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'African Dance': The Dangers of a Homogenizing Label

Alfdaniels Mabingo
Makerere University, Uganda

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Abstract

What is 'African dance'? Is the label 'African dance' representative enough of the diverse dance traditions in African communities, or is it just another form of tokenism? How is the term 'African dance' rooted in the histories of colonial racism against the African people? What are the dangers of using the same label as an attempt at instituting anti-racist curricular and interventions in universities, conservatories, dance studios, and dance companies? In problematizing the label 'African dance', we should be cognizant of the view presented by Stuart Hall (1991) that how people are represented is how they are treated. The article examines how the generalization

reflected in 'African dance' has genealogy in the earlier racist European colonial homogenization of Africa, which Valentino Y. Mudimbe (1988) has termed as the 'invention of Africa'. A critical examination is made on how using the label 'African dance' in the current anti-racist dance curricular projects compound racism that whitewashes a complex continent with multiplicity of cultures and dance practices into one single monolithic label. The article provokes critical reflection on the complexity of dance traditions in Africa and inspires a new thinking that looks at the different insidious facets of racism, which can easily be exacerbated by the very projects that seek to address social injustices, discrimination, and marginalization.

Introduction

What is 'African dance'? Is the label 'African dance' representative enough of the diverse dance traditions in African communities, or is it just another form of tokenism? How is the term 'African dance' rooted in the histories of colonial racism against the African people? What are the dangers of using the homogenizing label 'African dance' for programs and courses that seek to address the entrenched problem of racism? As a response to Black Lives Matter Movement, universities, conservatories, dance studios, and arts organizations have developed programs as anti-racist pedagogy. As such, programs in 'African dance' or 'West African dance' are mushrooming across universities in Europe and North America. This essay critiques the homogenizing label 'African dance' and questions the genuinity of applying it to respond to racism. I argue that the generalization reflected in 'African dance' shares genealogy with the earlier racist European colonial homogenization of Africa. The analysis engraves the label within the European racist colonial invention of Africa (Mudimbe, 1988), which has been carried forward through anthropological research, foreign aid regime, academia, and the Western mass media. I contend that using the label 'African dance' as part of the anti-racist pedagogy agenda is counterproductive. It exacerbates a form of racism that whitewashes a complex continent with diverse cultures and practices into one single simplistic label. The term inherently diminishes the diversity of more than one billion people, 54 countries, and thousands of complex dances into a form of stereotypical marginalizing homogeneity.

In her TED talk, *The dangers of a single story*, Chimamanda Adichie (2009) notes that "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (n.p). Adichie highlights how literary texts, media, and film industries had reduced Africa to a single story. She observes "to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (n.p). Adichie's conception draws parallels with the concept of alterity (Mudimbe, 1988) and orientalism (Said, 1978), which conceptualize how the Western world fabricate and invent the Other through the media, film industry, visual arts, literature, and academia as structures of

power in the Western world. Elucidating on the concept of alterity, Valentine Y. Mudimbe (1988) notes that "the invention of Africanism as a scientific discipline - can illustrate the differentiating efficiency of such general classifying devices as patterns of reality, designation, arrangement, structure, and character" (p. 9). Alterity, like Orientalism, connotes the caricaturing of Africa by Western imperial and hegemonic centres in ways that continue to subordinate African ontologies and epistemologies to Western modes of thinking, living, being, doing, and reasoning.

European Colonialism and the Invention of a Monolithic Africa

The invention of Africa has been a phenomenon that has marked Africa's interaction with other civilizations. According to Ali Mazrui (1986), this began with the very name 'Africa.' Writing in his book *The Africans: A triple heritage*, Mazrui noted that the term 'Africa' had been traced to Berber origins and Greco-Roman ancestry. Hence,

> "The ancient Romans referred to their colonial province in present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria as 'Africa' possibly because the name came from a Latin or Greek word for that region perhaps because it came from one of the local languages of that region – either Berber or Phoenician". (Mazrui, 2005, p. 69)

Mazrui's account draws attention to how the African people may have had marginal agency in the naming of the continent on which they lived. It can be deduced from Mazrui's revelation that the idea of 'inventing Africa' without the voice of local people is rooted in the name 'Africa'.

The discovery, naming, homogenizing, and claiming intensified during European colonization (Achebe, 1977). Africa is a western imposition that has been channelled through colonial systems of knowledge, which Otherize the cultures and people (Ogude, 2012). The European colonial project drew on Victorian morality to frame Indigenous embodied knowledge as backward, devilish, and primitive to remake Africa. The local epistemologies were obliterated through systematic structures of religion, law, commerce, and education. The remaking of Africa and the enlightenment of the African people by the colonial Europeans produced Africanness and an Africa that normatively depended on Europe for its recognition (Ngwena, 2018).

During colonial domination, the discourses about Africa were anchored in Eurocentric biases. The accumulation of knowledge in and about Africa followed the dominant European philosophical systems and methods. As a result, the "African modes of thinking about who Africans were and how they experienced the world were always determined—a priori—by forces other than African subjects themselves" (Tembo, 2018, p. 3). By exerting the European

worldview over the local Indigenous knowledge systems and people, the European colonial project marginalized, Otherized, and homogenized the diverse African communities. The colonial hegemony stemmed from a homogenization that imagined the sameness of the entirety of African people: primitive, exotic, and barbaric people in need of European enlightenment.

The postcolonial thinker, Achille Mbebe (2002) has noted that the period of enlightenment as presented in the positions and works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Immanuel Kant "identified in the African sign something unique, and even indelible, that separated it from all other human signs" (p. 246). The discovery and naming of the African from the European anthropological, political, touristic and evangelizing colonial gaze specifically zeroed in on "the black body, which was supposed not to contain any sort of consciousness and to have none of the characteristics of reason or beauty" (Mbebe, 2002, p. 246). The whitewashing of people's diverse identities and ways of life was activated by considering the Black body as a homogenous race and identity category suitable for cheap labor. The homogenization broadened the Black people in African communities as a target for evangelizing campaigns and enlightening projects that European missionaries and colonizers instituted.

The European colonial framing of the Other created racial categories upon which even subsequent forms of racism, subjugation, and injustices of Black people and homogenization of Africa are rooted. The logic of imperial reason created Eurocentric operations of the paradigm of difference and established the politics of alterity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The Eurocentric operation encompassed the imposition and elevation of European cultural, intellectual, social, and creative systems and modes of reasoning and erasure of the Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. The epistemologies and ontologies that European colonialism introduced in local communities accelerated conquest, subjugation, and colonization and validated the narrative of European discovery (Gordon, 2008). The European dominance created conditions in which the colonial mindset fabricated a monolithic image of Africa and the African people and practices. The European hegemony became a legitimate way to side-line Africans from participation in contributing to the work, ideas, and practices that were universally accepted (Mbebe, 2002). The modern-day Western university risks sustaining this colonial legacy by enlisting the label 'African dance' as a step towards anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum.

During the Eurocentric colonial reimaging and invention of Africa, the Indigenous forms of cultural expression, practices, and ways of life were erased and replaced with European traditions. The imposition of Eurocentric ways of thinking, knowing, doing, and being was put into practice by generalizing Africa as dark, empty, exotic, and uncivilized. The colonial imperatives for fabricating Africa "included map-making, the partitioning of Africa,

domination, and promotion of a singular idea of an African people who were collectively thought of as inferior, backward and primitive beings" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p. 214). Consequently, "Africa in the Western imagination has always been represented as the ultimate other, the repository of emptiness and the domain of untranslatable cultures" (Ogude, 2012, pp. 13-14). The invention of Africa in ways that privileged Eurocentric knowledge, practices, and ideas decentred knowledge and power from the Indigenous African people to the European colonial center.

As part of the colonial agenda, the Europeans named Africa south of the Sahara in ways that served the colonial interest and reduced the diversity of people into simple unitary homogenized categories (Ngwena, 2018). Thus, the "single story of Africa, whose genealogy goes right back to the age of 'Discovery' runs right through the period of colonialism and apartheid to the contemporary moment" (Na'Allah, Garuba, and Esonwanne, 2010, p. 201). The homogenization of Africa has roots in the colonial legacy, which was founded on racism. When the impact of colonialism on the African communities is unpacked, one begins to understand how the current homogenizing labels risk compounding the systems that produced it. Continuing to use monolithic names such as 'African dance', whose etymology is rooted in racist colonial formulations, is tantamount to sustaining the invisibilization of the African people.

'African Dance' and the Dangers of a Single Story

In her TED talk on the dangers of a single story, Chimamanda Adichie (2009) decries how the Western depiction of Africa through literature creates a dehumanizing image of African people and perpetuates an oversimplified image of Africa as a place with a deficit of multiple and complex stories (see also Eisenberg, 2016). In the same vein, a single story can create misleading preconceptions about cultures, people, and places. Homogenizing terms or labels can also create demeaning misrepresentations. Labels and stories are essential in shaping the way people perceive and understand the world. Dance scholars Davis, Carter, and Koff (2021) have indicated that "Terms such as "Non-Western" and "Non-European" or "Eurocentric" privilege a White frame as hierarchically more valuable than nonwhite cultural approaches to dance and movement. "Oriental," "Ethnic," "World," "Urban," "Folk," "Global," "Street," and "Vernacular" have been used to label nonwhite dance forms marginalized in the context of Eurocentric dance forms" (p. 3). The labels that are pegged to dance forms can carry inherent oversimplification of epistemological domains such as dance.

Labels or terms such as 'African dance,''West African dance,' and 'East African dance,' among others, carry homogenizing meanings, which diminish the diversity of the dance traditions. The invention of Africa can be seen in how the label 'African dance' has been consistently used in academic, research, media, and private dance practices, especially in

Europe, Asia, and North America. As early as 1928, anthropologist Evan Edward Evans-Pritchard (1982) used 'African dance' in his essay "The dance". He noted, "A short analysis of an African dance will show that its structure is quite different from modern European dancing" (p. 446). Although Evans-Pritchard centered his analysis on one dance from the Zande people of Congo, he uses 'African dance' to label a dance from one community in Africa. Pritchard conducted his anthropological research under the canopy of the European RACIST colonial rule of the Azande people. He notes, "The Azande come under the rule of three European administrations. Most of them are in the northern districts of the Belgian Congo, but they are also found in the Bahr-el-Ghazal and Mongalla Provinces of the Anglo-European Sudan and the Ubangi-Shari province of French Equatorial Africa" (1928, pp. 446-447). The monolithic framing of Africa confirms that "The naming of Africans proceeded along the firmly grounded imperialistic axis of exploration, colonization, and appropriation. It succeeded in inventing alterity as extreme otherness which congealed into a catastrophe for the othered" (Quijano, 2002, p. 551).

Researchers such as Ladislas Segy (1966), Lynne Hanna (1965, 1966, 1968, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1989), Roderic Knight (1977), Moses Serwadda, and Hewitt Pantaleon (1968), Robert Farris Thompson (1966), and Clare Cynthia Olive Hart (1977), among others, continued to use the homogenizing label 'African dance.' These articles cover specific dance traditions in African communities but still use 'African dance.' The generalization of dances in African communities has been compounded by the narratives that these dances have overarching commonalities. In her article *Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation*, Kariamu Welsh-Asante (2001) mentions polyrhythms, polycentricity, curvilinear, dimensionality, holistic, and memory as the overarching aesthetical commonalities in African dance. Dances in African communities are more complex and diverse than Welsh's homogenizing narrative would want the reader to believe. The tendency to "insist on African homogeneity teleologically serves to rationalize status subordination through a denial of pluralistic space for recognizing African difference and difference among Africans" (Ngwena, 2018, p. 33). Viewing Africa as monolithic undermines the epistemological and ontological depth and complexity of practices, traditions, and people.

African scholars such as Kofi Agawu (1995) and Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2012) have raised cautions regarding the continued homogenization of artistic experiences that exist in African communities. Kofi Agawu (1995) has noted that "'African rhythm,'" then, is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie" (p. 387). In her essay "What is 'African Music'? Conceptualizations of 'African Music' in Bergen (Norway) and Uppsala (Sweden)", the music ethnomusicologist Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2012) cites Sanjally Jobarteh, who mentions, "there are many tribal music[s]; each tribe has its own music. Yes, I think we can talk about African musics; they are associated with the different tribes, and you

know Africa has many tribes in each country" (p. 193). Elsewhere, writing from the perspective of music, which is interwoven with dance in African communities, George E. Winfield (1972) has observed that the name African music is misleading because in Black African communities, individuals use multiple styles forms, and approaches, and there is no single label that can best represent this diversity. Winfield, Nannyonga-Tamusuza, and Agawu are attempting to indicate that creative and artistic traditions in Africa are distinct, and their complexity cannot be accommodated in and represented by one generalizing name.

The diversity that Jobarteh underscores leads us back to the question of the imminent dangers of integrating 'African dance' in academics as critical action towards anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum. There is a need to disentangle the concept 'African dance' to understand its misrepresenting, marginalizing, and monolithic connotations. Ogude (2012) has cautioned that "the danger of ethno-centrist explanations of other communities and cultures [is] that texts (or events or values) can be significantly misunderstood if they are not seen concerning their particular contexts" (p. 18). Recognizing that 'African dance' does not adequately reflect the multitudes of cultures requires understanding the link between dances and people and histories, realities, experiences, spiritualities, ecologies, and practices. Hall (1994) has stated that there is no homogeneous and unified 'African' identity because 'Africa' is not a fixed identity; the continent is complicated by diversities of nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and age.

Engaging dance epistemologies from African cultures in the modern-day academy will require discarding the long-standing racist colonial attitudes that have framed Africa as one country. It is essential to pay attention to the fact that "African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably practices of the self" (Mbebe, 2002, p. 272). Africa needs to be read from communities and individuals' complex knowledge, practices, art forms, experiences, and stories. Universities, conservatories, dance companies, and arts organizations should consider the specificities of what constitutes dance epistemology in African cultures. In Indigenous settings, each community has various dances that reflect, represent, and illuminate the different facets of life. For example, a community can have rites of passage dances, fertility dances, war dances, ceremonial dances, children's dances, among others. The dances have specific names, contexts, structures, and ecologies. Although the internal social, economic, technological, and political changes within the communities in Africa have caused shifts in the ways dances are celebrated, created, shared, appreciated, and embodied, these dances still carry meanings entrenched in these communities.

'African Dance' and the Neoliberal' Hijack

Dance practitioners, dance studios, festivals, art centers, journals, magazines, universities,

conservatories, the film industry, social media, and mainstream media still use 'African dance' for commercial purposes. The label has been commodified into a lucrative brand that attracts attention and clientele. In the hyper-commodified neoliberal commercial ecosystem, the label 'African dance' is lucrative because it commonly feeds the prevailing exoticization and commodification of the Black body. The value that 'African dance' is accorded within this trade is its representation of an exotic place, culture, and people that the neoliberal appetite (originally in the West and now Asia) is craving. Appropriating diverse dances and condensing them in a single homogenizing label is one way of 'mining and refining', which is typical in other types of engagement between Africa and the Western world.

The insatiable desire to discover and consume 'African' has deep roots in colonialism and its aftermath – neoliberalism. Sarah Merzenich (2021) has shared, "It is very interesting that the way the Black individual is stereotyped nowadays, remains very close to how it used to be one hundred years ago" (n.p). The commodification and appropriation of cultural knowledge from African communities have proliferated with expansion of capitalism, mass media and neoliberalism, which has deculturated the people and the communities (Sachs, 1971). The profiteering that accrues from the appropriation of the label 'African dance' has blinded any form of critical examination of how the term is homogenizing, demeaning, and marginalizing. The capitalistic institutions and systems that have appropriated and invented labels of African dances as brands wield economic power that feeds a form of hubris that disregards the original owners of the dances. This form of neoliberal overreach and extraterritoriality has tended to economically and politically empower the appropriating agents than the cultures where the dance material is extracted.

Academic institutions, private dance studios, schools, conservatories, dance companies, and festivals that use 'African dance' risk compounding homogenization. Institutions and individual practitioners can engage in critical conversations and actions that can position distinct dance traditions from communities in Africa as valid and valuable knowledge. Sticking to homogenizing labels can contribute to institutionalized tokenism, which has compounded racism. If the attention is on commodification of the dances and their cultures, institutions, and private individuals risk exacerbating the already existing appropriation of material from peripheral communities by the capitalistic centre to which the Western academy, private dance studio, conservatory, and dance company are a part.

Towards a Meaningful Anti-racist Labeling

The term 'African dance' has normalized homogenization, white racial hegemonization, and cultural marginalization. The rich and complex dances from African communities are all clamped into one single name. When Mudimbe (1988) talks about alterity – the invention of Africa – 'African dance' falls squarely within his frame of theoretical interpretation and

formulation. The racist colonial systems planted the seeds of diminishing the intricate experiences of the African people to an imagined sameness. The history of European racist colonial invention of Africa needs to be excavated to reveal how some of the current programs and systems on dances from cultures in Africa are perpetrating colonial legacies.

As academic institutions, private dance studios, companies, schools, and festivals, among others, move towards instituting anti-racist pedagogies and curriculum, integrating programs with the label 'African dance' further undermines the cause it seeks to address. Meaningful critical action requires engaging the people in communities inside the African continent on how the programs that encompass dance traditions from Africa can be framed. A critical examination needs to be made of the marginalizing implications of continued usage of the term 'African dance'. Critical action calls for research on Africa to develop an understanding that Africa is not a single story. The legacy of using the label 'African dance' has been long-standing, and there has been a lack of critical reflection on the damaging weight that this puts on the people in Africa where the dance taught, staged, and performed are purported to originate.

The current interest in instituting meaningful anti-racist pedagogies presents an opportunity for artists, educators, and researchers, and curriculum designers to undergo soul-searching and come up with frameworks that can support the teaching of dances from cultures in Africa in ways that honor the dignity, distinctiveness, and richness of the dances and their attendant cultures. Ogude (2012) has reminded us that "individual elements of a given culture must be interpreted primarily in terms of that culture - in accordance with its system of meaning and values" (p. 18). By re-examining 'African dance,' academics, researchers, practitioners, and commentators will address the long-standing marginalization and disenfranchisement of the people in Africa, which frame the continent as one country and a single story. In the words of Chimamanda Adichie (2009), "When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (n.p). Dance forms such as ballet have grown into a profound body of knowledge and gained scholarly legitimacy because they were never marginalized under homogenizing categories such as European dance. Dance from African cultures have Indigenous names that can be a starting point in reimagining and decolonizing the naming of courses and programs that encompass them in academic, private dance studios, and practicing dance companies.

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About the Author

Alfdaniels Mabingo, PhD, is a dance researcher, scholar, performer, educator, and co-founder of AFRIKA SPEAKS. Born and raised in his ancestral village, Mbuukiro, on the shores of Lake Victoria in central Uganda, he has taught dance at Makerere University in Uganda, New York University in the U.S., the University of Auckland in New Zealand, and Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in Jamaica. A recipient of the prestigious Fulbright fellowship, Mabingo's dance research sits interweaves decolonization, interculturalism, postcolonialism, pedagogy, African philosophy, and creative arts economies. Mabingo has published more than 20 peer-reviewed scholarly articles and book chapters. His latest book is titled 'Ubuntu as Dance Pedagogy: Individuality, Community, and Inclusion in Teaching and Learning of Indigenous Dances in Uganda.' Mabingo has taught African dances and

drumming in schools and communities, and has delivered presentations in the U.S., Australia, China, South Sudan, Rwanda, Jamaica, Germany, Uganda, and New Zealand.

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