



CONFLUENCES:

CROSS-CULTURAL FUSIONS

IN MUSIC &
DANCE

Proceedings of the First
South African Music and
Dance Conference
Incorporating
the 15th Symposium
on Ethnomusicology

16-19 July 1997

University of Cape Town
South Africa

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The Problem of Literal Documentation in African Dance Studies

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Music, University of Cape Town, South Africa
16 - 19 July, 1997.

The Problem of Literal Documentation in African Dance Studies

Whilst the models of Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh have conquered the three dimensions of space in Western dances, a similarly universal mode of literal documentation is being earnestly sought in African dance studies. One is tempted to ask: what exactly constitutes the form, content and characteristics of performance as to render such documentation problematic?

- is it because indigenous dances are tied to ecology?
- is the dance in Africa analogous to rhythm?
- is the lack of indigenous writing a factor in dance documentation?
- is the lack of a uniform interdisciplinary field methodology a crucial factor?

These questions constitute a heuristic device by which this paper accounts for the problematic raised in this paper.

I. Methodology

The study of dance and theatrical performances often correspond to the study of human behaviour since the dance is a recognised behavioural pattern (Royce, 1977). Its analysis, apart from offering aesthetic patterns, often accounts for anthropological and historical events. Hence the references to the cave drawings and Palaeolithic rock paintings of Tassili; bas-reliefs of dancers in ancient Egyptian art (Thompson, 1974:29; Tierou, 1992). But since paintings and engravings are static forms, their records are not enough to demonstrate movements and kinaesthetic details in performance. The historical details of motion can, therefore, be supplemented, either in the description of historical records or in the representation of plastic forms and sculptures in various media depicting motion. But there is a limitation still: the details of performance as arrested or frozen on the frame of a mask or a head dress do not reveal the story line or content of a dance performance, given that every performance almost always has a story line (Layiwola, 1989:102) In this light, we must admit the considerable pain to which an art historian like Thompson went in an attempt to sketch a history of the dance in Africa. Though he cites medieval historians like Ibn Batuta (1352/3) and the Portuguese explorer, Ca'da Mosto

(1455 - 7); and noted Vasco da Gama's entry in his log book on 2nd December, 1497 at Mossel Bay, present day South Africa, no uniform method of the dance in Africa emerged. He noted, however, that the documentation of an African call-and-response emerged in the description of William Towerson in 1556 - 7 on the West African coast. The women were seen enacting a dance event. But Thompson regrets that:

We shall never know the calls, nor the motion of the dancers. Assuming a rough degree of accuracy, it is just possible that this ... sixteenth century call-and-response also shows that delivery in singing (and , by immediate extension, dancing) was characterised, in those days, by speed and drive as it is today. [p.29].

We realise that whilst a description of the dance is given, and there are references to the rapidity of drum syllables in the intervocalic consonant 'r', this has not helped in the documentation of the polyrhythmic dance that follows. Both Thompson and Nketia have described the dances of Africa as characterised by 'multi-meter' with simultaneous movements of various body parts (Nketia, 1975: 201 - 13). This is the reason why, unlike in ballet, it is difficult to isolate individual movements or distinct segments and document them as script in multi-metric African dances.

In the 1960s, Peggy Harper had tried to bring her knowledge of Western dances to bear on the documentation of African dances in Nigeria. She concentrated her efforts in the collection of a wide variety of dances both in the forest and savannah belts of Nigeria to see whether a form of uniform documentation method could be synthesised. Harper, whilst realising thus:

It is imperative that the recording should provide an accurate and comprehensive reproduction of the dance in terms which are accessible to the wide range of specialists whose work includes an aspect of dance study;

notes, somewhat, that:

Dance notations, forms of symbolic transcription, are extensively used in Europe and America to record dance. However, these transcriptions are too reliant upon personal and cultural factors to be trusted as a recording technique in Africa where a vast amount of material of great variety needs to be recorded in field conditions.[1968: 12]

Consequently, because transcriptions need to be an exact, or at least a close representation, of the dance form or style; she concludes that at the present time, professionally made films would seem to be the best medium of 'meeting the requirements of accuracy and accessibility'.

It is noteworthy that after an extensive fieldwork in the Tiv culture area of Nigeria, Harper observed of the Tsough dance:

The movements have shape and volume rather than linear definition, so that the accent is on the rhythmic-dynamic qualities rather than on the spatial patterning of the movement.
[1970: 58]

It is a technical observation of this sort which spurred Harper to adapt a tripartite combination of space, time and energy as a basis for further analysis of the dance event in Africa (see fig1).

Most researchers on performance have always expressed the opinion that dance will continue to be a mode of counterbalancing the force of gravity (Humphrey, 1959; Harper, 1968; Thompson, 1974; Tierou, 1992). The same goes for the feeling in agrarian societies that dance expresses fertility in (wo)man and in nature; as Tierou rightly writes:

Whatever the motivation of the dance, it combined the spontaneous expression of human feeling with the higher aspirations of man to communicate with the cosmos

The method of the dance will therefore always combine the element of beauty with that of balance and shape be it in the geometrical definitions of Western ballet or the rhythmic-dynamic potentials of African dances. But there is an increasing need to find a satisfactory method of notation that will combine aspects of multi-metric dancing with the documentation methods which Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh have accomplished for Western dances.

II. The Limits of Literal Documentation:

There is always the suggestion to bring together a large body of African dances as Sachs (1937), Thompson and Harper have done; and thereafter attempt a generic analysis which can constitute theoretical frameworks on group studies. This would, at least, be helpful in the interpretation of dances which are similar in content and form even if ethnic and geographical connections were lacking. We must realise that Africa is a vast continent and historical and cultural experiences often differ as much as they relate. But the task is less daunting if performances can be grouped and analysed using a conceptual tool that is

uniform. This will help to make definitive predictions which can lead to the classification of forms and concepts, and consequently lead to a generally acceptable method of notation and documentation. The limitation of an otherwise far-reaching effort as Tierou has recently accomplished is bedevilled by the insularity of linguistic and conceptual terms.

The mere recording of a dance event on celluloid or tape captures its essence and distinctive qualities, but in that state, they can be unwieldy. And if indigenous music can be scored into notes, there is no reason why indigenous dances cannot be so reduced to script. We cannot pretend to the common fact that the lack of a common alphabet beguiles the common heritage of African oral and literary expressions. In actual fact, this lack of an indigenous tradition of writing is fundamental to the problem of a literal documentation or transcription of African dances. After all verbalised language alone is not complete because renditions of gesture, tone and tempo also matter in performance. Even the existence of one or two written traditions will not be sufficient for the entire continent as there are languages still being reduced to writing at the present time. Africa, like Asia, is diverse in culture and in ethnic grouping; and this itself is a factor which militates against the common heritage of a 'universal' alphabet.

One interesting fact as a point of illustration is noteworthy. Among the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria, the invention of the hourglass or talking drum dates back about three centuries. Royal personages adopted the drum to encode proverbs and witticisms interpretable to only those entitled to the knowledge. The mere beating of the drum is not as nonsensical as strangers to the community often suppose (see, for instance, Soyinka, 1975: 27). Whilst it is beaten around palaces, messages on the environment and of visitors and traffic in the area are transmitted to kings and regents for necessary information or action. Approaching guests are introduced before they enter the palace; ditto for news of invaders and intruders. For a little over a century now, the drum has been adopted by musicians and entertainers because of its enhanced 'glottophilia', adaptiveness and mellifluity. This is one ingenious example which surmounts the frustration of a racial stock in search of new forms of verbal modulation and expression. This becomes an aid to memory and a mnemonic device (Layiwola, 1986:94; Euba, 1990:30,34; Dark&Hill, 1971:76-77). Writing or literal documentation is a tool fashioned to complement or cue the memory of things otherwise forgotten or 'lost'. African cultures have tended to overcome this lapse, in some degree, by a resort to the (re)creation of plastic artforms. Tierou echoes my mind with precision here:

African "memory" exists in other and more varied forms.
It slightly resembles a puzzle: it is impossible to recognise
the exact meaning of one part without reconstructing it in

full... To Africans, statues and statuettes represent memory inscribed in form, the materialisation of knowledge from every sphere of life: practical, magical, therapeutic, divinatory.
[1992: 9]

III. The Poverty of Theory:

There is another problematic with indigenous, non-secular traditions of art, namely, the documentation of non-material phenomena. One is tempted to think that certain gestural, expressive aspect of African dances use what we have described as their multi-metric and poly-rhythmic aspects as a metaphoric expression of the intangible. There is no dance movement without a story line. Dance, itself, is an aspect of the theatre and cannot but continue to respond, aside from its own laws, to other laws governing performance. Many of the dances we document in the field carry along with them dense accretions of mythology, history, ritual and religion. If indeed we succeed in inventing a method of notation for the dances of Africa, we have to contend with ways of interpreting also the ritual and mythological allusions which often attend these dances. As a concrete illustration of what I mean here, Ulli Beier once recorded a dance event in a small Yoruba town (Beier, 1959: 14). The dance was in the form of a pageant rounded off as a triumphal procession. Though the entire action is danced, the practitioners told him that the fifteen minute dance performance was the re-enactment of a conflict between two mythical heroes. The story was then told in its various manifestations which shed some light on his own research in the area.

There is also a dance called *Nyambi* recorded among the Lugbara by John Middleton (Spencer, 1985). The event is a transvestiture in which the sexual inversion is a metaphoric interpretation for the reversal of cosmic order, or a betrayal of the season in an agrarian society. The women involved are all women of an entire sub-tribe. It is performed on two occasions, neither of which occur together in any single year. An occasion may be after an unusually bountiful harvest or a harvest that has caused so much anxiety because delayed by too much rainfall during the ripening season. Another occasion might be after a drought or a protracted dry season. Either of these two occasions constitutes an unusual cosmic order and scarcity may upset the peace and stability within the various groups. The women would regroup outside the settlement near the raingrove holding gourds and rattles and would dance across the settlements singing obscene songs and challenging any man who might come their way. The hierarchy and roles are reversed so they are led by a male transvestite who wears either the horns of a buffalo or the antlers of a waterbuck. They dance up to the raingrove where the rainmaker receives them and performs his rites to reorder the calendar. Middleton sums up the phenomenon thus:

People say that this dance is a sign that the world has gone wrong and confused, that ordinary social hierarchies and relations are 'lost' or 'forgotten', and that the rainmaker must now 'start' the new year and the orderly passing of time again. [1985: 178]

This dance event travesties the pattern of actual death dances and a grotesque, mirror image of the real dance for a tragic or ritual occasion is enacted as a reflection of the crisis situation. In actual death dances, men dance in definite lines of patrilineal kin, but in this *nyambi* it is danced by women who have no affinal relationship, who do not dance in any definite lines, but appear only like a mob. They sing obscene songs and challenge men (including the subjugated transvestite leading them) to symbolise the fact that their world is amuck and that rules of temporal liminality is broken for a while. The suturing of social and cosmological categories is therefore carried out by the renunciation and parody demonstrated in the temporal world. A question immediately comes to mind: How will a simple notation which is sophisticated in the interpretation of form account for the empirical content of such a dance as we have just described? It is true that in Western dance forms, notes and story lines do accompany dance notation; but where empathy is necessary for the dancer's accomplishment, we are faced with a limitation. An easy way out is to advocate a secularisation of these dances and make do with the forms alone. Afterall, many of the masks we witness in performance have been synthesised by carvers and sculptors under religious instructions. The present writer was told at a *Gelede* festival in the northern Yoruba village of Ijio that mask carvers are sometimes under strict religious instructions when carving or designing works for performance. Thereafter they become co-workers in the preservation of art in the service of religious observances.

In some respect, theoreticians of the dance such as Thompson and Tierou who advocate the study of the dance as part of masking traditions have, probably, anticipated the aforementioned problem. in my opinion, this latter approach is the furthest we have come in the search for a method of dance notation of indigenous African dances. But it is by no means the furthest possible since we have still to contemplate a cross-cultural study of mask forms and dance traditions or patterns. It will thus appear that the approach to the notation of theatrical dances will derive from symbolic transpositions in particular linguistic patterns, if we conceive of linguistic here, not only as language but a whole system of signification. This, in itself, entails a study of the history and classification of particular dances and patterns of expression. certainly, a cross-cultural appreciation of the wide variety of African dances will, in turn, enrich performance in each of the distinct culture areas. the next turn of research in the area would be, it seems to me, language-based since the notation will

necessarily be a glossary of symbols or vocabulary which are universal within the concept of a unifying culture (cf. Laban, 1975: 6,12).

IV. The Relationship Between Sculpture and the Dance:

The plasticity of these two forms have led, as implied above, theoreticians and experts to study the dance through sculptural motifs. This is eminently justifiable especially as the mask could be more than a medium in performance. The mask also acts as a permanent form of representation in the absence of written script. This idea is conceptually related to the definition of dance derived from the Robert dictionary as “an expressive series of movements of the body executed according to a rhythm, and most often to the sound of music, and following an art, a technique or a social code which is more or less explicit”. To this Alphonse Tierou adds the ingredients of “freedom and awareness” (1992: 11).

Thompson consistently links the therapeutic ‘cool’ of the African masks to the beauty of dance and believes that a unification of the body/soul dichotomy is attained by the inertia achieved through the kinaesthesia of dance (1974: 1 - 45). Tierou, in like manner, bases his idea of the dance on the concept of *dooplé* as he had seen in statuettes and sculptural pieces. He accounts for the concept thus:

The dancer is standing, his knees are bent and the thighs are not held close together. His feet placed parallel and flat, keep close to the ground and are wide apart by between thirty to forty centimetres according to the length of the dancer’s feet.

The torso, bent slightly forwards, forms with the pelvis an angle of about 135 degrees... The gaze is fixed on the horizon
[1992: 53]

Roughly the same postural description is given by Nketia:

The postures that are assumed in these dances are directly related to the way the body is used and moved. Certain movements are more easily executed from a position in which the back is slightly bent with the knees slightly dropped and the arms held loose, than from a rigid, erect posture. [1975; 210]

Whilst Nketia believes that music creates the mood and dynamics to complement the posture in improvisation, Tierou believes that the movement in itself creates a tidal intersection which are activated at the shoulders, pelvis or the vertebral column.

V. Improvisation:

Both theorists mentioned above make valid points, the difference in opinion being derived from their training: Nketia is a musicologist who reads a time/space relationship in the skill of the drummer whilst Tierou, a dancer, reads the adjustment of body parts into movement. Both, certainly are justified from the viewpoint of improvisation and the private styles of dance groups, dance traditions and mythical or religious temperament. I prefer to distinguish two major improvisational styles or principles: the first is that which gives much scope to the relationship of the artist to the audible rhythms of the music. This is usually characterised by a lot of leg rhythms with gong or rattle beats. The drum, rattles or gong clearly or approximately delineates the rhythms for the footwork as seen in the *atilogwu* dances of the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria; and the *miango* male dancers of the plateau region of Northern Nigeria. In the former instance, the xylophone or gong rhythm is crucial to the multiple movements of the legs and rattles. Sometimes the improvisation is broadened to include acrobatic displays modulated by the rhythmic timing of the beats. Extensive group and personal initiative go a long way to maintain the regularity and tempo of the movement. There is much emphasis on footwork and motor display woven into short but concentrated dance phrases. Body patterns and movement tessellation are created with human components mounting one another's shoulders or backs whilst responding to the strains of the drums, xylophone, gongs and flute. The dancer can then guide him/herself with the aid of the rattles worn on the ankles, wrists or elbows. Because of the consistent stamping of the feet on the ground and the heavy emphasis on polyrhythm, these kinds of dances occur with a greater number of allomorphokines (dance movements on the meaning level that can be substituted without considerable change in meaning) (Royce, 1977:). Consequently, these kinds of dances also allow for greater improvisation and deviation from rigid rules. It shows that they will adapt better for intercultural conflation whereby classification and notation are easily accomplished.

The second principle relate to those dance events which combine complex facial and physiological expression for both private and public performance. And these are as varied as there are cultures and sub-groups. For, instance the *Sango* devotees and *Bata* dance group among the Yoruba often communicate feelings by the manipulation of facial muscles; they also jerk the thoracic and shoulder regions when invoking the climax of the dance. In the real heat of dance, a dancer takes several somersaults and attains ritual and mediumistic possessions. After the dance experience, devotees find themselves pop-eyed and serene. Others who, during possession, have gone through homophagy or

the ritual mutilation of their organs, re-emerge whole and apparently unscathed. In like manner, Nketia (1975: 209) described that the Anlo-Ewe and the Lobi peoples of Ghana emphasise the upper part of the body. Like *bata* dancers, they contract and release their shoulder blades, they move the shoulders up and down and rotate the upper part of the body. The *Gelede* transvestite dancers, again of the Yoruba, put the line of emphasis on the hip and girdle regions. Whilst posturing in *doople*, the legs go in a rather agile interpretation of the drum rhythms. On the contrary the *nyindogu dancers* of the Dagomba of Northern Ghana and the *Soponna* dancers of the Yoruba create a welling up of forces from the belly and the solar plexus.

In whatever way the African dancer postures on the margin of dance, (s)he dances in multi-meter and often simultaneously battles and relates to the pull of gravitation in a way that generates tension and inspiration which sustains his/her performance. Rather than weave patterns in space, the dancer weaves it in multiple media relating to sculpture and to performance; all in an attempt to gain a certain dynamism and grace without which art cannot attain genuine expression. Rather than create an outward experience, it relies on a measure of infectious inner satisfaction.

Theatre and the Dance:

Once a dancer attains the state of grace describable only within the limits of inner experience, it becomes necessary for the art to rely on costume and plasticism to elevate meaning to the level of an outward performance. It appears that from this point, the boundary between plasticity, theatre and the dance blurs and merges. The one, an integral part of the other, becomes a vehicle through which a theatrical experience is relayed. Hence the role of the masquerader in certain dance performances of Africa. This aspect of the dance enables us to study a material and tangible counterpart of the dance in an otherwise intangible, artistic context. This interdependence between material artefact and a vaporising aesthetic is often acknowledged by art historians and only seldomly so acknowledged by anthropologists (cf. Kasfir, 1988; Adepegba, 1995). This is often due to the emphasis that anthropologists placed on social institutions (content) to the detriment of formalistic features in art, and consequently on the *modus operandi* in research style, analysis, and field study. But this can only remain so to an extent since, at best, content and form in art are profoundly contemporaneous. In like manner, intangible experiences in art often tend to corroborate and elucidate their material counterpart. We seem bound to agree with both Cole (1969) and Thompson (1974) that process and performance are both aspects of one and the same thing. If viewed in semiotic terms, text and context merge in performance, and dance as a theatrical art is both intuitive as well as processual (Kasfir, 1988: 1 - 16). But since the realm of art, ritual and religion are not quite as defined in African and

Indian dances as they are in Western dances, how do we apply the same parameters of notation as have been done for Western dances? After all, we would like to have, in the long run, a universal yardstick for understanding all human dance and art forms. Or is it just as well to invent two levels of notation for these dances of Africa which represent four or five dimensions of space in the art?

This is precisely the cultural process extrapolated as the plastic representation of space and time on the frames of masks, costume and body painting. Performance has therefore become a cultural system which goes beyond its modern, physical representation. This is almost completely captured in this statement of Sydney Kasfir:

In much of West Africa, masks are mirrors of this small-scale cultural system. They accurately reflect in a performance frame the system of relationships that obtains in the "real world" outside the frame. If myth is a model which validates cosmology by grounding it in society, the mask system can be understood as its obverse: a model which validates cosmology by grounding it in the cosmic order. [1988: 6]

We can, therefore, conclude this section by recalling that the dance masks would seem to have gone past the idea of the theatre in its 'veritable lie' as a bare-faced illusion. It is true that the plastic phenomenon is sometimes stretched to accommodate aberration and deviance as in the revues of the Yoruba *egungun* and Tiv puppetry theatre where itinerant dancers represent shades of sociological archetypes in wood and mask carvings; or its conceptual counterparts in *gelede* of the Yoruba and the *nyambi* of the Lugbara where transvestism becomes a dislocation of hierarchy and order. What we can say, for certain, is that the invocation of liminality does invent new 'illusions' whilst denying old ones. What we cannot altogether account for, at the present time, is why the responsibility for enactment is foisted on the dance event. Whatever the reason, it has made the re-enactment and representation by dance ethnologists a doubly hazardous affair. It only remains for us to align the kinetic aspect of a material, yet activated, mask to its spatial, levitating potential.

Conclusion: The space-time Interaction:

It is obvious that the geometric aspiration of the dance in western societies cannot be overemphasised with the training of the ballerina as an actress in the construction of a space-time continuum. The dancer leaps and jumps and balances on the mid-point of his/her toes. S/He initiates the grace of birds and butterflies and temporarily conquers the illusions of gravity. The immediate

question that comes to mind is whether we can conceive of a masked dancer aligning with space the way a ballerina adjusts to the same phenomenon. Can a masquerade, with all his accoutrements, justify the use of a posture grid for neatness and symmetry? Do the burden and requirements of masquerading cross the boundaries of consciousness in time alone or in space as well? Is the beauty of the mask the same for the reference to geometry in western dances? It will thus seem that an *epa* masker of North-eastern Yorubaland in his gigantic head-dress will conceive of his 'burden' and his encounter with space a systemic aberration should he have to leap up to a height of two or three metres or attempt to stand on pointe. In the end an adequate notation method will seek to combine technicalities with the peculiarity of affective stages in performance.

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