another person. The word pa or papa, meaning “ good” is sometimes added to the sentence to make the meaning clearer in a moral sense. For

instance, onni suban pa (he has no good character, or his conduct is
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unethical). The opposite of this statement is, *owo suban pa* (he has moral, or he is ethical, moral). That is a person with a praiseworthy character. This takes our discussion to the meaning of character and its relationship to ethics.

Gyekye again defines character as “ a state or condition of a soul which “ causes” it to perform its actions spontaneously and easily”.[11]This presupposes that, the moral habit of an individual is innate and as he or she grows, the society teaches him or her to adopt good character to act positively at all times and in spontaneous situations. In support of this, Kant (1724-1804), states that, “ act as if the principle on which your action is based were to become, by your will, a universal law of nature”.[12]Kant’s statement has bearing in the Akan proverb that says *abaa a yîµde b4 Tekyi no, yîµde b4 Baah*. This is literally translated as, “ do what you want others to do unto you” or and therefore one should be mindful of his actions so as not to negatively affect other people. According to Kant, one must be fully aware of actions, whether good or bad, so that he or she will be fully responsible for the outcome thereafter. Bad people are not welcomed in social gathering such as festivals and therefore do not add up to the decision makers of the community. On the other hand, a person is believed to have the capability of changing from unacceptable behaviors to acceptable behaviors through the teaching of moral values embedded in proverbs, traditional dances and folktales. Such people become part of the society because, it is in living virtuously that human beings can give meaning to their social life and existence.[13]

Johnson's (2004) article on Kant's "Moral Philosophy" indicates his (Kant's) substitution of ethics with morals and proposes that "Once we "seek out and establish" the fundamental principle of morality a priori, then we may consult facts drawn from experience in order to determine how best to apply this principle to human beings and generate particular conclusions about how we ought to act".[14]Kant has observed that, to understand what ethics really is, an in-depth analysis of our moral concept must be sought. For example, Saint Augustine (354-430), as he sought to reinterpret the virtues of classical Greece says, "Temperance, courage, justice and wisdom are expressions of Christian virtue".[15]In this direction, an action is regarded as right if it is in agreement with a moral rule or principle.[16]The understanding of the concept of 'good will', 'obligation', 'duty', and so on as well as their logical relationship to one another, is inevitably linked with the African concept of ethics; thus, we can determine the rationality of one's actions; whether he does what is right or what is wrong.

To buttress this point, Bentham Jeremy (1748-1832) positions that, "correct actions are those that result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people".[17]To live in a harmonious environment with one another, one's deeds must bring about the greatest degree of joy and happiness to him or herself as well as people around him. To Jeremy, one's happiness is quantifiable to units of pleasure, therefore less units of pain.

However, Socrates (469-399bc) concepts of ethics that "every person has full knowledge of ultimate truth contained within the soul and needs only to be spurred to conscious reflection in order to become aware of it".[18]The ultimate truth found within the soul of the African, as confirmed by Gyekye, <https://assignbuster.com/dance-and-ethics-in-the-traditional-african-philosophy-essay/>

is interpreted in the Akan proverb that says, “ no one shows the child where God is”. [19] In other words, even a child knows what is right from wrong and this is because of the ultimate truth, which is an in-born-trait and is contained in the soul of the individual. While some African thinkers hold the view that, the punishment given to a person who has gone against an ethical rule may spur on others from committing the same crime, others hold a different view on the matter. For example, when a parent or guardian disciplines a child for insubordination, it spurs on other children from doing same. On the other hand, the idea of motivating people to do the right thing does not sit well with others. Since the ultimate truth is embedded in everyone, it presupposes that one does not need to be motivated to do what is right. Socrates’ ideology concerning ethics is to incite people to do the right thing and thus, without incentives people may not consciously reflect on the knowledge of “ ultimate truths.” I agree with the two assertions because, from childhood one experiences moral virtues through habit-forming activities such as traditional dances, folk tales and others that include singing traditional songs and proverbs for socialization.

[20] Furthermore, the society bears the responsibility of helping to discipline a child when he or she goes wrong, because of the collective perspective of society for the upbringing of its members. When a child goes wrong, the onus falls on the members of the community to discipline that child.

One significant example observed during my research trip is my experience of the sacred atmosphere the Adjumako-Kokoben town experiences a month before the celebration of “ Twene Kîµse” festivities. People are required to eschew antisocial behaviors most especially during the festival season.

Unethical behaviors such as stealing, gossiping, fighting and desecrating of sacred centers like the Twene Kîµse shrines and mpusuban[21]are highly prohibited. This is because the period of the festival is considered holy, where spirits of departed ancestors come back home to prepare the grounds for the up-and-coming events. The community frowns on people who go contrary to this ethical rule and culprits are summoned and fined by their traditional council. During the festival, such persons are ridiculed with insulting songs to spur on others during the celebration of the “ Abangye” which leads to the climax of the “ Twene Kîµse” festival. It is also a belief that, the spiritual entity that protects the community with its source from the deity, Twene Kîµse, does not condone unethical people in the society.

[22]This raises the question of whether or not the ethical rules or principles have a link with the supernatural or their traditional religion. However, John Mbiti (1969) agrees that ethical rule practiced worldwide may promote peace and tranquility among people. He points out that;

As in all societies of the world, social order and peace are recognized by African people as essential and sacred. Where the sense of corporate life is so deep, it is inevitable that the solidarity of the community must be mentioned, otherwise there are disintegration and destruction.[23]

He believes that, the African community is bound together with kinship relationship and therefore the unethical deeds of one person affect the entire community. This becomes sacrilegious during the ‘ holy’ periods of traditional festivals.

For the purpose of this dissertation, the word suban will be adopted, thus, the required suban proposed by either the community or the gods (supernatural entities) to be practiced in socio-cultural and political activities. Theories of philosophers concerning the source of ethics in the traditional African society in relation to my research findings will be pursued in the next section.

2. 4 Theoretical Framework

2. 4. 1 Ethical Concerns in African Cultural Standpoint

Many scholars have written extensively on the ethical concerns in the traditional African societies. Some have attributed the African's practice of ethics to their religious beliefs while others have disputed the fact and said that, ethics have less to do with religion. One of such philosophers who have suggested a relationship between the African's way of life and religion is Kofi A. Opoku (1974). He notes;

The phenomenon of religion is so pervasive in the life of the Akan, and so inextricably bound up with their culture, that it is not easy to isolate what is purely religious from other aspects of life. It may be said without fear or exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion, and religion is life.[24]

According to Opoku, the African cannot segregate himself from religion and hence religion affects his moral obligations, and therefore the Akan morality is based on religion. In other words, a person's moral standards are to a large extent dependent on his religion. Furthermore, Opoku (1978) writes on Akan morality and states that, " Generally, morality evolves from religious

considerations, and so pervasive is religion in African culture that ethics and <https://assignbuster.com/dance-and-ethics-in-the-traditional-african-philosophy-essay/>

religion cannot be separated from each other”.[25]The traditional African is seen as a religious being through his daily reverence to divinities in his or her life circle; birth, puberty or initiation and death. When a child is born, libation is poured to ask for blessing for it and thank the gods for its safe entrance from the supernatural to the natural world. In some cases, names of ancestors who led moral lives are given to the child to honor them. Puberty (a period that marks the beginning of adulthood in both men and women), farming, fishing, hunting, enstoolment and destoolment of chiefs are not performed without the consent of a deity, so as the death rite of individuals. These activities are the customs and belief systems of the traditional people. Some of the customs and belief systems of the African community contain some ethics. The ideas behind their practices are beneficial and connote morality in the community. For example, it is unethical for one to whistle and sweep at night in the most Akan societies. Whistling may attract snakes, which can bite one to death. In the same way, precious tiny objects may be swept away at night. These are beliefs which when practiced becomes beneficial to the people. Can it also be said that the gods propounded these beliefs? Bishop Sarpong, in support of the above discussion states, “ Ethics here merges with religious practices, and assumes communal proportions. Among the Ghanaian, every ethical conduct may be said to be religiously orientated”.[26]Busia (1969) a notable scholar of Ghanaian culture also declares that religion determines the moral duties for the members of a group or tribe.[27]Finally, Mbiti reinforces that, “ there exist, therefore, many laws, customs, set forms of behaviors, regulations, rules (...), constituting the moral code and ethics of a given community or society. Some of these are held sacred, and are believed to have been

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instituted by God....”[28]All these assertions agree that ethics is hardly segregated from religion, and religion[29]has its source from Supreme Being (God or gods), not man.

However, Kwame Gyekye, Segun Gbadegesin, Kwasi Wiredu and Polycarp Ikuenobe disagree with all the above claims. To them, moralities have less to do with religion where the source of this religion is God. Gyekye explains that, through his research in the Akan community, no one attributed rules of moral behavior to instructions from God. Nonetheless, Gyekye clarifies the relationship of Akan morality's dependence on religion, and he provides two distinctions. He categorically states;

It must mean or imply: (1) that moral concepts such as “ good,” “ bad,” “ right,” “ wrong,” and “ ought” are (to be) to be defined in terms of religious prescriptions or the commands of some supernatural being; (2) that moral beliefs, principles and ideas derive logically from those of religion and hence, (3) that religious prescriptions provide the necessary justification for moral beliefs, principles and judgments. Finally, (4) the moral conduct of individuals is determined or greatly influenced by their religious beliefs.[30]

He distinguishes the above assertion of religion merging with morality and explains morality as referring,

Either to a set of social rules and norms for guiding and regulating the conduct of people in a society, or behavior pattern, that is, responses or attitudes to such rules and norms. Thus, we speak not only of moral rules, beliefs, and prescription, but also of moral behavior, meaning behavior in conformity with accepted moral beliefs and rules: the moral person in one

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whose attitude or response to moral rule is satisfactory and commendable. So that the idea of the religious dependence on morality involves not only the sources of moral rules and principles, but also the influences that affect patterns of behavior.[31]

Gyekye proves that there are visible distinctions with these two implications and for that matter, vivid analysis must be done in this aspect to avoid people from the mistake of given false conclusion on the issue of religion and morality in the African culture.

According to Tufuhene Akorful IV and \$kyer1ma Kwaku Aky1 from the Adjumako-Kokoben traditional Area, ethics are the morals values within the belief systems of the community that promote acceptable behaviors and were passed on from their forefathers unto them. Here, ' forefathers' refer to the ancestors and traditional priests of the town. They believe that individuals do not accept acknowledgement for contributing to the welfare of the community, rather, wisdom is ascribed to people of old or ancestors, priest and gods. They therefore admit that, through the wisdom of the ancestor and the gods, ethical principles for moral behavior in the town, are propounded and communicated through their traditional priest unto the people. In this instance, one see two underlining features over here; the ancestors who were once human and the gods. Could it be that the provider of ethics is a shared responsibility of humans and the supernatural? Yes, because the traditional religion is a relationship between man and the supernatural, and though one is supreme over the other and may be the provider of ethics, the less supreme also has equal responsibility to make

moral rules to protect his or her community. Yet, he or she does not take glory for his achievement, but ascribes it to the gods or ancestors.

The Adjumako-Kokoben people believe that the traditional priest to the “Twene Kîµse” god is the greatest priest of all times. He (the Twene Kese priest) protects his people by providing ethical rules. These are found within their belief systems.

Table 1.

The ethics found in some belief systems of the Adjumako-Kokoben people

Examples Of Some Belief Systems In Adjumako-Kokoben

The Ethics In Such Belief Systems

Do not bring a whole bunch of Plantain called apim[32]to the house. Cut some fingers off first.

By cutting some fingers off, it encourages sharing with others in the society.

Do not bring a whole palm fruit to the house. Cut off some fruits first.

Share some of the palm fruits with a neighbor.

Do not pound fufu[33]at night.

Eating heavy food at night may cause stomach upset. Insects or objects may fall in the fufu during pounding and cause harm to those who eat it.

Do not go to the streams when menstruating or have a cut on your body.

Diseases may be transmitted to other people.

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Do not bring dog to town.

They are believed to carry bad spirit, which can affect the blessings of men.

They can also bit and transmit diseases as well.

Cut very long firewood into shorter pieces before bringing them home.

They occupy lots of space. The carrier may hurt someone with it due to the length of the log. Unbalance may break the neck of the carrier.

2. 5 Ethical Theories

The fundamental principle of morality binds every individual in a community because ethics are about how to live a good life wherever one finds him or herself.[34]Meaning, harmonious life in a community depends on obeying the ethical principles therein. Richard T. Hull (1979), in his paper, “ The Varieties of Ethical Theories”, explains various ethical theories and states the two fundamental types of ethical theory:

those based on the notion of choosing one’s actions so as to maximize the value or values to be expected as consequences of those actions (called consequentialist or teleological theories [from the Greek telos, meaning aim or purpose]; and those based on the notion of choosi