

**Borgman, D. (1988). The Importance of Dance in Africa. S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies.**

## **OVERVIEW**

Dancing is a holistic celebration of deity, communal events, and personal relationships. Within this genre are dances to praise God, to lament calamities, to prepare for war, to appreciate the victors, to encourage hard work, to prepare for marriage, and to release frustration.

This artistic activity is holistic in that it allows individuals to integrate physical, emotional, ideological, and spiritual aspects of life and one's being. Dancing gives meaning and satisfaction to one's self and others. According to Webster, to dance is "to move rhythmically to music, using improvised or prescribed gestures and steps."

"The artistic heritage of Africa," declared Andre Malraux in a speech at the [Dakar Festival](#) in April, 1966, "...includes dancing, music, literature, sculpture. Africa has transformed dancing throughout the world. But there is also a field of dancing uniquely her own: I refer to her secular and sacred dancing. This is dying out, and it is the responsibility of African governments to save it...Sacred dancing is one of the noblest expressions of Africa, as of all great cultures." (Nolen, B. [Ed.]. [1967]. [Africa is People](#) [p. 132]. New York City: E. P. Dutton & Co.)

In [The Music of Africa](#) (1974) Kwabena Nketia says that "purely contemplative music...not designed for dance or drama, is practiced in African societies...the cultivation of music that is integrated with dance, or music that stimulates affective motor response, is much more prevalent."

Nketia believes that the importance attached to the dance does not lie only in the scope it provides for the release of emotion stimulated by music. The dance is also a social and artistic medium of communication. It can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures, facial expressions.

Through the dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility and cooperation and friendship held by others toward them. They can offer respect to their superiors, or appreciation and gratitude to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence

of rivals, affirm their status to servants, subjects, and others, or express their beliefs through the choice of appropriate dance vocabulary or symbolic gestures.

Nketia shares some common gestures that emerge through an [Akan dance](#):

When a dancer points the right hand or both hands skyward in an Akan dance, he is saying, 'I look to God.' When he places his right forefinger lightly against his head, he means, 'It is a matter for my head, something I should think seriously about, something that I must solve for myself.' If he places his right forefinger below his right eye, he is saying, 'I have nothing to say but see how things will go.' When he rolls both hands inwards and stretches his right arm simultaneously with the last beats of the music, he means, 'If you bind me with cords, I shall break them into pieces.'

Western observer John Gunther, after four previous visits to Africa, traveled, from 1952 to 1953, to 105 towns in almost forty countries. In his fifth *Inside* book he notes that "the motivation of African art is largely religious...Masks are often terrifying because they are created to ward off evil spirits. Figures express ancestor worship, fertility, and so on. Many spectacular and beautiful objects were made originally to be used in tribal dancing, and they give pictorial expression to what the dance is about." (Gunther, J. [1953]. [Inside Africa](#) [pp. 308-309]. New York: Harper.)

We can assume Gunther watched dancing primarily staged for visitors. In the Congo, he observed a rather placid dance (in its music and movement)—"a ring of shuffling women around several drummers...the nakedness of the bodies and glittering ornamentation made them superlatively picturesque." (ibid., p. 680.)

In Rwanda, the 'mwami,' or king, gave the Gunthers a stupendous lunch and treated them to their famous dancing. "Watusi dances are altogether different from any other we saw in Africa—wild, violent, crashingly dynamic, and marked by tremendous jumps and bounds...The leading dancer, Butera, seven feet tall, weighs something like three hundred pounds...is celebrated as a dancer and high jumper...The dancers carried spears and wore red and white cotton skirts, long-tailed white headdresses of monkey hair and beading, and bells around the ankles." (ibid., p. 687.)

In South Africa, traditional dances were manipulated out of apartheid motives. Mining officials staged dances for entertainment and to let young men " 'let off sexual steam'...In any case the dances we saw were enthralling...Pandos doing an inflamed war dance...Amakwenkwes, who wore blue plumes, orange straps over their naked torsos, yellow shorts, and white wool anklets. Husky boys rolled in the dirt, pranced with an exaggerated erotic rhythm, did turns like those of tumblers." (ibid., p. 560.)

Visiting Uganda, the author found that

the Baganda love to dance...the night clubs outside Kampala are often a clay court underneath a tree with visitors sitting on crates or boxes. A dance was called 'ngoma': literally, this means 'drama.' The dancing is aggressively sexual, but not in an unpleasant sense...African girls with beautiful supple bodies...climbed to a dias in the center of the hall...guests tossed coins, and the girls...stroved to outdo one another in pelvic gyrations. (ibid., p. 431)

At that time, the prime minister of Buganda put a ban on western dancing in bars and clubs after wives complained of husbands going off to dance with prostitutes. The ban was criticized by editors and university students but upheld by the parliament.

In the nightclubs of Lagos, Gunther watched West African dancing: it is "music that positively burns the skin...their dancing is the most sinuous and rhythmic I saw in Africa." Gunther was impressed with the "easy-flowing mixture of black and white (folks)" in contrast to what he had experienced in the Rhodesias and the Congo.

A more reliable description of traditional social dancing comes from Jomo Kenyatta's [Facing Mount Kenya](#):

The social life of Gikuyu youths covers a wide field of activities. They organize numerous night and day dances for recreation and enjoyment. At these socials young men and women mix freely. It is generally at these social gatherings that friendship begins. A young man may attract the attention of a young girl, or girls, by his appearance, his smartness in dancing or dressing his hair, or by his charming and graceful carriage. Similarly a young girl may attract the

attention of a young man or men.

In a dance a 'getharia' or 'Keombani' (heart breaker or [Beau Brummel](#)) can easily be recognized, for he dances with several girls around him. But in order that he will not have a monopoly, a kind of Gikuyu 'Paul Jones' dance, 'gothombacana,' is repeated very often so as to allow the less attractive young men an opportunity of dancing with nice girls. Girls visit their boy-friends frequently, especially during the dancing seasons. The boys also visit the girls in their homes and take them to dances and escort them home afterwards. (Kenyatta, pp. 149-150)

It is hoped that traditional dancing will not only be preserved but also further studied to appreciate the richness of African culture that has influenced the world.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

- Basic questions need to be answered by further study: How has traditional dance evolved and how has it been influenced by outside influences in the past hundred years? What kinds of dancing are favored by modern, urban dancers, and what influences have shaped such dancing? What are the moral implications of various African dances?
- It seems that traditional dancing is a cultural art form that should not be lost and has a place in education today.

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