

ON THE NOTION OF "PRIMITIVE DANCE"

In June, 1990, the South African organiser of an examining body which has its headquarters in London phoned me. She contacted me because she knew I had an anthropological as well as a dance background. London head office had asked her if anyone could supply them with information about the Bushman Deer Dance (I assumed they were referring to the women's Eland Bull Dance), as they were going to introduce a "primitive" section into the children's examination syllabus. My immediate response was to tell her I advised changing the name of the new section. I said naming was problematic, but the best alternative suggestion I could give was "Traditional Dance". I also told her that in order to find out more about the so-called "Deer Dance" a great deal of time would need to be spent on research, and as I was leaving for 6 months sabbatical in Australia a few weeks later, I didn't have the time.

My personal feelings about this matter were mixed. On the one hand, a western, largely Anglo-Saxon dance organisation was at last recognising there were dances worth studying other than western European dances. This was not lightly to be discouraged. On the other hand, I wondered what the nature of these dances was going to be. Who was going to reconstruct or theatricalise them? What theory would accompany them and who would teach them? I know enough about Bushmen dances to know they are part of their sacred rituals and belief system, and the Eland Bull dance was performed as part of the girls' puberty rituals.

One of the problems this incident brought to light was that of cultural appropriation. Do we have the moral right to transpose part of another culture's sacred rituals? To use an analogy, how would members of the Church of England or Roman Catholics feel about the rituals of their Masses being used as part of a dance for a children's examination system? At the same time, one would want to encourage learning about other cultures in English-speaking countries. This problem is one I have examined elsewhere (Glasser 1993).

The second problem the telephone call generated was that of so-called "primitive dance". I was only able to formulate this after I had been in Australia where I was fortunate to attend Drid Williams's course in Aboriginal Studies and some graduate seminars on the Anthropology of the Dance and Human Movement Studies. It was during this period I was able to formulate

connections between my anthropological knowledge and my dance-teaching experience. I was also made aware that the attitudes and problems I had encountered as a teacher who had given non-western dancing¹ (in my case, the dances of indigenous South African black people) the attention and serious study normally reserved only for western danced forms,² were not limited to South Africa.

Australian attitudes towards the so-called "primitive" seem to have arisen out of similar colonial situations and attitudes to those that existed in South Africa. It wasn't just that the word "primitive" was being used as a blanket term for dances that originated with -- or were performed by -- non-western peoples: the word, "primitive" carried with it a whole set of value judgements.

Historical Perspective

I realised while in Australia that my experiences with terminology, although personal, were part of a widespread problem throughout the Western theatrical dance world. The "primitive" problem needs to be examined historically and anthropologically before we return to the domain of the dance.

The notion of "primitive" and its usages and meanings in Western societies needs to be understood before I attempt to unravel the notion of "primitive" dances and dancing. I believe there are two sets of meanings implied by the term "primitive" in Western society. These two sets may seem contradictory, but they are actually dependent on each other.

1. savage, underdeveloped, uncivilized, unskilled, unsophisticated, simple, basic.
2. natural, instinctive, spontaneous, exotic, romantic, colourful, unspoiled.

Both sets of meanings can be understood with reference to the process of colonization. By colonization, I refer to the appropriation of land and subsequent control and government of a technologically simple society by a technologically more sophisticated or industrialised society. The colonial conquests were often accompanied by missionary activity. The latter often described native, non-Christian populations as "savages", "barbarians", "pagans" and "heathens" who were in need of salvation.

These attitudes of superiority and paternalism were reinforced in the second half of the 19th century with the assistance of a misreading of the evolutionary theories developed by Charles Darwin which led to a set of ideas popularly known as "social darwinism". Social Darwinism held that all human societies (like biological organisms) evolved from simple forms to the complex. These ideas were transferred to the colonial situation where the indigenous inhabitants were perceived as having a less developed, or less highly evolved, form of social life than their conquerors. In the evolutionary scale, the people who were now referred to as "primitive" were on the side of "nature" as opposed to "culture". Nature embodied all things instinctive or biological, while culture embodied the aspects in life which are learned. Western cultures were equated with civilization. Coupled with evolutionary thinking was the glorification of the concept of "The Empire", especially in Victorian Britain, with the "mother country" protecting her child-like subjects. We can see in this historical process and intellectual climate, that the seeds for the growth of the first set of meanings of "primitive" were sown and nurtured; i.e. "savage", "uncivilized", "simple", etc.

In literature and art in most western countries during the eighteenth century, there was a romantic movement, based on the French philosopher, Rousseau's, idea of "the noble savage". This notion encouraged people to view the indigenous inhabitants of the new colonies as "natural" and "unspoilt". The nature/culture opposition, referred to above, reinforced the idea of the indigenous inhabitants of the colonies (the "primitive" people) as instinctive or spontaneous. As Williams observes, regarding her concept, *homo nullius*,

To early explorers, including Capt. Cook, Australia was uninhabited; it was no person's land and belonged to no one -- it was *terra nullius*...[The Aborigines] were effectively exotica; part of the flora and fauna of an uninhabited land (1991a:91).

Thus the second set of meanings of the word, "primitive" can be understood in relation both to romanticism and social evolutionism.

It may appear as if the first set of meanings of "primitive" has only negative connotations, while the second set has positive values.³ However, we shall see when we investigate the ramifications of both sets of meanings (and the attitudes they have been instrumental in forging) that both of them are based

on ethnocentric Western European perceptions. Both sets can be equally destructive with regard to the traditional dances of non-Western peoples.

Primitive Dances and Anthropology

In examining the notion of "primitive dancing", I will attempt to persuade readers that there is actually no such category of dances or dancing. However, even if one accepts this mythical blanket category, still widely used by Western dance scholars and practitioners, I propose to establish grounds for proving that certain southern African Bushmen⁴ dances do not fit into the category. Furthermore, I will endeavour to show that the perpetuation of attitudes which are both implicit and explicit in the term "primitive dance" have been a negative force, not only in relation to Aboriginal dances and to the dances of the bushmen, but also to non-Western dancing in general.

While the notion of "primitive" in contemporary anthropological thinking is regarded with extreme circumspection and largely seen as a fossil of late 19th and early 20th century construction, Western dance scholarship seems to have been largely oblivious of the developments that caused anthropologists to change their minds. At least two writers among several scholars of the dance who do have an anthropological perspective are Keali'inohomoku (1969) and Williams (1990 and 1991b). The former will provide general references in support of my argument, and the latter specific references.

Among Western practitioners and scholars of the dance, there is an unfortunate tendency to lump all dances and dancing that is not Western into the category "primitive". This fallacious, mythical category includes dances from continents and countries as disparate and culturally diverse as India, Indonesia, Africa, Polynesia and New Guinea.

With the rejection of the so-called primitive characteristics for the white man, it is common to ascribe these characteristics to groups existing among African tribes, Indians of North and south America, and Pacific people[s] (Keali'inohomoku 1969:25).

The tendency is to classify people as "them" and "us" with "them" embodying negative qualities and "us" positive qualities. By implication, "our" dances are better than "their" dances. On a purely theoretical level, this predilection for lumping together such dissimilar cultures can be faulted.

Even if one hadn't actually observed dances from Hawaii, South Africa or Australia, one might make a basic assumption that the dances wouldn't be exactly the same. Peoples from these different countries have different systems of socio-political organisation, as well as different religions and belief systems. If the dance is (as I believe it is) an expression of the socio-political and belief systems of the people who perform the dances, then the dances of different groups must be considered within the contexts of these systems. The concept of "primitive" dances and dancing should, therefore, be dismissed on the basis that it reduces a complex set of phenomena -- the rich diversity of styles and structures of dances -- to a single, simple concept.

Unfortunately the myth of so-called primitive people (i.e. simple, childish and somehow less developed) and their dances continues to be perpetuated. Roderick Lange's book (1975) *The Nature of Dance*, subtitled *An Anthropological Perspective*, tells us of

...the inability of the "primitive" to distinguish between work and play, as well as the inability to withstand mental stress over a long period of time. One can also observe this trait in children. They rest as soon as they need to do so (Lange 1975:15).

The rest of this paper could be spent refuting this generalisation, but it was quoted not as a focal issue, but rather to illustrate just how entrenched these attitudes are in Western dance scholarship. Williams (1976) gives a detailed criticism of Lange's book and Keali'inohomoku gives many more examples of the blanket use of the term, "primitive". She also vividly illustrates the muddled and ethnocentric attitudes of dance writers to so-called "primitive" or "ethnic" dances and dancing (Keali'inohomoku 1969:24-33).

Williams discusses the problem of perpetuating the evolutionary approach in dance scholarship in some detail (see Williams 1991b:157ff). She stresses the point that many of the books available on the dance are largely based on outmoded, outdated, evolutionary theories of culture, but they are still widely used as reference books in schools and in college and university dance departments. For example, Curt Sachs's *World History of the Dance* was highly significant at its time of writing (for the first time, the dance was being accorded an ethnomusicological examination in its own right), however, one may wonder how many teachers and lecturers draw upon the critical work of Youngerman (1974) as a parallel reference source, or, if Lange was familiar with the work of this anthropologist of the dance.

In order to understand the reasons for the perpetuation of the myth of "primitive dance", one needs to examine the role and function of Western dances and dancing. In general, dances in Western societies are forms of entertainment, whether they are theatrical dance forms, e.g. ballet, jazz or modern dance, performed for an audience, or whether they are recreational dances such as ballroom dancing, folk dancing or disco-dancing performed by people for their own pastime and enjoyment. There is a great deal of emphasis on the self-expression of the individual, even in group dancing.

When we focus on the dances of Aboriginal Australians and Southern African bushmen, we see that their dancing has a different role and function in their societies; it is done in different contexts and expresses different ideas from the dances of Western peoples.

Australia and South Africa

At the time of colonial contact, the Bushmen or "San" of Southern Africa and the Aboriginal people of Australia were both hunter-gatherer peoples. Both believed that the land and the resources of nature were there to be shared by all -- there was no private ownership of land or animals. Both peoples were killed off in large numbers by white settlers who occupied their country. They had a further feature in common: both peoples were seen as simple, childlike savages by the settlers. Their destruction and dispossession was not seen as any loss to colonial civilizations.

The Australian Aboriginals and the Bushmen of Southern Africa, like other so-called "primitives" were classified on an evolutionary scale with nature, in contrast to culture. They displayed no evidence of civilization in terms of that which their European conquerors deemed to be civilized. As Williams writes of the Aboriginal peoples, they were "non-people", i.e. *homo nullius* (1991a:88-89). By implication, their customs and traditional dances were also "non-dances", not worthy of attention.

If we look at Aboriginal dancing in terms of the notion "primitive" (i.e. simple, unskilled, undeveloped, etc.), we shall see that the dances recorded by Williams (1990 and 1991a) and Stephen Wild (1977) don't fit this category.

The Wallaby Dance

The Wallaby dance belongs to the Wanam people who (now) live in two small towns (Edward River and Aurukun) on the Carpentaria side of Cape York Peninsula. The Wallaby dance, which takes months of elaborate planning and preparation, is a complex event which isn't easily comprehended by outsiders. The dance requires knowledge and skills of a particular kind before it can be performed. Moreover, it has levels of meaning which indicate a highly developed system of beliefs or "world-view". It is on one level, a statement about kinship relations and status, and on another, it is a representation of the Wanam people's "origin-story" of creation. The actual steps and movements are symbolic of complex notions of transformations. The traditional Wallaby dance was a highly organised, complex event which was multilayered in meaning. It doesn't fit into the stereotype of "primitive dance".

The Laura Festival

When considering the other question, i.e. "how can the perpetuation of the myth of "primitive dance" influence traditional Aboriginal dancing?", we will turn to the Laura Dance Festival,⁵ where traditional Aboriginal dances are relocated into settings and situations which have nothing in common with the original events. Not unexpectedly, there are negative consequences. In cases like the Laura Festival and other tourist-centred events, the aim of the organisers/promoters is to attract more tourists and make more money, rather than to preserve traditional culture.

Traditional Aboriginal dances were not designed to satisfy Western aesthetic criteria of entertainment. In order to make certain dances more entertaining for tourists and more accessible to their audiences, certain aspects of traditional custom and art may be compromised. The audience will often expect to see the stereotype of "primitive" dances -- exciting, colourful, exotic -- and the performers may adapt their dances to please the onlookers.

At the Laura festival, Aboriginal participants played the *didjeridu* and threw boomerangs because the audience expected them to do so. Both are distortions of Cape York traditions, because *didjeridus* were not indigenous musical instruments. As one old man at the festival said, "Boomerangs? We never used them...too many trees" (Williams 1991a:93).

With the orchestration of traditional cultural events, there are other problems of adaptation. The Wanam dances, for example, were designed to be performed within a closed circle of dancers without consideration for an audience of involved onlookers. By opening the dances out so that they became more accessible to an audience, not only are the spatial structures of them compromised, but their intimate nature is lost. This kind of change which is imposed from outside, mainly by people from alien cultures, is very different to changes which are initiated by the people themselves. Dances aren't static or frozen in time, but *how* they change and the *motivations* for the changes will influence the nature and the meanings of the dances.

The whole question of change and the preservation of traditional cultures and their music and dances is a complex issue which cannot be dealt with in any depth here, however, if traditional dances are to maintain some form of integrity, then "we" as the "other" (or "outsiders") have a responsibility not to superimpose "our" expectations and aesthetic value judgements onto "their" dancing.⁶

The Bushmen's Trance Dancing

In the past, the attitudes of scholars and laymen to the rock-art of the Bushmen was a reflection of their attitudes to Bushmen culture as a whole. The Bushmen left a legacy of hundreds of thousands of paintings and engravings, mainly found in rock shelters. This art, until fairly recently, was viewed as child-like and simple, as were the beliefs of the Bushmen. Anthropologists, including Lorna, John and Elizabeth Marshall, Richard Lee, Patricia Draper and Megan Biesele (1990), have revealed the high degree of skill and planning which Bushmen displayed in their daily lives. They also disclosed an egalitarian society with mechanisms for dealing with conflict that their "civilized" brothers could do well to emulate. They had a highly sophisticated belief system and world-view. It was the work of David Lewis-Williams,⁷ however, who connected the strands and interpreted the rock-art as part of Bushmen's religious beliefs and ritual practices, and connected trance-dancing with the rock-art (see Lewis-Williams 1989 and 1990).

Some previous interpretations had seen bushmen's rock-art as sympathetic magic (*pace* Sir James Frazer!) and those who held this view believed the Bushmen painted an animal with arrows in it before a hunt in the belief that this act would make their hunt more successful. It is interesting to compare this with the widespread interpretation of so-called "primitive dance" as

sympathetic magic. It didn't matter that some primitives came from societies or groups who didn't actually believe in such magic. "There is no evidence that the bushmen believed in sympathetic magic of that kind" (Lewis-Williams 1989:23).

The Trance Dance

There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate convincingly that the rock-art and the trance-dancing of the Bushmen medicine man or "shamans" are connected. A trance dance usually lasts all night. The women in the Kalahari sit in a circle around a fire and clap rhythms of special medicine songs. The men dance in a circle around the women. The men wear foot rattles to stamp the rhythms. As the dance increases in intensity, the "...potency 'boils' and rises up in the shamans' spines" (Lewis-Williams 1989:32). By "potency" the Bushmen mean supernatural power. Shamans are filled with potency when in trance. Animals, especially the large game animals, have potency. The eland appeared in many Bushmen rituals and it was thought to possess much potency. The !Kung Bushmen of today use the word *nlum* for potency.

When in trance the shamans' stomach muscles contract and they often lean forward on sticks to support themselves. Sometimes they stretch their arms backwards. The shamans say they do this to ask God for more potency. Another physical change during trance is that the nose bleeds. When the rock-art is examined, the exact features described above can clearly be seen in the figures depicted in the rock paintings:

1. the bending forward position, sometimes with sticks
2. the arms spread backwards
3. nose-bleeds
4. foot rattles

One of the purposes of the trance dance is for healing. While in trance, the shamans draw out the sickness from the patient through laying their hands on them. The sickness is expelled through "...a 'hole' in the nape of their neck" (Lewis-Williams 1989:32). The Bushmen believe evil shamans can shoot arrows of illness into people to make them ill. At a healing ritual the shaman draws out these arrows. They also sometimes use flywhisks to keep the arrows away. The healing ritual is depicted very clearly in the rock-art. There are scenes showing the circle of the trance dance with the women

clapping and the men dancing. The shaman is touching a person lying down and there are arrows of sickness in the painting. In some paintings people hold flywhisks.

Transformation and Therianthropes

Among Bushmen it is believed that the shaman could possess the power of certain creatures or animals when in deep trance. They experience hallucinations or visions of things which are combined: often animals combined with people. The shaman experience a transformation into these part-animal/part-people figures called "therianthropes" By becoming, for instance, part eland, the shaman has the power -- that potency -- of the eland. He can see and know what the eland saw and knew. Once again this phenomenon is illustrated in the rock-art paintings, where many therianthropes are portrayed. The "trance-buck" is frequently seen in paintings in the southeastern mountains of Southern Africa. The trance-buck has human features and is painted with nosebleeds, antelope heads, hoofs and arms spread backwards. Features such as hair on the body, streamers and lines from the top of the head can also characterize paintings that are related to the trance-state.

Physical Sensations

Shamans report the sensation of tingling or hair growing on the body, usually associated with lion's hair. In the rock-art, the creatures often have hair growing. They also report prickling on the spine which is depicted as dots in the rock-art. People in trance also report tingling sensations in the tops of their heads. Trance-buck and other creatures often have lines which come from their heads. Bushmen believe that when in trance the spirit of the shaman can leave the body through the top of the head, therefore, lines from the top of the head in the paintings represent the spirit leaving the body. Similarly, streamers trailing from the body represent potency entering the body. Other purposes for the trance-dance (controlling the weather and hunting) can also be found in rock-art paintings with similar sets of related symbols.

The Trance Dance and Rock-Art as Part of Religious Beliefs

There seems to be too many real clues and too much evidence with reference to deciphering meanings of rock-art for it not to be connected to the trance

dances and religious beliefs and experience of the shamans. This leads one to ask when the painting was done.

It is well-known that shamans in other parts of the world experience after-images and recollections of what they saw while in a trance state for months afterwards. It seems likely that shamans painted their pictures after the trance. This hypothesis was confirmed by an old Bushman woman, the last survivor of the southern Drakensberg Bushmen, in 1985. She identified paintings done by her father and insisted that all the paintings had been done by shamans (Lewis-Williams 1989:36).

As Bushmen don't separate their spiritual lives from their everyday lives, these rock shelters were places where people lived and moved daily. The paintings were seen as one more link between the everyday world and the spiritual world. To phrase the matter this way is not quite correct, however; to the Bushmen the paintings were not a "link", because their reality was, as far as we know, seamless in that respect. The potency of animals such as the eland was stored and kept in the paintings. This potency could flow from the paintings to the shamans while in trance and give them more power to heal, make rain, or have successful hunting expeditions.

The trance dance of the Bushmen can only rightly be fully understood in terms of a highly complex belief system. This dance was part of the spiritual life of the Bushmen. Their symbols were highly evolved and part of a unified world where men and women were not alienated from nature. I think it is also true that Bushmen trance dances, their rock art and accompanying beliefs were not simple or child-like but very complicated. However, in order to understand their real meanings, (i.e. what they meant *to the Bushmen*) we have to look at the dance as part of a whole system of beliefs; as part of *their* view of the world.

The tragedy of the bushmen people, and our tragedy as well, is that the rock-art is fast disappearing through natural weathering, vandalism and lack of preservation. The traditional way of life of these special, gentle people has also disappeared through dispossession and decimation. Perhaps if Western attitudes to the so-called "primitive" ways of life had not been so negative and patronising, we might have managed to preserve more of "...our fragile heritage" (Lewis-Williams 1990:93).

"Primitive dance" as a label and as a concept has nothing positive to contribute to understanding the dances of Bushmen or any set of dances it purports to name or describe. Wherever it is found, in uncritical writings or casual speech, the only function the phrase serves is a perpetuation of European and European-derived myths about non-Western dances and dancing in general, and Aboriginal and Bushmen dancing in particular. Even the author of the theory that spawned social darwinism -- Darwin himself -- would have to recognise that the notion of primitive has failed to evolve and should therefore be doomed to extinction!

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NOTES:

¹ The term 'non-Western' is already a problem as it takes Western culture as the central reference point. It can imply a negative value judgement for anything that is not 'Western'. For the sake of an easily identifiable category, however, I use it here.

² Similarly, to refer in blanket fashion to Western dancing is also a simplification, but necessary for clarity in this paper.

³ There is also a third set of meanings for the word "primitive" which does not have negative connotations, especially in the world of fine artists. As Williams remarked, "primitive" can be used by anthropologists to mean technologically simple, while "primitivism" in art refers to a particular style (my lecture notes, University of Sydney, 1990).

⁴ Use of the word, "Bushman" is a sensitive issue. It is felt by many that "Bushman" has become a racist label which is insulting to the people in question. The word "San" is preferred by many anthropologists, but "San" also has highly pejorative associations. The *Nama* applied it not just to the original hunters of the [African] subcontinent but to any impoverished, cattle-less people (Lewis-Williams 1989:9). Like Lewis-Williams, I use the word Bushmen without intending any insulting overtones (see Lewis-Williams 1990:93).

⁵ An annual festival, originally for Aboriginal people only, but now a major tourist attraction on Cape York Peninsula (see Williams 1991a:92-94).

⁶ It has been suggested to me by the Editors of JASHM that the basis for many of our expectations can be traced to naive notions about the universality of dancing.

⁷ Lewis-Williams is head of the rock-art research unit at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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