

THE SOKODAE: A WEST AFRICAN DANCE

Preliminaries

The complexity, richness and diversity of the world, plus an unprecedented fund of available information in all fields of study produces fascinating subjects in the social sciences. Study of the dance, dances and dancing, one small, sub-field of research in social anthropology, has unique attractions, advantages and disadvantages. One of the latter pertains to the fact that in western societies, dances have been classified, not as objects of research, but primarily as entertainments or as vehicles through which people might savor the delights of aesthetic enjoyment. These classifications don't always reflect the attitudes of specialists. Over sixty years ago, Evans-Pritchard pointed out that

In ethnological accounts the dance is usually given a place quite unworthy of its social importance. It is often viewed as an independent activity and is described without reference to its contextual setting in native life. Such treatment leaves out many problems as to the composition and organization of the dance and hides from view its sociological function (1928: 446).

Evans-Pritchard issued a challenge with regard to future research, specifically regarding "problems as to the composition and organization of the dance" which have since been powerfully developed (see Williams 1991) into a field of human movement studies which has cracked several old chestnuts with regard to long-standing misconceptions about human behaviour. Current writers in the field have developed new theoretical insights, not only into the socio-linguistic functions of dances and dancing, but sign languages, martial arts, rituals and ceremonies as well (see, for example, Farnell [in press], Page (1990), Puri and Hart-Johnson (1982), Williams (1986) and Fairbank 1985 and 1986). The dance, however, not only provided the original inspiration for explorations into the nature and meaning of all kinds of human systems of non-vocalized communication, it provided the initial thinking out of which semasiology emerged (for full definition, see Williams 1991:363-364, Note 11).

The Director of the Institute of Cultural Research in London¹[see p. 133] took an enlightened interest in these ideas 22 years ago when they were still in the process of development. A lecture was presented at I.C.R. on 31 October, 1970. The lecture subsequently became a written paper, based on research

carried out in Ghana during the years 1967-70. The paper dealt with two questions which are still valid in spite of the passage of time:

1. *What* does one study: movements, “emotional expression” or what?
2. *Why* does anyone study this sort of thing at all?

The Paper

When people ask that kind of question, I wish they would formulate them in somewhat plainer terms; terms which would, I think, state what is really on their minds. What really puzzles them is what use does the study of an African dance have to them, or to anyone in a highly organized, technological society?

The Sokodae, a Ghanaian dance around which this discussion will turn, belongs to the Ntwumuru people -- a small group of approximately 9,000 human beings who live in the northeastern section of central Ghana. They are part of a larger group of Guang speaking peoples, including the Krachi, whose history and social organization in 1970 was intimately involved with this dance. As far as I know, that condition has not changed. We may well ask, however, “are these people and this dance not completely remote from the interests of members of developed societies?” The answer I would give is “Not so much as we might think”.

Study of the Sokodae (and of other, similar genres of African dances) can be of use simply because they are from different environments, different traditions and ways of life. This may seem a rather obvious point, but it is one which can hardly be over-stressed. From a perspective of these differences, the majority of westerners are ill-equipped to judge or to criticize these dances, or to try to do anything at the outset, except to understand them. It has been my experience that many people are willing to try to understand, even if the process involves some loss of cherished notions about “primitives” and/or stereotypes about the evolutionary process, but it is at this very point, no matter how positive the attitude or how sympathetic we try to be, that we are in difficulties about which we are frequently unaware.

These difficulties lie in habits of thought, culturally conditioned, basically learned ways of seeing and responding which can actively prevent (or at least obstruct) our understanding of traditional African art forms in the ways their

practitioners understand and practise them, or for that matter, the traditional arts of India, China, Islam or the South Pacific Islands -- any foreign or alien art forms.

For example, I have known many people to look at an African mask and the first thought that comes to them is "That was made before these people understood anything about perspective or anatomical drawing". In a like manner, many people look at an African dance as a rather disordered and chaotic affair. If not that, they think the dance is totally spontaneous, improvised or "free expression" which lacks form, coherence, intelligibility.

Apart from anything else, most westerners are used to seeing a dance, first, with a picture frame around it -- the familiar proscenium stage opening which is as appropriate to western danced forms as a cleared space in the village is to the Ntwumuru, or the terrace of a pueblo to the Hopi. Second, because of the extraordinary abundance of extremely poor literature that is available on the subject of African dances, it is likely that the novice western observer will want to believe that at least in the dances of Africa, they might find some untrammelled, uninhibited expression of primitive human beings -- an attitude which involves two stereotypes. These are (1) the image of the emotionally and sexually uninhibited African and (2) the naive belief that all danced behaviour is somehow symptomatic of the participants' individual or collective feelings. Unknowingly, they are in danger of classifying these dances as the first "simple" ("childish", "undisciplined") beginnings in what they imagine is a "world history" of the dance, which culminates in classical ballet or in some other contemporary western theatrical dance-form.

To be quite blunt about it, these points of view are just dead wrong. They assume that a people like the Ntwumuru are, or were, trying to do the same things with their dances, sculptures, and other artifacts that we try to do. It assumes that their dances have the same reasons for existing that ours do, and that they (poor dears!) just missed the point somehow. Research into any of the traditional art forms of the world demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that other societies are (and were) not trying to do the same things with their "arts" that we have done with ours -- at least for the last two hundred years, and that their criteria for what we call "art" is different from ours. Needless to say, perhaps, such attitudes and beliefs are blatantly ethnocentric and condescending.

Four major differences in cultural expression that can be discerned in the Sokodae dance are as follows:

1. The Ntwumuru and Krachi peoples, like people in most pre-industrialized societies, are not expressing themselves in their dances so much as they are expressing a set of ideas which are meaningful to them. The truth of this assertion becomes apparent when we examine the oral tradition for the Sokodae and the seven sections of it. This apparent lack of the western concept of 'personality' or 'individuality' means that
2. Their art is not an end in itself in the same way that many western dances are. Their dances are not 'products' in the same sense that art is a product in the contexts of producer/consumer, industrialized societies.
3. We should not forget, too, that the kind of traditional African art of which Sokodae is representative was, on the whole, anonymous, as indeed, much of pre-Renaissance western art was anonymous. That doesn't mean that people didn't initially create these dances. It simply means that their names are probably not remembered after one or two generations, or that, like many traditional Australian Aboriginal dances, they were given to the people by culture-heroes or Creator Beings, and were not, therefore, of human origin. Neo-African arts, including dances, have acquired many of the same conventions as present-day western art forms, together with personality cults and all the rest.
4. Finally, traditional African art is not relevant in the plastic and graphic areas because it is "like" Picasso or Modigliani, or, in the dance field, because it is "like" the works of Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey or Martha Graham or any other contemporary dancer. That is really putting the cart before the horse! Nor are these arts relevant primarily because of their design, aesthetic surfaces, or any of their surface characteristics, elegant and beautiful though they be.

Traditional African dances are relevant because of their content, because of the vital functions they perform in the societies to which they belong. In those contexts, they are considered to be "successful" in traditional terms, if they "work"; that is, if they accomplish the purposes for which they were performed.²

It is important to try to understand the Sokodae in terms of its content and its criteria; an attempt much more akin to an anthropological, rather than an aesthetic point of view. Anthropologists are committed to try to understand how people outside of their native socio-linguistic contexts think. They are committed to try to understand the meanings and substance of cultural acts and actions in any society, including their own. Anthropologists of human movement bring the same kinds of attitudes to bear upon dances, rituals and art forms wherever they may be found.

The results of an anthropological commitment with reference to human artifacts are too numerous to list here, but two points immediately spring to mind: 1) research of the kind I carried out in Ghana can produce fresh, interesting points of departure for re-evaluations of art and artistic behaviour in our own society; and 2) we might begin to share in an impulse toward a category of mutual, albeit secularized, metanoia;³ a process of developing awareness which is a result of a search for global understanding which constitutes a basic human need to recognize, rationalize⁴ and re-rationalize the significance of things and events.

The Sokodae Dance

In what follows, I shall tell you what the dance, Sokodae, is about, in contrast to telling you about the Sokodae dance, for in maintaining the previous line of thought, we will get nearer the mark.⁵

Ee-----eee-----eeee-----
Akyemba, agyanka bedi agoro,
agoro, agoro
Agoro a eye me de nono

Agoro
Eee-----ee-----eee-----Akyemba,
agyanka
Agoro, agoro

Ee-----eee-----eeee-----
 The weaver bird's child, the orphan,
 comes to dance, dance, dance
 This dance belongs to me (which I
 own)
 Dance
 The child of the weaver bird, the
 orphan, comes to
 Dance, dance.

This song in the Twi language is one of those sung in the first section of the Sokodae. It is reproduced here because it contains the three key ideas which the dance is about: (1) Ownership, (2) Orphan, and (3) Birds in general and the weaver bird in particular.

Ownership

In order to establish their ownership of the dance and to give some idea of its age, the Ntwumurus tell the following story from their oral tradition.⁶ In 1750-1800, the Ntwumurus crossed the Volta River from the western to the eastern side with the intention of settling in the new location. They had to abandon their homes on the western side of the river because of infringement by the Juabens. Some of the Ntwumuru clans sought the protection of Dente⁷ in the Krachi area and some of the kings of the Ntwumuru and the Basa fled to the Republic of Dahomey where they settled at Safé, Gbede. The Bejamso Ntwumurus did not go to Dahomey, but to the place where they established the present village which bears their name.

It was through conquest, therefore, that the chief (*Juabenhene*) of the Twi-speaking Juabens became the overlord of these areas and over many of the other Guang peoples as well.⁸ The Krachis, for example, had already crossed the Volta some time before and were permanently settled in their present area south of the Ntwumurus. They simply submitted without any warfare to the Juabenhene's rule. Dente became more and more important to the Juabens, who appropriated all of the customs and traditions related to Dente because their own *Obosom* [divinities] did not have the power of prophecy, of seeing into the future. Dente did.

When the Guang-speaking peoples became subjects of the Juabenhene, they had to pay homage to him. These annual homage payments took place at the Juaben festivals of Apafram -- a yearly affair which the *Ashantehene* holds for the whole Ashanti State, of which the Juabens are a part. At this time, the Krachis and all the subservient peoples presented gifts of slaves, sheep, elephant tusks, fresh fish, meat, honey and salt to the Juabenhene. Besides this, the Ntwumurus of Bejamso came to honour the Juabenhene with the drumming and dancing of the Sokodae. Usually, after paying tribute, the Krachis and Ntwumurus would go back to their homes across the river.

One year, they were not granted permission by the Juabenhene to return to their homes. They were kept at the town and used to labour on the farms of the Juaben chief and his elders. The visitors greatly resented this imposition but were afraid to act. They were sorely outnumbered and, of course, completely unarmed. The result was that they stayed for some time before they finally decided to ask for the help of Dente in their plight. They invoked

the powers of Dente by calling his special names and by playing the drums and horns of the Sokodae.

The story emphasizes that Dente reacted strongly to the appeals of his troubled people, for several things began to happen to the Juabens: heavy storms destroyed part of the town, elephants destroyed crops and many of the townspeople were caught and mangled or killed by leopards and lions. The Juabenhene consulted many oracles to try to find out what was behind all of the trouble. The oracles told him that he was keeping the Krachi and Ntwumuru in Juaben against their wills and more important, against the will of Dente. The Juaben chief was ordered by Dente to let his people return to their homes across the river.

Not wishing any further ills and misfortunes to fall upon his people and lands, the Juabenhene ordered that the former prisoners should go. He sent special messengers along with them who were accompanied by slaves in order to ensure that Dente would know of his obedience to his wishes. The slaves were given as gifts to Dente, who subsequently ordered them to be distributed among several nearby villages.

After this, the Juaben chief sent his drummers and dancers who were adept at the Kete (an Ashanti dance done only for chiefs) to dance in honour of Dente in Krachi. The Krachis didn't want these visitors to be in Krachikrom proper, so they assigned them a place to stay which was near to the old Krachikrom, now inundated by the waters of the Volta Lake. People used to say, "I am going to where they are playing Kete". Gradually, this developed into "I am going to Kete-Krachi", the two words which compose the present name 'Ketekrachi'.

It is in this way that the Sokodae is intimately connected with the known oral history of the Ntwumuru people. We are told that the dance was already done many years before this event took place. The fact that the Ntwumurus had this connection with a Twi-speaking people for so long accounts for the fact that some songs like the weaver bird's song were translated into Twi from Ntwumuru. The song quoted was especially important, because the Ntwumurus wanted to be sure that the Juabens clearly understood the origins, meaning and ownership of the dance.

Orphan

The other two ideas connected with the weaver bird's song are somewhat different both in character and kind, i.e. the notion of "orphan" and that of "birds". The word 'orphan' has no literal meaning as we would understand it or as it is used here. The dance is not about someone who has lost his or her parents. It has what might be called a figurative meaning stemming from the fact that the Sokodae dance belongs to everyone. This dance has no "parents"; that is, it is not restricted in any way to persons of a particular cult or class. It does not require any special knowledge nor does it have any priests, or other ritual specialists attached to it. All Ntwumuru may participate in it regardless of status, economic standing or other considerations.

Birds

Another kind of ownership of this dance is expressed in connection with ideas about birds. In that part of the song which says, "...which belongs to me" or "...which I own" the 'I' is used in a generic sense: it means, "I, an Ntwumuru". The idea is expressed symbolically through metaphorical associations with the weaver-bird. As everyone knows, this bird builds one of the most complex and distinctive nests to be found among the feathered species. No other bird can reproduce it. The Ntwumurus see themselves as the weaver birds and the Sokodae as the nest.

May I hasten to point out that by no means is there any confusion in their minds as to whether they are really weaver birds or not, any more than there is a confusion in an English ballet dancer's mind as to whether she is really a swan while performing Swan Lake. The weaver bird in Sokodae is used as a metaphorical concept which these people find good to think with.

Sections of the Sokodae

I. *Kowurobenye*

The major motif of the Sokodae is that of the courting and mating of birds. In the first section of the dance, called *Kowurobenye* (*Kowurobe* = orphan; *nye* = has got it), the men dance in clockwise and counter-clockwise circles simultaneously. They present a striking spectacle with their brilliantly coloured cloths streaming out behind them. The cloths in motion extend the

male dancers' bodies like the bright tail plumage of peacocks, cockatoos and parrots. The movements all suggest the bowing, strutting and ecstatic rushing movements of a courting male bird. My informants pointed out that in the *Kowurobenye*, the men rival each other for the attention of the watching women. Within the step pattern, they even try to bump against one another in an attempt to knock each other off balance so that they will make their rivals appear clumsy and unaccomplished to their female audience.

II. *Kenemoe*

The second section of the dance is the female counterpart of the first male section, although the movements are quite different. Men, if they wish, can change the positioning of their cloths to simulate how women wear them and dance in this part as well. In decided contrast to the vigorous use of space and running moves in the first section, the steps in *Kenemoe* are subtle and delicate, both in terms of footwork and movements of the torso. The whole of the torso is involved in a kind of light rippling movement from front to back, having no lateral overtones at all. Sometimes, this move is carried into the head and neck, reminding one of fowls walking or pecking softly at grains of food. The word, "*kenemoe*", means "a movement".

III. *Kumumuwuru*

The third section, *kumumuwuru* (spinning) is probably the most spectacular from a western point of view. It involves whirling, spinning turns done by the men in solo sequences. They practise the rather difficult manipulation of their cloths privately -- part of the skill required to perform the turns properly -- for the cloth must be made to rise up in such a way that the upper part of the body is invisible. While turning, the total shape of the man and his cloth should resemble a tulip blossom and stem. The men do this to "make themselves look beautiful" -- and it does. *Kumumuwuru* is done for the same reason that the peacock spreads his tail or that the male *legen* vibrates in the sunlight making his beautifully coloured wings bedazzle the female.

IV. *Kikyen*

Two women will usually dance the fourth section (another women's section) together. The kind of step involved in this section makes a track in the earth and the way the footwork is accented is closely related to the name of the section, *kikyen* (pronounced key-CHEN). The track made in the earth is of

special importance: the evenness of the steps and the straightness of the track are the desired results of the performance. It is perhaps interesting to know that this type of step may be seen in many parts of Ghana, always in women's dances and usually in dances involving puberty and marriage. There seems to be a strong association between women and the earth among the Ntwumurus and throughout Ghana. The essential meaning of this step is that it is important that a woman makes her mark firmly in the earth, for it symbolizes her passage through life.

V *Kedenkenkyew*

The fifth section is danced by men and women together. The name *ke-denkenkyew* is taken from the drum beats. This whole passage of the dance is freely, strongly and boldly erotic. Contrary to uninformed (or ill-informed) opinion, this is one of the comparatively few dances or sections of dances among many hundreds in Ghana which has the theme of eroticism as its content. The movement patterns are quite consistent with the overall theme of courting and mating birds already established in previous sections. *Kedenkenkyew's* movements are unselfconscious, direct and unmistakable in their meaning. The atmosphere is one of heightened awareness, joy and ease; a genuine zest for living seems to pervade the whole dancing community. As far as I could see, there was a complete absence of fear, hatred, shame or frustration, in contrast to much of what currently passed for eroticism on the western theatre dance stage in 1970.

VI. *Kyenkyenbrika*

This word is translated as "step-step-turn-around", and the section is also danced by men and women. They do not necessarily dance together in *kyenkyenbrika*, however, as in the previous section. If someone wishes to dance solo, he or she may do so. One of the most interesting gestures for women occurs chiefly here. The woman points to her forehead with her right hand and to the small of her back with her left. This means that the woman follows the man with her mind and supports him with the strength of her back. The image given by my informants to explain this gesture was, "all during the day from the morning, the woman follows the man in her mind when he is hunting or in the fields. At night, when he comes home, he rests and she tends to his needs, feeding him and serving him -- all this because of the strength of her back". Women use this characteristic gesture whether dancing alone, with each other, or with men.

VII. *Kedenkyenkprofe*

Also a name taken from the drums, this section contains the greatest variety of step patterns. It is danced mainly by men, with the women occasionally forming complementary patterns, either with the *kikyen* or the *kenemoe* steps. There is one gesture which means, "I am a true son of the land"; another which means that the dancer's great-grandfather killed a man in battle. A complex series of jumps, changing from one leg to another means, "My father was an Ojya", which means a priest of one of the state gods or divinities.

Cloth and Music

I was told that in the old days, only older men would dance Sokodae with cloths. All cloth was hand-woven then and younger men would not have acquired sufficient wealth or status to have them. The young men wore waistbands and a loin-cloth and danced with their arms lifted to simulate the outspread wings and breast of a courting male bird. Now, everyone wears an imported Java-print cloth, or a cotton cloth made in Ghana, or an Adinkira cloth.⁹ The art of weaving has, to my knowledge, disappeared among the Ntwumuru.

The musical ensemble which accompanies Sokodae is of special interest. It includes both drums and (animal tusk or head) horns. There are six drums in all: the master drums, called *Kitinmpene*, which are pitched 'talking drums', supported by one *Kakwedji* and two *Prentren*, all accompanied by a *dondo*, the familiar 'squeeze drum' of West Africa. The tusk horns, called *Ntahere* in Twi are seven in number.¹⁰ They are led by the master horn, named *Kabretense*, which plays melodies somewhat reminiscent of plainsong. Accompanying this horn are two *Kajesolo*, two *Namu* and two *Brekye*. A gong accompanies the horns, for they are often played by themselves with no drum accompaniment. Originally, there were three of each type of horn, totalling twelve horns in all. It is not known why there are only seven horns in use now. These horns are now made from the head horns of the buffalo, but in the past, they were made from elephant tusks.

Occasions for Sokodae

Once a year, the drummers, horn-players and a group of dancers came to Ketekrachi from Bejamso to dance the complete Sokodae to honour Dente, thereby taking active part in the Dente festival. This annual observance commemorates the occasion upon which Dente freed his people from the Juabens. One of the results of this is that parts of the Sokodae -- the *Kowurobenye* and the *Kumumuwuru* -- are done in the Krachi area and have come to be known as the "Krachi Flying Dance".

The Sokodae is considered to be "in the hands of the chief" who can command it for special occasions for the gods or whenever else he chooses. It is performed at special funeral occasions. For example, when the present *Asafohene*¹¹ of Bejamso dies, this dance will be drummed and danced for seven days. Once a year, Sokodae is danced and played for Sonko, one of the traditional war gods of the Ntwumuru. Sonko's shrine is situated outside Bejamso in the bush and is visited by most of the people during April. Great amounts of guinea corn are provided for the ceremonies, prepared three days in advance by the old women of Bejamso into *pito*, a kind of fermented wine made from the corn. Six or eight male goats are obtained as sacrifices for Sonko. On the eve of the ceremony, the Sokodae is danced. There is a contest between the two divisions of the town, Lentai and Chambai, in clearing the path to the shrine. It is a time of high celebration. These kinds of occasions and any others which are of great import are the occasions which belong to Sokodae.

Reflections

Dancing, one of the ancient art forms of humanity, has many sources, many impulses and many uses. Considered casually and superficially, we may only see in the Sokodae the leisure activities of a group of adult people who are imitating the movements of birds. We may well wonder why people do this sort of thing. Is it not a childish, simplistic (even if pretty and pleasurable) activity? I think not.

In an attempt to classify, categorize and explain their impressions and experiences -- in attempts to formulate in non-vocalized symbolic terms their knowledge about their particular universes, human beings have used the movements, colours, shapes and sounds metonymically derived from other creatures and from nature to convey their ideas about phenomena and

themselves. In the Sokodae, the weaver-bird is used as an extended metaphor to communicate ideas about social relationships and divisions of labour between men and women. The propensity to conceptualize in these ways is, according to Lévi-Strauss, a fundamental characteristic of the human mind.¹²

We might profitably reflect on the fact that although a dance like Swan Lake carries some rather profound notions about psychological transformations instead of social roles or divisions of labour, groups of adult western dancers have for the last century been imitating the movements of swans. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that Swan Lake and Sokodae are the same. Nor do I mean to suggest that the forms, gestures, muscular coordinations, costumes, musical accompaniment, etc., are the same. However, I would want to say that on a certain level of conceptualization, the use of weaver birds and swans as metaphorical vehicles for whole constellations of ideas about the nature of humanity, is in fact similar.

I feel constrained to add that neither Swan Lake nor Sokodae discloses the highest levels of conceptualization or function which it is possible to attain via the medium of movement or through dances. This fact is abundantly clear even if one reads the available extant literature about various forms of dancing in the far and near eastern countries of, say, Ceylon and India (e.g. de Zoëte 1953, 1957 and 1963). The existence of Bharata Natyam, the dances of Bali, or even the Gisaro ceremony of the Bosavi people in New Guinea (see Schieffelin 1978), however, in no way lessens the importance of Swan Lake or Sokodae, or numerous more humble examples of the world's danced traditions. All genuine traditional dances are important to the people whose ethnic identities are tied up with them, including our own. It is to be hoped that this brief examination of the Ntwumuru people's Sokodae has contributed in some measure to an enlargement of understanding about the potential depth and complexity of "a dance".

The Sokodae was (and, I hope, still is) a living expression of the social identity of at least 9,000 people. The dance offers many insights into human relationships and behaviour that are important to the Ntwumuru themselves. Like any serious danced artifact, the Sokodae represents an attempt to order experience into intelligibility through a kind of reasoning by analogy. Dances, regardless of where they are found in the world, are highly organized, highly structured human systems of actions and symbolic expression. They reflect, as we can see from the example I have given, an interesting and fairly

broad range of ideas, associations, cultural mores, value systems and symbols belonging to the societies in which they originated.

...rituals reveal values at their deepest level...men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies (Wilson 1968:166).

Research

The remaining problem to be dealt with in this discussion was stated in the first question asked at the beginning of the essay, "What does one study?" From the ethnographic account you have read of the Sokodae, some of the necessary components of needed information for this kind of research emerge.

- (a). The oral traditions, myths and historical evidence (if there is any).
- (b). The material culture, i.e. cloths, weapons, pots and dishes and such. Sokodae, unlike some dances, e.g. those using masks, perhaps statuary and other paraphernalia, was not problematic in this regard. The cloths worn by the dancers were the only item of this kind involved.
- (c). The musical accompaniment and the songs. This area of study alone has generated the field of ethnomusicology. An excellent example of research in this discipline, carried out in Ghana, will be found in Chernoff (1979).

Often, research into dances is looked at as a sub-field of ethnomusicology, and given the history of the discipline, especially in the United States, it was both reasonable and generous of ethnomusicologists to adopt the comparatively few dance researchers there were in the beginning and middle of this century. However, modern trends indicate that the young, but vigorous field of the anthropology of human movement studies may well establish itself as an autonomous discipline, in which case, research into dances would come into its own, along with sign languages, drama, rituals, martial arts -- all of the human structured systems of meaning which have

movement and non-vocalized human action as their primary mode of expression.

Practically speaking, from an anthropological standpoint, research into a dance involves the analysis of an event (see Ardener 1973, for apposite discussion). The analysis of a danced event entails at least six features of space/time organization, i.e.:

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. the physical space | 2. the lived time |
| 3. the social space | 4. the social time |
| 5. the conceptual space | 6. the mythological time |

“A dance” is a complex, self-contained, finite event which takes place according to certain specifications. It possesses a “context” (the environment in which it takes place) and an “internal space” or shape, which semasiologists call the “form space” of a dance. A dance has a beginning, a middle and an end, and while each danced event will have a different configuration of elements within the structures outlined above, each can be profitably studied using the elements indicated above as a plan to commence work.

The physical space of a dance is the easiest to define, because it is empirically observable, unlike the conceptual space of the dance, which is generally invisible. For example, physical spaces for dances might include the proscenium stage, which might be 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep, with a 19 foot vertical opening, or perhaps it is larger or smaller than that. On the other hand, the physical space may be a forest clearing 100 feet wide and 200 feet long, filled with people who are leaving only a small open space (or spaces) in the centre, the physical dimensions of which are marked off by an arrangement of drummers and singers, seats for prestigious ritual leaders, honoured guests and such. In Sokodae, the physical space was the “village square” or meeting place in Bejamso, near the chief’s house, partly shaded by an enormous mango tree by which the people gathered, creating a circle or “dance space” approximately 40 feet in diameter. The physical space of a dance might be a semi-circular arrangement of people seated on cushions and divans on a raised platform or series of steps, with a solo dancer being the focal point at a place on the marble floor which is equi-distant from either end of the semi-circle, if it were a performance of Kathak dancing in the north of India. The physical space might be a longhouse in Papua New Guinea.

The list of examples is nearly infinitely extendible, but these should give some idea of what is meant by the physical space of a dance.

The “lived time” of a dance means the actual time required for the observed and observable performance. Is it one or two hours; a half hour, 15 minutes, or, as in the case of some Australian Aboriginal “dances”, are the units so short that they are often only 10, 16, 18, 24 or 36 beats long? The notion of “lived time” is important to the researcher because he or she must make distinctions between this “time”, and the semantics of the “time” of the mythological, historical, or conceptual time (which may be past, present or future) of the dance. A western example is relevant: Antony Tudor’s ballet, *Jardin aux Lilas* (The Garden of Lilacs) took up about a half hour of “lived time” on the part of the dancers and the audience, but the ballet itself was the expansion of the instant of recognition on the part of the bride and groom at their wedding, in which many events took place “in another dimension” as it were. In the Sokodae, the lived time of the dance on the occasion I saw it was approximate two hours, but during that time, I was projected into a kind of “timeless” dimension of Ntwumuru ethnic identity, into a definitional time which, because of the content of the dance, revealed matters which, for the Ntwumuru, “were”, “are”, and “always would continue” as long as they continue to exist.

The “social space” and “social time” of a dance are not so easy to define, because with them, the researcher begins to enter the domains of those elements of a dance which are not empirically observable. Let us examine the notion of social space first: here, before us are two women dancing the *Kenemoe* section of Sokodae. They are in close physical proximity to one another with regard to the physical space of that section of the dance. One is old and one is younger, “middle-aged” we will say. We cannot see what social relationship lies between them; are they mother and daughter, are they aunt and niece, are they age-group mates, are they just good friends, are they dancing together because they are deemed to be “the best dancers” for that section, meaning that they could be from different clans, or are they from the same clan? The step patterns of the dance tell us nothing about any of this, which is why semasiologists say there is much about a dance that is “invisible”.

We discovered, however, that Sokodae “has no parents”, meaning that “...it is not restricted in any way to persons of a particular cult or class. It does not require any special knowledge nor does it have any priests, or other ritual

specialists attached to it. All Ntwumuru may participate...". As it happened, the two women I have in mind for this example were simply "good friends" and they enjoyed dancing *Kenemoe* together, because it was a context in which they could. Contrary to the stereotype of "unfettered spontaneity", that is supposed to be a *sine qua non* of Africa's traditional dances, I suggest that unfettered spontaneity (and its many derivatives) is a characteristic of a contemporary disco dance, but will not be found in traditional dances, where "spontaneity" is certainly not "unfettered", but exists, as indeed, it does in the ballet, in the context of complex sets of rules, not only with regard to the acceptable performances of steps and gestures, but with regard to the permissible social space/times of any given dance.

I have seen dances in Aboriginal Australia which my informants told me were "not really the 'X' dance", because a whole section could not be performed because relevant family members who performed it were not present, therefore, it was simply left out.¹³ But these kinds of considerations lead to the notion of the social roles/rules which directly influence the semantic content of a dance. There are dances from the Krachi-Ntwumuru area which are exclusive to members of a certain cult, e.g. Tigari. There are dances which cannot be performed by anyone except an Ojya¹⁴ because they are possession dances (e.g. Yentumi), and anyone who is not an Ojya cannot perform the actions of the divinity whose dance it is, for that would amount to something like sacrilege, and severe penalties would be exacted.

An old man in Pokwasi (a village close to Accra) told me, "I have come to watch the gods dance". He didn't mean by that statement that he had come to watch some god-like dancer dance. He meant literally what he said; he was coming to the that part of the festival to enter the socially prepared space/time (the festival) of the divinities (the next level, i.e. mythological time) -- to see them dance, not the dancers.

Research into danced events is to me, somewhat like playing with a beautifully constructed set of Russian dolls -- the nested dolls, where there is one big doll visible on the outside containing successively smaller and smaller dolls inside, until one has reached the last, tiniest doll, whereupon the researcher retreats into silence, for the limit of explanation, of verbalization, analysis and all the rest has been reached. With regard to the kind of research I advocate, the investigator is getting nearer the last doll when grappling with the notion of the conceptual space/time of a dance.

Some of the main features of the conceptual space of a dance are linguistic. That is, although the dimensions of physical space (up/down, right/left, front/back, outside/inside) are universal in the sense that no human movement, danced or not danced, takes place outside them, different cultures, different ethnicities within the same culture, even, assign different meanings to them. In Ghana, for example, the left/right dimension is specifically weighted, particularly with regard to the values placed on right hands and left hands.

Spatial restrictions prevent enumerating many examples, but suffice to say that the values of left and right with reference to eating, shaking hands, giving objects, whether food, books, pots or whatever, to another person. The right side of the body and the right hand are “good”. The left side of the body and the left hand are not “bad”, but they are considered to be impure and inferior: the left hand cannot perform the same functions as the right (say, handing someone an object), unless the right hand touches the arm or wrist at the same time. One carries a spear, eats, shakes hands, swears oaths, gives objects to others with the right hand. One does not clean oneself after using the toilet with the right hand, nor does one swear oaths, eat, and so forth with the left hand. Left-handed people were, on the whole, considered “special”, and the condition was recognized among the peoples with whom I was familiar, but the condition meant special ceremonies, pouring of libations, etc. in order to make the condition “right” in terms of the whole society.

I noticed these facts in dances because right-handed people are generally more comfortable dancing in, say, a clockwise circle, with their right sides toward the centre of the circle. Left-handed people found this difficult, so often, one of my teachers would explain why he or she was moving “upstream”, so to speak; why they preferred the left sides of their bodies towards the centre of the circle. They explained to me that they had to sacrifice goats, pour libations and have many prayers said before they could go against the mainstream. The general point is that orientational metaphors (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980:14-21) are essential to adequate understanding of danced events, because they are the first steps in the process of understanding the conceptual space of the dance.

With regard to conceptual, or mythological, time: we have touched on the subject by mentioning possession dances above, and a “created time”, as in *Jardin aux Lilas*, where the choreographer stretched an instant to cover a half hour of “lived time”. At the risk of doing the subject a disservice, I can

do no more than mention some aspects of this area of research here, hoping to enlist the judicious sympathy of readers for tackling an impossible task in a short essay.

As I never cease to wonder at the different spatial universes that are created by different peoples, I am no less astonished at the variety of concepts of time to be found in danced spaces. The most recent encounter occurred through a Rendile/Sampuru student, Lmakiya, whom I mentioned earlier (see Endnote 1). In a class discussion of orientational metaphors, we talked about 'front/back', and I had explained how English-speaking people generally associate the future with 'front', and the space directly ahead of them. 'Past' to an English-speaker is 'back' or 'behind'. 'Now' is 'here', where I stand, where my axis of gravity happens to be. As I talked, I noticed that Lmakiya had a withdrawn, puzzled look on his face. I asked him what was the matter. He replied, "I don't think that way", to which I replied, "That's all right. Can you explain how you do think about all this?" There was a long silence. Then he said, "You go towards the future. I don't. My future comes to me. Death comes to me. I stand. Time moves past, around, over and through me. I don't go into it".

Needless to say, perhaps, I haven't even begun to work out the implications of this. Having seen Lmakiya perform the actions of his war dance, I know it contains keys, for I have never seen moves like those the *illmurrān* make -- fantastically high leaps (*ng'oro*), for a start, without bending their knees. They seem propelled a foot or two off the ground by virtue of invisible springs. But, interesting as that is, that isn't the most important thing. "How?" I ask myself, "can I understand what he says?" "Can I conceive of a universe where I (and everyone) stands still -- a universe where it isn't time that stands still, but us?"

At the end of the original lecture/paper I gave for the I.C.R. in 1970, I concluded by evoking an extended metaphor of buildings and bridges. I attempted in a somewhat clumsy manner to finish by drawing attention to levels, which I described in terms of physical bridges, social bridges and mythological bridges, tying this to the notion of a physically observable dance and the social meanings elaborated in the dance through discovery of its role/rule structures. This led to "the conceptual and mythological aspects of a dance" -- a pompous, pedantic phrase, if I ever heard one!

Twenty-five years later, I prefer to leave you with the Sampuru:

"My future comes to me. Death comes to me. I stand. . ."

Drid Williams

END NOTES:

1. This group, headed by Idries Shah, is always, I believe, at the cutting edge of intellectual developments and creative innovations in the human sciences.

2. Relevant to the present situation in northeastern Kenya are the circumstances in which one of my students -- Makiya Le Sargé, a Maasai/Sampuru warrior -- finds himself. His family grazes their cattle in an area 62 miles north of Isiolo, Kenya where Somali bandits, for the past decade, have regularly raided. Sampuru war-dances are without doubt spectacular, and they would be classified by westemers as "art", but in their context, they are not so considered. The dances prepare the *illmurrān* for war, thus they perform these dances because they are in deadly earnest. They might be killed, but if the dance is effective it is not Makiya who will die but his Somali enemy.

3. Briefly, a "change of mind". For thorough discussion in a religious context, see Williams (1975).

4. This word is not used in the narrow, psychological sense of "falsifying". It is to be construed in its broader definition, which means "rendering something to the rational processes of thought" or "creating a rationale for".

5. The orthography of the Twi language uses phonetic symbols which are not available in this publication, therefore the following signs have been used as substitutions. Approximate English pronunciations are given. 'o' is the sound "awe" in English; 'e' is the sound "eh", as in "bet"; 'ky' always has the sound of "ch" as in "church"; 'N' at the beginning of a word (i.e. Ntwumuru) is not "en", but n-n-n (the sound). In this particular word, the 'tw' is pronounced "ch", and 'n' has the sound "ng", as in "sing".

6. The Krachis, Yejis and Ntwumurus all tell this story and they are all positive about it. The story is to some extent 'historically valid' in a western sense, because the event it recounts marked the beginning of the independence of the Krachi State as it existed in 1970; that is, its independence from Juaben domination, not from the nation of Ghana. The story also agrees with accounts from the Ashanti-Juaben history according to Dr. Adu-Boahene (Dep't. of History, University of Ghana, Legon). There are obvious mythological elements in the story as well, so that we might also think of the story as a mythological charter for the dance. Malinowski (1948), whose theoretical work is outdated in many ways, nevertheless stressed the importance of myth as charter, thereby focussing on the living relationship of myth to society and removing such stigmas from the notion as "falsified history" or "phantasy".

Whether or not the story is true or false history from a European point of view is really irrelevant. The fact that the story has a role in connection with the dance, and that it validates the dance in Ntwumuru and Krachi society is sufficient to justify its existence.

7. *Dente* [noun], also *Lente*, also *Konkom* (although the latter name is never used in speaking). *Dente* is the highest of the *Ikisi* [divinities] of the Krachi, except for *Nana Brukun*, who is older. The Krachis brought *Dente* with them to their present location when they moved from there during the 19th C. *Dente* resides in a cave a short distance from *Krachikrom*. When the capital had to be moved to a different location (the present location on the map) because of the flooding of the Volta Lake, *Dente* moved as well and took up his abode in another cave about a mile or so from *Ketekrachi*.

8. Krachis and Ntwumurus, together with *Nkonyas*, *Gonjas*, *Nawures*, *Atwodes*, *Anums*, *Kyrepongs*, *Efutus* and *Yejis* form the large linguistic group known as the *Guang* (also spelled *Guan*) people. *Guang* means "run-aways" in *Twi*.

9. *Adinkira* (or *Adinkra*) is a name given to cloth which is hand-block-printed with very old symbolic patterns, usually black on a brilliantly coloured background.

10. There was some controversy over the original ownership of these horns. Some people claim that they were originally Akan, actually Ashanti horns which the Ntwumuru copied. A set of *ntahere* were used as state horns by the Ashantahene. They are carved elephant tusks. However, according to the Ntwumuru, these very horns were originally owned by one of their chiefs, *Atere Firam*. Evidence to support this claim, hence original Ntwumuru ownership, is to be found in *The Ashanti Court Records; In the Asantehene's "A" Court in Kumasi, in the matter of Kumawuhene vs. Dwanhene, 1951, pp. 53, 55, 59, 61 and 75. The Ntwumuru chief, Atere Firam, lost a war to the Ashanti, and the horns were a part of the dwira (booty) that the Ashanti took from him.*

11. *Asafo* is a noun in the Fanti language which translates roughly as 'group', 'body' or 'company'. The French word *corps* is more accurate. An *Asafohene* is simply a leader of a group.

12. See Lévi-Strauss (1962). Although the English edition of this book bears the title *The Savage Mind*, the French word *sauvage* bears none of the usual connotations that the English word 'savage' implies. The book should have been entitled *The Untamed Mind*.

13. I refer to versions of the Wallaby Dance, owned by the Wanam people of Edward River and Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula, which required the presence of cross-cousins to execute a particular move in the dance where men dancing "wallabies" were meant to pass between the "hunter's" legs.

14. There exists wider ethnographic discussion of these terms, and the religious hierarchy of the Krachi people (see Williams 1991: 303-320)

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