

# THE TRUE MEANING OF AFRICAN DANCES

by Keita Fodeba

**D**URING the many tours our troupe has made in France and other countries, I have noticed that for most Europeans, the authentic African dance show corresponds to the single idea they have formed of Africa from attending a lecture or seeing a film.

But this idea is bound to be wrong, for Africa is a much larger continent than Europe and more varied. A film made of any given part of Africa cannot entirely reflect the essential character of our different regions, in the way that France, Germany or Sweden, for example, could never become identified to the point of merging into one psychic entity. Senegal and the Congo are as different from each other as Finland is from Italy. And has not modern science endowed the West with a number of means of human contact as compared with our so-called "primitive" countries, where Nature still weighs heavily on man, often isolating him from his nearest neighbours? It seems to us consequently tendentious to try systematically to classify the whole of this vast continent by reference to the colour of its inhabitants. The influence of background upon man is far more important than that of the degree of pigmentation of his skin. A thousand historical examples prove this eloquently enough, be it a question of white, black or yellow races.

Nevertheless, we do not think that the influence exerted by geographical or social surroundings, however powerful this may be, is alone sufficient to mould man. As far as we, the black peoples of Africa, are concerned, it is obvious that whatever may be the degree of assimilation of foreign cultures as a result of being many times uprooted, it is still historically too early for us to lose all our African ethnical characteristics.

Our transplanted brothers have generally been placed in such political, moral and material conditions, that as a result of retiring within themselves so often they have reinforced their psychic bonds with our continent. Owing to the dominating effect of conditions of environment upon the individual, it would seem difficult to speak of a culture of the Negro

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**RHYTHM AND MOVEMENT** are media by which the people of Africa express their feelings in a language of dance as intelligible as speech. Characteristic of the life of Africa, the dance can become ritual, magic, witchcraft, exorcism, an expression of freedom, of morals and varied sentiments... for dance is able to reach to man's instincts and subconscious powers and to express him completely.

Zulu dance. © Paul Almasy, Paris



# AFRICAN DANCES

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World. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, nowhere in the world during the long years of their tragic expatriation have the black races enjoyed social and economic conditions which were sufficient to destroy utterly their original ties.

On the one hand, Africa being the land of origin of the Negroes, we can probably deduce that for a long time, and wherever they are, they will retain something ancestral which will link them to their African brothers. On the other hand, when we consider the fate reserved, generally speaking for the black man in the so-called "civilized" world, we are obliged, in the present circumstances, to recognize and wish for a certain identity of aim in culture. "Every culture worthy of the name, must be able to give and to receive," it is said. And the added merit of the black cultures will be that they all have the same legitimate desire to defend the cause of an unjustly used race.

When drawing up the programmes of the African Ballet Company, our constant concern is to avoid misleading the public by presenting a fictitious picture conforming to the usual preconceived idea. To make Africa and all its variety known, we have chosen dance, not only as an excellent means of universal expression but also because, with us, it is connected with all the other arts.

African dance indeed, far from being the autonomous art that it is in Europe, is primarily a union of rhythm and movement. A characteristic phenomenon of our life, it can become ritual, magic, witchcraft, exorcism, an expression of freedom, morals and sundry sentiments... for dance is able to reach to man's instincts, to his subconscious powers and express him completely.

In all countries of the world, there are as many forms of dance as there are peoples, customs, cults, traditions and ethics. The differentiation between the arts in Europe has progressively raised dance to the status of ballet by detaching it from the life of the people, of which in Africa it is a spontaneous emanation. The developed form of dance, self-conscious and no longer imitative, collective or religious but a creation in itself, has existed in Western culture for many centuries.

This progressive tendency to intellectualize the dance, which seems to be in proper relation to progress, seems to forget the fact that the arts at the beginning sprang from necessity, that is to say, they were created in response to a vital need. Ballet, in its Western conception, is an original choreographic and musical creation. Our popular African dances hardly yet correspond to this. But if ballet is "a form of artistic and cultural expression developed by man in his endless quest for new means of expression, in his yearning to create forms which are ceaselessly renewed according to his genius and abilities", African dance as a means of expression and of exteriorization can be identified with ballet. That is the reason why we call ourselves the "African Ballet Company" with the conviction that our songs and dances will have some significance for all who have correct ideas about life in Africa.

If, in Europe, dance must necessarily aim at grace and beauty, be aesthetic as well as expressive of an idea, in our peaceful African villages, we still learn to sing and dance just as one learns to talk. Nobody dances for his neighbour but, instead, to express what he feels, translated by the rhythm of his movements and his body into a language which, although different from speech, is no less intelligible. Moreover in a country where drums can send messages to great distances, it would be impossible to dissociate music and dance for the rhythms of sound and those of the body have the same capacity for expression. A step evokes a rhythm as much as a song involves a dance figure.

Photo Ilse Steinhoff, from the film "L'homme contre la jungle"

**CIRCUMSTANTIAL DANCES** are as numerous and as varied as events in daily life in Africa and they are chiefly characterized by a strong element of improvisation. Thus, to the rhythms of the tom-toms and the balafons, the whole village will join in a common celebration for the return of a soldier, a successful hunting trip or the reconciliation of two tribal chiefs.





© Pierre Verger

**RITUAL CEREMONIES** are nearly always accompanied by dances of symbolic character. Each African dance has a definite reason behind it. There are traditional dances based on history or ceremonial rites, just as there are also circumstantial ones which originate in the innumerable aspects of human existence. Photo shows a ritual dance performed in Dahomey.

Neither would it be possible to understand the essential part played by dance in the life of the African peoples if one did not bear in mind their conditions of life. When a body has the lightness and the flexibility of a "liana", who could prevent it from dancing? When the economic stage is essentially agricultural, involving few needs and material worries why not move like a bird or snake, open like a flower and so be in communion with Nature and the mysterious powers which people it and animate it?

If one remembers these circumstances it is easy to see why the Africans are, so to speak, the real men of dance. For the very rhythm of their existence is already an invitation to dance—a simple rhythm in common time, which can be translated into the following needs:

- to work for the community
- to enjoy the fruit of common labour
- to honour the gods who protect man during his life and safeguard him after death
- to exteriorize the cause and effect of these activities by song and dance.

One should not however deduce from this that if our people rhythmically stamp the ground in the public place in the village, they do so unconsciously, like a leaf shaken by the wind. Not one of our dances is performed without a definite reason. Just as there are traditional dances based on history or ceremonial rites, so there are circumstantial dances which arise from innumerable circumstances of existence.

In this way, when the Mandinga civilization was spreading over a large part of the Continent, the vulture which usually hovered over the bodies of the fallen, was regarded as a symbol of bravery and courage. A dance was dedicated to him, which the more intrepid warriors solemnly executed after a victory. Today, the Mandinga tradition has adopted this "Dance of the Vulture" as a token of honour and no one has the right to dance it who does not deserve to do so through some brilliant feat of

arms or if he has not been authorized by the Council of Elders.

A thousand dances of this kind stand out as landmarks in the history of Africa and help to explain it. In return, popular tradition has created, through the centuries, other dances, the character of which is also symbolic, but which are dedicated to ceremonial rites. Such are those which, among the peoples of Upper Guinea, mark the initiation of the child at puberty to the principal duties of life. First, bewitched by the traditional rhythms, the initiate is possessed by the devils of his own natural bad tendencies; he dances until he loses consciousness. He is brought back to life by the witchdoctor whose exorcism then points out the path of good to the child... As for the circumstantial dances, they are as numerous and different as the happenings of life and are mainly characterized by the large part left to improvisation. In this way, for instance, to the rhythms of the tom-toms and *balafons*, the whole village will celebrate the return of a soldier, a successful hunting trip or the reconciliation of two tribal chiefs.

It is, moreover, important to note that a celebration of which the original character is completely circumstantial, may be periodically repeated later without in any way becoming part of the cycle of ceremonial rites. The best example which illustrates this is certainly that of the clearing of the land. At the beginning of the rainy season, the whole village gathers at the call of the drums to cultivate together, in common, the field of every head of a family. And at night, by moonlight, this form of mutual assistance enjoyed without distinction by all the families, is the occasion for great festivities and joyful dances.

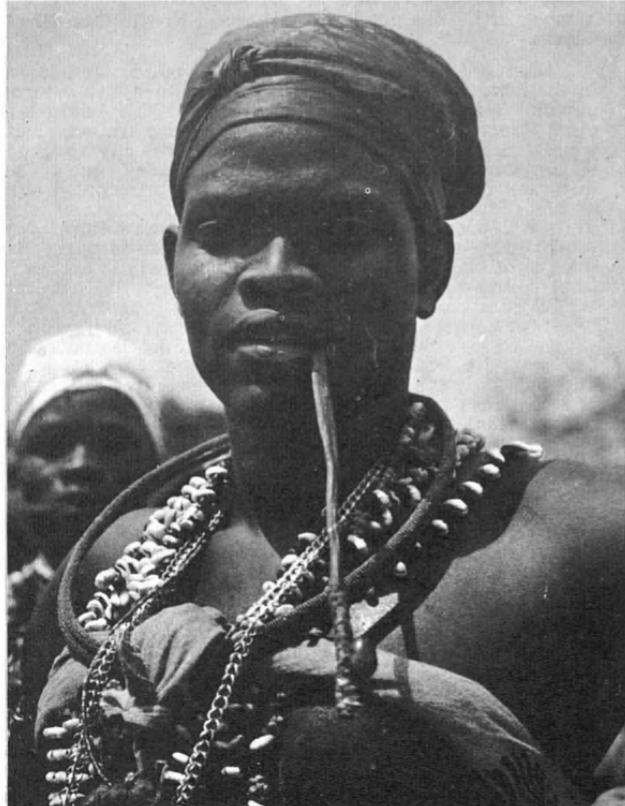
Yet, although all is replete with art and poetry, there are still some people for whom an African folklore performance is far from being artistic, for the simple reason that 2,000 years of civilization have not so far drawn their attention to the

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Sudan. © Paul Almasy, Paris

Dahomey. © Pierre Verger, Paris



*When a body has the lightness & flexibility of a liana, who could prevent it from dancing?*

existence of genuine forms of culture other than their own. One can also remember that some civilizations at their peak have died out, not having been able to regenerate themselves by contact with external cultural movements. The rôle of African performers of the future must be to bring out the essential, characteristic elements of our cultures while preserving their originality in our contacts with the Western world.

How often do we hear the word "genuine" used at random to describe folklore performances.

Genuine, in fact, compared to what? To a more or less false idea which one has conceived about the sensational primitiveness of Africa? No! Authentic folklore is that which truly represents the more characteristic aspects of the existence it wishes to bring to life on the stage. Thus, to appreciate the degree of authenticity, it is necessary to know at least a little about the life which gave birth to the performance. By giving, *a priori*, a pre-logical mentality to the Africans, it is indisputable that one cannot perceive the intense humanity contained in their songs and dances.

For us, authenticity is synonymous with reality. In so far as folklore is made up of a country's traditions, poems, songs, dances and popular legends, it can only be the reflection of the life of that country. And if this life develops, there is no reason why folklore, which is its living expression, should not develop too. That is the reason why the folklore of present-day Africa is as authentic as that of ancient Africa, both of them being the real expression of the life of our country at two different periods in its history.

### What makes folklore authentic?

**T**HE present tendency of an African folklore company such as ours must be to display to the whole world the cultural values of both these two Africas; the traditional and pre-colonial Africa of our forefathers and the Africa of today which is gradually being impregnated with Western civilization. Indeed it would be absurd to confine our folklore only to our own country's past, for no folklore in the world is entirely pure and free of all mixture.

Because Arab influence has indelibly marked Spain, this does not mean that the songs and dances of that country are not genuine. On the other hand the history of the dance teaches us how the liturgical dances of the Middle Ages differed from the popular French dances of the period, during which, through various influences, the latter became the choreographic language of the aristocracy and gave rise to theatre and court ballet, so nearly resembling each other as to be indistinguishable. Have the Basque dances of today remained unchanged in style and meaning for hundreds of years?

In Africa too, just as there are the dances of our fathers and our grandfathers, full of majesty and wisdom, so the younger generations in the villages create today songs and dances which picture our times, already marked by three centuries of colonization.

During our last African tour, a musician of the forest region of Guinea gave us, as a souvenir of his village, some fine "maracas" made of coconuts. Yet it is generally considered that maracas come from South America... There are a hundred similar examples that we could mention for the paradox of a certain type of ignorance is that it considers all objects, instruments, dances and so on, that the black peoples have brought with them in their enforced pilgrimages to other continents, have only become genuine since their exile and because of it.

The essence of authenticity in folklore is not to lose the original character through external influences. In our programme of African ballets we have a "Casamançais"

song, the words of which are in Portuguese Creole, but the feeling of which is deeply African because it expresses one of our oldest proverbs: "Love is like an egg, he who breaks it is lost". In this way a Creole African song may perfectly well find its place in an African performance, Portuguese Creole having become the current dialect of a large part of Casamance to the south of Senegal. In the same way one should not be at all surprised to see half-castes among our performers, singing and dancing in the usual manner of our villages. For if Western influence is felt in the economic, cultural and political life of our country, it is also felt in the field of simple human contacts and has produced the increasingly large class of mulattos, considered by Africa as her own children.

During our last Paris season at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a Press critic seemed to be upset by the fact that our singer Kandia, one of these traditional African "griots", sang in a more or less Spanish-Flamenco style. This journalist was obviously unaware that some African empires from the 12th to the 15th century, had strong ties with the Arab countries and were influenced by them just as Spain came to bear the same Arab stamp. Kandia has no idea what a Flamenco is but, brought up to a knowledge of African history he knows that if the huts in the Sudan (seat of the Mandinga Empire) are rather Arab in style, it is because they have been inspired by the Mosques built by Es Saheli, the architect whom the Emperor Kongo Moussa, brought back with him from his sumptuous pilgrimage to Mecca. And it would be absurd to think that our Sudanese huts were not authentic!

### Drums speak with power & magic.

**I**n all countries of the world, art progresses in relation to the social, economic and political conditions which determine it. Thus as well as our pure, unmixed forms of expression we must present those which have been influenced by other civilizations. But whatever the form of expression used, African art teaches us to regard as essential in our societies—solidarity, love of virtue and brotherhood between men.

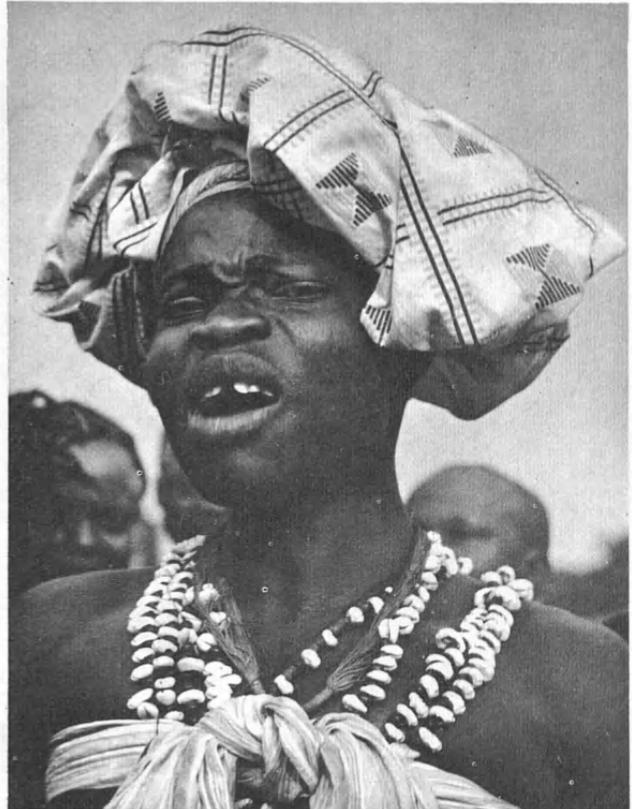
Nevertheless, the stage being different from life, it is necessary to resort to a certain amount of stage adaptation to make ourselves understood by a foreign public. In our African villages, the same dance may last a whole night without tiring anyone. The dances are, moreover, executed in the middle of a ring of spectators who also take part almost as much as the dancers and musicians. On the stage new conditions have to be created through different devices in order to retain the freshness and reality of the dance and to destroy the monotony which is quick to arise due to the non-active participation of the audience. That is the reason why we must take our dances only at their culminating point shorten them and cut out a thousand details which are not important except in the public place of the village.

In conclusion it only remains to express a wish which is dear to our hearts:

May the Africa of tomorrow never lose the secrets of its songs and dances! May it always be able to dance, for to Africa dance is life—a thousand years having been only like one long dance with many figures, a real dance of life which is the message of Africa today! The Africans in the cities must not neglect this message nor abandon its meaning to the hazards and vicissitudes of history. We do not know to what extent dance may play a determining role in other societies. But we know that with all its moral and social context, dance has been the link which enabled African societies to maintain their cohesiveness. We know that only the drums have sufficient power and magic in their voices to speak to Africans in their original language.

However different the forms and origins of our dances may be, they nevertheless seem to share the same spirit. This is the spirit which man never ceases to discover with wonder in himself. For him there is only one law: continual progress, onwards and upwards. In this way, to the dynamic power of the thought corresponds the dynamic power of the dance, which is thought embodied.

*The article above was adapted from "African Dance and the Stage" by Keita Fodeba, published in Volume VII, No. 3 of "World Theatre" (See page 35: "The Only International Theatre Magazine"). Keita Fodeba was born in French Guinea, and after leaving university he became a teacher in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Prior to forming his African Ballet Company in 1950 he travelled throughout Africa to recruit his dancers. He is now Guinea's Minister of the Interior.*



Dahomey. Photos Pierre Verger, Paris

