

African Dance Forms:

Introduction:

Africa is a large continent made up of many countries each country having its own unique diverse cultural mix. African dance is a movement expression that consists of a spectrum of many different dance forms. Each form defined by its own individual technique, style and cultural reference. It would take a lifetime and beyond to fully understand or experience the complete spectrum of African dance forms.

Characteristics of African dance forms

African music and dance is an important part of modern music and performing arts. Many artists worldwide via their works and words acknowledge the importance of African artistic and musical ideas upon their works.

As we move further into the technical generation, a generation where information and the access of it becomes more readily available, the problem of alienation and other social ills that accompany modern development become more apparent. With this in mind the need for increased participation in effective and aesthetic areas becomes apparent. Dance as a functional socio-cultural tool on the African dance model could play a part in the cross-cultural renaissance. Music and dance contribute to the integration of society by expressing social organization, validating instruction, perpetuating values and promoting group solidarity.

By untangling the treads of culture, tradition and history that create Africa's dance and music heritage, it is possible to deduce the characteristics of African dance forms. African traditions demonstrate that dance can be a significant psychosocial device able to penetrate many aspects of human existence. By commemorating such events as the passage of seasons and life cycles, transitions through life experiences are dramatized and made more meaningful.

Dance to the African is a way of life, a true representation of a people's existence expressed through rhythm and movement. In the African cultural paradigm the relationship between rhythm and movement is one that is inseparable; one cannot exist without the other. As the dancer is given breathe through the drummers rhythm so does the drummer feeds of the dancers breathe of expression as movement articulates rhythm; a perfect marriage where two become one in a synchronisation of rhythm and movement that creates dance.

Dance in Africa is used as a functional tool of expression and has and is used for a variety of reasons. Dance is used in ritualistic purposes, as a secular activity engaged in for recreation or entertainment, embracing such factors as physical exercise, performance of skill, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity. In general dance is used to commemorate important events in African life and society and since every second is an important event in the life of an African, dance becomes a way of life.

It is said that there is no art for art sake in African dance culture, emphasizing the extreme functionality of African dance. KwaKwa points out that the organisation of traditional African dances was motivated not only by the theatrical, but also by sociological, historical, political and religious considerations. He emphasizes that this identification is crucial to an understanding of African dance forms, these being the most important factors that

differentiate it from other dance forms such as Ballet and Contemporary Modern dance of the West that are performed primarily for the entertainment of others. In modern day times African dance still retains its characteristics with the added focus of the practice of African dance as a contemporary form of expression within the context of theatrical presentation for entertainment.

Another characteristic of African dance is its holistic nature. The interaction of multiple elements that can exist within an African dance performance gives it the view of the all-embracing art of expression. Unlike the western structure of training, where an artist focuses on the mastering of one discipline, the African performing artist is trained and encouraged to be proficient in as many art forms as possible. A sense of pluralism exists since it is customary to integrate dance with other arts such as music, drama, oratory as well as with various forms of visual arts. This structure as stated earlier has a direct relationship to the culture, since religious ceremonies, festivals and other occasion of celebration involve the exercising of all the art forms in one performance.

Within this structure, the nature of pluralism introduces a further element of the African dance genre, which is improvisation within the dance. Improvisation occurs and is encouraged and can be seen as a form of appreciation, self-expression or a visual announcement of skill. In the situation where the onlooker becomes part of the performance, improvisation in this instance can be interpreted as acknowledgement that he has transcended to the level of performer.

Summarisation of Points:

- African dance is a term used to represent a dance expression that consists of a range of other expressions known as African dance forms.
- The African continent is made up of many countries
- Each country has its own unique dance form, style and technique of expression
- Each form relates to and is a representation of the cultural environment within which the form is practiced.
- The first approach to understanding African dance forms is the understanding of rhythm and how it relates to movement from the African dance perspective.
- Improvisation is a large aspect of African dance forms. This is the occasion where the relationship between dancer and drummer is truly exercised.
- Dance to the African is a physical expression of culture
- Dance is an essentially social event, which not only accommodates, but encourages and appreciates participation by the spectator and is “elastic” enough to expand or contract in time according to the quality of the performance and the interest of the audience.
- The cultural influence on the dance defines its technique and style of expression, there exist a direct relationship between cultural expression and movement
- Each dance form will focus more on a certain area of the human anatomy as the main central focus for movement and expression.

- African dance is participatory in nature, the audience is also considered as part of the performance, the audience and performer belong to the same community and roles are interchangeable.
- Due to the multi-dimensional character of a performer, the integration of different arts forms and the lack of rigid distinctions between performers and audience, traditionally, dance performance can be described as “whole theatre”

History:

Dance is one of those rare human activities which simultaneously reconcile heart, body and spirit. Dance has existed since the beginning of time and images of dance have been found in the earliest rock paintings. It may have been the first universal form of expression to interpret and communicate the activities and aspirations of man. The early paintings show various dance forms: the round, the farandole, the open circle, forms which have lasted until today and which testify to the perennial nature of dance in human life. (*Alphonse Tierou – Doople, The eternal Law of African Dance*)

The history and development of African dance in early days was never written down, but has been passed from generation to generation through an oral tradition of word of mouth. In West Africa for instance, the griots - members of the dance and musician caste - related the ongoing story of their people through the medium of music and dance. It is impossible however to know exactly what had shaped Africa's early history. Archaeology and genealogy (including DNA research) give us some clues, as do the histories of other peoples and nations with which Africa had contact with in the past. It is clear that many cultural exchanges took place between the people of Africa, and between Africans and non-Africans, and that Africans' music/dance was affected and enriched by these exchanges, as was that of the peoples who had contact with Africans. Other factors influenced African music and dance over time. Some of these are wars, invasions, migrations, new religions, climate changes, population, ecological and economic pressures.

Culture:

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Community:

African dances are as varied and changing as the communities that create them. Although many types of African dance incorporate spirited, vigorous movement, there are also others that are more reserved or stylized. African dances vary widely by region and ethnic community. In addition, there are numerous dances within a given community. African communities traditionally use dance for a variety of social purposes. Dances play a role in religious rituals; they mark rites of passage, including initiations to adulthood and weddings; they form a part of communal ceremonies, including harvest celebrations, funerals, and coronations; and they offer entertainment and recreation in the forms of masquerades, acrobatic dances, and social club dances.

Characteristics:

There are some basic characteristics that are common to most African dance forms:

- **The relationship to the earth** – working together with gravity as opposing to trying to defy it as is such with some Western dance forms.
- **The spiritual representation** – dance in African within the traditional context, was used as a way of elevating oneself from the human realm to that of the spiritual universe. A dance form that engages the mind, body and spirit in order to truly release the conscious, allowing the individual to experience the power of self expression.
- **Importance of the Community.** Africans danced mainly with and for the community. Solo performers were supported and affirmed by the group through song, hand clapping, and shouted encouragement. The circle is a common structure in African dance representing unity and completeness
- **The relationship to rhythm** – rhythm is fundamental to the existence of African culture. It acts as a thread, binding the very fabric of African culture together through its expression. An attribute of African culture that has successfully influenced and continues to influence the world over.
- **The whole theatre structure** – the practice of dance is one in which the union of movement, song and drama come together, crystallising expression through the medium of communication.
- **The connection to culture** – African dance forms are direct expressions of culture through the medium of dance. Culture a stimulus to the development of movement and artistic expression

Forms:

The spectrum of African dance forms is wide and varied. Each dance form represents a particular cultural expression. The technique of African dance can be categorised into its five geographical placements:

North African dance / South African dance forms / East African dance forms / West African dance forms / Dance forms of central Africa

One must remember that within each main geographical placement, there exist a multitude of sub forms each having their own unique technique, style and signature that reflect the culture of the movement base.

Structure:

- **Physical**
The grounded body is one of the most basic generic positions in West African dance forms. This is a position where the body is placed in a seated posture with the pelvis dropped and tailbone pointing down towards the earth. The upper body seats in a disposed slightly forward position with chest pointing down towards knees. The position of the feet is placed in open parallel. The width between feet should be that

of the distance from dancers toe to heel. In this position, the body is said to be at its earth's centre where. The mass of the body is considered to be in equilibrium with gravity, energy radiated down towards the earth is exchanged with energy radiated up from below – two and equal opposite forces cancelling each other bring the body to a neutral state of rest.

In African dance, the body goes through a multitude of physical expressions. The range of basic positions, movement quality and nuance will greatly depend on the culture in question, since dance in African is an expression of culture – an archive of a people's existence documented through the medium of rhythm and movement.

- **Spiritual**

The peculiarity of the African tradition is that it never makes an abstraction of nature and cosmic laws, it gives the primary importance to the body, the necessary intermediary without spiritual life would be an abstraction. African spirituality starts from the principle that the only objective approach in trying to encircle reality is through the body and that in rediscovering the body; one rediscovers one's own identity in the midst of humanity and returns to its rightful place in the macrocosm. What is spirituality if not to feel within oneself the flow of energies and to be conscious of the vegetative currents which circulate in order to transcend them.

Music

The African concept of music is totally different to the Western one. Traditional African musicians do not seek to combine sounds in a manner pleasing to the ear. Their aim is simply to express life in all of its aspects through the medium of sound. The African musician does not merely attempt to imitate nature by music, but reverses the procedure by taking natural sounds, including spoken language, and incorporate them into the music. To the uninitiated this may result in cacophony, but in fact each sound has a particular meaning. To be meaningful, African music must be studied within the context of African life.

Music has an important role in African society. Music is an integral part of the life of every African individual from birth. At a very early stage in life the African child takes an active role in music, making musical instruments by the age of three or four. Musical games played by African children prepare them to participate in all areas of adult activity - including fishing, hunting, farming, grinding maize, attending weddings and funerals and dances.

An intimate union forms between man and art in Africa. It amounts to a total communion that is shared by the whole community. This may help explain why some languages in black Africa have no precise noun to define music. The art of music is so inherent in man that it is superfluous to have a particular name for it. The drum is so important in African society that it is sometimes equated with a man. Women must consequently treat it with the same respect that they would show towards their men folk. In some African countries women are not even allowed to touch a drum under any circumstance, though Islam and European colonial influence have softened some of these traditions. African music is nearly always coupled with some other art such as poetry or dance and is one of the most revealing forms of expression of the black soul.