

Such was the case with Africa when confronted with new religious forms, notably Christianity and Islam that made little or no attempt to find out the rational of existing religious practices.

1. Dance in African Religions

Dance is undoubtedly a vital means of communicating with the sacred in African religious practices; it is an expressive form fully integrated within the worship system. Already a favored art form among the numerous cultures of Africa, it is not surprising that it holds a preeminent position among methods of communicating with the divine. No religious worship was considered complete in the past without at least one dance performance by the devotees. Although this still holds true today wherever ancient African religions manage to survive, and even where the new religious forms have been effectively "Africanised", the survival of sacred dances in Africa has been extremely difficult. Contact with Christianity and Islam, and the ensuing contest for supremacy over African indigenous religions, almost wiped dance out as a means of divine communication. Coming with their own cultural bias against accepting dance as a form of religious worship, no attempt was made by the new religions to understand why dance was such an important means of sacred expression in African societies; rather every effort was made to destroy it.

The vital role of dance in religious worships in Africa today and in the past, is due largely to three main factors: 1) The cultural concept of the sacred, 2) intrinsic qualities of dance, and 3) the people's attitude towards the body.

1.1 The Sacred as Culture Specific. The concept of the sacred arises out of a universal human need to understand the foundation and function of the universe, and in particular the relationship of human beings with cosmic totality. However, cultural differences emerge as each group of people concretizes its perceptions of the universe in myths which ultimately are based on their specific environment and actual relationship with the land. Such myths become "creation stories" that determine who the Creator is, who or what and how they are created, the nature, form and the realms of the spiritual and the earthly. In determining the relationship between the Creator and the created, further differences emanate as some cultures see a corresponding relationship between the organization of the universe and the emerging human society, while others see no relatedness whatsoever. In the consequent conception of the sacred, the former group is able to visualize a multiplicity of sacred forces functioning as assistants to the Supreme Creator,

whereas the latter cannot conceptualize such a possibility. Thus monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam limit the sacred only to the Creator Deity, while polytheism revel in an abundance of minor deities around the Creator. Fundamental differences like these ultimately affect and determine the constituents of the sacred and how they should be approached and revered. Thus what constitutes the sacred in one culture may be total abhorrence in another.

Africans generally have a holistic concept of the universe. The cosmos is a single unifying entity which embraces the human society (i.e. both culture and nature), and the transcendental powers in a continuous cycle of interaction and regeneration.¹ In a cyclical motion, the earth connects with the sky through the rains, the sun and the rivers, all of which are generative forces nourishing the human society enveloped within the circle. Above in the cyclical continuum, are the transcendental powers, mediators between the Creator Deity and its people, spiritual forces intervening, influencing and affecting the human culture on earth. It is from this embracing totality that the Africans derive their concept of the sacred.

Implicit in this understanding is the belief that everything created by the Creator Deity or Supreme Being must have some of its sacred nature and creative force imprinted on it. This is a fundamental aspect of polytheism. Every creature of the Supreme Being becomes a symbol of the power of creation, the life force of its being. Consequently, the cosmic powers are seen as the Creator manifesting itself in concrete and visible terms to the physical world below, and in the physical world, nature and human beings become symbols of the Supreme, some kind of "god on earth" carrying its presence with them wherever they are found. A perception such as this creates a constant flux and an interchangeability within the subsidiary sacred order where nature assumes cosmic propensities and cosmic forces become personified in cultural heroes and heroines, who are deified and emerge as anthropomorphic deities. It is a situation where the sacred permeates both the religious world of the intangible, infinite spirituality and the more concrete, easily perceptible cultural space.

1.2 The Nature of Dance. Dance is both a sign and a vehicle of communication. It is able to express an action, an idea and, it is at the same time the action and the idea it expresses. For example, a person dancing can be a *sign* of happiness, at the same time this *sign* is a *vehicle* to communicate and express a state of mind. Since a sign derives its meaning from its nature, and a tool assumes its significance from what it is used for,² the use of dance in sacred rituals has both intrinsic and

cultural imports. As a sign, dance is a multi-communication channel, transmitting information not only through time and space but also kinetically, visually and through other human sensorial perceptions. This enables it to serve as an important vehicle for other means of communication. For example, through its movement patterns, dance kinetically conveys verbal information; music gets visually interpreted and in particular, many African plastic art forms attain their full significance specifically through dance motions.³ Its versatility as a multi-channel sign system makes dance a communication power house able to give information at many levels simultaneously.

In religious worship where devotees variously seek link with the divine in order to give praise and thanks, ask for general or specific blessings, appease, atone, acknowledge and celebrate the being of the divine in their lives, there is a need for an economic and composite communication sign. Dance with its multi-medium channel of communication, seems to be the quintessential choice for such a multitude of purpose. It is a maximization of facilities for the most effective results, carrying a myriad of messages via many channels simultaneously. Such quality is of course not unique to African dances, what is significant in the African experience and in other cultures that use dance extensively in sacred rites, is the people's attitude to the body—the primary tool of the dance.

1.3 Cultural Body Attitude. As mentioned above, human beings as one of God's creatures have associative sacred attributes in African cultures. Consequently, it is not considered incongruous to use the body in the glorification of god and other divine manifestations. It is a useful tool for both God and man. The secular and cultural dimensions of the body only serve to establish, confirm and enhance the circular (as opposed to the linear) relationship between the Creator, nature and culture. Thus there is no ambiguity in the people's concept between the sacred and the secular body; each is distinct and yet complement each other in the greater glorification of God. Neither does any conflict occur when the same body used in secular concerns is later used in sacred rituals. At the appropriate time, dance is either social, secular, entertainment, or religious, sacred and pious.

The conflicting and ambiguous relationship between the mortification and purification of the flesh which often beset monotheistic religions generally is missing in polytheistic cultures that have built in an extended understanding of the sacred. It presupposes the inclusion of the human society as an active and legitimate participant in the concept of the sacred. By initially recognizing the distinct but related con-

cept of the Creator and its creations, it appears that a safety valve has been created between a possible confusion of the sacred and the secular. This is why the use of the body in dance, a form more readily associated with the secular and the mundane, finds such a prominent and respectable place in the sacred rituals of African peoples.

2. Dance as Worship

The semiosis of a sacred dance becomes fully relevant only within both the contextual and conceptual meaning of the sacred itself. A close affinity evidently exists between the nature and concept of dance and the subject(s) of sacred rites. Essentially, both are intangible and evanescent but able to reach deep down to the profundity of human perceptions and emotions. In addition, both are made "real" through actual experience and/or through some concrete symbolic representations. As indicated earlier, through movement patterns, dance gives form to ideas in culture while the sacred is a conceptual thought made manifest as *nature on earth*. There is thus, at a certain level of perception, a relatedness of form which enables dance to serve as a solid bridge, i.e., as an instrument with which to cross over to the ethereal infinite, and also to function as a sign for the devotees' conception of the sacred. The anchor point of communication is that area of liminality where the ephemeral nature of dance fuses with transcendental powers. This is the high point of worship. It is perhaps for this reason—the ability to cross over to the beyond and establish a communication between god and man, that some cultures regard dance as a sacred art in itself.

The aim of worship is in effect to achieve communion with a powerful but intangible force, essentially therefore, worship is a journey from one stage, the earthly/physical, to another, the spiritual/etereal. It is a process of making known or, at least making comprehensible the unknown primordial existence that separates man from God. The worship process corresponds closely to Van Genep's classification of "rite of passage" or "transitional rite" into three phases: preliminary, liminal and postliminal (13). Worship then, is a journey from the known preliminary state of earthliness to the unknown liminal state of spiritual non-physicality and back to a spiritually enriched earthliness.

In religious practices, dance serves as an effective route for the journey bridging the liminal, and uniting the spiritual with the earthly. It becomes a significant form of worship, and together with the other means of sacred communication recognized within the culture, it is

able to effectively fulfill the multi-faceted functions of religion. Dance serves to bridge the chasm between this world and the other, between the deity and its worshippers. It becomes the anchor point between a high point of human creative perception and the sacred, which Turner describes as the "unformed void or infinite space held to have existed prior to the ordered universe" (202). It creates the liminal state, the high point of the worship where the devotees cross the human threshold to the spiritual realm; it is a meet point of the sacred and secular, between the creator and the created, the desires of a people and their desired goal. To reach this high point of worship, three stages of sacred dances can be identified: i) Invocational, ii) Transcendental, iii) Celebration, each corresponding respectively to the three stages of the "transitional rite" of worship.⁴

2.1 Invocational Dancing. Performed by all assembled devotees to music and drumming, an invocational dance takes place at the *pre-liminary* stages of the worship. It serves to: 1) call the presence of god into their midst, 2) get the devotees in the appropriate worshipful mood, divert their secular aspect and get them ready to enter communion with god, and 3) praise god for his mercies. It is very rare for an invocational dance to begin the service, usually it has been preceded by other forms of sacred actions like prayers, divination, sacrifice and/or chanting. Coming after other acts of invocation, dance functions as a reinforcer helping to heighten the level of perception already achieved and to move the service upwards spiritually.

The pace of the invocational dance is usually slow and does not involve any distinctive style; it is more of an individual personal expression of purging the self of secular earthly preoccupations. Gestures are usually directed heavenward, to the altar or to a sacred icon in praise and invocation of the deity. Moving together sedately, the devotees revel in the commonality fostered by the presence of so many bodies united in purpose and spirit. The kinetic cadence coupled with the rhythmic unity of so many bodies, is able to generate the purification of body and soul and sanctify the worshippers for the more delicate liminal stage that lies ahead. In instances where the performance of officiating persons is emphasized even at this preliminary stage, their performances may take on some of the attributive features of the deity being invoked, although they will not be as pronounced as in the next stage which will be discussed more fully below.

2.2 Transcendental Dance. This is the "dance of the heavens". It is used as i) a tool of reaching the sacred, this will be called 'progression dance' and, ii) a "possession dance" which is a sign that commu-

nication has been attained with the deity. The transcendental dance can be performed by any of the devotees, but quite often, a religious body may find it expedient to have an individual or a group of people specially anointed to be the dance medium between the two worlds. Such mediums are given special titles, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria for example, they are generally referred to either as *tyarwa*, *elgun* or *esin orisa* (wife, mount or horse of the deity). They are believed to be specially chosen by the deity itself either from birth or later in life through frequent and often unprovoked possession by the spirit of the deity.

The progression dance is a process towards possession, it functions in the same way as a tool is used to achieve a purpose. The performance of the first level of the transcendental dance is a willing, conscious action on the part of the medium. A progression dance features and recalls specific and powerful characteristics of the deity being invoked and it is accompanied by distinctive music used just for that deity. By performing the "progression dance", the medium has surrendered himself or herself to be taken over by the spirit of the deity. This stage may be speeded up by sacrifice (visual), words such as prayers or incantations (verbal and aural), and sometimes by the use of drugs (smell/taste). These are signs already built into the semiotic system of the religious dogma and whose signifying powers trigger appropriate meaning in the initiated and willing individual. The expected and inevitable response is heightened memories of the deity—possession.

The possession dance is an indication that the chasm between this world and the other has been bridged. It is an "altered state of consciousness" where the deity now takes over the control of the body of the medium; as the Yoruba say, *orisa gun un*—the deity has 'mounted' it (the medium). The transition to possession dance can either be very subtle, marked only by some changes in the dance pattern or it can be distinctly noticeable. The medium may give a shout, seize one of the sacred icons or, fall down in a brief trance before going on to the possession dance proper. Certain physical changes which are characteristic of the deity may also be observed in the dancer. Whether subtle or not, the change is always acknowledged by the other worshippers; they may fall into a total silence or take up the shout in chanted praises, the drums also change rhythm to suit the new dance steps. Sometimes the state of possession is accentuated by the addition of some other sacred paraphernalia on the medium.

During possession, the full personality of the deity including habits, emotional dispositions and the social mores he or she symbol-

izes are danced out and the distinctive physical features of the deity are manifested in the dancer. These are taken as conclusive evidence that it is indeed the spirit of the deity working through the medium. Like the deity, the medium becomes imbued with superhuman qualities and is able to see visions or perform extraordinary feats usually described as "magic". Occasionally some anti-social behaviors are committed by or on behalf of the medium however, these are considered part of the characteristics of the deity and therefore condoned. During possession, which in some cases may last from anywhere between five minutes to seven days, the medium is usually impervious to normal human emotions and sensations especially pain, hunger and thirst.

Although prophesying or seeing visions are later to play a significant role in African forms of Christianity, it should be pointed out that it was not always a common feature of possession, especially in West Africa. In the polytheistic religious practices of East and Southern Africa, where it was used to solve specific social problems, prophesying was more frequent. In West Africa, however, its functions seemed to have been replaced by the divination systems, the possession dance was enough indication that the service had found favor with the deity and that the worshippers were still in favor. If there was no possession when it was considered crucial, for example during the annual celebration of the deity, and in times of social crisis, or when something unpleasant happened during the liminal stage, the service would be suspended for further consultation with the divination system to find out what reparations needed to be made. However, this rarely occurred, for it was believed that consultation with the divination system at the invocational state of the worship would have foreseen this and necessary reparations would have already been made.

The liminal stage, as Turner pointed out is more of a process than a state and it entails getting out of, as well as getting into (202). The process of bringing out the mediums from their transcendental state into the cultural world can either be a gradual or shock therapy. The gradual process involves a systematic elimination of the various acts or objects used to promote the possession. The shock tactics goes abruptly to the opposite physical and mental state of the medium, for example, cold water may be poured on the medium to counter both the heat of the dance and of the spiritual encounter, the vision darkened where the emphasis had been on brilliance, or the rhythm of the music changed suddenly. Again all these are determined by the codification system in the religion and culture. Below is given an example of transcendental dance.

Sango's Transcendental Dance. The two dances that mark the limi-

nal journey during the worship of Sango, the Yoruba deity of thunder and lightning and of justice, are known as *lanke* and *ghamu*, performed only by the *elegun Sango*, the specially consecrated Sango's mediums. When the *elegun* starts missing his or her steps during *lanke* dance, it is known that Sango has mounted his horse, this may also be accompanied by bulging eyes (a characteristic of Sango who once lived as a king).⁶ As soon as the officiating priests and priestesses notice the changes, the *elegun* is led away to be costumed in the special possession attire and given the *ose Sango* (double axed wand) and/or *seré* (rattle wand), both insignias of the deity. Now with exceedingly bulging eyes in a rigidly transfixed face, the medium is brought back to the space of worship to begin *ghamu*, the dance of possession. The music changes to the appropriate beat.

Ghamu is a dance which recreates the very temperamental personality of Sango through an erratic use of space, a fast paced rhythm and jerky angular body movements. The *elegun* recalls the cosmic manifestation of Sango as the deity of thunder and lightning by pointing the dance wand to the sky and bringing it down to earth in sharp diagonal movement.⁷ This is a significant motion which in Yoruba cosmogony symbolically unites the cosmic halves—the earth and the heavens. At the cultural level, it invokes Sango's judicial qualities and his ability to punish social criminals by throwing thunderbolts on them. Paradoxically, the anti-social act of "appropriation" is committed in the name of the *elegun Sango* by his or her attendants. Once accompanied by the possessed one, they are free to take anything that appeals to them in the market; in any case the people usually give the "gifts" readily.⁸ The *elegun Sango* may remain in this state for several days without food, surviving only on *oregbo* (bitter kola nut) a form of stimulant. One of the supernatural acts performed during possession is to dance carrying a pot of live embers pierced at the bottom. Palm oil, believed by the Yoruba to have strong healing and soothing properties, is applied to the body of the *elegun* to facilitate a gradual return journey from the liminal.

2.3 Celebrative Dance. This dance wraps up the service and it is again performed by all devotees. It is a means of giving thanks and praise for a successful completion of the worship and particularly of surviving the crucial liminal stage. When possession is expected, there is the added tension of waiting for the sign from the deity and the weighty responsibility of receiving the deity in their midst. Usually the dance reverts to the free individual style, although a few devotees may perform some stylized movements. Mediums, priests and priestesses are, however, expected to perform dances associated with the deity.

3. The New Religions and Effects on Dance

Starting around the tenth century, with the introduction of Islam, and of Christianity a few centuries later, Africa became "colonized" by two monotheistic religions. It was "colonization" because both soon brought in their wake, cultural, economic and political occupation of the continent by the harbingers of the religions. Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions whose concept of the divine and (consequently) forms of worship are very differently structured from the African prototype. Their spread into Africa conflicted very strongly with existing beliefs not so much from Africa's polytheism, which in any case would usually welcome more religious expressions, but from the new ones which neither acknowledged nor tolerated the existence of another deity, be it major or minor.

It therefore became expedient for the new religions to wage a war of attrition against existing religions not only for survival reasons, but more for an undisputed monopoly of their own notion of the sacred. The Christian missionaries were perhaps the most relentless and unsparing in this respect. There was to be no meeting ground nor were they in the least prepared to find a balancing medium between the indigenous and their own form of religion. Hence there were vigorous campaigns against the various forms of indigenous worship and systematic destruction of other expressions of polytheism. New African Christian converts were coerced into bringing their sacred objects to be publicly destroyed in a bon-fire at the parish as part of the effort to cause an effective break both physically and psychologically with the past. Even in social life anything suspected to be remotely connected with indigenous form of religion (and there were many), was very harshly denounced and condemned as savage, barbaric, unholy and immoral. It was necessary to create a vacuum so the new religious expression could thrive unchallenged.

In these various acts of aggression against the indigenous religions, the primacy of dance in the dogma naturally became very threatened. First, dance did not have any place in the worship form of either Christianity or Islam. Rather, verbal expression dominated the dogma of these religions and spreading the "Word" which had been preserved in writing was and is still crucial to their survival. Secondly, as an integral part of the worship and a vital manifestation of the essence of the deity in African religious practices, dance became highly suspect as perpetuating the religion, and was singularly selected for unrelenting and often indiscriminate attack. Although, unlike the various sacred icons, dance cannot be physically and therefore effectively symboli-

cally destroyed, it was nonetheless subjected to the most sustained insidious attacks. Given its crucial role in the religion, a successful campaign against it hit the nerve center of the religion to ensure a quick end.

It comes as no surprise that African dances were variously distorted, misinterpreted and mercilessly ridiculed. For example, one European, a Mr. Hunter, in a short description that accompanies the photograph of a masked dancer from the Calabar area in Nigeria says:

With fantastic dances he parades the streets making extraordinary gestures and contortions, high kicking and the like without rhyme or reason. The whole object of this dance is to conciliate the Juju or Devils . . . The Niger bush native does not pray to his gods to help him but to devil so that he may not be harmed. The Juju dancers primarily object . . . is one of collecting alms. (427)

One immediately asks for Hunter's source of information. Was it the natives who told him they prayed to devils or his own presumptuous arrogance, blissful ethnocentrism and complexities of ignorance? The calculated attempt to denigrate the dance seems obvious. To the European with the self imposed mission of civilizing Africa, anything not Christian (or Islamic, a grudging concession was sometimes made to the Muslims), must be of the devil. By what criteria had he arrived at the conclusion that this must be a religious dance? To anybody who had taken the pains to casually enquire (to be fair, a few Europeans did attempt to, but their number was negligible and their motives mixed), the performer was either a professional entertainer earning his living within the cultural dictates of his society, or a parade phase of a community festival. But Hunter's aim, and many others like him was not to explore objectively, but to erode the cultural base and deny the humanity of a people. To do otherwise would have negated the colonial presence in Africa, contradicted the oft stated reasons and exposed the actual drive behind colonization—political and economic ambition and domination.

No religion is nurtured in the abstract, and neither Christianity nor Islam its inspired off-shoot,⁸ has escaped from the various influences of surrounding cultures. While polytheism with its rich concept of the sacred conveniently builds in the use of dance as a legitimate and proper form of reaching the divine, monotheism, with a much narrower concept makes it easier to exclude dance. This is not saying that monotheistic religions automatically reject dance, for Judaism, an older

monotheistic religion, uses dance extensively in worship. However, somewhere in the development of these two religions, they separated the physical body of a person; there emerged distinct separate entities—the flesh and its spiritual essence—the soul. Invariably, the dichotomy creates an opposition where the flesh is earthly, secular and impure, and the soul is spiritual, sacred and pure. Since the two are in reality one and the same mundane person, the attainment of the desired purified state for religious purpose is necessarily dependent on a deliberate suppression of the natural demands of the body. The body consequently must be denied and restricted, it must not be allowed to be unduly expressive, for this would be a triumph of the secular flesh. The attainment of spiritual purification depends on the mortification of the body.

Given its direct association with the body, and as the most expressive, physical human creativity, obviously dance has no place in this context. Since the verbal, especially the written form, is more exclusive, more internalized, and less physically demonstrative than dance, it becomes a much more comparable means as an intimate communication vehicle. Even though the church and the mosque exist as central and public gathering places for devotees, emphasis is on individual private internalization of the word as a means of purifying a person, or, more appropriately the soul, rather than in a collective bodily reception of the divine through dancing. The communal gathering place for worshippers is more of a sanctified space where the Word of God resides and which is guided by the officiating priest into a more sequestered liminal space—the soul of the worshipper. Thus in vivid contrast to the centrality of dance in African indigenous religions, there is a heavy reliance of the Word in both Christianity and Islam and its superimposition over the nonverbal, in particular, dance.

3.1 Dance and Christianity. Western cultural attitude towards the body and ultimately towards dance, further affect the Christian attitude towards dance and particularly its acerbic reactions to sacred dance in Africa. Davies points out that it was not so much Christianity *per se* that militated against dance but “more a product of the Western culture” (33). Central to the attitude of the Christian religion to dance are the cultural attitudes of the West to the body; there is a fundamental cultural bias and confusion about the body which strongly prejudices the use of dance in the sacred.

Cultural effects on Christian perceptions about dance can be found as early as during the formative years of Christianity in Rome. The religion blossomed as the Roman empire declined not only as a

political power but also as it fell into grave moral decadence. Dance, always a visible aspect of culture, consequently became very much abused and degraded. Its reputation even as an art form fell so low as to merit severe censorship from leading non-Christian Roman scholars. The Christians, anxious to establish their religion as a paradigm of morality and holiness, enthusiastically endorsed the various secular injunctions against dancing and denounced it specifically in the practice of their religion.

As the religion spread to Europe encountering local deities and other cultural norms, the initial anti-dance attitude persisted, although instances occurred where exceptions were made. According to Davies, some form of dance-rites were allowed during certain church services and dancing featured prominently at many Christian processions throughout the Christendom in the Middle Ages (47-61). The nineteenth century also produced a sect—the Shakers where dancing was largely misunderstood by other Christian sects (62-69). Nonetheless, denouncing dance remained essentially for Christians a means of identifying themselves as separate and distinct from the other religions and secular life. It came to represent what Christianity was not, and eventually emerged as the symbol of all social evils—undiscipline, immorality and sin. Philip Stubbes, a 16th-century moralist who recognized “thankful dancing or spiritual rejoicing” (162), still denounced dancing as

an introduction to whoredome, a preparative to wantonnes, a provocation to uncleanness, and an introite to al kind of lewdness . . . It stirreth up the motions of the flesh, it introduceth lust, it inferreth bawdrie, afforderh ribalderie, maintaineth wantonnesse . . . (166).

It is a symbolism regularly reinforced by a cycle of the moral and social decadence in Europe (again as in ancient Rome, the reflection of a crumbling ruling class). By the end of the sixteenth century, for example, the lascivious life style of the aristocracy with the associative social injustice and the emerging bourgeoisie gave rise to a particularly ascetic branch of Christianity—the Puritans. Reacting to social excesses, the Puritans became very strict and stern in their religious and personal lives. Dance especially was conceived solely in terms of gratification of the flesh leading to the total damnation of the soul. Ironically, the Shakers who believed in dance as a glorification of the Lord emerged from the Puritans.

It was at this period, that intensive Christian evangelism spread to Africa, bringing with it its puritan values. It was also at this time that various communities in Europe left their shores in protest against the general excesses and highhandedness of the ruling class to settle in the Americas in search of a "true" and "pure" form of Christianity which upholds high morality and socio-political justice. Unfortunately, the guiding democratic spirit of the Puritans did not accompany the introduction of Christianity to Africa, rather cultural arrogance and intolerance and a high notion of racial superiority were its mates. These attitudes were grounded in the Age of Enlightenment and Reason, the secular elements and philosophical enquiries that also characterized Europe at this time. It was a period when anything that could not be subjected to prevailing theories and be proved, was non-existent or at best sub-human (sub-European). The Cartesian separation of the mind from the body, and the super-imposition of the cognitive mind over the emotional body, further reduced the significance of the body. It became purely an emotional husk, divorced from the intellect-reason and therefore of no use to human civilization. Dance, the art of the body consequently became a purely physical activity below the new real humanity, and following on the Darwinian theory of evolution, it was discarded as a people ascended in civilization.

The association with the dance culture in Africa was clear. It was taken as conclusive evidence of their illogicality and incapability of reflexive thinking: if the Europeans were to successfully 'civilize' the Africans, their penchant for dancing had to be eradicated. Christianity which already had its own prejudice against dance was one of the weapons of the European "civilizing" crusade.

By mid-19th century, many African converts had received full clerical training and were serving as missionaries in various parts of Africa, particularly West Africa which had been very inclement to the Europeans causing high European mortality rates. The African missionaries first hand knowledge of the theology gave them more confidence in the religion, and enabled them to distinguish between the Christianity of the Bible and European-influenced Christianity. Ayandele's classic work on Christian missionary activities in Nigeria clearly demonstrates how this impacted on the direction of the religion in Africa (see 175-280) and the emergence of what is referred to here as "Africanised Christianity".

First, the Africans began to notice discrepancies between biblical injunctions and the various practices of the church hierarchy and discovered to their indignant shock that the much touted moral supe-

riority of the white man was a myth. Europeans were found to be as equally weak in flesh as any other human being and committed fraud, adultery, fornication, and drunkenness. But most damaging to the reputation of the church was the condonation or blatant cover up for the white men guilty of these crimes by the church, while Africans were always subjected to degrading punishment. Another source of discontent was the color discrimination policy (C.M.S. 1879), where experienced and better qualified Africans were routinely placed under unqualified and untrained Europeans. Ayandele reports that by the end of the century, European Christianity had become thoroughly discredited and was described as a "dangerous thing," "an empty and delusive fiction" (263).

The seething resentment against European highhandedness and the "unscriptural" Christianity brought to Africa led the African Christian leaders to begin to review their own acceptance and practice of Christianity especially in comparison with the ways their forbears worshipped. They discovered that the intensity of devotion and religious fervor which characterized the devotees of traditional religions were missing among African Christians. They therefore resolved to go back to their African roots "to study their religion in order to see how much features of indigenous worship could be grafted on the 'pure milk of the Gospel'" (264, see also Lagos Weekly Record). This was a radical step which, at one level, injected a new form of life and respect to indigenous African religions, and at the other, revolutionized the form of Christianity in Africa, and subsequently the rest of the world.

The result of these researches, in conjunction with the cumulative anti-white feelings, "secession" from the European Church missions and it was most pronounced in West Africa, the center of the rebellion. The first to break away was the native Baptist Church in April 1888, from the American based Baptist mission in Nigeria, followed in 1891 and 1901 by the United Native African Church and the African Bethel Church respectively. By 1914, there was an impressive proliferation of African Churches especially in Nigeria (196, 201-5). Although religion centered, their cause was so popular and took on such strong political fervor that they were referred to as "nationalists". While the popularity of these churches was due in part to the high nationalistic (anti-white) feelings of the time, it was also largely due to the presence of those "features of indigenous worship" infused into the system of worship—specifically singing, drumming and dancing, all rhythmic elements that help to heighten the worshippers' perception of, and collective union with God. These, more than anything else, sus-

tained the African churches amidst various efforts by the European church missions to see them collapse, particularly after the nationalistic sentiments moved out of the churches into full politics even up to the present time.

A number of churches such as the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), Celestial and the African Apostolic faith churches were also established during this time but outside the core of the "nationalists" movement. They were founded not as splinter groups from the European missions but independently by Africans who had not received any special theological training apart from reading and believing the Bible. Initially they totally rejected the Africanization of Christianity, criticizing what they regarded as the "pagan revisionism" of the splinter groups, especially their sponsorship of dramatic performances based on the stories of local deities. The bible served as their sole point of reference and inspiration. Three important features of worship they took from the bible are i) praising God with music and dance, ii) prophesying and iii) speaking in tongues (possession). In fact the C&S sect was founded in 1914 after a fourteen year old girl, Miss Akinsowon, had a vision instructing her on the directions of a new church very different from those already in existence. Their lack of a formal background in the European orthodox structure of worship afforded them the freedom to experiment with different forms of worship. Today, they are closest to the indigenous African system of worship in dance styles, prayer forms, composition of lyrics and in the use of musical instruments.

As in other churches, the Word remained the tenet of the religion but these new African churches have successfully blended both the Word and the dance in Christian worship. Bible readings, preaching and other verbal exhortation are regularly interspersed with gusty singing, lively clapping and ecstatic dancing. Possession, the climax of the worship occurs usually after a prolonged sing-dance session where the spirit of God is exhorted to descend amongst them. However, since the deity being exhorted here is the ultimate and Supreme God, and not a nature or an anthropomorphic god, His features are not known. Rather than manifesting "characteristics" of God through dance, the spirit of God (the Word) descends on the anointed (mediums) in visions or prophesies which may be rendered in 'tongues'.

Thus, as Africans became more confident of the significance of their cultural forms, the more Christianity adapted to the culture of its environment, and dance gradually reestablished itself as an important means of worship. The cultural innovations greatly endeared many

Africans who had felt alienated by the rather dull, uninspiring form of worship in European Orthodox churches but had stayed on because of the promise (or threat) of the afterlife. In the new churches they found religious upliftment and devotional piety. Even the African bishops who remained within the European missions attempted to introduce some music that encouraged rhythmic bodily expressions but the Europeans quickly put a stop to it.

3.2 Islam and the Representation of Human Forms in Art. Islam came into Africa not expressly as a religious crusade or with the righteous attempt to civilize non-believers, rather it came with the Saharan caravan trades through north Africa and the Arab slave-trade on the east coast of Africa. Nonetheless, even without the Jihad or the European vocation of "civilizing" the Africans, the effect of Islam on the African way of life and culture is no less devastating or total. In many superficial ways, it soon adapted to the local religions and the Imams settled amongst the people, intermarrying with them and eventually becoming *bona fide* citizens of authority.

This appearance of accommodation ultimately ensured the perfect assimilation of the new religion by the indigenes. Pressures to change to the ways of the "faith" and doing away with "practices of the unbelievers", were exerted from within families and "indigenous authorities" in the societies. Almost unobtrusively, Islamic practices became deeply entrenched, often times taking the garb of local customs, thus making it difficult to really distinguish Muslim culture from African cultures. Consequently, many indigenous creative expressions lost their originality or even disappeared altogether. Since the Islamic religion categorically forbids any human representation as an artistic expression, art forms such as dance, drama and sculpture, which capture the essence of humans, suffered the most. The contemporary concept of *fashe* performance among the Hausa people of Nigeria and its derivative among the Yoruba will serve as a relevant illustration.

During the month of Ramadan, the Muslim fasting period, a public procession is used to wake up Muslims, especially the women, to prepare the pre-dawn meal that precedes the day's fasting. Among Hausa Muslims, it is known as *tzashe* (wake up). Its origin, however, predated Islam, it had existed in ancient Hausa society as a form of comic drama satirizing social deviants and preaching cultural ethics. Islam later appropriated the play within its context using it to the advantage of its dogma. As has been pointed out by Odekunle, but for its moralistic tone and adaptability in Islam, it would have been wiped out like other indigenous artistic expressions (2-3). Except for a few inserted

Muslim characters such as the Imam, it is still not a religious drama, having kept its pre-Islamic form, function and content, but now it is no longer performed outside the Ramadan period. The attempt to present *tashe* as a legitimate Islamic practice includes equating it with the shadow puppet plays—a cultural pastime used in some Arab countries as light entertainment to relieve the long Ramadan days. Odekunle further points out that the most popular *tashe* piece is called *Kayi rawa kai mallam Kayi rawa* “the learned cleric denies to have danced” (5-6). This is a revealing piece about the reaction of the people to an important aspect of the religion. It is obviously a satire of the Islamic anti-dance posture.

It is the Islamic concept of *tashe* that was adopted by the Yoruba Muslims who call it *ji were* (wake up quick). Also performed by young adults, it survives only as musical exhortations waking up the faithful. Despite the Islamic strict injunction against representational arts including dance, *ji were* music has inspired social music and dances such as *sakara* and *apala*. But the process of appropriation is clear. By the time *tashe* moved out of its area of origin it had become a full Islamic affair, such that the social dances it inspired were, until recently, strictly forbidden to “good” Christians.

4. The State of Religious Dances in Contemporary Times

Dance is still a strong dynamic force in religious worships in Africa. After centuries of distortion, misrepresentation, and the various eradication tactics of the colonial forces, sacred dancing has survived not only in the indigenous religions where faithful devotees strive to keep them alive and meaningful against all odds in a differently paced society, it has also “appropriated” and become integral to the religions that initially sought its destruction. In fact, very importantly, it survived the brutal uprooting from its nurturing source in Africa during the European slave trade and subsequent attempts to stamp it out on the European slave plantations in the Americas. Its deep-rooted significance as worship transcended all obstacles and it survived keeping its religion alive in the Brazilian *candombles*, the Cuban *bembe* and the *orisa* shrines in the U.S. These religious dances still prevail, adapting and creating new styles in radically different situations and influencing many more.

The influence of African religious dances extend beyond the continent or in the African religions that survived the Atlantic crossing. Its influence is strongly evident among Africans in the Diaspora

converted to Christianity; the “Gospel” form of worship in African-American churches with clapping, singing, “shouts”, and spiritual, ecstatic body movements are firmly rooted in African worship forms. Long regarded with suspicious curiosity and even at times with outright hostility by the Europeans, such forms of “charismatic” worships are becoming acceptable in many Christian churches worldwide. While they may not be in the exact form of African ecstatic religious dancing, many contemporary non-denominational Christian worships now found in many parts of the world have come to embrace more bodily expressive form of service—gestures, and rhythmic swaying to the accompaniment of lively percussion music rather than the traditional organ music. Even churches still within the orthodox church system have begun introducing significant changes to incorporate more expressive body movements. In Nigeria for example, both the Catholic and the Anglican churches became alarmed at the rate they were losing members to the Celestial churches while not making significant new converts, and so started going “charismatic” in the 1980’s. Many religious sects are becoming “converted” to the idea that dance is a legitimate spiritual form of worship. The affecting influence of the religious dances of Africa cannot be denied; once denounced as heathenish and barbaric, they are now validated as fully devotional and spiritual means of communicating with God. These are the dynamics of African sacred dances.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of African cosmology and rituals, see Soyinka: *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 7-12, 45-54.
2. See Davies, *Liturgical Dance*, 124.
3. Thompson’s *African Art in Motion* demonstrates the importance of movement to African plastic arts.
4. The analysis which follows is made in reference to minor deities assisting the Supreme Deity hence, the small letters used when referring to them as “deities” or “gods”. The majuscule letter is used when their proper names are mentioned. Generally, the Supreme God remains an abstract conception of Power, as such, He or She is represented neither in nature nor in icons.
5. The possessions are unprovoked because the person involved would not have been performing the progression dance towards possession and need not have been a devotee of the deity in fact.
6. Sango was once a ruler of the powerful Oyo empire of West Africa. According to history, he was forced to abdicate because of his insatiable

- thirst for wars and also because one of his experiments in attracting electricity form lightning went wrong resulting in a fire that destroyed almost half his kingdom.
7. See also Thompson, *Yoruba Gods and Kings*, 81.
 8. Certain social codes are observed here so the privilege is not misused. While the citizens including non devotees are compelled to give, it is within their right to any unreasonable or malicious demands. Should they refuse, it is disaster for the *whole* community.
 9. The Quar'an states that in one of his travels, the holy prophet Mohammed was inspired by the monotheism of Christianity and on returning to his native land began preaching against the polytheism of his people.
 10. In 1990, the percentage of charismatic/pentecostal Christians is given as 21.4% of the world's total Christians, source: The Lausanne Statistical Task Force for the 1990 Pentecostal Convention in America. Although I doubt if the African charismatic Christians are included in this survey, this is still a remarkable number for a movement that did not begin to get recognition from the church hierarchy until the 1960s.

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THE ZIMBABWEAN DANCE AESTHETIC: SENSES, CANONS, AND CHARACTERISTICS



Kariamun Welsh Asante

Introduction

The African Aesthetic

According to art historian Susan Vogel, "the aesthetic is fundamentally moral" (Vogel, 1986:15). The word for beauty and good is usually the same in many African languages. "This word usually means well made, beautiful, pleasing to the senses, virtuous, useful, correct, appropriate, and conforming to customs and expectations and stands in contrast to the word meaning vicious, useless, illmade, unsuitable" (Vogel, 1986:15). Vogel correctly points out the symbiotic connection between beauty and good that is so prevalent in African societies. This fusion of beauty and good does not denote a lack of distinction between the two. It is instead an indication of the perennial multiplicity of concepts that occupy equal status and dominance. Vogel continues by stating that "It becomes clear, however, that a real understanding of African Art and African value systems lies in the very recognition that the two concepts overlap" (Vogel, 1986:15).

The Zimbabwean dance is typical of this recognition as it is commonly defined in form and content. "Good/aesthetic expresses two sources of African aesthetic: the aesthetic form of a work (its external appearance) and its aesthetic content (the signification of something