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# The Interaction of Music and Dance in Africa

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### **The Interaction of Music and Dance in Africa**

African people have integrated music into their everyday lifestyles for centuries. Music and other art forms are an inseparable part of their lives and are culminated into everyday activities. Instrumental, singing and dance are art forms embedded in the diverse cultures of African peoples and their traditions, beliefs, values, religions and artistic expression.

The art of dance plays a prominent role in the culture and is used in all types of musical idioms. To understand the role of dance and music in many African cultures, I will examine some of its uses through the life of an African child.<sup>1</sup>

- Before birth, a child is exposed to music as the mother attends various musical activities.
- At birth, families perform birthrights that introduce the child to the community. Music plays an important part in this occasion.
- Game songs are sung during childhood, and they serve the purpose of educating young children about appropriate social manners, the human body, gender roles, the surrounding environment and animals, and relationships.
- When girls and boys make the transition from puberty to adult life, they go through an initiation process that is marked by music. Music during this period ranges from weeks to months depending on the community and is used to convey the lessons for the initiates.

- Another milestone in any young adult life is marriage. Music at the marriage ceremonies marks the celebration of life of the man and woman as they start their lives as a family. During these ceremonies, music is used as means of communication between the bride and groom.
- When death comes, there will be music to comfort the family; irrespective of religious conviction, music plays a central role in funeral ceremonies and throughout a period of mourning.

While singing and instrumental music are part of the equation, African traditions also emphasize dance, for movement is regarded as an important mode of communication. For this purpose the dance utilizes symbolic gestures, mime, props, masks, costumes, body painting, and other visual devices. The basic movements may be simple, emphasizing the upper body, feet, or torso; or they can be complex, involving coordination of different body parts as well as variations in dynamics and use of space. The dance is usually open to all, or it may be an activity in which one, two, three, or four individuals (male or female) take turns in the dancing arena. There is also team dancing that occurs. These dance formations may be linear, circular, or columns of two or more rows of people moving together.<sup>3</sup>

For centuries dance has been taught and participated in by everyone in the local community. It has become part of the local fabric and represents local traditions. New dance forms have become part of the African culture because of colonialism as well as other outside influences over the years. Modern education has now become a part of Africa's new invasion of dance. Music education whether be dance, singing or composing in a classroom setting outside of a village is different and threatens the teachings of the "community" in a negative way.

Many teachers in today's African classrooms were not raised in the traditions of the local community and were not taught local dances by people in that community. The teacher's role is to teach generalized forms of music and dance that may or may not be exactly the same as the students were taught but instead

an overview of how dance is used throughout the region. Since students come from various communities, learning dances from everyone's community would be impossible to teach. This brings up a question that affects the local community and its teaching which is, does it matter if local dance traditions are changed to education the masses?

The art of dance plays a prominent role in the culture and is used in all types of musical idioms which were listed earlier. To understand the role of dance and music in many African cultures is to understand its local community and participants.

According to Yapo, "choreography explains the gestures of societies and the people who use these gestures in their art." <sup>2</sup> In other words, traditional *ngoma* dances that are taught by a community represent that community only. Although *ngoma* can be taught to others it loses a portion of its meaning in the translation.

Because dance is part of the local fabric and represents local people and traditions, changing it could be confusing to some young people who have learned it from their elders and the elders may not want their traditional practices to be altered thus creating tension in the community.

It is my opinion that traditions have always evolved and the teachings of elements such as dance have always changed because the methodology of oral communication changes from person to person thus interpretations can vary in any dance step.

Secondly, outside influences from popular culture have changed the way people think about dance and society in Africa. This has had to affect the *ngoma* methods of teaching and the way dance is taught. No matter what is taught by a school teacher or community elder, dance forms can and have changed.

Although there are many factors that make African arts diverse, the African people will continue to use their dance forms in everyday life to express themselves in all situations whether they are altered or considered true *ngoma*.

Traditional arts practices can contribute to the students creativity, perception and understanding of life and their cultural identity. The classroom in which the arts are treated as *ngoma* may become a place where communal, connective, relevant and ultimately enjoyable learning takes place. Teaching *ngoma* may require an adjustment to the standards by which teachers measure the success of learning.<sup>1</sup> It is not only what a dance performance looks or sounds like that is important, but what the performance feels like to learners. In the end, the notion of arts education as *ngoma* is a means of linking the knowledge and wisdom of the past to modern modes of expression to the wider world.

## References

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