

## African Dances/Aesthetics\*

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Just as "There is no single entity called American Indian Dance," (Farnell 2003), there is no such thing as "African Dance" nor can a single unit of dancing from the African continent be called by that name, because there are several thousand indigenous peoples living in Africa, each having their own distinct dances and ways of moving. The dances of urban Swahili-speaking peoples in Mombasa (Franken 1992), or in Cairo (Franken 1996), the *Sokodae* (Williams 1992), the Ewe *Agbakɔ* (Williams 2000), the Venda, (Blacking 1982), Lugbara death dances (Middleton 1985), the Nafana Dance of the Bedu Moon (Williams 1968), are as different from each other as tap dancing is from Martha Graham technique (Hart-Johnson 1997). Just as there is no single entity called "African dance," no single aesthetic identifies or defines them all.

The dances of Africa may be ceremonial (Gore 1999), sacred (Glasser 1996; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989), political (Chernoff 1979; Mitchell 1956) or social (Evans-Pritchard 1928), but in different ways, they all honor dancing as a major form of recognition, celebration, expression, healing and communication. All represent cultural and ethnic continuities as well as innovations. The dances affirm and perpetuate ways of life and beliefs that are important to the specific peoples to whom they belong. Some dances in Africa celebrate family, clan or life-cycle events (Koros 1992; Blacking 1969; Trimmingham 1964); some are seasonal (e.g. agricultural dances). Some dances are healing (Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997), some ward off evil, and some recall the particular events of (or prepare for) war (Lesarge 1992; Spencer 1985). Dances (and dancing), together with music, poetry, drama, weaving, painting and sculpture, are embodiments of indigenous cultural values and identity.

During the colonization process in Africa, missionaries, governmental agencies, and western educators tried to suppress indigenous African practices, or, they tried to bend these practices towards "assimilation." More recently, dances are manipulated and changed to satisfy international tourist industries (see Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997; Williams 2000). For colonizers, the dances of Africa were not "civilized" nor were they aesthetically pleasing. They were (often) considered time-consuming practices that interfered with a dominant culture's work ethic. Sometimes, dancing became a punishable offence. Many dances were subjected to prohibitions of some kind, with the result that some were "hidden." That is, they were performed on holidays belonging to the dominant culture's calendar, depending on the audience's lack of knowledge about the dance, or they were performed when members of the dominant culture weren't aware of the performances.

A clear lack of correspondence between western notions of "aesthetics" and African situations comes through examining Egyptian cinema and television

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(Franken 1996) because there are many places in Africa where dancing is governed by the same hierarchy that governs musical performances throughout Islam, ranging from "legitimate/*halal*" through "controversial" to the downright "illegitimate/*haram*" or "forbidden" categories, not because of any intrinsic qualities of the music itself, but because it is "associated with unacceptable contexts" (Franken 1996: 269). Dancing, too, is condemned for the activities that often precede it (drinking; drug-taking), or follow it (illicit sex). "Egyptian filmmaking was ahead of that in other Arab speaking countries owing to its more advanced level of technological and economic development and to indigenous Egyptian nationalism" (*Ibid.* 270). Egypt's indigenous dances are frequently staged "folklorically" — with considerable western influence (Franken 2002).

To obtain a detailed picture of one aspect of *ngoma*, dances of the Swahili speaking peoples of Mombasa, Kenya, "... characterized by a stratified town culture of many centuries duration," see Franken (1992: 77ff). Franken describes *waungwana* rituals and ceremonies, *lelemama* (an adult married women's dance) and *Maulidi* (recitations, with characteristic moves) performed on important occasions. These are three of the "status-laden activities" performed throughout Swahili speaking society. At the other end of the social scale are *uta* and *mwaribe*, both *watwana* ("low status") dances.

In Ghana, the *Sokodae* commemorates the occasion when Dente (a high divinity) freed the Ntwumuru people from the Juabens (Ashanti), resulting in two sections of the dance (*Kowurobenye* and *Kumumuwuru*) being done throughout the Krachi area of Ghana, known as the "Krachi Flying Dance." The *Sokodae* is considered to be "in the hands of the chief" who can command its performance for special occasions whenever he chooses. It is often performed for funeral occasions, such as the death of an *Asafohene*. In this dance, the use of an extended metaphor of weaver birds communicates ideas about social relationships and divisions of labor (Williams 1992: 125-126). Throughout Africa, dances can usefully be seen as attempts to classify, categorize and explain a people's attempts to embody their knowledge about life experience using movement, color, shape and sound metonymically derived from other creatures and from nature.

There is no single 'aesthetic' that identifies or defines the many dances of Africa. According to Best, among Western scholars and advocates,

It is *assumed* that there is a general underlying metaphysical 'aesthetic,' which is instantiated in both artistic and aesthetic experience. This vague assumption is usually taken to imply some sort of unspecified aesthetic *unity*. To repeat, rarely are any *reasons* given in favour of it, despite its implausibility. A unified 'aesthetic' is simply, and remarkably generally, assumed (this issue: 68 — italics added).

On the whole, there is no distinction made regarding Western dances between that which is "artistic" (meaning, purpose, insights) and "aesthetic" (elegance, beauty, ugliness, tragedy, comedy and such). Using this distinction, it would be easy to write about either artistic or aesthetic characteristics of indigenous dances, provided one knows the language, classifications and categories of the people to whom the dances belong.

*Tranceformations* (Glasser 1996) is a contemporary South African choreographic work for the theater that draws inspiration from an informed understanding of traditional San ritual practices. Glasser states, "The bushman metaphor for 'trance' is 'death.' They describe the trance itself as 'half death,' remarking on the similarity between the dying shaman [in trance] and an antelope, especially an eland, dying from the effects of a poisoned arrow. "Both the shaman and the eland tremble violently, stagger, lower their heads, bleed from the nose, sweat excessively and finally collapse unconscious" (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 50-51). These metaphors indicate states or movement descriptions that helped the dancers [in *Tranceformations*] to depict the trance state physically and otherwise. The identification of San shamans with the eland and the central part elands occupy in the rock art and Bushman mythology provided main themes for *Tranceformations* (Glasser 1996: 302).

Katz, Biesele and St. Denis (1997: 77-79) raise important questions about social change and the ownership and authenticity of dances when performance contexts change:

... the situation with the !Uihaba Dancers has changed dramatically. When the dance group was first formed and entered the government competitions, people of the !Kae!kae, especially the Ju! 'hoansi, were quite pleased. Wearing traditional Ju! 'hoan dance outfits, complete with leather garments, beadwork, and dance rattles, the troupe performed dances based on the traditional Ju! 'hoan healing dance. The songs were based on both Ju! 'hoan healing and initiation songs. However, there was no healing in the dance, nor any !aia or behavioral imitations of the !aia experience. As Xumi said, "There is no n!om in that !Uihaba dance. It's meant only as a dance." ... By 1989 the Ju! 'hoansi are no longer even 'assistants.' Their presence has become peripheral. ... Most devastating to the Ju! 'hoan people, especially those who had eagerly supported the !Uihaba Dancers, is that the prize money won by the group in the competitions never leaves the school grounds. ... Is the !Uihaba dance group helping to preserve Ju! 'hoan traditions, as the government seems to think? From the evidence in 1989, we are doubtful. The troupe, in fact, may be diluting the healing dance.

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