

THE ISHANGI DANCERS

Study Guide

All Africa sings, dances, and plays musical instruments spontaneously. Music is far more important in the daily life of the African than it is in the European lifestyle. Music is part of everyday work, religion, and ceremonies of all sorts. It is even used for communications.

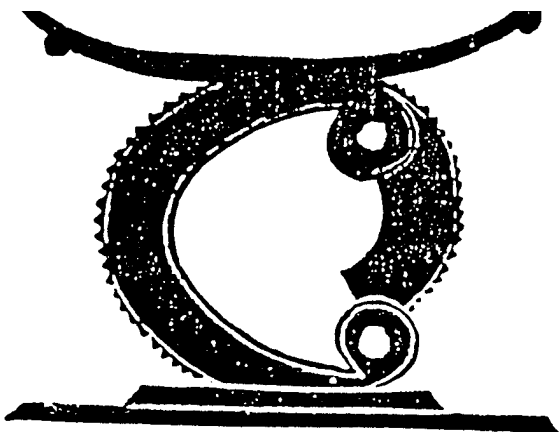
The African uses his entire body as an instrument to provide rhythmic accompaniment for his dancing. He makes percussive sounds with hands, feet, and mouth. He slaps his chest, thighs, knees, arms, and hands. Stamping dances are common everywhere, but especially where drums are scarce, as among the Nguni people of South Africa.

Sometimes dancers wear anklets, bracelets, and waist rattles made of metal balls. If they are of varied sizes, they produce different pitches, thus creating pleasant sounds to emphasize the rhythm of dance.

As one watches African dancers perform the ritual movements of their peoples, one can find isolated body movements (e.g. back-snapping) which are reminiscent of American popular dance of the '60's and '70's. But there the similarity ends, for where that style of dancing existed primarily to entertain, the African dancing serves specific social needs.

African dance is firmly anchored to community life. Fishermen are joined by girls of the port to celebrate a good catch; women desirous of bearing children dance a prayer of invocation; an exorcism is performed through a ritual dance.

Throughout Africa there are various instruments. From region to region they change. What the instruments are used for, however, does not change. There is a basic African culture in Africa, but people are led to believe that there are many different cultures. Although instruments may be different, clothing, houses or languages, all Africans respect elders, revere family life, use music, singing and dancing as languages, believe the earth is sacred and can never be owned, Almighty God is over everything and the ancestors sit in the after-life as extended family.



Most of Africa was colonized at one time or another. References to Francophone, or French speaking Africa and English speaking Africa leads one to believe that there is a French or English Africa. In all of the colonized areas African customs and traditions remained intact up to the present day.

In Africa there is a drum language, Morse code is not used. For instance, every group of people in Africa who play drums can speak there verbal, spoken language on the drum and can make announcements, historical recitations or proverbs. When a king or queen is walking in state, the court drummers (i.e. musicians) will play the history of the lineage of the rulers past and present. The musicians will call the names respectfully of those who passed before the present ruler took power. As they move along and see revered elders, the musicians will, through music, pay respects to their houses and lineages (i.e. singing praises). (There are groups who do not play drums but have other instruments they use which speak their language.)

The way music is utilized in the outside world is unknown in African society. When one plays music, he speaks a language. When one dances, he dances a dance that tells a complete story using the language of the dance. Speaking, chanting and singing are also highly revered as necessary tools for proper African communication. One does not only speak with words, but also with the body.

There are many different lifestyles in Africa, nomadic, stationary village life, traveling trader hunter/gatherer such as the Bushmen, farming, fishermen, Jewel or African historians erroneously called griots, herbologists, traditional spiritual practitioners who are mistakenly called witch doctors, city dwellers, businessmen, teachers, presidents, prime ministers, queens and kings, etc.

There are also different forms of education in Africa, i.e. traditional African way of teaching, European schools, Islamic and Christian schools, to name a few.

It is only very recently that Americans have become comfortable in using their bodies for expression. Universities offer avant-garde psychology courses in Non-Verbal Communication. Julius Fast published a book in 1970 called Body Language (M. Evans and Co.) in which he made some interesting points about the ways in which people's bodies communicate their feelings and needs. He called it the science of kinestics, the use of non-verbal communication through the means of body movements. This is, in effect, the essence of African dance. Through his body movements, the African reiterates his celebration of life.

Mr. Ishangi is a man who believes deeply in global unity. He expresses in all his works his feeling that "One cannot love his neighbor unless he is first aware of his neighbor. Through understanding of others' cultures, only then will peace and global harmony begin to come to mankind." His lectures and performances with his family take him to colleges, universities and communities where he tries to promote understanding of Africa's cultural expressions.