

A Critical Exposition of the Role of Women Principles in West African Dance Traditions

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Abstract

Dance in the West African societies reflects the people's experiences that has been developed over time. It comprises established beliefs, practices, ethics and ethos that are conveyed into expressive movements and gestures that are geared towards preserving community structures of a particular group of people. With these functions established, gender roles are essential in the realization of these practices. However, many European historians have interpreted the role of women in African dance as "erotic," "exotic," and "sexually suggestive" in ways to suggest they are functionally and comparatively lower compared to men. These narratives have devoid scholars the opportunities inherent in the role of women as technically and structurally influential in how dances are performed. I suggest here a change in how women principles in West African dance traditions are defined and how they manifest in various ways, including movements, themes and roles that highlight femininity, strength, empowerment and spirituality within the context of performance and custodians of these dance traditions. I argue that to appreciate the role of the women principles within West African dance traditions, it is crucial to understand the content and context within which the dance is being performed and how their bodies contribute to the overall meaning-making process. Using qualitative method of participant observation, interviews, related literature and incorporating my personal dancing experience as a principal female dancer, teacher, mentor, and creator, I explore the significant role women play as custodians in the propagation of West African dance forms as well as their political dissemination of these functions. Though there has been some attempt to address these concerns, there is the need to emphasis the values displayed when the woman exhibits such corporeality. This paper contributes much needed data to the epistemological gap addressing negative stereotypes and misconceptions of women in West African dance forms. The study will be useful to individuals and researchers in the field of West African dance research and movement analysis.

Keywords; Exposition, Women Principles, West African Dance, Body, Performance

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Introduction

I am a dancer, choreographer, researcher, and dance educator. I have performed on three continents and choreographed works on different bodies. I sometimes wonder why I was chosen for this line of work. I have come to see that it was a necessary decision, nevertheless. It is my natural calling, and I need to follow it wholeheartedly. The inner power to dance, create choreography, and teach is a complex bridge from the past to the future—a compelling calling guiding my journey. I started dancing at age six. My maternal Auntie Eyi, who used to perform with a community dance troupe called *Kpomegbe* dance troupe in the 1980s introduced me to dance. She would take me along to their numerous rehearsals and performances. That was where I learned my first traditional dance *Agbadza*—a social dance performed by the Anlo-Ewe ethnic group of Ghana.

Today, I have been called to choreograph, teach, and dance my history into the future. The presence of my maternal Auntie Eyi has played a profound role in shaping my identity as an Anlo-Ewe woman and my career in dance at large. To this end, when dancing, teaching, or choreographing, I tap into the female principles like fluidity, and spirituality that I have embodied from Eyi and other women I have encountered in my dance journey. This is a way to express who I am as a gatekeeper and keep their legacies alive into the future. When I choreograph, I feel the splendor of my ancestors around me, knowing that I dance and sing their songs, remembering my history, our stories, and my calling.

As a woman dancer and a custodian of cultural wisdom, my experience places me squarely within this research endeavor, aiming to explore the intricate tapestry of knowledge inherent in women's dancing traditions in West Africa. This study's

premise is that a woman's dancing body serves as a vehicle through which ancient wisdom and traditions can be revealed and lay a manifestation of knowledge expression. Such knowledge is reflected in their movement practices and cultural patterns. The individual and collective execution of these dance forms served as a vessel for this deep-seated knowledge. This interaction was crucial in forming their identities and establishing these women as unique individuals who went above and beyond to protect their heritage and traditions for future generations.

Women have remained particularly important to the development of dance in the past and in the present both in Africa and the diaspora (Asante 1996; Kwakwa 1994; Hanna 2010). The progression of social and spiritual values that women embody in dance performance may vary from one body to the other and from one culture to the other. Patience Kwakwa (1994) indicates that, in each culture, the female body demonstrates valuable aesthetic features in the contexts in which dances are created and performed. She goes on to submit that “the proper appreciation of dance in an African culture should start with the part women play in the cultivation of the dance as an art form in the African society” (Kwakwa 1994, 10). It is against this background that I explore the bodies of women as a site of cultural knowledge within the context and content of performance in West Africa.

The paper employs an Afrocentric perspective to analyze and interpret West African dance, ensuring cultural significance is understood within its indigenous framework rather than through Eurocentric or external lenses. Mazama attests that “the Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primary of the African experience for African people. It aims to give us our African, victorious consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European

voice as just one among many and not necessarily the wisest one” (Mazama 2003, 5). This perspective highlights the inseparable link between dance, spirituality, and communal identity, recognizing dance as sacred and social expression. By categorizing African dance into sacred and secular forms, the paper underscores the necessity of context when interpreting movement, symbolism, and intent. This approach rejects Western reductionism, instead framing dance as a dynamic cultural text that encodes history, cosmology, and collective memory in African societies. For example, social, war, court, and ritual/cult dances. In exhibiting their communicative nuances, the body becomes the vehicle through which these emotions and sentiments are displayed. Dance scholar Welsh Asante in her observation of dance in West Africa opines that

The subject matter of African dance is all-inclusive in every activity between birth and death seed which trembles to be born first breath of life growth, the struggle for existence-reaching beyond the every day into the realm of the soul-the glimpsing of the Great Divine-the ecstasy and sorrow which is life, and then the path back to the Earth. This is the dance! (Welsh-Asante 1994, 6)

It is upon these varied perspectives that African dance has been categorized into different functions, content, and contexts. Within these classifications are embedded philosophies and values enshrined in the people’s cultural systems. It is also imperative to note that West African dances are performed within a cultural context so that, one will not witness a ritual dance performed at a naming ceremony. This emphasizes the various structures that are put in place to safeguard the knowledge systems that are entrenched in the dance traditions.

Within the functionality of African dance, most practitioners and scholars including Kuwor (2021, 2015), Welsh Asante (1994), and Kwakwa (1994), have emphasized the various features including epic histories, curvilinearity of dancing, music-movement relationship, to mention a few, that are relevant within certain cultural domains that are peculiar in understanding the dance in its historical and performance context.

One of the major characteristics of West African dance is gendered-role specification as well as task-based roles. In many West African cultures, there are specific movements reserved for both men and women. Men typically perform dances that include jumps and multiple turns that emphasize strength, power, and vigor. These dances include warrior dances and hunting dances. For example, *Adzohu* is a dance and drumming repertoire of a war dance among the Fon-Ewe-speaking people of Benin, West Africa. The dance involves devotional activities like the rite of the invocation of the military valor and skills of their ancestral heroes in exhorting their descendants to emulate (Ladzekpo 1995).

Conversely, women often engage in dances that highlight grace, fluidity, and tenacity. Mostly serving as transmitters, celebrating family, fertility, and social cohesion. For example, *Togo-Astia* is a communal dance-drumming dialogue, traditionally used in disseminating the qualities of womanhood among the Ewe-speaking people in Togo, West Africa. In a collective spirit of subtle and graceful torso movements, the women address issues of equity, human dignity, peace, and unity. Emphasizing that the perspective of the woman within the West African milieu is vital to the social, cultural, and political dialogue (Ladzekpo 1995). In this discussion, I appreciate women as subjects and vital sources for the propagation of dance in West African traditions.

Women as custodians of dance in West Africa

Gender roles in African dance have been a discursive factor in most scholarly works in recent times. Some Eurocentric scholars argue that gender may be socially constructed and are not inherently tied to biological differences (Thompson 2012). On the contrary, the African concept of gender is biological and embodies complementarity between men and women. Most African communities believe in the social and cultural norms of gender. For that matter, gender roles of men and women are duly adhered to in the performance structure of traditional dance forms (Cudjoe 2015; Kuwor 2021, 2015). While it is common to observe both men and women performing to complement each other, body posture and movement articulation tend to differ between men and women. Complementarity, in this context, is the antithesis of competitive dancing where individual talent typically takes center stage. Here, it is the collective narrative and shared meaning that matters most. It is all about the message and the common goal of the community rather than the Eurocentric idea of solo prowess. Thus, men are expected to exhibit masculinity in their dance movements, while women exhibit grace and femininity. These specifications highlight aesthetics and the cultural nuances of the community.

In view of this, there are elements and symbols that are characterized by the woman's body which conveys significant messages that relate to the canons of beauty in the women performers and are culturally encouraged. Kwakwa writes

The poise of a woman, the slanting gaze, the elegant tilting of the neck, the rhythmic buffeting of the breast, the subtle movement of the torso, the relaxed and beautiful sweep of the arm, the natural swing of the

buttocks, and the gentle treat of the feet- all these give a dignified and majestic character to the female dances. (Kwakwa 1994, 35)

Kwakwa's in-depth description of the woman in the performance of African dance highlights the aesthetics and artistic role women play in the preservation and propagation of West African dance. It is an indication that the role of the woman in West African dance transcends entertainment, she is an embodiment of cultural knowledge, an educator, and an advocate to safeguard cultural inheritance. Women express their values of association and mentorship in exhibiting roles of power, maidenhood, and womanhood among others in the process of performing dances. "Using movements and song text that clarify the meaning of the movement, these women glorify fertility and generously praise childbearing women and midwives" (Hanna 2010, 25). This is not to say that African communities do not have empathy for the childless mother, rather they believe that in praising fertility, they emphasize the essence of spirituality and community building that opens doors for others who want children. This affirmation reinforces collective empowerment, strengthening solidarity and the belief that blessings can extend to all.

Women have used African dance for making political statements and advancing the political course of several African countries and women have played phenomenal roles in emphasizing their power and displeasure of a political situation through dance performance. Gilman (2009, 5) in her observation postulates that

The practice of women's political dancing in contemporary Malawi, which is rooted in the movement against British colonial rule, has long been fraught with controversy. During the independence movements, women activists in what was then the

British colony of Nyasaland capitalized on local performance practice and incorporated singing and dancing into their political activities to draw support, convey messages, and covertly criticize the British. (Gilman 2009, 5)

The political dancing of women in contemporary Malawi is a powerful testament to their historical role in resistance. Rooted in anti-colonial movements, these performances were more than cultural expressions. They were strategic acts of defiance. By blending song and dance, women effectively mobilized communities, conveyed political messages, and challenged colonial rule. The Malawian women became the communicative agents through which messages were sent and received with gestures and songs.

The function of the woman in West African dance, cannot be underemphasized, they capitalize on the dance traditions to express their grievances and demand change. For instance, in Ghana, among the southern Ewe people, the *Takada* dance serves as a platform for women to voice concerns and assert their roles in society. The women used the *Takada* dance to exercise their rights to freedom of speech and even played the drums which was reserved for men. In essence, the woman in the African society becomes an embodiment of historical and cultural knowledge which is relevant for the development of dance epistemology.

The subject of politics has been a part of the sociocultural makeup of every society of which the continent of Africa is not an exception. While exhibiting political intentions, dance and music-making are important facets of disseminating messages and enticing the masses into aligning with one political party. Gilman indicates that such roles of dancing and music-making are mostly done by women among the people of

Malawi in the southeastern part of Africa. She states that

Since the 1994 transition, women have been free to dance or not, and they can choose which party to support. If women refused to dance, the practice would either cease or politicians would have to find new ways to entice them. Because singing and dancing have long been used by those in subordinate positions in this part of Africa to respond to domination, politicians' use of these genres also embodies the ongoing risk that women might use the very medium intended for promotion to undermine or rebel against politicians' interests. (Gilman 2009, 150)

It is crucial to know how women use dance and music-making to navigate the political space dominated by men. Nonetheless, they use this medium to exhibit their power and affiliation to a particular section. In my experience as a professional traditional and contemporary African dancer, women use their performance to exhibit their role as peacemakers as well as indicate their displeasure and demand for economic and social justice. Their performances become tools to empower younger girls in the community who aspire to climb the political ladder. Such avenues are also used to correct social norms and encourage artistic expression. "These women especially use the dance-play to adjust wrong-doing and work through the contradictions of social life. This dance-play centers on women's creative and political powers" (Hanna 2010, 26). Though there have been instances of male chauvinism in several African communities, women are encouraged to express their emotions and power, especially during dance performances. They are urged to explore their creative abilities and improvisational skills which is an important tool needed for dance

transmission. Kwakwa reveals that “...despite male chauvinism, women are not prohibited from public or private exhibition of their dancing skills. Even men appreciate the art most when it is performed by women” (Kwakwa 1994, 10).

From a philosophical point of view, women tend to express some elements and characteristics that are peculiar to feminine movements. These characteristics are symbolic and convey significant messages to the community. Hence, I do agree that dance forms involving women tend to exploit the features of the woman's body in the total range of symbolisms that are relevant to their cultural makeup. West African dance traditions and their performances are rooted in the philosophies and symbols of a particular community. Their movements and gestures demonstrate the functionality of the dance and echo its relevance in West African societies. For instance, the *Gota* dance, a social dance among the Anlo-Ewe people in Ghana, is performed between a male and a female teenager to encourage courtship and cosmic balance between genders. Also, the *kple* dance among the Ga-Adangbe people of Ghana is performed to transition a teenage girl into womanhood. Therefore, the gestures and movement patterns of *Gota* emphasize the rhythmic movement of the lower back in coordination with the upper torso, and subtle hand gestures towards the other party while having a flirtatious gaze. *Kple* on the other hand is performed by only teenage girls. The girls are adorned with beads, jewelry, headgear, makeup and body decorations. Within *Kple* performance, the girls are encouraged to display their maturity through rhythmic movements, such as the isolation of arms, buttocks, and legs. The dance must be done so well to attract a potential suitor. Hence, I reinforce that there are movement patterns and themes in most West African social dances that portray courtship, fertility, puberty, marriage, and birth. It is essential to

know that women who exhibit these dance forms do so about the canons of aesthetics of their community.

Women as storytellers through dance

Women in West African dances often play crucial roles as storytellers. This is evident in my ethnic group and upbringing, as an Anlo-Ewe woman, where I witnessed and was taught this tradition firsthand through the powerful expressions of my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Their movements, deeply rooted in dance traditions, were not merely performances but embodied acts of resistance, storytelling, and community cohesion. Through dance, they conveyed grievances, celebrated resilience, and reinforced cultural identity, shaping my understanding of the profound role women play in the transmission of historical and social knowledge.

Often using dance to convey cultural narratives, myths, emotions, experiences, and histories passed down through generations. These narratives often reflect societal values, belief systems, and the role of women as well as men within the community. The women embody a dynamic relationship of tradition and innovation. Their role does not only preserve cultural narratives but also paves the way for new expressions that reflect contemporary realities. Within the context of their performances, women can express resilience, and hope, and foster cultural continuity. Female dancers often embody grace and fluidity in their movements, reflecting the power of maidenhood and womanhood. Their dance patterns frequently emphasize flowing gestures and rhythmic body undulations. Many dances celebrate feminine energy by connecting to nature.

Movements may mimic the cycles of life, fertility, and nurturing symbolizing women's roles as caretakers and providers as well as portals for continuity as was

demonstrated by the matriarchs in my family (Kwakwa 1994, 10). In most parts of West Africa and the diaspora, the woman is also the transmitter of knowledge and giver of informal education to the community. Ross postulates that “Culturally, African women were transmitters of the language, the history and the oral cultures, music, the dance, the habits, and the artisan knowledge. They were teachers and responsible for installing the traditional values and knowledge in children” (Ross 1967, 34).

During the rite of passage, the elderly women teach the young women how to keep the home, and how to take care of themselves. The priestesses of the shrines also teach them some rituals and dances and give them spiritual baths. An example is the *Dipo* rite of passage to womanhood by the Ga and Krobo people of Ghana. Kwakwa says that:

In some initiation schools, old dance masters are given the job of training neophytes. This is a means of perpetuating old dance forms. The nubile girls of Ga and Krobo traditional areas are taught the *Otofo* dance which they perform on the day of the “outing” by an elderly woman (*Otofonye*) while in seclusion. The *Otofo* dance portrays feminine beauty, charm, and dignity and every nubile girl must acquire all these qualities of womanhood through the dance. The *Otofo* dance thus emphasizes the flexible use of certain parts of the body: the swing of the arms backward with ease, gentle and easy-like movements of the wrist, and a natural move of the buttocks with each step taken. (Kwakwa 1994, 10)

The cultural purposes of the dance permeate every aspect of the people’s lives and influence the context and content of the dance forms.

Ritual/Spiritual bearers

Ritual represents the broadest and most ancient form of African dance. According to Welsh Asante, “Historically, dance is embedded in the ritual activities of specific communities...” (Welsh Asante 1996, 53). In most West African cultures, women have significant roles and responsibilities in society. Women play important spiritual roles, as goddesses, priestesses, female diviners, seers, herbalists, and medicine women and healers. Within the dispensation of these roles, dance plays pivotal functions. Okunade indicates that “women were the dominant figures in prehistoric Africa. Selected women controlled the spiritual systems and often held positions of leadership in African Traditional Religion” (Okunade 2022, 221). Okunade’s assertion positions women within the corridors of power and authority.

In some West African cultures, like the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and the Mossi in Burkina Faso, women are seen as mediators between the spirit world and the physical world. Among these ethnic groups, dance serves as a crucial ritual practice to honor ancestors and deities, often performed by women to invoke blessings, fertility, and protection. Through my experience as a dancer, West African dance is taught and learned through observation, imitation, and initiation. Thus, the female body becomes the repository of such cultural knowledge, embodied rituals, and historical memories across distinct groups. Yvonne Daniel highlights the importance of imitation and repetition within the context of *Ochun* rituals among the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the role of women. She indicates that

As worshipers imitate and perform her dance sequence repeatedly, they deepen into her spiritual essence with matching energy. Ochun’s dance

becomes not only an invocation for the essence of vibrant female energy but also a public display of the admiration and adoration of female gender and female body form. Within the gestures of Ochun, the viewer sees the Yoruba concepts of beauty, grace, and femininity "read" as other qualities. Within the dance sequences and movements, Ochun's beauty is openness, independence, alertness, mental strength, and an empowered sense of self. (Daniel 2005, 259)

The woman's body movement exhibits its deeper symbolic and definitive meaning in the context in which dances are created and performed. The movement patterns, derived from work situations often appear conventional, and they are organized into dance patterns performed and elaborated in ritual and ceremonial dances on selected occasions. Daniel's vivid description of the *Ochun* dance falls into the patterns of the stylized aesthetic of the woman's body and transforms into the woman whom the ancestors have empowered. Since power is grounded in social life and therefore belongs to the individual, the embodiment of the cultural element of the Yoruba woman's body is the result of social formation and empowerment of traditional dance patterns. The ritual patterns reinforce and affirm the belief system of the society it represents. The woman as a spiritual vehicle advances and facilitates the expression and values of the spiritual and ritual purposes of the community.

Role models of continuity and empowerment

Women as models of continuity and empowerment through dance demonstrate the profound impact of this art form on cultural heritage and building individual identity. This is established by embracing

their roles as transmitters, storytellers, advocates, and custodians of cultural narratives. Historically, African women have exhibited strength and power and played significant leadership roles in their communities. This includes the transmission of cultural values of which dance is a factor. It is imperative to imbibe into the contemporary African woman dancer and choreographer these values to enrich her creative abilities and a portal for continuity. Recently, women in West African dance have become a formidable subject to dismantle gender stereotypes, empowering budding dancers and choreographers to challenge societal expectations, express themselves, and occupy spaces traditionally dominated by men (Halifu 2018; Nketia 1974). Through West African dance and contemporary dance forms, women have emerged as strong, capable individuals who inspire others. Dance has proven to be a vital force in breaking chains and empowering women to reclaim their rightful place on the global stage. In their quest for continuity and diversity, West African women choreographers like Salamata Kobre, from Burkina Faso, find creativity and freedom in tapping into traditional materials in creating her choreographic works.

Her work highlights contemporary social issues, particularly the negotiation of gender roles, the visibility of women in leadership, and the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity. Within the context of contemporary creation and performance, women merge traditional forms with modern movements to address issues such as gender complementarity, women's agency in decision-making, and their role in preserving cultural heritage. In many West African societies, dance is a space where women assert their voices, challenge societal norms, and engage in social critique. For instance, performances often explore themes of motherhood, fertility, and political

activism, demonstrating how women contribute to community cohesion and governance. These principles showcase the complexities and depth of female representation in West African dance, reinforcing its significance in cultural preservation and social transformation.

Through performances, teaching, and choreographing, women dancers don't just showcase movements; they convey the historical and social significance embedded within each step. This depth is important for younger generations who are learning not just the dance, but the rich tapestry of history and values it represents. In the light of cultural dissemination and continuity, the accomplishments of renowned female dancers and choreographers have served as a source of inspiration for budding women dancers and choreographers. Trailblazers such as Germaine Acogny of Senegal, Irene Tassembedo of Burkina Faso, and Kettly Noel of Mali have shattered glass ceilings in the dance world, creating a balance between male and female dancers. It is important to know that the African worldview focuses on balance and harmony in their social order. Thus, in the African culture, balance, and harmony are deeply intertwined with the interconnectedness of humans, the natural world, and the spiritual realm, emphasizing a holistic view of life and seeking to maintain equilibrium through rituals, respect for elders, and community cooperation. It is such equilibrium that has been maintained by the women performers and educators that have paved the way for the subsequent generation of women dancers, choreographers, and dance educators across the continent like me from Ghana, Salamata Kobre from Burkina Faso, Germaine Sikota from Togo, and Aminata Traore from Ivory Coast among other budding women creatives.

Some European misconceptions of women in West African dance traditions

Many European historians and critics have interpreted the role of women in African dance as “erotic,” “exotic,” and “sexually suggestive” (Welsh Asante 1994, 13). This is due to European misconceptions of African cultural orientation in dance. Although such displays, such as shaking the buttocks and having a soft gaze reflect the principles of the community, there is the tendency for European audiences to interpret the sexuality in African dance in ways that decenter/marginalize its significance to African communities. “Throughout Western history, the intellectual and cultural complexities of West African female dance were never fully understood, nor considered, in order to support personal aspirations of missionary pursuits, economic interests, and scientific expeditions” (Thompson 2012, 2). In this discussion, I aim to re-conceptualize the role women dancers play in the socio-cultural context of the global African community.

This analysis extends beyond localized traditions to explore how African women dancers, both on the continent and in the diaspora, navigate themes of gender complementarity, identity, and resistance through movement. It is crucial to know that the empowering nature of African dance is spiritual and embodies women's principles. However, “the physical postures of black female dance were often used as evidence by European explorers to illustrate sexual deviancy” (Thompson 2012, 12). From my study of African dance, the element of sexuality is purposeful, symbolic, and cultural. Dance in West Africa encourages the expression of “flirtation and fertility” within the limits and the cultural norms of the community. Regardless, many Europeans tend to misinterpret the principles rooted in African dance. From an Afrocentric standpoint, African dance is not merely an aesthetic or performative act but a deeply embedded social, spiritual, and political

practice. It functions within a holistic framework where movement is intertwined with history, cosmology, and communal identity. Women in African dance performances seem to have to navigate through their personal identities and community sustenance. Though there have been numerous interactions with other cultures in and out of the continent, the role of women in African dance appears to constantly face the “male gaze” either within or outside her cultural structure. Thompson in her observation espouses that

Although cross-cultural exchanges occurred, black female dance was still depicted as overtly sexual, which directly affected their identity and experiences. Black women’s dance illustrated, according to these writers, their desire to be lascivious and to have sexual liaisons with white men, this opinion nurtured and justified white male notions of black female promiscuity. (Thompson 2012, 11)

Perhaps those who have this notion and criticize the role of women in West African dance have not taken a critical examination of women’s role as knowledge bearers within the various dissemination of this art form. In my view, the woman’s performance in African dance is contextual and cultural, and her intentions are to fuel the wheels of tradition in contrast to being “overtly sexual.” Kwakwa describes the significance of the Ashanti priestess in the performance of the *Akom*, a ritual dance. She explains

In worship, the Ashanti priestess, like her male counterpart performs the *Akom* to revere the gods. To ask for the cure of disease and prevent the spread of dangerous diseases such as smallpox. To protect worshipers from the misfortunes that may befall everyone, honor the gods, and provide entertainment for the

worshipers and the public in general. (Kwakwa 1994, 12)

Therefore, African dance performance provides avenues through which we can examine and appreciate the role of women as mediums to engage the spiritual. However, it is unfortunate that some of these roles are misinterpreted to create narratives negating traditional African societies. To counter these misinterpretations, it is imperative to interpret African dance from an African-centered perspective; one that recognizes its deep spiritual, socio-cultural, and historical significance. Understanding African dance as Africans do is to locate African dance within the purview of the African researcher. It requires acknowledging the role of dance in reinforcing communal values, gender complementarity, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. By reclaiming these narratives through an Afrocentric lens, we ensure that African dance is appreciated not just as movement, but as a dynamic expression of identity, history, and lived experience.

Conclusion

In advancing the scholarship of dance, and for that matter the role of women in West African dance, it is important to erase some misconceptions made by some historians and researchers. Rather highlighting the significant role women play in exhibiting some societal values and norms during the performance is important. Women have and still play a crucial role as custodians of dance in West Africa, where dance is not only a form of artistic expression but a vital part of cultural identity and social cohesion. Traditionally, women have been the primary transmitters of dance forms, often responsible for teaching and preserving dance styles that reflect community histories, values, and rituals. In many West African cultures, dance is essential to celebrations

like rites of passage and spiritual ceremonies. Women often participate in communal dances that celebrate life's milestones such as puberty, marriage, birth, initiation, and death. This helps to foster a sense of belonging and continuity within their communities. Through these performances, they share stories, express emotions, and pass down traditions to future generations.

Women are cultural vehicles through which the values, ethics, and aesthetics of the community are propagated to the younger generation. The importance of women in the custodianship of dance is evident in various social and ritual dances like *Agbadza*: "In the dance, the Anlo-Ewe woman portrays her feminine beauty through rounded movements. Casting her eyes down with very gentle movements of the upper torso in coordination with rounding movements of the arms" (Kwakwa 1994, 10). In my observation of *Brekete*, a ritual dance among the Anlo-Ewe people of Ghana, the woman medium makes intricate leg movements in coordination with broken and jerky movements of the upper torso with multiple turns. This movement indicates the medium is in a trance.

Many women like me have risen to prominence as choreographers, dance educators, and performers. Thereby challenging Eurocentric gender norms and misconceptions, while advocating for the recognition of women's contributions to the performing arts within an African-centered framework. This approach highlights the complementary rather than hierarchical roles of men and women in African dance traditions, countering reductive interpretations and reaffirming the vital role of women as cultural bearers, innovators, and leaders in the performing arts. Additionally, establishments and initiatives like "Ghana Most Beautiful," a cultural television show produced and run by the TV3 network of Ghana. It aims at preserving and promoting

West African dance often highlighting women's roles, providing platforms for their voices and creative expressions. Efforts to revitalize traditional dances and adapt them for modern audiences have led to the collaboration between generations of dancers which has helped enrich both the arts and cultural heritage.

Overall, women in West African dance performances are not objects or just participants; they are agents for preservation and discourse. Women ensure that the rich cultural tradition of the community continues to thrive. Through their performance, they reform their identity and reshape social values. Women in African society exhibit the philosophies and functions of these dance forms and exhibit agency in navigating their social and political affiliations. This exhibition of social values indicates the dynamics of power and safeguarding of cultural codes evident in African dance forms across various ethnic groups and nations on the continent. Despite regional and ethnic variations, African dance forms share fundamental principles that transcend geographical boundaries, including communal participation, call-and-response structures, rhythmic complexity, and movement deeply intertwined with spirituality and social functions.

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