Development and Promotion of Contemporary Choreographic Expression in Ghana

Africa is endowed with a great many assets: human as well as material. Among the greatest assets are the rich traditions of values, beliefs and customs which, over the centuries, have formed the basis of the endurance of her people. The years of the slave trade and colonization and the many tribulations associated with those times, have not deterred Africans from holding on to some of their cultural values. In contemporary Africa, festivals and rituals are still observed which embody traditions and indicate aspects of political, economic and artistic life. These perpetuate the ideals and identity of Africans.

One of the most significant aspects of these activities is dance and its related arts, music, poetry and theatre, which constitute some of the most powerful modes of expression as far as African culture is concerned. From rites associated with birth and coming of age, through activities related to funerals, these art forms are combined to articulate significant ideas and values. Generally what are described as 'traditional dances' are the result of both individual and community effort. As a result of being performed in public year after year, these dances become part of the group’s repertoire, handed down from generation to generation. Since no community or tradition exists in isolation and since dance movements can be learned or ‘purchased,’ there is exchange of inspiration either because of aesthetic appeal or because of the religious or recreational value of a dance.

An example of cross-fertilization within the traditions of a single group is found among the Ga people of Accra. The popular kpalongo recreational dance incorporates secular dance movements and gestures from older religious dances such as the kple and lakpa, and to these have been added lively and amusing elements. Eclecticism is thus authenticated by existing practice, and it is on the basis of this that the contemporary African choreographers build: establishing a relationship between material inherited from the past, personal experience and the needs of the time.
The process can be seen at work in the post-Independence period, during which several national dance troupes were formed as part of nation-building exercises. Such troupes often began by undertaking research into the traditions of dance and music from different areas, and continued by formalizing the method of teaching these forms to the members of the national dance group.

It can be seen that the development of new choreographic forms is the result of a three-phase development: The first involved the collection and presentation of individual traditional dances both within and outside their places of origin; the second concentrated on the study of the dances in the context of the festivals, rituals and rites of which they formed part; during the third phase, that in which we now find ourselves, the observation and research is used to form the basis of work to inspire the present and the future.

I now intend to look more closely at the work done in Ghana, aware that elsewhere in this publication there is an account of the early years of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. From that article it will be seen that, following the recruitment of a troupe, there was a period of consultation with performers of traditional dances who instructed the members of the troupe at Legon. When these specialists were satisfied that the students had learned the movements, the dances were examined from the points of view of duration, orientation, and clarification. Since dances performed in a traditional context were sometimes unacceptably long and included excessive repetition, they were 'trimmed,' or shortened. In a village performance the dancers often faced the drummers, but for the troupe's performances 'reorientation' was necessary, so that dancers faced in a variety of directions and movements were made visible from all angles. In their existing form, some of the movements could be misunderstood, and so a process of clarification and, where necessary, amplification was undertaken.

As an example of what happened in Ghana, it is convenient to consider the Nandom version of the Dagarti bawaa dance, a seasonal dance. Usually preceded by the pouring of libations to gods and ancestors, the dance was, it emerged, performed at the climax of the harvest festivities and was an expression of communal well-being. The movements involved were athletic and incorporated a great deal of foot stamping and of leaping into the air. The dancers characteristically formed a circle and moved in serpentine formations while the master drummer cued them for the many variations, each with a specific rhythm, which this exciting dance demanded. Because of the many variations of this dance which existed, the company was able to select the movements which it considered most appropriate and representative.

1 See W. Ofotsu Adinku, "The Early Years of the Ghana Dance Ensemble," in the present volume, 115–18.