PRESENT TEXTS, PAST VOICES: THE FORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WEST AFRICAN DANCES

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Methodological Proviso

Discovery of historical knowledge or disclosure of historical truth are no longer tenable research objectives, while speculation as to the conditions which enable forms of knowledge and truth to be constituted is conceivably a legitimate practice. Nor can there be the unveiling of a definitive version of past events, but rather, the mapping of a multiplicity of authorial voices through the deployment of interpretive strategies which acknowledge that all writing is situated (Adshead-Lansdale 1996; Buckland 1996 on Franko).

Reading the Past, Situating the Present

If the subtext of contemporary history is therefore the recognition of the constructed nature of all accounts including that of one's own authorial representations, then what am I to make now of statements made in 1994, when I was asked to write on historical methodology in relation to West African dance traditions (Gore 1994)?

I acknowledged then, as I do now, that expressions such as "dance in West Africa" or "West African dances" are shorthand terms, perhaps misleading and certainly misnomers, for talking of regionally circumscribed, local traditional practices of what is Eurocentrically called "dance". West Africa commonly denotes a geopolitical unit encompassing some 16 nation states and over 500 different linguistic groups, each with their own distinct traditions. It is neither culturally, socially nor even politically homogeneous, as numerous 'sixties post-independence democracies have been swept away by the tyranny of military and other totalitarian regimes. Moreover, the English word "dance" has no direct equivalent in most West African languages, some of which either have several corresponding words, and many of which concentrate multiple meanings into one word (Aguilar 1997: 86; Gore 1994: 60-1). Practices construed as "dance" in many European languages would, for the Nigerian Edo1 or Igbo for example, be termed respectively iku or egwu, practices which, in many parts of West Africa, are conceived as including music, singing, play, games as well as dance. To quote USA based Igbo painter and art historian Anìakor (1997b: 205): "To dance is therefore to play (igba egwu) or 'to dance play' in response to 'the beating out of music' (iku egwu)". "Danced play", I have deduced, is intrinsically rhythmic and sociable, that is, you never dance alone and you never dance without music. It would perhaps be logical or legitimate (but who's deciding?) to talk of West African dances in relation to popular musical forms such as high life or juju, as

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1 The terms Edo and Bini are used interchangeably in the literature, the former being the original indigenous term for Benin City, now also used to denote the language, the people, the kingdom and the empire (Egharevba in Agheyisi 1986: iii-iv; Picton 1997: 92). I have omitted tone marks in Nigerian languages as the meaning of words is clear from context.
these are performed, played and danced across West Africa even if they are said to originate in specific West African nations, respectively Ghana and Nigeria. Given these reservations, why continue speaking of West African dances when such expressions refer to no commonly held local conceptions of danced practice, and when they are in effect Eurocentric constructions, representations of exotic otherness which I risk reinforcing through their very use? I justify this discursive practice for a number of reasons, though this may be just a question of habits of thinking with all the lack of critical awareness which the term implies.

First of all, rather than working with any given empirical reality, I wish to question the historical discourses which have contributed to constituting African, including West African, dance as a generic form, one which seems to be gaining increasing currency in a multicultural Europe concerned with what might be called an ethical interculturalism. ² In Britain, for example, the state Arts Council has been publicly funding, through educational and choreographic projects, what it defines as African or African People’s dance; in France, an African dance teaching syllabus is under elaboration as part of the national teaching diploma (Diplôme d’Etat de Professeur de Danse); and, throughout Europe, African dance classes are increasingly programmed as are staged events in both theatrical and folk festival contexts.

My focus, in this paper, on West African, rather than on African, dances pertains to a certain familiarity with local discourses, which has accrued from my ten years spent in Nigeria (a British colony until 1960), and with available source material on dance practices in the region. This reference to presence in the field, to firsthand experience, is no doubt a vestige of an obsolete positivism and colonialism. Although it undermines the earlier emphasis on the analysis of the discursive, it does, of course, confer the illusion of authenticity and of textual authority; it also provides an evaluative or interpretive yardstick against which to measure the veracity and credibility of historical accounts.

Furthermore, the discourses on “dance” considered in this paper began to be constituted in an era which preceded the late nineteenth century “carve-up” of Africa by the colonial powers into distinct nation states. The term West Africa therefore conveniently delimits a region criss-crossed and commented upon by foreigners from as early as the Middle Ages with Arab conquerors coming first, across the desert from the North, and Europeans arriving later by sea and exploring the interior via the grand rivers Gambia and Niger. The European mapping and identification of West Africa, however, was a slow and piecemeal process. Although the Portuguese first navigated and traded with the coastal areas in the fifteenth century, it seems that the earliest references to the region as a whole appear in the eighteenth century, for example, with Barbot’s account of the “Western Maritime Countries of Africa” (in Churchill 1746).

² The political agendas as regards production and funding of “African” dance in Europe are numerous and complex, the latter often in the hands of “white” decision makers. To Africans living outside of their countries of origin, and in relation to African cultural nationalisms, the construction and dissemination of “African Dance” may have positive values. To those African peoples whose dances are not reified for inclusion under the generic rubric, and/or who may wish to resist the appropriation and globalisation of local cultures, such a move may continue to be interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism.
Mapping West Africa: From the “Bloodthirsty” to the “Dancing Negro”

By the end of the nineteenth century, West Africa is a region increasingly delimited and defined, through the combined efforts of the colonial and anthropological discourses, as that part of the world reputed for “the reek of blood, which ascends only too noticeably from any attempt to give an actual picturing of places and peoples such as these” (P.A. Talbot 1923: 339). “A belief in the efficacy of sacrificial blood in order to purchase the favour of the powers of fertility is worldwide; but perhaps nowhere in past days did this dread libation flow in such streams as in West Africa” (P.A. Talbot 1927: 128). Human and animal sacrifices, inextricably linked to the worship of each “tribe’s jujus”, are said to be practised throughout West Africa on ritual occasions and within the numerous secret societies, apparently so prolific in the tropical rainforest coastal zones. By the early part of the twentieth century therefore, generic cultural traits characterise West Africa and its “blood thirsty” “Negro” population, traits constructed from “fetishistic” practices so absolutely abhorrent to the White man, yet which because of their very otherwise have lured him to document these extensively (for example, Marriott 1899; Milligan 1912; Nassau 1904); and this occurs, paradoxically, at a time when European local “Government” is outlawing what it believes to be their more inhumane aspects. These practices, when revealed to the White man through performance or oral recounting, usually include references to “dance”, now connoted with the barbarism of sacrificial ritual. With the implantation of colonial administrations and the apparent eradication of human sacrifice and cannibalism, as well as other “barbaric” or “vulgar” aspects of traditional culture, these sinister representations of West Africa give way, without however disappearing entirely, to “exoticised” generic characteristics, positive representations already present since the seventeenth century in the discourses of those sympathetic to West African cultures. For example, Gorer (1945 [1935]: 186) in the 1930s in his well-known book Africa Dances celebrates the “Negro’s” innate capacity to dance. And I quote: “Far more exotic than their skin and their features is this characteristic of dancing; the West African Negro is not so much the blackish man or the cannibal man or the primitive man as he is the man who expresses every emotion with rhythmical bodily movement” (Gorer 1945: 186).

By World War II, West Africa, I suggest, has been constituted as a region exercising an ambiguous fascination over European observers. This fascination, present in much Euro-centric writing on African dance, is nourished by the latter’s apparent exoticism, that is, an absolute strangeness which inhibits critical analysis and favours the construction of generic traits. This may explain, in part, the frequent recourse to metaphors of energy and athleticism, which constitute a discursive thread dispersed in much post-war writing, whether critical or anthropological, on West African dancing, and which are largely absent from its historical antecedents. And I cite from a cross-section of West African and African dancing examples. “Speed and power flow through all African movement...” (My emphasis) (Bartenieff and Paulay in Lomax 1968: 258); “...for two and a half hours, loud, complex drum beats pound out the story...the dancers smile constantly and display the kind of energy that would have an average aerobics class begging for mercy after ten minutes...” (anonymous review of Adzido, pan-African English-based classical African dance company [in Semple 1992: 26]). “She then places her hands on her knees and begins moving her rear quarters in a series of precise athletic gyrations” (a description of the urban Senegalese female “electric fan dance” by ethnographer Heath in the 1994 American Ethnologist [in Aguilar
1997: 88]). And lastly, I include, from Brennan’s (1997) review of three separate West African or pan-African dance performances in Scotland, the quotes which prompted the writing of this paper: “...energetic dances,...astounding tours de force of complex drumming...” (1997: 14) or a “cavalcade of generous, unbuttoned energy that pounded out across the auditorium” (1997: 16), used to describe Guinea’s Les Ballets Africains; “the flow of possessing energy coursing through bodies until it formed a stream of oracular words” (1997: 17), a metaphorical flurry referring to England-based Kokuma Dance Theatre Company’s performance.

Energy and athleticism are, of course, ideological emblems of post-war modernity, as is the identification of the body in motion and of physical prowess with Blackness, for example on the sports field and dance floor. This stereotypic labelling of blackness as biological, whether in Afro-centrist epidermalism or the biological determinism of Bell Curve ideologues, “re-energises a worn-out Victorianism” (Gilroy 1997: 28), and reinstates the African body as essentially productive, a force to be contained and controlled, a transfiguration of the colonially constituted African as work-horse or rather “beast of burden”.

Energy and athleticism are also notions constitutive of local aesthetic discourses. They are, however, deployed differently, as we shall see later. Nonetheless, I believe that this ambiguous fascination acts as a kind of mirror reflecting only an ignorance which would be unacceptable in any analysis of European dance, whether theatrical or traditional.

Distinguishing Dance

I also wrote in 1994 that written source material directly addressing the traditional dances of West Africa was scarce, as dance had generally been overlooked by those writing about West African traditional cultures, but that there were other texts from which such information might be culled (Gore 1994: 62-64).

On further reflection, I now think that the apparent indifference towards dance derives from a number of factors, which do not include what might be regarded as a disdain for the body and its actions, inherited from the Christian rejection of all things carnal and reinforced by Victorian Puritanism.

Rather, the differences between European notions of “dance” and local conceptions of “dancing” have clearly conditioned the extent to which, and the modes in which, West African dancing was (and still is) written about in general terms if not in the anthropological literature. For, if little which was recognisably dance to the European observer, whether explorer, traveller, trader, missionary or government official, could be discerned in West African practices, and if local discourses did not distinguish between performance modes within categories comprehensible to the European, how then could details of such activity be identified through observation, then interpreted through discussion for final textual documentation?

A clear example of this is the repeated use of the term “play”, always in quotation marks, in D.A. Talbot’s 1915 account, from a white woman’s

3 Aniakor (1997a) has recently produced a survey of seventeenth to early twentieth century texts which mention dance, produced by travellers, explorers, missionaries, traders and colonial administrators in Africa. This compilation, which indicates those texts with more comprehensive description, includes a total of ninety-five texts, of which nearly half refer to West African dances.
perspective, of the Ibibio of Southern Nigeria. Faithfulness to local conceptions may have determined the eleven entries in the Index for “plays” and their complete absence in relation to dance, drumming, music or song. And, not surprisingly, half of these entries include direct references in the text to dancing, since a “play”, in Talbot’s account, is a performed event, which always includes a dramatic enactment, usually recounted in the form of a story, and some or all of the elements of drumming and other music, song and dance. Since, indeed, neither the Ibibio nor the British of that era thought of dance in ways conceivable today, why should they have highlighted the dancing as intrinsically more interesting than any other aspect of performance?

I am beginning to wonder if the preoccupation to search out and focus on the dancing, or to bemoan its textual absence, is not conditioned by the deeply-ingrained Eurocentric habit of conceiving of art as compartmentalised and specialised practice, and by the increasing globalisation of all performance, irrespective of its local contexts of production. Moreover, I suggest that the discourse concerned with “lack” of dance description may articulate Eurocentric notions of dance as framed activity:

framed either by the exigencies of theatrical conventions (with the literal framing of the stage and its attendant effects), or framed by the exigencies of social conventions (for example, that dancing is performed in contained or defined space/times such as the ball, the market-place, the disco or the theatre and so on). It may be that this discourse even contributes along with modernisation to the decrease in traditional performance in socially and ritually significant contexts. Dances, in the West African context, where they still constitute part of the social fabric, risk, in relation to a certain traditional network of signification, becoming only vestigial relics, hermetic mnemonic systems, framed museum pieces and staged events, not that these do not also become cultural capital, tactical elements in the negotiations and struggles of contemporary living: maskers welcome international dignitaries, acrobatic dancers promote national values, and so on.

The Intertextual and Intercultural in Contemporary Discourses

In the initial proposal for this paper, I had not intended to effect an auto-critique of what I wrote in 1994, but to explore further the idea that current discourses on West African dances derive part of their legitimacy from those constructed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. By the beginning of the twentieth century, such dance discourses belonged to a discursive formation which by constructing otherness had enabled the simultaneous constitution of the European within the humanist paradigm of Man, a figure which Foucault (1970) demonstrates is a historically specific mode and not an ultimate condition. Central to this project is anthropology and a certain kind of evolutionist history, so prominent in the earlier mentioned dance discourses.

On revisiting a variety of historical sources for this paper, I was struck both by the prominence of implicit evolutionist theory in the accounts of West African practices (even by those such as P.A. Talbot who took pains to record local

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4 African dancing is clearly subject to context specific ‘framing’, determining the boundaries and format of the activity. However, this may be an inappropriate metaphor for describing local conventions as it embodies notions of perspective, linearity and impermeability which may not be present in situ.
cultures from the indigenous perspective, that is, “to tell the story of a little-known people from a standpoint as near as possible to their own” [1923: vii]), as well as by the ways in which evolutionist discourse has filtered into local contemporary historical accounts.

Given the influence of Frazerian evolutionism from the end of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising perhaps that the main comparative references in both the Talbots’ pre-World War I accounts of Ibibio practices (1915, 1923), and also in Gorer’s (1935) later ones of West African dance, are ancient Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek. In P.A. Talbot’s description of the Ibibio “short tail” and “long tail” dances, one event performed by male members of the Egbo secret society to bury a chief, he deduces that they are bird dances from the costuming and movements, and therefore “another possible survival of the old [Egyptian] ritual bird dances” (1923: 163). The availability of such discursive models in Benin City (indeed I bought my copies of Talbot there and not in London) has, no doubt, shaped certain Edo accounts of both the origin of the Edo people as a whole (Egharevba 1960: 1) and of specific practices, all believed to have their roots in Egypt. In the mapping of local accounts of dance histories, further research needs to be undertaken to identify how early European anthropological and colonial accounts may have been incorporated within traditional discourses.

What I had not anticipated was that I would find some kind of discursive continuity between early European representations and local contemporary historical accounts, a connection which should have been obvious from the start given the visibility of Victorian colonial institutions in contemporary Nigeria. I had, on the other hand, expected to find some discursive links between contemporary European representations of West African dancing as energetic, powerful and athletic, and earlier European sources. Given the modernity of these notions, it now comes as no surprise that they emerge only after World War II.

Furthermore, on reading Aniakor’s (1997b) recent analysis of two Igbo masquerades, I was struck by the repeated use of energy-related expressions, which are indeed significant within the context of Igbo, if not West African, performance aesthetics. The notion of “heat” is endemic to dance and other ritual displays, and describes the charged atmosphere created during moments of tension in performance. (The opposite of “heat” is “coolness” which refers to calmness and purity.) Moreover, performer-audience relations in Igbo and many other West African performance contexts are dialogic and dynamic, with a reciprocity alien to most contemporary European contexts. A successful performance is therefore judged by the excitement generated in the audience, and their responsiveness. Aniakor therefore repeatedly uses verbs such as “excite”, “energise” and “warm-up” as well as adjectives such as “hot”, “athletic”, “energetic” and “vigorous”.

When the Igbo describe an event as being hot, they are underpinning a model of dance aesthetics which is embodied and well realized in the heavy t[h]reads, stomping dance steps and aggressive turns of the Mgbedike [male] masked spirit and/or the elusive and athletic dance movements of the maiden spirits. Such displays transcend the expected and normative (formalized) to draw from individual inventiveness, improvisation and other acts of dance movement transpositions. No two maiden spirit dancers perform the same way even when they draw from the same dance resource/model. As the Igbo say: ‘As a person dances, so the drums beat for him,’ (1997b: 208).
Despite the use, in common, of words in Aniakor’s text and in those earlier cited, I believe that the discursive context is different as Aniakor situates these within a bi-cultural analytical framework, which draws upon European structuralist theoretical traditions and Igbo discourses on performance. This kind of intercultural analytical work is to be distinguished from the fetishistic descriptions which continue to permeate certain texts, fetishism being a practice which, paradoxically, colonial Europeans went to such pains to outlaw in West Africa.

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