

## **Interrogating the Element of Dance in Contemporary African Christian Worship**

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### **Abstract**

Christian denominations in Africa as in Western countries have different opinions on the use of dance in worship. Some do not permit it at all; some allow it to an extent while some are liberal on the matter; allowing all forms of dance styles during worship. This makes dance a controversial element of worship. This work, therefore, traced the historical background of dance in contemporary African Christian Worship and highlighted its importance. It is a qualitative research which studied relevant scholarly literature to interrogate the element of dance in worship. Findings showed that dance has a chequered history within African Christianity. It is a cultural element in Africa that removes ecclesiastical classes created by the difference in social and religious status and equally unites worshippers. Although people dance for reasons other than religious, dancing is a fundamental element of worship in Christianity generally and African Christianity in particular. The work concluded that dancing to an African is as important as breathing. It is for self-expression, aesthetic pleasure and entertainment and all these make worship in African Christian denominations dynamic and dramatic. The work then recommended that African Churches, as a way of contextualizing the Christian faith should allow worshippers to fully express themselves in worship so as to promote the rich African heritage of dance.

**Keywords:** Dance, Worship, African Christianity, Culture, Christian Denomination

### **Introduction**

Dance is an important element in several cultures and religions of the world. It is one of the expressions of gratitude and praise worshippers engage in, in response to certain benevolence they might have received from the Supreme Being or a deity that is considered the subject of worship in such religion. Although people dance for reasons other than religious, dancing is a fundamental element of worship. While some religions forbid dancing, most religions of the world have systematic ways their adherents move their bodies to show their appreciation to their God or gods. Even in religions where dancing is prohibited, Islam for example, adherents of the Islamic faith disagree on dancing as an element of worship (Palmer, 2012). Some Muslim faithful believe in dancing and also engage in it, but some think that it is sacrilegious (Sacibey, 2012). He puts it more succinctly that the answer one gets while finding out if Muslims are allowed to dance depends on whom one asks.

Unlike Islam where Muslims disagree on the matter of dancing as an element of worship Christians accept it. Where Christians disagree is on the use of music and musical instruments that accompany and motivate worshippers to dance. While some Christian denominations accept fast, loud and all kinds of music with godly lyrics and which are usually followed with different dance styles; the kinds that make worshippers go into a frenzy, ecstatic and overly excited, some denominations within the Christian faith frown at such but recommend quiet, slow, and specific types of music that make worshippers conduct themselves in a solemn kind of worship. Therefore, the particular denomination in question and the personalities of individuals in a given local assembly play a huge role in condoning or condemning dance and dance styles in worship.

Western-initiated churches do not tolerate much use of dance during worship, but the story is not the same in African Instituted Churches. Besides, some Christians are born dancers and usually make use of dance to express themselves in worship. Some are not born dancers but love to dance and so they are easily motivated by those who are good at dancing. The youths of every Christian denomination fall into this category. These individuals usually seek a worship atmosphere that is loud and ecstatic where they can display their youthfulness in dance. This is one of the motivations for the creation of youth churches within a given parent church or denomination.

There is a paucity of scholarly work on the subject of dance as an element of worship in the Christian faith and the few that are available are not recent studies. Besides, to the best of the present writer's knowledge, no work has specifically addressed the importance of dance in African Christianity. What is observed in many kinds of literature written on dance are the various arguments by and divisions among African Christians along the lines of dance, debating what type should be accepted or rejected as a worship dance in churches. This is the gap this work attempts to fill because of its relevance to African Christianity.

In interrogating the element of dance in contemporary African Christian worship, this work traces the historical background of dancing as an expression of worship from various pieces of literature on the subject and also discusses some controversies that trail the use of dance in worship. The differences in denominational and individual worshippers' perspectives on dance generally and dance styles, in particular, are responsible for the issue of what is an acceptable and unacceptable dance in Christian worship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is premised on Bronislaw Malinowski's social theory of religion. Malinowski's view of religion is propounded as social theory. His social theory of religion includes anthropology, science and magic (Malinowski, 1948). Malinowski's social theory of religion was fully captured in the definition given by J. Milton Yinger for Sociology of Religion. According to Yinger, the sociology of religion has been defined as "the scientific study of the ways in which society, culture, and personality...influence religion – influence its origin, its doctrines, its practices, the types of groups which express it, the kinds of leadership, etc. And in opposite, it is the study of the ways in which religion affects society, culture, and personality – the processes of social conversation and social change, the structure of normative systems, the satisfaction or frustration of personal needs, et cetera (Yinga, 1957).

In propounding his social theory that has to do with anthropology, Malinowski rejects the rationalistic approach to the religious phenomena, which is one of the various theories that are

being critically surveyed and points out the significance of emotions as a source of religion. Anthropology deals with the origins and social relationships of human beings and dance, especially in the African context, has been to strengthen this bond (Kane, 2000). According to Malinowski (1948), man, especially the primitive man who lives in a constant struggle for survival, cannot be and is not a reasonable and reasoning being. He believes that the life of a man is mainly emotional and active, full of emotions and passions, and it is these elements that shape his whole behaviour and not a philosophical reflection. According to this sociologist, man has urgent strong needs, and constant, sometimes dangerous, vital pursuits, and it is easy to show that these very elements lead him to the performance of such acts and activities which constitute a germ of religion (Wallis, 1939).

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **The concept of Dance**

Dance is an element in performing arts that have been variously defined. According to Mackrell (2000), dance is the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, to express an idea of emotion, release energy, or simply take delight in the movement itself. Dance, itself, is a powerful impulse, but the art of dance comes to play when the impulse is channelled by skilful performers into something that becomes intensely expressive which delights spectators who had no wish to dance. These two clearly expressed concepts in the art of dance, which are: dance as a powerful impulse and dance as a skillfully choreographed art practised by some professionals the two most important connecting ideas in the subject of dance; neither can exist without the other (Mackrell, 2000).

Although the definition of dance given by Mackrell (2000) seems elaborate, which also covers all forms of the art, however, philosophers and critics throughout history have equally suggested different definitions which simply indicate the kind of dance the particular writer in question was most familiar with. In Aristotle's view, dance is a rhythmic movement whose purpose is to represent men's characters as well as what they do and suffer (Bresnahan, 2015). Aristotle's definition of dance refers to the central role that dance played in classical Greek theatre, where the chorus through its movements reenacted the themes of the drama during the lyric interludes. Thus, Aristotle's definition of dance was simply informed by his observation in the Greek theatre. Thus, it does not fully express what dance is as a performing art.

John Weaver (1673-1760), the English ballet master, also made his thought on dance known. In his view, dancing is an elegant, and regular movement, harmoniously composed of beautiful attitudes and contrasted graceful posture of the body and parts thereof (Dorris, 1999). Weaver's description reflects very clearly the kind of dignified and courtly movement that characterized the ballet of his time, with its highly formalized aesthetics and lack of forceful emotions. The 19th-century French dance historian Gaston Vuillier (1845-1915) as well as John Martin, the 20th-century dance critic gave their different opinions on the subject of dance, but none of these views could be described as having an all-encompassing description of the dance. A comprehensive description of the dance, therefore, sees dance as an art or activity that makes use of the body in various movements in response to musical sounds, which expresses self-expression, aesthetic pleasure, and entertainment (Gaston and Gaston, 2014).

In Mackrell's (2000) detailed work, three basic motives for dance were mentioned: self-expression, aesthetic pleasure and entertainment. Yet, regardless of the various views of dance from various writers, there appears not to be a universal definition of dance. Dance itself takes a wide variety of forms, from simple spontaneous activity to formalized art or from a religious or social gathering where everyone participates to a theatrical even with dancers performing before an audience. All these realities make defining dance a complex attempt. Therefore, the best approach to define dance according to Mackrell (2000) is to consider it according to its functions, intent and non-verbal language.

As a function, dance fulfils several very different functions including the religious, the military, and the social. Virtually all cultures possess dances that play important roles in religious rituals. Ubud (2017) notes that are situations where some dance performers and their spectators work themselves into a trance to transcend their ordinary selves, and in the process become ecstatic to receive the powers of the gods or enact the stories of the gods as a way of worshipping them.

Dance also plays several important roles in all cultures, notable in matters of celebration, courtship, recreation, and entertainment. According to intent, dance is distinguished from another patterned movement. As a nonverbal language, dance can express emotions and actions in a detailed way and as a result could be used to communicate or express a feeling or thought.

### **Biblical Foundations for Dance**

As with every other action and activity man engage in, the concept of dance is clearly defined in the Bible. Desola (1977) in his work *The Spirit Moves: A Handbook of Dance and Prayer* thinks that dance began with God in Genesis chapter 1 when his spirit moved on the face of the deep. Although Desola tried to show the importance and relevance of dance by tracing its origin to God himself, his opinion that the Spirit of God's movement on the face of the waters means that God was dancing is weak and unconvincing.

The first record of dance in the Bible is traced to Miriam, the sister of Moses and the woman with timbres after crossing the Red Sea to celebrate their escape from the Egyptians (Exodus 15:20-21). This, however, may mean that the people also had cause to dance in Egypt during their servitude, as it would be impossible to invent timbres and dance in the wilderness. The timbres may have been taken with them from Egypt, which suggests that they might have been involved in dance before they got to the wilderness.

The Bible also records how David danced when the Ark of Covenant returned to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:16). Similarly, Jephthah's daughter when her father returned victorious from the battle against Ammonites danced (Judges 12:34). The Psalms also mentions dance (Psalm 149; 150), and in Jeremiah's vision of the rebuilding of Israel the celebration will be led with timbres and dance (Jeremiah 31:4).

Taylor observes that in the Hebrew tradition, dance functioned as a medium of prayer and praise, as an expression of joy and reverence, and as a mediator between God and humanity. So, dance as an element of worship is established in the Old Testament; it was an Old Testament expression of worship (Taylor, 2008).

Dance is equally mentioned in the New Testament but on few occasions. This is where most critics of “worship dance” conclude that dance is not for the church today regardless of the cultural context of the church. The conclusion is that since there are no instances of either Jesus or His disciples teaching dance as a part of worship, Jesus must have not wanted Christians to dance. According to *The History of Dance in the Church* by Refined Undignified (2009), there are a few ways that one can interpret this position: Jesus truly didn’t want people dancing as an expression of worship to him; although dance is not taught in as an expression of worship, could it be that it was already happening and didn’t need to be taught, since it was a normal way of life and everyone accepted it as a given?; or maybe Jesus did teach on dancing and just as his disciples missed so many other crucial parts of his stories, the Church has done the same. The last two reasons are more probable because there are still clear references to dance in the New Testament and it is not likely that Jesus didn’t want those who believe in him to dance.

There may be only a few references to the word “dance” in the New Testament, but when they are mentioned, it is a powerful portrayal of God’s heart for dance. The parable of Jesus about the prodigal son as mentioned in Luke 15:24-25 is a good example. The father of the prodigal son celebrated the return of his “lost” son. The scripture records the father’s house filled with “music and dancing”, which are the basic elements of celebrations.

Mark also recorded how Herodias' daughter danced on Herod’s birthday; the dance Herodias exploited to demand the head of John the Baptist for being truthful (Mark 6:23ff). This shows that dancing continued as a cultural practice among the Jews, which undoubtedly would have been part of their Synagogues’ worship. Refined Undignified work on the *History of Dance in the Church* also believes that there was undoubtedly dancing at the wedding of Cana in which Jesus probably participated. Jesus was there and certainly, he did not condemn the act.

In addition, Jesus often told the people to “rejoice” (cf: Luke 6:23; John 14:28). According to Adams (1983), to rejoice, in the original Aramaic language can be translated as “to dance”. Thus, Adams believes that Jesus was telling the people to celebrate with all their beings, which included their bodies. The lame man cured by Peter and John in Acts 3:1-8 leapt as he rushed into the temple; a pointer to how he danced as it has been already established. Paul also exhorts the church in Corinth to “glorify God in their body” (I Cor. 6:20). The clearest way to do this is to dance.

Cameron (1982) referred to a story about how Jesus himself danced as recorded in one of the non-canonical kinds of literature, “But before Jesus was arrested, he assembled us all. So told us to form a circle, holding one another’s hands, and he stood in the middle and said “Answer Amen to me”. So, he began to sing the hymn and say “Glory be to thee Father” and we circled round him and answered him “Amen”. After the Lord has so danced with us, believed, he went out.” With these basic facts, it can be said that the concept of dance is well-established in the scriptures. Both Testaments and even extra-biblical references attest to this.

### **Purpose of Dance**

There are different purposes for dance. Humans dance for various reasons. Dancing, according to Heather is a means of social communication and bonding. According to him, “Dance may have been used as a tool of social interaction that promoted cooperation essential for survival among early humans. Studies found that today’s best dancers share two specific genes associated with a preposition for being good social communicators (Heather, 2006).” The writer agrees with Heather and the result of his research. Most dancers today, especially in Nigeria, are in the entertainment

industry and the basic objective of the entertainment industry is for social communication, which also provides platforms for social bonding.

Manorma (2007) explains that dance can also be used as folk celebrations. Many dances of the early periods were performed to celebrate festivals, on important or seasonal occasions such as crop harvest, births and weddings. Such dances are found all over the world and they are still so even now as civilized as the world has become. This shows how fundamental dance is to the wellness of society and humanity at large.

In addition, dance may be performed in religious or shamanic rituals, for example in times of drought. Shamans' dancing for rain is mentioned in ancient Chinese texts. Dance is an aspect of some religious rites (Pan Historia), and according to Kassing (2014), in his work, *Discovering Dance*, dance is integral to many ceremonies and rites among African people. Ritual dances may also be performed in temples and during religious festivals, for example, the Rasa ritual dances of India and the Cham dances of Tibet (Manoher, 2000). The use of dance for ceremonies and religious and cultural rituals, of course, cannot be denied.

Another interesting early use of dance is that it is probably a precursor to ecstatic trance states in healing rituals (Guenther, 1975). Dance is used for healing by many cultures. This includes Medieval European *denses macabres*, which were thought to have protected participants from disease; however, the hysteria and duration of these dances, as Laurson observes, sometimes led to death due to exhaustion (Laurson, 2012).

Furthermore, dance can also be a method of expression, in which a dance performer uses dance in telling myths. It was also sometimes used to show feelings for one of the opposite genders. It is also linked to the origin of "love making." Before the production of written languages, dance was one of the methods of passing these stories down from generation to generation (Naathanie, 2004).

In European culture, one of the earliest records of dancing is by Homer, whose *Iliad* describes chorea (χορεία; *khoreia*). The early Greeks made the art of dancing into a system, expressive of all the different passions. For example, the dance of the Furies, so represented, would create complete terror among those who witnessed them. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, ranked dancing with poetry and said that certain dancers, with rhythm applied to gesture, could express manners, passions, and actions (Mackrell, 23). The most eminent Greek sculptors studied the attitude of the dancers for their art of imitating passion.

More importantly, dance is also used for worship. This type of dance is designated "worship dance". As a basic element of human expression, dance is found within many of the world's religions, and it is frequently associated with worship. However, as Gagne, Kane and VerEecke observe, worship dance appears to be restricted to Christianity and Messianic Judaism.

In African culture, dance bridges the social gaps that exist among people thereby promoting egalitarianism in African society. African Christians, especially members of African Instituted Churches (AICs) take this same attitude with them to worship in the church. When such worship becomes ecstatic, the clergies as well as members come together before the altar to express gratitude to God in dance. This act brings worshippers closer to their priests and leaders. It helps in making the relationships between church leaders and their members cordial and healthy, which eventually results in Church growth and development in all ways.

## **Dance, Early Church and African Christianity**

It is a fact that the western missionary approach to African Christianity was generally done in such a way that African culture and way of life were not put into consideration when the Christian Faith was imported to Africa (Dairo, 2013). The cultural inclinations of the African society were jettisoned and this accounts for the avoidable condemnation of worship dance in African churches. Although dance has had a chequered history within Christianity and even in the early church. The early church has a legacy of dance, of using the body holistically. Dance was perceived as one of the “Heavenly joys and part of the adoration of the divinity by the angels and the saved” (Dairo, 2013) but records exist of prohibitions by leaders within most branches of the Christian Church, for such reasons as the association of dance with paganism, fears relating to sexuality, and a Greek-influenced belief in the separation of soul and body (Gagne, 1999). In 300 C.E. the first ban (of which there came to be a legion number) of dancing was issued, directed at the gravesite dances in the churchyards. These dances were led by women, in the tradition of Miriam, and women were specifically forbidden to dance in the churchyards. A dualism of sexes was created.

Adams explains further:

After Constantine, who became the ruler of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, officially recognized Christianity as a religion and stopped its persecution, cathedrals were built in which grand dancing became the norm. The Council of Nicea in 325 CE made a distinction between individual and group dancing. Individual dancing was sanctioned, but only in connection with the Mass, allowing primarily the priests, deacons and choir boys the privilege of dancing. Group dancing was prohibited. The churchyard dances often did turn into naked and drunken orgies, so perhaps there was some wisdom in it. However, the expressed fear cannot escape notice that “Invading hordes of pagans threatened to overwhelm the church. The superior position that clergy maintained over their laity had required that dancing together be suppressed as too equalizing and revolutionary” (Adams, 1983).

As a result, the dualism of classes was set up. Christians of higher social status were kept from intimate contact with Christians of other social classes, and from intimate contact with those outside the Christian community. Augustine hated all dancing and wanted to ban it entirely, but there were too many objections. The priests danced on St. John's Day, and the Deacons' festival dance was on St. Stephen's. These fairly tame, although once elaborate, dances deteriorated by the 11th century into bowing and movement patterns in the chancel, which is still evident in the higher liturgical churches today. The choir boys' Innocent's Day dance became the Children's Festival which had its corrupt and raucous seasons, and the Sub Deacons danced on the Feast of Circumcision and Epiphany. This latter became the corrupt Festival of Fools, against which there were innumerable bans through the centuries (Adams, 1983).

The laity was encouraged to dance in their spirits rather than their bodies, knowing that when they reached heaven they could dance with the angels around the throne. The people would not stop dancing, however, and the bans against dancing continued. The one dance permitted for everyone was the labyrinth dance on the floors of many churches. It was an elaborate maze in which one danced alone, into the centre and out again. For some, it was a journey to the underworld to defeat

Satan, and back again, symbolizing Jesus' resurrection. For others, it was a journey to heaven for healing and back to earth.

In his sermon titled *Dancing, Drinking and Card Playing*, Billy Sunday, a revivalist forerunner of Billy Graham, who was a stern critic of worship dance equated dance with the unethical act of alcoholism and gambling (Fant and Pinson, 1971). This probably was the mentality that the western missionaries had while bringing the gospel to Africa. However, in Africa cultural practices, which were also carried into her religions, dance is not seen this way. In Africa, as Kane (2000) observes that to dance is to breathe, to be connected with the earth. To dance is to be alive, and to be in touch with the rhythms of the universe. There is no separation between the secular and the sacred; no difference between the sacred and the profane. As the early church leaders knew, dance integrates. Dance is egalitarian. It levels and removes dualism, class structures and isolation.

This is the reason most of the Africa indigenous churches engage in elaborate dance during worship, creating no spiritual class between the priests and the congregants. This, perhaps, suggests a cultural dimension of the dance as an element of worship:

In American liturgy, for instance, dancing is done mostly by women, often dressed in white using primarily their arms in balletic upward kinds of movements. The sense is of angels waving to God. There is little community involvement. But in Africa, the movements come from nature: waving grasses and lumbering animals. The whole body and spine are involved with downward, earth-connected movements. Much repetition and improvisation happen so that the community can be easily involved. Both men and women are leaders in the dance. The norm of dancing as a religious activity here is the opposite of that in America (Kane, 2000).

Doubtlessly, syncretism, which is the blending of elements from at least two different cultures, has worked well in the churches of Africa. According to Alphonse (2009), African spirituality begins from the theory that the only objective approach in trying to establish a reality is through the body and that in rediscovering the body one finds out one's own identity amid humanity and returns it to its rightful place in the macrocosm. As a result, the Masses in the African Catholic Churches have been restructured so that this use of the body in dance can become an integral part of them, just as it is an integral part of the lives of the people outside the church walls.

So, there is a perfect blend of culture and Christian worship in Africa whether it is a processional, congregational reading of the Bible, the preaching of the gospel, or the Eucharist. This integration makes Christianity meaningful to the African mind; the contextualization that is needed to make Africans expressive in worship. Although not all African cultural practices are fitting to Christian worship, the practices that are not opposed to the Bible and its injunctions, to which dance belongs, should not be viewed as sacrilegious or unacceptable in Christian worship. African worship should be African in all senses and dance among other things, brings this uniqueness to African worship.

### **Implications of Dance in Christian Worship**

- Worship in African Christianity is strongly connected with the African culture of which dance is a part. So, to dance as Africans in worship is to appreciate the rich cultures of Africans and to equally make Christianity native to Africa and Africans.



- Dancing during worship gives room for the appreciation and celebration of the rich African cultures. A good number of churches in Africa, especially in Nigeria are made up of people of various and diverse cultures and when they all come together to express themselves in dance, these diversities in cultures are celebrated.
- True worship is never forced. It is dynamic, dramatic and dialogical. Dancing plays a whole lot of roles in making worship satisfying. This is one advantage African Indigenous Churches, which are mostly Pentecostal have over their contemporary mainline churches that were Western-established.
- Dancing is for self-expression, aesthetic pleasure and entertainment. Worship dance equally provides all these functions of dance. It is never out of place for worshippers to express themselves in worship and be entertained at the same time. When worship is real, God is not only exalted, man is equally made happy. A critical aspect of worship is entertainment. Every true worship amuses worshippers at some point. Dance is one of the elements that provide such pleasures during worship.
- Dancing in African Christianity removes the social and religious classes that exist among people. Africans are known for strong ties and interrelatedness and these should always be allowed to foster among the people.

## **Conclusion**

The present study has traced the historical background of dance as an expression in Christian worship in general and in African Christianity in particular using several scholarly works. Dancing has been part of the very rich Africans' way of life. Africans love to dance because it is part of their cultural heritage. Africans use to dance on several occasions including religion because dancing is as natural to them as the breath they breathe in and out, which keeps humans alive. The study equally examined the several controversies that trailed the use of dance for worship in the church. Denominations that condemn dancing in Africa are those that have been greatly influenced by Eurocentric worldviews. African Instituted Churches and Western-initiated churches in Africa that have successfully contextualized the Christian faith in Africa do not have issues with the use of dance as an element of worship. Although there are possibilities for worshippers to abuse the use of dance even during worship as they can do to every other element of worship and practices within the Christian community, it would be an unjustifiable action to ban dance or to restrict worshippers from expressing themselves fully before God in worship. Therefore, since African cultures are diverse and rich and are not inferior in any way to that western cultures and worldviews, African Christianity should be practised in such a way as to promote this cultural heritage and not sacrifice them to the spread of Christianity that does not consider the cultural milieu of the locals.

## **Recommendations**

Having considered dance as an element of worship and its implications on African Christianity, the following are thereby recommended:

- i. Churches that operate in Africa even if not of African descent should come to terms with the cultural setup of their local community and present the Christian Faith in a way that will appeal to the locals.

- ii. Dance is a vital aspect of every true and real worship in the African community, church leaders, therefore, should not frown at their members when they dance as a way of expressing their gratitude to God
- iii. African churches should promote African Christianity through dance. Cultural services should be celebrated from time to time where local music and language would be used. This will make members a sense of belonging and appreciation for their being Africans.
- iv. Worship dance is a means to an end and not an end in itself, therefore, worshippers should always make sure their motives are pure as they express their thankfulness to God in worship.
- v. African churches should endeavour to make their music ministry effective as music is a major drive to dance. When music is good, worshippers will be encouraged to express their gratitude to God in dance.
- vi. In addition to good music, African churches should maximize the use of traditional musical instruments in worship. These local instruments have certain effects they bring to worship and music in particular, which makes worship indigenous to Africans and this indigenization of worship is critical to African Christianity.

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