

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

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<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 4 Issue 1

March 31, 2020

Political Systems and Educational Policy: A Reflection of Dance Education in Ghana

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Citation: Osei, L. A. & Ferguson, E. E.A. (2020). Political systems and educational policy: A reflection of dance education in Ghana. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 4(1), 61 - 70.

Abstract



Dance education in Ghana has undergone rapid transformation as a result of the dynamic political atmosphere Ghana has experienced over the period covering pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. During the pre-colonial era, dance was an integral part of the worldview of communities in Ghana and its education was viewed as a critical aspect of the continued survival of the communities. As power shifted into the hands of the colonial masters, the promotion of indigenous performing arts, including dance, were seriously marginalised. Efforts expended to revitalise dance education in Ghana, during the post-colonial era, has achieved little success, particularly at the basic and secondary levels of the educational system. This paper is a review dance education as it existed before the advent of Europeans on the soil of Ghana, the colonial as well as the post-colonial eras. The history is presented within the framework of the critical education theory, which postulates

power negotiation and its rippling effect on educational policies. Varied political systems that have spun over the history of Ghana and their impact in the promotion of dance education in Ghana are reviewed. Reflections indicate that political power and systems have the ability to control the development of a philosophy that guides the policies and practices of educational system in Ghana. Possible implications are that if efforts are not expended to revitalise dance education in Ghana then this aspect of Ghanaian culture is heading towards extinction.

Keywords: Ghanaian Music and Dance, Critical Education Theory, Dance Education, Ghanaian Political Ideologies, Educational Policies.

Introduction

Music and dance have been an integral part of life for the Ghanaian. Osei (2010), citing Hamera (2007), explains that dance in Africa and particularly Ghana, serves as a product for public consumption and has the ability to connect individuals who may otherwise have very little in common. Dance is a psycho-social device that has the ability to penetrate many aspects of human existence (Nicholls, 1996). The core of the above submissions indicates the power dance has on the African and his environment.

Nonetheless Ghana's political history is fraught with varied ideologies that have fuelled social relations and activities. The political ideologies espoused in pre-colonial communities in Ghana as well as those of the post-colonial periods pervaded the lives and the worldview of the people. The influence of these ideologies on education is visible in current educational reforms. This paper is a reflection on the influence of political ideologies on the promotion of dance education in Ghana. The reflection takes the stance of reviewing dance education, as it existed during the period before the advent of Europeans on the soil of Ghana and the post-colonial eras. Post-colonial Ghana, particularly the immediate post-colonial period was vibrant with political ideologies that sought to dismantle the vestiges of colonialism. The educational system was reformed to propagate anti-colonial views and ideologies. The "African personality" which was espoused by post-colonial African leaders, particularly Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, supported the ideology of *sankofaism* "with the hope of reigniting and empowering African knowledge" (Petrie, 2015, p. 47). Today, how eminent is the *African personality* among the Ghanaian people? How well informed are the Ghanaian youth about their *African personality*? What is the future of Africa, if we are not well grounded in the African personality? It is upon the backdrop of these that this reflection has become necessary.

Pre-Colonial Era

During the pre-colonial era, dance was an integral part of the worldview of communities in Ghana and its education was viewed as a critical aspect of the continued survival of the communities in pre-colonial Ghana. According to Nketia (1974), communal ownership and communal efforts directed at the pursuit of activities that supported the survival of ethnic groups were features of Ghanaian indigenous communities. He noted that the performing arts in Ghanaian indigenous communities, before the advent of the Europeans in Ghana, were well organised and a system for transferring skills and knowledge in the arts from one generation to the other was firmly established. Indigenous communities had a clear understanding of the nature and value of dance and held it in high esteem. For these communities, it pervaded critical socio-cultural events such as religious healing, chieftaincy, annual festivals, rites of passage, among others (Amlor, 2016). Throughout this era, well-structured and hierarchical political systems were established in nation-states and their vassal communities. In this regard, Dartey-Baah (2015) indicated that, "before the advent of colonization, Ghana, then Gold Coast, did not have any notable political leader because it was not unified as a single country with one leader" (p. 50).

In each nation-state, though the king wielded considerable power, it was believed that decisions and actions that were of critical importance to the survival of the community were strongly influenced by the Supreme Being, gods, spirits and ancestors (Adeyemo, 1978). Idowu (1974) affirms that political, economic and social activities were strictly controlled by supernatural beings. The implications of this were that the Supreme Being, gods, spirits, and ancestors could not be ignored on matters affecting the selection and installation of chiefs. In the same vein, their presence was felt in matters relevant to farming, trading and the provision of essential services (Mbiti, 2015). The daily activities of the people were stalwartly guided by these supernatural beings. In this regard, culturally-oriented scholars such as Gyekye (1996) and Parrinder (1961) indicate that even in the selection of marital partners and consummation of marriages, the king and his community members, had to consult the supernatural beings. The belief in the relationship between the physical and the spiritual worlds was so strong that seeking the approval of the gods and ancestors on decisions and actions affecting the survival of the communities was not compromised. No wonder Mbiti (2015) supported the worldview that promotes the inevitability of the spirits in the operations of the physical world through the proliferation of rituals that punctuated the life-cycle of the individual members of the communities. This view is strongly supported since the beginning (birth) and end (death) of an individual had to have some connection to these supernatural beings.

There is excessive evidence to demonstrate the influence of indigenous political systems on the education and training of minors in preparation for later adult life in the community (Mushi, 2009; Nketia, 1974; Cameron & Dodd, 1970). The indigenous educational system, though informal in nature, was founded on a well-developed philosophy and implemented within the framework of collective responsibility. This duty was supervised by the political hierarchy that referenced the Supreme Being, spirits, and ancestors in all deliberations affecting the education of minors. Learning took place anywhere and everywhere in the community. Every growing child belonged to the community and not just his or her nuclear family. It was the responsibility of an elder to correct a child whenever he or she went wrong. Punishment to certain unacceptable norms was tied to the wrath of the Supreme Being and every child got that kind of training as s/he grew up. This approach to educational delivery hinging on community leadership and well supported by the supernatural being was adopted by pre-colonial communities to prepare their members for citizenship (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). The education was facilitated through the community leadership with backing from the spirits and ancestors and it instilled good character, adequate knowledge of one's history, beliefs, and reverence for supernatural beings and appreciation of cultural identity (Eyiah, 2004).

As stated earlier, though power is wielded in the leader of a community who is the king, Parrinder (1961) observed that among ethnic communities in Africa, power was vested in the ancestors, gods, and spirits. Thus, the life cycle of the African, and for that matter, the Ghanaian, revolved around rituals that sought to affirm the allegiance owed to the gods, spirits, and ancestors. Similarly, Amlor (2011) asserted that the rituals that punctuate rites of passage are incomplete without music and dance. Nketia (1974) also averred that the African is born and dies in music and dance. Both statements by Amlor and Nketia are confirmed in the various stages of the life cycle where rituals are performed to pacify the gods and solicit their support during each stage of the life cycle. At such ceremonies, be it joyous or sorrowful, music and dance are performed. Other events like the installation of a chief, annual festivals and religious worship are lame without music and dance. These ceremonies, all of which are performed with music and dance, are meant to show reverence to reign of the monarch (Agordoh, 2005).

Members of pre-colonial communities in Ghana believed that the gods, spirits and the ancestors appreciated music and dance. They viewed it as a responsibility to develop a system of transmitting the knowledge on music and dance from one generation to the other. The methods adopted to achieve this goal were oral-aural approach as well as observation and imitation (Herbst, Nzewi, & Agawu, 2007; Flolu & Amuah, 2003). Minors in the community received their training in music and dance during adult

performance events. On such occasions, the children participated as learners on the fringes of the performance ring, applying the tools of observation and imitation in the learning process. The entire community assisted in the formative and summative assessment of the child's progress. The raising of their hands and the spreading out of the index and middle fingers communicated a message of approval.

As the child's performance skills approached the level of the adult performer, s/he was invited to join the adult performance ring. Elaborate initiation rites were organised for children who exhibited a high level of skills that qualified them as musicians and dancers. It could be observed that the indigenous communities in fulfilling their obligation to the gods, spirits, and ancestors developed and implemented a well-structured succession plan in producing future musicians and dancers. There is no doubt that these activities supported the critical education theory where power wielded by the gods, spirits, and ancestors supported the implementation of music and dance education.

British colonial schools instructed music through Western forms, as African music and dance were not considered an art form worthy of study (Kwami, 1994; Graham, 1971; Kitchen, 1962; Nketia, 1974). There was the introduction of Western musical instruments of which Ghanaians began to learn how to play and became very good in them. Since traditional dance had no bearing on the churning out of interpreters and bookkeepers for the trading activities as well as teachers and catechists, it was not included in the curriculum. This conscious sidelining of dance education is a demonstration of the application of inordinate power to influence the processes of education. African music and dance education was irrelevant to the colonialists and hence was ignored.

Post Colonial Era

The first administration after independence, headed by the first president of the Republic of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, sought to revive and nurture a dying culture. This was corroborated by Schramm (2000) who wrote that:

One of the most pressing questions for the new political elite was: How should a national identity be formed that would have relevance for all sectors of the population? An ideology was needed which would reconcile the idea of national development in a global arena with local cultural references, the latter having a great potential for identification. Nkrumah's concept of an "African Personality" was envisaged. Traditional culture would thereby not just be revived but creatively renewed and developed. (p. 340)

For Nkrumah's *African Personality* to become a reality, there was the need for a platform that would assist in its advocacy and propagation. As a result of this, Schramm (2000) indicated that "the formation of an African as well as a Ghanaian personality could not be arrived at overnight and it, therefore, have to be embedded in an all-encompassing educational policy" (p. 341). To fulfill this task, several cultural institutions with an African outlook were founded. This included the Centre for National Cultural in Kumasi and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. The theoretical and ideological claims of decolonisation were to be translated into practice via these institutions. So that the performing arts would be viewed as important aspects of the promotion of African culture.

In 1962, the Institute of African Studies was established with the responsibility of researching African cultural practices and promoting the ideals of African personality. In the following year, the Ghana Dance Ensemble was formed within the Institute of African Studies. According to Schramm (2000), the task required to be performed by the Ghana Dance Ensemble was twofold:

Apart from offering a matrix for national identification, the members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble were to play the role of "cultural ambassadors" who represented the nation to the outside world, achieving comparable status with other nations and thus the ability to enter the international arena on equal terms" (p. 343).

Ghanaian music and dances, therefore, became the backbone for propagating Nkrumah's ideology. With the assistance of the post-colonial government, the University of Ghana established a School of Performing Arts in 1962 (Flolu & Amuah, 2003); and among the three departments in this school were the Departments of Theatre, Dance, and Music; all three Departments have survived till today. The University of Cape Coast in 2012 established a dance unit in the Department of Music. The University of Education, Winneba and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology also offer music and dance courses. The picture painted indicates that Nkrumah's vision was planted and has survived at the tertiary level of education. Again, power to influence the processes of education was vested in the presidency and that accounted for the efforts put in place.

In retrospect, during the early 80s, music was taught in most second cycle schools as a subject to examine students and to prepare them for further studies into the University. Additionally, some second cycle schools at the time in Ghana prepared students to take examinations in the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of London (ABRSM), a foreign music programme. Meanwhile, some other students registered privately to take the

examination. This programme was pursued with interest and passion by the students in those days and most of the students who sat for that particular examination did quite well in their effort to go beyond the pass mark.

Reflections

This paper reflects on the influence of political ideologies through the critical education theory on the promotion of dance education in Ghana. The reflection takes the stance of reviewing dance education, as it existed during the period before the advent of Europeans on the soil of Ghana and the post-colonial eras.

As indicated earlier, before the Europeans landed on the Ghanaian soil, the country had well-structured and hierarchical political systems that wielded power into the hands of the chiefs who presided over the various established nation-states. During those times dance formed part of the day to day activities. The chiefs used their leadership powers to make sure dance was part of all community activities. Though dance education during those times was through informal systems it was practicable and was valued by each community. As power shifted into the hands of the Europeans, things took a different turn. Dance education became silent and emphasis was placed on reading and writing. As Ghanaians gained independence, the then political leader, Nkrumah, used his power as leader to bring back the almost lost culture of music and dance. Through his intervention notable institutions were established for the advancement of music and dance education at the tertiary level in Ghana.

In recent years, the focus of attention of governments that followed after the Nkrumah regime has focused more on science and language education to the detriment of the development of the performing arts in the basic schools. A child is considered brilliant if he or she is good in English language, mathematics and science. This is evident in the amount of funds and publicity directed at the annually organised National Science and Mathematics Quiz in Ghana. Sadly, a child who is gifted in dance or music is considered less of an intellectual. There seems to be very little nurturing process for children with special talents in the performing arts. It may be argued out by some, that adequate provision has been made in the basic curriculum concerning the teaching of the creative arts for which music and dance are part. Yet, its practical implementation has not been so visible. As a nation, Ghana's economy could have a facelift through its cultural artistic performance such as music and dance. Some of the original traditional musical genres and dances have gone extinct while others seem to have been bastardized, syncretised and adulterated. Worst still, Ghanaian's at home have abandoned their traditional music and dances for European ones in which they excel. The youth of today, have a stronger urge to copy newer Western trends instead of maintaining their Ghanaian cultural

identity. Future implications are that with time, majority of Ghanaian youth will loose touch with Nkrumah's dream of an African personality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, critical education theory is a very delicate resource that needs careful handling by political leadership for positive results. The Ghanaian educational system, on the whole, has gone through several significant changes, of which, some have had a positive impact on the educational development of Ghana. This review reflected on how political power and ideologies have exercised inordinate control over the development of philosophies that guided the educational endeavours of communities in Ghana. As Ghana obtained independence, it was necessary to make some changes from the colonial educational system to fit the Ghanaian cultural and economic orientation. This paradigm shift from colonial education to a post-colonial system of education seems to have had strong justifications but its execution through the various political systems have not made its validation convincing enough, especially, in the area of music and dance education in Ghana. However, the consequences of not inculcating in people the sense of valuing their culture as an integral part of their development through education is grave. The psychological feeling of anything that is African to be inferior and everything European to be the superior still controls the mind and emotions of people. It is recommended that political systems use the power they have to salvage the extinction of the Ghanaian cultural identity.

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