Music and Dance in African Culture

Music and dance are closely interrelated in all aspects of African life. Professor Yapo quotes Gilbert Rouget as saying that “Africans sing their dance and dance their song….. Music can integrate closely with dance; music can generate dance” (Yapo). The people of Africa appear to understand music through not only the mind but also the body. Yapo describes their belief that “music contains the sound, the source of life…, and rhythm appears to be the expression of life” through dance. In African culture, music and dance compliment each other with each aspect making the other more expressive (Yapo). “In all African cultures, dance, music, and song help define the role of the individual and the group within the community” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

African dancers externalize the music based on the rhythmic precision. Musicians provide the rhythm through percussive and/or pitched instruments, singers, or a combination of the two. The dancer’s goal is to be able to “‘play the drums with his feet’ or with whatever part of the body articulates the rhythm.” The music is the building block of the dance, and the term dance will be used to designate both music and dance in the rest of this paper. A dance may serve more than one purpose, but it is usually a reflection of the community values and social relationships of the people. Some of the cultural functions that African dances may serve are: dances of love,
rites of passage, dances of possession and summoning, education, and recreation (Wikipedia, Encyclopedia Britannica).

Some dances are used to transition those in the community to the next stage of life as can be seen in the dances of love or rites of passage dances. Dances of love may be performed for occasions such as weddings and anniversaries, but courtship dances can also be found in this category. Some examples of courtship dances are the Larakaraka from Acholi which is used to partner those who are ready for marriage, the Ding Ding Dance from Acholi which the girls dance to attract boys, and the Runyege, Entogoro from the Toro region of western Africa where the girl chooses the best dancer to marry. An example of a coming of age dance is the Mwaga initiation dance of the Bagishu people. In order to become a man, a boy dances for 21 days this dance which reflects the initiation ceremony that is to follow. The community believes that if one does not go through this initiation that the boy will be cursed until the spirits force it to happen (face-music). The initial rite for girls among the Ga of Ghana includes dance as “a preparation for womanhood” and as a way to “display their talents to suitors” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Dances of possession and summoning could also be considered religious or ritual dances. These dances play a critical role in traditional African religions and have a central theme of calling to the Spirit (Wikipedia). The Mhondora spirit mediums of Zimbabwe sing and dance to the mbira lamellaphone in order to relate to the guardian spirits of the dead. Dances are also used to exorcise evil spirits associated with hysterical disorders in Nigeria while female spirit mediums of the Kalabari are thought to have healing powers which are displayed through a therapy of song and dance. Masquerade dances are another religious type of dance used in some cultures to guide and judge the living by their dead ancestors (Encyclopedia Britannica).
African cultures use dance as an important educational tool. Dances are used to both teach children physical control and to teach the accepted standards of conduct for the community. Some of these children’s dances may be typical playground dances games such as the leapfrog game that Makindu boys of Kenya sing to a dance rhythm or they may be training for membership in adult societies. Dances are also used to express the qualities proper to a particular age and to show the transition from one age grade to the next (Encyclopedia Britannica).

The most popular form of recreation in Africa is dancing, and the area has seen a shift from the traditional dances with community meaning to contemporary dances that are purely for entertainment. This can be seen in villages with informal dancing or in towns, when people of all ages meet in dance clubs. Ghana’s highlife, Nigeria’s juju rhythms, Zimbabwe’s jit music, and Zairian dance bands are just a few types of music that people can be found dancing to in the clubs. These dances are a combination of traditional African concepts with Western and other influences. The spread of radios and ease of communication have had the greatest influence regarding the change from traditional to contemporary dances. The traditional dances have found a place in entertainment through the institution of civic arts festivals which hold dance competitions, but the original social purpose of the dance tends to be lost as it is changed for the entertainment medium (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Dance plays a critical role in all aspects of African life. The importance of dance to the community is much greater than just that of entertainment as seen most often in other countries. The following quote best sums up the relationship between music and dance within African culture.
Dance plays a cathartic role during the key transition from one social state to another: a child is welcomed into the community at his naming ceremony; an adolescent is initiated into the responsibilities of adult life; a woman moves from her paternal home to join her husband’s family; an elder recognition for service in the form of a title; a member leaves the community to join the world of the spirits. The individual is not left alone to bear the emotions that accompany critical change, as members of the community carry him and his family through the crisis with appropriate ceremonies containing the emotions of the moment in music, song, and dance. (Encyclopedia Britannica)
Works Cited


