

THE DANCE IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY

by A.M. Opoku*

Dance is the oldest art form and from the African point of view the most complete, and satisfying of the arts which form part of the African Dance scene. The basic materials of Dance are Space, Time, rhythm and as motivation for the movements of the human body in space and time. Architecture is a space art form and music and poetry are time or temporal art forms. Dance is a Space-Time Art form since it employs the use of both Spatial and Temporal patterns in expressing ideas and emotions in time and space by the use of movements disciplined by rhythm of sound, locomotion and body-movements.

Early man had to polish his movements by constant use and experience to make them better tools and materials for his needs, and as means of transporting himself from place to place; just as we learn to use new tools or materials today, after the first crude attempts due to our being unfamiliar with them. Most important of all, man learnt to use movements to express himself to others, even as we do in a foreign country or as the deaf and dumb today. It is amazing how much we can say with our bodies, heads, hands, feet and facial expressions, when we meet a people whose language is unknown to us and therefore unintelligible to us. One can at least make oneself understood well enough, to satisfy his basic needs for food, water, help or shelter. Just as children learn to control their movements to satisfy their daily needs and soon learn to apply their use for play activities, for the fun of it, so have people of all nations, through the ages made use of movement, not only to find food and shelter, but as a means of inner satisfaction, which is the result of discovery, creation and achievement, to make life more bearable within their environment. Thus leaping and running after an escaping antelope until it is brought down, may in the retelling of the chase, show different ways of running, stalking, jumping, slashing or hacking, seizing or grasping, shaking, twisting and turning usually embellished just for the relief and joy they give to our emotions and the effect on a captive and perhaps admiring audience, like one's wife and children.

* Mr. A.M. Opoku is Artistic Director, Ghana Dance Ensemble, Legon.

Such movements, consciously or even spontaneously acquired, cease to be copies of the original movements but specially created imitations of them. Because of this, they can be repeated again and again with a few refinements, or even exaggerations, to a pattern according to the mood and will of their creator. This orderly plan of movement sequences, sometimes of one part of the body, followed by another pattern of movement-answer, is visually and emotionally sensed as rhythm. Stamping tends to halt or frighten an enemy and stamping and advancing may chase away a dog or a human enemy who threatens us. In Tongo, the Golgo dance which is performed as a mock battle between the Highlanders and Lowlanders may have had its origin in stamping and brandishing a cudgel and advancing on a wild animal to the accompaniment of shouts or chants meant to scare it.

"Late in the afternoon an army of swordsmen appeared. A soloist chanted a trunting song and the rest responded with a deep grunt followed by a chorus made more effective by the sound of the boat-shaped jingles tied to their right ankles. As they stamped hard with their right feet a step forward, the elbow was pulled back to lower the sword and the fore-arm flexed with the sword outward. On count two, which was taken as a step on the left foot, the elbow came forward and the sword was thrust forward and upward with the right arm flexing into the original position. The body was inclined slightly forward when stamping with the jingles on the right foot with the sword lowered. As the left foot came down, the body was pulled rigidly erect and the sword held high. It is also usual to find other movements of the body in addition to the stamp and even the stamp was developed as gesture-steps to varied rhythms of jingling sounds and shuffling stamps and kicks with the right leg or both legs simultaneously". Movement is essential to life, and rhythm makes movement more efficient. Movement which is fashioned and disciplined by rhythm of sound and body develops into dance movements.

Rhythm in movement and rhythm in sound combine to make work lighter as the Frafra grass cutting labourers show by stamping and grunting to the rhythm of their traditional fiddle and gourd shakers, bending down, cutting the grass and advancing as they raise their bodies in rhythm, as in a dance chorus. Or, take girls from the Upper or Northern regions of Ghana or Nigeria, pounding millet in long mortars and creating counter rhythms with the pestles in pounding and knocking the inside of the mortar as

they come up for another thrust into the mortar. Sometimes the rhythms induce singing too. Fishermen move in rhythm as they haul in their nets and sing instinctively to their occupationally rhythmic movements. Thus music and dance which depend on time and rhythm have always been linked together. In the African Dance scene this is even more apparent in the use of clapping, stamping, singing, and the use of gongs and rattles or sticks. In the African Dance expression we are made to see the music, as it were, and to hear the dance. A first rate dance group, must have good drummers, good singers and good dancers. The Akan word 'Goro' means all this and a group may be said to dance well or sing well or drum well but if the over all result is expressive and satisfying the term 'Goro' 'to play' is used. The dance in Africa then must express fully and clearly through movements, the inner feelings, which are acceptable to a region, and is disciplined by the rhythm suggested by the music in the mode or form of that social group, and the mind of the dancer and audience.

Although dancing is common to most people, even in Africa, where the dance is the major art and has an integral function in the lives of the people at all levels, different communities differ in their dance styles. In some areas, there are dances for women only or men only or for both as the occasion dictates. Dances may be slow or fast, solemn or joyful consciously funny or grave and majestic. All these differences are the result of the environment or physical conditions, climate, occupation, means of communication with other societies, and social, religious, and political conditions and standards acceptable to a particular social group. In these diverse culture patterns, one thing is common to all. That in a traditional society the dance is a way of expressing the lives of its people, their hopes and fears, their antagonisms and comradeships, their religious beliefs, their joys and reaction to group or individual tragedies. In the words of Miss Pearl Primus: "Dance was and still is critical importance. Every phase in life is accompanied by dance. Here people use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable emotion or event is projected. The result is a strange hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable. Love, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement, all these and other emotions are expressed through rhythmic movement".

Much has been written about the African Dance but few realise that just as other people seek to draw attention to conflicts and joys in their society, so does the African seek to express similar ideas in his own life from birth to his final departure to what is his real home - the spirit world. For the African, Art is life, and the fullest expression of the African Drama is the Dance.

For purposes of study and convenience only, one can classify the manifestations of the African Dance under two main headings; but we have to be clear in our minds that social needs and some functions by their complexity and content, tend to create overlapping in the use of dance for such occasions.

1. Ceremonial Dances:

Royal or Court dances provide opportunities for chiefs and other dignitaries to create auras of majestic splendour and dignity to impress their office over the community at festivals or durbars and in the case of royal funerals, a deep sense of loss. In either case the populace demonstrate their loyalty and homage for the person and office of the chief who is a father-godhead figure. Alive, the chiefs command respect, pride and love through their proficiency as dancers at such Thanksgiving Festivals as the Damba Festival of the Dagbani, Ohum of the Akyem or Odwira of the Asante. Such dances are rarely performed except within the environs of the palace for joyful occasions or state funerals, although in essence the drums and musical instruments used belong to the unit of society with the chief as titular owner of the drums and instruments. In processions, the chief is preceded by various court officials, pages, guards and others each with distinctive ceremonial dances or movements. In his palanquin, or on horse back, the chief expresses himself as a fearless warrior, a leader of his people and as a kindly father but a strict disciplinarian. As the funeral of the late Asantehene demonstrated the traditional funeral cortege re-enacts this pageant with the coffin taking the place of a living ruler. A chief's dance movements must at all times reflect his position to win the acclamation of his people, who while exhorting him to make graceful, studied and regal gestures, use stronger dynamic

forms of the same movement patterns to express pride in him as the embodiment of the highest within his society and their willingness to die for him in peace or war. This is not a mere piece of theatrical demonstration but often meant especially during funeral procession for chiefs or installation ceremonies of new chiefs such as was witnessed at the installation of Nana Poku as Otumfoɔ Opoku Ware II.

Religious Dances:

These are of two types. The more common type is for individual worshippers on the day of worship at particular shrines. The second type may involve a whole community, the religious dances ending a festival for planting or harvesting. The Golgo Festival of the Tongo community, is one of free dancing with the spiritual heads, moving in circular dances with slow movements and miming to represent the sowing of millet. The 'Akɔm' of the Akans involves specialised dances by individual priests or priestess with fast intricate steps, spin turns, leaps, jumps and virtuosity. The dancer tries to portray the attribute of the deity who possesses him or her. In Shango worship of the Ede-Oshogbo, the dance is formal and skilful and is performed by priests and initiates. This is also true of the Yeve cult in the Anlo and Togo areas. In the Ga Kpleɔzo Festival, the Obene dance is performed in free style by the mass while the priests and priestesses dance Kple in formation as specialists. In the main, priests dance to come out of induced trance. Guild, Secret, Warrior and Hunters' dances are exclusively performed by members of the particular groups. Secret society dances take the form of masked dances like the Egungun Masquerades of the Igbomine of Nigeria. The Bird Dance of Guinea is an example of this secret society dance. Because of the disguise, masked dances are usually free and unrestrained and uninhibited in movement expressions. In some instances they can be violent or even anti-social. Nigeria's Annual Masked Dance Festival takes the form of a parade in which individual participants display ingeniously carved and painted masks and head pieces usually prepared in secret for this spectacle of colour, gaiety, and free and expressive movements.

Warrior dances and Hunters' dances are mimed versions of the actual experiences of the dancers or the achievements of dead relatives. Recently the Hunters Guild held a colourful

funeral for a master hunter who had killed 99 elephants. This provided an occasion for individuals to boast of their fame as hunters while paying tribute to the dead great hunter. In Ashanti where chiefs hold military ranks, the dance of the chiefs in the Fantom from Atopretia takes the form of a mock battle in which the chief, clad in battle dress studded with talismans, re-enacts past personal achievements or that of his predecessors or regiment with a gun and sword supported by dancing attendants. In this dance, the ordinary dancer is not permitted to use the gun and the sword and therefore uses his whole arms for slashes, thrusts, feints. Side stepping, manoeuvres are discernible, ending in the capture and beheading of the opponent.

The team spear dance, is the accepted form among the Konkomba of Ghana while in Ethiopia, we have the group and individual sword dances of the Esa Somali tribes of dramatic interest. In times of war, these dances instilled courage and raised morale in the warriors and the thundering, challenging boom of the war drums mingling with the horn calls of units, taunted the enemy and was calculated to frighten and demoralise them. In peace-time, these dances took the form of military display of the army's strength, their past glories and disasters. The Lelik Dance is an example of this and is performed in full battle dress, swords, bows and arrows and a hooked harpoon.

Hunting dances, at least in Africa, are not performed to bring success to the hunter but to retell the adventures encountered in a successful hunt. The Absofo of the Akan and their Frafra version bear testimony to this. Dances marking phases in life take many forms. Some societies emphasise birth, puberty, and funerals while others highlight marriages, but nearly all make the most of funerals for individuals, heroes or chiefs as a mark of their last respect and as occasions for consoling a member of the community while remembering a long deceased relation.

11. Recreational or Social Dances are usually created by the more youthful members of the society for entertainment and recreation. If the new creations based on the movement forms of the region prove popular, older people adopt the dances and in time include them in the repertory of regional recreational dances. Such

recreational dances as have become regional dances are, Agbadza, Adowa, Adenkum, Nagla. They serve to bring the young of both sexes together in a clean atmosphere which results in marriages. They encourage the youth in providing opportunities for creating new rhythms, dances, songs and presentation.

These are some of the uses of the Dance in African Traditional Society; in all, the spirit and character of the society, its sanctions, its joy are reflected. Thus it can be said that a study of the African Dance is a study of its peoples.