

Technique Development and African Dance in the UK: An Interview with Peter Badejo OBE¹

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Introduction

The issue of technique is one which every performing artist has to contend with, especially where none is in existence or have gained currency. This paper offers a very basic insight into Peter Badejo's attempt at developing a notation system for African dance which he believes will form the framework of a meta-technique on African dance. Badejo intends the technique to be directly or indirectly applicable to all African dance forms, even though his approach is problematised from the beginning by the use of a Western framework to read African dance. Also in this paper, some of the challenges of performing African dance in the UK are highlighted, howbeit sketchily with the view of exposing attempts at relevance in the multicultural British society where African dance is often performed in contextual situations that are apposite to that in Africa.

The excerpts presented are based on an interview with Peter Badejo in which he bares his mind on the state of African dance in the UK and his pet project, the development of a technique for African dance based on Labanotation, which he calls the *Batabade* technique. It is hoped that this paper will draw relevant attention to the state of African

¹ This paper is based on an interview with Peter Badejo at Interchange Studios, Hampstead Town Hall, London on Monday 4th October 2004.

dance in the UK, and Badejo's project, perhaps opening them up to critical appraisal and debate on the way forward.

The Issue of Technique Development

The notion of *Batabade* is very interesting and the proposal of its technique as a prototype for African dance is useful since there are inherent similarities in dance practices across the African continent, in which case adapting the *Batabade* technique could be useful across African and African diaspora dance practices. What is left to be seen is how the technique would be received by African dance choreographers and dancers. According to Badejo Arts, the *Batabade* project which is made possible with assistance from the Dance department of the University of Surrey and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has as one of its main aims to "to be the first fully codified African dance technique"². In the excerpts below Peter Badejo Discusses the project and why he feels it is relevant.

IGWEONU: Can you tell us the relevance of the *Batabade* project and what it aims to achieve?

BADEJO: I seriously believe that what is debarring us from moving ahead in arts generally and in dance particularly is the lack of technique development in African dance. We have different forms of dance, practised from tradition to theatrical, but we haven't build a bridge between the forms and the technique. Once a technique is developed, then you can evaluate it from the same point of view like in western dances like ballet, contemporary dance, and jazz, because those are already based on technique. So what I

² Information from Badejo Arts website, <http://www.badejoarts.co.uk/> (Visited Sept. 1, 2006).

am doing now is that I am developing a technique called *Batabade* based on the Bata dance³. Bata dance has already built a bridge for me anyway, in the sense that in the Diaspora, in Cuba, in Brazil and in America you find people dancing Bata.

Because of the transit of slavery, people took along a lot of Yoruba culture and dance happens to be one of them. I thought since that bridge has already been built why not capitalise on it and then develop a dance technique. Once the technique is developed then if you are studying *Batabade* in Ilorin or Indonesia you will be studying the same technique. But at the moment if you study Bata form there are varieties, it is interesting that one of the essences of Bata form in Nigeria is the shoulder which symbolises the lightening and power of Sango but in Cuba they do not even use the shoulder, they do some similar movement, like the leg movement but then their hand have already absolved the other influence that they have there which is the western dance but you cannot blame them. But those of us who are still not too far from what I call the origin are in a position to come up with such a technique that lets you know how to go about it. It would not stop people from doing Bata dance but it is an extraction of the essences that people need to look into to do Bata.

IGWEONU: So do you see the possibility of developing the *Batabade* technique so that it cuts across, and can be applied to all African dance forms?

BADEJO: It will be used as a prototype. There are three aspects to it, first, there is codification of existence, secondly the alphabets of the techniques itself like you have in

³ Bata is the national dance of the Yoruba people of Southern Nigeria. It is also practised extensively in places like Cuba, Trinidad and Brazil, mainly due to transatlantic slavery.

western dance, thirdly through the alphabets you build your own technique. These three forms become a prototype that if you want to develop an Atilogwu⁴ technique you can use them. You can then say for instance, if I can do the codification and the alphabets, it becomes a written technique that you can apply to that dance.

IGWEONU: In other words, you are saying that while the *Batabade* technique may not cut across all African dance forms, it will have a structure that can be applied to other forms?

BADEJO: There is no technique that cuts across all forms of dance. *Batabade* is a technique that can be adapted, improved on and applied to other forms. Because what you need in Bata may not be what you need in Atilogwu or Jarawa dance of Northern Nigeria, there needs to be that kind of adjustment. I am getting annotators to notate it but at the moment we have no choice, we still have to base our notation on Labanotation. But in doing the notation for *Batabade*, because the demand of the Bata dance is different from the straight forward ballet dance, the annotators have to work very closely with me to be able to make some additions to it so that you will be able identify its Africanness when you see it even though its based on labanotation.

IGWEONU: From what you have just said about *Batabade*, I am interested in knowing if you have any programme on ground for teaching African dance, where you are experimenting with this technique?

BADEJO: I run training programmes like the Annual “Badejo Dance with Me” Summer School, which is an international event bringing together people from Nigeria, Cuba, and

⁴ The Atilogwu is the national dance of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria.

other parts of the world. We have been running that for about nine year and are going to continue but expand it. The development on that level is that it is time now for Badejo to revisit its source, we do the summer school here (UK) every year but the participants are cut off from the origin. When you study African dance, you cannot study it in isolation because it is interwoven with other things in our lives. So from next year (2005), if we do two weeks here (UK) we will do about a week or two in Nigeria so that participants can relate the dances to its culture.

I started a platform just to help young choreographers to develop along the lines of African dance using the material that they have learnt. At the moment, what they call contemporary African dance here (UK) is a bit of African dance layered with Western contemporary dance which is not right, but you cannot blame them because most of their training is on Western contemporary dance. So may be they have been to one or two classes on African dance and they are black. That should not be the criterion, it should not matter whether you are black, green or blue as long as you know the particular form you are working with. So the training we are going through has changed now into *Batawumi* because I want my work to zero into Bata and it will involve getting young choreographers to work with the company for a period of weeks and then use that experience to create short pieces which will then platform and we will do that once in a year. So in another way if the *Batabade* technique is successful, we will need disciples and the quicker way of getting disciples for it is to invite choreographer to share in the experience and then use it in their works.

African Dance in the UK

Another important issue touched upon in the interview borders on the challenges of performing African dance in the UK. Again, excerpts from the interview in which Badejo talks generally about African dance and African dance in the UK are presented below.

IGWEONU: Earlier you raised a very interesting point about the issue of race in African dance. What do you have to say about some of the views expressed by Alphonse Tiérou in his book *Dooplé: The Eternal Law of African Dance*, especially that regarding the qualification for teaching or performing African dance?

BADEJO: We have to go back to the word African dance, are we talking about dances from our shrines, our ceremonial dances or our sacred dances, or are we talking about African dance in the theatre? African dance in theatre in an adaptation, you are using materials that are there for a different expression completely. When it comes to our sacred dances I want to keep them as sacred as possible, even though there is nothing static in this world. We want to keep them sacred because that belongs to a particular cultural experience for us, our cultural experiences are not secluded but your coming in is at our own term, that is, are you are a participant or observer? So I agree with him to the extent that there are certain aspects of African dance that should be our own, but when it comes to theatrical dance it does not matter who performs it.

Henry Oguike for instance is doing very well here in the UK but he is not doing African dance. Nobody is blinking an eye because he went to school here and learnt it and he is doing very well in his choreography. So even though he is black African he is doing

Western dance and likewise the fact that one is European does not mean one cannot do African dance, but what I am insisting on is that it has to be learnt. This is where the technique comes in, because some people just attend two workshops and then become African dance teacher.

IGWEONU: What would you say is the dominant influence in your work?

BADEJO: My work is highly influenced by traditional African dances because I do not believe that an artist can create from a vacuum, you have to have had a particular cultural experience. Even in place where the culture has been bleached there is still a remnant of it to influence the artist and we all work in contemporary environments in the sense that where we live or work influences how you express yourself. So I express myself in a contemporary form but the basis of my influence is traditional, it is embedded in the traditional.

They have turned contemporary into the preserve of particular cultures and it should not be, because if you go back to where you and I were born, you will be shocked to see how far they have moved if you do not want to see what your head tells you because sometimes you could be looking at things that has moved on and say that they are still in their traditional form. Look at the costumes of egungun masquerade, it now has buttons and all that, it has changed. I remember when I was in elementary school when the Queen came to Nigeria in 1956, we did a dance for her, there were two characters that were made into masks to represent the Queen and the Duke, and we dressed them in white to do the dances to welcome the Queen. So I believe that we are not living in the past but

each time we talk about Africa people look at the past. If you go to Alaba market⁵, the electronic that you cannot find here in London you find them there and as much as all these things come in they influence the way people think, the way they dance, the way people eat and the way people talk. So we are living in a contemporary world but the contemporariness of our existence is there for the artist to pick and use in their works and that is what I do.

IGWEONU: Is ritual central or complementary to your works?

BADEJO: I am delivering a lecture in Ireland in two weeks time and it is about the total theatre form of the African expression. Unfortunately African universities have departments of music, drama, dance and so on, but once you get outside those four walls and look at what people are doing, you see it is a total form of theatre which is what the West is trying to revisit themselves. My choreography takes off from ritual but in a much neutralised form. If you visit a lot of contemporary African dance productions, quite a number of young African are revisiting ritual, but only to mesmerise. As much as ritual is the basis of your work, you do not choke people with your ritual. The audience here (UK) do not have the ability to comprehend your ritual, if you choke them with your ritual you cheapen the meaning of it and it becomes meaningless. You have to kind of dilute it to an acceptable extent, whereby you can use aspect of it as means of communication rather than teaching them ritual.

My first production here (UK) is called "A Ritual for Survival" and in it I looked at the situation then of people like us coming from Africa, it was heavily Sango dance and the

⁵ Alaba market is located in Lagos State Nigeria.

likes. Sango dance worked for me in Nigeria, the Northerner, whether they call it Sango or not, when there is no rain for months would bring out their drums and dance for it, so there was a reason for their ritual, but why would you dance Sango in Brixton? So what I did was that I divided the programme into two to mirror one another, one is that if there is a problem in the African continent the people might call on their ritual in its very raw form to sort it out, Sango to bring rain, another to bring wind and so on.

So then I switched in the second part of the production to the problems in Brixton where I created a god of jobs, and where the Sango priest is important in the first part, I used a man costumed in tie and suit to be the god of the job who they need to appeal to for jobs. In the coat I labelled different aspect, when this is removed the audience sees another problem like health so this same character in suit and tie stands for all the gods and it went down very well and I remember the Guardian wrote good reviews on it. I did not do anything new, but was still coming from my ritual but had transformed it for people to understand, they could relate to it because they saw the first part. Ritual becomes the vehicle and the driver must be trained, the artist is now the driver of this ritual and you have to know how you are going to use it. That is how I approach my work which has to relate to my kind and how I view us in this society.

IGWEONU: To what extent would you say your work is influenced by the British society and Western culture in general?

BADEJO: First of all there are aspects of my work that I cannot run away from Western influence such as the theatrical setting and the audiences we are trying to reach. No artist

lives within a cultural vacuum so you are influenced by a number of factors within the society and beyond. It is give and take, and so I try to make my work live where I am creating for. I am not talking about doing Western dance, because in quite a number of productions I have seen people point their toes and then a bit of contraction and release, and all that, but I am not into that. I try to keep my Africanness. Even without dancing, if you place five African on stage and tell them to walk across, the way they walk is different, you are able to trace their Africanness up to this point. As much I am in Western society, I try to underpin my Africanness.

IGWEONU: You work regularly with dancers from all over Africa and the African Diaspora, would you say that principles of African dance cuts right across the different African nationalities?

BADEJO: There are certain essences that are in African dance that makes it African continentally or even within the Diaspora. Take for example the bent knee or bent position of African dance, which even though is very West African, has influenced a lot of dances all over the world. In Western contemporary dance they call it “the relaxed position.” How about the relationship to music, we do not joke with music, in fact I do not choreograph without having the musicians there, the two develop together. Contraction and release in Western contemporary dance was developed from African dance technique, this is also common to African dance continentally.

One thing that Western contemporary dance has done for black dancers around the world is that it has taught them how to learn African dance. This is what makes it possible for

people like me to do their productions here in the UK. A journalist that reviewed one of my productions wrote that the dances were fantastic but that it looked grafted on the dancers. This is because they learned it, they have a technical way of learning dances. But when you do African dance, it is approached from two perspectives the inner and the outer, and you can tell from the way the dancers are doing the dance whether they are doing an outer or inner. Most of these dancers started with looking at how they see themselves in the mirror, rather than how they feel. Each time I teach I emphasise to students that the first thing is “how do you feel the dance” before how you look dancing it.

Conclusion

It would be interesting to see how the *Batabade* technique plays out in the public domain when it is eventually introduced, bearing in mind that Badejo does not seem to problematise the fact that he is trying to create a technique based on that already in use for Western dance - Labanotation which, in a sense, could be expecting African dance to fit into a foreign mould or conversely trying to read African dance using Western frames of reference.

The *Batabade* technique seems to follow the same trajectory as Greenotation which was created by Doris Green, an ethnomusicologist. Greenotation is a percussion notation system primarily designed for notating African percussion instruments, but which is aligned with Labanotation⁶. The contention being that the placement of the two systems

⁶ Information from Green, Doris. “No Longer an Oral Tradition.” *Ntama Journal of African Music and Popular Culture*. Jan., 2004. <http://ntama.uni-mainz.de/content/view/11/29/1/0/> (Visited 6 July 2006).

in a single grid would make it possible for both African music and dance to be read simultaneously thus ensuring that the two are kept together as in most Africa performances. Whereas both the *Batabade* and Greenotation seems to obligate African dance to its Western counterpart, the major difference perhaps, rest on Badejo's proposal that the *Batabade* technique would derive from, rather than incorporate Labanotation as the Greenotation ostensibly does.

Whereas the dual issue of funding and paucity of performance venues remain the biggest problem facing African performance companies in the UK, in the interview, Badejo deliberately focuses on the need for what is performed to be relevant without necessarily losing its Africanness.