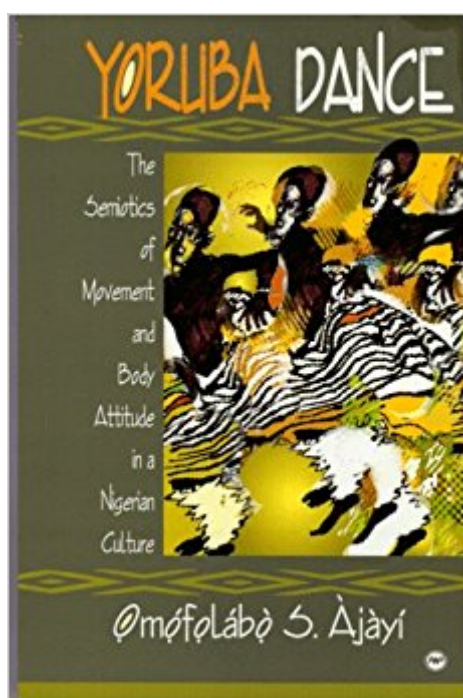


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# Yoruba Dance : The Semiotics Of Movement And Body Attitude In A Nigerian Culture



## Synopsis

This book investigates the aesthetics, significance, and the production of meaning in Yoruba dance forms through an analysis of the dancer's body attitude in communication as well as through the events in which dances take place. The author examines the Yoruba creative concept of dance as a performing art communicating non-verbally through and with other art forms and describes how dance functions as an extensive and complementary vehicle for the other arts. This approach, fully grounded in the cultural context of the Yoruba, highlights dance as a microcosm of Yoruba culture and at the same time presents it as a powerful art form and a communication vehicle. The collection of dances and dance events studied are from both ancient and historical times, reflecting and signifying the various cultures that engendered them, and each significant dance type -- whether ritual dances in sacred / secular contexts or social and political dance ceremonies -- is represented. The overall analysis emphasizes the fundamental integration of dance and dance-event in the African aesthetic, which is designed to both entertain and instruct.

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## Customer Reviews

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INTRODUCTION: Dance in Ancient Yorubaland - To the Yoruba people, located in the southwestern part of Nigeria, dance is an important and versatile art form that is fully integrated into the culture. The communicative and expressive properties of dance are maximally employed and

deployed in different intersocial and aesthetic activities of the people. At significant events, such as end-of-year rituals and festivities, religious observances, rites of passage, political ceremonies, and professional activities, dance not only serves as a popular convivial accompaniment but also serves to illustrate the meaning and underline the symbolism of those occasions. Equally enjoyed for its recreational and its aesthetic pleasures, the dynamic form of dance functions to visually and kinesthetically enhance and complement the aesthetic as well as the symbolic impact of other art forms, whether verbal or non-verbal, bringing out their full significance and meaning. In the art of storytelling, for example, many sessions are spiced up with dance performances, especially when the stories are accompanied by songs and music. Sometimes a new dance is even created in the process, especially in children's stories, in which case it later becomes part of the children's numerous dance-based games. A one-dimensional ephemeral art form, dance brings alive more substantial multi-dimensional material art like sculptured headgears, masks, hand props, wands, and fabric collage. It is perhaps in this area that dance achieves its peak as an expressive communication art; a non-verbal art form itself, dance vivifies the meaning of these other non-verbal art forms. Many Yoruba sculptures specially created as theatrical or ritual pieces attain their full potency, significance and/or functions mainly through a dance performance. In fact for this reason, many of these sculptures were in the past kept out sight in shrines or special out-of-bounds rooms when not in "active service." To expose them without motion is to destroy their artistic metaphor and symbolic aura. Thus, even while recognized and performed as an independent art form, many dances are created either as part of, or to emphasize and illustrate important aspects of Yoruba social structure and events. In this context, they also served as repository of meaning to other Yoruba art forms. Essentially, therefore, to study ancient Yoruba dances in depth is really to get a good insight into that culture. The dance was not segregated from other aspects of life, rather, it was closely interwoven with significant aspects of the culture, informing, enriching and perpetuating it. It is therefore very surprising to realize that dance has not been as seriously and systematically studied as other aspects of Yoruba culture whose meanings are in fact, more enhanced precisely through the art of dance. A vital key to understanding a culture is its communication system, both verbal and non-verbal. Unfortunately while linguistic differences are readily acknowledged and efforts made to learn how to speak an unfamiliar language, other means of communication are neglected. Specifically, the non-verbal means of interpersonal communication - facial expression, spatial distance, hand gestures, and general body movements and appearance - are not considered important enough to be bothered with. Consequently, they are often ignored and there is no systematic effort to learn them. Yet in every culture, different forms of non-verbal communication

(NCV) are crucial aspects of the daily communication system which, depending on the circumstances, can enhance or alter the meaning of the spoken word. Through ignorance, cultural arrogance, or simply utter disregard for cultural differences and specificities, some people have unceremoniously grafted their own culture's body attitude onto another's. Many of these same people would shudder at the notion of doing the same with the spoken form. Such disregard for NCV easily, and perhaps with far-reaching consequences, precipitates conflicts that are otherwise avoidable. For example, while the Yoruba and other African cultures consider direct eye contact - especially from a younger person to an older one - a sign of rudeness and poor social etiquette, many European cultures simply regard it as an expression of candor. Such differences in the interpretation of the same act lead to centuries old cross cultural accusations of crudeness (against Europeans) and shiftlessness against Africans. The failure to acknowledge the importance of NVC and the resulting depreciation of a divergent culture is keenly felt in that most dynamic culmination of body attitude in communication - the art of dance. Yoruba dances, like other African dances, have been subjected to gross misinterpretation and misrepresentation, particularly in the Western world. Strongly rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, particularly in the events surrounding the historic rise of Christianity to prominence in the waning days of the Roman empire, the Western culture maintains an ambivalent attitude towards the body and its expressive powers.. Christian moral ethics vacillates between perceiving the body as the site of the soul/spirit and the temple of God on one hand and, on the other, as the weak flesh, the base of carnality, and the ultimate house of sin. This is a dichotomy that only succeeds in vilifying the body (which is naturally and visibly associated with the flesh in real life) and sanctifying the soul (even though the soul is equally inconceivable without the body). However, because it is unseen, the soul is therefore "perceived" as separated from the physical actions of the body. The soul is conceived of as an abstract, disembodied entity. To remain pure and worthy as the site of the soul, therefore, the body must remain untainted by the ordinary doings of the flesh. In other words, the body must also become as much "disembodied" as possible. One solution to this dialectical dilemma is for the body to avoid being unduly expressive - which would effectively eliminate dance as a socially viable form of communication. The Yoruba, by contrast, have a more positive and holistic attitude towards the body. The body is the site of culture, beauty, art, expression, and spirituality. In other words, if you have what it takes, show it; there is no point in hiding it. If a particular body has been used for unsavory purposes or in any unbecoming way, then that body, during the period of such abuse, takes on that unwholesome quality. But this does not necessitate a blanket condemnation of all other bodies, nor does it condemn the particular "offending" body forever. There are rites of purification to cleanse the body of whatever impurities it

has acquired at any time in its lifetime - provided, of course, that the owner of the body (i.e. the person) is willing to be cleansed. The same body that dances with spiritual and pious fervor in worshipping God, dances with sensual pleasure and delight on social and courtship occasions and assumes all seriousness of purpose during political dances. There is no contradiction. Thus, to the Yoruba, dance is one of the attributes that defines a person and which integrates one fully as a member of society. Such inherently conflicting attitudes are bound to clash historically when two cultures meet. Indeed, the Christian missionaries, armed for their world-wide evangelism with the belief that "all dances must lead to fornication" became (in the words of Malinowski) "frightened of the dances without ever coming near them. Early Western anthropologists also fell into the same ethnocentric bias and moralistic trap, authoritatively describing non-Western dance forms as "lewd ambling" or "imitative fornication." The denigration of these dances cannot be separated from the general imperialist attitude with which the colonizing European countries regarded conquered African peoples and their cultures. Backed by these incontrovertible "divine" pronouncements, and by 'scientific objectivity,' the colonizing European countries showed little tolerance for the indigenous dances of conquered peoples. Moreover, given the cultural importance of dance in many of these cultures, it was politically expedient for the colonizers to prevent their survival. Their destruction served as a cultural re-enforcement of the military defeat and helped to facilitate the act of ruling over the subjugated peoples. This combination of religious intolerance and political imperialism - two major and fundamental forms and expressions of power and domination in many a society - all but destroyed the art of dance among the Yoruba. The colonialists were frequently aided in their acts of destruction by some indigenes who had become alienated from their own cultures either through exposure to the Western educational system and/or by converting to Christianity. In order to prove that they no longer believed in such "uncivilized" practices these converts helped ferret out many institutions where the dances had "gone underground" and aided the destruction of important dance paraphernalia. Their collaboration had deep demoralizing effects on the participants of the art and seriously affected the natural growth and survival of the art of dance itself. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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