

## The Special Issue on African Dances

### Editor's Introduction

The arrangement of the four essays composing this volume of JASHM contains several messages. Three of them are about East African dances: Franken's work on Swahili dance and status is from the coastal region of Kenya, Koros's briefer essay on Maasai men's circumcision ceremonies emanates from his father's grazing area south of Narok in southwestern Kenya in the Maasai Mara, and Lesarge's criticism of Paul Spencer's interpretation of the dance of Samburu warriors and their girls is based on his own experience from the area of his birthplace north and east of Isiolo and Archer's Post, Kenya. Williams's essay (the last of the four) about the Sokodae projects readers across the African continent from Kenya to Ghana into the northern Volta region near the small towns of Bejamso and Ketekrachi.

Williams's work is not only separated from the East African essays in space, but in time, for her research on the Sokodae dance was carried out in 1968, while she was connected with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. Franken's research on Swahili dances in Mombasa and surrounding area was done as part of her Doctoral research during the early and mid-nineteen-eighties in Kenya. Koros and Lesarge wrote their essays under Williams's supervision at Moi University in 1992, as part of the requirements for an undergraduate course in the Anthropology of the Dance and Human Movement Studies.

It seemed appropriate to arrange the essays starting with Dr. Franken's work in the East African field, followed by the two student essays from entirely different geographical and socio-linguistic areas in Kenya, concluding with the West African contribution, first written a quarter of a century ago, when the anthropology of human movement studies (and semasiology) were nothing more than remote ideas (and ideals) in the author's head. It also seemed appropriate to bracket the two younger, male students' work between their two elder, female professionals' work -- locating them solidly between their more experienced 'mother' and 'grandmother', so to speak.

Altogether, the essays are meant to provide a kind of intellectual sandwich of uncommon flavor and interest because of the many insights they provide on several levels.

Historically, the essays represent three generations of writers who study dancing from an anthropological perspective. Linguistically, the essays represent one tiny community of Guang-speaking people (the Ntwumuru) out of the vast array of West African language groups and two of the great variety of spoken and body-language groups which comprise the modern nation/state of Kenya (Maasai and Kiswahili).<sup>1</sup>[see p. 76]

From a socio-political standpoint, the two student essays exemplify values, customs and ideas belonging to a nomadic tribe whose past identifies them as a warrior elite. Between the middle and the end of the 19th century,

Masailand itself was a heaving pasture of alternately rich and eroded terrain about the size of West Germany. Straddling the present-day Kenya-Tanzania border and extending northward some two hundred miles up the Rift Valley, the land provided more than ample accommodation for its 50,000 Masai and their million-odd cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys. Theoretically, if not in practice, each Masai herdsman had more than 1,000 acres on which to graze his stock. Obviously, the country could have absorbed at least fifty times the Masai population, but if neighbouring tribes had felt any need to extend themselves, it would not have been in the direction of Masailand. Even those caravan leaders who received permission to cross the land or skirt its boundaries were not encouraged to tarry. Nor did they. (Miller 1987:101)

The "caravan leaders" to whom Miller refers were from the settled towns and villages on the coast about which Franken writes -- most of which had been there for at least 400 years. The essays thus represent a tripartite opposition between a Kenyan urban and nomadic culture and a West African rural community. Neither the Maasai, the Sampur<sup>2</sup> nor the Ghanaian Ntwumuru reflect Islamic influences, in contrast to the Swahili, whose language and culture are a combination of Islamic and African sources.

The Sokodae is the most egalitarian dance form represented here, for as the author tells us, the Sokodae is an "orphan". It is the "child of the weaver-bird" meaning that it "has no parents"; thus it belongs to all Ntwumuru regardless of class or economic level. This dance is not gender-specific; it belongs to everyone in the sense that any Ntwumuru can dance in it.

Unlike the Sokodae, Maasai circumcision rituals and dances are not danced by everyone, but by young boys only -- the initiates in a rite of passage to manhood. In contrast, the example of Sampuru dancing is for men and women who bear a special relationship (*enkijeman dorropu* i.e. "short marriages") to one another. The *waungwana* and the *watwana* dances of the Swahili are not only restricted to members of upper and lower social classes, they are further restricted in terms of gender. Of the dances Dr. Franken describes, only the Swahili *chakacha* is not restricted in terms of social class; however, only women dance it.

Franken's analysis of the movement characteristics of the set of Swahili dances is intriguing. We hope she continues to produce more work along the same lines and would want to suggest a possible theoretical addition to the direction she has taken: it would be of great interest to have the Swahili taxonomies of the body -- male and female -- and an accompanying discussion of the semantics of the (biological) body to set against the movement analyses. We need to know more about the semasiological bodies of the Swahili, so that we might comprehend how and in what ways the perceptive focal movement analyses she offers correspond to a wider hierarchy of values in the community as a whole.

The two undergraduate papers are instructive because both are written by "insiders" -- by people who are members of the societies they write about. As is well-known in anthropology, writing about one's own society is often more difficult than writing from a standpoint of an outside observer. Both viewpoints are valuable, of course, and the problems for insiders were well-expressed, I think, by Callan (1975: 87-88) who wrote about diplomatic wives during an extended period in her life when she herself was one. More recently, we have profited from an excellent collection edited by Jackson (1987) in which the problems of insiders were thoroughly examined and the notion of "reflexivity" in anthropology fleshed out in plain terms. These works were of great assistance to Ole Koros<sup>3</sup> and Lesarge, who were somewhat amazed to discover that anthropology wasn't only about "all those others". In the past, the "others" generally meant non-European peoples, in other words, "them".

According to him, Lesarge's paper was relatively easy, for he first read Spencer's paper, which inspired him to "set the record straight" with regard to dances in which he participates regularly when he returns to his home from university on holidays. Ole Koros's paper was difficult -- or so he said,

because he couldn't imagine that anyone but another Maasai would be interested in knowing about the boys' circumcision rituals, a ceremony he was familiar with, as he had just gone through it a few months previously (without, we may add, "flinching").

Neither Salau nor Makiya knew anything about the dances from Mombasa or Lamu; thus the reading of Franken's paper was, for them, a real revelation. Like many Kenyans, both students speak a form of Kiswahili because it is the national language of Kenya, but even so, they had no knowledge of the culture of the people whose language it is. Because they had one or two Ghanaian friends at university, they were interested in the account of the Sokodae, although none of the Ghanaians they knew were Ntwumuru, and indeed, their friends had not heard of Bejamso, Ketekrachi or the Sokodae.

The two beginning papers are, however, well done, and, I think, of positive value as contributions to an anthropology of the dance. Although they are "pre-analytical" papers, they offer a strong sense of what both writers consider to be important about themselves and their people. In my opinion, one can't ask for much more than that with regard to first attempts.

My own paper, first written twenty-five years ago, and published twice<sup>4</sup> was an interesting exercise in applied personal anthropology (see Williams, 1991: 287 ff), for the I.C.R. Sokodae essay was written during the transition period from amateur to professional anthropologist. The ethnography still holds, although I have not been back to Ghana during the intervening years, and it would be interesting to know whether the Sokodae is still performed and if it is, how much change has occurred. I find that traditional dances change far less than many people think they do, provided they survive at all.

With regard to the theoretical aspects of the essay written so many years ago, I was intrigued to discover that, apart from changes in the conclusion (noted in the text itself), I have not altered these ideas in broad outline, although I have refined and developed them to higher levels of sophistication. The essentials of what is now "semasiological research" remain the same. The original vision, like the ethnography, still holds.

On a more mundane level (and to conclude): the bibliographical references for this volume are combined into a master list which can be found at the end

of the journal. The authors' endnotes and any appendices are retained at the close of each individual article.

Drid Williams  
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 Nairobi, Kenya

#### ENDNOTES:

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1. Swahili [Kiswahili] is a Bantu language spoken primarily on the east coast and islands of Africa in an area extending from Lamu Island, Kenya, in the north to the southern border of Tanzania. (The Bantu languages form a subgroup of the Benue-Congo group of the Niger-Congo language family.) Swahili is used as a *lingua franca* in Tanzania, Kenya, Zaire and Uganda; there are about 1,900,000 native speakers. Swahili has been greatly influenced by Arabic; there is an enormous vocabulary of loanwords in Arabic, including the word, 'Swahili', which in Arabic is 'Swahili' (a plural adjectival form of an Arabic word meaning "of the coast"). The oldest preserved Swahili literature, which dates from the late 17th or early 18th C., is written in Arabic script. The three most important dialects of Swahili are Kiunguja, spoken on Zanzibar and in the mainland areas of Tanzania; Kimvita, spoken in Mombasa and other areas of Kenya; and Kiamu, spoken on the island of Lamu and adjoining parts of the coast. Standard Swahili is based on the Kiunguja dialect. Arabs have continued to occupy the coastal strip since mediæval times; they were -- and often still are -- engaged in trade between Africa and Asia. They number about 28,000, still speak Arabic, and adhere to Islam. The community is divided between "old" and "true" Arabs -- respectively those who are descended from the early traders and those whose ancestors migrated to Kenya after the Portuguese arrived in the 16th C. Of the approximately 75 languages spoken in Kenya, Kiswahili was chosen, in 1971, as the national language. (English is the 'official' language of Kenya). Kiswahili is a *lingua franca*, as it is a multi-purpose language that evolved on the coast and is spoken in several dialects throughout the country. Essentially a Bantu language, it has loanwords from Portuguese, Hindi and English, as well as Arabic. It has evolved a written form and is a required subject in many schools.

2. See the endnotes for Lesarge's article for the reasons why these words are spelled differently here.

3. The 'ole' in Salau ole Koros's name means "son of". Readers will notice that Lesarge's first name is sometimes spelled 'Lmakiya' and sometimes 'Makiya'. The latter is the Anglicized form. Because he is half Rendile Maasai and half Sampuru, he uses the 'L', to indicate "son of", but the Rendile and the Sampurr, according to him, don't use the form 'ole'.

4. First in 1969 in African Arts/Arts d'Afrique which still emanates from U.C.L.A., but simply as African Arts these days, then in the Institute of Cultural Research Journal in 1970.