

Villagers Dance with a Difference: Courting Begins. (1988, September 4). [Sunday Standard](#) (Nairobi, Kenya).

OVERVIEW

"One sure way in which many African communities express joy or sadness" is through dance. In Nigeria, one Bango village yearly celebrates "a dance with a difference"—a spring rite of courtship. This is not the Hausa 'biki' celebration, in which much cooking, feasting, and dancing signifies a marriage engagement. This is, rather, an engagement dance in which seven- to fourteen-year-olds from an area that includes many villages gather to express attraction for one another.

Of course, a mate is not chosen through a single dance. Parents are an important part of the choosing, for a boy must be strong enough to farm, able to provide a home, and possess some promising attributes for the girl herself and the family.

Nonetheless, by dawn dozens of boys and girls will pledge themselves as life partners.

Bango is a small section of northern Nigeria of five settlements and about 500 inhabitants. But an open invitation to this yearly event goes out to all the villages in the region. Their dance is the last of many such dances in the courtship season.

According to the article:

Many of the children at Bango's dance had already been to a number of others but had failed to find the right mate, and the crowd was of considerable size...those who fail to make a match tonight would have little choice but to wait until next year when the round of public courting begins again.

Hundreds of children and adults are already gathered by foot and bicycle when the gong announcing the beginning of the dance is sounded at 7:00 p.m. Children's excited shouts respond. A ring of drummers marks the site of the dance, and a master of ceremonies is in the center, giving orders for a circle to fit all participants.

The author describes the tradition:

The would-be brides appeared under the dim lantern light, their short hair plaited and braided, their faces, palms and feet painted, parallel lines bracketing their features and a red circle in the center of each forehead.

The boys were on the other side. Suddenly flashlight beams began to shoot across the ring, as one side surveyed the other, searching for prospective partners as they danced...When the beam returned repeatedly to the same person, a contact was made: the chosen partner followed the beam back to its source and the negotiations began.

Each dancer makes up to four choices. The deal is sealed with a small down payment, rejected suitors receiving a refund when the list is later pared down. Parents eliminate partners too young or insolvent, while the children themselves may have a change of heart. A boy without prospects, or who takes too long to produce the required home, can quickly be eliminated from the short list.

Bayi, a village woman whose daughter Rakiya is in the ring, confided that she and her husband already had an idea who Rakiya should marry. 'The father is very hard-working, wise and has a good character. Besides, there is a chance of educating our children through his close connection to the missionary who works among us.'

Rakiya's choice, like her [sic] was about seven. Though he was in the crowd, it would be several years before he could fulfill Rakiya's parents' hopes—and then their daughter might have found someone else.

Villagers say the early marriages combat promiscuity. Single mothers are unheard-of in Bango other than through widowhood, and most men are courting their children by age 16. Intermarriages between villages are common, and help cement regional bonds.

As the night approached the small hours of morning, Bango's dance was just warming up. It would last until just before dawn, then reconvene again that night.

IMPLICATIONS

1. A good bit of this ritual seems to be traditional. How much of it has been modified in recent times is an interesting question.
2. Early marriages obviously work best in traditional and rural areas. Most would agree such engagement dances are not suitable for modern, urban centers.
3. There is no evaluation of this rite in this article. Those working with youth may have several questions:
 - a. Does this tradition put too much pressure on young people?
 - b. Does it put too much emphasis upon physical qualities?
 - c. Is such dancing a reasonable form of courtship?

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