

Inter-Relation of Form and Function in Primitive Dance

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The challenge to space and gravity seems to be typically characteristic of the most complex of animal species. This challenge often assumes a symmetrical expression involving form and time. The leap, the dash and the run of young animals, the complex movements of the choreography of birds, the seasonal show of masses of elephants, are obvious signs of such deep need for rhythmical and organized movement.

It is obvious that, in spite of its continuous effort to reach an organic unity with nature, dance – generically defined as “rhythmic action” – has persisted through the various phases of human stages (physical, psychological and social) from prehistory to our days.

To define often means to limit unconditionally. The efforts to define the fundamentally unconscious and deeply rooted instincts, the senses, the atavistic movements, are supposed to be superfluous according to common thinking. “Rhythmic movement” is however too vague a definition for dance unless it includes a total of experience, sounds feeling and purpose. In the attempt of giving a definition I have come to this:

“Dance is rhythmic movement for a multiplicity of reasons: social coexistence, physiological or psychological, catharsis, exhibitionism, self-hypnosis, pleasure, ecstasy, sexual selection, recreation play, development of artistic values, stimulus to action (whether aggressive or not), extension or assertion of social goals and so on.”

The universality of dance has been recognized since immemorial times by historians, philosophers, artists, and has recently become subject of study by anthropologists, psychologists and physiologists; furthermore in recent years dance has had a vast echo, not only from a show-business and entertainment point of view, but also and

mostly as a branch of culture studied in its form and related to its social, biological and psychological meaning. But as this new cultural aspect of dance has been diffused by such vehicles as folklore theater, film shooting and travel literature, in modern society has arisen a contradiction focused on putting dance in an ambiguous position between science and art, essay and entertainment. This separation seems useless to me as art and science often cross each other's paths, at times even mingling, thus creating a new dualism. In primitive society dance is a functional element accepted both as a personal and as a collective phenomenon and this is why there still does not exist a conflict of classification.

Ecstasy, repression, fights, pain and pleasures of these still primitive people are expressed and controlled through ritual dance. It is through intense observation of dance as expression of a community that we can formulate useful hypothesis, both psychological and philosophical, on different types of culture.

The wish of man seems to be addressed in two directions: one towards an obscure atavistic past lost in millenniums, the other towards a better integration and a more organized form of life. According to the character of the individual and of the kind of culture he belongs to, depending on elements still unknown to the psychologist and the physiologist, the longing for unity heads toward a concept of the divine, towards nature, towards the unification of the different personalities from which that individual was born, towards a quest for a conception of good or simply toward an unknown light. Once one has reached some form of unity, a certain stage of freedom from evil is attained, and this is the reward.

Since the ascendancy of evil in our industrialized society is obvious, it becomes even more timely and interesting to observe in societies which still benefit from a primitive stage, to what degree dance serves as a unifying element, to what degree rhythmic movement reaches the depth of the community and individual life, thus creating an equilibrium, preserving it, controlling its emotions. This interest does not have to concern only societies classified as primitive or folkloric. Also modern society exposes itself to be judged through displays of rhythmic-motor activities. Dance in modern society is

almost always confined to ballrooms or other theatrical forms of entertainment. The taste of the non participant audience, the spectators, is important in its analysis: and if we observe the taste for dance of masses through statistics of highly industrialized metropolitan centers, we will find an evident proof of the fast change of morals, ethics, economy and religion throughout the last century.

The rhythm of an average metropolitan center is not made to create integration, on the contrary. Or perhaps, we human beings are still too bound to our traditions to adapt to the ever growing heterodoxy imposed by our own way of life. Our step is uncertain, our bearing has lost its composure and our spirit has no relation with the air we breathe. We are ruled by a continuous turmoil of rhythm and movements emanating by insignificant men turned into machines and institutions, by fears, anxiety and loss of faith. The very rhythm of the human body, the heartbeat, the breathing, the delicate system of waves emanating from the nervous centers of the brain, the flux from the blood-vessels and the unconscious movements of the muscles, are in constant struggle with the cacophony and disharmony which are the fruits of our industrial age. In the dance halls, the giddy jazz of the 1920-30 period, leads to the raving frenzy of the Lindy Hop and its following developments. Ten years later, once reached the top, came the return to the years before 1920: the Charleston, Dixieland and the bright folk-dances. An odd combination of jazz and bolero came from Cuba during the 1940-50's, under the name of "Mambo" and has invaded America and Europe.

Since the time of the great waltz born immediately prior to the industrial revolution, floor dance of modern man, which is after all the only remainder left of dance as culture portrayal other than theatre, has stressed the augmenting neurasthenia, the growing lack of an integrative tendency and the fundamental lack of harmony we live in today.

There is a biological evidence that a fundamental sense of order exists in every living organism: a neither fortuitous nor shapeless movement. The search for the visible evidence of such order has engaged and still engages philosophers, scientists and artists. The

obvious and almost obligatory start of this problem should be a study of those societies which still live in a status relatively free from the vast complex of industrialization.

PART II

Although I have chosen the Island of Haiti to depict the various theses explaining the unity between man and his gods, man and the elements of nature, man and the complex of the fundamental rhythms that govern him, I do not feel I can state that the people of Haiti are not neurotic. For some of them African gods have become schizophrenic superstition, for others the effort to reconcile these divinities with Catholicism creates a deep conflict, and for many others the anxiety of the "Caste-color" system is psychologically unbearable. But once having set foot on the island one soon realizes that unifying agents are already at work.

The Republic of Haiti occupies one third of the island known as Santo Domingo, at first named "Hispaniola" by its discoverer Christopher Columbus. The other side of the island, less attractive from a geographical point of view, is formed by the Republic of Santo Domingo of Spanish origin. Whilst Haiti is French in the contacts and habits of its upper class, the influence of the brief North-American occupation and the subsequent influence of tourism have soon been absorbed by its culture. The uncultivated people speak French Creole, work sugar cane and coffee, pick cotton in a concerted rhythm known as *combite*, singing under the direction of a leader, fish in the deepest sea drawing a special dance movement from the movement of waves in honor of the god *Agwe*. At night when Haitian peasants gather around a small fire to tell stories, chat, judge and question, they create a pleasant rhythmical game. Furthermore, nine out of ten nights, guitars, maracas, and Cuban imported bongos give rise to a "Bamboche" which has the power to bring together the neighboring villages. Or else a jukebox will play endless mambos in the various coffee shops on the ocean shores, on the road to Leogane. On the hills above Port au Prince, the *Rada-Dahomey* drums, once beaten by fine sticks on a five-foot trunk

covered by ox skin, break the freezing mountain air and diffuse along the coast a wave of excitement throughout the Champ-de -Mars, where mulatto lovers hold hands on the stone benches. *Legba, Ogun, Damballa, Aida Ouedo*, invocation to these and many other gods can be heard from the stairs of the Presidential Palace, while a group of bearers descending rhythmically from Petionville, suddenly performs a dance swinging their shoulders and shuffling their feet. From the bowls of the southern land, the Congolese drums answer this hierarchy of gods with obsessive sexual moans. At night it is the drums, during the day the sound of the hooves of donkeys on the stone pavement; the play of their mistresses and the endless shuffle of steps leading to the market and then back to the hills, always shaped rhythmically and always, even if watched from a distance, in some sort of choreography . One immediately realizes that this rhythmic sense penetrates every aspect of the island life.

Industrialization has not yet invaded Haiti, notwithstanding the strong influence of North America and tourism. No doubt the great success of the bands of slaves rebelling against the Napoleonic army has contributed to form the character of modern Haitians. Certainly the success reinforced the belief in African and Haitian divinities and the violent destruction of all material traces of the former colonial state, gave a free hand to the development of a truly folkloristic and highly individualistic society.

When one arrives in this island one feels a cohesive force: it is the rhythm. Contrarily to any political or social dispute of the moment, a Haitian, no matter to what class he belongs to, will answer the call of the *vodun* drum. His social status may inhibit a direct reaction but to deny an answer would be as if a true Spaniard let himself be appalled by the sight of blood at the entrance of the arena or by the cry of a flamenco song.

There is another more intangible quality of the rhythmic element than the sounds and movements associated to a conscious action, and this can be noticed at any moment, observing the reactions in motion and the sound of a crowd in front of a battle of cocks: the screams of peddlers and the dance like motions of the dockhands loading coffee.

For the elite, the only physical participation takes place at carnival. At receptions or in night clubs. For the most part of the population, the peasants, the farmers, the small shop-owners on dusty roads, it has always been dance to express emotions, experiences, joys and suffering. Thus it is dance that makes the not easy life of the Haitian peasant, more bearable.

The emotional life of any community is obviously visible in its forms of art. And since dance tries to capture constantly the various moments of life in a fusion of time, space and movement, dance becomes at one point the most faithful reporter of a culture.