African Dance and the Warrior Tradition

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The "warrior tradition" has been characterized as capturing such aspects of human organization and symbolism as (1) the idea of adulthood related to notions of self-reliance and (2) the concept of manhood linked to violent valor and sexual virility (Mazrui 1975). In this paper I shall explore the relationship of dance to the warrior tradition: its multifarious manifestations, the Eurocolonial impact on warrior dances, and the transformation of "traditional" warrior dance in the post-colonial independence period. The discussion will be introduced by some preliminary qualifications and a summary of the mechanisms or properties of dance which help to explain why this form of human behavior is so commonly a concomitant of the warrior tradition.

Qualifications. A few preliminary remarks are called for concerning the problems involved with data and generalization about the concepts of "warrior" and "tradition". Unfortunately there is no full study of the relation of dance to the warrior tradition. Rather than a diachronic thread within a single ethnic group woven from precolonial through the European imposition to the independence era, one finds scattered and often superficial descriptions of warrior dances in the literature. By the time many scholars were on the African scene, pacification had occurred. Some colorful descriptions refer to mock attacks, frenzied leaping and charging, wild plunging and thrusting of spears, savage weapon brandishing, abandoned gesticulating faces, transfixed eyes on invisible enemies, dilated nostrils, perspiring bodies, nervous trembling, unflagging vigor, blood-curdling shrieks, roars of defiance, and exhilarating

1 Uzoigwe (1975) reports on the dearth of pre-colonial military studies. When a tradition is stamped out, it is hard to write about it. Brelsford (1959) found that there was little descriptive material on war dances in Zambia, attributing this to inspiration lost with the cessation of warfare. Since few anthropologists could observe "illegal" warrior action, many were obliged to rely on the memories of informants, some of whom glorified their history or suppressed it in accord with the values they presumed the inquirer to hold. Furthermore, the literature on war was usually written by individuals who considered dance from the contemporary Western perspective of being a segmented, "frivolous" slice of life and not worthy of attention. "They danced" is the reference ad nauseum.
throbbing sonic accompaniment. These are hardly useful to the serious social scientist. Warrior dance description and discussion of purpose, function, and relationships between dance behavior and other sociocultural phenomena are also limited because of the underdeveloped status of African dance studies. My discussion of African dance and the warrior tradition must therefore be incomplete.

It is important to point out that on the African continent with its 800 to 1000 ethnic groups, not all have a “warrior tradition”. (Cf. Welch 1975). Sometimes entire groups migrated or parts seceded from a group in order to avoid confrontation. Others surrendered to preclude it. The Lala were not alone in their behavior in the event of a raid: they would desert their villages and seek refuge in the nearby hills until marauders had left (Long 1968: 80). Through conquest or voluntary submission to a warrior tribe or nation, some groups were forced to acquire the warrior tradition.

The concept of “tradition” in dance has been misunderstood. From the evidence we have, dance seems to be characterized by change (cf. Hanna 1965, 1974a; Ranger 1975 on contemporary history). The concept of “warrior dance” refers to dance which is performed by real or symbolic warriors. “War” will be used broadly to include national battles, group raids, dyadic affrays, and the isolated manslaying to prove manhood.

The notion of the warrior tradition encapsulating adulthood and self-reliance must be qualified. Warriors achieved physical characteristics of adulthood and usually an increased detachment from their parents’ nuclear family. However, in many instances, the warrior tradition was a “liminal” (Turner 1967) transitional status toward adulthood and social power. In the Samburu gerontocracy, the warrior junior age set (moran) was forbidden to marry and kept in a state of delayed adolescence until it could be replaced by a new age-set, the creation of which was determined by the elders. Among the Zulu,

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2 This field is retarded because of factors related to the study of the “arts” generally, the study of dance in particular (Hanna 1975b, 1976d), and the factors of the colonial experience and historical time in Africa (discussed in the section on the European impact upon dance and the warrior tradition). The social sciences felt a need to emphasize the “science” in their disciplines and thus neglected the “arts.” Discourse—verbal speech—was the primary key to human behavior. In the arts and humanities, systematic focus on nonwestern forms is also comparatively recent. With respect to the study of dance in particular, scholars reflect the cultures of their own societies and thus have tended to have ethnocentric concepts of dance. Western researchers were most active in Africa and carried with them attitudes of Victorian and Puritanical dislike of the body or shame toward it. Perhaps a voyeuristic appreciation of African dance occurred, but objective reporting may have been psychologically and socially difficult. There was a tendency to perceive dance forms different from one’s own as not dance at all. Anglo-Saxon men rarely studied dance since men’s dancing came to be considered effeminate or with homosexual implications. Most students of an art form have some minimal experience in it. The study of African dance has been seriously hampered by the fact that scholars were not acquainted with dance—its elements (space-rhythm-dynamics and the instrument of dance, the human body) in motion. Consequently, if there was no dislike or shame toward the body, there was often a detachment from it and inability to “read” it.