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**A Ritual for Survival: Questions of Identity and Politics in One Hundred Year of Nigerian Dance**

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**Abstract**

This paper sets out to examine questions of identity and politics in one hundred years of Nigerian dance practice and scholarship. It takes off from the premise that the idea of 'Nigerian dance' came into existence with the amalgamation of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and Northern Nigeria Protectorate to create a single Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914. In other words, prior to the British amalgamation of the two Protectorates, the notion of a Nigerian dance tradition(s) could not be said to exist in any sense of the word. It acknowledges contributions by foremost dance ethnographers like Peggy Harper in shaping the study of indigenous dance forms in Nigeria; as well as those of leading dance scholars exemplified by Chris Ugolo – with his long-held view and effort to articulate the sense of a national choreographic style for Nigeria by drawing specifically on the work of Herbert Ogunde. Following on from Ugolo's work in this area, the paper sets out to examine some of concerns and aspirations for Nigerian dance in its one hundred years of existence. The paper uses *A Ritual for Survival* (1989), Peter Badejo's first dance production in the UK, as a metaphor to contend that there is a need to revisit the issue of identity and politics in Nigerian dance, a challenge that is all the more imperative considering that Nigeria, as we know from the recently concluded national conference, is a country in search of identity. Ultimately, the paper seeks to infer that the founding of ADSPON portends good news and marks the first real/considerable effort in that process of framing a consensual identity for Nigerian dance.

# **A Ritual for Survival: Questions of Identity and Politics in One Hundred Year of Nigerian Dance**

## **Introduction**

If allowed, people will let us get to know them by performing (part of) their culture. Such knowledge – let us call it performative – demands participation (at least as an audience) and therefore some degree of mutual recognition (Fabian, 2007: 212).

This paper considers questions of identity, politics and continuity in one hundred years of Nigerian dance practice and scholarship. The paper takes off from the premise that the idea of ‘Nigerian dance’ came into existence with the amalgamation of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and Northern Nigeria Protectorate to create a single Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914. In other words, prior to the British amalgamation of the two Protectorates, the notion of a Nigerian dance tradition(s) could not be said to exist in any sense of the word.

The paper acknowledges leading contributions made by dance ethnographers like Peggy Harper in shaping the study of indigenous dance forms in Nigeria; as well as those of leading dance scholars epitomised by Chris Ugolo – with his long-held view and effort to articulate the sense of a national choreographic tradition/style for Nigeria by drawing specifically on the work of Herbert Ogunde. Following on from Ugolo’s work in this area, the paper sets out to examine some concerns and aspirations for Nigerian dance in its one hundred years of existence. The paper draws on *A Ritual for Survival* (1989), Peter Badejo’s first dance production in the UK, as a metaphor to contend that there is a need to revisit the issues of identity and politics in Nigerian dance, a challenge that is all the more imperative considering that Nigeria, as we know from the recently concluded national conference, is a country in search of identity. It will focus on the creative exploitation of metaphors that undermine the African identity in Badejo’s work and considers how his projection of an acquiescent black personality is antithetical to his overall desire to project African identity in Britain.

In examining Badejo’s work, the paper sets out to articulate the problem of adjoining imageries that are evocative of an illusory Western (in Badejo’s case, British) cultural hegemony in an African or Nigerian dance performance. It concludes by suggesting that not sacrificing the African identity in the bid to survive within ‘mainstream’ Western educational model or socio-cultural space positions contemporary African performance arts in place, to borrow Isidore Diala’s expression, “recontest” and offset the “subtle hegemonic assault [...]”

of Western assumption of cultural superiority” (Diala, 2005: 91). It is worth clarifying that this paper does not claim to have answers to questions about what should constitute the accepted identity of Nigerian dance for this Twenty-first Century. On the contrary, it seeks to clarify and map out a key requirement in this journey, while also inferring that the founding of DASSON portends good news and perhaps mark the first real/considerable effort to begin that process of framing a consensual identity for Nigerian dance.

### **Evolving a Nigerian Dance/Choreographic Tradition**

A number of intellectual interventions by Nigerian dance scholars have conveyed the importance of adopting a national dance/choreographic tradition or style as a way of framing the identity of Nigerian dance. At the forefront of this effort is Chris Ugolo who contends for a Nigerian choreographic tradition and/or style that is built on the work of Herbert Ogunde. Ugolo argues that Ogunde can be considered “an inventor of a Nigerian national choreographic **tradition**, having also pioneered the setting up of the National Troupe of Nigeria (NTN)” (Ugolo, c. 2013, unpublished). Elsewhere Ugolo goes further to observe that:

The national choreographic **style** should be able to represent the ideals of the society, in fact, its “spirit and soul”. National symbols of collective identification should therefore form the basis for constructing and nurturing the national choreographic style... National choreographic style therefore is a form of identity and identification construction, a sort of national way of doing things, and in this regard a national way of dancing and constructing dances (Ugolo, c. 2011, unpublished).

Ugolo’s views as articulated above indicates an evident understanding of the importance of formulating a clear identity for the Nigerian dance – one that involves, as he puts it, “submerging and fusing different Nigerian movement forms to create a contemporary movement code that reflects a modern cultural identity that is typically Nigerian in outlook and not necessarily a representation of the cultural/movement diversity of the Nigerian nation-state” (Ugolo, c. 2011, unpublished). However, it equally raises a crucial concern for that process of identity formation, which this paper tries to address vis-à-vis the interchangeable use of the terms **tradition** and **style** in discussing the “national way of dancing and constructing dances” (ibid).

While the term tradition denotes a conventional or institutionalized way of “doing and being” in its performative sense, “style is a fundamental aspect in the staging of dance works because it encapsulates the choreographer’s ‘signature’ and identifies the work as belonging to that particular tradition” (Main, 2005: 107). It is not imperative, therefore, to seek to

delineate a national choreographic style as such, but rather efforts need to be focused, first, on developing a Nigerian dance or choreographic tradition that recognizes and accommodates the multiplicity of choreographic styles informed by that tradition. Accordingly, it is not uncommon for several choreographic styles to exist alongside each other within the national dance or choreographic tradition of contemporary nation-states. A case in point is the British dance tradition, which is, in essence a composite of “national” – English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish – dance forms, as well as the attendant styles of its leading choreographers and dancers. With this in mind, it becomes imperative to reappraise our approach to the issue of evolving a Nigerian dance/choreographic tradition – to focus on expounding the underlying philosophy of such a tradition to which different choreographers can append their respective signatures or styles. This view is equally evidenced in Lesley Main’s identification of the philosophy behind a tradition as the significant factor that ensures “the ‘handing down’ and the subsequent development is rooted in ideas, perhaps more so than in physical action” (Main, 2005: 107).

Seen from this perspective, the development and handing down of a national choreographic tradition from one generation to another, as well as of individual choreographic styles from one choreographer to another, is rendered operable by the ideas or philosophy that underpins that tradition. What is even more interesting about this point is that the physical/embodied characteristics of a dance, which derives from its ethnic/tribal origin, does not necessarily render a national choreographic identity inoperable due to the ideas/philosophy that underpins it. Main goes further to acknowledge that whereas choreographic interpretation of the ideas/philosophy that underpins a national dance tradition will change over time, particularly in terms of physical manifestation as part of the natural evolution of the dancing body and choreographic styles, “the ideas, however, will remain intact as ideas, and their continuing existence creates a foundation that can underpin a tradition, allowing for the co-existence of both roots and development” (Main, 2005: 106).

Like the idea of a Nigerian nation-state, the concept of Nigerian dance or a Nigerian choreographic tradition is grossly in need of consensual re/definition in terms of re/framing the critical and philosophical perspectives through which they can be articulated and assessed. One way to approach this task would be to pay more careful attention to the overarching choreographic structure of historical and present-day dance works in that process of exploring the idea of a Nigerian dance/choreographic tradition. Choreographic structure is used here to represent both the philosophical underpinning and the artistic configuration (choreographic styles) of the dance. While both aspects are imperative for that process of

crafting a consensual national dance or choreographic tradition, it is evident from the thesis presented here that the process of articulating that national identity must start with the articulation of a robust and viable philosophical base or as Lesley Main puts it:

The issue is not just about the practical engagement with a work from an artistic perspective, however. It is also about the perception of a work, and the processes through which we determine what a work “is” and, moreover, what a work “can be” (Main, 2005: 119).

It should not be a surprise that this paper contends for the need to revisit the question of identity and politics as a starting point in that process of building a consensual identity/philosophical framework for the Nigerian dance or choreographic tradition. Quite the contrary, it is not unexpected that there is no universal treatise on what a Nigerian dance or choreographic tradition should be. This is even more so when one considers that Nigeria, as we know from the recently concluded national conference, is a country in search of identity. However, it is worth clarifying again that this paper does not claim to have answers to questions about what should constitute the accepted identity of Nigerian dance for this Twenty-first Century. As I stated previously, it seeks, on the contrary, to clarify and map out a key requirement in this journey, while also inferring that the founding of ADSPON portends good news and perhaps mark the first real/considerable effort to begin that process of framing a consensual identity for Nigerian dance.

In the next section of this paper, I move away from the argument about the need to develop a consensual national identity for Nigerian dance to highlight the danger that lack of political astuteness on the issue of identity could hold for dance that is not rooted in a uniquely Nigerian dance/choreographic tradition underpinned by a well-defined philosophy. In doing so the rest of the paper examines Badejo’s *A Ritual for Survival* in order to articulate the problem of adjoining imageries that are evocative of an illusory Western (in Badejo’s case, British) cultural hegemony in an African or Nigerian dance performance. It concludes by suggesting that not sacrificing the African identity in the bid to survive within “mainstream” Western educational model or socio-cultural space positions contemporary African performance arts in place, to borrow Isidore Diala’s expression, “recontest” and offset the “subtle hegemonic assault... of Western assumption of cultural superiority” (Diala, 2005: 91).

## **Ritual and Myth in Dance and Theatre**

Rituals and myths do not function within contemporary performances the same way they do in traditional contexts. When applied to a present-day dance/theatre production, ancient rituals and myths have always had as their primary purpose, the facilitation of an experimental rediscovery of their socio-political and economic potentials. This is achieved through the creative exploration of contemporary cultures by passing them through rituals and myths.

The fact is that the great themes of myth parallel our own experiences – they play out on an imaginative plane our deepest hopes and fears. It is because we can identify with and be moved by many of the strands within their narratives that myths remain of enduring interest and continue to attract new audiences. (Littleton, 2002: 7)

Most African artists seek to relate ancient myths and ritual practices to present-day cultures, hence sustaining its practise in a way that is meaningful to contemporary society. This, according to Chinua Achebe, is because “...art and community in Africa are clearly linked” (Achebe, 2012: 56). He also goes further to state:

African art as we understand it has not been distilled or purified and refined to the point where it has lost all traces of real life, lost the vitality of the street, like art from some advanced societies and academic art tend to be. In Africa the tendency is to keep art involved with the people (Achebe, 2012: 56).

This is indeed a trend in contemporary African performance practice, especially among those artists that take pride in identifying their work as African – that is rooted in indigenous forms and practices. It was therefore this desire to reproduce African ritual in such a way that it is relevant to both Africans and non-Africans that informed Badejo’s production of *A Ritual for Survival* in London in 1989. However, in using Badejo’s phenomenal dance production as a metaphor in this paper, I will emphasise his inadvertent use of this approach to articulate a political view that is antithetical to his attempt to project an identity that is uniquely African.

There is always the tendency that in the bid for a work to be identified as African, an artist may arbitrarily incorporate rituals and myths into a performance in order to create spectacle or to mesmerise. In the case of diasporic performances, the reality however is that any arbitrary imposition of pristine ritual practice on stage would not only alienate non-African audiences who cannot associate the imageries to anything they know, but would ultimately fail in its quest for Africanness. The inappropriateness of ascribing Africanness to

such works lies within the notion that “art for arts sake” is not a vibrant practice in Africa where art is functional. Every artistic creation has a message that it intends to convey and as such didacticism is a major factor in African performance practice, especially where ritual and myth are concerned. The use of these two mechanisms in contemporary performances must therefore take into account socio-political realities on ground in the attempt to articulate a vision that is both pragmatic and germane to African and non-African audiences alike. In a seminal thesis on Esiaba Irobi’s dramaturgy, Isidore Diala aptly observes his proclivity for incorporating rituals and myths in his plays and engaging them didactically to articulate contemporary viewpoints.

Irobi clearly exemplifies this trend. His plays do not dramatize specific changeless myths subsumed in Igbo ritual, an alleged finished artistic product in its own right. His inclination is rather to appropriate Igbo ritual as basic source material for enunciating a secular vision of contemporary society...Recreating in terms of contemporary experience situations in which ritual had cogency, and treating myths as malleable narratives capable of authorizing an ideological position...(Diala, 2005: 110)

Every society has its own rituals, some of which are specific to them, being particularly derived from their mythologies. For instance, non-African audiences may not be able to comprehend indigenous African myths and rituals in performance, thus their symbolisms become meaningless or altogether lost on them. However, most contemporary African artists and choreographers like Badejo transform these rituals such that they become accessible to a much wider audience, including non-African ones. In other words, these rituals become so transformed in terms of the images they project, and the form of presentation it adopts, that they become communicative in new and often opposing cultural setting. This development, which features prominently in *A Ritual for Survival*, is aptly summarised in Diala’s enunciation on the creative use of rituals in Irobi’s plays.

In Irobi’s drama contemporary society is mired in “crisis situations” that recreate the primordial ones in which ritual had evolved and held a promise of resolution. Thus, claiming for ritual an efficacy and a timeless sacred origin going back to ancestral memory...(Diala, 2005: 89).

Like Irobi, Badejo also validates his use of African rituals and myths by re/creating similar circumstances to the ones in which they are used in indigenous African societies. For the production of *A Ritual for Survival*, Badejo draws on the Sango myth for what he describes as a performance in Brixton that mirrors the fervent dependence on myths and

rituals in African (Yoruba) culture. This according to Badejo is based on the premise that in Africa, ritual observances are undertaken for specific reasons, most of which are usually not unconnected to the need to regulate individuals and the society at large. In this respect, *A Ritual for Survival* is a thesis presenting the argument that for the Sango myth to be relevant in Brixton, the rituals surrounding it has to be recreated and presented in such a way that they address relevant issues in “this particular Western” community.

### **Setting and Political Context for the Dance Production**

*A Ritual for Survival* is a dance production set in Brixton, an inner London suburb known for its significant population of black people of Caribbean and African descents. In the production, Badejo explores an African (Yoruba) oriented solution to the myriad of real-life problems facing the black community in Britain. Some of the problems that this production addresses include black unemployment, poverty, social degradation, increasing crime rates and violence. It was produced in the 1980s - a particular period/context for Brixton that is different today. As a result, the 1989 production of *A Ritual for Survival* was shaped by a number of factors, at the top of which are the Brixton riots. It is important to indicate what it was about Brixton in the 1980s that makes it different from today. Brixton was the scene of violent riots on 11 April 1981 and 28 September 1985 respectively. In both instances, black people in Brixton were reacting to concerns over social inequalities, lack of equal employment opportunities, and police discrimination. The Brixton riot of 1981 was described by the Metropolitan police as the “the first serious riots of the 20th century, and the first entailing substantial destruction of property since the formation of the Metropolitan Police”<sup>1</sup>. The riot was sparked by what Hattersley, a parliamentary member of the opposition Labour Party, identifies as “the conditions of deprivation and despair...youth unemployment, poor housing and the relations between the Brixton police and Brixton public” (Fitzgerald and Layton-Henry, 1986: 107). This highlights the kind of socio-political condition in which black people living in Brixton found themselves in the 1980s. By this account, 1980s Brixton was a city of severe social and economic problems.

In the aftermath of the 1981 Brixton riots, the then Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher set up a public inquiry into the riot headed by Lord Scarman. The Scarman report was published on November 25, 1981 and blamed the riot on what he noted

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<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from [http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton\\_riots.htm](http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton_riots.htm) (Accessed 21 Feb. 2007).

as “racial disadvantage that is a fact of British life” (Scarman, 1981)<sup>2</sup>. Lord Scarman’s report criticised the police and government for the treatment of blacks in Brixton. It also recommended among other things, that effective community policing should involve the recruitment of people from ethnic minorities into the police force. “He also advised the government to end racial disadvantage and tackle the disproportionately high level of unemployment among young black men - as high as 50% in Brixton” (Scarman, 1981).

After the 1981 riot, Brixton was relatively peaceful until 28 September 1985 when it erupted in another round of violence. This 1985 riot was sparked off after the shooting of Mrs. Cherry Groce in her house by armed police who were looking for her son in relation to a robbery incident. The shooting of Mrs Groce, a Jamaican migrant to Britain was seen by many in the black community as further proof of institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police. As a result violence broke out between black protesters and the police leading to the death of one person, with about 50 people injured.

After the 1981 and 1985 riots, another riot took place in Brixton 13 December 1995 after the death in Brixton police custody of a black man, Wayne Douglas. Even though the 1995 riot took place after the production of *A Ritual for Survival* in 1989, it demonstrates the trend of violence that characterises the agitation of black people for racial equality in Britain.

The political climate of Britain in the 1980s was not favourable to blacks, particularly with regards to their articulation of identity through the medium of African/African-Caribbean cultures. Crucially, the period was marked by overwhelming political coercion to conform to white British stereotypes of Britishness. This racial political notion of Britishness will be discussed later, with an emphasis on how Badejo’s subscription to its idea detracts from the Africanness of *A Ritual for Survival*.

The concept of “thick description” is relevant to my analysis of Africanness in Badejo’s projection of an African ritual on the British stage in Brixton. Thick description is a term popularised by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In the first part of the book, under the heading “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (Geertz, 1973: 3 - 30), Geertz applies thick description to explain a methodology for analysing the social contexts of human action and behaviour. In other words, thick description allows us to not only understand human action, but their contexts as well; thus opening up our understanding of social behaviours that are otherwise alien to our own cultures. For this analysis of *A Ritual for Survival*, thick

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<sup>2</sup>[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/25/newsid\\_2546000/2546233.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/25/newsid_2546000/2546233.stm) (Accessed 21 Feb. 2007).

description is tied to Badejo's transference of an African ritual practice to Brixton. Consequently, I will be looking specifically at Badejo's ability to navigate cultural differences to present African ritual in Brixton, such that it becomes applicable to life in Brixton.

### **A Ritual for Survival: Summary and Analysis**

A Ritual for Survival is Peter Badejo's first production in Britain. In it he x-rays some of the problems facing the black community in Britain and proffers ritual solution as the way out of the quagmire. The production draw on communal ritual practices in Yoruba culture, to propose a solution to the problems faced by black people in Britain. It mirrors the dependence of people in indigenous African cultures, in this case Yoruba people, on their gods for solution to societal problems. For instance, traditionally, whenever there is no rain in agrarian Yoruba communities, dance and divination become functional tools as the people roll out their drums and dance to Sango to send rain<sup>3</sup>. Irrespective of the African tribe concerned, there are always gods/goddesses that are responsible for different aspects of life. Consequently, when there are droughts or other social malaise, the people would bring out their drums, dance and appeal to the gods/goddesses responsible.

In Brixton however, the culture is not the same as in Africa and, as such, the idea of appealing to Sango for help would ordinarily be out of place. The ritual worship of ancestral gods, especially Sango, is not altogether alien to black people in Britain, especially migrants from West Africa and the first generation African-Caribbean migrants to Britain. Bata dance and Sango worship are prominent features of the indigenous lives of Yoruba people in West Africa, and indeed parts of the Caribbean where it was introduced during the era of slave trade.

For the production of A Ritual for Survival, Badejo divided the performance into two parts so that they mirror one another. In the first part, Badejo depicts typical situations in Yoruba culture where ritual worship based on the Sango myth is relied upon to bring solutions to the people. Four of the dancers wear trousers and vests, with the exception of the fifth dancer, representing the priestess of Sango. A female dancer played the role of the priestess of Sango. She had on the traditional Yoruba bata costume, which consists of a loose

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<sup>3</sup>*Sango*, also spelt Shango is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightening. According to a Yoruba legend, he has a fiery personality and emits fire from his mouth when angry. *Sango* was once the king of Ile-Ife, which is recognised as the cradle of the Yoruba race. *Sango* adopted *bata* as his signature dance because its vigorous nature suits his volatile personality.

fitting robe (known as *gbariye*) and trouser made from embroidered hand woven fabric (known as *aso oke*). Generally, this Yoruba costume enhances bata dance performances as it swirls around the dancer's body with each movement executed. The weight of the costume also adds to the dance by emphasising the jerky arm and leg movements. All the dancers perform the swift and energetic bata dance movements, spurred on by the vigorous music of talking drums. The fast and vigorous bata dance movements are generally acknowledged to characterise Sango's temperament. The movements of the arm and legs, such as the angular and jerky arm movement, and shuffling and darting movement of the legs symbolise the strength and violent personality of the deity. The dancers react to commands from the lead drum (*iya ilu*) with the typical sharp, angular and jerky movement of the shoulders. The distinctive bata shoulder movements represent thunder and lightening which are Sango's trademark features. Far from being the actual ritual, Badejo draws on the Sango worship tradition to depict the indigenous Yoruba reliance on ritual as a vehicle for remedying societal problems.

Part one of the production opens with dancers in casual everyday costumes dancing unto the stage. The backdrop consists of the silhouette of a man gazing towards the top of a mountain. This backdrop signifies the obstacle that people had to surmount in their quest for answers to their problems. The mountain also stands for hope, a theme that Badejo extracts from the bible. This allusion is drawn from Psalms 121; "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help" (King James Version, Psalms 121 verse 1). By drawing this analogy, Badejo signifies the relevance of the Christian faith - a product of the colonial encounter that now constitutes a part of fabric of contemporary African culture - in dealing with issues relating to Africa and Africans.

The dancers perform movements that portray their profession as farmers. In the dance they bend toward the ground and describe the motions of tilling the ground by clasping both arms together and swiftly raising and lowering it in the direction of the ground. Their eyes are fixed on the ground, as their bodies' rises and falls in unison. As the dance progresses, the dancers start to tire. They then go into contorted body movements emphasising pain and suffering. The entire dance movement at this point adopts what Badejo describes as "creative movement". This basically means that the dances are not necessarily based on specific dance forms, but are created to reflect the emotional state of the dancers and the situations they portray. Another dancer, the Sango priestess is ushered in with a ritual song in praise of Sango. The dancers then perform a ritual movement calling for rain. For this ritual, Badejo

makes use of bata dance led by the priestess of Sango. At the end, the dancers move towards the mountain rejoicing as an indication that Sango had responded to their appeal for help.

In the second part of the production, Badejo switches back to some of the problems that confront black people in Brixton. In direct contrast to the Sango priestess in the first part, Badejo costumes himself in suit and trouser and appears as a “Western god.” This suited “god” is actually representative of the “British pantheon,” or more appropriately, white political establishment to which black people in Brixton would need to appeal to for jobs, decent housing, and equal opportunities. Hence for every problem identified in Brixton, this same character in suit is used to represent the various “gods” to which the people would need to appeal to for answers, just as the Yoruba people would entreat different Sango and other gods on various issues. The costume worn by the dancer representing the “British pantheon” have labels pinned to the front and back such that when one label is peeled off, another is revealed thus keeping the audience informed about the particular god being represented at any given time. Unemployment for instance, was tackled by pinning the inscription “jobs” on the suit, which was later removed to reveal the sign “housing,” underneath which was written “education.” The connotation which this suited character holds for the African identity forms the core of the argument presented in this paper, and thus the adoption of *A Ritual for Survival* as a metaphor for discussing one hundred years of Nigerian dance.

The backdrop remained in place in this second segment of the production as an indication of Badejo’s belief that in every culture, people face obstacles that they need to overcome. Perhaps more precisely, it underlines the fact that as former colonial subjects, Africans and African-Caribbean peoples are re/introducing faith in the Christian religion to its former colonial masters who brought the religion to them in the first place. The beginning of this section starts with dancers appearing in everyday costumes. They all walk briskly across the stage, coming in and leaving from different directions. Their paths intersect at various points on the stage as they perform this pedestrian movement, however each time they meet they move off again without stopping to acknowledge each other. Badejo uses this scenario to pass social commentary on the individual existence in Western societies that does not do much to encourage communal existence or living. Of course, this paper acknowledges that this kind of assumption could inadvertently reinforce the kind of Global East/West binary that Said’s *Orientalism* addresses. In *Orientalism*, Said highlights and questions inaccuracies that characterises various assumptions about the Orient (East), which are often generally accepted by those in the Global West as facts. Even though Said’s examples focus

on the West's understanding of the Orient, this example from Badejo's production shows those in the Global East could hold a similarly generalised view of the West.

When the dancers appear again, they are doing the kind of dance that Badejo refers to as "creative movement" which they use to articulate various social problems. In essence, they transform everyday/pedestrian movements into dance by making them to appear larger than life. For instance, one dancer's depiction of the problem of drug abuse involves a movement that entails walking precariously on the outer edges of his feet. The dancer's body contort with every step as if he is pain and his hands stretch and reach forward as if it would leave the body. It is this sort of distortion of the body in performance that constitute "extra-daily" action (Barba and Savarese, 1991: 36), which establishes a model of performance behaviour that is different from everyday actions. As the suited dancer (the British pantheon) reveals different labels pinned to his jacket, the other dancers move towards him pleading for help. This dancer who represents the "British pantheon" does not dance the bata like the Sango Priestess in part one; instead he performs creative movements as he dances across the stage. He swirls and stretches his hands forward in a grand gesture in response to the requests made by the other dancers. Eventually, all the dancers move towards the mountain like they did in the first part. The performance ends with all the dancers looking up toward the mountain in hopeful anticipation.

Invariably what Badejo achieved was to transform Yoruba ritual to something that could be understood by his audience in Brixton. People in Brixton who may not have understood African ritual in its pristine rendition could then relate to it in *A Ritual for Survival*. They were able to connect their experience in the second part to what they saw in the first part of the production. *A Ritual for Survival* is steeped in Yoruba ritual; but Badejo's awareness of the efficacious quality of ritual performances meant that he adapted it to suit his audience so that they understand, and are educated through the performance. In other words he tempers the ritual content, whittling it down to a form that can be used to communicate rather than mesmerise.

What Peter Badejo did with *A Ritual for Survival* is nothing new in itself, but it follows such Afrocentric beliefs that issues affecting black people should be addressed within African cultural frameworks<sup>4</sup>. To that effect, what Badejo did was to build his story along the same lines as the ritual practices in Yoruba culture but transform it in such a way that his non-Yoruba and/or non-African audiences in Brixton could understand. Badejo's technique

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<sup>4</sup>This assumption is central to most Afrocentric discusses. For a more detailed analysis, see Bayo Oyebade's "African Studies and the Afrocentric Paradigm: A Critique."

means however that his audiences are able to observe the transformation of an African ritual from a highly codified text to a subtext that they can relate to. He achieves this by allowing his audience to see the first part which shows where Sango dance rituals are performed as it is practiced in indigenous Yoruba culture; while equally leading them into the second part of the production in which the same ritual ideas are reconstructed within a familiar context. In both contexts ritual remains the vehicle for the expression of intent in the dance.

### **Issue of Identity and Politics**

In another paper I argued that Badejo's productions retains an overall sense of Africanness in relation to content despite his near lack of dependence on indigenous African dance costumes in most of these production. In the same paper I contended that Badejo's use of leotards, unitards, skirts and tops do not detract from the essential nature of his choreography, which is African – however, as Sarah Whatley observes, “by covering most of the skin, the costumes play a role in the movement” (Whatley, 2005: 90). Consequently, by costuming the central character in *A Ritual for Survival* in a “functional” suit and trouser, Badejo inadvertently makes an adverse political statement that undermines the African identity of the characters in the dance production. As a consequence, the Africanness of the production can be called to question mainly because of the functional role of the Western costume worn by the lead dancer in the second part of the production. This is accentuated by the fact that the particular costume (black suit and trouser) holds a specific ideological and political connotation for black people in Britain during the 1980s when the performance took place. It is important to note that so far in this paper, I have been discussing the overall content of Badejo's production and not its structural aspects (in terms of choreography). This is based primarily on my belief that the idea of a Nigerian dance does not necessary reside in the invention of unique choreographic styles, but in the thoughtful articulation of a choreographic tradition that is ideological, functional and addresses the identity and political needs of our 100-year old nation state.

Thus in *A Ritual for Survival* the functionality of costumes is rendered evident when this foundational production by Badejo is weighed against subsequent ones. For instance, in successive productions Badejo does not call attention to the “non-African” costumes worn by the dancers as he did in *A Ritual for Survival*. Costumes used in *The Pains of Aspiration* and *Emi Ijo* “lacks visual clarity” (Akunna, 1999:23) in performance; as such, they are not vital factors in considering the Africanness of these productions. Ijeoma Akunna defines the “lack of visual clarity” as an analytical phenomenon that sets in when an audience's awareness of a

dancer's costume and other bodily accessories recede in contrast to the actual dancing. Badejo suspends this "lack of visual clarity" in the production of *A Ritual for Survival* by attaching labels on the front and back of the suit and calling attention to it. The labels are then changed at intervals to reveal various social problems such as unemployment, crime, illiteracy, and so on, thus making the audience aware of what the suited character represent at each point during the production. By employing this alienation technique, Badejo succeeds in reinforcing the audience's awareness of the costume, which does a lot to distort the Africanness of the production due to its projection of an acquiescent black image, lacking in indigenous cultural expressivity.

Examining this suited character in line with Paul Gilroy's analysis of British Conservative Party's election poster of 1983 is intended to demonstrate Badejo's enactment of a mixed message in the production. Even though he articulates Africanness by examining issues affecting black people in Brixton by applying an African paradigm to resolve them, invariably, Badejo counters this thought by adopting the image present in the Conservative Party's ethnic election poster of 1983. The poster shows a young black man in suit and trouser, with his arms folded across his chest. Below him, in bold prints, is the inscription "Labour says he's black. Tories say he's British" (Gilroy, 1987: 58). This paper underlines my belief that the use of evocative imageries can either enhance or impair identity in performance. By unwittingly projecting white British culture as a model for black people in Britain to aspire to, Badejo undermines Africanness in *A Ritual for Survival*. This is based on the functional role of the Western costume used in the production due to its attendant political connotation. Not only does the functional use of suits affect the reading of the performance, the context/period in which this imagery is utilised is loaded with adverse connotations for black people from Africa and the Caribbean.

The second part of *A Ritual for Survival* constitutes the highlight of the production. This is where Badejo renders his assessment of the problems of race relations in Britain. This section reveals a slight departure in Badejo's idea of transposing an African myth to Brixton. By using the suited dancer to reproduce the Conservative Party's 1980s racial ideology about what constitutes Britishness, Badejo calls the overall slant of the production into question. This is especially so since by associating the Conservative Party's image of black Britishness to the production, Badejo endorses an approach to Britishness that negates the relevance of Africa and African derived cultures in the society. The suit, in Gilroy words, becomes a key signifier in the articulation of white Britishness and a representation of what it means to be British.

Blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct before real Britishness can be guaranteed. National culture is present in the young man's clothing. Isolated and shorn of the mugger's key icons – a tea-cosy hat and the dreadlocks of Rastafari – he is redeemed by his suit, the signifier of British civilisation. The image of black youth as a problem is thus contained and rendered assimilable. (Gilroy, 1987: 59)

Considering Margaret Thatcher's endorsement of Enoch Powell's view that "the essence of Britishness is whiteness" (Waters, 1996: 214), it is no wonder that her government was notorious for such representations in which "there is more to Britishness than a passport" (Gilroy, 1987: 59). This representation of Britishness throws up another interpretation of the Conservative Party poster of 1983, especially in view of the idea expressed in the caption, of a colour-blind society. The angle presented in this interpretation is captured in Gillian Rose's analysis of the poster in *Visual Methodologies*.

The poster depends on other stereotyped images (which it does not show) of young black men, particularly as muggers, to make its point about the acceptability of this besuited man. This poster thus plays in complex ways with both visible and invisible signs of racial difference. (Rose, 2001: 11)

It is against this backdrop of what can be considered as Thatcherite rules for Britishness that Badejo's use of an image that reflects her party's notion of Britishness is antithetical to Africanness. This is even more so when one considers the fact that the idea conveyed by the Conservative Party election poster which Badejo echoes in *A Ritual for Survival* clearly suggests a repudiation of the African culture. It unambiguously champions the view of the Conservative Party in the 1980s, which was that in order to be accepted within the mainstream, black people would need to adopt white British values.

The forceful nature of this Conservative ideology is captured in Chris Waters' summation of post-war race relations in Britain. In tracing the development of this ideology, Waters recognises the fact that "...Powellism was one of the most important precursors to Thatcherism" (Smith in Waters, 1996: 214).

Despite its excesses, however, Powell's racism was not simply exclusionary. Blacks willing and able to assimilate to white British values were acceptable; those who could not adapt to British values, or who actively subverted them, were the real target of his animosity. (Ibid.)

This statement illustrates one of the ideological premises surrounding Badejo's production of *A Ritual for Survival*, taking into consideration that *A Ritual for Survival* was produced in the 1980s when black and white relations in Britain was under immense pressure

as a result of the 1981 and 1985 riots. It makes sense to assume that the production was targeted at mediating the impasse suggested by the situation. Gilroy suggests that the image clearly exploits extant ambiguities in the British discussion of race and nationhood, to try to assuage the feeling of non-inclusivity experienced by blacks (Gilroy, 1987: 57). Consequently, Badejo's concerns about the Brixton riots and allied problems that it reveals, prompted him to try to redeem blacks by suggesting that they conform to dominant white expectations suggested by the conservative party image.

In presenting this disturbing view, Badejo fails to reckon with the reception accorded the suggestion in 1983 when the Conservative Party made it. Gilroy clearly attests to the facts that this Conservative Party ideology was "attacked by black spokespeople for suggesting that the categories black and British were mutually exclusive" (Gilroy, 1987: 57). This suggests that black people in Britain were already articulating a different kind of Britishness that did not require validation from a white perspective. Writing about the effect of the SS Empire Windrush generation on contemporary British society, Mike Philip concedes that the success of the Notting Hill carnival stands as a testimony to black people's redefinition of Britishness to include, not only themselves but other cultures as well. Philip remarks, "the people of the Windrush, their children and grandchildren have played a vital role in creating a new concept of what it means to be British" (Philips, 1998). The recognition of African and African derived cultures as constituting contemporary Britishness is evidenced in the featuring of Notting Hill carnival as part of the Queens golden jubilee parade in August 2002<sup>5</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of the particular period it was produced, which informs my reading of its dominant imagery, *A Ritual for Survival* fails in its attempt to project Africanness and as such serves as useful example for discussing the identity of Nigerian dance in its one-hundredth year of existence. By using Peter Badejo's *A Ritual for Survival* as a metaphor, the paper articulates the problem of adjoining imageries that are evocative of an illusory Western cultural hegemony in our quest to carve out a unique identity for Nigerian dance - apropos developing a national dance/choreographic tradition. Finally, it is hoped that as Nigerian dancer scholars, we will seize on the space curated by ADSPON to advance the debate on the framing a consensual identity for Nigerian dance that is founded on sound philosophy. Such a

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<sup>5</sup>Information from <http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/page3959.asp> (Visited 4 Feb. 2007).

debate must not seek to rely on the institutions and symbols of the Nigerian nation-state as they stand at the moment since the identity of the nation-state represented by these institutions and symbols is currently in question. To this end it is worth noting that great civilisations and advances in science and technology are often built on the arts and cultural life of its peoples – and in this respect the political identity and unity of the Nigerian nation-state is best served by the development of a consensual national dance/choreographic tradition that is suitably ideological and pragmatic.

### **Note**

A Ritual for Survival was produced and choreographed by Peter Badejo in 1989, prior to founding Badejo Arts in 1990.

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