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Full Length Research

The Significance of Dance Performance in 'Abibgro' Tradition; *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* in Retrospect

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Abstract

Almost all Mohammed ben-Abdallah's plays are based on 'Abibgro' concept of performance, which makes use of a post-colonial presentation of dance, music, and drama a typical African story-telling tradition. The research investigates the relevance of dance in Mohammed ben-Abdallah's 'Abibgro' performances focusing on the *Trial of Mallam Ilya*. His productions will be mostly incomplete without the inclusion of dances and just limited to the dialogues. This makes dances in the productions very instrumental in the progression and development of the performance. In Ben-Abdallah's plays, the dances are carefully and aesthetically described and strategically positioned to build themes, sub-themes, and plots to provide humour and relaxation. The dances, similar to the style of 'Abibgro', also help to loosen the tension and break the monotony of dialogues and sometimes gets the audience involved during performance. Aesthetic presentations of the dances provide further and deeper analytical reflections in the person of the playwright. This paper attempts to discuss *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* through the lens of performance theories and try to unravel how everyday life activities have been employed in the choreographic process as well as proxemics. Using an ethno-choreology approach, the paper will interrogate dance movements, gestures, music, and song texts within the context of cultural transmission theory in the production of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*. This paper using semiotics, will further analyze the choreographic concepts employed and how these were achieved in the production. Finally, the paper brings to the fore how dance serves as a vehicle in 'Abibgro' tradition and how this can be explored further.

Keywords: *Abibgro* Performance Tradition, Dance, Ethnochoreology & Semiotic Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The Man Ben-Abdallah

The Trial of Malam Ilya is a political satire, written by Mohammed Ben-Abdallah who had his early growing up days in Kumasi Zongo and going to 'Makaranta' (traditional Islamic School) alongside regular local government school. Mohammed ben-Abdallah relocated to Accra for his secondary education and later entered the then School of Music, Dance and Drama at the University of Ghana to study Drama. To further his education, Ben-Abdallah went to the United States to study Theatre Arts

and returned with a major in playwriting. He is a playwright, dramatist, educationist, academic scholar and cultural activist. These experiences got him to be appointed as the first chairman of the National Commission on Culture (NCC) and later the Secretary¹ of Education and Culture in 1980s of the PNDC² era. He is one of the three founding members who established the 'Abibgromma' Theatre Company of the School of Performing Arts as an experimental resident theatre

¹ Secretary in the then PNDC era is an equivalent to a Ministerial portfolio

² PNDC is the Provisional National Defense Counsel a military government led by the Late Jerry John Rawlings as the Chairman from 1980-1992.

group to facilitate practical learning of the school in 1984.

Problem Statement

The study interrogates the place and significance dance in 'Abibgro' tradition. There is lots of research and scholarship written and discussed on 'Abibgro', its form, structure and style, (Asiedu, 2014). It is also mostly done from the perspective of practitioners and theorist such as drama directors, theatre critics, and reviewers who do not provide details in dance or the choreographies that underpin the play or the production. Furthermore, their focus and discussion are on the total 'Abibgro' concept and tradition which incorporates dance. Therefore, there is not much attention given to the discursive treatment and analysis of the dances presented in the play as well as the production. This paper attempts to bridge the gap and add to the scanty literature in analysing dance choreography in the 'Abibgro' total theatre experience.

The Concept of 'Abibgro'

With 'Abibgro' which is an expansion of Efua Sutherland's 'Anansegro', Asiedu (2011), pines that, Sutherland sought a 'Ghanaian-specific aesthetic' in 'Anansegro' while Abdallah sought a wider African aesthetic in 'Abibgro', (p. 371). 'Abibgro' is a total theatre experience of music, drumming, dance and dramatic experience of performance woven through storytelling. The storytelling style is a typical everyday Ghanaian practice and by extension in Africa as well which is underpinned by Richard Schechner's performance theories, (2004, p. 432). According to Schechner performance goes beyond the stage where context is very important in what is determined as performance to place in context where the performance takes place.

Certain events are performances, and other events are less so. There are limits to what "is" performance. But just about anything can be studied "as" performance. Something "is" a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is. Rituals, play and games, and the roles of everyday life are performances because convention, context, usage, and tradition say so. One cannot determine what "is" a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. There is nothing inherent in an action in itself that makes it a performance or disqualifies it from being a performance (Schechner, 2006, p. 30).

The above statement underpins my approach in harnessing information from the text which is the primary source and gathering secondary information from archival materials, interviews and personal interaction with the author. This enabled to situate the practices of Islamic traditions and the believe systems into the choreography of the production. Therefore, in the play, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* has been given a bigger platform on the stage through the broader sense of performance discourse for more people to see the political tensions and reflect on

the history of Ghana through the production. So that in the storytelling tradition where the narrator serves as the storyteller, in *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* the narrator is presented by the playwright as the main character who narrates the events of the play, is something that happens especially in Ghanaian storytelling situations. The typical narrator in the person of the man on trial who gives vivid accounts of his exploits that has brought him on trial in the 'Abibgro', style, is one way of choreographing a dance to depict the narrations of the events to fit into the context and setting of the production. Again, the argument that, Abibgro like 'Anasesem' and 'Anasegro' has the characteristics to evolve very fast, (Asare, 2006), the narrator sometimes goes back into memory (history) and relies on his audience to help him tell his tale to acquit himself as it happened in Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*. In this play, Mohammed Ben-Abdallah artistically builds upon the 'Anasesem or the Anasegro' tradition by Afua Sutherland, where (Asiedu, 2011), identifies 'nmoguo' as music and dance which serves as the interlude of the performances (p. 368). On the other hand, in the case of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, it is an interwoven part of the plot which cannot be done without in the production. According to Asiedu (2011), 'Abibgro' 'borrows heavily on traditional story-telling technique' which is also very characteristic in almost all Mohammed Ben-Abdallah's plays.

The Play (Production)

The play brings out some of the activities of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, also comments on 'Ghana's turbulent political history', of Ghana, as espoused by Djisenu, (2000, p. 43). The setting is that of an Islamic tradition, in which the playwright sought to mock the nation Ghana through the actions of (Imam Abbas), the high priest of Angah (Ghana). These activities of the High Priest led to the arrest of Ilya and subsequently to his trial. Even though the playwright provides a disclaimer to the play and that it is only a piece of fiction and the similarities of characters in the play to real people are merely coincidental, yet there are some activities that one can relate with in the political history of Ghana that cannot be coincidental but factual. But given the benefit of hindsight and as a creative person Abdullah may have employed his artistic license as mentioned by Yaw Asare, in his work *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, (Asare, 2006, p. 1), to create characters that actually lived in the persons as Kwame Nkrumah (Mwuake Kumhran), Mallam Tula (Mallam Muhammad Ilya), Fatima (Halima), Princess of the Nile (Princess of Nil) and Adamafio (Adam El-Affiu). For instance, one of the occurrences in the play that showcases the non-fictional nature of the play is projected in the marriage of Kumrahn the Black to the Princess of Nil which was meant to foster diplomatic ties with other nations. This relates to the first president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah who married a Princess from Egypt (Fatima) to establish political relations with foreign

nationals³. Another instance in the play has to do with the death of Kumrahn in a foreign land. This situation brought with it, the controversy as to bringing the body home for burial, and finally, the debate that ensued afterwards. This is very much evident in the death of Kwame Nkrumah as when he died in a foreign land. These incidents in the play cannot be coincidental to the debate that hit the country Ghana when Ghana's 'Showboy', according to Anyidoho, (1985), the Osagyefo died in exile in Conakry (p. 86). The debate as to what to do with his body became an issue for the people of Ghana. Kofi Anyidoho captures this vivid scenario very well in the accounts of the *Earthchild*, (Anyidoho, 1985).

The concept 'Abibigro' developed by Mohammed Ben-Abdallah have been discussed extensively, written about and theorized in different forms and on various platforms. In all these discourse and studies, there is very little discussion on the use of dance in the debates, and it is one of the main aims of the study. As identified earlier many of the literature has been on the text or similar production in total but not necessarily interrogating the dances and the choreographic principles in the text or the production. Furthermore, I am yet to see discussion or written documents on the use of dance in 'Abibigro' and how dance helps to project the concept to its fullest realization. Based on this premise, I choose to focus on the significance of dance in the 'Abibigro' tradition, concentrating on the production *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, which I happened to choreograph in 2012 and 2017 at the Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio at the University of Ghana and the National Theatre of Ghana respectively.

My main objective in this paper is to interrogate the choreographic process in the production of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, through the theory of semiotics and proxemics. This is because, the dances are mostly described in the book as stage directions by the playwright and how these ideas materialized into the ephemeral dance presentation. Secondly, the paper also examines the importance of these choreographed dances to the production and in the 'Abibigro' concept. The study is further guided by these two main questions:

1. How is dance projected in 'Abibigro'?
2. How does Mohammed Ben-Abdallah appropriate the use of dance in *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*?

The Production

The focus of the presentation is to concentrate on the usage of dance performance and how it helped in the development of the production. As has already been

identified above, the setting of the production is an Islamic one hence there are some cultural practices of Islamic women that are identified and described by the playwright. It is common practice that within the Islamic tradition, men do not mingle with women (Pellow, 1997). Gender activist Judith Butler opines that 'African traditional societies are also organized by gender roles and spaces' (Butler, 1990, pp.4-5), confirming these statements by Pellow and Ben Abdallah in the way he described the wedding scene with all women performing specific functions and the men coming in to execute what they must do and quickly exit. Therefore, in a typical Moslem community, during an occasion like a marriage ceremony, one is bound to see lots of women who come in to assist to prepare meals and to share little gossips in town to aid the bride. (Ba, 1989). According to Pellow, at Islamic weddings both male and female perform:

The men's feast takes place in the forecourt and entrance of the hut, the women's in the women's quarters. At the men's gathering the celebrants are entertained by roko and drumming. At the women's, there is drumming, followed by bori dancing, and singing by the female maroka. (Pellow, 2006, p.293).

It is therefore not out of context that Abdallah presents to his audience an all-female dancer who could also serve as griots (praise singers) as well. During the marriage of Ilya to Halima the 'Bridal Washers' also serve as praise singers in the production were at the same time presented as the dancers in the production. During the dancing one of the maidens recites the following as part of their dance to emphasis the role of griots in the society as knowledge bearers.

Bridal Washers:

*The bride is washed
and the groom is ready
Let the Mallam tie the not
The man is standing
and the gate is open
Call the priest to usher him in!
Imam of the faithful, we are ready
(Abdallah, 1987, p. 49).*

These recital serves as a cue for the Mallam to finish performing his rites to allow the maidens to continue their dance and celebrations. The semi-circular design created is to enable the audience to see the bride and the groom as well as the maiden presenting the couple to the 'Imam of the faithful'. The picture below shows the dancers as maidens with one of the maidens reciting a praise song for the bridal wash.

³ Personal interaction with author in 2004.



Fig.1: *Marriage scene between Ilya and Halima with the maidens.* Credit; David Quaye

In the preparation for such festive occasion, food is always at the centre of activities. It is not surprising when the playwright introduces grinders, washers, and pounders to precede the marriage ceremony. Where these activities are related to the preparation of food, it is also symbolic in the preparation for procreation after the marriage ceremony. It is also expected the couple would produce children during their marriage and for that reason these activities are done as symbolism for the marriage ceremony. It is also believed that the bride must be clean(ed) and be chaste before she meets the groom, hence the cleansing and washing. The semiotics of the movements are acts of sexual connotations that the playwright has employed to ease the tension and the serious confrontations of the trial of Ilya.

Choreographic Concepts

The playwright gives vivid descriptions of how the dances should be. There are three (3) maidens, each represent the various activities being done during the marriage ceremony, that is, the grinders, the pounders and the washers. Even though the playwright provides these descriptions for the dance activities of the maidens, creating movements together for the dance were carefully selected and done. With the use of ethno-choreology, I choreographed the dance with careful selection of movements knowledge from everyday life activities which the playwright has also described in the play. The dances described by the playwright are not specific indigenous dances but rather an imaginative dance that has to be created, (Abdallah, 1987, p. 47). With this idea in mind, one must understand the occasion, the setting and the message that is to be conveyed.

Ethno-choreography are two different methodological research approaches that combines theory and praxes to investigate a phenomenon using an action or practice-based qualitative research approach as outlined by Naidoo, (2012, pp. 1-2) to use the approach to create a new art form of study such as the ethno-choreology. The two words are ethnography and choreography. Ethnology deals with the study of societies and the use of applying ethnological study tools in choreographing dances to communicate, educate and to entertain. Even though it has similarities to dance ethnology, which is the study of various dance forms from different ethnic backgrounds, ethno-choreography engages the dynamics more in the sense that it creates new dances out of the various dance forms. Especially, making use of the narratives of the cultural backgrounds, the themes, values and norms of the ethnic people to create a new choreographic dance form.

In defining dance to ascertain the non-verbal communicative element of movement gestures, I contend with the argument by Judith Lynne Hanna as she defines dance as a "physical behaviour or activity, in which the human body releases energy through muscular responses to stimuli received by the brain" (Hanna, 1979. P. 217). Again, according to Albert Mawere Opoku, one of the foremost dance scholars in Africa, he perceives dance activity as. life with its rhythms and cycles is dance. The dance is life expressed in dramatic terms. To us the dance is a language, a mode of expression, which addressed itself to the mind... through our everyday activities and real-life experiences. (Opoku, 1966, p.53). Green (1994, 14), recounts that "African dance translates everyday experiences into movements". This is also reiterated in the works of Margaret Drewal that performance is the praxis of everyday social life. It is

therefore not surprising as opined by Doris Green, Mawere Opoku, Judith Hanna and David Quaye as they all perceive African dance being created around events of everyday happening such as, historical events, war, famine, marriage, birth, puberty, harvest, etc. as exhibited in the idea of Drewal, (1990).

Performance is a fundamental dimension of culture as well as the production of knowledge about culture. It might include anything from individual agents' negotiations of everyday life to the stories people tell each other, popular entertainments, political oratory, guerrilla warfare, to bound events such as theatre, ritual, festivals parades, and more (1990, p. 1).

Ben Abdullah in his play *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* addresses almost all the issues Margaret Drewal concerns herself about in everyday life activities. So, in watching the production, the director tries to get close to reality and interprets the script as close as possible in an attempt for his audience to feel guerrilla warfare, political history and the oratory of female griots which Opoku, Hanna and Green have all reiterated as everyday life activities. To be more specific is to reiterate the words of States (2001, p. 65), that, "the field of theatre studies is rapidly being re-shaped by the principles of performance, abetted by the rise of multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity and gender studies". These thoughts and ideas are very much embodied in the theatre performance of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, which borders on issues of gender, interdisciplinary through the arts and multicultural through the background of the playwright, that is, being a Moslem and growing up in an Akan community, that is, Kumasi in the Ashanti Region.

Listening to the song of the maidens in each of the activities, the songs dwell on certain symbolic idioms. These idioms are activities such as grinding, washing and pounding. All three activities have sexual underpinnings in the song text provided by the playwright.

Allasa Jaki!: Let the he-donkey

Yagamu da Jaka!: Meet the she-donkey

Muga Sokawa!: So we may see

Muga Zwarewa!

Muga dan tsakan mai run wan kubewa!: The plunging in

Muga dan tsarin na bullum bullum!: And the plunging out

And the shower of life
And the ecstasy and dance of life

So we can jump
Up and down!
Up and down!

(Abdallah 1987, p. 48)

Therefore, the choreography was done with sexual gestures toned down with contemporary popular dance forms for aesthetic presentations and appreciation. This was ably done using ethno-choreology, which is based on cultural underpinnings, ethnic norms amidst popular culture to a choreographic piece that would be accepted by all as well as aesthetically pleasing. In simple understanding of the words of the song, I created movements that made use of the pelvis to thrust forwards and backwards whiles lifting the legs simultaneously. This movement gesture brought out exactly what the director was expecting which also projected the idea of the description provided by the playwright.

Choreographic Process

I have had the opportunity of choreographing this piece on different occasion and in all these situations the choreography was different because of the approach, the style and most importantly not having logistics in terms of funding, the number of maidens and performers available, the use of proxemics and finally, the themes on which any of the choreographies were done.

To begin the choreographic process as part of my methodology in achieving my aim. Through a qualitative research design, I started my primary investigation from reading the text of the play to have a firsthand understanding of the text. Then my next was to pay particular attention to the dance descriptions in the script as well as the stage directions to understand what the playwright wants to convey in addition to the director's goal. Having than that, I had interactions with the director of the production to understand what he has in mind so we could agree on how elaborate the choreography should be, the length, the use of music whether to use recorded music or live music and finally the numbers of maidens to use. We also discussed the use of space and the arrangements of the dancers on stage interspersed with the rest of the actors on stage. For me as the choreographer, this was critical since the same dance was done at the National Theatre space, it was very important to examine the use of that space as well. The National theatre space was much bigger, and the numbers of dancers were few. Therefore, enhancing the dance and stretching it a bit longer to accommodate time and to perform within the given time frame. The theory of proxemics was applied to aid in the design of the dance in relation to other performers on the stage and to make maximum use of the space.

In choreographing the dance pieces in *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, I took into consideration the number of ladies especially for the ETS Drama Studio stage and then the space in which the performance would finally be done. Since in all three situations the place and purpose of the performances were different which also affected the choice and adaptation used. In any stage performance, there is no one performance that is always the same, there will certainly be differences.

Secondly, my initial interactions with the playwright on some of the Islamic practices in the play and how these should be projected in the dance also helped the situation to articulate those elements well. The song texts were written in Hausa language, and I needed to interpret these through movement gestures in the choreography. Therefore, semiotics was applied to help create movement gestures that will relate and represent the ideas in the song text and give meaning to the songs through the dance. That was why I develop movement vocabulary around grinders, pounders and washers which are typical everyday performances in a home as espoused by Richard Schechner, Magaret Derawal and many more scholars on performance theories.

In the first performance in 2012, this was done as a staff production where funding was not a constraint, students were available for rehearsals and so it was quite easy to achieve close to the playwright's descriptions of the maiden's dance in the script. For the three dances, each of the dances had three maiden dancers each, that is, the grinders, the pounders and the washers. For the Halima's dance, I was able to choreograph Halima very well since she herself was flexible in movement, so I was able to achieve my purpose in getting close to the description in the script.

For the second performance produced in 2017, for the Kwame Nkrumah Conference at Institute of African Studies, (IAS), the timing was short, and I could not get enough ladies to play the different roles for the three dances, I decided to adapt for the production. Subsequently, not getting enough ladies for all the maidens as described by the playwright in the dance, I used all the five ladies who were available for the various activities of the dance, i.e., grinders, pounders and washers.

The third performance was done as part of theatre season organized by the National Theatre of Ghana, which meant that the performance was to be staged on the big space in the National Theatre auditorium, thus the choreography was enlarged and biffed up with more people to fill the space.

Grinders

In trying to understand who grinders are especially with the context of the production and be able to choreograph them, I had to unravel the concept of grinding so I can harness movement articulation for the activity. Therefore, for this grinding dance activity, the simple understanding of grinding is an act of performing an activity of rubbing two surfaces together, these are friction and abrasion, which is to smoothen a particular surface (Groover, 2002. P. 587).

Within the indigenous African traditional setting, grinding may refer to the use of grinding on stones to prepare food. In metaphorical underpinnings, grinding also connotes sexuality where girls may rub their buttocks on the surface of a guy's phallus, manhood or the male

organ in the act of dirty dancing. It is this symbolism that is projected in the dance even though the act of preparing food in the home was also projected from the beginning of the dance.

In every society when there is a traditional marriage, music and dance performances form key component of the ceremony as exhibited in the use of the 'Abibigro' concept. It is therefore not out of context in the performance of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, music and dance became key aspects of the development of the performance. The three different dances choreographed in the production are themselves connected to the cultural traditions of marriage ceremonies and connotes the expectations of marriage couples, which is procreation and childbirth.

In the first dance piece, maidens are seen gesturing to kinesthetics of indigenous women grinding as an act of food preparation in any typical African traditional home which is not different from a typical Islamic home. Marriage is a festive occasion, where family, friends and community members are invited. These people need to be catered for in terms of food, drinks, and water. So, African women are most likely to be seen in the courtyard preparing food for the whole occasion. As the play is set in an Islamic tradition, women mostly get involved in the preparation of food. So, in the production, the symbol of the three women depicting the grinding of pepper, okra, tomatoes, garden eggs etc. amidst singing is a representation of what pertains in a typical traditional Islamic marriage and other marriages as well. The song text below aided in choreographing the maidens to bring meaning to the articulation of grinding gestures.

Bisimi Layi: *In the name of Allah*

Arahami Mumfara: *The merciful we begin*

Da Sunun Allah: *The name of Allah*

Sunan Allah Bawasaba: *Is not to be played with*

Idan Kunce: *If you say*

Abin Wasane: *It is a plaything*

Mu Bamuce Abin Wasaba: *We don't say it is a plaything*

(Abdallah, 1987, p. 47)

Translation (Sidikou, 2000, p. xi)

In a more metaphorical sense, the grinding dance piece signifies the rubbing of the two surfaces together for procreation. In this context of the performance, grinding is the friction of an abrasion of the bride and groom in an amorous condition which is expected to yield in precreation. The dance starts with the maidens exhibiting grinding gestures with their arms, then they kneel to

exhibit the same things while wriggling their waist from right to left and then raising their arms up. These movements provide sensual and sexual instincts for the

marriage couple. In the grinding dance piece, the sexual connotation was not so much pronounced.



Fig. 2: *The two pictures depict movements of grinding maidens. Credit Obugacy Production*

As already identified above, the setting of the production is that of an Islamic tradition. Hence some of the cultural practices of Islamic women are identified and described by the playwright. It is common practice that in traditional African societies, any female activity is accompanied with songs, verbal arts which according to Sidikou, (2001) “helps them pass the time, to coordinate and minimize the toil and to boost their morale” (p. xi). It is in reference to this that the dance performed at the wedding ceremony were all maidens, performing various household activities such as pounding, grinding and washing. These dances are normally accompanied with songs as in *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*.

Pounders

The second dance piece, the pounders, is a projection of maidens pounding various food substances such as

millet, corn, cassava, plantain, palm nuts etc. the idea of food preparation is still evident in the dance gesture. The semiotics of the pounding of the pestle symbolizes the groom’s phallus representing the pestle “pounding” into the mortal which is the representation of the female reproductive organ. The symbolisms are an act of expectation in marriage where the couple are expected to procreate. The playwright gives a detailed description of this particular action. In the dance piece, women are seen standing holding an imaginary pestle and pounding together into an imaginary mortar. While they do this the maidens break their torso and the pelvic in the dance to synchronize with the song, they sung *Muga dan tsakan na bullum bullum*, ‘so we can jump up and down’, (Abdallah, 1987, p.48). The picture below shows a pictorial example of the pounding gesture of the maidens and thrusting of the waist in the dance performance described on page 10 above.



Fig. 3: *Maidens in a pounding dance movement. Credit, David Quaye*

Washers

Washing is an act of cleansing, and this act makes the object pure. In the third dance piece, (washing), movement gestures were selected to depict literal washing and drying of clothes. Through semiotics in the context of this discussion, washing in this sense symbolizes the cleansing of the bride to make her chaste before marriage. According to the playwright, within the Islamic tradition it is normal practice for women to symbolically bathe a bride in an attempt to get rid of all evil spirits and bad habits, making the bride a new person before going into her marital home, (Abdallah, 1987). Furthermore, in the play *Dilemma of Ghost*, Ama Ata Aidoo, discusses cleansing as a preparatory ground for childbirth in the case of Eulalie Rush when the family

members perceived her to be barren. Some rituals had to be performed to cleanse her womb, "...it is to prepare her for childbirth", (Aidoo, 1972, p. 45). These instances demonstrate how much the African attaches so much importance to childbirth in marriage. So that even before the couples are married rituals are performed for procreation within the union, (Kwakwa, 1998, p. 291).

In the choreographed dance piece, the maidens were made to line up in a communal way of washing while they sang and danced. In one of the instances, the bride knelt in-front of them as if she was being literally washed. This according to Ben-Abdallah is to make the bride chaste for the husband and make her ready and ripe for childbirth.

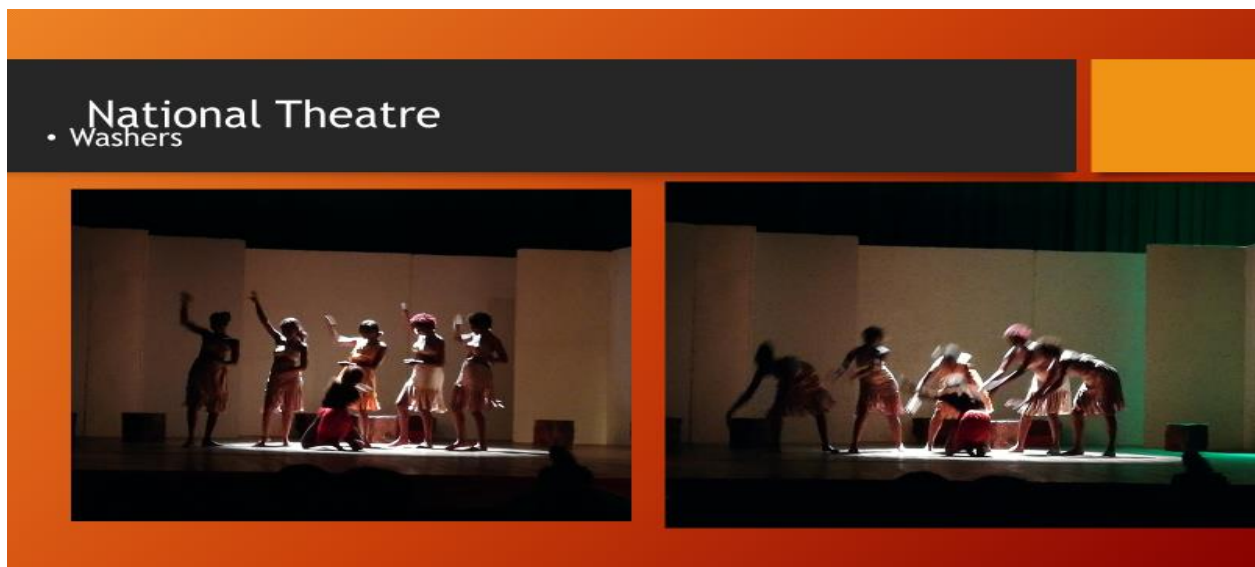


Fig. 4: Maidens symbolically washing Halima Credit, Obugacy Production.

The above pictures reveal the maidens and the bride (Halima), kneeling in front of them while they perform some popular dance movements such as Azonto to depict the washing and cleansing of the bride. This act also demonstrates the uniqueness Africans attach to marriage and childbirth.

Halima's Dance Piece

The concept in choreographing Halima's dance was not much different from the previous ideas. Having been cleansed and washed symbolically, Halima was now ready and chaste to meet her groom for the marriage ceremonies. Therefore, Halima's dance was to exhibit sexuality as well as sensual kinesthetic emotions that would arouse Ilya (the groom), for an intercourse that would lead to procreation. Therefore, in wriggling the waist, moving her arms round her breasts and her body

just to execute the dance in Ilya's arms. This whole action also adds to the development of the plot where Ilya is forced to confess later that he raped Halima. Therefore, movements were carefully selected to convey both the author as well as the director's idea in projecting Ilya as a rapist through the narratives of the protagonist who is the same person as the storyteller, in the person of Ilya, through the 'Abibigro' concept discussed earlier.

Even though the choreographed dance enacted during the performance may be seen as entertainment, it is not just for art's sake where the audience may appreciate the work of art but has much deeper underpinnings to the production which is for life's sake. The understanding of semiotics and symbolism used in the play adds to the plot development of the play especially in the way Halima got married to Ilya and the development of her character. Most African traditions attach so much importance to traditional marriage where music and dance forms a key component in the event. As

has been enumerated in the works of Kwakwa, (1998), Sowah, (2011), Green, (2013) and Welsh-Asante, (1994) in the way the indigenous African celebrates life through dance, this production of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* is not devoid of that celebration which has been well projected by the author.

The Masquerade Dance

For the masquerade dance piece, unlike the usual sexual motifs that had run through most of the dances described, for this masquerade scene, it was more of creating a comic relief of representing colonial identity and their various exploits on the African soil. Just like Prince Henry the navigator is credited with the discovery of the Coast of Guinea, the playwright ridicules him with the African Priest. Likewise, David Livingstone is also satirized with his exploits with the African priests as well as the encounter of Sir Cecil Rhodes and his activities in the Cape colony which is presumed to have been sent by Queen Victoria in the 19th century. Movement's gestures were created to the descriptions given in the form of images that the masquerades were positioned by the playwright. This also provided me the opportunity to exploit with movements that will be comfortable and fit into the positions the masquerades had been described by the playwright. For example, the image of Queen Victoria dance on the belly of Chaka the Zulu was quite a difficult one to achieve. Their positions were quite restricted, and I could not move the two dancers much, so the best in the situation was to use the legs of Chaka the Zulu and allow Queen Victoria to wriggle her waist to the music. With this position the two performers were comfortable to execute their movements and still freeze in that position when their dance performance was over for the rest of the act to continue.

All these symbolisms introduced by the playwright in the play have their latent function underneath the messages they convey as well as their aesthetic appeal that arises within the performance, especially through use of costume, song texts, props, scenic design and lighting.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a research design employed to understand a phenomenon. For this practice-base study, the study adopted the qualitative research approach which according to Bell (2010) provides a vivid description of events of how the study was done (p. 8). Furthermore, this study draws on research tools such as ethnology and fusing it with choreology to interrogate meaning with both interviews and movement gestures as well as descriptions from the written text to make salient arguments in analyzing the study. Even though the playwright gives vivid descriptions of how the dances should be, as a choreographer and a creative person I had to develop an idea and a concept within which to

achieve the choreography as close as possible to the description in the play. In so doing, the methodology adopted for this work was the ethno-choreology approach. Kaepler's, (2000), studies enable one to understand the traditional society in which the dance is originating from and to create out of it, (pp.116-117). Furthermore, to understand the setting in which the play has been set in other to create from that traditional society to suit the performance or the production and the stage directions provided by the playwright in the script. Through the ethno-choreology approach the choreography was done based on the script, interviews and information from the author and research gathered from Moslem community and cultural traditions as well as practices. In *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, there are about five different dance forms. As discussed above, the maidens' dances which comprised of the grinders, pounders and washers. The other dance is that of Halima's flirtatious bridal dance and finally, the dances in the masquerade scene, (Abdallah, 2008, p.37).

Analysis (The use of space)

The performance space is a very vast space which can be identified in various forms such as the marketplace, palace square, the community centre, lorry park, under the big tree in front of the chief's palace, the conventional space and the newfound contemporary space the mobile phones and the cyber space. All these spaces in one way or the other can engage various forms of dance performances which is enjoyed by the audiences that patronize the various spaces. For this the performance, the performance space used was largely the proscenium space both at the ETS Drama Studio and at the National Theatre of Ghana.

Each of the dances choreographed for the different performances on the two different stages has its own aesthetics appreciation. Aesthetics is a concept that was developed by Alexander Baumgarten, a German philosopher (Wessell, 1972, p.333), who coined the term and has been developed further by critics and various scholars in academia. According to Merriam, (1965, p. 260), the term aesthetic has been used by Western and certain middle and far Eastern cultures to denote something about the arts. This idea of the arts relates also to African art forms which *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* is a part of. The concept of 'Abibigro' in the Ghanaian context has its aesthetics and this is appreciated by the audience, which is also corroborated by Kaepler, (2000, p.117). For that matter, the dance choreographies in the production have their aesthetics based on the proximity of space, the number of dancers and maidens used, the costumes provided for the dance and the music that was used, all culminated in the one production. Maybe, singling the dance out could be enjoyed for its own sake but would not be complete without adding the rest of the performance to it. I will attribute the kind of aesthetics in the performance to spaces used for the various

performances. The Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio has its limitation in terms of proxemics with the proscenium stage compared with the National Theatre stage, therefore one cannot use too many dancers on stage or as it were to open the positions too wide as in the case of the masquerade dance. So, for aesthetics purposes, some of the movements that were minimized and reduced in the E. T. S. Drama Studio, the movements were elaborated and enhance at the National Theatre for quick paces and artistic presentation since the distance between the stage and the audience at the National Theatre is much further than that of the E. T. S. Drama Studio. The proxemics for example at the Drama Studio is so limited that both the choreography at the marriage celebration and that of the masquerade scene had to be squeezed for all performers to fit into the stage and within lighting distribution. This situation at the national Theatre was rather helpful since it enhances creativity in opening positions in the dance choreography for aesthetics appeal and vision from the audience unlike the Drama Studio. In the case of the National Theatre, the stage was quite big for some of the dances due to the number of the performers, so again the stage stretched my creativity to make do with the situation and allow the dancers to draw

on the theory of enhance exaggeration to enable them to articulate their dance movements very well for the audience.

For me I will not go into the debate of what aesthetics is and what it is not but will rather agree with Alan Merriam in what she describes as a matter of semantics which cultivates in an intuitive feeling for what is considered aesthetics and not considered to be aesthetic. Aesthetics can be enjoyed for its own sake and can also be enjoyed when the purpose for the intention is changed. Of course, the creative process for the production was an intentional venture to make the audience enjoy the dance performance through the elements of choreography which include design, focus, levels, dynamics, mood and shapes. In reference to Gyekye, (1996), the purpose for the artwork must be for its intended purpose and not otherwise (p.126). The purpose for this creative artwork was to arouse excitement, enjoyment and fun from the audience and once this was achieved then the intended purpose was done. Therefore, in each performance space at the ETS. Drama Studio and the National Theatre stage gave the dance performance the needed aesthetics for the different periods, that is, 2012 and 2017.



Fig. 5: *This is a masquerade Scene from the National Theatre stage where I have added some more dancers to fill up the space. Credit, David Quaye.*

Apart from providing entertainment for the audience to enjoy themselves in both the National Theatre and at the ETS. Drama Studio, the performances also create a vivid imagery in the minds of the audience what is not really spelt out in the script. Some of these were achieved using costume, light, sound, music and singing as well. Within the African context, it has been identified that the African aesthetics has a more dynamic way of

representation, and it is a holistic one where every component of the arts is critical in the determination of aesthetics. Almost all the dances choreographed in this production are meant for the art's sake since they add up to the total elements of the production and therefore must not be taken out of context.

Space was another challenge in the production. Using the ETS Drama Studio stage limited the use of numbers for

the dance as well as creativity. But on the other hand, it also makes one creative in terms of how to manage limited resources for a smaller space as against the National Theatre space which was much bigger. The proscenium stage in the ETS Drama Studio is so small that one cannot explore with 'wild' ideas. Furthermore, since most of the dances have been described in the script, it sometimes behooves the choreographer to try as much as possible to be faithful to the script and the stage directions. Especially in the case of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* when the choreographer does anything contrary to the script, it is likely to change and distort the interpretation of the story in the production. It is certainly difficult to choreograph a Ben Abdallah play because the dances he describes are mostly imaginative and one is not in the playwright's head to be able to create easily as well as to achieve exactly what the playwright wants.

Challenges Encountered

In such a work where the choreographer is not the final arbiter. It is very difficult for the choreographer as a creative artist to have autonomy on what he thinks would be best for the production especially relating to the dance. The choreographer must contend with other issues as costume designer, lighting and the scenic designers as well as the director to agree on common aesthetic practices to enable the production open for the first night. Since theatrical performance is a collaborative art, it does not behold on one person to dictate. A performance such as this is fused with music, dance, props, and visual art in terms of scenery (architecture) to achieve a composite performance. Alan Merriam reiterates this phenomenon when she opines that drama performances rely on interrelationship of the arts to a point. (Merriam, 1964, p.273). Hence the choreographer must work in tandem with all creative artists in a production such as this.

CONCLUSION

The experience of choreographing Mohammed Ben Abdallah's play, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* in particular and some of his plays has given me some insight into not just reading the script and providing what the stage directions requires but also going beyond to understand the setting of the play and the background of the playwright to interpret these ideas into dance choreography. Furthermore, this has provided the opportunity to add on to body of knowledge choreography plays that sometimes do not have dance descriptions in but can be incorporated to enhance the stage performance. Drawing on concepts and theories of semiotics, which brought out the interpretations of the symbolic gestures of dance movements as well as the song text plus the theory of proxemics which underpinned how performance space was utilized in both the ETS. Drama Studio and the National Theatre spaces respectively. Finally, how the

concept of 'Abibgro' has been used and analyzed through careful discursive themes in the production has also been addressed as much as possible. The study is also to add on to the existing available literature on the many scholarly works on 'Abibgro', as well as the concept of ethno-choreology and how it has been applied. It has also broadened the scope on how to understand the creative principles and ideas in the dances presented in all the staged production.

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