

So, You Think It's African Dance?



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times
The troupe Urban Bush Women at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

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EVERY year the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) holds its DanceAfrica festival. Other cities have their own versions, and they serve a purpose in modern America — honoring traditions that were for centuries ignored and repressed — that a DanceEurope festival would not. But on such occasions it's too easy to refer to "African dance" as if it were a single genre.



Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times
Mouminatou Camara teaching at Broadway Dance Center New York.

What is African dance? "I certainly don't know," [Judith Jamison](#), the departing artistic director of the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#), exclaimed in a recent interview: "Africa is a *con-ti-nent!*" Actually, the term is often applied to mean West African dance alone. That geographical area has a particular resonance: many slaves in America were taken from West Africa. Yet who thinks that everyone across West Africa dances alike? And what about the rest of Africa? The Brooklyn festival, which begins on Friday, wisely bypasses those issues. In its 33 years, it has included dances from all over, including the African diaspora.

The clichéd view of "African dance" goes like this: It uses the pelvis all the time and in a much livelier way than the dance of any other continent; the dancers wear wonderfully bright costumes; there's a lot of drumming (the word "polyrhythms" may be added here); the costumes are bright; and of course it's all *perfectly marvelous*.

Yet this exaggerated generalization was once useful, especially for African-Americans re-embracing a heritage that had long been maligned. The label “African dance” helped introduce traditional forms to many Americans. It brought revelations, and it helped advance the causes of civil rights and black power in the United States.

The first stages of reclaiming Africa’s dance heritage were often arduous. The scholar Doris Green remembers that when the national dance company of Guinea, Les Ballets Africains, first came to America in 1959 after great success in Paris, the appearance of bare-breasted women caused offense here. Insults were hurled. One reporter, she recalls, referred to the performers as “savages.”

The choreographer [Jawole Willa Jo Zollar](#), artistic director of the troupe Urban Bush Women, recalls how, growing up in a largely segregated community in Kansas City, Mo., in the 1950s, “we never said we were of African descent.” She added, “Our idea of how people moved in Africa came from Tarzan movies: I honestly grew up imagining that everyone there swung from the trees.”

To switch from these still-fresh memories to the situation today is startling. It’s now evident that African dance should no longer be lumped together as a single category but parsed as pure artistry. The area is as diverse as it is fecund.

It may help to say what African dance is not. No African dance can be “authentic” as performed in America. Chuck Davis, the founder of the Brooklyn event, explained in a phone interview: “We try to show African dances accurately; but they’re theatrical presentations. Authenticity happens in the space and on the soil.”

Further, Ms. Green said, many African languages have no word for “dance.” The words that define movement to music as dance all come from the languages of the colonizers. Throughout the continent, what we call dance is an automatic part of ceremony and social function. For Mr. Davis, it is even more important to know a dance’s intent than its music. Each dance marks some occasion: work, family, season, age.

Examples of these burst into life in conversation with Mouminatou Camara. Formerly a dancer with Les Ballet Africains, today a teacher in New York and elsewhere, she specializes in the dances of Guinea. And she describes dances for male and female rites of passage, full-moon dances of courtship, dances of male strength, working line-dances for men, dances for older men, hunting dances, all-female dances and Saturday-night dances before the Sunday wedding.

It’s the contrast between one African dance and another that the choreographer Reggie Wilson, who has traveled widely, finds staggering. “When I first went to West Africa, my whole brain exploded,” he said in an interview. “I’m still picking the pieces off the wall.”

Mr. Wilson remembers growing up in Milwaukee as black, then Afro-American: “By the time I got to high school I was African-American.” His family can trace its lineage to the early 1800s in the Mississippi Delta; his curiosity about his roots led him there, then to Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and then to Africa. For him, the greatest revelation came in the contrast between the gestural Adowa of Anglophone Ghana and the ecstatic Sabar of Francophone Senegal. Whereas the lively but contained Adowa (which began as a dance for royal funerals) may tell stories with the hands, Sabar has been called the ancestor of street dance. “It’s all limbs!” Mr. Wilson exclaimed. YouTube clips show how Sabar dancers hurl their legs and arms back and forth with phenomenal intensity, sometimes do rapid-fire turns and often explode into the air in jumps.

Ms. Green vividly recalled the sensation that Sabar caused when it was first shown at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1971. “It changed forever ideas here about how African women could move,” she said. Other African forms had shown women in dainty and time-marking steps; in Sabar they were extraordinarily bold and energetic. “At that time black people had just emerged from the terrible ’60s and were defiantly using the slogan ‘I am black and proud.’ The Senegalese paralyzed the audience with their remarkable dancing, singing and drumming. The public had never seen anything so spectacular.”

Ms. Green has spent decades recording and notating dances in Africa. Ms. Zollar has made far fewer visits, and while she notes the wealth of contemporary dance and club dancing there, she, too, speaks of the marvel of Sabar. “Sabar is a verb, a noun, an adjective,” Ms. Zollar said. “It’s old but it’s dynamic; it’s tradition that isn’t static. It’s for the whole community.”

It’s obvious that different parts of the body are used in different ways in various dances. Ms. Camara demonstrated how one dance from Guinea can emphasize the head while another tips the pelvis from side to side, but in each no part of the body is still. That’s crucial to the forms of that country, she said: “The whole body moves.” What about the cliché that the pelvis plays a constant and central part in all African movement? Ms. Green debunked this theory by pointing to YouTube clips of Adowa, in which the upper body leads, and Zaouli (from Ivory Coast), in which the feet pulsate as if on hot coals. If there is a pervasive approach to the use of the body, Ms. Zollar said, it’s simply that there is no taboo.

Virtually all traditional African dances, however, are tied to music-making. In most traditional ones, that music is the language of drumming, but Ms. Green cites exceptions. The jumping Masai (of Kenya and northern Tanzania), for example, sing their own music while they move. But in all the forms she knows, the connection of music and dance is profound, she said, adding, “Every move corresponds to a beat; every beat prompts a move.” She beat a rhythm with her hands on the table. “And when I hear that” — marking one stress — “then I know I’ve got to turn,” she explained.

These discoveries have had powerful effects on American dance makers. For Urban Bush Women, which she helped found in 1984, Ms. Zollar has been drawing on African-derived traditions from jazz to dance ideas from Zimbabwe, say, or Guadeloupe.

Mr. Wilson recalls that his studies in New York included kinesiology, anatomy, the techniques of Martha Graham and Lester Horton, and the work of [Merce Cunningham](#). In an African village, he said, he would encounter “a step that the elders are doing, and you think it’s going to be a variation of some rhythm you know,” he said. “But then,” he continued, “someone moves some part of the body and you think ‘That’s not possible!’ To me the possibilities of the experimental avant-garde are not greater than the experiences I’ve had traveling in the African diaspora.”

In recent decades, students of traditional forms have not all been of African descent, and interest is clearly widespread. As a teacher, with a class schedule that includes Broadway, Brooklyn, Japan and Sweden, Ms. Camara speaks of this with enthusiasm. Mr. Wilson said that while almost all the African dances taught in New York are from West Africa, he had also seen Central African steps executed with real skill at an arts center in Oakland, Calif.

For Mr. Wilson and others, the ways in which African dance forms have become more widely available has enriched their sense of what it is to be African-American. Ms. Zollar said, “I would go further: I would add that it is changing the sense of what it is to be American, and the larger world’s sense of what it is to be American, too.”

“It’s still a gradual process,” she added. “In New York, I find the dance audience is very segregated except when I go to the Ailey company or to Harlem Stage. But there’s a growing sense of diversity, of different kinds of heritage.”

It’s hard, as these experts outline an abundance of dance, not to feel a romantic version of Africa and its extraordinary dance vitality. All of them speak of “the village” as a wellspring, and the divergences between the forms of one village and another can be thrilling. But Ms. Zollar cautioned against “a longing to keep Africa in the same unchanged silo.”

Even if desirable, no such unaltered state is possible. Ms. Green, referring to the traditional forms, stated flatly: “The dances are dying.” Colonialism had already damaged some African dance traditions. (There are regions where drumming was banned, for instance.) In some areas, Islam has also created ambivalence

about dancing. As a girl growing up in a Muslim family over 30 years ago, Ms. Camara encountered parental opposition when she first took to dance.

Economic hardship and social change also pose threats. On her return visits to Guinea, Ms. Camara has tried to consult the elders. Many of the experts she knows, though, have left Guinea.

Ms. Green speaks with particular dismay of the ways in which dance and music are now often taught separately in Africa. “If you don’t know both, you don’t know the dance at all.” A fervent advocate of dance notation, she insists that hers will be “the salvation” of these traditions.

The years to come can only bring further changes, both in the practice of such dances and in how they are perceived. Just now, their profusion — on the stage, in the classroom, in festivals, on YouTube — is a welcome and multilayered phenomenon. As Mr. Davis tells African-Americans who learn these dances, “You’ve got the best of both worlds — you’re Now, and you’re making contact with Then.”