Traditional Dance in West Africa[1]

In most of this chapter I am concerned with historical methodology as applied to traditional dance in West Africa but the perspective from which it is written is anthropological. The use of the personal pronoun 'I' is an acknowledgement that the cornerstones of anthropology, fieldwork and ethnographic writing, are reflexive practices and, in some senses, autobiographical.[2] By 'traditional' dance I am referring to local forms which are said to belong to the cultural fabric of the people in question.[3] Moreover, while what I write is based mainly on my knowledge and experience of dance in the Nigerian context, much of it is relevant to other areas of West Africa that have comparable colonial pasts and where the local cultures are also largely constituted through discourses and practices which bypass the written word (though today not the radio and electronic media).

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To speak of West African dance is in fact a misnomer. As has been well documented (Blacking 1983: 89; Grau 1983: 32; Kaeppler 1985: 92-4; Middleton 1985: 168); Spencer 1985: 140; Williams 1991: 5, 59), the ethnocentrically European term 'dance' is not applicable to systems of structured human body movement of non-European peoples, who have their own terms of reference for conceiving of such activities. For example, in southern Nigeria most ethnic groups have a generic term which includes dance among other activities which are construed as intrinsically sociable and usually rhythmic. The Bini word *iku* refers to 'play', 'dance', 'games' and the Igbo *egwu* to 'play', games, 'dance', 'music', song. In Bini the word for 'to dance' *gbe*, also denotes 'to beat', while in the related Isoko language *igbe* means 'dance'. The specific meaning of each of these expressions is context-dependent. Individual dances do, however, have their own names. The generic term may provide the basis for these names as in the Igbo compound *egwu-ugegbe* ('mirror-dance'), dances may be named after the accompanying drum as in the Bini *emaba* or *esakpaede* or may have emerged for other culturally-specific reasons. While acknowledging these complexities, the word 'dance' is used throughout the chapter; the indissoluble connections to music and play which exist in the word 'dance' for many if not all West Africans should not, however, be forgotten.

Moreover, it is not only that dance is conceptualized in culture-specific terms, but also that conditions and relations for its production and performance are different. Although the creation of a dance, for example, may be attributable to one person, it is unlikely that the dance will be either named after this person or recollected in those terms (see Begho 1986: 115). In religious cult dances, individual performers may introduce new 'unrehearsed' steps, but the acknowledged creator or choreographer is the god in question since this is the one who guides the performer's actions. This implies that, along with European notions of dance, those of 'choreography',

'performance' and 'appreciation' may need to be reconceptualized in the process of researching the dances of West Africa.

There are further reasons why the expression 'West African dance' should be used with caution. While West Africa may be considered as a geographical entity comprising some sixteen nation states[4] stretching from the Atlantic in the west and the Gulf of Guinea in the south to the Sahara in the north and Lake Chad and the Cameroon mountains in the east, it is not a homogeneous unit. Geographically it may be further defined by its north/south divide; a large but diminishing savannah belt which occupies the southern coastal zone. A fundamental religious split between Muslim and Christian, a reflection of west Africa's colonial history, more or less mirrors this north/south divide; in addition, there are numerous indigenous religions which still flourish, especially in the rainforest belt. Muslim Arab and Christian European colonization have thus created a fundamental political and cultural rift within West Africa even if, simultaneously, they created forms of unification which cut across ethnic differences.

Colonization of black West Africa[5] began in the eleventh century with the Muslim Almoravid conquest of the then kingdom of Ghana and continued until the nineteenth century with the European 'scramble for' and subsequent 'carve-up' of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884. Kingdoms, such as that mentioned, are known to have existed since the eighth century and managed to survive, despite colonialism, in less accessible areas until its culmination at the end of the nineteenth century. With the consolidation of West African colonialism between 1900 and 1914 , those kingdoms which had maintained their independence were brought under either French or British dominion. A period of 'stable' colonization lasted until Independence was granted in the 1950s and 1960s to all but two countries under Portuguese rule. Each contemporary West African nation state has, moreover, its individual history of colonization. None the less, certain common infrastructural features have been established at the level of social, economic and political organization, as well as a dependency on the west for all forms of commodity including cultural elements. It is important to note that the first Arab and European contacts, established through the gold trade and made before the eighth century with the Berbers and in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese, had already begun to influence the local cultures.

With the exception of Liberia,[6] the current national boundaries, which have been endorsed by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), were constructed by Europeans. To suit their own purposes, they constituted indigenous groupings of peoples into modern political units with little or no regard for ethnic differences. The contemporary West African nation state, the fragile product of colonialism, thus encapsulates a rich socio-cultural tapestry as well as containing enormous political and cultural tensions because of this arbitrary division of peoples.[7]

Finally, the most striking feature of West Africa is the tremendous diversity of its peoples and of distinct cultural traditions. For example, Nigeria alone, the largest African nation with a population in the region of 88.5 million (1990 census), has over four hundred distinct languages, a quarter of the languages of sub-Saharan Africa (Hansford *et al.* 1976); and while an ethnic group is not usually defined only by the language that it speaks, linguistic differences are a good indicator of cultural diversity. Each of these socio-cultural groupings, with their own forms of traditional political organization which operate substructurally within the nation state, has its own dance traditions. These are not usually enshrined within special dance institutions but operate in diverse contexts. Traditionally these include cultural groups, religious cults, guild systems, age-grade organizations, secret societies and associations with a variety of functions. There are, however of number of contemporary special dance institutions. Local dance groups are run by individuals and usually perform only the dances of one cultural tradition; and, in Nigeria for example, the companies of the state (i.e. regional) arts councils perform the traditional dances of all the peoples of that state.

Membership in the local dance groups is largely a matter of either automatic affiliation, as with age-grade organizations, or voluntary adherence as with the cultural groups which alone choose performers specifically for their dance skills. In many instances, the choice of performers for a specific dance will depend on skill in relation to local ideas of what constitutes correct performance, and those groups with open membership will attempt to lure those who are known in the community as 'good' dancers to going with them.[8]

From this brief discussion of the heterogeneity of West African culture it is possible to make a number of further generalizations about dance practice and production. For reasons of dogma and morality Islam and Christianity have outlawed dance at various points in time. Because of the longer-term and more deep-rooted Muslim colonization of the northern sahel and savannah belts there is less visible dance activity there today than in the more densely populated Christian dominated southern regions. Here, during the colonial era, much dance activity was banished and went 'underground' or rather into the 'bush', only to return after Independence to the larger villages and urban areas for revival and public performance, at least in the former British colonies. This rich dance culture of the south has in fact been sustained by the adherence to traditional religions, which continue to hold sway and flourish alongside various forms of Christian worship, and to a traditional *modus vivendi* in which the profane and the sacred are contiguous and overlapping fields and the mundane is, therefore, imbued with the numinous (Mbiti 1970; Uchendu 1965: 11-21). Thus, most traditional dance, whatever its context of production or performance, and although not specifically religious, has religious associations (Gore 1986: 54-5; Hanna 1987: 101-127), the significance of which is often difficult to grasp fully for those brought up in secular societies.

Finally, the importance of dance in societies which are traditionally based on oral and performance modes of communication and forms of knowledge requires highlighting.[9] Because of its polysemy, that is, its capacity to bear many meanings, and its economy as a means of communication, and because the body is its 'instrument', dance can thus serve as a most effective mnemonic system (Connerton 1989: 102-4). It can store all kinds of embodied information for transmission through performance. These include occupational activities, historical narratives, moral precepts and a host of other symbolic, emotional and social codes.

The effect of common ecological niches, of intercultural exchanges or of parallel historical conditions has been to produce dances which may be said to display stylistic similarities.[10] No traditional dance, however, may be described as characteristically West African, for to isolate one as representative of the whole region would be to violate the richness and diversity of dance in West Africa.

SOURCE MATERIALS

A number of major problems emerge when researching the history of traditional dances in West Africa. Foremost there is a lack of written materials (including scholarship in the field), the conventional resource for the historian. This can be explained not only by the 'orality' of the societies in question but also by the fact that dance has generally been overlooked by those who have written about West African traditional cultures. This applies equally to indigenous and foreign writers, since written discourses in West Africa tend to be Eurocentric.[11]

With the exception of Gorer's (1983) *Africa Dances*, a travel book first published in 1935, there are no texts which deal with dance in West Africa in general. Gorer documents a journey which he undertook with the Senegalese Wolof dancer Feral Benga through part of the French West African interior and the Gold Coast, to study traditional dances. The bulk of his observations concern all aspects of the socio-cultural context, including an indictment of the French colonial administration and its effects on traditional culture. None the less, descriptions of dances do pepper the book and one chapter is devoted to a description of the general characteristics of dance in West Africa together with a number of more detailed examples. Gorer (1983: 201) makes no claim to expertise in dance analysis, and his descriptions suffer from lack of precision as well as from the linguistic and ideological bias, if not prejudice of that era. They also lack anthropological rigour, as Gorer had not, by then, studied anthropology. They should, therefore, be approached with caution. Despite these reservations and the fact that any generalizations about West African dance are difficult if not impossible, his observations may be used as a historical source as regards, for example, the performance of certain dances in the 1930s.

There is no introductory general history of West African dances, nor indeed any published detailed histories of specific dances or dance traditions. The focus of texts written in English has been on the dances of East Africa (see Mitchell's (1956) *The Kalela Dance* and Ranger's (1975) *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*).

Therefore, for each study of the history of a specific dance (or set of dances) a resource base of accessible primary and secondary materials, written and otherwise, needs to be constituted. Also, if at all possible, new primary materials need to be generated through contact with those who have first-hand knowledge of the dances in question. Ideally an extensive period of fieldwork (historical and ethnographic) in the 'indigenous' locale of the dance would be of most benefit; but fieldwork in Europe, for example, in the local West African communities with members born 'at home' would also reproduce valid and valuable source material.

Primary and secondary sources

The distinction between primary and secondary sources is not only a shifting one depending upon disciplinary perspective or the research in question: it is also a matter of strategy, that is, a means of evaluating and validating sources by organizing them into a hierarchy of difference which accords them their relative significance and authenticity. So what is conventionally valued in both historical and anthropological methodology is the presence of the author (whether known, as is usually the case with ethnographic field notes on dance, or anonymous, as with publicity advertising a dance festival) at the scene of the dance event. This authenticates and confers authority on the document in question, considered as 'raw material' observed and recorded, and thus confers the title of primary source. However, since history usually deals with the inscription of the past and anthropology with the inscription of the present, the source which in history is considered primary (for example, P. A. Talbot's account of Nigerian Efik dances at a funeral ceremony [1923: 163-4]) would be generally considered secondary in anthropology. Field notes, and other documentary sources such as photographs generated by the researcher from first-hand experience, are the anthropologist's primary materials per se. The historian is almost always working with materials produced by someone else. Given the mobility of the boundary between primary and secondary sources, historical material on traditional dance in West Africa is described here according to its medium of communication, that is whether written, oral, visual or performed. It is important to note that my choice of categorization privileges the written over the oral (and relegates the performed to the last), and by implication foreign accounts over indigenous. It has the benefit, however, of enabling a preliminary overview and critique to be undertaken of the mostly foreign writers' secondary sources.

Written sources

Although written histories are sparse, there are a number of other texts from which dance historical information can be culled. Accounts from travellers, traders and missionaries who penetrated West Africa before the establishment of the colonial structures date back to the Middle Ages. One of the earliest descriptions of dance is the brief observations of Ibn Battuta, the African from Tangier and probably the greatest traveller of the medieval period (McEvedy 1980: 62), who, during his journey to the then West African Sudan in 1352-3, apparently witnessed a ceremonial dance procession at the court of a sultan in Mali (Thompson 1974: 29).

Descriptions such as Battuta's continue until the seventeenth century, when they become more detailed observations not only of general context, costuming and musicianship but also of the movements themselves. Many of such accounts, like those more natural scientific ones of the eighteenth century, demonstrate a genuine enthusiasm, lively interest and positive appreciation for West African dance. They construct a representation which affirms the cultural sophistication of the people and which is very much in keeping with the eighteenth-century image of the 'noble savage'. Like most accounts of the 'other', the practices observed are implicitly judged against those of the writer's own cultural expectations.

> They dress quite elegantly, especially the women when they wish to go dancing, which they execute with great presumption.
>
> de Marees (1604) in Thompson (1974: 30).

> The Negroes do not dance a step, but every member of their body, every joint, and even the head itself, expresseth a different motion, always keeping time, let it be never so quick.
>
> Adanson (1759) in Thompson (1974: 37).

In the nineteenth century, with the increase in colonization and eventual establishment of colonial administrative structures, accounts of West African, especially Gold Coast, cultures, including its dances, increase dramatically. It appears to be during this period (not surprisingly, when European 'Victorian' culture is being imposed upon or adopted by the local populations) that certain descriptions of the dances adopt the moral, prudish and prejudiced tone of the era, which represents them as non-aesthetic, sexually lewd and animalistic practices. A precursor of this form of description is Mungo Park's cursory reference to the dances of the people of the Galam region: 'The dances, however, consisted more in wanton gestures than in muscular exertion or graceful attitudes' (Park 1983: 49).

Simultaneously, a new source of written documentation emerges in the form of the newspaper. For example, in 1863 an enterprising Jamaican of mixed blood, named Campbell, founded in Lagos, Nigeria, the first locally published newspaper, the *Anglo-African*. This was the only local paper until the 1880s, when some five other publications in English were established.

While these newspapers "were specifically concerned with Lagos affairs" (Echeruo 1977: 6), traditional (Yoruba) dance and music practices, in so far as they impinged on Lagosian social mores (for example, burial ceremonies) and European-influenced culture (for example, concerts and plays) drew comment (Echeruo (1977: 67-79). Exceptionally, the Record of 2 January 1904 published a report on a meeting of Lagos chiefs with the Governor, commissioner of Police and Lagos Executive Council to discuss "the question of the prohibition of drumming in the town" (Echeruo 1977: 68), which would also imply a cessation of accompanying song and dance activities. This reached the press as drumming was a daily (or rather nightly) feature of Lagos life and, therefore, affected all Lagos citizens. From the report, which extensively quotes all those who participated actively at the meeting, can be gleaned the importance of drumming and dance in Yoruba culture. It is likely that references to dance in West Africa also appeared in European newspapers, which would certainly constitute a valuable and as yet untapped source.

With the establishment of local colonial administrations the publication began, in the early twentieth century, of lengthy ethnographic reports (both official and unofficial) from government administrators, such as district officers and commissioners, or from government anthropologists. By this time the indigenous populations had become "malleable inferiors to be subjugated and controlled as a labour resource" (Fothergill 1992: 48) by expanding imperial interests and, in order to do this effectively, knowledge of local socio-cultural practices was invaluable. The degree to which dance was considered worthy of comment apparently depended on the author in question. For example, the government anthropologist Northcote Thomas (1910) produced an *Anthropological Report on the Edo-speaking Peoples of Nigeria* in which dance is referred to but never described:

> These preparations finished the Egwaibo was opened, and men and women danced; offerings of kola were made, and the images were painted. In the evening dancing began in the Egwaibo, preceded by a sacrifice in the ogwedion or shrine of the ancestors of the village (Thomas 1910: 30).

Such passing reference to dance, without detailed description, seems to have set the tone for later ethnographic writings by professional social anthropologists. Like Thomas, they focus on the details of social organization and of cultural practices and their meanings to the exclusion of dance, "an obscure rather than a challenging phenomenon, unwanted and dispersed as fragments in the anthropological literature" (Spencer 1985: ix). This can partly be explained by the lack of an available language and analytic framework as well by the textual precedents of omission or deliberate silence such as Thomas's. Bradbury (1973) for example, who has written extensively on the Benin kingdom of southern Nigeria, makes at least thirteen references to dance or dancing throughout the text and yet only in one instance does he engage in any detailed description of performers, costuming, overall structure, meanings etc. with the rider; "There would be no point in describing the move-

ments of the dance here" (Bradbury 1973: 1940. Horton's (1960) monograph, *The Gods as Guests*, on Kalabari religious festivals similarly refers to dancing without detailed description.

On the other hand, there were those such as P. Amaury Talbot, a colonial official, whose extensive records of southern Nigerian peoples (1923, 1926, 1927), some of which were written in the style of travel books rather than 'scientific' texts, contain detailed accounts of dance including movements, costumes and properties, settings and, sometimes, meanings. Indeed, his work on *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (P. A. Talbot 1926) includes a lengthy section on dance with a general introduction, followed by details of the practices of each people (802*ff.*). Along with a general characterization of southern Nigerian dance movement, Talbot attempts a classification of dances into 'styles'.

> The dances may be roughly divided into: mimetic, under which would be included those that portray the sexual emotions and the movements of birds, beasts and fishes, of men swimming, fighting, etc.; the more formal, symbolic, religious and conventional measures, in which the feelings are kept under restraint; and the ordinary social performances carried out purely for amusement. However they may be regarded from the aesthetic standpoint, the anthropological interest of many is very great (P. A. Talbot 1926: 803-4).

Here Talbot's stance in relation to the aesthetic value of the dances is unclear, a characteristic, even today, of much writing on 'African dances', which invariably highlights their functions and thereby implicitly represents them as non- or un-aesthetic (Begho 1986). In general, his writing indicates a genuine appreciation derived from prolonged contact and familiarity with the dances, and, at the same time, it acknowledges the difficulties which his fellow Europeans might have in recognizing their "variety and detail" (P. A. Talbot 1926: 803). The representation of southern Nigerian dances which Talbot constructs is very much the forerunner to many contemporary texts on 'African' or 'black' dance (for example Gore 1986, Thorpe 1989), which continue to use the discourse of evolutionism and otherness characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Two trends in twentieth-century writings on the traditional dances of West Africa are discernible: the 'scientific' ethnographic texts of professional anthropologists with their conspiracy of silence (which even the publication of Spencer's (1985) *Society and the Dance* has not broken) and the 'non-scientific' Eurocentric writings of others. Both of these, it is proposed, belong to the same 'discursive formation' which Thomas and Talbot, as colonial government officials, were both subject to and in the process of constructing. Thomas's silence about the details of dance may have been a function of the more or less official ban on dance activity. This meant that it could not be witnessed "save in the depths of the bush, where many of the old ceremonies [were] carried out whenever there [seemed] a chance of eluding the vigilance of 'Government'" (D. A. Talbot 1915: 194). Thomas, a government

anthropologist, could not therefore write about dance in an official government document, whereas P. A. Talbot could write openly since his texts were apparently private studies. This discursive formation enabled traditional dances to be evoked by those who had no voice in the growing world of academic anthropology and to be glossed over by those who belonged to it.

Less accessible than twentieth-century ethnographic and colonial government texts, but perhaps more useful because they constitute 'primary' sources, are the unpublished field notes of anthropologists and the unpublished government reports, which provide a more random and usually less purposefully constructed version of events. A degree of 'detective work' may be required to obtain these although they are often lodged in specialist libraries in Europe as well as in the locale of the dances.

Journals and magazines also constitute a further source of written documentation. Some useful ones date back to the nineteenth century,[12] others like *West Africa* are more recent, and those produced locally in West Africa largely began publication in this century. *Nigeria Magazine,* one of the best sources of information about traditional dances in Nigeria, has been published by its government since the 1920s. Included are reports on the many national arts or dance festivals and numerous contemporary descriptions of traditional festivals of which dance constitutes an intrinsic element. The former are interesting in that they provide an overview of dance traditions in Nigeria and sometimes critical appraisals of the dances, which give the reader a notion of aesthetic criteria. Especially valuable are the festival articles as they are mostly insiders' accounts in that they are written by people who come from the locality and culture in question. While these may in one sense be treated as historical primary sources, they should not be treated as 'raw data' since, in the process of describing the dances, of textual construction and of writing in English (the magazine's medium), the field experience of the dances has undergone a process both of transformation and of translation.[13]

The various institutions established to collect, document and preserve West African culture should not be forgotten as sources of information on dance. These include not only museums (for example, the Museum of Mankind in London, the Musée de L'Homme in Paris, the National Museum in Lagos as well as local museums) but also research centres (such as the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan, the Centre for Social, Cultural and Environmental Research at the University of Benin, and the Centre for Cultural Studies at the Ahmadu Bello University, all in Nigeria). In addition, the arts councils, both national and regional, often have small research units and effectively constitute living museums of cultural traditions. All these institutions usually house collections of a variety of documentary sources (oral, visual and written) and often produce occasional or regular publications; for example, the Institute of African Studies has, since 1964, been publishing a twice yearly journal, *African Notes*, with regular

articles on or including dance. All of these, and especially the arts councils, may also be a source of unpublished records relating to local dance practices. For example, documents relating to the organization of the state and national arts festivals in Nigeria, the first of which was held in 1965 as a forerunner to the Commonwealth Arts Festival of that year, may be useful sources on national or local distribution of specific dance traditions.

Oral sources and oral histories

It has already been stated that West African communities have traditionally depended upon discourses and practices which bypass the written word for the transmission of information including that of a historical mode. Such societies had in the past been characterized as having '"no history", that is in the "normal" sense of documentary records' (Finnegan 1992: 46). This in part provided the impetus for the emergence of oral history as a methodology which explicitly challenged such an assumption and which established oral traditions as alternative sources to the written and, later, the oral as a field of study in its own right. Oral sources constitute a privileged means of access to constructing dance histories, especially as the music, in particular drumming, and songs which accompany the dances usually refer in some way to the meaning, history or context of the dances. Moreover, the narrative of the dances, when recounted orally, is often historical and refers to events in the past which gave rise to the dance and which the dance therefore celebrates. The histories of the dances are commonly recounted in terms of myths of origin which refer to non-human worlds and often benevolent animal hosts. All those materials which are constituted from verbal interactions or performances, including the more obvious oral traditions such as myths, stories, folktales, epics, legends, etc. as well as music and song, are therefore relevant, as are the dialogic products of interviews.

Research has been undertaken since the 1950s on oral sources in West African communities.[14] None, it appears, has focused exclusively on constructing dance histories through oral sources. This research should, however, be consulted as a source of contextual material on the oral in specific cultures and of methodologies applied in the field. The constitution, through fieldwork 'at home or abroad', of oral sources on dance history in West Africa therefore becomes an essential task.

Collecting oral sources

Assembling oral sources (and indeed all cultural materials and practices) is not, as was once thought, simply a matter of collecting already existing artefacts or data. Rather, it is a question of production, with the implication that this is a socially constructed process subject to the rules and strategies of a particular discursive arrangement, "the art-culture authenticity system" (Clifford 1988: 215-51). "Every appropriation of culture, whether by insiders or outsiders, implies a specific temporal position and form of historical narration" (Clifford (1988: 232).

This growing awareness of the historical specificity of the collection and recording of oral sources, and of their politics, has led to a questioning of the conditions of production of oral texts. Thus, the 'collection' of sources which once depended predominantly on audio-recording has, with the recent interest in orality as performance, required photography and video-recording as further tools. Debates about the best methods for conducting and transcribing interviews (the most cited 'textbook' being Ives 1980) and also on the contexts and strategies for recording oral materials, whether in the 'natural' performance setting or in specifically contrived situations, whether overtly or covertly etc., continue. More recent discussions focus on the ethics of research and of its purposes, particularly on those of fieldwork, because this necessitates direct engagement with people in the research process, field assistants or collaborators, informants, performers etc.

Another key issue related to fieldwork is that of reflexivity, that is, the notion that subjectivity, including the 'cultural baggage' of the researcher is a crucial tool in the construction of materials and is always implicated in the process of research; "reflexivity . . . can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge" (Callaway 1992: 32). Moreover, while a main tool for researching performance and context is participant observation, which implies some distancing between researcher and participants, emphasis has recently been placed on the research process itself as interactive, dialogic and intersubjective.[15]

Transcription, translation and the construction of oral texts

Requiring as much thought as other aspects of research is the transciption of oral materials and their construction into oral texts or other fixed forms for repeated study and circulation. Although there is a mechanical element in these tasks, the effects of the researcher's choices are important in determining the kinds of knowledge produced.

Decisions are required regarding the medium, mode and style of presentation. The use of print is conventional, but other media such as audiotape and videotape are increasingly common, as they more readily capture all elements of performance including setting, music and movement. In the case of textual construction, music and movement notation may be used as adjuncts to the verbal; recent experiments have been conducted using verse and special typographical representation to describe, for example, individual and choral performances which occur simultaneously.

There are even more preliminary issues to confront concerning transcription and translation. Key questions need to be addressed as to 'what is being transcribed [and translated], for whom, why, and the theory of language or communication that lies behind it' (Finnegan 1992: 196). Is it the factual content of an interview about changes in dance pattern since the inception of

a new chief priest (leader of the cult and dances) or is it the speaker's views on those changes which are sought? Is the drum music being transcribed for comparative analysis with other performances of the 'same' dance and music, or for the translation of the tonal messages sent by the drummers to the dancers? Is it the expressiveness of the song's narrative which is of interest in conveying the mood of the dance or the onomatopoeic words (ideophones) for their percussive qualities? Literal translations which include everything (if these are ever feasible) may be useful as a first step, but are usually inadequate for analytical purposes and for publication. Selection is inevitable and should be a conscious process.

Moreover, given that transcription and translation are both culture-bound processes and that there is no equivalence or correspondence either between the oral and the written or between one language and another, understanding of context is essential. Knowledge of the specific and general socio-cultural contexts of the oral material, including local conventions for transcribing and translating (few languages today remain unwritten and untranslated), and of the socio-cultural contexts of the target language is essential. For example, the Ufe Yoruba ideophone *winni winni*, which usually describes broad patterns made up of smaller units on woven materials, is used in different ways in a number of songs. Not only is there no literal translation into English but the meanings differ in each case and can be translated only through the various contexts (Bamikunle 1984: 85-60).

Accuracy and faithfulness to the original, or at least lack of unfaithfulness, are usually cited as the crucial factors in transcription and translation (Finnegan 1992: 190 and 196). If, however, the process of textual construction is conceived as creation rather than re-creation or as a process of intertextuality (see Clifford in Clifford and Marcus 1986: 115*ff*), reference to any 'original', however obtusely, is inappropriate. Furthermore, insiders' accounts of dance events are today constructed not only from lived or embodied traditions or *habitus*[16] and from consciously transmitted oral sources, but also from interactions with books, newspapers, radio and especially television, as well as with the researcher in the field.

Methods and problems of analysis of oral sources

Written sources are largely Eurocentric and logocentric, even when produced by insiders, and represent the dances from a position of otherness, the captivated observer's perspective. The oral narratives are often highly encoded ethnopoetic discourses, which are intelligible only to the insider. Considered as texts rather than performances, these are examined using methods of textual analysis for their style, structure and content. Methods popular until the 1970s included studies of narrative originals, of their variants and of their historical diffusion, classifications of narratives and indexes of motifs and tale types, and analyses of structure using Propp's morphological approach or Lévi-Straussian structuralism. Recent

narratological methods have been derived from the last two approaches, although investigations of genre and style and conventional literary analyses continue to be undertaken. The latter use any number of perspectives from formalist and hermeneutic approaches to studies of symbolism, of authorial intentions, of the relations of text to context etc.. Interest has recently been shown in quantitative and other analyses using computer technology.[17] As with the other stages of the research, choice of method will be determined both by the material in question and by the aim of the analysis as well as by implicit or explicit theoretical positions.

In the construction of dance histories from oral sources a number of analytical considerations are important. Whatever methodological approach is used, it is not feasible to construct, for dances beyond living memory, any history of their origins; it is also highly unlikely that changes to the dances over time can be accurately mapped. Equally contentious are attempts to chart the history of diffusion of a given dance for this would presuppose that its origins were established. Attention to the content of the narratives is, however, important and can assist in establishing the socio-cultural and political histories of the dance. Questions concerning the relationship of the oral narrative to other forms of historical statement, such as chronologies of established events, are relevant, as are those concerning the relationship between competing versions of the same narratives. When presented with material which conflicts, as with competing narratives or disjunctures between the 'fiction' of the oral source and 'fact' of the event, it is important to represent all the materials without authenticating any given one and to contextualize them. "One of the lessons of new historiography is that different versions of historical events (or tales) are possible according to whose voices are heard" (Schechner 1990: 55). The socio-political position of the narrator may, for example, have produced a specific version of narrative events. The relationship of text to context, or rather the intertextual relationships, are therefore crucial in the process of historical construction.

Worthy of consideration are structural features of the oral narrative, especially in the analysis of oral histories about dances. For example, it would appear, from a superficial reading, that many of the myths of origin about southern Nigerian dances have comparable narrative structures with stock characters. A dance is often said to have been a gift to the community from a god, spirit (often a water spirit) or animal through the medium of one of its members who has strayed beyond the confines of the village into the bush. There spirits are encountered, initiation in the dance occurs, and on return home the dance is disseminated through rehearsals and performance. The narrative structure is characteristic of rites of passage, which invariably entail initiation and performance, and also echoes the oral accounts of individuals who acquire artistic skills in dreams from the gods. This seems to be a culturally acceptable explanatory mechanism for individual artistic creation in a context in which the collective and communal are prized above the individual, and in which creation and its products, including the artistic, are

in a sense religious matters. Formal structural analyses of an adequate sample of myths of origins (assuming that they demonstrate certain features of regularity) could, therefore, assist in understanding indigenous notions of 'choreography', for example, as well as revealing indigenous historical methods.

Visual sources

While representations of dance in West Africa though the visual are legion, little has been done to assemble these for the purposes of dance research, historical or otherwise. Included as visual representations are both those 'visual accompaniments' to the dances, such as costumes, masks and properties, as well as the products of a variety of 'media', which range from the three-dimensional such as wood and ivory carvings to the two-dimensional such as illustrations, photography, film and video. The former represent the dance in a metonymic relationship, that is from masks as fragments of the dance the 'characters' and their movement styles may be reconstructed. The latter also represent the dance, but in metaphoric relations which re-frame and re-contextualize the dances into scenarios afforded by the era and by the conventions of the medium in question. An example of this is de Maree's early-seventeenth-century illustrations of an Akan funeral procession (in Thompson 1974: 31), in which the physiognomy of the dancers is not only European, but, apparently, classical Greek. As with the other sources, it is imperative to situate them contextually in order to obtain an appropriate reading.

A list of these sources in Nigeria would include such media as the Benin ivory carvings, which are predominantly in tusk form, the 'bronzes' of Ife and Benin (the most graphic of which are plaques), woodcarvings, including the rich variety of masks, costumes and textiles, newspaper and other photographs and illustrations, and most especially the made-for-television documentary videos of traditional dances. As regards the traditional sources, it is difficult to date many of them with any accuracy as the style and content of the representations follow time-honoured conventions. This does not negate their value as sources since the representation may, none the less, depict historically locatable events, as with the Benin tusk carvings which usually make reference to one of its kings.

Foreign sources include illustrations and engravings by traders, scientists and others, which in the late nineteenth century were largely superseded by photography. The history of foreign visual material parallels the 'colonial' history of written sources. This has culminated in the documentary and ethnographic film genres, both of which are engaged in forms of constructing the 'other', and which have now been constituted into the recent field of visual anthropology.[18] Many of such films do not directly address dance but contain copious dance material. Collections of visual material are usually housed with the ethnographic collections of national museums or in

specialist collections such as the ethnographic film collection held by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London.

Performance as a source

Given that much research will entail fieldwork with existing dances, performance constitutes a major source of information. One of the main features of this kind of research is the opportunity afforded to study 'living traditions' and, therefore, the ways in which 'traditions' are transformed or rather constructed in the process of performance. For example, in repeated performances of the same dance, the pattern of movements may change with the apparent introduction of new steps. While it may be possible to identify certain fetures of the dance (its 'structure', for example) what may be of greater interest are the creative processes and how these determine changes in the dance over time. Access to local aesthetic criteria, to decision-making and other aspects of the production process is thus granted. Also of special interest are audience-performer relations which can be documented only in the live context. Attention to these may assist in understanding local performance dynamics and local concepts of 'dance'.

As regards methodological approaches, much of what concerns the collection of oral sources is relevant. There is, moreover, one tool of special use in this context which Bovin has termed 'provocation anthropology' (1988: 21). This uses personal engagement to provoke interaction with the participants in the field (by for example offering a performance from the researcher's culture) and thereby creates the conditions for the exchange of new information for all the participants including the researcher. Blacking (1984) has urged similar participation in the field with an emphasis on research as a process of interactive construction, in which documentation and textual formulation, i.e. ethnographic writing, should both be done in the field. Most recently, Grau has proposed the expression 'dialectical anthropology' to describe "a process in which there is an exchange between analysts and informants which brings into play two kinds of technical knowledge and experience, and in which informants share the intellectual process of analysis" (Grau 1992: 5-6). The term 'dialogic anthropology' would equally well describe this process, which emphasized "dialogue on an equal footing" (Grau 1992: 9). In all these approaches to fieldwork, the researcher's own subjectivity and 'cultural baggage' become consciously used tools.

Brief mention should be made of a further tool of use in the field and with certain visual sources, that is movement notation. Although this is an ethnocentric tool and may provide representations of the dances which are unfaithful to local conceptions, it can be useful as an *aide-mémoire* in producing field notes of the dance movements. The ephemerality of performance makes lengthy note-taking difficult, and notation, with photography and video, is often a more efficient means of documenting live performance. Notation

may also serve as an economic means of communicating research findings regarding movement and as the basis for structural analyses.

EVALUATION OF SOURCES

That all source material is the product of specific social, historical and political conditions has been already established. A critical approach to the material is therefore essential and it is necessary to situate it especially in relation to the question as to 'who is speaking'. This not only applies to textual and visual material, much of which can be situated within already elaborated 'western' discourses, but also to oral and performance sources which are constituted in the field. Local discourses are equally formative in determining the range of positions from which people may speak or move and narratives are normally constructed from a particular perspective. Especially important are local socio-political hierarchies, which constitute an intricate network of overlapping and often shifting power relations, in which people struggle to assert themselves; a 'big' person in one context is a 'small' one in another. Moreover, people are stratified not only in relation to each other but also in relation to the gods who occupy a separate, more all-embracing and therefore powerful realm. This might explain why dances, which assist in organizing the human social world, are usually conceived as some form of gift from the gods. It is, therefore, often the case that different versions of the 'same' myth represent or articulate the interests of particular social groups, rather than those of individuals. A related issue, which requires attention, is that of attitudes embodied in the narrative. These may well be representative not of the local culture, conceived as some homogeneous whole, but of a section of the community, with specific vested interests, for whom the narrative is a weapon in the negotiation of personal and cultural identity (Clifford (1988: 273-4).

A further question relates to the status of sources and to their characterization as 'fact' or 'fiction'. Of particular interest in considering alternative and competing versions, this is also important when comparing the narrative fiction to the established so-called 'real' event, which, as earlier mentioned, merely belongs to a different category of historical statement. As with the division into primary and secondary sources, the categorization into 'fact' or 'fiction' carries with it an implicit notion of validation and authentication: one source is authorized as authentic, and therefore real, while the other is consigned to the margins of history as unauthentic. It is thus that a 'regime of truth' is constructed. This process of conferring historical validity occurs as much, in situ, with local narratives, be they oral, performed, visual or written, of which there is often an official 'true' version and then subordinate alternatives, as with Eurocentric ones. If, however, all sources are viewed in some sense as 'fictional', that is fabricated, then they must all be treated as equally valid and given equal weight in the process of historical construction.

WRITING THE DANCE HISTORY OF WEST AFRICA

Given the lack of conventional, that is, written historical sources, one of the most important tasks is to generate materials through the construction of contemporary dance histories. This, therefore, requires using not only historical but also anthropological methodology, and it is this perspective which has informed much of what has been written.

There is, however, a fundamental tension between history and anthropology, which is of special relevance in this context. Much contemporary anthropology, in an attempt to dislodge or short-circuit its colonial history in which the 'other' is always framed within a Eurocentric discourse, conceives of fieldwork as an intersubjective process (thus jettisoning any mask of objectivity) and of ethnographic writing as a form of textual construction, verging on the fictional, which deploys all the literary devices available. This kind of anthropology is incompatible with a history which amasses and sifts evidence in the production of some true version of events. If, however, its aim is the construction of local histories, in which it is the participants' cultural perspectives and notions about 'dance' in interrelationship with the researcher that form the focus, then an interface with anthropology emerges.

Writing the dance history of West Africa may also be conceived as a process of intertextuality, and one of the most creative strategies in what is effectively an emerging field, would be to encourage the production of local oral dance histories as texts both in the host and in the target languages.

Also useful are monocultural studies either of one dance performed in different social contexts and by different groups of people, for example, or of a number of dances viewed comparatively. Such studies would provide contemporary materials to serve a number of purposes including the provision of educational resources for the multicultural markets at home and abroad.

A final approach, although one which might offend cultural purists, is to undertake comparative studies of diverse dance traditions in West Africa. This in effect would be to construct 'West African dance' as an innovative and hybrid form, an undertaking already well under way in Europe and America in the theatre dance world.

Georgiana Gore

Endnotes:

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[1] This essay was first published in *Dance History: An Introduction* (Eds. Janet Adshead-Lansdale and June Layson). London: Routledge [2nd Edition], 1994. Reprinted with permission.

[2] For further details on these and related issues, the text which emerged from the Association of Social Anthropologists' 1989 Annual conference on *Anthropology and Autobiography* (Okely and Callaway 1992) should be consulted, in particular Hastrup's contribution, 'Writing Ethnography' (1992: 116-33).

[3] For a discussion of the term 'tradition' and its pitfalls, as well as other problematic terms such as 'oral', 'popular', 'discourse' etc., see Finnegan (1992: 5-17).

[4] These include Benin (previously Dahomey), Burkina Faso (until 1984 Upper Volta), Cape Verde Islands, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

[5] The first 'settlers' in West Africa were the Sanhaja Berbers, who, by the eighth century, had discovered how to survive in the Sahara. Until then little contact had been made with sub-Saharan black West Africa.

[6] Liberia was created by an American charity between 1821 and 1847, as a haven for freed slaves, and constituted as an independent republic in 1847. It was, therefore, never colonized by Europeans.

[7] This sketch of West African history has been produced mainly from McEvedy's graphic historical atlas (1980). For a more detailed history Ajayi and Crowder (1985 and 1987) remain a most reliable source.

[8] For further elaboration on the contextual framework for dance production, see Nketia's discussion of the 'social and cultural background of musical production in Africa' (1979: 364*ff*).

[9] The Muslim cultures of West Africa are included here since, despite Islamization and the impact of the written through Koranic teachings, traditional *modus vivendi* are based on the transmission of the socio-cultural through oral and performance, and not written, methods.

[10] The concept of style is problematic and is used here to refer only to visually comparable features of the dance with no reference to local or other meanings.

[11] A number of West African authors (Acogny 1984 and Tiérou 1992, for example) have used dances from West Africa to represent African dance. While this practice may be a conscious strategy to place 'African dance' on the world map, as is the case with Acogny (1984), it does not always produce sound historical source material. Such writing can, however, produce useful contextual information.

[12] For example, the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, which became *Man* in 1960, was first published in 1871. It had previously been the *Anthropological Review* and *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, which was established in 1863.

[13] For an elaboration on the problems and politics of the notion of cultural and linguistic translation in anthropology see especially Asad (151-64), Crapanzano (51-2) and Tyler (139-40) in Clifford and Marcus (1986).

[14] For further details see Finnegan (1970 and 1992).

[15] Finnegan's comprehensive 'guide', *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts* (1992), should be consulted for further details on these issues and other research practices.

[16] For a discussion of the term *'habitus'* see Bourdieu (1977); Connerton (1989; Gore (1982), and Mauss (1973). [Editor's Note: for a discussion of 'getting out of the *habitus*' see Farnell 2000).

[17] See Finnegan (1992: 158-85) for a more extensive summary.

[18] For an overview of issues in the field, see Crawford and Turton (1992).

[Editor's Note: See also JASHM Special Issue on African Dances, Volume 7(2), 1992.]

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