

The Role of Dance in Haitian Vodou

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Dancing, along with singing and drumming, is a fundamental part of Haitian Vodou ritual ceremonies. Just as how the songs and the drums have a spiritual function and reflect a creolized heritage, dance holds a similar value in Vodou. As a religion that is kinesthetic in nature, dance is part of the physical manifestation of serving the *lwa*. Dance is not only an important part of Haitian Vodou but also of Haitian culture, in which there are two types of dance: secular and sacred (Dunham 1947: 15). For the purpose of this paper, the sacred dance will be addressed.

Many anthropologists have studied ritual dances in the African diaspora of the Caribbean. Through the studies of dance in Haitian Vodou, the connection to spirituality and memory provided to the community through dance and music in Vodou ceremonies is evident. The community is a key element in Vodou ceremonies. Hebblethwaite argues that Vodou songs are important because they are the “living memory of a Vodou community” (2012: 2). Dance holds the same importance in preserving this “living memory.” Vodou songs educate about the *lwa* and the philosophy of Vodou and they signal the transitions between phases of the ceremony. Dance in Vodou also educates about the *lwa* and philosophy and through careful study of the different dances, one may also understand how dances change in the different phases of the ceremony.

Before getting into the study of dances, the importance of drums must be addressed. Wilcken (2005) describes the drums as providing the fuel and guidance to the dance participants. The different rhythms of the drums, not only signal the song that is being sung but also the dance that should be done at that moment in time (Wilcken 2005: 195).

Dunham’s ethnographic work on Vodou dance gives us an excellent account as to the organization and form of dance in ceremonies. A Vodou ceremony has two parts in chronological order: a Rada rite and a Petwo-Kongo rite. Dunham (1947) observes that the Rada-Dahomey service begins with a *danza zépaules*, which purifies and prepares for the arrival of the *lwa*. This dance is usually accompanied by songs sung to Legba and then to the other *lwa*. The rest of the dances in the ceremony are determined by the type of *lwa* that are to be worshipped that night. These dances are called *rele lwa* which mean to call or summon a *lwa*. These dances are different than other dances because they are dances of possession. They symbolically reflect the *lwa* possessing the individual. (Dunham 1947: 49-50).

Yanvalou is one such dance. Dunham (1947: 50) describes *yanvalou* as the dance for a general group of *lwa* that include Ayida Wèdo, Èzili, Saint Jacques, and Gede. However, both Daniel and Wilcken describe the *yanvalou* dance as a dance that mimics a snake’s movement and is thus dedicated to “Papa Danbala” (Daniel 2005: 8-9; Wilcken 2005: 195). Dunham does make a distinction for “Danbala” having his own dance that is stylized after him as the “snake god” (2005: 50). However, after viewing videos of *yanvalou* dances on the internet, it may easily be determined that the *yanvalou* dance is really for Danbala due to the movements of the body and arms that mimic a snake (UFLibraries). Dunham gives us another example with Agwe whose dances are in flowing movements: half-swimming, half-waves (1947: 51). These examples demonstrate, as Daniel (2005) argues, that the purpose of ritual dance is to transform the community in such a way that the spirits will appear.

Not only is it important for the *lwa* to appear at the ceremony, it is also a reflection of the “living memory” mentioned before. Daniel (2005) also goes into detail about “embodied

knowledge” which is comparable. Daniel’s example of embodied knowledge is in the dance for the *lwa* Ogou. Ogou’s dance involves “aggressive warrior stances, rigorous travelling movement sequences, and an emphasis on slicing or cutting with a sword or some sort of metal.” (2005: 63). Through the dance of Ogou, the audience is reminded as to who Ogou is; his representation as a warrior, and his association with iron. Brown also describes the possession of Mama Lola by Ogou and the dance that was performed (2001: 95). She describes his gestures as elegant, which speaks to the power that he embodied as the warrior.

The ideas of “living memory” and “embodied memory” are reflected even within the cultural history and structure of the dances. Wilcken translates Moreau’s description of the dances as being from Africa in their characteristics (2005: 197). As mentioned before, Rada and Petwo-Kongo are the two main parts of a Vodou ceremony. Rada is the remembrance and worshipping of the *lwa* originating in the Dahomian region. Petwo-Kongo includes the *lwa* originating from Africa in the Kongo and Angola regions. It is different from Rada because some of the *lwa* it includes also originate in Haiti. (Hebblethwaite 2012: 278, 282).

Three different dance styles make up the dances of Rada. The *zèpòl* which means “shoulders” is a move featuring fast pushing of the shoulders back and forth. The *mayi* is a fast paced three step pattern dance with agricultural influences. These two dances, along with the *yanvalou* addressed earlier, make up the Rada dances (Daniel 2005: 111-112).

The Petwo dances are considered more powerful than Rada. The steps are violent and include the thrusting of the chest and the high lifting of legs to create tense stances and fast-paced running and jumping (Daniel 2005: 114). Dunham describes the Petwo ceremony to be more violent and negative while the Rada ceremonies are beneficent and positive (1947: 66-57). Though her descriptions may be extreme in calling one negative and the other positive, she does highlight the difference between the ceremonies and the dances: the Rada dances are more calm and orderly than the fiery Petwo dances.

Dance is an integral part of the Vodou ritual ceremony. By studying the nuances of the dances involved in a ceremony, one may understand how the dances, drums, and songs are interrelated. With all of these components, it becomes clear that Vodou is a layered religion in terms of its complex history and culture.

Works Cited

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