

*Communicating Social Justice Through the Dance Performance of Amona
by Eda Theatre International*

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Abstract

Nigerian society grapples with issues related to ethnic conflict, religious violence and corruption. These forms of social injustices have led to a disregard for human dignity, rights and freedom, undermining economic development and limiting opportunities. Additionally, they have destabilized government institutions and democratic processes. In an effort to create a better and more equitable society, contemporary dances are being performed. One such dance performance is entitled *Amona*. Staged on October 1st, 2023, in Lagos State, this performance combines cultural and contemporary movements as a means of communication. The focus of this study is to explore the social justice messages conveyed through the movements in the *Amona* dance performance. By Applying John Swales' rhetorical moves and critical discourse analysis method, the findings reveal that this performance conveys powerful messages about achieving an equitable and fair society.

Keywords: Social Justice, Dance, Amona, Eda Theatre International, Rhetorical Moves

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Introduction

Reports by diverse agencies reveal a deepening corruption in Nigeria. In 2015, Nigeria was ranked 136th out of 170 countries assessed. In subsequent years, the rankings continued: 139th out of 176 countries surveyed in 2016, 148th out of the 175 countries surveyed worldwide in 2017 and 144th out of the 175 countries surveyed in 2018. By 2019, Nigeria's ranking had dropped further to 146th out of the 180 countries considered (Transparency International, 2020). Nigeria failed to meet virtually all the basic conditions for development and found itself stuck in the vortex of perpetual poverty. It is currently ranked as the world's 15th most fragile country (Fund for Peace, 2023).

In the health care sector, funds meant for healthcare have been embezzled, medical equipment and supplies have been stolen. Money meant for development projects, such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), has been misappropriated. Diversion of resources intended for education to personal projects. Billions of dollars have been lost in the oil industry due to corruption, including the infamous Malabu oil deal (Global Witness, 2023).

The 2023 general elections were marred by allegations of fraud, voter suppression and rigging. The Nigerian Police Force has been accused of widespread bribery and extortion, with officers demanding bribes from citizens. Fake employees and pensioners have been discovered on government payrolls, with millions of dollars lost to fraud (Amnesty International, 2024). These corrupt practices and many others have subverted the rule of law, democratic institutions and public trust, and most importantly, increased poverty, inequalities and discrimination.

Equally, multiple armed groups continue to perpetuate harm and discrimination against individuals and communities. For instance, ongoing attacks and counter-attacks between Fulani herdsmen and indigenous communities (mostly Christian) in States like Plateau, Benue and Taraba. Inter-ethnic clashes and banditry in Kaduna State, involving various ethnic groups like Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri. Clashes between farmers (mostly Christian) and nomadic herders (mostly Fulani Muslim) over land and resources. Unrest and militancy in the Niger Delta region over oil resources and environmental degradation. Tensions and protests by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) for an independent state in the Southeast region. Furthermore, these situations have led to killings and jeopardized the livelihood of millions across the country, hindering efforts to build a harmonious and inclusive society.

As a means of contributing to building a better and more equitable society, the *Amona* dance is performed by Eda Theatre International. *Amona* was staged on 1st October, 2023 in Lagos State at an event organized to sensitize citizens. The performance featured only seven dancers and utilized body movements as the primary means of communication. Additionally, the movements of the seven dancers were accompanied by minimal costumes, props, set design, sound and lighting. Therefore, the focus of this study is to explore the social justice messages conveyed through the movements in the *Amona* dance performance.

Dance as Communication

Dance serves as a powerful form of expression, using movement to convey meaning and evoke emotion. Movement lies at the heart of dance, providing the framework for expression, storytelling and communication (DeFrantz, 2020). It emerges from the parallel interface of a

dancer's kinesthetic sense of movement and their awareness of space (kinesphere), allowing them to convey profound messages. Unlike other art forms that rely on paint, words, or sounds, dance employs space, time, and force as its materials. Within dance, these materials unite seamlessly: the body moves through space, requiring time and utilising energy as its force. In various combinations, they create images perceived through visual-kinesthetic senses.

In African dance, movement becomes a potent form of non-verbal communication, transcending language barriers. Dancers convey messages and emotions without relying on words. Rhythm and timing play a critical role in conveying meaning and emotion, with complex polyrhythms and precise timing forming a rich and nuanced language of movement. The use of space and proximity allows dancers to express relationships and emotions. While, facial expressions add depth to their performances. Specific body parts, such as the hips, arms, or legs is isolate to convey meaning and emotion. Connecting with the earth, dancers use weight and gravity to create powerful movements that infuse performances with depth and emotion. Paraphernalia like music, costumes, make up, props, set design, lighting, verbal utterances, texts/poetry enhance the dance experience (Mensah, 2016; Asante, 2018; Albright, 2019).

Across most African Societies, dance serves as a conduit for communicating cultural values. Examples include the *Mhondora* dance among the Shona people of Zimbabwe and *Gelede* dance in Nigeria, both conveying belief systems. Additionally, dances that mark communal life such as agricultural festivals, seasonal transitions, rites of passage, successful project completions and the hope for prosperity. Carry cultural heritage, traditions and identities. Notable examples include the Zulu Reed Dance in South Africa, the Dogon mask dance in Mali and *Koroso* dance in Northern part of Nigeria.

Social Justice and Dance

Social justice means to foster and encourage, in and through partnership, the highest possible development of all human faculties in all its members; and this end is justice or right ordering of such a society. It is a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions (Murrell, 2006). Social justice is a process and a goal, aimed at creating a society that values equality, justice and human rights. It seeks to challenge and transform the systems, structures, and institutions that perpetuate inequality, oppression, and social injustice (Sen, 2009; Horton, 2019).

Through the use of body movement, dance exposes social injustice and promotes equality, human rights, empathy, respect and dignity. For example, traditional dances such as *Toyi-Toyi* and *Pantsula* in South Africa, *Adumu* dance among Maasai community in Kenya, *Ndombolo* dance in the Republic of Congo, *Ngoma* dance in Tanzania have been used to resist and protest against the apartheid regime. Protest against land grabbing and advocating for rights of citizens. Promotes peace and reconciliation in conflict affected areas. Educate communities about HIV/AIDS prevention and reduce stigma.

In the South-Western part of Nigeria, dances such as *Bata*, *Egungun* and *Obatala* have been used to mobilize communities against oppression and political marginalization. Promote respect for ancestors and challenge cultural appropriation. Promote agricultural sustainability and challenge environmental degradation. Promote physical and mental well-being and

challenge healthcare disparities. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, *Atilogwu*, *Efi* and *Ogwu* dances have been utilized to promote peace and nonviolence in communities. Challenge gender-based violence and advocate for women's rights. Promote environmental sustainability. Equally, In the Northern part of Nigeria, dances like *Bori*, *Shadi* and *Yanjuwa* are used to address mental health issues and challenge stigma around mental illness. Promotes cultural heritage and challenge cultural erasure. Promote youth empowerment and challenge ageism.

Furthermore, in 'Dance against Human Trafficking', 'Dance Against Gender-Based Violence', 'Dance for Change' and 'Dance for Education', body movement is utilized to advocate for disability rights and inclusion. To raise awareness about human trafficking and support survivors. Exposes gender-based violence and advocate for women's rights. Raise awareness about reproductive health and challenge stigma around sexuality. Equally, In the face of several social injustices such as corruption, ethnic conflict and religious violence, body movement is utilized to convey social justice messages in order to build a just society and inspire positive change. Hence, this study set out to explore the messages conveyed through movements in *Amona* dance performance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on John Swales' rhetorical moves. This approach originated from the educational objectives of supporting the teaching of academic writing and reading for non-native speakers of English (Swales, 1990). Rhetorical moves are a framework for analyzing and understanding the rhetorical strategies used in communication, particularly in academic and research writing. Swales' framework identifies six rhetorical moves that writers or performers use to achieve their goals:

Establishing the research area and claiming its significance, identifying a specific gap in the existing research and claiming its importance, establishing the research question, objectives, and methodology, presenting the research findings and occupying the niche, interpreting the findings and making a claim about their significance, providing evidence and justification for the claim. (Swales, 1990; Swales, 2004; Bhatia, 2004; Henry and Roseberry, 2001; Samraj, 2005)

Eda Theatre international's *Amona* dance performance can be situated within the context of the aforementioned rhetorical moves framework. The performance raises awareness about social injustice issues such as corruption, ethnic conflict and religious violence. It creates a space for reflection and action on social justice matters. The audience is encouraged to engage with the performance, grappling with the complexities of social justice. By applying Swales' Rhetorical Moves framework, this study analyses the social justice messages conveyed through movements in the *Amona* dance performance.

Social Justice Messages in *Amona* Dance Performance

In the dance performance of *Amona*, social justice messages such as transparency, accountability, unity and equality are conveyed. In conveying these social justice messages, contemporary dance such as *Waack*, one of the fundamental dance styles in Hip-hop is expressed. Dancers performed *Waack* with a slight bend in the knees and a relaxed posture. Followed by a quick contraction of muscles in the arms, legs and a release of the contracted muscles. Another movement is *Chest Pop*. Dancers express a sudden, sharp contraction of the

chest muscles accompanied by a slight freeze with the chest and shoulders being the focal point. Also, dancers engage in patterns of foot placement, such as forward and backward walks, side steps, and turns. Shifting their weight onto one foot and distributing it evenly between both feet. The positioning and orientation of the feet and legs are in relation to the body and the direction of movement. The dance steps are performed in a rapid and repetitive manner to the music titled *Amona Tete Mabo* by J. A. Adelokun.



Figure 1: Waack movement indicating transparency. **Figure 2:** Chest pop demonstrating transparency



Figure 3: Footwork conveying transparency

Aforementioned dance movements such as Waack, chest pop and footwork depict the importance of transparency in leadership and governance. The movements also showcase the negative impact of secrecy and deception on individuals and groups. Emphasises the need for transparency in community organizing and collective action. Celebrate the courage and resilience of individuals who demand transparency. Envision a future where transparency is prioritized and social justice is achieved. The dance steps are accompanied with light and shadow which symbolize the contrast between transparency and secrecy. Equally, speech is incorporated to emphasize the importance of transparency on personal, collective healing and growth.

Dancers also engaged in *Gbekuru* and *Kiniun* forms of Bata dance which is a rapid vibrations of the legs, arms, and torso. Characterized by light footwork involving rapid tapping, stamping and turns. Another movement expressed along with these forms of Bata dance is the

Nae Nae. This is a popular dance move in the dab gesture Hip-Hop style. It is a sharp movement of the arms and hands. Quick swaying and snapping of arms down and up. Followed by movement of hips and torso in a subtle way and flipping of the hands up and out to the sides with palms facing upwards.



Figure 4: *Gbekuru* movement representing unity



Figure 5: *Kiniun* movement signifying unity



Figure 6: Nae Nae movement depicting unity

This set of dance movements challenge systemic divisions. Illustrate the principle of ensuring individuals having equal rights, opportunities and treatment, regardless of their gender, religion, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic. They struggles and triumphs of groups coming together to achieve social justice. Highlight the importance of individual and collective actions in achieving social justice. Portray alternative futures of a united and

equitable society free from ethnic conflict, religious violence and corruption. Promote unity and solidarity in purpose, vision and action.

Furthermore, dancers convey ideas through voguing a series of precise and angular movements, poses, and gestures. Involving intricate tosses, quick flicks of the wrist, sharp finger snaps held briefly in a specific position, creating tension and release. Next comes a dipping movement, involving a swift and controlled descent into a squatting position, a brief hold and a quick ascent back to standing position. Dancers take a lateral position and move forward. Lastly, dancers glide their feet while rotating their bodies clockwise around a central axis. They also glide their feet inward, outward, forward and backward while rotating their body.



Figure 7: Vogue movement portraying equality



Figure 8: Dip movement conveying equality



Figure 9: Glide turn illustrating equality

The aforementioned dance moves expose systems that perpetuate inequality. Illustrating the need for equal access to resources and opportunities. Showcase the resilience and strength of people fighting for equality. Illustrate the value of unity and cooperation in attaining equality. Highlight a future where everyone has equal rights and opportunities. Depict empathy and understanding as traits that promote equality. Present a society where cultures are valued and celebrated equally. Project an alternative futures with equal representation of diverse voices and experiences. Illustrate the duty of individual and collective action in the pursuit of equal opportunities.

In addition, *Apepe Oniyo* is a form of *Apepe* dance that dancers use to convey messages. It involves expressive hand, arm and hip movements accompanied by subtle facial expressions. The dancers execute slow and controlled movements, emphasising their poise. Dancers also perform *Etighi Ogene*, characterized by quick footwork, rapid rotations and arm swings. They slightly bend their knees, maintaining a slight crouch. This is followed by rapid

stomping and jumping, incorporating dynamic hip movements. Finally, the dancers express another dance style referred to as *Kpakujemu*. In this movement, they perform while seated, legs stretched out. The focus is on shoulder, chest and hip movements, each moving independently.



Figure 10: *Etighi* movement depicting accountability



Figure 11: *Apepe Oniyo* movement implying accountability



Figure 12: *Kpakujemu* movement suggesting accountability

These movements illustrate the power of accountability in achieving social change and justice, including the fight against corruption and embezzlement. Portray alternative futures featuring accountable leadership and governance, free from oppression and discrimination. Depict groups holding leaders accountable for their actions, including instances of corruption and human rights violations. Highlight the positive impact of accountability on both individual and collective growth. Emphasize the importance of self-reflection and introspection. Emphasize the significance of collective care and support in advocating for accountability and achieving social justice. Showcase personal responsibility in advocating for accountability and working towards social justice.

Conclusion

The *Amona* dance performance conveys powerful messages about achieving an equitable and fair society. By holding leaders accountable, confronting social injustices, ensuring equal access to resources and promoting openness, a just society can be built. Equally, the cultural and contemporary dance movements in *Amona* performance further emphasizes the urgency of supporting positive change. It is the submission of this paper that Eda Theatre International's *Amona* performance plays a vital role in shaping understanding of social justice.

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