



On Bodily Transformation in the Ritual Context of Mask in Dance Performance

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Abstract: With the development of social interaction, a number of questions arise along with such increasing realization. For example, what does a ritual include? What purposes do ritualistic practices within dance performance through the body of the performer? And where do we draw the line between ritual and performance through bodily transformation? In this essay, I will explore bodily transformations in the ritual context of the mask in dance performance. Firstly, the different definitions of ritual from a wide range of scholars are contained, and the relationship between ritual and dance performance is explored. Secondly, I will use mask as a example to deeply analyze on how the mask has an influence on bodily transformation during ritual in Chinese Nuo dance, especially focus on how mask relates with body and performance in Chinese Nuo dance. Finally, I will analyse the interaction between bodily transformations and ritual context.

Keywords: boundary, ritual, dance performance, Nuo dance, mask

1. The ritual in dance performance

1.1 Definition of ritual

Evidently, the examples described have various characteristics which may, to some extent, involve with a vast array of religious or spiritual practices and rituals. There are many academic definitions of ritual.

There are many scholars have discussed the definition of ritual. Turner points out that the ritual is a banal list of events, including objects and gestures language which acted in a concealed place and purposed to effect the supernatural entities or prompts to representation the benefits and objects of the actors' (Turner, n.d.). Ismene A. These may involve crucial moments in an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death, among others, serving as essential forms of passage from one stage to the other, within the life-cycle of the person and the community, once again, of the individual or the group. Other types may involve divinatory rituals performed by an authority, ensuring the health of the community, fertility, initiation into religious societies, as well as offerings to ancestral figures and deities".

Besides the historical and cultural elements mentioned above, Robert McCauley suggested that "the rituals are those kinds of religious behaviours which structure describing covers a logical object and attracts a culturally assumed preterhuman agent's action within their entirety structural description" (cited by Ronald L. Grimes, 2014:2). It may mean ritual is an active process of social behaviour, performance, in a wide variety of manners in numerous aspects of one's life within the community. 'superhuman agent' is an intrinsic symbol in ritual performance, as symbolic language, movement and items are used in the process.

The relationship between ritual and the reality performance also discussed through several researches. Performers have often made use of symbols with spiritual connotations, derivatization or spirit from ritual of many religious and cultures. For example, in Chinese Nuo performance, the performer use Nuo mask as a symbol of 'god', it is related to the body and the human being nature, which use of scared face expression, as well as become a state to reach and overcome control performance in ritual.

1.2 The relationship between ritual and dance performance

Dance which defined as a complex mode of communication is one of the significant entities representing ritual. It puts kinesthetic and beauty-appreciation features of human beings exercise together. Dance originates from cultural understanding symbols in socio-religious content. It transmits the information and meaning of ritual, rite and entertainment. The audience needs to understand the cultural customers that processing human events in space and time in order to understand depth connotation dance.

This kind of deduction has some theoretical support. Cynthia Freeland's (2001) book *But is it art* mentioned a theory of art, the ritual theory of art. She lists the ritual theory of art such better-recognized theories are the expression theory and

the imitation theory. The summary of her book at ritual theory of art, it may claim that the best way to understand the nature of art, it probably to understand art connections to ritual. So, as a result, ritual and dance performance may be essentially connected, and dance performance plays a similar function today which ritual played in the past.

2. The Chinese Nuo dance and Nuo mask in ritual contexts

In order to have a convinced analysis, in this section, the Chinese Nuo dance is taken as an example. Chinese Nuo dance is a hybrid and diverse mode of ritual performance, which originated from the worship to the totems in primitive society. Nuo dance, a combination of ancient dance and wood-carving art is shown in a form of salient features which is the wood-carving mask worn by the dancer. It reflects the fact that ancient people wanted to look ferocious to scare away the imaginary monsters and demons. Indeed, of those existent religious rites, Nuo mask, as one kind of folk power, carried the most primitive driving force and symbolizing power of bodily transformations.

2.1 Chinese Nuo dance and the Nuo mask

Nuo culture began to appear. According to Xiaozhen Liu (2008:150), “the origin of ‘Nuo’ was closely related to sacrifice offering, worship, breeding, land and harvest. It almost covers the whole developmental history of China. In general, Nuo dance aimed to exorcize evil spirits and keep disaster, and also pray for good weather, bumper harvest in the coming year”. For Chinese people, ‘Nuo’ seems like a ‘god’ through over of their long history, which continues to maintain a certain of mystery.

Indeed, masks are the soul of Nuo dance, which performed throughout Nuo dance, and is richly varied along with the ages (Xiaozhen Liu, 2008). All the masks are ferocious masks with mysterious scenes. When performer plays the role in Nuo, he is considered to be the embodied spirits of ‘god’ surrounding people to exorcize evil, restoring balance and granting blessings. The Nuo mask as the symbol and medium of a spirit became a living ‘god’ after performance of ceremony upon its completion.

Later, Chinese Nuo dance evolved into a form of folk dance for entertainment. Nowadays, Chinese people no longer think Nuo is a ‘god’, but the turning point of the seasons, when Nuo performer worn Nuo mask, people still believes that it is benefit for harvest and good fortune will follow in the coming year.

2.2 How Nuo mask relate with body and performance in Chinese Nuo dance

In Chinese Nuo dance performance, the process of Nuo mask concealing the human body reveals the presence of the ‘god’s’ spirit. Nuo performer wear Nuo mask is belief in ritual. When the performer worn the mask to imitate the ‘god’ agent to project people in Nuo ritual. Chinese people believed that performer wearing the Nuo mask as ‘god’ agent in social and religious event was the real existence.

In ritual contexts, Nuo dance performer wearing Nuo mask is the behavior of body and performance. And also performer wearing Nuo mask performs a function that through the people’s body to reveal ‘god’ spirit. In Chinese Nuo performance, the mask is the major medium for performer’s transformation into the ‘god’ as the agent, which provides a visual expression of scary. Chinese Nuo dance is the behavior of spirits with body and performance, which shows bodily movements. So that the Nuo mask is a facial expression in ritual contexts relating with body and Nuo ritual performance.

Nuo dance was showed as the entity display of ritual. The scholar Ronald R. Grimes in his *Appendixes for Craft of Ritual Studies* about definitions of ritual (2014:2), Anonymous mentioned “Ritual is a systematic beliefs and actions that have a beginning, middle, and an end, and it related to superhuman beings directly”. This point of view may connect with Chinese Nuo dance. From the Zhou Dynasty (11th century-256BC), Chinese Nuo dance was performed as a ritual (Yu Zhu & Dexuan Pang, 2002). It is not only from the worship to the totems, but also in region. Nuo performer wearing the mask was central part of the dominion of the Zhou Dynasty. Nuo dance accomplished with the purpose of exorcize evil for people, and it was an important social and religious event. In some ways, it seems like social control in Chinese Nuo ritual.

The mask is an important feature of Chinese Nuo dance, which played the role of ‘god’ from the other world to people surrounded. In Chinese Nuo dance performance, the performer wearing Nuo mask have a mythical history, the style and content of Nuo mask from area to area, and have highly depend of individual performance. Chinese Nuo dance are normally on account of famous Chinese historical matters or folktale, for example, “Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Journey to the West, Water Margin’ and the story of Dragon Kings and so on” (chinatown-antiquer, 2014). Different role have different masks. When performer wears the specific Nuo mask, their body movements show a specific role in the whole performance. Chinese Nuo dance relate with Hanna’s view, the role meaning that connect with various bodily movement, and also shows various masks facial expression in different historical event or social and religions event.

3. The interaction between bodily transformation and ritual context in dance performance

3.1 The interaction between mask and physical body

Chinese Nuo dance is in a ritual context that mask and physical body linked. The performer wearing the Nuo mask through live performance is fully realised in ritual context, because performer do not know the original performance from older generations. The “usefulness of ritual as a tool for analysis does not only lie in established rituals though. It is also useful to see transitions in the rituals themselves as they are adapted to have different influences through generations” (Alvaro, 2011). But how are visual and bodily elements of the performance related, and how do they interact within the performance will arise. When the mask contains some different roles of indeterminacy, the dance performance will change dramatically with every performance. Analysis of performances – whether of one particular performance of the conceptual set up or framework, it needs to take into the relationship between body, mask and performer, and the role of each in shaping performative outcomes.

The bodily transformations take place as precondition, however, a particular understanding of the body, relations between body and mind as well as existing forms of presences. Jorge Luis Borges claimed that when people think about how powerfully movement influences them, So, mask transform the physical body, which was understood as temporarily transformable and as seat of different person, and physical senses and sensual experiences are essential in process of transformation when performer become inhabited by spirits.

3.2 The reflections of bodily transformation and ritual context in dance performance

The performer especially in ritual performances, usually played the role of the ‘god’ in Chinese Nuo dance, it contains spirit, mythological character, and also in order to be able to act as its embodiment to receive it. According to Rituals — Asian Tradition Theater and dance (n.d), “The embodiment of a sacred being or character is also possible by employing fixed costuming, masks or complicated make up”. By these mediums, the performer is dispersed, and also the performer is able to use body as a symbol to sacre being in a similar way. It may because of numerous of dance performance have their origins in ancient rituals that the conception of acting in many “classical” traditions also still similarities to the performer’s role in ancient rituals.

These external factors, costuming, masks, make up and so on, especially Nuo mask as mentioned above, are an external factor to strengthen the ritual expression, which not only reflects on the specific cultural, but also in the bodily transformation, it is not a limit expression and not have a boundary in ritual context.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in this essay, by exploring bodily transformation in the ritual context of the mask in dance performance, the analysis on the profound description on ritual is conducted. Firstly, I explored the definition of ritual through the cultural analysis in anthropology from different scholars. Following the actions as a ritual context, the analysis gives us a way to understand what the cultural group supposes to become important. And also, in socio-cultural context, ritual is quite essential because it provides the social control, a sense of confession of culture and promotes cultural into an integrated entirety. The relationship between ritual and dance performance, there is an essentially connection because dance performance plays a similar function today while ritual played in the past. Secondly, Chinese Nuo dance as a part of Chinese ritual performance, the Nuo mask plays an essential role in bodily transformation, it also reflects on physical body with no boundaries in ritual contexts, and the Nuo mask is also a part of ritual connecting with body and dance performance. Finally, in the interaction between bodily transformation and ritual context in dance performance, bodily transformation may strengthen the ritual contexts, it is not only the reflection on cultural, but also without boundaries in a ritual context.

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