

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN DANCE

Frederic Will, PhD

Overview The dances of sub-Saharan black Africa have traditionally been communal, rooted in the desires, hopes, joys, and despairs of villagers throughout Black Africa. As such, these dancing traditions have been among the richest repositories of African music, mask art, and narrative skill, as well as of the dance itself. Despite efforts to revive them, these traditions are no longer intact--thanks to tourism, national pride, or the almighty dollar. The erosion of the African dance tradition has assumed many forms, but among the chief causes have been the opposition of Christianity to traditional dance, the migration of rural culture--the home of the traditional--to the cities, and the decline, from within rural cultures, of the group spirit.

The nature of African dance Traditional African dance was of many kinds, and served different purposes, depending in part on the regional setting and culture of the dancers.

Religious function It is a frequent assumption, of traditional sub-Saharan Africa, that the dancer is a direct representative of the tribal god, and can serve as a communication channel between the tribe and its creator--or spiritual forces living from the supernatural. The dancer expressing this spirit function is usually preoccupied by inspiration, even trance, during the period of the dance itself. In Yoruba dance the powerful thunder god Shango enters the lead dancer, who replicates the awesome and furious gestures of the force that takes him over. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe it is common for the lead dancer to transform into a spirit medium, a voice-piece for the dead, and a transcendent information source for the living. It need hardly be said that the Christian tradition, especially as it derived from the missionary impulse, was unfriendly to this kind of dance.

Therapeutic function Using dance and song for purposes of exorcism, the female mediums of the Kalabari in Nigeria carry out such therapeutic rites as the following exorcism:

...the patient 'is made to hold on his head either a big bowl of water-and-herbs or a fowl. The assistants stand around beating gongs, singing, clapping, dancing and urging the gbeshi with threatening shouts to 'come out.' The patient ... looks dazed and dreamy and sways drowsily. Then suddenly 'the gbeshi gets up' and the patient dashes wildly off into the bush still carrying his head-load and pursued by the assistants, all reviling the gbeshi and commanding it never to return. When the patient's excitement leaves him he ... has no recollection of any part of the episode except the beginning, but ... the evil thing has left him and ... the future is bright.

Among the Nigerian *Jukun*, some women with hysterical disorders may be cloistered for several months, in a house shrine, and taught healing songs and dances. At the end of their healing period they emerge to 'join the community.'

Communality function In Igbo culture, in the south east of Nigeria, the masquerade ceremony (*mwanmu*) is the ultimate in color, social purpose, and crowd fascination--especially before the power hold of Christian evangelism had gripped the society, in the twentieth century. A typical masquerade could last for a few weeks--some for a few months--and would take place near the end of the harvest season, and not long before the new planting season. (The agricultural basis of the ceremony is by now largely outdated.) Representing, and reinforcing the values of the community, the living-dead masqueraders appear to the community in stylized dances during which they reprove or mock community members whose behavior needs bringing into line. (An alternative form of masquerade is carried out at night, and consists of terror-striking cries, from the masqueraders, intended to assure community security). In visible form, the masqueraders are particularly overwhelming, as they dance on high stilts, wearing huge fearsome animal and fantasy guises, and leaving no room for misbehavior.

Labor and procreation function Ever more deeply lost, in the fading agricultural base of African society, there remain vestiges of dance function which takes us back to the historical depths of Sub-Saharan cultures. (Those depths, as this brief survey indicates, are no longer within sight, for reasons mentioned above and of course because African cultures have not recorded their developmental stages, leaving us obliged to reinvent their evolution, from slim clues such as we sampled in discussing history and African languages.) Those vestiges would include dances in which youngsters mime flirtatious behavior across gender lines, and in which the labor of harvesting is replicated

symbolically: the successful harvests of procreation and food-production played out in dance for the very people most involved in them. The decline of village life and the flood of emigration to cities like Lagos render dance traditions like these last two things relics of the past.

The new world It is tempting to speak of a new African world in which the old role of group public dance has been lost. But that would be too easy. For one thing, dance preserved as a tourist attraction is still dance, some of it splendid, and fascinating even though part of a commercialist spectator world. (Many West African countries have sent brilliant dance troupes out into the world.) Christianity may have dispelled elements of what it considered 'pagan' in traditional dance, but the churches house transformed dance rituals without a scruple. Televangelist prophets, like T.B. Joshua, stage exorcism rites to global TV audiences, rapt as audiences are in the ritual drama of cleansing and purging. And in a subtler guise, Christianity has let dance back into the churches themselves. Through the newly founded Aladura churches--vision-inspired in Ogun State, Nigeria, in 1925--dancing has been invited back into the evangelical houses of prayer. Even the Catholic Church, not anxious to be left behind where the ancient African passion for dance is involved, has grown hospitable to aisles full of 'thanksgiving offering' worshippers, filing-shuffling-dancing past the altar with their yams, pineapples, and songs of praise.

Reading

Asante, Kariamu Weish, ed. *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, Trenton, 1996.

Bédouin, Jean-Louis, *Les Masques*, Paris, 1967.

Kubik, Gerhard, *Dance, Art, and Ritual of Africa*, New York, 1978.

Ranger, Terrence, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970; The Beni Ngoma*, Berkeley, 1975.

Royce, Anya Peterson, *The Anthropology of Dance*, Bloomington, 1977.

Sow, Alpha, *Introduction to African Culture*, Paris, 1979.

Discussion questions

What are the remote origins of African dance? Have we any way to periodize its historical development?

Does 'ballroom dancing' take place in Africa? Do men and women dance 'cheek to cheek' in contemporary Africa? Why did the two sexes not touch one another in traditional African dance?

What kind of 'quality control' did the African village exercise, over the dancers who were to represent community values or wishes? What kind of dance training and education was offered?

Has Islam (say in Northern Nigeria) been critical of traditional African dancing, as Christianity has been? How prevalent is group dance in Hausa culture?

The masquerade ceremony is supervised by a secret male society, in the community in question. Who chooses the inner circle of elders? How do they acquire their secret power?

Many western countries have hosted African dance troupes. Have these encounters been fruitful for western dance?