



THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL DANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT:

Traditional dance plays a special role in South African society and social life. People dance to express joy or sadness, and stories are often told through mime and dance to reinforce cultural beliefs and values. Dance has been part of South Africa's history since the first nations' (the Khoi and the San) inhabitation of South Africa. Today, South Africa is a myriad of different cultural groups, each expressing its cultural heritage and traditions through dance. The African Renaissance philosophy of South African President, Thabo Mbeki, emphasizes the rediscovery of Africa's creative past as a possible way of creating a new national South African identity. This article attempts to identify generic roles of traditional dance as a reflection of Africa's creative movement culture in South African context. A perusal of the literature and personal interviews were used as a research methodology. The following generic roles were identified and are clarified: establishing and reinforcing social values role; cultural-educative role; political supportive role; communicative role; cultural integration and transitional role and an economic role.

KEY WORDS: *traditional dance; roles; South Africa*



INTRODUCTION:

Based on traces of the earliest human excavated along the enormous rift of the African continent, it has been suggested that Africa could be the cradle of humankind (Hammond-Tooke, 1974; Coetzee, 1982). The paleontologist Raymond Dart, concluded that three main racial groups once lived and wandered in ancient Africa, resulting in an unhurried southward migration and gradual split into four ethnic groups crossing the Limpopo River into South Africa. The Nguni, Tsonga and Venda spread into the eastern regions of South Africa, and the Sotho occupied the central part of the country (Doke, 1960; Hammond-Tooke, 1974). When the Dutch formally set foot on South African soil in 1652, they were met by the San (Bushmen) and the Khoi (Hottentot). Today, South Africa is a myriad of cultural groups. Each of these groups shows distinct characteristics, dance and cultural traditions and beliefs, practiced as part of tribal culture and history from early homogeneous development, which is still reflected in contemporary South African multicultural society.

METHODOLOGY AND AIM:

A thorough perusal of the literature and personal interviews were applied as appropriate qualitative research methodologies (Henderson, 1995). The aim of the research was to identify generic roles of traditional dance as a visible manifestation of movement culture of South African cultural groups and not to analyze or interpret specific dances from an anthropological perspective. Generic roles are illustrated by referring to examples of dances practices by South African cultural groups.



ROLES OF TRADITIONAL DANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY:

Dance, like music, forms an integral part of African culture. In contrast with Westernized cultures, traditional dance in South Africa is still practiced as a basic life form and is probably why this form of movement culture plays such a prominent role in the everyday lives of the majority of South African people. Singing without rhythmic dance is almost inconceivable. In many South African languages the word for dancing and singing (and music) is derived from the same term (*-bina*) (Malimabe, 2000). The form of dance is influenced basically by the occasion. Song, dance and the often-accompanying praise poetry are important issues in the culture of African people because it is regarded as living records of past and present events and traditions (Kgobe, 1999). Dance and song as historical records equip present generations with knowledge about important traditions, beliefs and rituals which have existed from the beginning of time (Kgobe, 1999). A review of the literature (Evans-Pritchard, 1928; Kurath, 1960; Schapera, 1962; Hanna, 1965; Morris, 1966; Monnig, 1967; Kealiinohomoku, 1976; Elliott, 1978; Schoeman, 1982; Pinnock, 1994) reveals six generic roles of traditional dances of the ethnic groups in South African society: establishing and reinforcing social values and rituals (solidarity) role; cultural-educative (cognitive) role; political supportive (cognitive) role; communicative role; cultural integration and transition and economic role.



SOLIDARITY ROLE: ESTABLISHING AND REINFORCING SOCIAL VALUES AND RITUALS:

Traditional dance depicts the social norms, traditions and beliefs of a community. Members of a community are educated to retain the constructive measures that are expected from every member within a given group. This implies that social and cultural norms are established and reinforced for future generations. Dance as articulated movements accompanied by song, publicize mutual relations, social values and the protocol for co-existence between members of the particular community (Evans-Pritchard, 1928; Hanna, 1965). From this perspective, traditional dance plays an important role in marriage, funerals, initiation ceremonies, religious practices and rituals (Malimabe, 2000).

MARRIAGE:

Marriage among the African ethnic groups is not an individual affair, legalizing only the relationship between a man and a woman. It is a group concern legalizing a relationship between the two groups of relatives (Monnig, 1967). Because this is a public affair, dance and song accompany it. In rural areas, wedding songs and dance were regarded as an occasion for “social” competition and positioning, especially among the Sotho group (Botswana, Bapedi and Basotho) (Kurath, 1960; Monnig, 1967; Malimabe, 2000). During the wedding ceremony, a group of singers escort the bride to the in-laws’ house for the second day of the wedding celebration that started on the first day at the bride’s home. The bride’s group of dancers



could ridicule and jeer at the bridegroom's group of dancers. Once the bride has been welcomed at her husband's home, the singing and dancing becomes mutual. Although the basic choreography of the wedding dance exists, each group's interpretation may differ but groups can adapt to the others' choreography without difficulty (Malimabe, 2000). The wedding dances are also opportunities to show off the traditional regalia and decorations and to honor the ancestors with praise poetry and dance (Kgobe, 1999). The encompassing objective of song and dance at a wedding feast is to unite families and relationships, to express co-existence among members of a society and to establish social position (Malimabe, 2000).

rites of passage:

In the Botswana culture, some of the songs and dances of boys and girls are connected to proposal and finding a future husband or wife (Hammond-Tooke, 1974). As they sing, the rattles on their feet make sounds that are in rhythm with the dancing moves. A whistle or horn might be blown; only the movement of the feet and body language convey messages (Malimabe, 2000). Dance plays a very important role in the initiation ceremonies of both girls and boys. Probably the best known initiation dance is the "Domba" (python dance) of the Venda. It is through dance that the expected codes of married life are conveyed and reinforced. Initiated men do not dance in a rough exciting way like young women. They move in short steps, holding long thin sticks, looking down at all times. This body language is in accordance with their status. They are no longer boys but men – therefore,



dance shows maturity (Coetzee, 1982). Upon completion of their initiation school, the girls dress in their best traditional attire. A feast is held at the king's kraal where all the new "graduates" dance in front of the king so that he can choose a wife for himself, even if it is the second or third wife. The best example of such a dance is the "Reed Dance" of the Swazi (Hammond-Tooke, 1974).

RELIGION AND RITES:

Although Christianity is regarded as the dominant religion in South Africa, 38.5 % of the population is animistic and also practices ancestral worship (Statistics South Africa, 2006). Sangoma and traditional healers are considered important mediums and derive their powers to predict the future, diagnose and cure diseases from the ancestors. Sangoma and traditional healers use song and dance in training as well as practicing their profession. Dancing and singing in these circumstances are always accompanied by the beating of drums with the purpose of invoking the ancestral spirits (Morris, 1966).

SOCIAL POSITIONING:

Men and women usually dance separately, although there are instances where dancers mix. The dances reflect the social role and status of the two sexes. The dance of the Southern Ndebele women, for instance, differs totally from that of most of the other South African tribes. The traditional attire of the Ndebele women is made of huge, beaded rings worn around the neck and legs. This, obviously, restricts their movement because the Ndebele women are supposed to take time



doing things. Their dancing movements reflect the social position, in that both feet and hands are moved in slow motion. Men as the dominant sex in African society, on the other hand, use fast aggressive dance movements – like the powerful lifting of the legs in the Zulu warrior dances (Malimabe, 2000).

CULTURAL-EDUCATIVE (COGNITIVE) ROLE:

Every community raises its young according to its norms and values. Traditional dance has an educative role in that it conveys knowledge about the customs and traditions of a society. When boys and girls cross the bridge between childhood and adulthood, social, religious and sexual instruction are given through the medium of song and dance. The dances are living records of a community's cultural legacy. A nation's movement archives contain the cultural and moral records of past generations. Many of the moral lessons on desirable social skills are taught and reinforced through traditional dance (Kgobe, 1999; Malimabe, 2000).

POLITICAL SUPPORTIVE (COGNITIVE) ROLE:

Traditional dance (accompanied by songs and praise poetry) fulfills a cognitive role. It can induce feelings of unhappiness, fear, hatred, affection, pride or courage. These feelings can arouse different reactions (Kgobe, 1999). If these feelings are linked to the political views of a community, it becomes a powerful instrument. An excellent example of the political supportive role of traditional dance can be found in the toyitoyi dance. This dance as a form of political fighting



originated out of the dissatisfaction with the previous apartheid regime. The toyitoyi dance usually accompanies mass political striking actions. Its choreography is based on the movements of the traditional Zulu dance, which is fast, aggressive and warrior-like (Groenewald & Makopo, 1992). Even the traditional dances of the white Afrikaaner (Volkspele) play a political role. These Volkspele dances still carry a strong political connotation and are often incorporated in conservative Afrikaaner political rallies and festivals. The political supportive role of all traditional dances is, therefore, primarily to stabilize and promote group solidarity and identity and has political value as it serves as a medium of political comment.

COMMUNICATIVE ROLE:

The communicative role of traditional dance is to some degree underpinning all the identified roles. Traditional African society is an oral one where cognitive and social information are conveyed orally and reinforced with body and dance movements. Dance movements clearly communicate intentions and are often visual chronicles of a community (Malimabe, 2000).

CULTURAL INTEGRATION AND TRANSITION TO WESTERNIZED SOCIETY:

A number of South African national policy documents and philosophies guide the social re-engineering process of society. South African President Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance philosophy



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emphasizes the rediscovery of Africa's creative past and indigenous cultures (Mbeki, 1999). Traditional dance, given the diverse roles it fulfills, plays an important role in the implementation of the African Renaissance philosophy. Different cultural groups use traditional dances as a conduit to convey social and cultural values to members of other cultural groups. It serves as an intersection of cultural and individual identities and promotes intercultural tolerance and facilitates cultural harmony and pride. To operationalize these roles, traditional dances are an integral part of South African national festivals such as Freedom Day, Heritage Day, Youth Day and Women's Day. The national Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (1999) identified traditional dance as a vehicle for cultural development by staging annual traditional dance competitions to uphold the cultural legacy of all ethnic groups in South Africa. Even choir dance choreography includes traditional dance movements and presents excellent opportunities for mutual exposure to diverse traditional dance movements and expressions. The influence of traditional dance is also detected in modern day South African Sepantsula and Kwaito dances (Malimabe, 2000). In the urban townships of South Africa, the Sepantsula dance is a mixture of different ethnic dance styles. The fast movements of the feet of the Tsonga and the Khoisan are combined in this popular township dance. According to Malimabe (2000), the Kwaito dance and music of South Africa also show traces of traditional dance influences in the uplifted position of the hands, criss-crossing of the hands in front



of the body, wriggling of the waist and hips (Tsonga, Tswana, Khoisan). Internationally renowned South African singing groups such as “Boom Shaka”, “Juluka” and “Ladismith Black Mambazo” incorporate traditional styles of dance in their performance choreography.

ECONOMIC ROLE:

While in the past, traditional dance was practiced at festivals and rituals, it has also become a way to earn a living and contribute to the economy. Groups of traditional dancers and singers are hired to perform at different official functions and private functions such as weddings, funerals, graduation ceremonies, and parties. The tourism value of traditional dance is also reflected in the number of international tourists visiting attractions such as “Gold Reef City” and “Shaka’s Village”. South African Mining Houses host annual tribal dance competitions that carry substantial prize money. These competitions, as cultural showcases, combine the roles of traditional dance as described above.

CONCLUSION:

Traditional dance, music and song are inseparable in African society. South Africans dance to express joy or sadness, and stories are often reflected through mime and dance that reinforce cultural beliefs and values. The Africanization of South African society is reflected in the presence of traditional dances at official government functions; at the same time, traditional dances have not escaped the influence of globalization. Contact with western culture, especially the African American type of



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music and dance like pop and rap, is influencing the younger generation in urban areas. Based on the diverse roles of traditional dances, it can be concluded that the richness and diversity of traditional dance in South Africa may prove to be an invaluable contributor to the peaceful transition of South African society.



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