

Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

HISTORY DANCES

CHRONICLING THE HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL
MANDINKA DANCE

Ofosuwa M. Abiola



History Dances

The field of history is founded on the interrogation of written documents from the past. However, culture is the center of life in Africa. As a result, in the past – and to a degree in the present – the process for documenting events in Africa was not written, it was performed. *History Dances: Chronicling the History of Traditional Mandinka Dance* argues that a wealth of information is housed within traditional Mandinka dance and, consequently, the dances can be used as an African-derived primary source for writing African history. Ofosuwa M. Abiola highlights the overall value of studying Mandinka dance history specifically, and African dance history generally, as well as addressing the issue of scarcity with regard to primary sources for writing African history.

History Dances proves to be a vital read for both undergraduate students and scholars in the fields of dance history, African history, performance studies, and cultural anthropology.

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History Dances

Chronicling the History of
Traditional Mandinka Dance

Ofosuwa M. Abiola

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**For the Creator
For Tchesar, Emun, and Ayinde**

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Preface

In 1996, I founded and operated a traditional African dance company and school in Southeastern Virginia, in the United States, which I ran for fifteen years. Historical research was conducted, and African dance ballets were choreographed that depicted my findings. Most people in that area had not previously been exposed to African culture or history. Thus, it was necessary to create interest in the continent of Africa in order to cultivate an appreciation for her culture, and thereby create a forum and a venue for my African dance company and school, respectively.

As fate would have it, I later married into a Gambian family of traditional dancers and musicians. Accordingly, when I traveled to The Gambia in 2004 to study dance, I stayed in indigenous African dance communities and circles. My travels to Senegambia for the purpose of studying Mandinka dance systems and the process of translating what I have learned into African dance ballets in the United States triggered an epiphany. I arrived at the understanding that exploring African dance for historical lessons was effortless because traditional African dances were inherently equipped to store, preserve, and articulate historical narratives. In other words, I realized that history dances.

Ofosuwa Abiola, 2018

Acknowledgments

Due to the unorthodox nature of a work such as this in the conservative field of history, myriad challenges were anticipated. However, I did not expect the undulating assistance I received from diverse groups of people from two continents. Their support, advice, and excitement made the book's completion possible, and facilitated the inclusion of intricate previously unresearched details.

To Yorro Barry, who revealed the antiquity and resilience of Mande dances, and their significance to professional dance practitioners in The Gambia, my special thanks. I wish to extend a warm thanks to Master Dancer Mustapha Bangoura for generously taking time from his impossible schedule to share his experiences as a traditional Master Dancer with me. My sincerest thanks go to Ibrahima Sory Bangoura for the many conversations over several weeks in Senegal. His insights as a Guinean-born Mande dancer and musician made it possible for me to include details in this work that allowed me to break barriers of superficiality, and thereby engage more complex cultural tenets.

I am eternally grateful to the members of *Corichow African Dance Troupe* in The Gambia, for providing me with months of hands-on practical interpretive training in, and discourse on, Mandinka, Susu, and Jola dance systems. My experiences with *Corichow* played a large part in the refinement of my argument. I am also forever indebted to the members of The Gambian National Dance and Music Troupe. Their countless conversations introduced me to the often unnoticed existence and the unrelenting realities of artisan caste systems in everyday life in The Gambia. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the members of the traditional Susu band African Melodies in Senegal. Through their generosity I was allowed to observe their rehearsals over the course of numerous weeks. Time spent with the group facilitated a refinement of my perception and an assurance that this work would be from an African perspective.

I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to Dr. Jean-Michel Mabeko-Tali for his mentorship and for generously spending countless hours sharing his experiences with me of his childhood in his village in Congo-Brazzaville. He made it possible for me to realistically understand the social and cultural dynamics at the heart of cultural history projects such as this. Without his support, such cultural jewels may have been overlooked.

I would like to thank Dr. Mbye Cham, who allotted time from his busy schedule to share information with me that facilitated the development of a clear conceptualization and a strong foundation for this book. I am grateful to Dr. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, who equipped me with valuable scholarly and “life” tools. To Dr. Isabel Rodrigues, who took the time to meticulously analyze this work, many thanks. Her comments not only enhanced this project but also increased my understanding of how to convey heartfelt narratives.

My heartfelt thanks go to former members of Suwabi African Ballet, Emun Abiola, Ayinde Abiola, and Tchesar Jendayi, for allowing me to use their photographs and images in this work. Their contributions greatly enhanced my ability to accurately convey this narrative.

Lastly, my sincere thanks go to the people in the rural areas of St. Louis, Senegal, and Kololi and Serrekunda in The Gambia, for their kindness, hospitality, and willingness to share their culture with me.

Introduction

Manjani, dance of the initiate

Dance in Africa is more than simply a performance. It is performed history. It retains a historical core, but it also evolves. African dance transcends written narrative. It is embodied, taught, and directly experienced by both performers and their audiences. Hence, Mandinka dance specifically, and African dance generally, is a living and fluid record of history. It is permeable to change, while consciously and unconsciously harboring continuities with the past. Fittingly, African dance systems are therefore viable sources for research in African history, dance and theater history, performance studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and a host of other fields.

Traditional African dance systems house a wealth of historical and cultural knowledge. Many of the current dance movements are executed in the same fashion as they were performed at the time of their inception centuries ago. Others have been created afresh, or combined with long-standing movements, to reflect recent cultural issues, cultural evolution, worldview, and aspirations of the people who display them. The fact that African dances are portrayed within a “system” adds multilayered dimensions to the potential various uses of this primary resource. These dance systems are comprised of auxiliary items that complement the dance and facilitate a more complete understanding of the dance message. For instance, all dances include some type of musical accompaniment – such as singing, drumming, or hand clapping – among other things. Therefore, the auxiliary items that are part of the dance system include the musicians providing the musical accompaniment, the attire the dancers and musicians are wearing, the gender of the dancers and musicians, the location of the performance, and so on. More importantly, they all convey information. Traditional African dance systems must be examined within the context of the culture and history that gave birth to them. This will facilitate comprehension of the structure of African cultures and will reveal how the dances within those cultures convey messages from the past while creating and preserving the present.

The unexplored potential of African dance systems cannot be overstated. They possess a unique ability to depict historical accounts, provide a more nuanced understanding of cultural continuity and cultural change, and provide a voice for historically omitted populations. However, they are disregarded

2 Introduction: *Manjani, dance of the initiate*

as a primary source. What is more alarming is that African dance systems are disappearing. As Africa becomes more urbanized, traditional African dance is taught and performed less in the rural areas and in the cities. Although this phenomenon is occurring at different levels in diverse regions in Africa, it is nonetheless a continental occurrence. Moreover, scholars do not understand the tenets underpinning the meanings of African dances. Thus, they are limited in their abilities to utilize those African dances that still exist as a source for scholarly inquiry. The history of traditional African dances must be studied and documented in an effort to make the information housed within the dances accessible, and to assist in averting the extinction of the dances. Experts in the knowledge and practice of African dance must be identified and interviewed while they still exist. Memoires and documents left by eyewitnesses during the time that these dances were in abundance must be examined and compared with the dances as they are done today. *History Dances: Chronicling the History of Traditional Mandinka Dance* attempts to expose the fact that there is a plethora of historical information housed within the traditional dances of Africa. It also endeavors to encourage the continued practice of these important dances thereby assuring their transmission to future generations. Lastly, this work seeks to inspire college students and scholars in particular, and novices in general, to consider utilizing African dance as a primary source. Although *History Dances* focuses on traditional Mandinka dance, the core principles are universal and can be applied to other styles of African dance where ever it is practiced.

The importance of African-derived primary sources

Historiography is the method, theory, history and study of historical writing. It is also the study of the body of historical work on a given subject. The field of African historiography is not as robust as it can potential be because of the scholarly perception that African-derived primary sources are not abundant. This scholarly notion stems from the idea that credible primary sources for the construction of historical narratives must be derived from written documents. The dilemma of scarce primary sources with regard to research on African phenomena creates a domino effect that extends beyond African historical studies. It touches all studies on Africa, and by extension, African diaspora studies as well. After all, most if not all research on Africa is grounded in history because history provides an understanding of current social and cultural dynamics. Hence, history offers a starting point for all research on Africa. If one considers the fact that man, and therefore culture, began in Africa, then African cultural forms comprise the foundation for much more than the field of African history. Consequently, researching Mandinka dance systems contributes additional African-derived primary sources to diverse disciplines, and addresses the overall problem of scarcity with regard to African primary resources. The study of Mandinka dance systems can also assist in the effort of decolonizing African history because they insert an African voice into the conversation, and they therefore disrupt the non-African dominance in the field.

Modern-day renditions of traditional Mandinka dances have not only preserved the essence of cultural tenets of past centuries but also continuously reveal new developments in the culture of the practitioners, regardless of whether or not the practitioners are of Mandinka origin. Mandinka dance is an undervalued but important source that transcends territorial boundaries and languages more easily than written documents and spoken words. Traditional Mandinka dance systems are an endangered resource. They have survived the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonialism but not without paying a price. In addition, the processes of Modernity are presently taking a toll on these indispensable resources. All things considered, *History Dances* is crucial because it identifies a valuable methodology and a primary source for researching, writing, and comprehending African history, among other fields. Additionally, this book provides an analysis of the sacrifices and innovations that had to be made by Mandinka dance systems and its practitioners in order to endure. Although numerous aspects of African dances are discussed in this work, in an effort to promote clarity, Mandinka and Susu dance systems in the Senegambian region of West Africa, are the focus. Susu dance systems are often included in the repertoire of Mandinka African dance practitioners due to their similar mechanics, related history, and, most importantly, because of their common Mande origin.

Why written sources will not suffice

The past is an integral part of identity and a crucial element in the development of a society. The past is not only preserved in written sources but also in the minds of people and the objects and types of societies they create. Although a relatively small number of written sources can be found for writing African history, they are erratically dispersed throughout historical periods and locations in Africa. With the exclusion of North Africa, the centuries least addressed by written documents are those prior to and succeeding the first year CE. The overwhelming majority of precolonial written sources that are well known and extensively utilized by scholars were produced by people who originated outside of the continent of Africa – Romans, Greeks, Arabs, and so on. The Elder Pliny, Herodotus, Strabo, Al-Bakri, and others have documented their travels, trade, and raids, on the coast of Africa, across the Sahara, and in the Sahel. However, historical accounts from such writers often lack cultural understanding, and many are deficient in intricate and far-reaching knowledge about the actual people and the terrain the accounts were written about. The utilization of African-derived cultural sources such as dance for writing African history corrects these deficiencies.

Cultural sources fill in gaps left by written sources – or by the lack of written sources – and they strengthen documentation supported by conventional evidence or data. More importantly, African dance – and other cultural sources – enable a depiction of history from the point of view of the people creating the history. In other words, cultural sources such as African dance place

4 *Introduction: Manjani, dance of the initiate*

Africans and Africa at the center of the cultural and the historical research process. Additionally, they facilitate the understanding that Africans are agents and architects of their own history.

Alas, there are always limitations

An alarming number of traditional Mandinka dance systems have declined since the colonial period. In addition to the challenges posed by the colonial engine, Modernity has also facilitated their diminution. Subsequently, the information housed within those extinct dances is forever lost. Written memoirs and information supplied by eyewitnesses of the era when the extinct dances were still practiced cannot be corroborated with examples from their contemporary counterparts or related dances. As such, it would be erroneous to assume that every detail or nuance of Mandinka dance or its history can be delineated in this book. In addition to the fact that dances have already begun to fall into disuse, many of the “would-be” next generation of practitioners – the youth – have abandoned their quests for knowledge of traditional culture. With this break in dance transmission, it would be unrealistic to believe that all of the lost information can be fully retrieved. These limitations only serve to accentuate the urgency of this book. They underscore the necessity for scholars and students to utilize traditional African dance as an academic resource, for the study of cultural development and continuity in Africa and the African Diaspora, and for the continued practice of these valuable dances.

Book format

This book contains four units which are referred to as parts. Each part begins with a unit introduction which is followed by related chapters. There are seven chapters as well as an introduction, a conclusion, and a glossary of terms. There will be areas in the book where the information or references that were discussed in previous chapters will be repeated. This will facilitate readers who may need to access information in single chapters or who may desire to consult narratives in chapters out of sequence.

Part 1 provides pertinent historical information about the Mande people and the emergence of the culture that gave birth to Mandinka dance systems. It contains indispensable background information about the original culture responsible for creating Mandinka dances as we currently witness them. Chapter 1, which is placed under Part 1, discusses where the Mandinka fit within a larger group of Mande-speaking people and how they emerged as a dominant cultural force in the Senegambia region of West Africa. Thus, the origin of the Mali Empire and its role in the inception of Mandinka culture is critically examined. Chapter 1 also addresses the expansion of the empire and the creation of the Mandinka Diaspora in West Africa as a result of such. Finally, the formation of Mandinka cultural structures and the resulting process through which Mandinka dance was created is discussed.

Part 2 examines the intricate details and mechanics of traditional Mandinka dance movements and the instruments used for Mandinka dance systems. It also discusses and contrasts various transitions the dance systems have made. Part 2 provides the theme for discussions in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. The overall purpose of Part 2 is to facilitate understanding about how these dances display and preserve history and culture. Chapter 2 commences with a discussion on the origin of Mandinka dance movements, and exposes readers to the first documentation of dance witnessed on millennia-old African rock art. It emphasizes the form and significance of Mandinka dance movements and the systems they exist in, as well as details concerning the dance systems' auxiliary items. Chapter 2 also discusses the instruments used in Mandinka dance systems. It addresses how the dances are perceived and practiced by dance musicians, dancers, spectators, and society at large.

Chapter 3, which focuses on the theory and the meaning of Mandinka dances is also included in Part 2. Its purpose is to illustrate how Mandinka dance systems can facilitate cultural continuity, uncover hidden historical cannons, and display recent developments in Mandinka culture. It provides the foundation for Chapter 4. In an effort to provide a method for "reading" Mandinka dance, Chapter 3 focuses on the interpretation of Mandinka dance systems. It also provides a cultural and historical analysis of Mandinka dances. The chapter utilizes specific dances as examples and reveals and discusses the cultural and historical tenets housed within them. Additionally, the process through which dance has been created and utilized by women and how the study of such gives birth to new insights regarding gender roles in Africa are addressed.

Chapter 4 explores the results of transitions that Mandinka dance systems have undergone, including the shift from the village to the concert stage. The chapter also examines the transformations in dance execution and instruction over time. Lastly, Chapter 4 discusses the creation of the African dance ballet format, its purpose within traditional Mandinka dance systems, and its contributions toward the preservation of the dance systems.

Dance cannot be studied in a vacuum. Like all other phenomena, it is impacted on by historical events while simultaneously influencing them. Often, events perceived as calamitous are omitted from conversations regarding dance. These events often have the ability to leave a footprint on specific dances and sometimes on the entire dance culture. Yet their nature, trajectory, and ultimate aftermath can also be altered by dance systems. Part 3 engages these conversations. Chapters 5 and 6 are placed under Part 3, and each addresses a different historical cataclysm in Africa and its influence on dance or how it was altered by dance. Chapter 5 introduces indigenous forms of servitude in Africa and provides details that substantiate its distinction from the types of slavery systems brought into the continent of Africa by foreigners. Chapter 5 also discusses slavery brought in first by the Arab invasion of North Africa, and later by trade between Berber nomads and sub-Saharan Africans. After the foundation of these historical events are firmly established, the exchanges between dance and these slavery systems are discussed. In addition, Chapter 5 explores

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the transmission of dance throughout indigenous systems of servitude in Africa and the cultural fail-safes that were made systemic to protect the dance process.

Due to the extreme distinctions between the transatlantic slave trade and indigenous and Arab slavery, the transatlantic slave trade is discussed under a separate heading in Chapter 5. As such, Chapter 5 also examines the process of transatlantic slavery. It discusses its effect on Mandinka dance specifically, and Mande culture generally, in the Senegambia region. Lastly, the instability caused by the transatlantic slave trade is addressed with regard to dance continuity and transmission.

Although the introduction to a new religious system is not always perceived as a detrimental occurrence, the discussion of the appearance of Islam and Christianity in Africa is placed in Chapter 6 under Part 3, in which historical calamities are explored. This placement is largely due to the oppressive and restrictive policies enacted by officials of these two religions in Africa in general and the Senegambia region specifically. Chapter 6, then, examines the interaction between traditional Mandinka dance and these two religious systems. In addition, Chapter 6 also engages discourse on colonialism, and it discusses Modernity first as a concept, and second as a historically specific period. Within those constructs, the effects of colonialism and Modernity on indigenous Mandinka dance practice, dance transference, and retention is examined.

Social effects of colonialism have been one of the most debated topics within the realm of African identity. European cultural hegemony that was imposed on Africa in an effort to maintain the colonial engine had lasting effects after decolonization. Thus, the African identity debate consistently appears in cultural, colonial, and postindependence historical conversations. Part 4 and its accompanying Chapter 7, simultaneously address the social effects of colonialism and provide a case study. Chapter 7 reveals the dance renaissance that occurred in West Africa once independence was achieved through African agency. The chapter highlights the fact that new African leaders turned to dance as a device for advancing African identity, lifting self-esteem, creating nationalistic sentiments, teaching “accurate” African history – as opposed to colonized history – and preserving culture. In Chapter 7, attention is placed on the African dance ballet in the Mandinka dance tradition and its place during the era directly after independence in Guinea-Conakry. Lastly, Chapter 7 examines the Guinean dance company, Les Ballets Africains, as the case study.

Part 1

Lamban, dance of the jali

Mandinka history and the origin of dance systems

Introduction

A profound understanding of traditional Mandinka dance systems requires knowledge of the origin of the culture and the people that produced it. Although the larger Mande-speaking language group contains myriad subgroups, only a small portion of those splinter groups is responsible for creating Mande culture as it is currently known. From the Middle Niger Valley to Ancient Ghana and the Mali Empire, the overwhelming influence of the Soninke, the Susu, and the Mandinka cannot be overlooked. Equally important are the political structures founded by the culture hero Sunjata Keita.¹ Although many traditional cultural tenets were retained, Sunjata laid an entire system of prohibitions on top of them. As a result, the dynamics among artisan classes, other social groups, the larger society, and all accompanying dance systems were forever transformed.

Divisions and expansions occur within all groups. Artisan classes splintered into many from the original four. Informal internal tenets of age-grades and other social associations became more tangible and began to occupy a more centralized space within the group. The empire created by Sunjata spread west and southwest and brought with it the entire entourage of cultural tenets that were characteristic of the Mande in general and the Mandinka in particular. Hence, a Mandinka cultural diaspora was born. As a result, Sunjata's mandates regarding dance systems were adhered to over an extensive area.

Mandinka influence did not die with the decline of the Mali Empire. Dependencies created as a result of Mali's expansion became empires in their own right. The state of Kaabu rose to prominence, founded by Sunjata's loyal general, Tiramaghan Traore. Its dominance over the entire southwestern region of Senegambia escalated after the decline of Mali. Thanks to the aforementioned accounts, Mandinka dances can be witnessed throughout a large portion of West Africa today.

Note

1 Culture heroes are individuals credited with founding long-standing cultural and political tenets deemed significant by the constituency of a society. They can be found within the folklore and oral histories of societies throughout Africa. In this respect, Sunjata is similar to Shaka Zulu in South Africa, Simon Kimbangu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and many others.

1 Mande and the emergence of a distinct cultural system

The Mande

Mandinka culture is a product of Mande-speaking people. To possess a sound understanding of the history of traditional Mandinka dance systems, one must obtain a basic knowledge of the history and culture of the people that produced them. Thus, the discussion of Mandinka dance systems must begin with the Mande. The land that the Mande ultimately dominated nearly a millennium ago has historically been referred to by many names. “Sudan” has long been a word associated with diverse parts of Africa. It translates from Arabic to “land of Black people” in English. The territory referred to as East Sudan is understood to be the political entities of Sudan and South Sudan, located in East Africa south of Egypt. The western portion of Africa that protrudes into the Atlantic Ocean, also the area discussed in this book, is known as Western Sudan. Before the political partitioning of Western Sudan by the process of European colonization, Western Sudan was also known as Senegambia. Precolonial Senegambia reflected the cultural cohesion of the area and included the territories of the modern-day countries of Guinea, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, in addition to Senegal and The Gambia. It is therefore referred to as Greater Senegambia by Africanist scholars. Sahel, Arabic for “coast” or “shore,” describes the area of land directly south of the Sahara Desert and north of the African rainforest. It stretches across the continent from West to East and encompasses Western Sudan and the Greater Senegambia region. Hence, in this study, the terms Western Sudan, West Sahel, and Greater Senegambia will be used interchangeably.

Mande is a language family that is part of the larger Niger-Congo language group. Linguists theorize that the group originated in East Africa in Sudan.¹ Over the course of time, as a consequence of a continual process of environmental deterioration, and through myriad migrations, the Mande people began to inhabit large portions of West Africa. Initially, they resided in small groups based on lineage. However, in the third century BCE, an unusually large number of Mande and Fulani began to cluster around the valley of the Middle Niger River – located in the modern state of Mali (see Map 1.1).² This society emerged in the Middle Niger Valley without the influence of the Arab or the Mediterranean world; it was a purely African phenomenon. The urban center



Map 1.1 Middle Niger Valley Civilization, Third Century BCE

Map is not drawn to scale. Modern-day names of countries have been included in Map 1.1 for reference purposes only. The Middle Niger Valley Civilizations indicated on the map was located in the center of what would be modern-day Mali.

that emerged organized itself into a heterarchy and formulated the foundation for the ancient Malian cities of Dia and Jenne-jeno.³ Artisans, cultivators, and merchants began to congregate in Jenne-jeno in circa 250 BCE. The networking systems employed by these groups facilitated specialization, but this was apparent in remote periods before the inception of the cities of Dia and Jenne-jeno. A corollary of specialized trade was that the trade networks and clientism became the glue that held the cities and villages together. Although the population was extensive – tens of thousands of people resided there – it was governed through the interdependence of its residents, which was facilitated by the activities of the artisan groups (especially the smiths), the cultivators, and the merchants.⁴

The significance of the artisans and cultivators cannot be overstressed. These groups were instrumental in creating and maintaining cohesion in early multi-ethnic noncentralized, and centralized states. They are also the focal point where a large number of Mandinka dances were conceived. To fully understand the culture that provided the foundation for Mandinka dances, the primary social groups from which they originated must be discussed.

Artisan classes

The artisan groups have been referred to as caste groups. Yet, they differ significantly from the more familiar castes of India. Although some artisan professions such as blacksmiths existed before centralized states, strict caste groups in Senegambia did not emerge as such until the Mali empire.⁵ Before Mali, the artisans were individual professionals with areas of specialization. Their crafts were transmitted through an apprentice system. One need not be related to the master artisan in order to become his/her apprentice. All artisan groups formed their own secret societies and they each generated their own dances.

Artisans traveled from household to residence, from village to town, and they also frequented marketplaces. They simultaneously overlaid a cultural blanket over all areas they came into contact with. This cultural drape embraced and emphasized similarities between the Mandinka, the various other Mande daughter-groups (see Table 1.1), and other ethnicities it touched.⁶ Thus, at the points in history when the ethnic groups dispersed from the Middle Niger Valley, they brought with them a common culture along with their distinctive cultural tenets. As a result, inhabitants from the Middle Niger Valley all contained specialized artisan groups or guilds, within their societal structures. The numbers and types of artisan guilds multiplied and varied from Mandinka

Table 1.1 Classification of Mande-Speaking People (Abridged)

<i>Mandinka</i>	<i>Soninke</i>	<i>Susu (Soso)</i>	<i>Songhay</i>	<i>Nono</i>
Bambara	Jula	Vai	Bozo	Mende
Khassanke	Koranko	Kono	Jogo	Ligbi
Numu	Atumfuor	Wela	Jeri	Yalunka
Kpelle	Looma	Bandi	Loko	Sorogama
Tieyaxo	Sarakolle	Hainyaxo	Bobo	Dzuun
Sembla	Jo	Mano	Dan	Tura
Guro	Yaure	Mwa	Wan	Gban
Bgen	Bisa	Sane	Samogo-Tougan	Maya
San	Maka	Busa (Bisa)	Boko	Shanga

Columns are constructed as such to efficiently utilize space. They are no indication of particular relationships between groups that share columns or rows. Where possible, the names have been converted to Anglophone spellings from the Francophone spellings. For instance, Dyula is spelled Jula in the classification table. Classifications of people frequently discussed in this work are in italics in the table. This table is included in this work to illustrate the magnitude of the Mande-speaking people. It is by no means exhaustive.

12 *Lamban, dance of the jali*

to Tukolor, and from Wolof to Fulani, but the role that the artisans played in their societies were identical and were undeniably of Mandinka origin.⁷

Dance earmarked all momentous events, and it was intimately tied to the various duties and activities of the artisan guilds. The blacksmiths, jalis, woodworkers, and so on all had their own particular dance repertoires.⁸ The historical order of appearance of the artisan guilds are: blacksmiths, jalis, leatherworkers, and last, Islamic praise singers. The latter group was included in the artisan social classes after the introduction of Islam. The blacksmiths are considered to be the oldest of the professional artisans and were one of the groups that held the Middle Niger Valley civilizations together.⁹ Nonetheless, it was the ability to wield Nyama that facilitated all of the artisans in their endeavors.

Nyama is the force that enlivens the universe. It is the world's rudimentary energy. Nyama is supernatural power and the foundation of ethical reciprocity. Nothing happens without Nyama, and miracles can only occur with it. In Mande cosmogony, Nyama is a force that all artisans possess and employ in order to create their products. The dancer's movements, the jali's words, the blacksmith's wares, and the leatherworker's sandals are all endowed with power or Nyama.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that although cultivators and merchants were considered an indispensable component of life in the Middle Niger Valley (and in the later empires of Ancient Ghana and Mali), they were never considered artisan groups in their respective societies. It was acknowledged that cultivators who cleared lands and made them conducive for farming were believed to wield Nyama, but they were still considered separate from artisans.

In addition to specialized artisans, cultivators, and merchants, other social groups emerged, particularly after migrations away from the Middle Niger Valley. Along with the formation of states, or centralized societies, social groups became more diverse, and the emergence of hunters, weavers, slaves, and so on, all with their own set of dances, were witnessed. In the centralized polities, aristocrats, governors, and chiefs were included in the social stratification of the states. Aristocrats, others in authority, and merchants did not create or perform dances. It was frowned upon in these social groups.¹¹

Age-grades

Age-grades are the oldest of the social groups. They are associations organized around the age of the members. Each member enters the age-grade process with a group of youth who are the same sex and roughly the same age.¹² The group evolves through stages. Each stage corresponds to a progression in age. With each progression, the group is considered to be ascending to a higher grade; hence, the term *age-grade*. Membership in the age-grades are lifetime. The last stage in the age-grade is experienced when the group members are of an advanced age and are called upon to join the council of elders to advise political officials. Age-grades were and are still found throughout Africa, and a number of societies in East Africa and South Africa were historically governed solely by them.¹³

In West Africa, age-grades were usually called upon to perform tasks that required substantial amounts of manpower. They were also utilized by nobility and other authorities to form military groups for wars. An interesting feature of the age-grade is that they were often multiethnic in composition. For instance, Sunjata's age-set (his group of cohorts of roughly the same age) that assisted him in the war with Sumanguru included Fulanis, Bambaras, Soninkes, and others (Sunjata, the founder of the Mali Empire, and his rival Sumanguru, will be discussed later in this chapter). The age-grades and their secret society components were responsible for the creation of a large number of dances. The majority of the Mandinka dances that are currently popular throughout Africa and the African Diaspora are age-grade celebration dances. It makes sense that these would be the most known dances because everyone was expected to pass through the age-grade process. One did not need to wield Nyama and no special skills were required to be a member of the age-grades.

Secret societies

Secret societies in Western Sudan are often referred to as autonomous entities. Yet, they are virtually always a component of one of the numerous social groups. Thus, every artisan group, the age-grades, the hunters, and practically all such associations in Mandinka culture contain a secret sector. In this secret department, the members have access to more extensive knowledge pertaining to their craft, their livelihood, or the particular task that called them together. Additionally, all secret societies contain dances that were specifically created for and by the association. Most of the masquerade dances are the product of the secret society components of social groups. In addition to harnessing the forces of nature and imparting special knowledge, the masquerades are often used to uphold or to enforce customary laws. Masquerades cannot exist without the animating spirit of dance.¹⁴

An interesting example of an age-grade secret society is the Mende association known as the Sande society. Mende belongs to the larger group of Mande-speaking people in West Africa. The Sande society is significant because it is a society in which the women wear masks. In the Sande society, dance is utilized to teach the initiates about the secrets of life. Dance also facilitates members' access to beauty and to adult village citizenship.¹⁵

The origin and evolution of early social structures in the Middle Niger Valley Civilizations were discussed earlier. However, in order to gain a historical understanding of the roles that the social groups and their dances played later in societies in the Greater Senegambia, it is necessary to discuss the emergence of centralized states that formed after migrations out of the Middle Niger Valley.

Ancient Ghana

In roughly the middle of the first millennium CE, a kingdom began to emerge that was later known as Ghana. To prevent confusion with the modern Republic of Ghana, this polity will be referred to as Ancient Ghana. The word "Ghana"

means “warrior king” in Soninke, the Mande group that founded it. The exact date of the origin of Ancient Ghana is the object of much debate. According to a seventeenth-century scholar from Timbuktu, Abderrahman Es-Sa Di, Ancient Ghana had twenty-two kings prior to the year 622 CE.¹⁶ Ancient Ghana was one of the first states – along with Takrur and Gao – to utilize a centralized system of governance in Western Sudan. This is significant because Ancient Ghana’s centralized government emerged in a territory where noncentralized governance was prominent for many centuries. It has been theorized that Arab influence was the cause, but this argument is not convincing.¹⁷ Ancient Ghana existed before the Arab invasion and its accompanying religion, Islam. Another school of thought asserts that there were other dynamics – some internal, possibly demographic, or social upheavals – which nudged people in the Western Sudan toward different or more complex societies.¹⁸ Complex in this sense should not be understood to denote more advanced, or better, only different. Another possible explanation for the formation of centralized governments in Western Sudan is that it was a defensive strategy. This school of thought asserts that inhabitants in the area may have needed to consider more defensive measures against the increasingly threatening incursions from North African nomadic Berbers.¹⁹ In this case, centralized governance was a defensive response to repeated attacks and/or the threats of attack from Northern nomadic groups.

Lastly, some scholars contend that the formation of early states such as Ancient Ghana (and Takrur and Gao) occurred gradually over time and was noncoercive – at least initially. To date, the depth of internal dynamics in ancient Western Sudanese cities has not been fully identified or fleshed out by scholars. This is significant because Mandinka dances (and virtually all African dance systems) reflect the historic and the contemporary experiences of the people who created them. An examination of current dance systems with foundational cores from those ancient periods would shed light on the motivations and experiences of the people who founded those early states.

Nevertheless, what we do know is that the establishment of Ancient Ghana was the first organized manifestation of a Mande expansion.²⁰ The Mande daughter-group known as the Soninke were the actual founders of Ancient Ghana (see Table 1.1). The Susu – who were also Soninke – initially were a clan of blacksmiths who displayed clear intentions to object to the new religion being introduced into the area, that is, Islam. In the mid-1100s, when Ancient Ghana was in decline, they broke away and established a capital in the city of Soso – hence the name, Susu. Soso was located in the mountains in the Kulikoro region, just under one hundred miles north of present-day Bamako, in modern Mali. Soninke, which means “traditional worshiper,” is the original name of the Susu faction of the Mandinka daughter-group.²¹ It is important to note that the Susu, Soninke, and the Mandinka were originally one ethnic unit of the larger Mande mother-group. What distinguished the Soninke from the Mandinka is the fact that the Soninke were initially hostile to Islam, whereas the Mandinka welcomed it. The distinction between the larger Soninke group and the Susu offshoot was that the Susu was initially a group of blacksmiths

who separated themselves from the rest of the Mande inhabitants in the area to form an anti-Islamic state.

The Susu state and the Mandinka challenge

The Susu vehemently opposed the expansion of Islam into the Western Sudan region. From circa 1180 until roughly 1230, the Susu dominated the territory. Kemoko Kante commenced the conquest of the Soninke region by unifying Kaniaga and Soso, thereby establishing the Kante dynasty. Kemoko's son, Sumanguru Kante, completed the conquest roughly between 1200 and 1225.²² Sumanguru is reputed to have been abusive to the Mandinkas. It is alleged that he demanded exorbitant taxes from the Mandinkas under his domain. However, it is possible that the animosity between Sumanguru and his Mandinka constituency had more to do with trade than with taxes. Sumanguru and his Susu counterparts prohibited Muslims from trading in the area. Sumanguru can actually be viewed as the first Mande nationalist because he preferred to trade with other Africans and not with outsiders – Arabs.²³ He preferred economic and political independence for Africans. Alternatively, Sumanguru could have simply been xenophobic, fearing the unknown consequences of trading with strangers. In any case, the consequences were that as long as Sumanguru reigned, the area was closed to what was the international economy of the time. The Mandinka – who converted to Islam in the eleventh century – may have viewed Sumanguru's prohibitive actions as a precursor to economic stagnation.²⁴ After all, most who converted to Islam in that era did so to gain access to trade networks.

While the Susu were taking over the region, the two wives of the Mandinka king Mansa Nare Fa Magan were each in the process of giving birth to a son. The eldest, Dakaran Tuman, ascended to the throne, while the younger son, Sunjata Keita, lived in exile.²⁵ Despite the grievances of his Mandinka constituency, Mansa Dakaran Tuman believed it would be best to become an ally of Sumanguru – the Susu king – instead of an enemy. As a gesture of friendship, he gave his sister, Princess Nana Triban, to Sumanguru to marry.

Sunjata's family descends from a long line of hunters. In Mandinka society, hunters are highly regarded. They organized themselves into an association very early in Mandinka history. The hunter's associations had secret society components, initiations, and dance systems similar to the artisan groups.²⁶ The hunters gave Sunjata's mother to his father to marry. The hunters were also responsible for finding Sunjata when he was living in exile. They implored him to return to Kangaba – reputed to be the original home of the Mandinka – to claim the throne. After hearing the news of Sunjata's return to claim the throne, and preferring peace, Mansa Dakaran Tuman fled.

After securing his position as king, Sunjata met with age-sets in his age group from several regions and villages at Sidi to bond and to plan his attack against the Susu. The Susu-Mandinka war lasted fifteen years, from 1220 to 1235, and resulted in Sunjata's victory at Kirina in 1235.²⁷ His triumph in the war at Kirina was the precursor to the expansion of Islam into the Western

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Sudan. With his more than capable generals, the majority of the lands previously under Ancient Ghana's domain were conquered by Sunjata and his regiments. Tiramaghan Traore was one of his most prominent generals. After conquering the Jolof kingdom in the west, he set his sights south and founded Kaabu.²⁸ Fakoli Koroma, another of Sunjata's accomplished generals, conquered territories in the southeast and was responsible for the strong Mandinka presence in parts of southern Senegal and Guinea. Sunjata conquered the rest of Sumanguru's allies in Mali. The result of these conquests, and the benefit of time, facilitated the unification of the Greater Senegambian region.²⁹ More significantly, they facilitated the spread of Mandinka dances and culture and opened the region to Islam and, by extension, to international trade. Current-day equivalents of territories that would be under the domain of Medieval Mali include Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, Mali, Southern Mauritania, and western portions of Niger (see Map 1.2).



Map 1.2 Mali Empire at Its Height, Fourteenth Century

Map 1.2 depicts the boundaries of the Mali empire over the modern political map of West Africa. At its height, the Mali empire included territories comparable to the modern states of Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Conakry, and portions of Guinea-Bissau, Niger, southern Mauritania, Northern Cote d'Ivoire, Northern Sierra Leone, and Burkina Faso.

Kaabu

Kaabu, the territory founded by Sunjata's general, Tiramaghan Traore, was the westernmost terrain under Mali's domain. At its height, Kaabu spanned from the northern banks of the Gambia River to the border of northern Guinea, and as far east as the boarder of Mali. It included the modern state of The Gambia, southern Senegal (Casamance), Guinea-Bissau, and Northern Guinea. The state religion of Kaabu was not Islam and, surprisingly, Traore, Sunjata's premier general, was not a Muslim. Even more interesting is the fact that there is an oral history account that states Traore implored Sunjata to allow him to conquer the western regions so that Traore could relocate there and practice his traditional religion.³⁰ According to this interpretation, Traore had no desire to leave Mali until after it adopted Islam as the state religion. Predictably, Muslims were prohibited from Kaabu until the second half of the nineteenth century. Because dance systems were intimately tied to indigenous religion, it is significant that Kaabu was able to retain its traditional religious practices at a time when other provinces under the Mali Empire were converting to Islam.

During Kaabu's height, its status in the region, its aversion to Islam, and its size, greatly slowed the spread of Islam in the western provinces of the Mali Empire. When Islam did begin to penetrate the region, the chiefs were the primary converts, but they also held onto many of their traditional beliefs and customs.³¹ In 1868, Kaabu was defeated by a massive onslaught of Fulani Muslims from Futa Jallon (in modern day Guinea). The rationale for the attack was that Fulani Muslims disapproved of the practice of traditional religions in Kaabu.³² It is more probable, however, that Kaabu was attacked because it prohibited Muslims. Islam was intimately tied to trade. As a consequence of Kaabu's Islamic prohibitions, Muslims did not have access to trade or the trade routes that ran through Kaabu. Nonetheless, from the founding of Kaabu in the thirteenth century until its demise in the nineteenth century, it was the hub of important dance systems that accompanied the state-sanctioned traditional religious ceremonies of the western Senegambia region.

It is important to keep in mind that dance was intrinsic within and perpetually accompanied traditional religious activities and customs. Although Kaabu was an indigenous religion-state, the kings, or mansabas, looked to Mali for validation. Those who sought to rule Kaabu would travel to Mali with an entourage of dancers, musicians, and jalis to ask the mansa for permission to rule Kaabu.³³ All of the provinces in the western regions of the Mali Empire, however, accepted Kaabu as the authority in the region. Unsurprisingly, Kaabu's influence and power grew when the Mali Empire declined.

Kaabu's cultural impact was as important as its political influence. For instance, the kora (a harp lute) became an extremely vital instrument for all jalis – including those from Mali. It was created in Kaabu. Before its creation, the Malian harp lute, the bolombato, and the Malian three-stringed guitar,



Map 1.3 Kaabu, Early Nineteenth Century

Kansala was the capital of Kaabu. At Kaabu's pinnacle, it was comprised of territories comparable to all of modern-day Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia, portions of Senegal, and northern Guinea.

the *kotingo*, were utilized as principle instruments for *jalis*. The *kora* replaced them.³⁴ In addition to instruments, Malian masquerade dances were replaced with those of Kaabu. Subsequently, Kaabu masquerade dances such as *Tintirinya*, *Kankouran*, and *Maamo* all replaced Malian masquerade dances.

Sunjata's constitution

Sunjata restructured Mandinka culture before the emergence of Kaabu and prior to the zenith of the Mandinka expansion. At the conclusion of the war between Sunjata and Sumanguru, in a village near Kangaba, a victory meeting, or a *gbara*, took place. It was at this juncture that Sunjata formulated his empire and declared that the capital would be in a location near the current-day city of Niani in Mali.³⁵

Table 1.2 Mali's Original Societal Stratification

<i>Quiver-Bearing Nobles</i>	<i>Marabout Clans</i>	<i>Artisan Guilds</i>
This social group was comprised of freemen and included the Mandinka and their allies. It was categorized into sixteen clans.	There were five marabout clans. They were referred to as Mori Kanda Lolu, or five guardians of the faith. This group was added by Sunjata and was not present in the earlier noncentralized states in the Middle Niger.	This social group was organized into guilds and included four artisan associations, which were called Nara Nani. The four original guilds of Mali were blacksmiths, jalis, shoemakers, and weavers.

Table 1.2 reflects the artisan groups as they were initially constructed by Sunjata. The groups increased in number as the empire of Mali progressed. For example, tailors/seamstresses, dancers, and other social groups who were not members of the blacksmith class emerged. Musicians who were not members of the blacksmith class began to carve their own drums. The activities of the blacksmiths also increased. Blacksmiths became carpenters, jewelers, and potters, among others. The slave class became more pronounced in Mali after the death of Sunjata, and many other groups emerged.

He arranged the society into three large categories – the Mandinka and their allies – comprised of sixteen clans; five marabout clans; and four artisan groups – blacksmiths, jalis, shoemakers, and weavers³⁶ (see Table 1.2). Each artisan group contained a representative or chief.

The artisan chiefs presented the concerns of the entire guild to the mansa. The number of social groups increased over time. Although it was often omitted in the chronicles of the original social order of Mali, a slave class did exist. The slave class was placed beneath the artisan guilds. The issue of slavery plagued Sunjata's conscience such that he abolished it. Sunjata composed a charter (c. 1236) – known as the Mande Charter – to enact the eradication of slavery. The Mande Charter was comprised of seven decrees originally recited (centuries later it was written) in a poetic style. Unfortunately, twenty years after Sunjata's death, the abolition of slavery was overturned by his heirs. It is noteworthy that the law that forbade enslavement of members of artisan groups is the only one of Sunjata's prohibitions regarding slavery that remained long after his death.³⁷ Sunjata's constitution for Mali addressed all areas of life including cultural stratification of the society. Under his constitution, artisan guilds were made endogamous. Prior to the establishment of the Mali Empire, professional artisans – jalis, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and weavers – were able to accept apprentices of their choice. After implementation of Sunjata's constitution, members of the guilds could only marry other guild members (see Table 1.3). Their offspring were the only people allowed to dance, initiate, and become apprentices in the guilds. The artisan guilds were prohibited from political office and politics in general. In addition, aristocrats, nobles, and freemen were barred from participating in dance and any other activities of the artisans.

Table 1.3 Mali Social Group Dance Prohibitions

<i>Social Group</i>	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Dance and Music</i>
Aristocrats	1. Members of Sunjata's family, the Keita Dynasty. 2. Generals and members of the military who are descendants of kings	Completely barred from engaging in dance and music
Slaves	Captives from war, criminals, etc.	Generated their own repertoire of dances and corresponding music
Freeborn	Farmers, fishermen, pastoralists, traders	Work-related songs and dances were created and executed during times of large group projects only. Not allowed to engage in the dances and music of the artisan guilds
Original artisans (Artisan groups increased over time. The artisan guilds listed in the table were the only four at the time of Sunjata. Dance and other artisan groups formed later)	Blacksmiths, jalis, leatherworkers, and weavers	Barred from all political power. A large number of dances music and instruments were created by this social group. Members of this group were not prohibited from becoming farmers, fishermen, or pastoralists. They could elect not to practice their hereditary craft
Noblemen	Governors, chiefs, and elders	Barred from participating in dance and music
Age-grades (intersected all other social groups)	Every pubescent male and female were required to initiate in the age-grades, including noblemen and aristocrats	All initiates in the age-grades, regardless of their social standing, were required to participate age-grade related ceremonial dances. After the age-grade process, members returned to their normal lives with all prohibitions in place

The guilds were ranked in society and in relation to each other in Sunjata's Empire. The artisans were considered below freeborn and nobles, but they were ranked above slaves. Within the artisan groups the jalis and blacksmiths enjoyed the highest rank and the leatherworkers were among the lowest. Jalis and blacksmiths were utilized by freeborn families as intermediaries during family disputes. Jalis were also messengers for the king (occasionally, blacksmiths held this post). Most significant is the fact that the highest ranked jalis coordinated all the dance, music, ceremonial, and entertainment activities in the palace.³⁸ Blacksmiths performed the circumcisions, were the hairdressers, and jewelry

makers. The women in the blacksmith guilds were also cosmeticians and potters. Artisan lineages – like most other lineages in Western Sudan – resided in specific areas in the village, and often formed their own distinct neighborhood within the province.

Endogamous guild members were not confined to the practice of their hereditary crafts. Often, they would engage in cultivation and garner substantial returns for their agricultural products. Regardless of the paths they chose in life, members of the endogamous guilds were traditionally taught their hereditary crafts and the accompanying dances, as a component of their upbringing. The only instances where non-artisan guild members were allowed to dance and produce music was in the age-grade initiations that existed long before Sunjata's system. A significant number of Mandinka dances have been generated by these artisan endogamous guilds. Thus, knowledge of the emergence and the practices of these artisan classes is indispensable for understanding Mandinka dance systems.

Although the age-grades existed before the Mali Empire, they formed another essential social group in the empire. This group produced as many – if not more – dances as the artisan endogamous guilds. It is noteworthy that although the age-grades were virtually always multiethnic, their ceremonies and initiations were performed according to Mandinka customs. This phenomenon stems from the first congregation of peoples in the Middle Niger Valley (see earlier discussion).

Another interesting feature of Sunjata's system is the treatment of Nyama with regard to the artisan guilds. In the Middle Niger Valley, anyone who cleared land for farm use was perceived as possessors of Nyama. Creating farmland from thickly forested woods containing dangerous animals required special characteristics including strength, fortitude, and courage. However, a number of people have tackled such a task and were successful in clearing enough land for their families and others who desired to become cultivators. Such people were revered by others and were expected to occupy leadership positions in the village that developed due to their initial efforts. These first cultivators were considered to possess Nyama.

After Sunjata's constitution was established, only artisan group members were believed to possess Nyama. In effect, because of their abilities to wield Nyama to produce their wares, the nonartisan population viewed artisans with awe but also feared members of the artisan groups as well.³⁹ This phenomenon can still be witnessed currently in The Gambia, and in other countries in the Senegambia region. After Sunjata organized Mali's society, the jali's role was indispensable because the history of the king's lineage was stored in the jali's mind. The mansa's jali was always selected from the Kouyate lineage. This was the family line of Sunjata's jali, Balla Fasseke. The jali was the mansa's primary spokesperson.⁴⁰

As time progressed, dance emerged as a separate stand-alone artisan group. Historically it was included as part of the traditional activities of jalis, leatherworkers, age-grades, secret societies, and so on. The emergence of dance as a separate entity is quite recent.⁴¹ Nonetheless, after its departure from its mother-groups, dance inherited the social standing of the associations from

which it split. Dancers were believed to wield Nyama; they were both feared and admired, they were barred from political power, and dancers were only allowed to marry members of artisan guilds.

Political structure of Sunjata's society

Sunjata organized the Mali Empire as a replica of Ancient Ghana. Each territory or region's character was recognized. Polities organized under indigenous religious systems, and those governed by Islamic structures, were allowed to remain in place. One difference was that initially heirs to the throne were obtained from the maternal side of the aristocratic family. However, with the introduction and spread of Islam, kings began to be chosen from the paternal line of the royal lineage. Another difference was artisans were free to choose their professions in Ancient Ghana. As discussed earlier, in Mali, artisan guilds became endogamous and lineage-based. Sunjata's cabinet was comprised of African marabouts – rather than Arab marabouts – and clans who had joking relationships with the Keita dynasty.⁴² Soldiers and generals were also included in Sunjata's cabinet, but his advisory council was comprised of his military aristocracy. Although Sunjata allowed the conquered regions to uphold aspects of their traditional governments – for instance, he allowed their chiefs to remain – he appointed a *farin* or governor, to rule alongside their traditional chiefs.⁴³ Additionally, Sunjata infused many aspects of Mandinka culture into the lifestyles of the peoples residing in the conquered areas.

The Mali Empire, like Ancient Ghana, was a federation. It was composed of all the villages and provinces that were conquered in the process of establishing and expanding the empire. Each polity was semiautonomous and had a hereditary governor who was appointed by the mansa of Mali. This governor was also judge over his district. He mediated during disputes among villagers and administered punishment for criminals. Although the governor was appointed by the mansa of Mali, and his offspring inherited his post, the governor did not make decisions without the consent of a council of elders in the village and the indigenous chief of the village.⁴⁴ Equally important, the people in the village also had to concur before a judgment could be acted upon. Although the king or mansa may have converted to Islam, the majority of the people remained loyal to their traditional religions. Therefore, their consent, and any decisions they made, were based on traditional customs and principles. The mansa of Mali was under similar constraints. He could not make or act on a decision without the consent of a council of advisors. He could not even wage war without the approval of the council.⁴⁵ Thus, it is significant that all decisions based on tradition were validated by the performance of dance systems.

Creation of the Mandinka diaspora

The beginning of a Mande diaspora commenced centuries before the Mali Empire. Sometime prior to the early eleventh century, Mandinka, Soninke,

and other Mande daughter-groups began migrating from territories located in modern Mali in search of farmland. These migrations occurred centuries before the decline of Ancient Ghana.⁴⁶ Climatic change may have played a role in the migrations. These migrants settled in Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and other areas south of modern Mali. They provided support for the later groups of Mandinkas who migrated west and south as part of the expansion of the Mali Empire. As a result of the empire's enlargement, numerous cultures and people were unified under one Mandinka political and cultural umbrella.

Pre-Mali Empire migrants had a significant effect on indigenous populations as well. Ethnicities that traditionally resided in the southern territories of the western Senegambia region had already begun absorbing the tenets instilled by Mande hegemonic influence by the time Traore arrived. Thus, groups such as the Malunkobes, Konyajis, and the Koronkos eventually adopted so many Mande, and by extension Mandinka, cultural principles that their own traditional lifestyles virtually disappeared.⁴⁷ Moreover, the nomadic groups in the Sahara Desert – such as the Messufa, Lemtima, Sanhaja, Tuaregs, and the Godala – over time, all fell under the domain of the Mali Empire.⁴⁸ As a result, a common culture bonded the populations of the Western Sudan. Within this framework, there existed kinship bonds and joking relationships between the Mandinka and Fulani, the Fulani and the Jolof, and the peoples of the coast and the Mandinka. Most importantly, cultural differences were dissolved by a corresponding name system, while cultural similarities were highlighted.

Another phenomenon facilitated the creation of the Mandinka diaspora – trade. Thanks to Mali's numerous gold mines, Mali became the largest precious metals producer in the world at the time.⁴⁹ Gold, copper, salt, and kola nuts were very important to Mali's economy. The Wangara, and later the Jula (both are names for Mandinka traders), played an indispensable role in circulating Mandinka culture, especially in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and the Republic of Ghana (modern-day Ghana).⁵⁰ They were also influential in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

By the fourteenth century, the Mandinka had built stations on roads from the edges of the Niger River to Cote d'Ivoire (known then as Kong) and to the land of the Akan in present-day Ghana (known as Begho in the fourteenth century). Trade – not conquest – was the vehicle through which the Jula advanced Islam and Mandinka culture in the South. The commercial enterprises of the Jula experienced a massive upsurge in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries after the decline of Mali, and as a result of the rise of Kaabu. Additionally, with the increase in the transatlantic slave trade on the coast of Senegal and The Gambia, in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the gold trade declined.⁵¹ As a result, large numbers of Mandinkas migrated south and southeast during the late sixteenth century to take advantage of the kola nut trade. At locations along the kola nut routes, the Mandinka immigrants founded settlements. It was these very settlements that Samori Toure turned

to for support centuries later when he was building his empire to challenge European encroachment in the region.⁵²

As a whole, there were five channels through which Mande, and by extension, Mandinka dance and culture, were spread in Greater Senegambia. The process began before the seventh century when the Mande (Soninke branch) left the Middle Niger area and founded Ancient Ghana. Second, the mid-1100s through 1230, witnessed a split from Ancient Ghana (the Susu blacksmith branch) and a consolidation of territories. Third, the empire of Mali was founded in 1235 (Mandinka branch) and expanded west to Senegambia.⁵³ The fourth channel was created by the Wangara and the Jula merchant groups. Their commercial activities witnessed an upsurge from the period of the height of the Mali Empire in the 1300s and in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries during the rise of Kaabu. This merchant class traveled south for trade but zealously spread Mandinka culture in the process. Lastly, the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast in the fifteenth century brought an increase in slavery, which decreased the trade in gold. As a consequence, many Mandinka migrated south and southeast to take advantage of the kola trade. However, they also brought Mandinka dance, culture, and customs with them and introduced such to provinces where they settled.

The decline of Mali and the rise of an independent Kaabu

In the 1430s, Mali began to fall into decline when it lost its northern territories. Its demise began with assaults from the Tuaregs and the Berbers which were followed by the conquest of Sunni Ali and the Songhay army in 1468. Due to the economic might of its western territories, Mali was able to exist alongside the new Songhay state until the end of the sixteenth century, but it had reverted back to the state it was in before its expansion. Meanwhile, Kaabu's power and influence increased exponentially. It grew to dominate the Senegambian territories in the west and declared Kansala as its capital. After the emergence of the Songhay Empire in the fifteenth century, Kaabu remained independent and powerful. By the mid-seventeenth century, Kaabu reached its peak and was the principle power in the western region of Senegambia. By the eighteenth century, it was comprised of more than thirty provinces.⁵⁴

The aristocracy of Kaabu legitimized their claim to the throne by proving either marriage to or being descendant from female heirs of a mysterious woman named Balaba.⁵⁵ Male aristocrats who were from the lineage of Sunjata's general, Tiramaghan Traore, and who married a female descendant of Balaba, were allowed to claim the throne and rule over Kaabu. This was a warrior aristocrat class known as Nyanchos. Male descendants of Traore who did not marry descendants of Balaba were only allowed to become governors or chiefs called Korings.⁵⁶ It is noteworthy that the inhabitants of Kaabu retained their traditional religion, along with its accompanying dance rituals, and other cultural practices. This is significant because Islam – and later Christianity – was hostile toward African indigenous dance, religions,

and cultural customs. Kaabu's retention of its customary practices resulted in an abundance of traditional, indigenous, ritualized dances. These dances were a reflection of ancient customs and were sanctioned by and intimately tied to the state. A different scenario existed in the east where the head of state was a Muslim who did not sanction, but in certain respects did tolerate, the traditional practices of his constituencies. This phenomenon explains why the prominence of so many masquerade dances and instruments that originated in Kaabu surpassed those generated in Mali (see earlier discussion on Kaabu in this chapter).

A note on Nyama and dance as a separate entity

The separation of dance from its mother-associations – age-grades, artisan groups, and so on – is a later consequence of Sunjata's reorganization of society. In 1998, I remember sitting in the audience at Old Dominion University (Norfolk, VA) witnessing the dance, drumming, and singing jali performances of The Gambian National Dance and Music Troupe.⁵⁷ At the end of the show, the audience was encouraged to ask questions. I asked about the number and diverse types of dances in their repertoire. The response was "We know them all." The concept of "knowing them all," was intriguing to me because prior to that time, the prevalent notion was that African dancers were trained primarily in the dances of their artisan groups, ethnic groups, or village/towns. The phenomenon of one dance group familiarizing itself with the dances of many other groups exposes the possibility of a dance association organized for the sole purpose of the study of dance. In the Mandinka traditions of West Africa, dance was intimately tied to the culture and, thus, life itself. Fittingly, dance professionals would have to possess a working knowledge of the history that created the dances. In this respect, and especially after the separation from the parent social groups, dance professionals could be compared to jalis. Their profession, like that of jalis, would require them to learn the history of areas, lineages, and traditions.

In addition to independent dance associations, the control of Nyama shifted as a consequence of Sunjata's system of social stratification. Artisans were barred from political power, but everyone else was barred from direct access to Nyama. Although everyone was exposed to dance in the age-grades, and on occasion the freeborn and the slaves also danced, but only artisans were believed to have the innate ability to conjure, possess, and utilize Nyama.⁵⁸ This ability was considered inherent within artisan members. They inherited it, without the need to exert much effort. They could increase their "voltage" of Nyama by obtaining quantities of daliluw.⁵⁹ For instance, the blacksmith masquerade dancer, Sidi Ballo, purchased large quantities of daliluw to assist in his famous execution of the masquerade dance. Although he inherited Nyama by virtue of the fact that he was a blacksmith and a dancer, he endeavored to increase his power. This process must be understood in the context of the thirteenth century reordering of Mandinka society. Sunjata assigned stations in life for specific

social groups and created a prohibition of Nyama. From that point forward, the allocation of Nyama was exclusively reserved for artisans.

The assignment of social position may have also facilitated a later separation of dance from the artisan groups. Sunjata limited the pursuit of plausible livelihoods for artisans. As a result, they could only focus on that which was within their reach. History reveals that as the population, wealth, and by extension, demand increases, professional specialization usually follows. Hence, it makes sense that dance would eventually become a separate entity.

A woman's place

After the introduction of Islam among the Mandinka, the process for validating one's claim to the throne was a patrilineal one.⁶⁰ With such a system, the logical assumption is that woman's station in society became subordinate to man's. Yet, in 1325, the Moroccan scholar, Abu Abdullah ibn Battuta, traveled to Mali and witnessed events that proved this assumption erroneous. In the chronicle of his journey, Ibn Battuta asserted, "The queen is his [the king's] partner in the kingship, following the customs of the Blacks. Her name is mentioned with his in the pulpit."⁶¹ In Mandinka tradition the Queen, or Kasa, ruled alongside the king and was considered a woman-king. She was a very important component of the kinship system which was the Mandinka's first system of governance after the heterarchical system and before full-fledged centralized states. The queen was a monarch in her own right and was frequently chosen from a pool of princesses from a royal bloodline.⁶²

When one examines the position of women in Mandinka history, the dance systems should be the first source of inquiry because they reveal a much larger role politically and socially than orthodox historical narratives depict. Instead of an overwhelmingly male-dominated world where women's positions are invisible, or subordinate, the dances depict an egalitarian universe where men and women share equally in the inception, maintenance, and preservation of the Mandinka domain. Thus, women are witnessed dancing in male rite of passage ceremonies such as Dundunbah.⁶³ The prevalent hypothesis is that women were not allowed to participate in such "manly" dances. Likewise, it is also generally presumed that the participation of women in dances such as Dundunbah, is a recent addition to male initiation dances. However true (or erroneous) these hypotheses may be, the fact that it was necessary to include women in these dances at all is significant. Women's understanding of the male initiation process is embedded within the dance movements they bring to the ceremony. Accordingly, their appearance enhances symmetry. Their presence makes a statement about the position and importance of women historically in Mandinka society. Additionally, the fact that this phenomenon occurs in an age-grade ceremonial dance increases its significance. Age-grade dances are among the oldest dances. They existed before the first set of artisan groups, and before the artisan groups of Sunjata's era. Lastly, the dances of the age-grades reflect the mindset of the people that created them in a detailed, descriptive manner.

Conclusion

Mandinka culture as it is currently known began with the establishment of the Mali Empire in 1235 CE. Sunjata's constitution for Mali addressed all areas of life including dance systems and cultural stratification of the society. Under this constitution, craftsmen guilds were made endogamous. Prior to the founding of the Mali Empire, professional artisans or craftsmen – jalis, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, weavers, dancers, and so on – belonging to the guilds were able to accept apprentices of their choice. After implementation of the constitution, members of the guilds were only allowed to marry other guild members. Their offspring were the only people permitted to initiate and become apprentices in the guilds. This history and cultural stratification permeates the mindset of the creators of the dances; therefore, the essence of the dances themselves is also influenced by this process.

The Mandinka began migrations from Mali and other regions prior to the eleventh century. After the Mali Empire was founded in the thirteenth century, the Mandinka diaspora was created through a westward expansion of the empire. This expansion facilitated the process of establishing Mandinka cultural hegemony as far west as Senegal, The Gambia, and modern-day Guinea-Bissau, and as far south as Cote d'Ivoire. As a result, Mandinka culture is still prominent in these and other West African countries. Knowledge of the origin of the Mandinka diaspora is vital for the study of Mandinka dance, because it explains why Mandinka dances are witnessed so far away from the Mandinka homelands.

The age-grade is an essential social group that must be taken under consideration for an effective study concerning Mandinka dance. This group produced as many – if not more – dances as the endogamous guilds. The age-grades are virtually always multiethnic in composition, and are formed to mobilize a large labor pool, a military, and so on. This fact emphasizes the need to consider them in this work because in Senegambia, regardless of the ethnic group, many age-grades utilized Mandinka dances in their rites and celebrations.

In conclusion, in order to access and interpret historical and cultural accounts in Mandinka dance systems, it is necessary to understand the origin of the culture that produced the dances. The foundation of Mandinka culture is intimately bound to the origin and expansion of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. Mandinka dance systems house infinite information about the history and worldview of the Mandinka people, and of the non-Mandinka people who practice them.

Notes

- 1 Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse discuss the origin of the Niger-Congo language group in their work *African Languages: An Introduction*.
- 2 Roderick James McIntosh's work, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger: The Island of Gold*, provides an extensive discussion on the Middle Niger Valley Civilization. Although

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other ethnicities such as the Fulani resided in the Niger River Valley, the largest number of inhabitants were the Mande, which included many daughter-groups or subgroups. For example, the Mandinka, the Soninke, and the Susu all are daughter-groups and fall under the umbrella of the Mande mother-group.

- 3 McIntosh discusses this phenomenon in *The Peoples of the Middle Niger*, 9–10. A heterarchy is the process by which a state is governed by the mutual agreements of diverse peoples representing various social groups and professions.
- 4 Clientism is a social order that depends on relations of patronage. See McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger*, for an idea of the magnitude of the Middle Niger civilization.
- 5 To avoid confusion, the term *caste* will be replaced with the word *artisan* from this point forward. For an extensive discussion on the professional artisans of West Africa, see Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *The Journal of African History*.
- 6 Offshoots from larger or primary language groups are referred to as daughter-groups in this study. For example, Mande is the primary or mother language group. Soninke, Mandinka, Susu, and so on are offshoots or daughter-groups belonging to the larger Mande language group.
- 7 See Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems.” The Tukulor are a sedentary offshoot of the nomadic Fulani. Tamari suggests that the Wolof did not contain artisans in their social stratification until centuries after the cities of the Middle Niger. It is possible that artisan guilds emerged among the Wolof when the Mande began to migrate west. Scholars generally purport a different point of original congregation for the Wolof than the Niger River Valley. However, it should be noted that the Wolof language is part of the Niger–Congo language group and therefore has the same origin as the Mande. It makes sense that the expansion of the Mande diaspora is responsible for the emergence of artisan guilds among the Wolof. The impact of the creation of the Mande diaspora will be explored further later in this chapter.
- 8 Tamari also expounds on this in “The Development of Caste Systems,” 225. A *jali*, also spelled *jeli*, is a historian/poet/musician.
- 9 Cultivators or farmers, and merchants or traders, were also present and played a significant role in the Middle Niger communities. However, these groups are not considered artisans. Additionally, the traders did not generally produce dances. Yet, they were later very instrumental in the transmission of them. McIntosh also covers this topic in *Peoples of the Middle Niger*.
- 10 For an extensive discussion on Nyama, see David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, eds., *Status and Identity in West Africa*.
- 11 See Conrad and Frank, *Status*, 36–7.
- 12 See Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara, eds., *Africa*, 175. Age-sets or age-grades are the initiation processes that all pubescent boys and girls are expected to experience. During the process, secret knowledge is conveyed to the initiates. Initiates were grouped in cohort sets with others of the same sex but whose ages could range a few years older or younger than the initiate.
- 13 Kevin Shillington discusses age-grade-governed societies in *History of Africa*, 263–4.
- 14 For a discussion on the utilization of masquerades as policing tools, see Peter M. Weil, “The Masked Figure and Social Control: The Mandinka Case” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*.
- 15 See Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*, 63.

- 16 For a discussion on the dates of Ghana's origin, see Abderrahman, *Tarikh Es-Soudan*, 18. The Hijra in Islamic history is the period when Muhammad and his followers migrated to Medina. This migration occurred in 622 CE. Es-Sa Di asserted that Ancient Ghana had twenty-two kings before the Hijra. As such, Ancient Ghana may have existed a century or more prior to the year 622 CE. Also see Edward William Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, 54.
- 17 See McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger*, 252; and Bovill, *The Golden Trade*, 54.
- 18 McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger*, 252.
- 19 See F. de Medeiros, "The Peoples of the Sudan: Population Movements," in *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, General History of Africa, abridged edn., 68–9.
- 20 D. T. Niani introduces the concept of a Mande expansion in his UNESCO-sponsored work. See "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," in *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. 4 of General History of Africa, unabridged edn.
- 21 See Patience Sonko-Godwin, *Ethnic Groups of the Senegambia Region: A Brief History*, 15. Additionally, Niane also offers an extensive explanation for the Mandinka, Soninke, and Susu offshoots of the Mande mother-group in chapter 4, "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," of the unabridged edition of UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, Vol. 4.
- 22 According to legend, Sumanguru created the balafone. It is an instrument that is very similar to the xylophone and is used to accompany drumming in specific dance systems. See Niane, "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," 125.
- 23 Nationalism in this respect refers to the actions taken by members of a particular nation in order to either maintain or achieve self-determination.
- 24 See Niane, "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," 132.
- 25 *Mansa* means king in Mandinka. See Fa-Digi Sisoko, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition*; and Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute, *Sunjata*; also see David Conrad, trans., *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*, for details about the life of Sunjata and the reasons why he was in exile. These three books present the Sunjata epic told by jalis from Mali, The Gambia, and Guinea, respectively.
- 26 The hunters were not regarded as an artisan group in Mandinka society.
- 27 Sidi is a province located roughly thirty-one miles southeast of modern-day Bamako. Kirina is located twenty-five miles south of Bamako. For a discussion on the war, see Conrad, *Sunjata: A West African Epic*.
- 28 Kaabu, also known as Gabu, became a great Mandinka empire after the decline of Mali.
- 29 For a detailed discussion of Greater Senegambia, see the introduction to Boubacar Barry's *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*.
- 30 For details about the oral history account of Traore's appeal to expand west to escape Islamic dominance, see Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Histoire des Mandingues de l'Ouest: le royaume du Gabou*; and Toby Green, *The Rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589*, 42.
- 31 The Muslim chronicler, Ibn Battuta, was appalled by the large incidences of indigenous African religious tents embedded within Islam in the territories of the Mali Empire. See Hamdun and King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*.
- 32 See Sonko-Godwin, *Ethnic Groups of the Senegambia*, 13. In 1868 the Fulani brought down the state of Kaabu after repeated attacks over the span of years.
- 33 Kings of Mali were called Mansa. The kings in Kaabu were called "great king" or Mansaba. For a discussion on the Mansabas' entourage to Mali, see Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 236.

- 30 *Lamban, dance of the jali*
- 34 See Sidibe, *A Brief History of Kaabu and Fuladu*, 24.
- 35 The capital of the empire of Mali was located on the border of present-day Guinea and Mali.
- 36 The Mandinka and their allies were referred to as Quiver-bearing Nobles.
- 37 See Nubia Kai, "An Investigation of Malinke Historiography: From Sundiata Keita to Almamy Samori Toure; and Albin Michel, *La Charte Du Mandé, et Autres Traditions Du Mali: Calligraphies de Aboubakar Fofana*. The ban on enslavement of artisans was enacted during the period of Ancient Ghana. However, Sunjata upheld it in his new administration.
- 38 See Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems," 230.
- 39 See McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths*, ch. 1; and Conrad and Frank, *Status and Identity in West Africa*.
- 40 Ibn Battuta asserted that the mansa always spoke to his jali and the jali would convey the mansa's words to whomever the mansa was conversing with. See Hamdun and King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, for early accounts of interactions between the jali and the mansa.
- 41 Professional Mande dance practitioners currently exist as a separate group. Although jalis' presentations and other types of performances are often still accompanied by dancers, professional dance groups also exist outside of the jali profession. The point of separation is surprisingly recent. Dates of departure will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.
- 42 Arab traders who were also marabouts had penetrated Western Sudan since the eleventh century. Joking relationships (or joking cousins) were developed to create harmony within potentially volatile interactions. Sunjata developed joking relationships with groups of non-Mandinka ethnicities who assisted him in defeating Sumanguru and were afterward ruled by Sunjata. This type of interaction was also encouraged for relationships with allies of the defeated Sumanguru. Joking relationships eased tension and created an atmosphere of camaraderie among the parties.
- 43 See Niane, "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," 135.
- 44 See Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed Under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 245.
- 45 See Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 245.
- 46 Mandinka hunters, farmers, and merchants began to migrate south prior the eleventh century. They settled in villages along the west coast of Africa. See Donald Wright, *Oral Traditions from the Gambia, Volume I: Mandinka Griots*, 20; Sonko-Godwin, *Ethnic Groups of the Senegambia*, 3; and Sidibe, *A Brief History of Kaabu and Fuladu*, 14.
- 47 Sidibe, *A Brief History of Kaabu and Fuladu*, 14.
- 48 See Bovill, *The Golden Trade*, 89.
- 49 See Niane, "Mali and the Second Mande Expansion," 170; and Bovill, *The Golden Trade*, 87, 106–7, for a portrayal of Mali's immense stores of gold, which was at the disposal of her kings.
- 50 Wangara (from the Ancient Ghana Empire) and Julia (of the Mali Empire) are names bestowed upon Soninke, Mandinka, and other Mande Muslim traders by groups they came into contact with in areas south of the Mande original heartland.
- 51 See Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Barry's discourse sheds light on the results of the increase of the transatlantic slave trade on Senegambia's economy.
- 52 The later generations of those traders – or Julias – who migrated south in earlier centuries set up trade networks. In the mid-nineteenth century, Samori Toure

constructed an army from traders along the network routes initially to protect merchant travelers and their goods. With the encroachment of the French and the British in the territory, Toure redirected the focus of the army toward prevention of European conquest. For an account of Toure's strategies, see Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, 235–6.

- 53 This channel was responsible for founding Kaabu.
- 54 Sirifo Camara, ed. and trans., *The Epic of Kelefaa Saane*; see introduction.
- 55 Ibid.; and also see Sidibe, *A Brief History of Kaabu*, 16.
- 56 Sonko-Godwin's *Ethnic Groups* offers a clear explanation of Korings and Nyanchos, in addition to Sidibe's *A Brief History of Kaabu*, and the *Epic of Kelefaa Sane*.
- 57 The Gambian Dance and Music Troupe toured the United States in 1998 and performed at Old Dominion University in April of that year.
- 58 For instance, farmers performed the dance Kassa, Manjani is a dance performed by the girl's age-grade, and Jondon/Wolosodon is a slave dance.
- 59 Daliluw is the process by which herbs, amulets, and actions, are utilized to intensify Nyama. When Nyama is increased by daliluw, it is usually for the purposes of perfecting or refining a specific skill or task. Only specific individuals possess the knowledge to manage the herbs, amulets, and so on – a process called “jiridon” or science of the trees. Those desiring to increase their Nyama in order to focus it on a specific task must purchase units of daliluw from such individuals. For more on daliluw, see Patrick McNaughton, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African Masquerade*, 77.
- 60 As discussed earlier, Kaabu, which retained traditional practices, was a matrilineal society. The kings validated themselves by proving they were directly related to the woman named Balaba.
- 61 See Hamun and King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, 55.
- 62 Ibid., 91.
- 63 Dundunbah is a male age-grade dance. It is executed to both bestow and display strength. It was generally performed by those who completed the age-grade process, also known as the rite of passage.

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Part 2

Kankouran, dance of the Masquerade

The particulars of Mandinka dance

Introduction

Diverse types of primary sources exist in Africa. Some are abundant, others are scarce. Written primary sources are among those that are the least plentiful. Nonetheless, cultural sources in Africa can fill historically gaping cavities with vital information. Unfortunately, they have not been fully utilized by historians and other scholars. Africa is replete with ancient cave and rock paintings and engravings – often referred to as rock art – which document dance and other cultural phenomena. African rock art dates to tens of thousands of years in the past. These valuable underused sources depict dance practices, religious rituals, cultivation practices, pastoralism, and numerous other aspects of ancient life. Rock art has been found throughout the continent of Africa. Currently, the oldest African rock art discovered in South Africa has been dated as 77,000 years old. Archaeologists and nonprofit entities such as the Kenyan-based organization, Trust for African Rock Art (TARA), have devoted extensive resources to the study of rock art. However, scholars outside of the field of archaeology have yet to utilize rock art as a viable lens for the study of dance history and the construction of other types of narratives. Unfortunately, African rock art is not as stable as rock art found in colder climates.

Rock art in Africa has been created in open air hollow caves and other shallow shelters as well as in totally exposed areas such as cliffs. Consequently, sunlight, rain, and other climatic phenomena have greatly impacted the paintings and engravings. Much of the rock art that survived in Africa dates to almost 10,000 years ago. However, the tradition of rock art in Africa extends beyond 50,000 years in the past.

Dance has copiously been portrayed in rock art throughout all eras and regions in Africa – including Senegambia – and provides hints about the history and practice of dance in antiquity (see Figure 2.1). For instance, African rock art furnishes clues regarding the sequence of occurrences with respect to which came first, dancing or instrumentation. The oldest specimens of surviving rock art in Africa depict dancing but no instruments. There are depictions of clapping, and perhaps chanting, along with illustrations of dancers. Elaborate as well as rudimentary body painting, masks, ornamentation, and props such as



Figure 2.1 Dance on Saharan Prehistoric Rock Art

In Figure 2.1, ancient African dance is depicted on rock art in Tassili N'Ajjer, Algeria. Rock art in Africa has been created in open air hollow caves and other shallow shelters, as well as totally exposed areas such as cliffs. It displays documentation of dance thousands of years old.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, 2010

staffs are also displayed on the dancers themselves and in the background. Yet instruments are not depicted in most of these early representations.

Dance in African rock art appears to be intricately connected to religious rituals. Subsequently, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that dance in Africa was one of the first expressions of bodily communication linked to spiritual practices and the precursor to extravagant ritualized religious observances. More importantly, the rock art reveals that dance, predates the endogamous artisan guilds and several other social groups. Religious practice tied to the process of food acquisition, appears to be the catalyst for the initiation of

body movement as a tool. It became a device to induce a trance state which facilitated communication with the unseen world responsible for providing food – whether through cultivation, gathering, hunting, or pastoralism.

Many examples of rock art were discovered in areas near Greater Senegambia. For example, rock art has been found in Tassili n'Ajjer in southern Algeria, in Mali, and in Burkina Faso. As climatic conditions prompted migrations, the traditions and dances depicted on rock art were transported with the people to new areas, such as the Niger River Valley in Mali, and other regions. As a result, many of these migrants were the ancestors of the Mandinka speaking peoples who founded the Mali Empire. More importantly, many of the dance movements – also called movement vocabulary – depicted on ancient African rock art have been identified in modern executions of traditional Mandinka dance. The following chapters will highlight African dance movement vocabularies to harness the skills necessary for historical interpretation of Mandinka dance systems.

2 Form and Mandinka dance movements

African dance movement vocabulary

This chapter will focus on two specific types of Mande dance systems – Mandinka and Susu.¹ A dance system is the vehicle through which ideas are conveyed. It includes the dance itself, which is comprised of a series of steps, the dance practitioners, the drummers and other musicians, the attire worn by the dancers, drummers and musicians, the location where the dance is traditionally done, the time of year, and all props.² One dance system is capable of providing a plethora of historical and cultural information. As such, this chapter will introduce wide-ranging concepts that can be utilized generally for obtaining and/or decoding tenets found in Mandinka dance systems. Hence, this is an introduction to the potential that lies within Mande dance interpretation. However, this is not the end or the definitive road map for deciphering dance. Infinite keys to Mande dance interpretation await discovery by scholars.

For clarity, we will begin this discussion by explaining the parts of the body with regard to dance. The torso is the part of the body that the ribcage resides in. It includes the chest, waist and the back. In dance movements, a torso can be held at a ninety-degree angle or an acute angle to the earth. A ninety-degree angle is comparable to a straight vertical line emanating from the floor – in other words, dancing with a straight back. Acute angles are less than ninety degrees. Accordingly, they are akin to diagonal lines emanating from a flat surface. The diagonal line in an acute angle is always tilted forward – specifically, the chest is held in a diagonal position over the toes. Thus, while executing dance movements the torso can be held straight (a ninety-degree angle) or tilted forward towards the toes (an acute angle). Dance steps can be executed with a high, medium, or a low torso. A high torso is displayed when the torso is slightly less than ninety degrees (which is still an acute angle in dance). One should apply caution when observing movements performed with a high torso because they sometimes appear to be executed with a straight back. A medium torso is immediately identifiable. The torso is noticeably held at an angle over the toes forming a diagonal line to the ground. A low torso is held at an angle (still considered acute) in which the back appears to be almost parallel to the ground.

90 degree angle

Acute angle



Figure 2.2 Dance Step with Low Torso

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 1998

The pelvic area is the hip region and is located directly below the torso and ends where the legs are connected to the hip bones. It is literally the entire hip region – front, back, and side.

A contraction is an isolated movement forward and backward of a particular body area. In other words, the body area must expand and contract. There are two types of contractions; pelvic contractions and torso contractions. To execute a torso contraction, the rib cage area must move forward and backward. Similarly, a pelvic contraction involves the forward and backward movement



Figure 2.3 Dance Step with Medium Torso

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 2004

of the hip region. One cannot achieve a pelvic contraction by moving the hips from left to right. Contractions involve forward and backward movements solely and can be fully or partially executed. A partial contraction is also referred to as a semicontraction. Partial or semicontractions also involve forward and backward movements, but the movement is executed without reaching the full limit of the body part being contracted. Contractions typically only refer to movements that involve the torso and/or the pelvic regions of the body.

There are dance movements and combinations of movements that are characteristically African. They are found in African dances throughout the continent of Africa:

- contractions (torso, pelvic, semi or partial);
- rapid head movements (in a multiplicity of directions including circular movements);



Figure 2.4 Dance Step with High Torso

Figure 2.4, author (right) and Suwabi African Ballet member Tchesar Jendayi (left)

Figures 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 portrays the author executing dance steps with low, medium, and high torsos, respectively. Acute torso angles, or angles less than ninety degrees, are extensively portrayed in traditional Mandinka dance.

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 2005

- movements emanating from bent knees with legs parallel to each other;
- movements executed with the torso at acute angles to the earth including jumps and leaps;
- hip movements from right to left.

Additionally, movements which utilize several parts of the body above and below the waist simultaneously, and often at cross-rhythms with each other, are all movements that are characteristically African and are all present in Mandinka and Susu dance movements.³ Moreover, hops and leaps performed in Mandinka dances are often executed with knees bent while in the air, and simultaneously



Figure 2.5 Leap with Bent Knees and Medium Torso

Hops and leaps performed in Mandinka dance systems are often executed with knees bent while in the air, and the torso is often simultaneously held at high, medium or low positions. The author is executing a leap with bent knees and torso held at a medium position.

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 2006

the torso is often held at high, medium or low positions of acute angles with the earth.

The dance step

Before embarking on the discussion of dance systems in Senegambia, it is important to understand the distinction between a dance step and a dance movement. A step in Mandinka dance systems can be and is often comprised of more than one body movement. For example, it is possible for a step to

require that the knees be bent, the torso be tilted towards the earth (in an acute angle), the arms wave, and the head bob backwards and forwards all executed simultaneously. In contrast, a dance movement is the most basic element in a dance system. If one returns to the prior example, each of the items named is a movement. To bend the knees is one movement in and of itself. Similarly, bobbing the head backward and forward is another single movement, and so on. A dance is comprised of a series or a combination of steps. A step is composed of a sequence of movements.

Similar to languages, which are founded on a few root words and sounds, Mandinka dance systems began with one or two root steps. The root steps do not change throughout the course of time. Other steps, some with more complex movements, have been added to the dance system over time as circumstances and events have dictated. However, the root step has remained unchanged, and has been passed down throughout millennia. Steps added to a dance system after the root step has been established will be called auxiliary steps for the purposes of this study. The auxiliary steps added to a dance system are comparable to the prefixes and suffixes added to root words in a language. They are also akin to the innumerable seemingly unnecessary additional words added to a language over time with the same meanings as the root words. The auxiliary steps in Mandinka dance systems support and compliment the idea that the root steps are attempting to convey. They redundantly convey the idea or message that the root step represents.

Natural body movements

Mandinka dance in particular, and African dance in general, are comprised primarily of natural body movements. Thus, due to the acute angles of the torso, the multitude of steps emanating from bent knees, pelvic contractions, and so on, virtually everyone in the village – youth and elders alike – has access to the dance systems. This is especially true of age-grade dances; the dance systems that all in the village was required to learn. Natural body movements then, are dance movements that imitate the positions and stances performed by the body during everyday tasks and through subconscious gestures.

For instance, both types of contractions are natural body movements. People are not generally taught how to contract the pelvic region; it occurs without coaching or instruction. Pelvic contractions became a symbol of fertility in Mandinka dance systems because it is the area of the body that is contracted during the act of procreation. It therefore is the region of the body that represents fertility in African dance vocabulary. Fertility in this sense refers to all aspects of life; not solely procreation. As such, it represents a continuation of all life processes, advancement, and an increase in creativity and in productivity. Indeed, many contemporary African dances still employ pelvic contractions combined with right to left or circular hip movements.

Torso contractions fall under the purview of subconscious gestures. People naturally contract the torso – or stick their chests out – when asserting themselves

without applying any thought to the action. Accordingly, in Mandinka dance, torso contractions often depict assertion, or aggression. It can also denote ambition. Torso contractions represent the act of propelling oneself toward progress or a higher level of existence regardless of impending obstructions. It represents the act of chopping through or breaking down obstacles. For example, in the age-grade dance *Dundunba*, which is done to display strength and fortitude, the root step employs multiple torso contractions.

Types of dance

Mandinka dance systems are devices that facilitate and accentuate all processes involved with life itself. The purpose of the dance systems and the narratives the dances convey vary from dance to dance and from region to territory. However, it is possible to recognize distinct categories or types of dances in Mandinka dance in particular, and African dance systems in general.

Some dances are distinct in that they are executed by a specific gender. Accordingly, there are dances that are traditionally performed by men or by women. For example, the celebration dances *Guinea Fare* and *Mane* are traditionally done by women. The separation of the dances by gender is witnessed most frequently in the age-grade ceremonies. An example would be the age-grade dance *Soli*. It is traditionally performed during the male's rite of passage and circumcision ceremonies. Moreover, age-grade or rite of passage dances themselves constitute another category of Mandinka dance. *Manjani* and *Dundunba*, are examples of dances that are executed during the women's and men's age-grade ceremonies, respectively.⁴

There are a number of age-grade dance systems that require adherents to demonstrate that they can safely manipulate and, in some cases, become the embodiment of natural forces such as fire. For instance, the Susu dances *Mampa Para* and *Talasa* are fire-eating dances. Thus, they are dance systems that require devotees to handle fire during the performance of the dance. Dancers perform the fire-eating dances with sticks and other flammable materials that they set on fire during the performance. They expose the flame to unprotected parts of their bodies such as their arms, legs, and so on. The dancers also put the fire into their mouths via lit cotton and other types of flammable swabs or materials. Fire dance systems are utilized to bring about a dramatic change in circumstances. For example, fire dances are used to heal an individual or a community that has endured a traumatic physical, social, or political ailment. The fire represents a potent force that breaks the cycle of illness, corruption, and so on.

Within the age-grade/rite of passage process lies another phenomenon for which dance systems were created; the secret society. Many of the masquerade dances belong to this category. Masquerade dances were executed by dancers whose identities were concealed behind masks. Masks were fashioned in diverse ways, and with innumerable types of materials. It is noteworthy that masked dance systems facilitated the enforcement of customary laws. Stilt dance systems are an example of masked dances utilized for social control. The stilt dancer



Figure 2.6 Fire Eating, The Gambia Dance, and Music Troupe

The Gambian National Dance and Music Troupe performance, Norfolk, Virginia, 1998.

The photograph depicts a member of The Gambian National Dance and Music Troupe eating fire during a dance performance. Fire-eating is not only engaged in by men in Mande dance systems.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, 1998

represents a spirit of the forest concerned with justice and adherence to tradition. The stilt dancer in a dance system always emerges from the forest after the dance ceremony has already begun. Because the stilt dancer represents and, indeed, becomes the spirit of the forest, it does not manifest at the same time as the “human” dancers but enters the dance ceremony apart from them. It has its own nuanced entrance. The stilt dancers’ identity is always completely concealed.

As discussed earlier, all social groups contained a secret society component. Additionally, there were – and still are – many areas in Africa where Islam,



Figure 2.7 Stilt Dancer Practicing on the Beach

The photograph depicts a stilt dancer practicing on the beach in Kololi, The Gambia. It is significant that even when practicing, the dancer's identity is concealed. The shack to the right of the stilt dancer was constructed for an average height man to occupy. Although distance should be accounted for, the stilt dancer stands noticeably taller than the tree directly behind him and the shack. While in The Gambia, I frequently witnessed stilt dancers so much taller than buildings and similar structures that they literally stepped over such objects to enter a performance area.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, 2004

Christianity, and colonialism were not able to completely thwart traditional religious institutions. Training in traditional religious systems survived because it occurred much like that in age-grade secret societies; away from missionaries, colonists, and the eyes of oppressors. Dance systems formulated in these secret environments, such as prophetic dances, dances that induce a trance state, rain dances, and healing dances, still exist currently.⁵ An example of a dance system that emerged from a secret sect is the *Kankouran*.

The rite of passage process is not the only phenomenon deemed important enough to underscore with dance systems. Court dances were also considered culturally important. That is, dance systems that were performed only for specific officials, in a political environment, or for a specific class of people, or a distinct social group. *Lamban* is a dance that was created by the jali class.⁶ It was traditionally performed solely by jalis and only in the king's palace or court.

Historically, when people from neighboring territories posed threats to the Mandinka, the hunter social group formed a warrior class to address such a threat.⁷ Accordingly, warrior or military dance systems evolved. The warrior dance *Sofa* is representative of such a phenomenon. Dance systems also depicted reverence for the strengths and the wisdom of nature. These nature dances often portrayed animals in an effort to capture and utilize the virtuous and the potent qualities that existed within them. *Konodon*, or the bird dance, is one example of such. Other examples are the women's masked dances, the *Solindingo* (baby leopard), the *Sontokuhoo* (the ostrich), and the *Sakulaakaa* (the heron).⁸

Calendrical dance systems, or dances that were performed at the same time during a measurable climatic cycle, were also performed by the Mandinka. For example, the Mandinka dance *Kassa* was performed during the harvest time. The times of harvest corresponded to the climate and therefore the yearly calendar. As a result, dances such as *Kassa* were performed at the same time or during the same season each year.

Courtship practices and marriage were depicted in dance as well. The two-part Susu dance system, *Yankadi/Macru* is an excellent example of a courtship dance system. *Yankadi* is a medium-tempo dance done by young men and women attempting to gain the attention of the opposite sex. The dance employs hip movements along with extravagant arm interchanges.⁹ If a couple agrees to enter a courting phase, the dance is said to be successful. In order to celebrate a successful courtship commencement period, the fast corresponding dance, *Macru*, is performed by the men and the women.

Mandinka dance attire

The dance attire communicates with the audience, the other dancers, and the musicians. The attire utilized for each dance has meaning and everything on the uniform has a purpose. The attire traditionally used for dance in Mandinka dance systems should not be referred to as costumes when discussing dance done in a village setting. The word costume denotes a simulation, or a showcase of displaced realities.¹⁰ Traditional attire used in Mandinka dance systems do not become costumes until they are utilized on the concert stage away from the village. On the concert stage, there are often additions or omissions to the dance garments to appeal to non-African audiences and sensibilities while attempting to simulate a village environment. It is in the village, in the rural areas of Senegambia – and Africa in general – that the intricate, meaningful age-old dance attire details can be witnessed. As such, the words attire, garments, and even uniform, are more accurate descriptions for that which is

worn during the execution of traditional Mandinka dance systems performed in their natural settings.

In order to comprehend the messages conveyed by the attire in any dance system, one must take note of the color. Colors affect mood and state of mind. They also invoke certain emotions and/or notions. For instance, the color red in Mandinka cultural systems represents Nyama, the spiritual force that drives everything in nature and provides the artisans with the catalyst to produce their wares.¹¹ Red also represents aggression, passion, and action. The color red will often be found on the attire of dancers in the Komo Secret Society when executing a fiery bird dance.¹² Blue, by contrast, represents tranquility, peace. It also depicts devotion and stamina or patience. Dance attire with blue or red – or any other color on it – conveys messages to the spectators, drummers, or other participants in the dance. Entire uniforms need not be the color red, blue, and so on to produce the desired effect – although many instances in which the entire dance garment is comprised of red or some other color do exist. The amount of a specific color depicts the intensity of the message that the color is intended to convey.

Dance attire materials are laden with meaning and body paint and props are often components of the dance vestments. Materials such as shells, feathers, beads, leaves, and so on convey ideas and messages that are intensified or pacified by the amounts, placements, and size of each. The fabric or textile the dance attire is comprised of also communicates a message. For example, mud cloth is composed of strips of fabric sewn together which has been died utilizing a technique that employs mud.¹³ Each strip contains figures or patterns that convey a narrative. Masks are utilized in many Mandinka dances. They are also made from a variety of materials including carved wood, cowrie shells, feathers, raffia, paint, beads, metals, and much more. Masks are created in a variety of sizes from those barely large enough to conceal the face to masks that disguise the entire body of the dancer. They not only conceal the identity of the dancer, but they facilitate, along with the dance postures, the transformation of the dancer into the natural element, animal, or spirit that the dance portrays.

As a whole, in traditional settings, Mandinka dance attire reveals clues about the age, gender, and status in the community of the dance practitioner. The attire facilitates communication without the utterance of words. It also separates or distinguishes the different ideas, messages, or symbols conveyed in the dance system. The spectators, upon viewing the dance attire, immediately arrive at culturally understood conclusions, oftentimes even before the dance itself has begun.

In contemporary settings in Africa and on the concert stage outside of Africa, dance attire is often altered to address current situations. Fabric may be added to areas of the body that were traditionally bare (see ballet format later in this chapter). For instance, sports bras or other tops have been added to attire in dance systems that were customarily danced bare-chested by women. Similarly, pants were added to male's rite of passage dances that were traditionally danced by nude men in inaccessible or secluded localities. Additionally, the types of materials traditionally used for specific dance systems may change. For example,



Figure 2.8 Preparing for Performance

The photograph depicts the author in dance attire and preparing for an outdoor performance. The author's dance regalia accentuates the unlimited ways in which shells, fibers, beads, and color have been traditionally utilized to facilitate the narrative that Mandinka dance systems convey.

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 2002

synthetic fabrics and plastic beads have been substituted for attire that was traditionally composed of cotton, and with glass or ceramic beads.

The additions and omissions to Mandinka dance attire must be applied with caution. Dance systems were executed with or without certain materials and/or coverings for a purpose; to convey a particular nonverbal message. Therefore, African dance attire in contemporary settings should only be designed by persons knowledgeable in the specific dance systems that such garments are to serve. Unfortunately, this is not always the case (see changes made for the ballet format later in this chapter).¹⁴

In addition to contemporary settings, dance attire can also be altered from its original version by traditional experts in the village. Under these circumstances, additions and omissions to the dance system vestiges are culturally compliant. As such, Mandinka and Susu dance attire in particular, and Mande dance attire in general, are comparable to auxiliary steps in the dance systems. In contrast to the root steps which do not change over time, auxiliary steps can be added, customized, or omitted in dance systems. Equally, dance attire can also change throughout the life of the dance system.

TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS FOR MANDINKA DANCE

The original instrument

The voice box was the first instrument used for dance. Subsequently, virtually all dances in the Mandinka cultural system have traditional songs that accompany them. Instruments outside of the body were gradually constructed and incorporated into the dance systems.¹⁵

Therefore, although the focus of this study is dance, instruments must be included in the discussion. Instruments compliment the dance and contribute to the delivery of the message that the dance is to convey. They are equally as important as the attire that accompanies Mandinka dances, and they are also integral parts of the dance systems. That said, only those instruments that are commonly used in traditional Mandinka dance and modern Mandinka ballets will be discussed. The instruments discussed in this book are by no means comprehensive in the representation of the types and the number of instruments used in all the countless Mandinka dance systems in existence. The select number of instruments discussed below are to serve as a sample of those most commonly used in Mandinka dances. Lastly, one must not forget that dancing emerged before the crafting of the instruments which exist outside of the body.

The myriad specimens of ancient rock art throughout the continent of Africa provides convincing evidence that dance emerged as a consequence of religious rituals, and it was initially probably performed to some form of religious chanting. As dance evolved, percussive sounds made by the feet and hand engagement with other body parts (i.e., hands slapping the thigh and sides, foot stomping to a rhythm, etc.) probably led to the crafting of drums and other percussive instruments. Wind and string instruments probably evolved later. Many instruments emerged throughout time, yet only a few instruments garnered the honor of being associated with Mandinka dance on a consistent basis.¹⁶ As such, the jembe/djembe, dundun, balafon, and the krin, will be discussed later in this chapter.

Jembe/djembe

The jembe drum (djembe in the French spelling) is one of the major musical instruments traditionally played for Mandinka dance systems.¹⁷ It is reputed

to have emerged with the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century.¹⁸ It was created by the Numu artisan group of blacksmiths. The jembe is shaped similar to a large mortar bowl on top of a slim neck. The entire instrument is hollow, carved from a single piece of wood, and has a skin (traditionally goat skin is used) attached to the top. Metal rings and roped strings facilitate the secure attachment of the skin, and the exquisite sound it makes. Although jembes are played with bare hands, several different sounds can be produced.

The jembe dance orchestra usually includes a lead drummer, and two or more accompanists. The lead drummer plays the breaks. Breaks are a signal, a call, or a break in the rhythm, that signifies that something different is to occur next. For example, when the lead drummer plays a break, the dancers know it is time to change steps, or begin or end a dance, and so on. The breaks also signify changes for the other drummers and the singers. The jembe accompanists play different but complimentary rhythms simultaneously. Hence, the rhythms played for Mandinka and Susu dance systems are polyrhythmic.¹⁹

A person who has dedicated a great deal of his life to perfecting the art of jembe playing is called a jembefola (djembefola in the French spelling). Jembefolas must not only master the art of playing jembe drums. They must also learn the names, purpose of, and the accompanying rhythms of all the dances in the Mandinka dance systems. Therefore, many jembefolas also dance.

Dundun

The dundun is another major instrument in the Mandinka dance systems. The dundun family of drums are each constructed from a large single piece of wood or log. The log is hollowed out and the rough outer portion of the log is smoothed. Skins are attached to the top and the bottom. Unlike the jembe drum, which utilizes goat skin, cow skins are traditionally used in the dundun family of drums. The cow skins are attached via metal rings and thick rope.

The dundun drum is reputed to be older than the jembe drum. Although often called a dundun (singular), it is actually part of a family of drums. The dundun family consists of three different sized drums – the small kenkeni, the medium songba, and the large dundun. Each drum varies in pitch, dictated by the size and the tightness or looseness of the attached cow skin. Additionally, a metal bell, or a kenken, is usually attached to the songba or kenkeni and it is played with a wooden stick. However, sometimes the kenken bell is struck or played with a small piece of metal. The metal that the kenken is constructed of is traditionally iron. Dundun drum families are made in diverse sizes. As a consequence, the dundun drum in one family of dunduns may be smaller or larger than a dundun drum from a different dundun drum family. Regardless of the size of the dundun drum, the songba, and the kenkeni will always be smaller than the dundun drum in descending order. The rhythm played simultaneously on the kenken bell is different than



Figure 2.9 Jembe and Dundunba Drums

Suwabi African Ballet drummers Araaku Abiola (left), and Ayinde Abiola (right)

Like dance attire, the jembe drum itself tells a narrative. The manner in which the drum is decorated (or not decorated), how it is held by the drummer, the type of wood, carvings on the shaft, and so on all provide clues about Mandinka dance systems, the musician playing the drum, and the drum's history. The photograph displays jembe, songba, and dundunba drums. The kenkeni drum, the smallest of the dundunba drum family, is not pictured.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, 2007

the rhythm played on the drum it is attached to, which makes the dundun a very complex instrument to master. The largest drum in the dundun family is also called a dundunba and it possesses a very deep and resonating sound. The “ba” at the end of the Mandinka word “Dundunba” is translated to “big” in English. Consequently, the dundun or dundunba is considered to be the heart-beat of the rhythm by the dancers. It emphasizes the rhythm and it accentuates harmony within the dance system.

Krin

The Mandinka are not the only people who traditionally and currently utilize the krin drum or log drum. Various forms of the krin can be found among countless ethnic groups throughout the continent of Africa. Accordingly, the origin of the krin as well as its expansion to various regions in Africa are difficult to pinpoint. The krin is constructed from a hollowed-out log in the center. The two ends are closed. Additionally, the krin does not contain a skin to facilitate sound production. Instead, slits are cut horizontally across the top. The hollow body of the drum amplifies the sound when it is struck by the two wooden sticks used to play it, and it is constructed in a variety of sizes. Although they are utilized in Mandinka dance systems, krins are not used as often as jembe and dundun drums.

Balafon

The balafon is not a drum. It is comparable to a wooden xylophone and it is played by a variety of peoples across the continent of Africa. There are countless versions of balafons – with as many names – played in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Congo Basin, to name a few places. Its history is just as varied ranging back to at least the Mali Empire in West Africa, and the ancient Kingdom of the Congo in Central Africa.

The name “balafon” is of Mandinka origin. Although played primarily by jalis during oral history performances, it is sometimes played during dance performances as well. In contrast, the kora, an important instrument in the Mandinka instrument pantheon, is a string instrument that is also played by jalis. It is not usually played during dance performances unless the dancing ceases or pauses to allow for the kora presentation. As such, the kora then, is traditionally played during those oral tradition presentations without dance. Consequently, although the kora is also a significant Mandinka instrument, it will not be discussed in this study on Mandinka dance systems.

Balafons are made in diverse sizes. It contains long wooden keys which are fastened to a wooden frame usually with a material similar to raffia – a type of plant in the grass family – or ropes. Calabashes in a variety of descending sizes are hung underneath the keys to amplify the sound. The wooden keys range in size successively from large to small. The balafon is played with two mallets, and the size differences of the keys facilitate the ability to produce different tones, notes, and pitches. The balafon is played mostly by jalis during oral history performances and dance ceremonies.²⁰

Kutiro drums of the Gambian Mandinka

Some of the Mandinka in southern Senegal (Casamance) and The Gambia, play kutiro drums which are very different from the more popularly known Mandinka jembe and dundun drums. They use these drums in dance systems such as *Lengengo* and others.²¹ The Kutiro drum family consists of three drums in

successive sizes from small to large – the kutirindingo (the smallest), the kutiriba (medium-sized), and the sabaro (the largest). Essentially, kutiriba is “big kutiro” in Mandinka. It is typically shorter than the sabaro but is sometimes wider. The sabaro is the lead drum. The kutirindingo and the kutiriba play interconnecting rhythms which both complement and follow the sabaro drum rhythm.

Kutiro drums have an elongated shape, are open at both ends, and possess wider openings at the head where the goat skin is fastened by wooden pegs. Kutiro drums are also carved from a single piece of wood or log. Drum makers often attach strips of leather around the edge of the head of the drum to add a decorative dangling effect which also adds to the resonance. In contrast to the potentially large group of jembe players permitted in dance systems such as *Manjani*, *Soko*, all the dance systems discussed earlier in this chapter, and countless others, orchestras of Mandinka kutiro players consist of only three musicians. They play one drum each, and their drumming style employs a stick-and-hand technique.

As a whole, instruments are more fluid than the root steps in dance systems. As discussed earlier, root steps do not change over time. However, there have been cases where instruments have been substituted for others, rhythm accompaniments have changed, or increased, among other things. For example, the age-grade dance *Dundunba* currently has over fifteen rhythms.²² Yet, the root steps have remained unchanged and are performed regardless of which rhythm is being played.

Dancer-drummer bond

As discussed earlier, dancing preceded the creation of instruments. Through time, instruments then, were created to facilitate the dance. It makes sense that historically there would be a harmonious connection or blending between the dancer and the drummer; for one came into being as a consequence of the other. Hence, the dancer-drummer bond emerged as a result of this harmonious connection.

The dancer-drummer bond has endured even during the transformations Mandinka dance systems have undergone via the creation of the new ballet format (the ballet format is discussed in Chapter 4). The ballet format was fashioned to adapt dances that were traditionally created to be performed in the rural areas of the village to the urban concert stage. Whether in a ballet or in the village setting, the drummer must be meticulously attentive. He or she must intuitively observe the dancer’s movements in order to provide accents for them. This interaction between dancer and drummer is not rehearsed in the village setting. It must come naturally and in real time. The fact that the drummer must observe the dancer’s moves – that is, the dancer leads the drummer – provides clues about the origin and the elder of the two artforms. The interaction is considered fruitful when the drummer anticipates which steps or body movements the dancer is going to implement before he/she executes them and the drummer plays accents for the movements simultaneously as the dancer performs them.

There are elements of the ballet format (ballet format is discussed later in this chapter) that are detrimental to the dancer-drummer bond in particular,

and to the holistic nature of Mandinka dance systems in general. In the process of transferring Mandinka dance systems from the village to the concert stage, there are now instances where audiences pay to see only drummers perform without dancers. This phenomenon is untraditional and culturally unnatural. Traditionally, the drummer – and the practice of drumming in general – was an integral part of the dance systems in Mandinka cultural institutions. In instances in which only the drummer is performing, obviously the dancer-drummer bond cannot exist because of the absence of the dancer.

Conclusion

Dance in Africa has been documented on rock and cave art thousands of years ago. Such art often depicts dance movements, attire, face and body paint, masks, and props. The rock art also suggests that dance initially emanated from religious rituals created to control and understand the environment. Moreover, evidence from numerous African rock paintings and engravings suggest that dancing emerged before instrumentation. The first instrument was the human body, and therefore the first music was made by chanting, clapping hands, percussive foot movements, and patting the body. Gradually, instruments crafted outside the human body were fashioned and applied to Mandinka dance systems specifically, and African dances in general.

Dance systems are comprised of the dancers, musicians, attire, instruments, location where and the time when the dance is traditionally performed, and so on. Thus, they contain everything necessary to convey the message embedded in the dance. Body movements are the building blocks for dance steps. There are dance steps and body movements that are witnessed through the continent of Africa and are therefore considered characteristically African. Similar to dance systems in other parts of Africa, Mandinka dances can be witnessed in many categories – gendered dances (male and female), age-grade dances, religious, masked, courtship, secret society dances, and so on. Although instruments emerged after dance, they are an integral part of Mandinka dance systems.

The shapes and types of Mandinka instruments utilized for dance performances are numerous. However, there are a few that have been consistently used for Mandinka dance systems such as the jembe, the dundun drum family, the balafon, and the krin. Some Mandinka musicians in The Gambia and southern Senegal also play the kutiro drum. Regardless of the drum played, a bond exists between the dancer and the drummer, whereby the drummer anticipates what steps or body movements that the dancer is going to execute next. As a result, the drummer plays accents for those steps simultaneously as the dancer executes them. In order to fully grasp the dynamics of drumming, the Mandinka dance systems, their evolution over time, and the village vs the stage phenomenon, the emergence and impact of the ballet format must be discussed. Hence, Chapters 3 and 4 address the ballet format and the evolution of Mandinka dances.

Table 2.1 Mandinka and Susu Dances and Meanings

<i>Name of Dance</i>	<i>Type of Dance</i>
<i>Sofa</i>	Mandinka hunting dance. It was also done by soldiers to prepare for war.
<i>Soli</i>	A Mandinka and Susu age-grade/rite of passage dance. It was originally performed by men. Currently, women also perform Soli.
<i>Yankadi</i>	Susu dance used for courtship, weddings, and the full moon. It is performed by men and women.
<i>Macru</i>	Macru is the fast counterpart to Yankadi. It is performed immediately after Yankadi and has a faster livelier rhythm than Yankadi's slower seductive rhythm. Macru is performed to mark the beginning of a courtship.
<i>Lamban</i>	A Mandinka dance created by the jeli/jali endogamous guild. The jalis are the oral historians/poets/musicians among the artisan classes. The full name of the dance is, "Lamban Jelidon," which translates to "dance of the jeli" in English.
<i>Guinea Fare</i>	A Susu women's age-grade dance. Originally performed primarily in Guinea.
<i>Dundunba</i>	Mandinka age-grade dance. Originally performed by men but is today practiced by women as well.
<i>Kassa</i>	Mandinka harvest dance performed by men and women to encourage the farmers and to give them energy during their work. The Mandinka word "Kasa" means "to plant" in English.
<i>Lengengo</i>	Mandinka dance system performed in The Gambia, Casamance (southern Senegal), and other parts of southern Senegal. Instead of the customary jembe and dundun drums, the Mandinka use drums from the kutiro drum family to play for this Mandinka dance system.
<i>Soko</i>	Mandinka age-grade dance performed by the group of young people who have not yet undergone initiation. It is done to emphasize the duties the youth have to society.
<i>Manjani</i>	Mande girl's age-grade dance. It is performed by Mandinka, Susu, and other Mande groups throughout West Africa.
<i>Jondon</i>	Mande dance system practiced by the slaves who have been recently acquired. It is performed at a slow to medium pace to highlight the tenuous position of the slaves.
<i>Wolosodon</i>	Wolosodon is the faster counterpart to Jondon. It is danced immediately after Jondon. Wolosodon highlights the more stable position the slave is in once he/she has been absorbed into or born into the family unit of the master.
<i>Kankouran</i>	Mandinka male age-grade masquerade dance. Due to the dispersal of African people as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, Kankouran can also be witnessed in ceremonies in remote areas in the United States – primarily in the south – and in the Caribbean.
<i>Domba Yeri Yeriso</i>	Susu dance performed at the end of the rainy season in The Gambia to celebrate the first taste of the newly harvested cereal.

(continued)

Table 2.1 (Cont.)

<i>Name of Dance</i>	<i>Type of Dance</i>
<i>Jamba Dongo</i>	Mandinka girls' age-grade dance performed in The Gambia to celebrate womanhood.
<i>Kulu Dongo</i>	Kulu Dongo is a Mande dance (specifically Serahule) performed to initiate healing.
<i>Kuku</i>	Mande (specifically Susu, Toma, and others) age-grade celebration dance. Kuku has become a very popular dance that can be witnessed in diverse areas of the Mandinka Diaspora in Africa.
<i>Sinte</i>	Susu young women's age-grade dance. Originally, the women played Sinte's rhythm and performed Sinte's dance to large Krins (log drums), which were also played by women. In the 1980s, the dance rhythm was converted to the jembe and dundun orchestra.
<i>Diambadong</i>	Mandinka age-grade dance. The female initiates are not women, and the male initiates are not men until the initiation process is complete. The Diambadong dance symbolizes that transition.
<i>Jole</i>	(Djole: French spelling) Mandinka and Susu Mask dance performed in southwest Guinea, and by the Temne in northwest Sierra Leone. Jole is performed to teach and showcase the different masks to the younger generation.

Notes

- 1 As discussed in Chapter 1, the Mandinka and Susu split from the Soninke. Their languages are similar and they share the same dances. In Kololi, Serrekunda, and other parts of The Gambia, both Mandinka and Susu dances are called Susu dances.
- 2 Props, masks, and other complimentary dance objects will be referred to as auxiliary items for the purposes of this study.
- 3 For example, the head may move rapidly while the arms progress slowly. Torso contractions might also be executed more slowly – or rapidly – than the head and foot movements, but faster than the arm placements, and so on.
- 4 “Manjani” is the English spelling. This age-grade dance system, like many others from ex-French colonized territories, has spellings which utilize French vocabulary. This study utilizes the Anglophone spellings for Mandinka, Susu, and other group's words.
- 5 I witnessed many of these types of Mandinka dances in 2004 when I visited The Gambia. A prophetic dance is one that facilitates the practitioner with the ability to determine the future. Dances such as these are done to answer difficult questions, predict the harvest, and so on.
- 6 Also called Lamban Jelidon. “Don” means dance in Mandinka/Malinke.
- 7 The hunter class is not the only social group in Mandinka history that organized themselves into a warrior faction. Julas, as in the case of Samori Toure, age-grade sects, as in the case of Sunjata's warriors, and so on have formed militaries when needed.

- 8 Peter Weil provides an extensive discussion of these now extinct women's masquerade dances in his article, "Women's Masks and the Power of Gender in Mande History," in *African Arts*, 2.
- 9 The hip movements in the courtship dance Yankadi typically involve right and left movements, but not pelvic contractions.
- 10 The word *costume* is customarily utilized to explain vestiges worn during pretentious or theatrical displays. In contrast, African dance attire is worn during real-life rituals and ceremonies executed in African rural areas. The location in the rural localities has protected the authenticity of the garments.
- 11 See McNaughton, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African Masquerade*, 233, for a brief discussion on the meanings of color in Mande culture.
- 12 See McNaughton, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City*, 233–41. Myriad dances were created to model birds. However, not only were dances created to emulate and absorb the powers of birds in general, different types of birds were recognized for their different virtues. For example, among other things, hawks were viewed as powerful, strategic, and graceful. Vultures were perceived to be nurturing, caregivers. Birds in general in Mande culture were perceived to be intelligent, and as the mediators between the heavens, the ancestors and man.
- 13 The traditional name for mud cloth is *Bógólanfini*. The mud cloth technique originated in Mali. It is a multifaceted process that involves first weaving the fabric into strips of material, sewing the strips together, preparing the patterns on the fabric, preparing the mud dye-bath, and soaking the fabric in the mud. Each process takes a specific amount of time, and several types of skills.
- 14 Many changes were made to traditional Mandinka dance systems to adapt them to the concert stage outside of the African village.
- 15 Instruments that are of the body include: clapping hands, stomping the feet, singing/chanting, snapping fingers, hitting thighs, hips, or other body parts with hands or another part of the body, and so on.
- 16 Many instruments can and have been displayed during the presentation of Mandinka dance systems. However, only a few are virtually always present. As such, those instruments – the jembe, the dundun family, and so on – are considered standard parts of a Mandinka dance system.
- 17 The French spelling for the word jembe adds a letter "d" to the beginning of the word. However, this study will be utilizing the Anglophone spelling – jembe – without the addition of the letter "d."
- 18 Oral history among jembe musicians state that the jembe was a creation of the Numu which is a blacksmith artisan group. It is also believed that a woman or women from the Numu artisan group were actually responsible for either commissioning or creating the jembe. This is significant because the jembe is currently customarily considered a male's instrument.
- 19 Polyhythmic or polyrhythms are the act of playing several different rhythms simultaneously.
- 20 See Captain Theophilus Conneau, *A Slaver's Log Book or 20 Years' Residence in Africa*, 131. Conneau provides accounts of his experiences with music and dance in Greater Senegambia during his twenty-year stay in the early to mid-nineteenth century. He provides an extensive description of the balafon. Also see Chapter 3.
- 21 Traditional use of kutiro drums for Mandinka dance systems appears to only be employed by the Mandinka from The Gambia.

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22 See Youssouf Koumbassa, *Let's Go Wangai: Dances from Guinea West Africa*, Volume 1, DVD; and Youssouf Koumbassa, *Let's Go Wangai: Dances from Guinea West Africa*, Volume 2, DVD.

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3 Deciphering Mandinka dance systems

Dance and culture: A symbiotic relationship

Cultural unity is enforced in Mandinka dance systems. Therefore, tenets of Mandinka dance systems are portrayed in areas of Mandinka society that exist outside of the dance continuum. Thus, Mandinka dance systems are reflections of the cultural landscaping, mindset, and the structure of society itself. An examination of traditional dance systems, then, can reveal the cultural unity that is inherent within Mandinka society. This chapter will focus on the symbiotic relationship between dance and society, how to recognize such in cultural institutions, and how to “read” recurring cultural tenets apparent in both.

In many regions in the West, and particularly in the United States, dance is perceived solely in the realm of performing arts and entertainment. However, this type of thinking must be dispensed with in order to gain access to the plethora of information lodged within Mandinka dance systems. Mandinka dance principles are apparent in the myriad philosophies, languages, religions, educational institutions, and visual arts, among others, of the society. Thus, cultural tenets in dance systems should not be construed to only have significance in areas of life that are confined solely to the dance world.

When interrogating dance for clues to other aspects of societal experience, one must not narrow one’s scope of questions to one particular movement representing planting a seed in farming dances such as *Kassa*, or a specific movement depicting laughter in a celebration dance such as *Koukou*. What is significant is that the movement represents how that entire society understands cultivation, celebratory occasions, and the like, and how that understanding is part and parcel of that society’s perception of its relationship to the earth and the cosmos. Fundamentally, dance movements represent universal concepts that govern the societal members’ daily lives, and their perception of life in the ancestral world. Dance movements represent their worldview. As a consequence, the ideologies embedded within those dance movements are continuously repeated or witnessed in other aspects of society and life. Hence, dance unifies the culture.

An example of cultural unity is witnessed in the dance circle. Circular shapes in Mande society are significant and abundant. For instance, when I visited the village areas in The Gambia in 2004 and 2014, there were housing compounds within extended family units that were arranged in circles that were enclosed by

gates. In more rural areas, the standalone residencies were themselves circular-shaped. In the Mande worldview, circles represent a continuation of life. They enclose and therefore embody all events in the universe.¹ They are complete in and of themselves. If dance is to be representative of life, it must include circles. Although many Mandinka dance systems include circular steps, the dances themselves are executed in a circle to ensure continuity and the embodiment of the universe. This paradigm also advances the Mandinka philosophy that dance systems as a unit (which are comprised of several components) are reflections of life regardless of the immediate purpose for the dance. The dance circle then, universally depicts and reflects all the processes of life, and the renewal of such. Even so, the dance circle is not the only example of the fact that cultural unity is mirrored through Mandinka dance systems.

Dance and gender

When attempting to decipher Mandinka dance systems, it is important to understand that there are gendered dance movements. Such movements provide a surge of cultural information, particularly regarding the foundation of African societies. Family units were the building blocks and consequently the strength of societies in traditional Africa in general, and Senegambia in particular. Therefore, lineage held a central position in culture and the strength of the culture resided within the women.

Bare-chested women in Mandinka society represented the fact that they were unmarried.² Single eligible women participated in their age-grade initiations bare-chested not only as a signal to eligible men that she was not married, but it also enforced the fact that she had not yet been bestowed the honor of motherhood. More importantly, the act of being bare-chested in traditional Mandinka societies conveyed a promise of future capabilities with their associated potential for progression of the family. Women create more human beings. They make sure that those human beings are nourished on every level. Therefore, not only the physical but also the intellectual, psychological, and emotional foundations of all who are born are provided by the mother. The mother is the first teacher – even before the age-grades – and the first cultivator. All this begins with the single bare-chested woman. Fittingly, gender, and the roles that accompany its understanding in Africa were – and still are – exceedingly significant and is readily apparent in Mandinka dance. Appropriately, movements in Mandinka dance systems that involve the women shaking their shoulders highlight their understanding of gender, culture, and the importance of continuity in their societies.³ These shoulder movements reveal gender roles and are an important part of socializing individuals into gender categories. Such gendered movements also provide clues about the African mindset of members of ancient, and subsequently, contemporary African societies.

Additionally, the number of steps performed in gendered dance systems by a specific sex discloses information about gender relations in a society. For instance, *Dundunba* was initially a male's rite of passage dance.⁴ However,

currently there are a significant number of women's steps in the dance. This phenomenon denotes that women were incorporated not only into elements of the age-grades that were traditionally male but also into societal arenas that were held to be solely male. Indeed, the age-grade process penetrates all aspects of society, everyone is required to pass through it, and it is designed in such a way as to teach all societal members about life.

The significance of this phenomenon is multiplied when one considers the fact that there are a number of *Dundunba* steps that are performed solely by the women. Additionally, in the *Dundunba* presentations depicted in the ballet format, women are currently also witnessed wearing pants that were traditionally only worn by the men. The ballet format is recent (see Chapter 4). However, the considerable number of steps in *Dundunba* attributed to women is not a recent phenomenon. Due to the number and variety of women's *Dundunba* steps, it would not be unreasonable to postulate that these steps were incorporated at least a century ago if not longer. In this regard, the structure of dance systems are not dissimilar to that of languages. Older languages are identified by the fact that they contain an overabundance of words and variations of words when compared to younger languages.⁵ Geneticists apply the same principles when identifying the age of specific ethnicities within the human family. As such, copious amounts of genetic variation denote age.⁶ The knowledge that humans originated in Africa was derived from the fact that the largest amount of genetic variation in human beings is evident in Africa. Moreover, in *Dundunba*, women have a root step and several auxiliary steps reserved solely for them. These steps are intimately known by spectator-dancers throughout Greater Senegambia, which means they had to have been part of the dance system before it spread or migrated to these regions.⁷

Complexity of steps

The process for obtaining information from Mandinka dance systems is not unlike learning to read a foreign a language. Hence, scholars must equip themselves with basic tools to facilitate comprehension. When studying a foreign language, one must familiarize oneself with not only a hefty amount of vocabulary but with a fairly good understanding of grammar as well. In Mandinka dance systems, the vocabulary words are the steps, and the grammar is the level of sophistication or complexity of the steps.

Basic steps are straightforward steps that generally require fundamental body movements. For example, a basic step may require that a leg be kicked and that the opposite arm is raised or waved simultaneously. The torso can be held at any level – high, medium, or low – but every movement is clear and identifiable in a basic step. Lastly, basic steps generally contain only three to four body movements. Complex steps differ from basic steps in that one step requires an arsenal of body movements, many of which are subtle, to execute the step. For scholars or students who are nondancers to recognize the difference between complex and basic steps, care must be taken to analyze every aspect of the step

while it is being executed. In addition, one dance system should be studied at a time. Pelvic and torso contractions are generally easy to identify. However, semicontractions, or partial contractions are subtle, and can go unnoticed to the undiscerning eye. All body movements within a step, even those that appear to be nothing more than a twitch, or a slight idiosyncrasy of the dance practitioner should be scrutinized. For example, in the men's rite of passage dance *Dundunba*, there is a movement within the root step of the dance that includes a momentary jerk of the male practitioners' head to the right – or the left – while executing the step. At first glance, if one were to study the *Dundunba* dance system solely through an inspection of one particular dance practitioner, the scholar could erroneously come to the conclusion that that head jerk is an idiosyncrasy of that one particular dancer. However, careful study of the *Dundunba* dance system as it is practiced by a variety of practitioners will reveal that virtually all of the male *Dundunba* practitioners exhibit that jerk in the head at one time or another while executing the same root step. Consequently, the jerk of the head while executing the root step in *Dundunba* is a standard movement belonging to that root step.

Dundunba was initially a male age-grade dance accentuating strength and courage, but women now also perform the dance. The steps are gendered. Thus, the steps that are understood to be women's steps are distinct from the men's steps and body movements. The step discussed earlier that includes the head jerk is a male step. However, over the past decade, increasing numbers of women are witnessed performing that particular men's step with the head jerk.⁸

Complex steps also differ from basic steps in that one step may contain movements that incorporate one or more pauses. A pause is a brief halt in body movement. The pause is also an extremely subtle movement – or lack thereof – within a step. Pauses are often overlooked by nondancers. Nonetheless, meticulous analysis of a single dance system as it is executed by several dance practitioners will reveal pauses in steps. As such, the importance of engaging several practitioners while thoroughly studying one dance system at a time cannot be overemphasized.

False steps or false foot movements are also signs of step complexity within dance systems. A false foot movement is the act of appearing to place the foot on one area of the ground, yet at the last possible moment, the foot is placed somewhere else. For example, the age-grade celebration dance *Koukou* contains a number of false steps. Steps that give the appearance that the dancer is tripping over his or her feet or almost falling but gaining composure at the last possible moment before hitting the ground are also in the category of false steps. Lastly, dance systems with complex root steps are often older than those with basic root steps.

Lamban jalidon/jelidon

Lamban jalidon (commonly known simply as *Lamban*) means “dance of the jali” in Mandinka.⁹ It is a court dance that was created by and for jalis. Hence, it

was created by, and at one time performed solely by, a specific class of people. Additionally, it was also only performed in the king's palace. *Lamban* is comprised primarily of complex steps. The steps in the dance heavily employ pauses, partial or semi torso contractions, and multiple head and body movements executed simultaneously. Many cultural clues can be derived from this dance. For example, to date, although *Lamban* is a well-known dance throughout Senegambia, it is seldom performed in the villages. It is however, generously utilized during stage performances in ballet formats. Its exclusivity was retained – that is, it initially was performed exclusively in the king's palaces.

The complexity of most of *Lamban*'s steps, including the root step, also denotes age. The jali profession itself in Mandinka society began with centralized state formation in the Western Sudan. Ancient Ghana (discussed in Chapter 1), which was founded prior to the seventh century CE, had a jali class. Although the first documentation of a jali was provided by chronicler Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century, the jali class, and by extension the dance *Lamban*, were born not long after the formation of Ancient Ghana.¹⁰ Ibn Battuta witnessed a jali performance during his travels to Mali between February 1352 and December 1353. Ibn Battuta supplies evidence of the age of the jali's performance when he stated in his journal, "I was informed that this act [the jali's dance] was already old before Islam, and they continued with it."¹¹

The most significant cultural clue that the dance system *Lamban* provides concerns the jali artisan group itself. Currently, although female jalis do exist, most of the jalis witnessed performing oral history in Senegambia appear to be men. The overwhelming majority of the epics and oral history accounts that have been recorded and/or documented are that of male jalis. However, the dance system *Lamban* is dominated by female-gendered steps. When the dance system is executed, it is performed primarily by women. There are male steps in *Lamban*, but they are extremely basic and limited in number, which would denote that they were added at a later date. The fact that *Lamban* was created by the jali artisan group and traditionally performed primarily by this particular class of people, denotes that women jalis initially were much more prevalent in the jali artisan group than they appear to be today. Additionally, due to the important place that dance holds in Mandinka society, any group afforded the opportunity to create a dance system must be viewed with some form of reverence or at least bestowed authority in the society. This is particularly evident for a dance system such as *Lamban* that has been retained by a society for the better part of a thousand years.

Another example is the 1853 account of Captain Theophilus Conneau who resided in Sierra Leone (part of Greater Senegambia) for two decades. In his account, Conneau describes a balafon, which was played primarily by jalis (see Chapter 2 for discussion on the balafon), and the female musician playing it. According to Conneau:

This was something like a harmonica: a board the size of a tea waiter with a light open frame at the extreme ends. On the frame were tied

two strings made of cane, and on it reposed several pieces of bamboo well cleaned from the pith. These pieces were gradually made, one larger than the other, declining in size and placed in rotation; under them were placed seven gourds also gradually declining in size. This instrument was carried with a strap around the neck and played with two wooden hammers covered with gutta-percha. Its harmony was peculiar. The female musician who played it had fastened to her elbows, wrists, ankles, and knees a lot of bells which she managed to sound as she struck the harmonica and danced in the meantime.¹²

As discussed in Chapter 2, balafons were played chiefly by jalis for oral history recitations and as an accompaniment for jembes (the French spelling is djembe) and other instruments during dance performances. Historically, if there were women jalis, it makes sense that they would master the instruments germane to their profession. The predominance of the women-gendered steps in the dance system *Lamban jalidon* reveal the fact that women jalis were once prevalent, and their contributions to the profession of the jali was significant. As discussed earlier, the preponderance of complex steps reveals the fact that *Lamban* is not a recently created dance; it is ancient.¹³ Therefore, women were actively jalis very early in the profession. It also discloses the fact that playing the balafon was not traditionally solely in the purview of men – as would be assumed by the predominance of men who play the instrument today. Women also mastered this potentially large (balafons come in a variety of sizes), and unquestionably complex instrument. This is an image not often witnessed – if at all – today. Indeed, by studying the dance system *Lamban jalidon*, historical gaps in the narrative regarding the role of women in Mande cultural institutions can be filled. As a whole, if one examines gendered steps in Mandinka dance systems, it can be determined how much freedom or power women traditionally held African societies – even if that dynamic is no longer apparent in contemporary cultural institutions.

Gambian Mandinka and Kutiro drums

Mandinka migration into Western Senegambia as a consequence of the expansion of the Mali Empire is the commonly held notion. A few scholars have argued that the Mandinka began migrating into Western Senegambia prior to the establishment of the Mali Empire, but it was not the commonly held view.¹⁴ Until oral history was utilized as a methodology, there simply was no evidence to support historians' suspicions that pre-Mali Empire Mandinka had indeed migrated far west, even if it was only small bands of farmers. The discovery and acceptance of the utility of oral history as a methodology provided hope for the existence of oral documentation of early Mandinka migrations. However, for the oral history to be useful, scholars would need to actually set forth to gather it. Embarking on such an endeavor presents its own set of obstacles, but the most crucial of them is identifying which oral historian to interview (i.e., which oral historian would be familiar with the specific knowledge sought?).

A thorough study of Mandinka dance systems in the Senegambian area presents an elegant solution to the aforementioned conundrum. As discussed throughout this work, a dance system is comprised of the dance and all its auxiliary items including the drums and other instruments used for the system. As delineated in Chapter 2, the jembe drum and the dundun family of drums are generally utilized for Mandinka dance systems. However, in The Gambia and Casamance (southern Senegal), some Mandinka play kutiro drums for their dance systems.

Jembe and dundun drums are reputed to have been created during the Mali Empire. They were then transported with the Mandinka during the expansion of the empire. It follows then, that jembe drums as they appear today did not exist before 1235 CE.¹⁵ Kutiro drums were in use in The Gambia and Casamance region before 1235. They were and still are traditionally used by the Jola who are credited as one of the first groups of people to arrive in the area.¹⁶ When the early groups of Mandinka migrated to the Senegambia region, if they migrated before 1235, they would not have brought jembe and dundun drums with them because these drums had not yet been created. The exact types of drums these early Mandinka migrants brought to the Senegambia region is not known at this juncture. What is certain, though, is at some point after their migration to the area, and during their interactions with the Jola, the Mandinka migrants adopted the Jola kutiro drums to their Mandinka dances. The Mandinka's use of the kutiro drums as opposed to their traditional jembe drums, supplemented with oral history accounts, provides evidence for the notion of a pre-Mali migration of the Mandinka to the western Senegambian region. It also supports the supposition that the Mali Empire was unsuccessful in its attempt to impose its cultural hegemony universally throughout Senegambian. Obviously, the Jola – and possibly other ethnicities in the region – were able to retain key tenets of their cultural institutions.

The Mandinka's use of the Jola's kutiro drums in Mandinka dance systems may also suggest that the Jola exerted an aspect of cultural hegemony over the Mandinka migrants. For the Mandinka migrants to adopt kutiro drums or discard whatever drumming traditions they may have brought with them may suggest that they initially migrated to Senegambia in small numbers. If they were greatly outnumbered by the Jolas, all trade, interactions, and cultural exchanges would have been on the Jolas' terms.¹⁷ Lastly, the Mandinka comprise the majority of the population in The Gambia currently. Of the Mandinka population in The Gambia, most utilize jembe and dundun drums in their dance systems. A minority of Mandinkas use kutiro drums. The majority of the Mandinka population in The Gambia and Casamance migrated to the region after the founding of the Mali Empire – that is, after the invention of the jembe drum. By the time the majority of Mandinka arrived in Senegambia – after 1235 – the earlier Mandinka migrants in the area had already been using the kutiro drums for generations and subsequently did not convert to jembe drum usage. Kutiro drumming by Gambian Mandinka must have been a strong tradition rooted in longevity and significance since the earlier Mandinka

migrants did not convert to the jembe drum traditions of their later formidable Mandinka Mali Empire counterparts.

Interrogation of the dance practitioner and the dance knowledge source

The skill level of a Mandinka dance practitioner is not as important as the source of the dancer's knowledge. While correct dance step technique and precise body movement execution present noteworthy data, the fact that the dancer is a generational (inherited) dance practitioner as opposed to a newly acquired dancer is invaluable knowledge for an inquiring scholar to be equipped with. Dance practitioners who received their dance knowledge from generations of people in their families, had an abundance of information to pull from. Accordingly, passing the dance system knowledge down to each line of descendants preserved and contributed to the history and practice of the systems. It is not uncommon to witness a master dancer stating that they learned the dances from their parents, who learned the dances from the generation before them, and so on. Some master dancers are able to trace their family dance traditions to the Mali Empire (thirteenth century). Others are also able to delineate when their families migrated to The Gambia, bringing the dance systems along with them. A great deal of history was passed down to posterity along with the dance system knowledge because the experiences of each generation was also passed down. During one of my visits to The Gambia, a Master dancer shared with me that they had the benefit of inheriting knowledge of Mandinka dances from their mother and knowledge of drumming from their father. Their mother came from a long line of dancers. The master dancer stated that their mother's side of the family had been dancing for more than ten generations. Their father had been drumming for more than seven generations. Although some are very knowledgeable, new dancers from nondance families who decide that they enjoy, and therefore will pursue a dancing career understandably cannot compete with the knowledge base of generational dance practitioners. Accordingly, the scholar should obtain information about the dancer's source of knowledge at the onset of his or her study or interview.

An analysis of, and historical knowledge of, the society where the dance system is practiced, provides vital clues about the dance practitioners from those regions. Strict adherence to, or abandonment of, endogamous artisan customs (see Chapter 1) in a society provides placards regarding the abundance – or lack thereof – of generational dance practitioners. In Guinea, Sékou Touré, the first president, changed the way Mandinka dance systems are transmitted and presented.¹⁸ An extensive discussion on Touré and Mandinka dance systems are presented in Chapter 7. However, for our purposes at this juncture, it is important to understand that Touré's Demystification and Cultural Revolution programs have significantly impacted the endogamous aspects of Mandinka dance system conveyance in Guinea. Additionally, Touré's emphasis on Mandinka dance as a process to overthrow French cultural hegemony has made the ballet format for

Mandinka dance presentation ubiquitous. This was accomplished – unwittingly as it may have been – at the expense of traditional dance presentation formats. It is important that this not be construed as a negative or a positive impact on Mandinka dance systems. What must be understood, however, is that due to Touré’s political utilization of dance, the practice of Mandinka dance systems was universalized. He provided access to dance for people from nonartisan lineages. As a result, Guinea produces many dance practitioners who are from nondance family backgrounds.

In contrast, The Gambia adhered more strictly to the tradition of endogamy with regard to dance system transmission. As a consequence, every dancer I met in The Gambia came from generational-dancing families, with centuries-old knowledge of dance systems. Dissimilarly, the Mandinka dance practitioners I met in Senegal – those who were nationals of Senegal, and those who were nationals of Guinea – did not hail from dance families. As mentioned earlier, such information about the source of knowledge of Mandinka dance practitioners does not devalue their skillset or their potential to become master dancers. Nor does it negate the possibility of the nongenerational dance practitioners embodying a great deal of knowledge about the dance systems they practice. However, the source of knowledge provides valuable information about how a scholar can use the information obtained. For example, when I asked some dance artists (who had acquired their dance skills) in Senegal about the history and meaning of *Domba Yeri Yeriso*, I was told that it is a Susu dance. In contrast, when I asked dance practitioners in The Gambia who had inherited their dance knowledge from generational-dancing family lineages about *Domba Yeri Yeriso*, they explained that it was a Susu dance performed at the end of the rainy season to celebrate the first taste of the newly harvested cereal. They also asserted that the dance was brought to The Gambia after the spread of the Mali Empire by Susu cultivators seeking arable land.¹⁹ That said, an understanding of the source of knowledge of each dance practitioner interviewed can greatly enhance the amount and type of data a scholar can obtain about Mande history in general, and Mandinka dance systems exclusively.

Conclusion

Mandinka dance specifically, and African dance universally, house a plethora of cultural and historical narratives. Nonetheless, not unlike learning a new language or cracking a numerical code, one must develop the skills and foundational tools necessary for extracting the information from African dance systems. Once scholars arm themselves with pertinent preliminary knowledge, they will garner the ability to identify significant cultural tenets lodged within the dance systems. In addition, the narratives embedded within the dance systems will be perceived with increased clarity.

Indeed, gender, dance steps and body movements, instruments, areas where dances are traditionally performed, and the dance practitioners themselves all

provide pertinent data. Acquisition of interpretive tools such as the ability to identify and understand the significance of complex, basic, and false steps, and the like provides access to the information within Mandinka dance systems. Such tools are an indispensable prerequisite for understanding those systems. With these tools, scholars will be able to meticulously analyze Mandinka and other African dance systems. They will also be able to identify patterns and discover new clues for African dance interpretation. On the whole, history, worldview, cultural tenets, and the significance of dance in people's lives will become apparent with a little effort on the part of the scholar.

Notes

- 1 See Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 61. Olupona discusses the fact that calendrical rites occur in cycles or circular time in African philosophical and religious systems. Each time the rite is repeated, it is believed that the world is renewed.
- 2 This practice during execution of rites of passage dances persisted well into the 1960s openly. See *Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper*, November 22, 1960. Guinean single women performers who were forced to wear garments to cover their breasts felt uncomfortable because only married women covered their chests.
- 3 The Dimbas of Senegal are women's societies that advocate for women's rights through dance. Although Mande in origin, these multiethnic organizations were in existence since – or before – the thirteenth-century Mali Empire. In addition to providing support for barren women, these societies advocate, and often stage protests for any injustices committed against women. See Cheikh I. Niang, "The Dimba of Senegal: A Support Group for Women," *Reproductive Health Matters*.
- 4 Rite of passage is understood to be the age-grade process referred to in Chapter 1. In this study, the two phrases will be used interchangeably.
- 5 The concept of root word variations and language age is discussed in Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse's edited work, *African Languages: An Introduction*.
- 6 Spencer Wells discusses the origin of man and genetic variation in *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*.
- 7 *Dundunba* and other Mandinka dance systems were brought to The Gambia with Mandinka migrations to the region centuries ago. Also see the emergence of the Mandinka Diaspora in Chapter 1.
- 8 In my studies of Mandinka dance systems – over twenty years – I have noticed this development in recent years (roughly after 2006). This occurrence makes a statement about the changing roles of women in society.
- 9 The word "don" means "dance" in Mandinka. The oral historian/poet/musician is referred to as a jali. Both words – jali or jeli – have the same meaning and their usage is contingent upon region.
- 10 It has been documented that the ancient state of Ghana was founded sometime before Islam was established in 622 CE. Ancient Ghana is reputed to have had twenty-two kings before 622 CE. The average length of the reign of kings this early in antiquity cannot be guessed with any certainty. However, one can be fairly certain that Ancient Ghana was in existence at least a century prior to 622 CE. See Abderrahman, *Tarikh es-Soudan*. Also see Said Hamdun and Noël King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*.

- 11 See Nehemia Levtzion and Jay Spaulding, *Medieval West Africa: Views from Arab Scholars and Merchants*, 78.
- 12 See Captain Theophilus Conneau, *A Slaver's Log Book or 20 Years' Residence in Africa*, 131. Conneau provides accounts of his experiences with music and dance in Greater Senegambia during his twenty-year stay in the early to mid-nineteenth century.
- 13 *Lamban* was brought into The Gambian area with the expansion of the Mali Empire.
- 14 Sonko-Godwin mentions the possibility of small bands of Mandinka migrants into The Gambia prior to the establishment of the Mali Empire, and D.T. Niane considers the formation of the Mali Empire as the second expansion of the Mande. Consequently, there was a first expansion at an earlier date. See Patience Sonko-Godwin, *Ethnic Groups of The Senegambia Region: A Brief History*, 3; also see J. Ki-Zerbo and D.T. Niane, eds., *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*.
- 15 The Mali Empire was founded in 1235 CE. See Chapter 1.
- 16 See Sonko-Godwin, *Ethnic Groups of the Senegambia*, 68. The Jola and other ethnic groups such as the Balanta, Basari, Bainounka, and the Pepel are considered to be some of the first people in the area of Casamance and the southern banks of The Gambia.
- 17 The Jolas currently comprise two thirds of the population of the Casamance region.
- 18 See Chapter 7 for an extensive discussion on Sékou Touré and the impact of his administration on Mandinka and Susu dance systems. His Demystification campaigns and his Cultural Revolution did much to reorganize the way Mandinka dance systems were practiced. His most significant contribution to Mandinka dance systems was his embracement of the ballet format (see Chapter 4), and the nationalization of Mandinka dance systems through it.
- 19 The names of the dance artists are not divulged in an effort to protect their professions as African dance instructors and performers.

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4 Mandinka dance

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow

Dance in the village

There is a noticeable contrast between traditional Mandinka dance systems performed in the village and that presented on the concert stage. In the village, Mandinka traditional dances are performed in a circle. The drummers and the villagers form the circle with their seating arrangements or standing placements. As the drumming intensifies, a villager enters the circle to dance. Solos are customarily short, and the dancer may enter the circle several times if he or she wishes. At the conclusion of the solo, the dancer leaves the circle and another dancer emerges to perform a solo. Sometimes another dancer or several other dancers will join a soloist in the middle of the circle, but usually only after the soloist has first enjoyed some time alone in the limelight of the center of the circle. Due to this dynamic, all the villagers can be referred to as spectator-dancers. Spectator-dancers experience comradery, continuity, and a sense of security when performing dance in the circle. In this respect, dance binds the society and safeguards its history and culture. Dance is a significant part of all important occasions and cycles of life. The dance validates the occasion's importance and assures that commemoration of the event is passed down by the entire community to future generations. The dance circle facilitates this process.

Traditionally, the dance circle would begin by women clapping their hands and singing a particular song that customarily would be followed by the dance associated with that song. The drummers would assemble and begin to play. The villagers would gather and complete the dance circle. Dance circles would also be formed at celebratory events such as weddings or naming ceremonies, the completion of a rite of passage process, and countless other festive occasions. Calendrical events such as farming, and transformative events such as funerals, all either ended with or began with dance circles.

Contemporary dance circles are formed in an assortment of ways and for a variety of reasons as well. For instance, contemporary dance circles may be formed for social gatherings. Thus, the drummers may assemble first, and the villagers may arrive as a consequence of the drumming. In other words, the drumming "calls" the spectator-dancers to the drumming event. Another

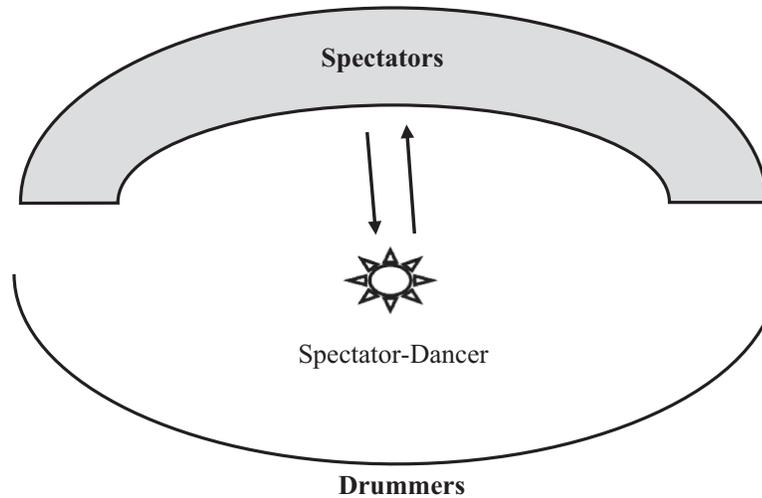


Chart 4.1 The Dance Circle

The dance circle is created by the positions of the spectator-dancers and of the drummers and other musicians. It can be formed from spectators or drummers who are seated or in standing positions. Spectators who desire to dance leaves the seating area on the perimeter of the circle and enters the center of the circle to dance. Once he/she has finished dancing, they return to the spectator area. Dancing in the center of the circle is comprised of improvisation with a constant return to the root steps of the particular dance being performed. Sometimes other spectator-dancers will join the soloist in the center of the circle after the soloist has danced in the center alone for a time.

contemporary example for the formation of a dance circle would be that drummers and dancers are “hired” for a birthday party. Regardless of the purpose that the dance circle was formed, once assembled, the age-old practices discussed earlier ensues.

The solos performed in the center of the dance circle follows a specific format. First, they are highly improvised, and they showcase the pinnacle of the dancer’s skills. Second, the soloist must include a root step from the traditional dance being played in his or her improvisations.¹ A constant return to the root step serves as confirmation that the soloist, who for the moment appears to be dancing alone, is of one mind with the group and is contributing to the harmonious workings of the whole. Despite the soloist’s spur-of-the-moment creative embellishments and skilled acrobatics, all the participants – spectator-dancers and drummers alike – must recognize that the soloist is executing the dance that is being played. For example, if the drummers are playing the age-grade celebration dance *Manjani*, it would be frowned upon for the soloist to perform steps from the celebration dance *Koukou* or any dance other than *Manjani*.² Third, the lead drummer, or the drummer performing the accents, must form a dancer-drummer bond with the soloist. As discussed in Chapter 2, the drummer must anticipate the dancer’s moves, and provide accents that highlight them.

Dance transformations and safeguards for conducting research on dance

Traditionally, dance, drumming, and musical skills would have been solely the purview of endogamous guilds and the other social groups such as age-grades, secret societies, and the like.³ Mandinka dance systems have undergone a host of experiences from self-imposed transformations, climatic instabilities, decolonization and liberation struggles, to modernization, development initiatives, and globalization. With the exception of the root step, it would be unrealistic to maintain the notion that the dance systems could emerge unscathed, or at least unchanged.⁴ In addition to the dance systems themselves experiencing alterations, the process by which the dances are transmitted have also seen its share of modifications. The alterations in transmission are important because they dictate the flavor, or brand of dance system displayed, and will impact the quality or substance of the information the inquiring scholar will obtain from such. All things considered, the researcher should remember that the root step is the primary element of the dance system that not only remains unchanged but is also the component that houses the significance of the dance.

Currently, the process of dance transmission varies depending on myriad factors including location. Some countries in West Africa still vehemently uphold the rules of endogamy with regard to dancers and other artisans. There are also countries and provinces that apply such rules only in areas of politics. Hybrid scenarios exist as well, and all of these scenarios are constantly changing. Globalization and the technologies that accompany it such as the internet and cellular phones all contribute to the contemporary changing nature of traditional dance transmission. Due to such diversity regarding how dances are handed down, it is necessary to identify the method through which a dance practitioner received their dance training in order to obtain a better understanding of how the information received can be best utilized. As such, categories for assessing the skills of Mandinka dance practitioners are discussed to ease the process.

A master dancer is a dance practitioner who has studied traditional Mandinka dances for twenty or more years. He/she knows the history, purpose, auxiliary items, root step techniques, and auxiliary steps for a tremendous number of Mandinka dances. This requirement could also be applied to a specific dance system which would render the practitioner a master of that particular dance system – that is, a master dundunba dancer. The master dancer is also familiar with and can readily recognize the rhythms for all of the dances he/she knows how to execute. He or she can play the rhythms as well. Albeit, probably not as well as a master drummer, but well enough to make the rhythms recognizable to dancers and drummers alike. The master dancer knows traditional attire for each dance, the gender of the dance – for example, if it is a woman's age-grade or a man's masquerade dance – and the times and locations where the dances were done historically. By contrast, a good or accomplished dancer is a person who can clearly articulate all of the intricacies inherent in the root steps, who can create complimentary auxiliary

steps on impulse, and who can incorporate complex dance movements such as pauses, false foot movements (discussed in Chapter 3), and to a lesser extent, semicontractions, into their improvised solos. In addition, a polished dancer can incorporate isolated body movements – for example, only one portion of the body such as the right thigh, or the hips, while the rest of the body is stationary – during pauses in the dance solo. A good dancer is also able to make all of these movements appear effortless. Master dancers are usually good or accomplished dancers particularly due to the length of time that they have studied dance systems. However, a dance artist can become an accomplished dancer without ever obtaining the same level of knowledge as the master dancer. Hence, the dance artist is not a master dancer.

A dance artist is a dance practitioner who may be able to execute the dance steps well – in some cases extremely well – but only possesses superficial knowledge of the history and other pertinent details about the dance systems. Often, little more than the name of the dance is known. Occasionally, the general location where the dance is or was practiced, and limited information about the purpose of the dance is also known. Some dance artists may know more or less. However, to be a master dancer one must be a true scholar of the dance system.

The knowledge and skills to practice traditional dance systems can be either acquired or inherited. When the skills for performing traditional dances are inherited, they are passed down through the generations in a particular family. This process is witnessed in instances in which the ancient endogamous systems of the artisan groups have been retained and are practiced in present-day dance communities. Dance skills are considered to be acquired when people from diverse nonartisan backgrounds enjoy dancing and actively seek to learn Mandinka dance systems. Dancers who acquire their skills experience liberation from dispiriting circumstances, such as poverty, the death or loss of a loved one, pain, and other hardships in life, when they dance. Moreover, dancing facilitates or extends celebratory gaiety during festive events and dancers who acquire their skills enjoy being able to contribute to the festivities of the event. During numerous travels to the Senegambia region and lengthy residences in dance communities, a distinct pattern revealed itself.⁵ Dancers who had inherited their dance skills generally were more knowledgeable about the history and the nuances of the dance systems than dancers who have acquired their skills. This phenomenon makes sense because the dance practitioners who have obtained their skills from family members have had the benefit of several generations of knowledge to draw upon.

Dance skills are taught and learned via a variety of scenarios. Traditionally, after Sunjata's reordering of Mandinka social structures in the thirteenth century, anyone who sought to pursue dance as a profession had to be born into an artisan family (discussed in Chapter 1). Today, opportunities exist for nonartisans to learn Mandinka dance; however, there are stipulations that must be kept in mind. The enforcement of Sunjata's laws are strictly and/or partially adhered to in some areas, and not upheld at all in others. Furthermore, the strictness or

lack thereof also varies from town to region, and from family line to artisan group, even within the same country. In general, persons who are not born into artisan families but who are seeking to learn Mandinka dance systems have the following options:

- They can locate an artisan family, persuade them to adopt him/her, and then learn the dances as a member of that family's artisan group.
- They can find a master dancer and ask to learn from him/her.
- In some countries artisans in dance groups have formed an agreement with one of the universities – or some other established institution – to provide dance and drumming instruction as a noncredit, nondegree component. This option is usually targeted at foreigners.
- Lastly, those seeking to learn Mandinka dance systems will need to visit the country of interest often, and make sure to be at as many ceremonies as possible to ensure that they are one of the spectator-dancers forming the dance circle on many occasions. This last option requires a bit of courage. The novice will need to enter the center of the dance circle and dance even though they may have little to no knowledge of the dance system. When the novice enters the dance circle, it will be noticed that he/she is unskilled and another spectator-dancer will usually enter the dance circle to assist the novice with executing the dance steps. During these instances, the novice is usually taught the root step of the dance being played by the drummers. The novice will know when he/she has at least a basic understanding of the root step. In this instance, either spectator-dancers will no longer enter the dance circle with the novice, or spectator-dancers will enter the dance circle to dance with the novice instead of attempting to provide instruction for the novice.

Traditional vs. Modernity: Payment for dance instruction

The type of trade or the means of compensation for dance instruction between a master dancer and his or her pupil will dictate the type of teacher-student experience that will occur. The master dancers are highly respected by the dance community in their regions. Moreover, thanks to the internet, specific master dancers are sometimes known throughout the global dance community, and it is not uncommon for prospective dance students to travel around the world to learn from master dancers. If the initial contact of a potential student with his or her master is approached within the spirit of commercialism, then only superficial, commercial knowledge will be divulged by the master. However, if the student approaches the master dancer with a knowledge of and respect for Mandinka culture, and offers a culturally significant form of currency in exchange for dance lessons, then the master will impart the secret information that facilitates full comprehension of the dance systems.

Consequently, in areas in Guinea – and other more rural parts of Senegambia – there are two paths for learning traditional Mandinka dance from

master dancers; one sacred, and the other commercial. The sacred path should not be construed to mean solely religious. In the sphere of teacher-student relations, the sacred path should be understood as a quest where the student approaches the study of African culture in general, and Mandinka dance specifically as a phenomenon worthy of reverence, devotion, and profound respect. The commercial path is taken by those who only wish to dance to make money, to further their careers in the entertainment business, or for any other form of superficial gain.

Keita Fodéba and the creation of the African ballet format

The phenomenon of dancers acquiring their dance system knowledge instead of inheriting them, the commercial form of payment for dance lessons, and the global notoriety of certain master dancers are three significant changes that occurred with Modernity, globalization, and modern technologies. However, there was a significant transformation in the nature of Mandinka dance systems that significantly impacted the way in which the dance systems are engaged worldwide – the invention of the African dance ballet.⁶

The African dance ballet format emerged at the dawn of decolonization. Its founder is Keita Fodéba. Born into a jali family in Guinea, Fodéba created the ballet format for Mandinka dance systems in 1952 while studying in France (see chapter seven for an extensive discussion on Keita Fodéba). Fodéba endeavored to teach the world about Africa through African dance on the concert stage. In an effort to adapt the traditional dance systems to the concert stage outside of the African village, considerable changes had to be made. It is important to note that the ancient core, the root steps, were retained. Yet, the auxiliary steps and items were altered in order to accommodate the new environment that the dance was to be portrayed in. Although several modifications to traditional African dance practice can be witnessed, the ten most significant additions and/or adjustments are:

- 1 The dance systems were transferred from the village to the stage. As a consequence, the dance performance had to be modified for space limitations. Additionally, time constraints were imposed on the entire performance. For example, instead of observing the successful completion of an age-grade process through the traditional practice of dancing for three or more days, performers would be tasked to execute the dance portion of the process within a two-hour performance time.
- 2 Entrance fees were charged. In the rural areas in Senegambia – and Africa in general – dance represented life. When such was displayed, all were welcome. When traditional Mandinka dance is performed on the concert stage, only those with the finances to pay the entrance fee are admitted.
- 3 The interaction (or lack thereof) with the audience manifested a new dynamic – an impersonal one. The concert stage is often a noticeable distance from the audience. In the village, there was no stage. There was

only a dance-circle formed from the seating and standing arrangements of the spectator-dancers and the formation of the drummers. Anyone who wished to dance could enter the circle and perform. In contrast, the concert stage is generally elevated and located several feet away from the audience prohibiting audience participation. This separation created a spectator-entertainer phenomenon as opposed to the traditional village-all-inclusive dynamic of the spectator-dancer. Hence, the stage dancers were now solely considered entertainers.

- 4 Foreign standards were sometimes taken into consideration for costume design. For instance, some of the women's rite of passage dances were done topless, and some of the men's were traditionally done nude and in seclusion. However, on the concert stage in European or other western countries, or in front of foreign audiences in Africa, fabric was added to costumes to appease foreign concepts and sensibilities.
- 5 Breaks or calls were added to the drumming accompaniments to provide instructions for large dance and drumming groups. A break or a call is a signal created by specific strikes and rhythms on the drum. The lead drummer plays breaks to indicate to the dancers and the other drummers which dances and rhythms are to be performed.⁷ Breaks also indicate when to change steps, when to begin, and when to end a dance and/or a song. Traditionally, in the dance circles in rural areas and the villages in Senegambia, drum breaks did not exist.⁸
- 6 Drummers control the dances in modern Mandinka ballets. Traditionally, the women controlled the drumming and consequently the dances. The women would start events by singing and clapping and the drummers and dancers would follow their lead. The women then, dictated which dances were to be done and which rhythms were to be drummed. With the new style of African ballets performed on the concert stage, the drummers control the dances. Their breaks dictate the tempo and mood of the dances and consequently the types of steps to be performed.
- 7 Solos are deemphasized in the African dance ballets. When Mandinka dance is done on the concert stage, the emphasis is on group performance. Traditionally, in the village, the soloist dancing in the middle of the circle is emphasized.
- 8 Several dances, sometimes with no historical relationships or prior contact, are strung together to tell a single narrative in the Mandinka ballet format that Fodéba established. Subsequently, dances from different regions, diverse Mande daughter-language groups (discussed in Chapter 1), and even the cultural tenets and dance movements of other ethnic groups may be displayed in Mandinka ballets.⁹
- 9 New dance themes were introduced. Although traditional root dance steps were retained, dances were created to reflect the contemporary experiences of modern society. For example, when Les Ballets Africains (discussed in Chapter 7) performed the African dance ballet *Jubilee!*, dancers who were dressed in contemporary western urban attire returned to the rural village

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in the ballet. The rural area was portrayed by dancers who were dressed traditionally and engaged in traditional activities such as farming. The dances in this portion of the ballet were constructed to depict the need to pursue development but not at the expense of one's heritage.

- 10 Lastly, flamboyant steps and/or components of dances were stressed often at the expense of redundant or rudimentary dance steps. In some cases, dance patterns had to be shortened as well. These measures were taken because the dance message had to be conveyed in shorter periods of time. This was due to performance time constraints and the short attention spans of audiences comprised of foreigners without a basic knowledge of Mandinka culture.

The new ballet format for Mandinka dance had its flaws. As this discussion reveals, there were sacrifices. Shortcomings notwithstanding, Fodéba's contribution to traditional Mandinka dance systems were invaluable. He is virtually responsible for the modern representations of traditional Mandinka ballets. Sékou Touré, the first president of Guinea-Conakry, was responsible for nationalizing Fodéba's conceptualization of the African dance ballet (discussed in chapter seven) and putting it on global display as a representation and repository of African identity and cultural history.

The audience

The audience is as much a part of the process of performance as the dancer. The dancer adjusts and embellishes his or her presentation to appeal to the sensibilities of the particular audience in attendance at the time of the performance. This audience dynamic did not exist in traditional settings where the dance circles were the focus. Therefore, when Mandinka dance is removed from the village setting to the stage, adjustments must be made. The link that enabled the dancer to travel in and out of the dance circle and back and forth between the positions of dancer and spectator must be reestablished. Since the stage and the dance circle dynamics are different, it makes sense that the link must also change. Movement in and out of the dance circle requires the spectator to attune himself or herself with all activities in or comprising the dance circle. For example, when the lead jembe drummer increases the energy by playing faster, or by playing complex accents, or by skillfully intuiting the moves of the dancers in the dance circle, it compels spectators on the outer rim of the dance circle to become dancers in the center. In the rural setting, it is not uncommon for spectators to say, "the drumming is too good, I have to dance," or "the dance is calling me."¹⁰ As a result, there is a fluid movement from a spectator (observer) to becoming a dancer, and then back to a spectator again.

The change of positions from spectator to dancer to spectator again, cannot occur with stage performances. The audience is placed at a distance from the dancers. The dance circle is broken. However, the relationship between the

audience and the dancer, although altered, still exists. Due to the distance between the stage and the audience, the dancers and all other aspects of the dance system – the drummers, the attire, etc. – attune themselves to the audience despite the distance. All components of the dance system attempt to decrease the distance from the audience by increasing the energy of their performance. Accordingly, auxiliary dance movements are executed more spectacularly, acrobatics are added to dance performances that may not have included them in the traditional village setting, among other things. While participating in a dance performance in The Gambia, I witnessed a master dancer stating, “There should always be action on the stage, something to look at...to make the audience want to be on the stage too.”¹¹ If the dancers are successful in establishing a link with the audience, the audience responds with verbal outcries, clapping, or standing ovations. Indeed, over the thousands of performances my African dance company has engaged in over the years, countless audience members have approached me to convey to me that the performances made them weep, induced a state of elation, made them proud, among other things. In stage performances, although the audience cannot actually dance on stage with the performers, the audience can still be “touched” and communicated with by the dancers.

The new generation and the extinction of Mandinka dance systems

When he created the ballet format for Mandinka dance systems, Keita Fodéba saved Mandinka dance systems from possible extinction. He removed the dances from the isolated environment of the villages. Once the dance systems received worldwide recognition, other people – Mandinka and non-Mandinka – began practicing them. Sékou Toure, the first president of Guinea-Conakry, also facilitated the survival and longevity of Mandinka dance systems when he connected them to Guinean decolonization and development.¹² Toure also broke the monopoly that the elders and artisans held on dance. Nonetheless, detailed or in-depth nonsuperficial knowledge of the dance systems and their history diminishes with each new generation of practitioners. As dance practitioners seek to learn the dance systems simply because they “like” dancing, they bypass the long initiation process traditionally experienced by a dancer and the bond developed with his or her master. Instead, the new generation opts to learn the dances quickly. They are inclined to only familiarize themselves with superficial knowledge, such as the fact that the dance is a celebration or a circumcision dance. As a result, the history and by consequence, the very life of the dance system may fade into obscurity.

Conclusion

In addition to the development of the African dance ballet, Mandinka dance systems have undergone myriad transformations. Thus, when researching

dance systems, it is important for the scholar to understand where their data emanates from. Master dancers will possess in-depth knowledge. Many will originate from generational dance families. By contrast, dance artists are dance practitioners who dance because they enjoy it. Although some dance artists will have mastered dance movements and steps, they often do not possess the extensive knowledge of the dance systems that the master dancer possesses.

Dance systems traditionally were performed in dance circles where the drummers and spectator-dancers formed the circle with their standing and seating arrangements. There would be a flow of spectator-dancers entering and leaving the circle thereby interchanging how they participated in or contributed to the dance event. However, contemporary dance performances on the concert stage disrupts the spectator-dancer phenomenon. On the concert stage, dance systems are limited by time, proximity away from the audience, notions and sensibilities of audience members who are unaware of Mandinka cultural tenets, admission fees, and a host of other elements.

Master dancers can become world renowned without leaving their countries. In such cases, it is not uncommon for foreigners to beseech such masters to learn their dance system. The tenor and quality of the instruction, as well as its depth, will be dependent upon the type of compensation rendered for the dance lessons. As such, it would benefit a researcher to possess a fundamental knowledge of Mandinka dance system interpretation. The ability to decipher the narratives conveyed by traditional Mandinka dance will equip scholars with the skills required to appreciate and engage the dance survivals of the historical cataclysms discussed in Part 3.

Notes

- 1 When a solo or dance is improvised, the dancer is creating the dance moves in real time. He/she is not performing a formatted, rehearsed dance.
- 2 Manjani is spelled in a variety of ways. The spelling in this work is that of the Anglophone version of the word.
- 3 Chapter 1 discusses the endogamous guilds and the social groups at length.
- 4 Under these circumstances, the root step is the only part of a dance system that would be able to emerge unchanged. No other parts of the dance system – attire, auxiliary steps and items, and so on – are exempt.
- 5 Dance communities are comprised of groups of people with a common interest in performing, learning, or teaching dance. Dance community members gather together often and consistently for the purpose of practicing and advancing African dance. It is not necessary for members of a dance community to live in the same vicinity, though many do. Dance communities exist worldwide.
- 6 The word “ballet” in this book refers to the process of conveying a story or narrative through dance. Any dance system, whether Mandinka or European classical ballet, can be formatted or presented as a ballet.
- 7 Kalani and Ryan Camara discusses the role of the lead drummer and drum breaks in *West African Drum & Dance: A Yankadi-Macrou Celebration*.

- 8 Many dance systems in other parts of Africa still do not employ drum breaks. For an example, Nigerian dances do not utilize breaks. See Omofolabo Ajayi, *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture*.
- 9 See Chapter 1 for a discussion on Mande language groups. A daughter-language group is a subgroup of the larger Mande language group. For example, the Dogon and the Soninke are subgroups that splintered off from the major Mande language group. Many Mandinka and Susu ballets also include Fulani dances and dances from other ethnic groups that may reside in Guinea, or other parts of Senegambia.
- 10 These are comments made by spectator-dancers during the performance of a celebration dance when I was in Kololi, The Gambia, 2004.
- 11 Statements such as these were repeatedly made by many dance artists and Master Dancers during my sojourn in dance communities in The Gambia.
- 12 Sekou Toure is the first president of Guinea-Conakry. He was the first African head of state to nationalize a dance company, Les Ballets Africains, and to utilize it as a symbol for the heritage of his country.

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Video Recordings

Les Ballets Africains. A Special Performance for the United Nations Celebrating the Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. DVD. Directed by Ramakantha Sarma. 1968; Produced by United Nations Television, Released by US Broadcasters.

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Part 3

Dundunbah, strength, and endurance

Historical cataclysms and dance survivals

Introduction

Throughout history, Mandinka dance systems in Greater Senegambia – the modern countries of Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Guinea, and Sierra Leone – have been impacted by momentous social and political occurrences. Cataclysms produced by foreign slavery – Arab and transatlantic – have touched Mandinka dance in particular, and Mande culture in general. The instability that began during the peak of the Arab slave trade across the Sahara only escalated with the advent of the transatlantic slave trade and the nineteenth-century infamous scramble for Africa. In addition, Islam and Christianity often arrived as an introduction to, or on the heels of, cultural upheavals. Lastly, Modernity was – and still is – the latest assault on traditional Mandinka dance systems.

In a determined effort to survive, practitioners of traditional Mandinka dance systems adopted innovative techniques. Protection became the primary concern. As a result, the practice of dance systems was removed from commonly populated areas. During slavery, colonialism, and other times of turmoil, many dance systems were performed deep in the forests, swamps, mountains, and anywhere else where access was challenging. New communities were forged in these inaccessible locations, and age-grade practices reigned supreme. Fittingly, the rite of passage process was inherently equipped with the tools necessary for unifying people from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. Understanding the history and the social and political dynamics germane to these experiences prepares one to “read” the narratives embedded within the dances. Therefore, Part 3 will examine key events such as slavery, religion, colonialism, and Modernity in the Greater Senegambia region. It highlights how these historical events were impacted by or may have influenced traditional Mandinka dance systems and the social groups that produced them.

5 Slavery in Africa and its influence on dance systems

Slavery in Africa

In Africa, culture and life are interlaced. It makes sense that dance, an element of culture, is likewise intertwined within the processes of life, and by extension, all historical events that impact the continent. The relationship between dance and historic events or upheavals, has not always been conducive to the survival or the progression of both dance and each historic event. The occurrence of slavery is a classic example. To fully grasp the effects of slavery on dance systems in the Senegambia region, it is necessary to first understand slavery in its historical context in the region.

Slavery in Africa was comprised of at least three distinct types and underwent several transitions throughout the ages. Indigenous servile systems in Africa – or ISS – had existed long before the appearance of any other form of servitude.¹ People began to move out of the Middle Niger Valley roughly around the time that Ancient Ghana, Gao, and other early polities in Western Sudan began to form.² The Middle Niger Valley civilization was based on a form of governance that was heterarchical. In other words, there were no kings, slaves, paupers, and so on. There was no discernable societal stratification. Unsurprisingly, servile systems did not appear to be present in the region until the formation of states.

ISS differed from foreign forms of slavery that later entered Africa. ISS was based primarily on a system of kinship and farming or cultivation. It was greatly dissimilar to Arab slavery which was based initially on luxury and status, and it was significantly different from European/American slavery which became the driving-force for entire economies. ISS was used as a penal system and a process for rehabilitation through service, as a means of collateral, and for charity. Most significant, ISS did not remove the most valuable labor pool from the area and did not disrupt cultural systems including dance. Within ISS, a set of standards were enacted and adhered to.

Before an adequate analysis of Mandinka dance systems during the slavery era in the Senegambia region of West Africa can be conducted, it must be understood that African ISS influenced and was acted upon by foreign systems of slavery. Although three systems of slavery appeared in Africa, these systems of servitude floated in between each other, frequently merged together, transformed each other, and in some cases existed independently of one another during the same

period. Accordingly, tenets of Arab slavery were applied to principles of ISS creating hybrid concoctions.³ Moreover, the advent of European/American slavery, or transatlantic slavery, created additional mutations. Cases also existed where ISS was abandoned completely and replaced by foreign practices of slavery, and situations in which ISS was practiced without interruption or foreign influence. Every possible combination or transformation occurred in between both extremes. Therefore, the fact that there were distinctions in each system must not be overlooked. The differences in the usage, acquisition, treatment, and purpose for the slaves are most significant. These systemic differentiations affected or interacted with traditional Mandinka dance systems in diverse ways. With a few exceptions, scholars have generally treated the different forms of slavery found in Africa throughout the eras as extensions of African ISS into the international market.⁴ This grave oversimplification mars any in-depth inquiries into cultural systems in existence during the slavery eras. That said, each system of slavery must first be examined individually. Second, an analysis of the influences the foreign and indigenous slave systems had upon each other should be highlighted. Last, Mandinka dance systems can then be explored within the larger discussion of slavery in Senegambia.

African indigenous servile systems

The form of slavery that existed in West Africa centuries before the advent of the transatlantic and Arab slave trades was substantially unlike its Western and Arab counterparts. Including it in the general category of slavery would be misleading to say the least. Consequentially, it is more accurate to refer to the forms of servitude that was indigenous to Africa and existed before the seventh century CE (before the Arab invasion of north Africa) as ISS, or Indigenous Servile Systems.⁵

In West Africa, before there were centralized states, there was the kinship lineage unit.⁶ Thus, when the first centralized states were instituted, they were founded upon the kinship lineage principle. Early communities were established through kinship lines in horticultural settlements. Members of each family, or kinship line, were considered part of its wealth. Large families were considered to have wealthy kinship lineages. A kinship line had the ability to increase its wealth by adding a family member. The converse was also true if a family lost a member.⁷ If a member of a kinship line owed another lineage a debt, the former kinship line would lend the latter a member of the former kinship's family for collateral. If the debt was paid, the member would be returned to their original family. If the bill was not paid, the person would become a member of the new kinship line.⁸ Kinship lineages would also lose or forfeit a part of its wealth if a member committed a crime or if a member was captured in war. In either case, the acquired person was treated as a subordinate member or dependent of the new kinship line. Lastly, on occasion, during periods of famine or drought, or if a person was heavily in debt, a person would place him/herself into servitude by appealing to a wealthy person. The affluent person's entire lineage would be required to accept the dependent.⁹ Such examples of charity within African ISS were not unusual.



Figure 5.1 Jondon/Wolosodon

The author performing Jondon/Wolosodon.

Jondon/Wolosodon is a Mandinka dance that depicts the stages that dependents in Indigenous Servile Systems (ISS) experience. When a dependent is first brought into the master family's household, the fate of the dependent is unknown. Both the new family and the dependent are not yet familiar with each other; thus, loyalties have not yet been established. If the dependent commits offences against their new family, he or she will be sold without much thought. This precarious stage is represented in the first part of the dance – Jondon.

After the dependent has either spent a considerable amount of time with the family and the family has grown attached to the dependent, or if the dependent has a child in the new family household, the family will consider the dependent (and any offspring), a family member. Trust has now been established between the dependent and the family. This stage is represented by the second, faster part of the dance – Wolosodon.

Photograph: Araaku Abiola, 2005

Acquired individuals were considered dependents and treated as such by the kinship line that procured them. ISS utilized dependents chiefly for agrarian labor. Land was abundant and labor was deficient. Accordingly, the primary job that dependents were charged to do was farming. The master of the house along with the other members of the family, would work in the field side-by-side with the dependent. Owners of dependents were customarily required to provide a plot of land, and either a wife or bride wealth which would enable the dependent to obtain a wife on his own. Dependents were allowed to practice their indigenous religions. Although dependents were marginalized by their servile status, they were considered humans – not chattels – and treated accordingly. They had rights and were able to petition to the chief or the elders of the lineage to protest cruel treatment by masters or other injustices. Manumission was granted over time through absorption into the master's family line.

Dependents were acquired through several means. They were either criminals, prisoners of war, pawns, debtors, or voluntary dependents. Before the seventh century and prior to the advent of the Arab invasion in North Africa, a transsaharan trade existed. The primary products traded were gold, ivory, various other items, and small numbers of dependents. The dependents that were traded across the Sahara Desert in this early period were most likely criminals and prisoners of war. Additionally, and most significant, the number of dependents transported out of the Senegambia region across the Sahara Desert did not make a significant impact on the dance and cultural systems in the region in this early era.

Pre-seventh century effects of ISS on the social groups and dance

The nuclei where dances were generated and transmitted in Senegambia resided within the social groups of the society.¹⁰ It follows then, that any events or upheavals that affected the social groups would also affect dance systems. Traditional societal rankings were retained within the ISS system. Aristocrats, elders, and chiefs occupied the highest societal positions. They were followed by the freeborn class – cultivators, fishermen, and merchants. Artisans were next, and slaves or dependents were at the bottom.

All groups were able to obtain dependents. Alternatively, they could become dependents as well. Yet, in the case of artisans, special rules applied. Artisans were allowed to acquire dependents, but it was forbidden for any of the other social groups to enslave artisans. Dependents of artisans would on occasion learn the crafts of their artisan masters. Nonetheless, customary law prohibited them from practicing their master's crafts when their masters were not present. In other words, artisans' dependents could not practice their masters' crafts on their own, nor could they make a living on their master's craft.¹¹

Before the seventh century, and when ISS was practiced without the influence of foreign systems of slavery, dance systems in Senegambia remained intact. They worked correspondingly with ISS. Few dependents were taken out of

the area annually as a consequence of the transsaharan trade during this period. Hence, they continued to create and perform dances that depicted their cultural realities and they preserved their ancestor's legacies through dance. This uninterrupted continuity of social and cultural practices permitted the creation, transmission, and preservation of Mandinka dance systems. Cultural continuity to the extent that existed between ISS and dance systems would no longer be witnessed after the Arab invasion of North Africa. Muslim Arabs would bring with them a brand of slavery that would alter the understanding and practice of systems of servitude in Western Sudan forever.

Arab slavery and early states in Western Sudan

Arab slavery was introduced to Africa with the Arab invasion of North Africa in the seventh century. From that time onwards, an insatiable demand for incalculable numbers of slaves was initiated by the Arab enslavers; the first people to do so.¹² Arabs were also the first to integrate enslaved Africans into an international system of slavery. From the seventh century forward, with the exception of Ancient Ghana which existed centuries before, the emergence of Mande and non-Mande centralized states, were also witnessed. As such, in addition to Ancient Ghana and Gao, the non-Mande states of Takrur, Silla, and other smaller polities in the Greater Senegambia were founded. Centralized states were organized primarily for protection against external onslaught. However, trade also figured prominently into the centralized states' foundation and continuance. The control of trade routes created a huge incentive for individuals to seize the opportunity to establish a physical permanent secure post for such.

The Arab invasion in North Africa created instability in sub-Saharan Africa. As a consequence of the invasion, large numbers of Berbers migrated south and competed for resources and access to trade routes with the indigenous inhabitants there. Skirmishes led to wars and the emergence of new centralized states for protection. With the appearance of Arab traders and greater numbers of Berber traders in Senegambia, the demand for traded items increased which, among other things, included slaves.

Foreign practices that were indigenous to Arab slavery were introduced into African ISS.¹³ Prior to the introduction of Arab slavery to sub-Saharan Africa, ISS utilized dependents chiefly in the agrarian undertakings of family or kinship groups.¹⁴ The adoption of Arab aspects of slavery practices largely increased the fashion in which slaves were used in Senegambia in particular, and Africa in general. Arab slavery utilized slaves in the military, as tax collectors and state officials, domestic workers, concubines, and so on. These features were incorporated into African ISS in varying degrees. It is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of slaves in Africa before European arrivals were comprised of women, girls, and young boys. Widows and children of killed or captured men during war campaigns, young girls used as pawns for a debt or transgression of a relative, the practice of witchcraft or some other criminal

activity, among other things, were all considered acceptable causes to enslave an individual.

In the initial stages of Arab slavery incorporations into ISS, African traditions were upheld for the major part. Aside from demographic leakage, and early instability caused by Berber southward migrations, cultural systems in Western Sudan remained intact. Age-grade initiations and their accompanying dances, farming enterprises and their complementary dance rituals, and other traditional representations of dance and culture continued as usual. By the ninth century, Arab rule had been established in most of North Africa and Islam had continued to seep its way into sub-Saharan Africa via Berber Muslim traders.¹⁵ New avenues and partners for trade were witnessed, and powerful states began to emerge in Greater Senegambia following the decline of Ancient Ghana. As time progressed, the transsaharan trade intensified. For example, trade escalated during the zenith of the Mali Empire in the fourteenth century while it was under the leadership of Mansa KanKan Musa. Trade items included ivory, gold, hides, ostrich feathers, and slaves from the south in exchange for horses, salt, books, textiles, and paper from the north. The fourteenth-century chronicler Al-'Umari articulated the magnitude of such trade when he stated, "The king of this country [Mali] imports Arab horses and pays high prices for them. His army numbers about 100,000, of whom about 10,000 are cavalry mounted on horses."¹⁶ Indeed, the process of trading slaves for horses had become the standard. Thus, with the appearance of new Arab-Berber sultans in North Africa, the increased demand for horses in the south, and the new utilizations of slave labor by African Muslim heads of states, the demand for slaves increased exponentially.

The Western Sudanese custom that forbade the enslavement of dancers and other artisans was generally adhered to during the seventh through the early fifteenth century in Senegambia. Dance conservation and transmission was safeguarded for the most part. However, from the 1440s forward, with the arrival of Europeans, and the ascendance of wealthy Arab-Berber sultans in Morocco, the colossal demand for slaves wreaked havoc on the cultural institutions in Western Sudan. Demographic drain took its toll on dance transmission in the villages of the freeborn that were the targets of most slave raids. When empires were expanded, these freeborn or farming communities were seized. Consequentially, the dances and rituals connected with the age-grades were also at risk of discontinuation due to the instability in the region.

Slave raids and the survival of dance in the early periods

Although a discussion of Islam and its relationship to Mandinka dance systems will be explored later in this chapter, it must be briefly explained here to facilitate a fuller grasp of these historical dynamics. Islam was ushered into North Africa along with the Arab invasion. It is important to note that the Arab conquest of North Africa was not for the sole purpose of converting nonbelievers into Muslims. Gold and the other riches of Africa had been well known outside of the continent for millennia.¹⁷ The allure of the possibility of controlling

trade routes and the manufacture of and locations of gold mines were powerful incentives that convinced the Arabs to consider invading Africa.

By the ninth century, North Africa had been conquered and converted into an Islamic region. Yet, sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Western Sudan, became increasingly more in control of the products sought by the Arabs. Centralized states such as Ghana, Gao, and Takrur, had become more powerful through their control of trade transactions and routes. However, in order to gain access to the international market – of which Muslims had a firm grasp – it was necessary for African heads of state to convert to Islam. Slave raids began in the Greater Senegambia region with the conversion of African leaders to Islam. Enslaved non-Muslims – particularly the women, but the men as well – were transported to locales where the possession of slaves was linked to status. Arab chroniclers have documented raids conducted by Ancient Ghana, Gao, Takrur, and other Muslim leaders, on weaker non-Muslim states in their vicinities.¹⁸ The appearance of these early slave raids were made possible by the introduction of Arab slavery into African cultural institutions. Be that as it may, they were miniscule compared to the magnitude of the slave raids and the instability that occurred during the transatlantic slave trade. In addition, until the sixteenth century, Muslim African state leaders in Western Sudan were selective about which non-Muslims they enslaved. Dancers, blacksmiths, and other artisans were considered exempt from enslavement, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, was customary law in Senegambia.¹⁹

Traditional safeguards

The practice of providing a separate protected town or location for the artisans and religious figures was witnessed in Ancient Ghana in the eleventh century – two centuries earlier than Sunjata. According to the eleventh-century chronicler Al-Bakri, “Around the king’s town are domed buildings and groves and thickets where the sorcerers of the people, men in charge of the religious cult, live. ... These woods are guarded and none may enter them and know what is there.”²⁰ Religious practices were intrinsically connected to dance, the artisan groups, and to the wielding of Nyama. Nonartisan individuals who were knowledgeable in the generation and increase of Nyama, or the art of daliluw, also existed.²¹ During slave raids, the artisan villages were not raided. Artisans abducted from civilian communities during raids, war, and other upheavals were deposited in artisan villages like the one described by Al-Bakri, for safety. Their products were considered too important to risk interruption of production or possible extinction.²² Fittingly, dance rituals were intimately connected to the practice of their crafts and were safeguarded. This practice was witnessed during the era of the empire of Ancient Ghana and was retained until the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade.²³

Alternatively, independent indigenous practitioners – as opposed to artisan practitioners – who had the knowledge of producing and increasing Nyama through herbal science, were fair game for enslavement. Dance rituals attached

to their practice were probably lost due to one significant factor; they were taken out of the Senegambia region. With the advent of Arab slavery in the seventh century, and the increase in demand for slaves in distant territories by the eleventh century, many Senegambians enslaved during this period were transported across the Sahara Desert to North Africa and beyond.

Freeborn cultivators, or farmers, were also vulnerable to slave raids. Thus, many dances connected to agricultural practices were at risk of extinction. Age-grade dances were also at risk, but they had the protection of numbers. All of the members of communities were required to pass through an age-grade process. It makes sense that age-grade dances were – and still are – the most abundant. They are the dances that survived the most intact until present day.

Importance of dance systems in early states in Senegambia

Dance systems include drumming and all other items necessary for idea conveyance. They were exceedingly important for the continuity and cultural identity of early states – and nonstate polities – in Senegambia. Al-Bakri depicted the importance of dance systems in the king's palace when he stated, "When their king sits down [to eat] a drum is beaten and Sudanese women dance with their thick hair flowing."²⁴ Dance systems were so significant in Senegambia that states and towns named themselves after drumbeats. As asserted by Al-Bakri, "They [society members] maintain that they are called Kaw Kaw because this word can be heard in the noise of their drums. In the same way the names of Azwar, Hir, and Zawila are heard in the drumbeats of these people."²⁵ Drum calls were also used to announce the audience. Al-Bakri gave an example of this phenomenon when he maintained, "The audience is announced by the beating of a drum, which they call 'duba,' made from a long hollow log."²⁶ Dance systems were indispensable components of the cultural engine in Western Sudan. Life and identity were intimately dictated by them.

THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE, DANCE, AND REGIONAL INSTABILITY

First contact: The arrival of the Portuguese

The dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade must be examined in historical context in order to fully fathom its significance and its impact on Mandinka dance systems. In Greater Senegambia, state formation and the longevity of states were largely tied to access to trade and trade networks. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese directed trade from the interior to the coast. They gained control over and impaired Senegambia's inter-regional trading system as a result of this regional shift. The damage the Portuguese caused to the trade centers in Senegambia would be intensified in the following centuries with the arrival of other European powers. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese trade monopoly was challenged by the French, the British, and the

Dutch. Each of the European powers chose a base on the coast from which to partake in the transatlantic slave trade. Accordingly, many dimensions of African economies became dominated by the European capitalist commercial system. It assigned specific, subservient roles for Africa within the global production system of emerging capitalism.²⁷ Increasing subordination of Senegambian societies to the capitalist system resulted, and internal transformations of Senegambia's social institutions were governed by it.

The Atlantic trading system accessed Western Sudan through the Senegal, The Gambia, and the Southern Rivers.²⁸ Consequently, Senegambia became the primary route for penetration into West Africa. There were various types and sizes of societies in Senegambia before the arrival of the Europeans in the fifteenth century. The Mali Empire, founded in the thirteenth century, began its decline by the end of the 1460s. Nevertheless, it was responsible for the transformation of kinship-based societies into states in the Senegambian area. The Mali Empire also integrated the entirety of Senegambia into a long-distance trading system that involved such states as Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea, among others. The western most expansion of the Mali Empire resulted in the establishment of Kaabu.²⁹

Senegambia's societies and states were significantly impacted by Portuguese trade from 1445 forward, despite the fact that it was small in scope at the time. For example, by 1488, when the Portuguese were prohibited from establishing a fort in The Gambia – they were blocked by powerful Mandinka kingdoms in the area – they settled for trading in the inlets of the Senegal and The Gambia Rivers, and along the coasts of the mainland.³⁰ The Portuguese also established large plantations on islands such as Cape Verde and utilized substantial numbers of slaves from the Senegambia mainland to work on them. Through the course of time, an Afro-Portuguese population which was known as *lançados*, emerged. These offspring of Portuguese men and African women formed a middleman merchant class whose interests were tied to the Portuguese endeavors and their own personal profit.³¹ From the islands off the coast of Senegambia, the Portuguese directed their attention towards the Southern Rivers area. The Southern Rivers region of Senegambia was an important site of inter-regional trade. The Portuguese established themselves there and created a monopoly on trade in gold, ivory, hides, spices, and slaves, and the Cape Verdean Afro-Portuguese, served as middlemen.³² They used the old inter-regional trade circuits for cola, salt, cotton cloth, and iron trade. The Portuguese rerouted all trade circuits that they seized to the coast.

By the 1490s, the region in the south, between the Casamance River and Rio Cacheu, was flooded with Cape Verdean traders selling cloth. These new traders began to compete with the indigenous weavers and dyers.³³ By 1500, rivalry between states who previously cooperated with each other was instigated by Portuguese interests via *lançados*. Additionally, slavery was Portugal's primary focus of trade from very early. Their trade in slaves created a political, cultural, and economic crisis in the southern rivers area from virtually the moment they arrived on the islands off the coast of the region. At the behest of the Portuguese,

people from the Bijagos Islands participated heavily in the manhunts for slaves on the mainland.³⁴ The Bijago men built *almadis* – canoes – which became fleets of war-canoes. They wreaked havoc on the populations of the southern rivers area who became the first victims of the early transatlantic slave trade.³⁵

The instability in the southern rivers area generated by the Portuguese trade in slaves intensified from the 1590s onward. In addition to enslaved peoples transported to Cape Verde and other islands off the coast of the Senegambia region, a substantial number of skilled people were seized and transported to the plantations in the Americas. In Senegambia, dancers, artisans, cultivators, and others, discontinued their livelihoods and their traditions. Some attempted to escape capture by migrating to less accessible territories, others were killed fighting for their freedom or that of loved ones. Large numbers of people – sometimes whole villages – relocated to isolated regions. They migrated to lowlands comprised of dense river side brushes, mangrove swamps, and marshes and creeks, because they were ideal territories in which to avoid capture. Even the best organized raids could not maneuver in swamps and lagoons. As a consequence, population movements resulted in large influxes of people from diverse lands, ethnicities, religious practices, and the like. They were all strangers to each other and it was difficult to trust strangers in such uncertain, precarious, and often desperate times.³⁶ Fittingly, the age-grade dances particularly, and the overall age-grade system in general offered a logical solution. The age-grade framework was previously established by the Mandinka during the zenith of their reign in the region, and thus it naturally had the ability to provide direction and organization to diverse groups. The age-grade dance rituals were extremely instrumental in providing cultural cohesion in such precarious times.

Nevertheless, there was an overall lack of stability in the region and social institutions became perverted. For instance, instead of the enslavement of captives from bonafide wars, there was a proliferation of kidnappings and unfounded or trivial wars for the sole purpose of obtaining slaves. Moreover, accusations of insignificant crimes, unsubstantiated adultery, and witchcraft increased exponentially.³⁷ These events occurred throughout the Senegambia region with the advent of the transatlantic trade system. The final consequence was, lineage-based states' cultural institutions and political progression in the region was impeded.³⁸ Due to wars and violent manhunts from neighboring peoples, they did not evolve. This stagnation and stalled cultural development increased unfailingly until the colonial conquest in the nineteenth century.

After a two-century monopoly in the Senegambia region, other European powers arrived and challenged the Portuguese by the early 1600s. They also sought control of the trade circuits, and their interests were solely centered on the trade in slaves. From almost immediately after their arrival, these powers established zones of influence and guarded them meticulously from each other. Accordingly, the whole coastline of Senegambia was teeming with forts at Arguin, Saint Louis, Goree, Fort Saint James, Cacheu, and Bissao.³⁹ The forts acted as holding cells for slaves in transit. From the second half of the seventeenth century, the slave trade became the primary business of the European

powers. Manhunts were necessary to assure a consistent supply of slaves. Subsequently, severe cultural, economic, political, and social crises developed.⁴⁰ The consequence was rampant inner and inter-state violence, the militarization of regimes, and the emergence of revolutionary Islam. Accordingly, from the end of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, marabout-led revolutions, or jihads were widespread in Senegambia.⁴¹ Jihadists endeavored to unify states while combatting the slave trade and its corresponding atrocities.

The accounts discussed here concerning the southern rivers area repeated themselves throughout Senegambia after the arrival of the other European powers commencing in the early 1600s and continuing to the mid-nineteenth century.⁴² The transatlantic slave trade overtook and entirely replaced other forms of commerce in a region where states were founded and maintained based on trade. It also increased the amount of slaving in Senegambia and marked the regression of Senegambia's societies. Manhunts abound, and other slave-trading Afro-European merchant groups – in addition to the earlier



Figure 5.2 Fort James Island, The Gambia, West Africa

The Portuguese were the first to visit Fort James Island in The Gambia (currently named Kunta Kinteh Island) in 1455. Nearly 200 years later, other Europeans – the British, Germans, Dutch, and French – arrived on the island, and after several skirmishes, the British were the victors. The British utilized the island as a holding cell for enslaved Africans awaiting transport to the Americas.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, The Gambia, 2004

Afro-Portuguese – sprang up around the coast and acted as middlemen while they protected European interests.

The transatlantic slave trade reached its peak during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. The instability it created, particularly during that period, had adverse effects on dance systems in Senegambia. All social groups were targeted – the freeborn, those already enslaved under ISS and Arab slavery systems, and for the first time in Senegambian cultural history, dancers and artisans. Cultural safeguards protecting specific groups of people were not adhered to. Those with knowledge of ancient dance systems were enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic.

Despite efforts by the British to curtail it in the early nineteenth century, slavery in Senegambia lasted decades beyond. The Senegambia region passed directly from this deteriorated state into colonialism.⁴³ Hence, the transatlantic slave trade led to a general arrested development of dance systems and the regression of African societies over a period of several centuries.

Slavery and demography in Senegambia

Apart from the instability discussed earlier, demographic drain was an ominous problem during the slavery era in Africa, and for the continuation of dance traditions in Senegambia. When considering the types of slavery introduced into Africa, the phenomenon that created the largest deterrent to dance survivals was the unprecedented numbers of people taken out of Greater Senegambia. Obviously, indigenous systems of servitude did not contribute to the demographic drain since dependents were put to work on family farms in Senegambian territories. In this regard, a word must be said about Arab slavery.

Much of the literature concerning Arab slavery and its connection with the transsaharan slave trade downplays the number of people transported out of the region during its later periods. The transsaharan slave trade lasted for over a thousand years. The number of slaves taken out of Senegambia during the transsaharan slave trade increased with time, particularly after the ninth century. At that stage, North Africa had been conquered and consolidated by Arab Muslims. The rise of Moroccan Arab-Berber Muslim Sultans and their demands for slaves to work in their palaces significantly escalated. In addition to this increase, the demand for Senegambian slaves in other areas such as the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and other portions of North Africa was also substantial. Moreover, the Moroccan Sultan Al-Mansur, whose reign reached its peak with his victory over Songhay in 1591, intensified the practice in Morocco of utilizing large numbers of Western Sudanese men for his military and personal bodyguards.⁴⁴ The pinnacle of this practice was witnessed with the administration of Sultan Mawlay Isma'il (1672–1727). For instance, Mawlay Isma'il was reputed to possess and maintain over one hundred fifty thousand Senegambian Black men for his military, and the same number of Senegambian Black women for their wives. He also obtained thousands of palace workers and concubines from Senegambia.⁴⁵ His fifty-five-year reign alone was responsible for roughly 500,000 enslaved Senegambians transported out of the Western Sudan.

It is noteworthy that from Al-Mansur's administration in the sixteenth century through Mawlay Isma'il's reign in the late seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, the transatlantic slave trade was also picking up steam. In order to fully appreciate the magnitude of the demographic damage incurred in the Greater Senegambian region, both the transsaharan and the transatlantic slave trades must be considered together. This demographic drain from two sources simultaneously, dealt a serious blow to dance creation, transmission, and preservation. People with age-old knowledge of dance systems were removed from Senegambia's cultural landscaping in droves. Of those that remained in the area during this tumultuous era, dance continuance was immensely difficult with the ensuing instability and uprooting due to mass migrations to safer territories. However, all was not lost. Despite the demographic drain and the ensuing regional instability, new innovations in culture were initiated. These innovations ensured the survival of Mandinka dance systems and the continuity of the culture they emerged from.

Cultural innovations

During the height of the slavery era in Western Sudan, mass migrations from the coast to marshes, swamps, and secluded riverine areas were witnessed.⁴⁶ These remote communities were founded by lineages and groups of diverse people from various territories. Some of these defensive communities became densely populated. New cultural systems, and/or alterations of old ones, were enacted to govern the lives of this diverse group of people. For instance, the migrants adopted new agricultural techniques that simultaneously enabled them to fortify their residencies so that individuals could not be easily abducted from them.⁴⁷ This is significant because dance rituals always accompanied agricultural practices. Accordingly, new dance systems and/or innovations within old ones were also adopted.

These communities were often composed of different kinship lines and various people from different villages. Thus, a system for living harmoniously and one that provided a defense against slave raiders had to be implemented. Appropriately, age-grades became indispensable in this regard. In these expatriate communities, the age-grades occupied a central position in the society; a position that was once held by the kinship lines. As a result of the creation of the Mande diaspora (discussed in Chapter 1), Mandinka age-grade principles were utilized in many areas in Senegambia. This is especially true in the southern region where Kaabu reigned supreme for many centuries. Mandinka age-grade principles were utilized extensively in these expatriate communities. All the aforementioned dynamics were depicted in the dances produced in these regions because during this period, dances were still intricately intertwined within the age-grades and other social groups.

A fitting example is age-grade related dance of the *Kankuran*. The *Kankuran* is part of a Mandinka age-grade system that is currently practiced in many locations in southern Senegambia. It has been practiced from the time of the Mali Empire to present day in Ziguinchor, Senegal, among other places. The

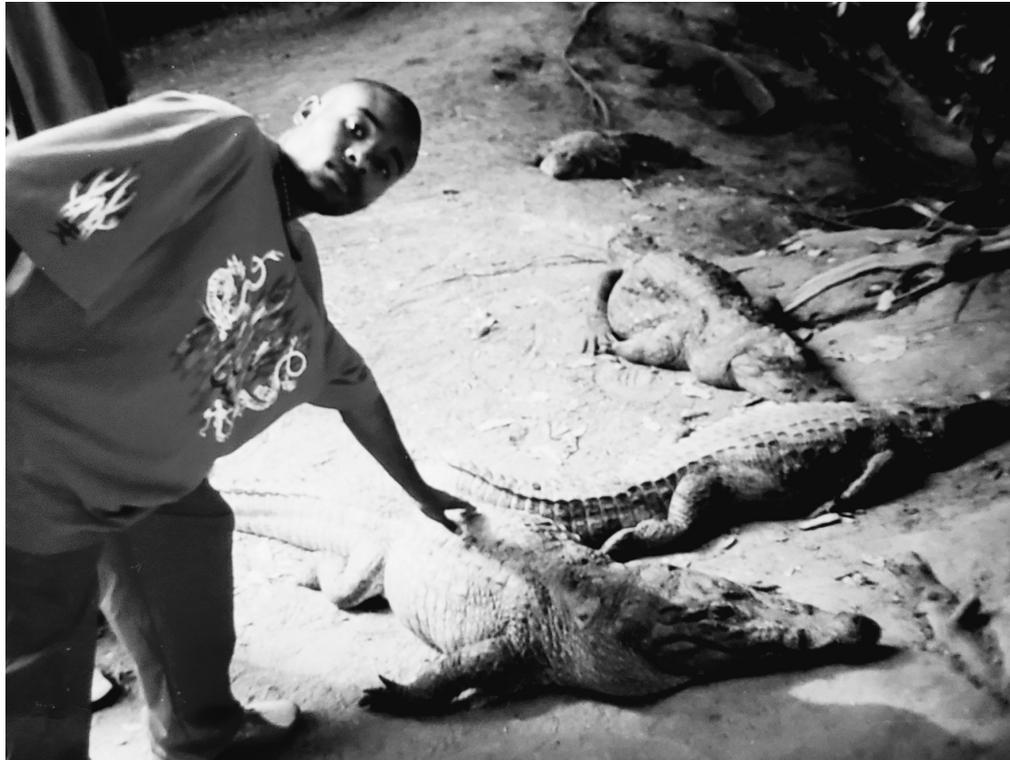


Figure 5.3 Kachikally Crocodile Pool

Kachikally Crocodile Pool is located in The Gambia in the city of Bakau. During the instability period created by the transatlantic slave trade, large numbers of people migrated to inaccessible areas such as cliffs, heavily wooded forests, swamps, and crocodile pools, to avert capture. Consequently, the crocodiles at Kachikally Crocodile Pool have resided alongside humans for hundreds of years.

Suwabi African Ballet drummer Araaku Abiola touching a crocodile.

Photograph: Ofosuwa Abiola, The Gambia, 2004

age-grade and dance of the *Kankuran* was utilized by this expatriate community in the centuries of the slavery era. The migrants of the slavery period are the ancestors of many of the inhabitants of Ziguinchor who utilize the dance of the *Kankuran* currently.⁴⁸ This present-day community is comprised of Jolas, Mandinkas, Susus, Fulanis, Balantas, and others. They all adhere to the practices of the *Kankuran* dance system in particular, and the Mandinka age-grades in general.⁴⁹

The very nature and purpose of the age-grade was to organize groups of people with apparent differences – diverse kinship lines, dissimilar home-villages, different livelihoods, and so on – to foster solidarity to accomplish large tasks. In the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries of the slavery era, instability reached an historic apex. It was during this period that the very essence of that task was protection against physical capture, and the assurance of cultural continuity through ritualistic practices such as dance. Innovations in dance were

also witnessed during the initial expansion of Islam into the Senegambia region. Before the impact of Islam on cultural systems can be assessed, the emergence of Islam into Africa must be discussed.

Conclusion

More than one system of slavery existed in Africa by the fifteenth century and each had a unique effect on Mandinka dance systems. Indigenous servile systems or ISS originated in Africa. Traditional dance systems and culture continued without interruption within and in tandem with ISS. When Arab Muslims and their form of slavery was introduced to the region, hybrid forms of slavery emerged. As African kings converted to Islam to take advantage of new opportunities for trade, slave raids of non-Muslim societies commenced. Although Arab slavery and increased demand in the transsaharan trade resulted in demographic leakage, cultural continuity was not arrested, and Mandinka dance systems endured. Alas, the transatlantic slave trade ushered in the type of instability never before experienced in Greater Senegambia affecting dance systems and every crevice of the cultural landscape.

The contrast between the three systems of slavery in Africa by the 1500s was substantial – with ISS as the most benign to Mandinka dance systems, and transatlantic slavery as the most detrimental to them. In addition to a blatant disregard for local customs and laws, the transatlantic slave trade was responsible for the removal of unprecedented numbers of dance practitioners from the area. Although many dancers were lost due to demographic drain, some practitioners of Mandinka dance systems and custodians of cultural institutions were able to find refuge in isolated territories. In swamps, on mountain cliffs, and in marshy terrains, new communities were forged where Mandinka dance systems, at the behest of governing age-grade structures, reigned supreme.

Notes

- 1 From this point forward, African Indigenous Servile Systems will be referred to as ISS.
- 2 Western Sudan, Senegambia, Western Sahel will be used interchangeably. Chapter 1 discusses the usage of these terms. Chapter 1 also discusses the notion of the Middle Niger Valley civilizations and the formation of early states; also see Roderick McIntosh, *The People of the Middle Niger*.
- 3 See Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations of Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, for a discussion on how slavery in Africa underwent many transfigurations.
- 4 See Walter Rodney, "African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave-Trade," in *The Journal of African History*; and Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Fage, Thornton, and others argue that the transatlantic slave trade was an extension of ISS into the international market. They assert that slavery existed in Africa long before the transatlantic slave trade, and that the existence of African forms of slavery made it possible for the transatlantic slave trade to

- exist and proliferate. However, the difference between the transatlantic slave trade and African ISS is comparable to the difference between night and day. Many of the aforementioned scholars also consider Arab/Islamic slavery as indigenous. However, Arab/Islamic slavery was introduced by foreign entities. See J.D. Fage, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History," in *The Journal of African History*; and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*.
- 5 By the seventh century, after the birth of Islam in the Middle East, the Arab invasion of North Africa commenced. It ushered in the Islamization of North Africa by conquest, and an introduction to its own brand of slavery.
 - 6 The terms kinship line and kinship lineage will be interchangeable for the purposes of this study.
 - 7 See Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa*, 10. An example is bride wealth. Bride wealth of cattle or some other type of currency, is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family because the bride's family *lost* a member, the bride.
 - 8 In such cases, the acquired member was called a *pawn*.
 - 9 See Arthur Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule: A Historical Study of Political Change in Sierra Leone 1890–1937*, 23. In cases where crimes were committed, the offender served the new kinship line as a form of rehabilitation. The use of the term "slave" regarding ISS in Africa is inappropriate due to the nature of African ISS. Accordingly, with regard to ISS, the term "dependent" will be used instead of "slave."
 - 10 Chapter 1 provides an extensive discussion on the social groups. The social groups are categories of people based on class, profession, and the like.
 - 11 See Andrew Clark, "The Challenges of Cross-Cultural Oral History: Collecting and Presenting Pulaar Traditions on Slavery From Bundu, Senegambia (West Africa)," *Oral History Review*, 6–7. Clark interviewed Mandinka artisans in addition to his Pulaar interviews. Clarks' interview with an elderly Mandinka blacksmith, testified to the prohibitions concerning artisans and enslavement.
 - 12 See, John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*, 3; and Lovejoy, *Transformations of Slavery*, 15.
 - 13 This study utilizes the term Arab slavery instead of Islamic slavery because slavery in the Middle East pre-dated the advent of Islam by several centuries. It was already in place before Islam was introduced to the region. Slavery was then intertwined into the practices of the new religion – Islam. See Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, 18.
 - 14 Although the word "dependent" is utilized for the early stages of ISS, it will not be used for Arab slavery. Due to the nature of Arab slavery and European or American slavery, the term "dependent" would be inaccurate. Subsequently, the term "slave" will be employed for the discussions on the two foreign systems.
 - 15 When the Arabs conquered North Africa, they forcibly installed Islam on all the inhabitants. Yet, in sub-Saharan Africa, Islam was introduced through trade; not militarily. Islam provided connections into the international trade system of the time.
 - 16 See, Al-'Umari, in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, Levtzion and Hopkins, eds., 266. For more on trading slaves for horses, see Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History*.
 - 17 See Edward W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, 69.
 - 18 See Nehemia Levtzion and Jay Spaulding, eds., *Medieval West Africa: Views for Arab Scholars and Merchants*.

- 19 See Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," in *The Journal of African History*. Tamari's article provides an extensive account of artisan groups and the protections and prohibitions concerning them. In addition, Chapter 1 discusses all of the social groups and the restrictions accorded to them by the laws of Sunjata.
- 20 See Al-Bakri, in *Medieval West Africa: Views from Arab Scholars and Merchants*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Jay Spalding, 15.
- 21 For more information on Nyama and Dalilu, see Patrick R. McNaughton, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African Masquerade*, 38, 77–8.
- 22 For example, see Ibn al-Dawadari in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 250. Mansa Musa stated that whenever he attempted to conquer the land where gold was produced, the gold would disappear. Obviously, the producers of the gold, the smiths, would discontinue its production. This fact was known since the era of ancient Ghana.
- 23 Artisan villages existed as late as 2004 in the Senegambia region. I had the privilege of visiting a woodcarving artisan village in Kololi, in The Gambia.
- 24 Al-Bakri discusses this in, *Corpus*, 87.
- 25 See Levtzion, *Medieval West Africa*, 32. Kaw Kaw was another name for the Mande state Gao.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 27 For an extensive discussion on Africa's place in the global economy see Samir Amin, "Africa Living on the Fringe," *African Insight* 53.
- 28 The Southern Rivers are the groups of rivers located in Guinea-Bissau and north-west Guinea. The southern rivers area is considered southern Senegambia.
- 29 Kaabu is discussed in Chapter 1. It became a power in its own right when the Mali Empire declined.
- 30 See Barry, *Senegambia*, 36.
- 31 This phenomenon also occurred after the arrival of other Europeans such as the French and Dutch. See Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 60.
- 32 Although the Portuguese's initial concerns were the gold trade, they were engaged in slave trading from the very start. See John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 131.
- 33 For a discussion of the Cape Verde textile industry in the fifteenth century, see Bill Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society Since 1800*, 47.
- 34 The Bijagos are some twenty islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau.
- 35 Those effected included the Bainuk, Jola, Papel, Balante, Nalu, Landuma, and Baga.
- 36 See, Walter Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, 1400–1900*, 153.
- 37 See Sylviane A. Diouf, ed. *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, 135.
- 38 See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Undeveloped Africa*, for an extensive discussion on the subject.
- 39 See B.A. Ogot, ed. *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 5 of *General History of Africa*, abridged edition, UNESCO, 139.
- 40 See James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700–1860*, 29.
- 41 Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa*, 131. For further discussion on the jihad movements in Africa, also see Nehemia Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society, and Politics to 1800*.
- 42 Slavery in Africa was not greatly reduced until roughly 1860. The British push for its abolition in 1807, and "legitimate" trade in its place prompted the emergence of

- increased slavery in Africa. Large numbers of slaves were utilized in the cultivation of peanuts, palm oil, and other raw products desperately needed by Europeans.
- 43 The French began its colonial conquest in the 1860's in Senegambia. Due to the fact that the slave trade in Senegambia continued into the mid-nineteenth century, Senegambia went from slavery directly to colonization. For more information on this topic, see Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, *Africa Since 1800*, and Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*.
- 44 Songhay was a large Soninke state that emerged during the decline of the Mali Empire. For information on the Moroccan practice of utilizing Black soldiers and bodyguards, see El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 122.
- 45 See, Octave Houdas, Abd l-Qasim bin Ahmad al-Ziani, *al-Turjiman al-Muarib an Duwal al-Mashriq wa'l-Maghrib*, 30–1; and El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 160.
- 46 See Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves*, 12.
- 47 See Hawthorne, *Planting Rice*, 61.
- 48 Throughout the centuries, Ziguinchor, like other regions in Africa, has witnessed myriad migrations of people from diverse ethnic groups. Some of the migrations are fairly recent. However, a significant number of residents in Ziguinchor are descended from the expatriate communities of the slavery period. Nonetheless, the same could not be said of every single resident in the region. That said, Mandinka age-grades are widely utilized by the residents of the area.
- 49 See Ferdinand De Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity: Power and Secrecy in Casamance, Senegal*, 98.

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6 Foreign religions, colonialism, Modernity, and dance

Islam in Senegambia

The primary reason Islam was successful in Western Sudan is because it was Africanized.¹ Thus, African traditional religious tenets were applied to Islam or performed alongside it and correlations were made between Islam and African social, and political practices. Islamic tenets were incorporated into dance and other cultural systems, Arabic words were included in African languages with African pronunciations, and so on. Africans were extremely resourceful in their efforts to retain the traditions of their ancestors while simultaneously embracing unfamiliar principles; even when they emanated from outside of the continent.

The first introduction West Africa had to Islam was after the seventh century when Muslims flooded into North Africa. Initially, the major agents of the expansion of Islam were the traders who combined their religion with their profession.² The Mande kingdom of Ancient Ghana was thriving during this period but her kings had not yet converted to Islam. By 1076, the people of Ghana had adopted Islam; albeit, their conversion may have been coerced.³ In 1040 CE, a large surge of Islamic influence in the Senegambia region was witnessed after the conversion of the Tukulor king of Takrur, War Jabi. From that time, his territory became a hub for Islamic practices.

From the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries African kings took the middle of the road with regards to their religious devotion. They adhered to some Islamic practices while they were also committed to the religions of their ancestors. Circumstances dictated which religion they would follow at any given time. It is important to note that during this period, Islam did not penetrate the heart of African society. Apart from kings, traders, and the elite, few became Muslims. The eleventh century Andalusian chronicler al-Bakri asserted that in Gao, the king converted to Islam but his constituency remained loyal to their indigenous religions.⁴ Exceptions are polities such as Takrur whose king forced his entire constituency to convert to Islam. It should also be noted that there were also stateless societies where Islam did not penetrate at all until the Islamic jihads of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As a whole, in the initial stages, Islam was not a significant factor in the lives of Senegambian dancers and societies. Apart from access to opportunities

for inclusion into the international trade markets, Islam was not regarded as a necessary part of life. Consequentially, in Western Sudan, virtually all traders were Muslims. This phenomenon was so pervasive that the two words – trader and Muslim – were virtually synonymous. Nonetheless, when traders retired and became cultivators, they underwent a self-imposed “de-Islamization” process that prompted the forfeiture of the performance of Islamic tenets and a return to indigenous religious practices.⁵

Another example of the importance of traditional religious systems in the minds and lives of Western Sudanese can be witnessed in the narrative of Sunjata’s victory over Sumanguru.⁶ Sunjata’s family line had converted to Islam at least two generations before his victory over Sumanguru in 1235. Yet, Sunjata’s most effective battle strategy was based in his traditional practices. Sunjata believed Sumanguru had magical powers. He believed that it was necessary to obtain knowledge of the key to those powers to defeat Sumanguru. Although many battles were physically fought against Sumanguru and his army, victory did not come to Sunjata until his sister revealed the secret of Sumanguru’s magic. Sunjata applied this knowledge via magic of his own, which resulted in his victory over Sumanguru. Islamic practices were not utilized or consulted in this momentous battle that would decide the fate of the entire Mandinka nation in general, and Mandinka dance and cultural systems specifically.

The expansion of Mali and Islam

As Mali expanded into a large multiethnic state in the 1330s, its rulers began to adhere more to Islamic principles at the expense of their ancestral traditions.⁷ Mali, similar to most states in the era, was built upon trade and control of trade routes. Islam provided an opportunity for access to an international trade network that was controlled by Muslims. By the 1430s, Mali was in decline. As a result, she had lost the Sahel, Timbuktu, and Jenne. These territories had firmly established Islamic influences. The loss of these territories disconnected Mali from the international trade network located north of the Sahara. Moreover, the commercial Muslim community left the declining capital. Mali reverted back to its pre-Islamic origins and indigenous dance and cultural practices with the exception of the king and his court. In other words, when the possibility for international trade diminished, there was no longer any need for the religion that fostered it.

It is noteworthy that the Muslim kings of Mali and other states in the Western Sudan were torn between Islam and their traditional religious and cultural systems. After all, it was their traditional religious practices that were responsible for their ascendance to the throne.⁸ Their political power was contingent upon their knowledge and mastery of indigenous religious systems and knowledge of the dances that accompanied them. Their constituency’s respect and obedience was subject to this criterion. The kings could never be devout or loyal Muslims as long as their authority was established and maintained

via traditional cultural institutions. Alternatively, when Islamic practices were retained they were Africanized.

Early Islam and the expansion of dance and cultural systems

Early Islamic influence in the Senegambia region, whether intentionally or unwittingly, assisted in the creation of more Mandinka dances or the increased practices of old ones. For instance, Mansa Kankan Musa ascended to the throne of Mali in 1307. He was responsible for Mali's greatest expansions. He was also accused of being unfaithful to his ancestral religions by traditional authorities of his time – which was a weighty accusation since Musa was Sunjata's grandson. Musa's elaborate pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, was construed as a colossal waste of the royal treasury.⁹ However, according to the fifteenth century chronicle, *Ta'rikh al-Fattāsh*, Musa accidentally killed his mother and was attempting to atone this grave sin through the pilgrimage.¹⁰ Dance artisans and other traditionalists expressed disappointment in Musa and his disloyalty to the traditions of his ancestors. In response, the artisans and traditionalists created the Komo Society. The Komo Society was a secret association created to keep the dance and other traditions of the Mande alive. Interestingly, unlike other secret societies, the Komo Society was not initially a component of a preexisting social group.¹¹ It was created from the beginning as a standalone secret society. It became the main male initiation society, particularly in eastern Senegambia.¹² The Komo Society has become renowned for its spectacular masquerade dances.

All things considered, the fact that dance systems in Senegambia thrived during Islamic expansion into the area from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries is readily apparent. War Jabi of Takrur was the first king, and his kingdom was the first state, to adopt Islam in Senegambia. He demanded that his entire kingdom convert. Nevertheless, he allowed the blacksmiths and the other artisans to continue their traditional religious practices so that they would not cease to produce gold and other trade items.¹³ Dance was an integral part of those practices. Additionally, kings in the Senegambia region converted to Islam to access and control trade routes and items, but they also remained loyal to their traditional religious practices which were responsible for their authority. Unsurprisingly, those religious practices were replete with dance rituals. Traders also converted to Islam for access to international trade networks. Yet, when they retired and became cultivators, they reverted back to their indigenous cultural systems which included their agricultural dance rituals.

Lastly, the age-grade ceremony continued throughout the Islamic period in Western Sudan. All members of society – including the king – were required to pass through the age-grade process. Dance was a significant component of every stage of the age-grade initiations. By and large, it can be safely concluded that dance systems persisted during Islamic influence in the Senegambian region from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries. The presence of Islam in Western Sudan created new possibilities for change via Islamic doctrines. Over

the period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a series of Islamic jihads emerged that challenged existing states and created new polities. These Islamic revolutions had a significant impact on the creation and transmission of dance systems in the area. Hence, the origin and the intent of the initiators of the Islamic jihads – or revolutions – in the Greater Senegambia region cannot be justifiably omitted from this discussion.

Marabouts: Agents of Islamic jihads

Marabouts are Muslim clerics or spiritual leaders who adhere chiefly to the Sufi branch of Islam. Africans' affinity to the Sufi branch of Islam assured the Africanization of Islam. Sufism included doctrines that fostered mystical practices which allowed the incorporation of African spiritual systems within Islam. Marabouts were the representation of the highest expression of Sufism.

As Islam expanded further into Senegambia, specific roles traditionally held by jalis were transferred to the marabouts. Jalis were customarily the advisor to the king. They organized all the dancing and drumming, the cultural activities of the court, singing, music, and others. They also were intermediaries for lineage disputes, in addition to keepers of historical repositories of the king's family line. As Islam penetrated more into the cultural institutions of Senegambia, marabouts replaced jalis and became the advisors to the king. This process can be witnessed as early as 900 CE when, according to the fourteenth-century chronicler al-Umari, the kings' advisors were all Muslims.¹⁴ This practice continued through the ages. For instance, 169 years after Ancient Ghana's decline in 1076, Sunjata entrusted Muslims as his advisors and cabinet members in 1235, when he organized his new state, the Mali Empire. Still, it must not be misconstrued that marabouts took the place of jalis overall. The number of elites and kings with jalis were few compared to the masses of people who employed jalis to organize their weddings, naming ceremonies, age-grade rituals, and to safeguard the history of their lineages.

Marabouts also familiarized themselves with all healing knowledge in the Islamic world as well as the extensive herbal knowledge of African traditional healers.¹⁵ They were healers and diviners, they constructed amulets for their patrons, and they were able to draft agreements and commercial correspondence. These abilities also facilitated their proselytizing efforts. Despite their knowledge and abilities, full-fledged Muslim communities were slow to manifest. Marabouts were mostly members of the trading class. They traversed areas of life that did not include the nucleus of African societies and its accompanying traditional dance systems. Consequently, Marabouts remained on the fringes. They successfully converted individuals to Islam, but they did not transform African societies into Muslim communities. With the exception of aristocrats, other elites and traders, Marabouts were largely unsuccessful at converting dancers, blacksmiths, and other social groups who utilized traditional practices on a regular basis to conduct their lives. As will

be discussed below, the marabout-convert scenario begun to change in the seventeenth century. European conquest and colonialism impacted the indigenous groups of people in Senegambia and as a result, Muslim and even Christian converts increased. Nevertheless, jihads led by Muslim marabouts in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries also witnessed increased numbers of Islamic converts – albeit, not as extensively as in the colonial era.

Origins of Islamic revolution in West Africa

In North Africa, conversion to Islam was a protracted process that took place under military conquest and Muslim political domination. In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa's introduction to Islam was primarily a peaceful process. Muslim traders and clerics, under the patronage of non-Muslim rulers advanced Islam. In the Senegambia region, in addition to the spread of Islam through peaceful trade activities, it was the Islamic revolutions or jihad movements, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – not conquest from the outside – that resulted in the political ascendancy of Islam. These jihad movements were the result of the evolution of events. Communities resulting from jihads often consolidated themselves far inland at great distances from the coast.¹⁶ They frequently chose inhospitable difficult to reach locations to protect themselves from enslavement. Most significant, the initiators of the revolutions – Fulani Marabouts¹⁷ – were African Muslims who did not emanate from outside of Africa, they lived in the Western Sudan area. These Marabout-initiated revolutions had profound effects on Mandinka dance production and transmission. The origins of the jihad movements must be delineated to comprehend their impact on dance systems in particular, and cultural systems in general in the Western Sudan.

The Fulani population in Western Sudan had steadily increased since the fifteenth century due to successive waves of migration. One factor responsible for their migration was the reality that gold no longer fueled the West African economy.¹⁸ Inspired by Islamic ideals of justice and equality, the Fulani clerics released themselves from the rule of abusive aristocrats and established Islamic states. For example, the king of Gobir – an area in West Africa located in what would be modern northern Nigeria – is reputed to have been abusive to non-Muslim Fulani pastoralists, Fulani Muslims, and other residents in his kingdom. The Fulani cleric, Usman dan Fodio, launched a jihad to address the abuse, among other reasons. His successful jihad resulted in the creation of the Islamic state of Sokoto. The spread of West African jihads progressed from urban areas to the countryside, from the elite citizenry to the grassroots class, and from the Sunni system of Islam to Sufi practice.¹⁹ Thus, the expansion of Sufism is partially responsible for the spread of Islam to the grassroots rural communities. Sufism was more attractive to Africans in rural areas because of its strong emphasis on community, and its more mystical expression of Islam which was akin to traditional African religions. More importantly, the jihads were responsible for the penetration of Islamic principles into indigenous Mandinka dance systems.

Generally, scholars connect the West African jihads of the nineteenth century to the Almoravid movement (1042–1148). However, the Almoravid movement did not have a lasting effect in most areas of West Africa.²⁰ It was the impact and processes of the Islamic revolutions of the seventeenth century that would be felt and imitated repeatedly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa. In addition to grievances about noncompliance with Islamic standards of behavior and governance, rural Muslim clerics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were particularly concerned about, and consistently preached against, Muslims being captured and sold into slavery. Jihadists sought stability in turbulent times due to the transatlantic slave trade by creating Islamic states. The jihadists utilized Islam not only as a religious tool, but as a political and social one as well.

The initial factor in the sequence of jihads in West Africa can be traced to the western part of the Sahara in the late seventeenth century. Arab nomad groups, called the Bani Hassan, spread far into the Western Sahara. The Bani Hassan movement was coined Sharr Bubba. This group began to spread south commencing in the 1300s and extended as far as the Senegal River in Western Sudan. The Bani Hassan introduced Hassaniyya (from the name Hassan), and they increasingly dominated the indigenous inhabitants. Nasir al-Din, a scholar-warrior from the southern part of what would be modern day Mauritania, revolted against the Hassan domination in the 1670s. He organized a coalition with the indigenous inhabitants of the area, overthrew the Bani Hassan, and established an Islamic state based on Shari'a law.²¹ It is noteworthy that al-Din used the grievances of the common people against the dominating group to recruit and empower his jihadist militia. This procedure would be repeated time and again in later jihads in the Western Sudanese region. Indeed, Nasir al-Din's migrant disciples flourished as they conveyed their visions of an Islamic state to future posterity when they traveled south of the Senegal River, and further into the interior of Senegal.

In the 1690s, a generation after al-Din's revolt, Malik Sy founded the Islamic state of Bundu in Senegal through jihad. Although the process of conquest was similar to that of al-Din's, Sy did not commit to strict adherence of Shari'a law in his state. In the mountainous region of Futa Jalon, south of the state of Bundu, a jihad was launched that was not fully realized for fifty years. In the 1730s two members of the same Fulani family, Ibrahima Sori and Karamoko Alfa Barry, waged jihad against the Mandinka Jalonke ruling elites and other aristocrats. After fifty years of fighting, in 1780, Futa Jalon was founded.²²

Meanwhile, in the 1760s, the Fulani Muslim scholarly class – or the Torodbe – were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Mandinka Denyanke dynasty's lax governance of its Fulani state. A jihad was launched and was successful by 1776. This particular jihad also centered around two Fulani figures. The first, Sulayman Bal, prepared the way by criticizing the non-Muslim customs of the Denyanke dynasty, and by launching the jihad. Several years later, after he died in one of the battles, Abdul Qadir Kan took control, founded – in 1776 – and maintained the post-jihad state that resulted. It is noteworthy that the Fulani

jihad of Futa Toro was launched against non-Muslim Fulani. Additionally, in the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, the transatlantic slave trade was at its height, and the Muslim revolution in Futa Jalon, like the one in Bundu, was a reaction against the violence and chaos created by the transatlantic slave trade.

As a whole, although the jihads were not the primary cause of the instability in Senegambia in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, they contributed to the mayhem and therefore impacted dance formation. The preservation of dance systems was extremely difficult during periods of demographic and social instability and when large groups of people were being mobilized to fight in jihads. The magnitude of the jihads of the nineteenth century is demonstrated by the fact that they resulted in the creation of the largest states in West Africa at the time. Although they were part of a larger revolutionary movement, the founders of the largest of the jihad states – Usman dan Fodio, al-Hajj Umar Tall, and Samori Toure – each had their own specific intentions. As a consequence, the practice of traditional dance and other cultural systems was tolerated or restricted according to the individual jihadist and his motives for creating his revolutionary state.

Goals of the nineteenth-century jihadists and the impact on dance systems

In the mid-nineteenth century, the almamis became oppressive hereditary rulers of monarchies and preyed on their subjects.²³ It is important to remember that the almamis were an aristocratic minority ruling class who exploited the masses. The scenario that all, or the majority of Africans sold each other into slavery simply is not true. That said, although the transatlantic slave trade was in decline, the intensity of the internal slave trade increased and the almamis were capturing Muslims to sell as slaves. In addition, the French were preparing to colonize the area and the almamis entered economic and political relationships with the French. The almamis permitted the French to construct fortified posts along the Senegal River Valley. They also excused the French's disregard for local traditions. The increasing authority and military presence of the French and the British was resented by the rural Muslim clerics. Jihadists appealed to and received tremendous support from the huge enslaved population and the dance and other artisan groups in Western Sudan. These events became the catalysts for nineteenth century Islamic revolutions.

The overall goal of the nineteenth-century West African jihad movements was to dislodge oppressive regimes, and to restore Islam to its perceived purity. The word perceived must be mentioned here due to the fact that it was the Africanized version of Islam that jihadists were advancing. Most importantly, the Torodbe initiating the jihad was viewed as a messianic figure who embodied the optimism and aspirations of the common people – dancers, artisans, cultivators, slaves, and so on. He provided what they held to be an assured way out of crisis.²⁴

The first in the series of nineteenth-century Islamic revolutions was Usman dan Fodio's jihad against the Hausa state of Gobir, which was launched in 1804. Usman dan Fodio was a Fulani cleric and teacher in Gobir, which was located

in what is modern-day northern Nigeria. His reputation spread throughout the region as a devout holy man and he attracted a substantial number of peasant and pastoralist followers who voiced their grievances about the abuses of the Gobir aristocracy. The leaders in Gobir became threatened by the increasing power, influence, and the considerable numbers of disciples surrounding dan Fodio.²⁵ The situation reached its critical point when Yunfa – ruler of Gobir – attempted to assassinate dan Fodio in the early 1800s. Consequentially, dan Fodio launched a jihad and the new state, Sokoto Caliphate, was born. Usman dan Fodio's primary goal for launching his Islamic revolution was conversion. He was concerned with converting the Muslim Hausa leaders to a pure form of Islam who, in his opinion, had fallen below shari'a standards of Islam. He was also concerned about the conversion of Fulani pastoralists to Islam, who still clung to their indigenous religions.²⁶ Because dan Fodio's mission included converting people to pure Islam, dance and other indigenous cultural systems were frowned upon in his new state.

In 1818, a jihad that was inspired by Usman dan Fodio's, was ignited in the upper Niger area in West Africa. Muslim and non-Muslim Fulanis revolted against their corrupt leaders. The result was the creation of the state of Masina. Interestingly, roughly forty years later, a jihad initiated by al-Hajj Umar Tall would engulf that very state.²⁷ Under Tall's leadership, Mandinka and Fulani Muslims, and non-Muslim Mandinkas, fought against reigning aristocracies to install a jihadist state. The jihad resulted in the founding of Tall's Tukulor empire. At the edge of the Futa Jalon border, Tall generated an enormous following in the 1840s. He modernized his army by exchanging non-Muslim captives for guns. The French presence at Medina on the Senegal River prohibited him from capturing his home region, Futa Toro. However, Tall's jihad campaigns in 1854 and the 1860s were successful against the Bamana kingdom of Kaarta and the upper Niger states of Segou and Masina, respectively. Al-Hajj Umar Tall's main goal was not as specific as Usman dan Fodio's. Due to the influence of the successful state of Sokoto, Tall's goal was to create an Islamic state that spanned the entire Western Sudan through military action.

A diverse set of people assisted Tall with his jihad. Many of those who fought by his side were not Muslims; many were not Fulani as well. Subsequently, the resulting state was composed of a diverse group of people with various religious and cultural practices. Observance of tenets belonging to dance and other indigenous cultural institutions within the state was inevitable. Still, Tall also assisted with the destruction of the practice of dance systems and rituals due to the fact that he captured many non-Muslims to sell as slaves to purchase firearms and supplies.

The instigation of Islamic revolutions in the nineteenth century have been largely dominated by Fulani Torodbe, or clerics. Yet, a Mandinka jihadist empire founded by a Jula,²⁸ Samori Toure, also sprang up and was located to the south of the Tukulor Empire. Toure converted to Islam in the 1860s. He created an army of well-armed fighters to safeguard his family's trading pursuits. Toure came from a non-Muslim Jula family who resided east of Futa Jalon. Under Toure's direction, his family utilized their Jula networks to import firearms from

the coast to strengthen and modernize their army. Through successful Islamic revolutions, or jihads, waged from 1865 through the 1880s, Toure converted his trading kingdom into a large empire. Toure's initial foremost goal was to protect his family's trading interests.²⁹

Although his goals and methods of achieving them were similar to jihadists who preceded him, Toure's jihad was quite distinct. First, he was Mandinka, not Fulani. Second, Toure was from a Jula trading family and community, not a community of Torodbe. Third, instead of selling his prisoners of war as slaves, he kept them and commissioned them to serve in his army. Fourth, despite the fact that al-Hajj Umar Tall also trained and maintained a standing army, Samori Toure employed Mandinka blacksmiths to repair guns in addition to equipping his soldiers with the latest weapons.³⁰ Lastly, Toure confronted French invaders so formidably that he became a figure of African resistance against colonial occupation and conquest.

Samori Toure specifically, and all the other jihadists as a whole, needed the skills of the blacksmith artisan class to produce iron weapons. They believed that the blacksmith's skills were intimately bonded to their wielding of Nyama and their practice of traditional religions with its accompanying dances. Subsequently, dancers and other artisans were exempt from forced conversion to Islam, and enslavement. In addition, leaders of successful jihads also retained jalis to conserve the knowledge of their military and lineage endeavors. Indeed, virtually all of the skills possessed by artisans – leatherworkers, tailors, potters, and so on – were indispensable to jihad initiators. Accordingly, dance was a crucial component in the application of those skills and the resultant products. Therefore, dance systems persisted in jihadist states. Truth be told, the Mandinka warrior dance, *Sofa*, was created during the nineteenth century jihads to preserve the knowledge of the exploits of Samori Toure and his “Sofa” or cavalry.

Limited space precludes an exhaustive discussion of all the Islamic revolutions that occurred in the nineteenth century. There were countless jihads; some were successful, others were not. However, it is significant that the largest states in West Africa in the nineteenth century were the result of Islamic revolutions. The success of the jihadists lies in the advantages they had over those they defeated. Their largest advantage was that they were able to articulate the frustrations and grievances of the grassroots people and used such as a rallying tool.³¹ Accordingly, the jihadists had the support of the masses – dancers, other artisans, slaves, and non-Muslim traditionalists – which the aristocracy had abused and alienated.

TO DANCE, OR NOT TO DANCE: COLONIALISM, ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY, AND MODERNITY

Colonization and Mandinka dance

Colonization in the Senegambia region began in 1854 by the French in a territory that spanned from the Senegal River to the Niger River.³² Waalo, a western

territory located south of the Senegal River, was conquered in 1855. This was followed by a string of victories for the French that reached its zenith in 1898 with the defeat of Samori Toure. After Toure's defeat, European military action in the area continued until the early 1900s when the entire Senegambian region was colonized. In Western Sudan, the French carved the largest piece of the "African pie" for themselves. By comparison, the British and the Portuguese managed to hold onto the miniscule territories of The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, respectively. With all the social, political, and cultural upheavals created as a result of colonialism, Mandinka dance became an enduring apex of cultural cohesion and stability.³³ In the midst of missionary prohibitions and colonial onslaught, traditional dance systems continued to emerge. The function of Mandinka dance in weddings, naming ceremonies, agriculture, funerals, and all spheres of life, continued despite the cultural fragmentation, social and political assaults, and missionary restrictions imposed by the colonial engine in Senegambia.

A fitting example is reported via Geoffrey Gorer's firsthand account in his book, *Africa Dances*. Geoffrey Gorer was an author in the 1930s. In 1935, while Africa was still under the yoke of colonialism, Gorer traveled to Senegal, Sierra Leone, and other parts of Greater Senegambia for a cultural study. Although he admonished the colonial system's assault on traditional dances, and the restrictions and prohibitions imposed on dance by Christian missionaries, he could not help but to acknowledge the resilience, and continuity of dance forms despite such odds. Dance held too important a position in the lives of Africans for them to allow all remnants of it to completely disappear in Senegambia during the colonial occupation. Gorer illustrated this fact with his statement concerning African people, "They dance for joy and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time."³⁴ Indeed, cultural systems and the dances that fueled them continued throughout the colonial period.

Colonization and Islam: A recipe for destruction

Islam became more problematic for the practice of Mandinka dance systems after the advent of colonization. During the initial stages of Islamic expansion from the eleventh through the early nineteenth centuries, Islam in many cases, became a stimulus for the creation of new dances. For example, the women's artisan group of leatherworkers introduced a female Muslim's mask dance, *Kurukupaa*, to the age-grade process in Bantunding and Wuli in The Gambia in the nineteenth century during the jihad era. As such, masked other types of dances were introduced into the cultural systems in Senegambia as "Muslim" dances.³⁵ Jalis who converted to Islam incorporated dances along with their song/chant performances, and so on. It was not until Islam was expanded under colonialism that it began to be an influential deterrent to dance creation and transmission. Yet, Islam during the colonial period still did not completely obliterate all vestiges of traditional dance practice in Senegambia.

The colonial era in French West Africa witnessed the largest expansion of Islamic presence in Africa.³⁶ The French was the major colonizer in Western Sudan. Initially, the French administration feared Islam. Muslim support during the beginning of World War I changed French colonial attitudes. As a result, the French became more tolerant of the Islamic religion. Muslims appeared to be in agreement with French ideologies concerning the war effort. They supported the French and assisted with military recruitment.³⁷ The marabout heads of the Sufi brotherhoods, which emerged as a result of the jihads in Senegambia, no longer overtly resisted the French colonial government.³⁸ As discussed earlier, from the introduction of Islam into Western Sudan until the nineteenth century, all Muslims were traders or Julas. The Julas acted as intermediaries and interpreters on trails and railroad routes for the colonial administration. Accordingly, the colonial administration either supported – or at least did not hamper – the proselytizing activities of the Julas. They were responsible for the large increase of Muslim recruits during the colonial era as they had the entire colonial territory to freely proselytize to.

From the period Islam was initially introduced to Africa, Muslims from the Senegambian region traveled to Mecca as part of their religious observances, and to other parts of the Middle East to study Islam. The colonial period was no different in this regard. However, a number of the Muslims from the Senegambia area returned to their home region with a zealotry aimed at reforming the type of Islam that was practiced in Senegambia. This phenomenon was also not new. The Almoravid Movement in the eleventh century and many jihadists in the nineteenth century also sought to “purify” Islamic practices in the Senegambian region after their return from the Middle East. In their opinions, the variety of Islamic practices witnessed in the Western Sudan was not entirely pure. This puritanical approach to teaching and practicing Islam was extremely critical of indigenous artistic and religious practices including Mandinka dance. Consequently, traditional Mandinka dance systems were frowned upon whenever they came into contact with strict Islam. This brand of restrictive Islam was spread throughout Senegambia in the colonial period particularly in the early twentieth century to the 1970s. The desire to advance a “chaste” version of Islam has been exhibited by individuals and groups throughout the history of Islam in Senegambia. However, during the colonial period, and particularly during and after World War I, zealous Muslim clerics had the support of the colonial system. Although dances were able to survive, the restrictive Islamic practices that resulted from this relationship are the cause of the extinction of many Mandinka dances as well.³⁹

Christianity in Africa

In the nineteenth century, countless European Christian associations sent missionaries to Africa. Conversion was so slow that by the 1880s less than one percent of all non-Muslim Africans had embraced Christianity.⁴⁰ These events resulted in the Christian missionaries appealing to their European governments

for assistance. The consequence was that missionary activities became completely enmeshed within the imperial campaigns that culminated in the colonization of Africa.

For example, during this period in modern-day Ghana, Christian missionaries asked the British government for protection.⁴¹ In instances in which the British government complied, it was followed by British occupation first, then outright colonization. As a result, in many cases conversion to Christianity was coerced, with the might of the British military backing missionary pressure. In cases such as this, restrictions can be – and were – imposed on the colonized regarding their lifestyles, customs, spiritual practices, institutions, and all their accompanying dances. The Senegambian equivalent to the Modern Ghana scenario would be The Gambia. Christian missionaries imposed many restrictions on Africans during the colonial period. They prohibited polygamy, made Africans comply with European dress codes and of course, the missionaries condemned dancing. Despite these prohibitions, Africans continued to practice traditional religions along with their accompanying dance systems.⁴²

Although Christianity was not as pervasive as Islam was in Senegambia, its initial appearance was not restricted to the colonial period. Christianity arrived in Western Sudan in the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries on the heels of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, respectively. Christian missionaries were not as numerous in Western Sudan as they were in other parts of West Africa such as Ghana, Southern Nigeria, and Benin. However, Portuguese Christian traders flooded Cape Verde and other islands off the coast of southern Senegambia in the 1520s and the 1530s. They took African women as mates and were responsible for creating a highly adaptable Creole society of Afro-Portuguese.⁴³ As such, Christian influences can be witnessed in southern Senegambia as early as the first decades of the sixteenth century. However, these Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese Christians were traders; not missionaries. No large-scale proselytizing campaigns were witnessed in the region at the behest of this class of Christian-traders. Their primary focus was trade.

Moreover, the Afro-Portuguese traders were restricted in their movements as they ventured further into the interior. Although Christians, they were regarded as traders first, and powerful Mandinka and Fulani marabout traders considered them competition.⁴⁴ Unlike Christian missionaries in other parts of Africa, Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese Christian merchants in Senegambia did not have a strong enough political position to influence the religious affinities and therefore the dance systems, of the indigenous people.

By contrast, the strength of the Christian traders in Senegambia during this period, was their ability to adapt themselves to the people and the culture of the region; not the other way around. It logically follows that the Christian influence in Senegambia as a whole in the sixteenth centuries could not to prevent or completely restrict the practice of dance systems in the region. However, in addition to colonialism, the processes of Modernity would emerge to challenge the existence of traditional dance systems in Senegambia.

The impact of Modernity on Mandinka dance systems

From the 1960s onward, Modernity and its urbanizing effects, have impeded the continued practice of traditional Mandinka rituals and dances. For the purpose of this work, Modernity will be defined as a societal movement away from traditional or agrarian economic institutions toward a society where the economy is driven by industrialization and capitalism. Key factors within a capitalistic economy are competitive markets, wage labor, and capital accumulation. Hence, the processes of Modernity have obstructed Mandinka dance transmission and preservation. The southern Senegalese city of Ziguinchor is a case in point. The Mandinka male age-grade masquerade dance of the *Kankouran* and its accompanying rituals, have been performed there since the expansion of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. As with all age-grade associations, people of multiple ethnicities in the area – Wolofs, Fulanis, and Mandinkas – participated in the Mandinka initiation process.

In Ziguinchor, the age-grade process was performed in the dry season which occurred from February through April.⁴⁵ During this three-month period, the boys were circumcised and taught secret knowledge, which included a secret sign language. They learned all the edicts regarding proper conduct in numerous social situations. The young men were taught to sing songs in the Mandinka language. They learned the dances that commemorated their induction into the age-grade process and the dances that ensured their success as full citizens. Lastly, the age-grade initiates were taught the dance systems that contained the narratives that preserved the age-grade institution. During and after the circumcision, witches would arrive to prey on the newly initiated. Accordingly, the *Kankouran* was sent by the ancestors to protect the boys and administer justice to all who broke the laws of the society.⁴⁶ At the conclusion of the three months, the initiates would be given a ritual bath, and would then be prepared to return to the village as a full adult. The dance *Jambadong* would be performed to venerate the age-grade participants' reentry into the village.

Due to Modernity, dance and tradition was moved out of the center of life in Ziguinchor and into the periphery. Dance was once perceived as the facilitator of life's processes but is now being replaced by the preoccupation of the realities of Modernity such as gainful employment in stores and offices, school and college attendance, among other things.⁴⁷ The practices associated with Modernity have usurped the position tradition once held. For example, many people are no longer practicing the *Kankouran* age-grade system in Ziguinchor. Boys and adolescents are sent to the hospital for circumcision.⁴⁸ Those who do still adhere to the age-grade system must participate during holidays from school or work, instead of the traditionally observed dry season. The three-month ritual is reduced to a couple of weeks. It must be logically assumed that much is lost during this reduction process. It is not realistic to expect anyone to master an entire language, three months' worth of esoteric knowledge, dances, and songs in a couple of weeks. Therefore, as a consequence of Modernity, Mandinka dance systems are falling into disuse in Ziguinchor.

Another example of Modernity at work is the case of the women's Mandinka mask dances of Bantunding. Bantunding is a territory that was the capital of the Mandinka state of Wuli. It was founded in 1890 when the encroachment of the British and French in the region caused the fragmentation of the original Wuli state. Wuli was established during the expansion of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. Bantunding is one of many villages in the region where Mande women created and participated in age-grade mask dance rituals. Some of the women's masks in Bantunding were constructed and danced before the expansion of Mali in the thirteenth century, and others were created more recently and danced throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ As a whole, the masks emanate from associations of married women of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The utilization, rituals, and significance behind the masks were under the direction of elder women.

As Modernity took hold in the twentieth century, the ten women's mask dances that were traditionally performed in Bantunding were impacted. A number of them lost their significance in society and were therefore no longer performed. Others, although still functional, also became extinct. Lastly, many were transferred to young prepubescent girls. This transfer to young girls speaks volumes about the loss of significance that the women's mask dances experienced. Mandinka societies particularly, and most African societies in general, value the wisdom that age imparts. Consequently, any concerns or interests of elders are deemed important to the entire society. The transfer of the masks from the old to the young symbolizes a deterioration of the significance of the masks. Overall and as a consequence of Modernity, these mask dances were seldom performed after 1960. By 1975, the more powerful masks had disappeared completely.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Although the jihads did facilitate the spread of Islam, it was not on as extensive a scale as the Islamic expansion caused by colonialism. It cannot be overstated that the jihads brought Islam – a previously elitist religion – to the masses of everyday people where dance practice and dance creation was pervasive. The jihadists' primary focus was to release themselves from the abusive yoke of the corrupt aristocracies via Islam and Islamic reform. However, the impact of the assistance that jihad leaders received from those who were oppressed by the aristocracies was a significant factor in their success. Dancers, slaves, practitioners of traditional religious and cultural systems, cultivators, Muslims, and non-Muslims joined forces with jihadists to overthrow oppressive aristocracies. Thus, pure forms of Islam were not equally practiced in all of the resultant post-jihad states. Africanized systems of Islam were practiced in such states, but Mandinka and other dance systems were also practiced according to their respective customs. As such, the slave class, the artisans, and especially the age-grades – male and female components – continued their dance practices. Additionally, new dances were created to incorporate Islamic principles into the traditional systems of the

land. The female Muslim's mask dance, *Kurukupaa*, and other dances added to the traditional dance system pantheon are examples of Islamic inclusion.

In addition to Islamic jihads, another impactful event occurred in Senegambia that facilitated the expansion of Islam. Colonialism also caused the spread of Islam in Senegambia. European nations had conquered huge tracts of territories more enormous than individual jihadist states. Accordingly, when Islamization occurred at the behest of Jula merchants and the cooperation of colonial governments, the Julas had an expansive territory with which to proselytize to.

Islam negatively impacted dance and cultural systems significantly after the advent of colonialism. Muslim traders restricted the influence of Christianity. Hence, Christianity in Senegambia was not significant enough to totally obliterate Mandinka dance and cultural institutions – albeit, some damage was caused by missionary prohibitions. Colonialism also imposed obstructions to dance creation and transmission, although many people practiced some form of their indigenous cultural systems despite the restrictions. Finally, Modernity with its emphasis on wage labor and rigid Eurocentric style of schooling, has forced many dances into the periphery of social experience.

Notes

- 1 See Nehemia Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam," in *Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society and Politics to 1800*, 207.
- 2 See George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630*, 115.
- 3 Levtzion asserts that Ghana's conversion was the result of the Almoravid Movement. His contention is not far-fetched since Ghana was assaulted by the Almoravids during this time period. Interestingly, this assault on Ancient Ghana is also reputed to be the cause of Ghana's decline. See Nehemia Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800" in *The History of Islam in Africa*, 64.
- 4 See, Nehemia Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa*, 207.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 6 For the complete narrative, see Chapter 1; also see Fa-Digi Sisoko, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition*. Translated by John W. Johnson.
- 7 See Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa*, 211.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 9 See J. Ki-Zerbo and D.T. Niane, eds., *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, abridged edition, vol. 4, *General History of Africa*. UNESCO, 151.
- 10 See Al Hajj Mahmud Kati, trans., *Tā'rikh al fattāsh: The Timbuktu Chronicles, 1493–1599*. Edited by Christopher Wise, 64.
- 11 See discussion in Chapter 1. Until the creation of the Komo Society, secret organizations were compartments within artisan guilds, age-grade associations, and other social groups. Komo Society was the first to be created outside of a social group.
- 12 See Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems," 248.
- 13 This is a practice that began in the Mande states of Ghana and Gao.
- 14 See Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 261.
- 15 George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630*, 117.

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- 16 See, Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, 36.
- 17 The Fulani are also known as Fulbe, Peul, Fula and other designations, depending on language and region.
- 18 The instability created by the arrival of Europeans and the transatlantic slave trade caused the cessation of gold production in Western Sudan.
- 19 Sunni and Sufi are two different factions in the practice of Islam. Sufism is distinct due to its mystical components. See Levtzion and Pouwels, *History of Islam in Africa*, 131.
- 20 See Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, 230. The Almoravid movement was an Islamic revolution that commenced in the Western Sudanese state of Takrur and spread to other states in the Sahel, to Morocco, and terminated on the Iberian Peninsula. See David Robinson, "Revolutions in the Western Sudan," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, 132.
- 21 Shari'a laws are rules, guidelines, and laws found in the Islamic sacred book, the Quran. These laws were used to govern post-jihad Islamic states.
- 22 See Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*; and Robinson, "Revolutions," 135.
- 23 An almami is a title of Fulani West African Muslim rulers. Almami is a corruption of the Arabic title "Al Imam."
- 24 See A.A. Batran, "The Nineteenth-Century Islamic Revolutions in West Africa," in *Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*, vol. 6. of *General History of Africa*, unabridged edition. UNESCO, 538.
- 25 See Shillington, *History of Africa*, 232.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 al-Hajj is a title that indicates the person has made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca in accordance to Islamic tenets. Such a title confers prestige and denotes devotion to Islam.
- 28 A Julia is a Mandinka merchant. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the role the Julia played in the spread of Mandinka dance and cultural systems.
- 29 For a detailed account of Samori Toure's tactics, see Levtzion and Pouwels, *The History of Islam*, 107–8.
- 30 See Shillington, *History of Africa*, 236.
- 31 Levtzion provides an excellent discussion of this point. See "The Eighteenth Century Background to the Islamic Revolutions in West Africa," in *Islam in West Africa*, 24.
- 32 See Barry, *Senegambia*, 210.
- 33 The scramble for Africa and the ensuing "pacification" tactics applied after the establishment of the colonial regime created chaos and instability and resulted in countless African deaths. See Wole Soyinka, "The Arts in Africa During the Period of Colonial Rule," in *Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen. Vol. 7 of *General History of Africa*, abridged edition, UNESCO, 232.
- 34 Geoffrey Gorer, *Africa Dances*, 243.
- 35 For a discussion on Muslim tenets incorporated into Mandinka dance systems, see Peter Weil, "Women's Masks and the Power of Gender in Mande History." *African Arts*.
- 36 See Jean-Louis Triaud, "Islam in Africa under French Colonial Rule," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Levtzion and Pouwels, 169, 172. Virtually the entire Greater Senegambian region was colonized by the French, barring the small colonies of The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.
- 37 Triaud, "Islam in Africa," 175.
- 38 The Sufi Brotherhoods are phenomena that emerged in Western Sudan and became particularly influential in Senegal. These Brotherhoods were founded by prominent marabouts. They made a tremendous contribution to the process of Africanizing of Islam.

- 39 In some instances, this occurrence can be witnessed in the 1980s and beyond. See the discussion below on the women's mask dances in Wuli for an example of Islamic practices and Modernization deterring the practice of Mande dance systems.
- 40 See Shillington, *History of Africa*, 301.
- 41 Not to be confused with Ancient Ghana, which was located in the Sahel. Modern Ghana is roughly 400 miles south-east of the ancient polity with the same name.
- 42 Gorer describes the types of limitations he witnessed the missionaries attempting to impose on African cultural systems. He also witnessed dances being practiced despite the missionary and colonial restrictions. See *Africa Dances*, 198–9.
- 43 See Toby Green, *The Rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589*, 121; See earlier discussion on Lançados and the instability created by the transatlantic slave trade. Toby Green's work, *The Rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, extensively discusses the phenomenon of Creolization in the Senegambian region.
- 44 See Hawthorne, *Planting Rice*, 60–1.
- 45 De Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity*, 110.
- 46 The *Kankouran* was an imposing figure that was constructed with large amounts of leaves to the extent where the person's identity was completely concealed. The *Kankouran's* dance movements were always fiercely executed and fast paced.
- 47 Before Modernity set in, schooling took place as part of the age-grade process.
- 48 While circumcision performed in a hospital is an undisputable safe option, this study seeks to underscore what is lost when the age-grade ritual is impacted by Modernity. See De Jong, *Masquerades*, 119–20, for an in-depth discussion of Modernity and Mande masquerade dance rituals.
- 49 Mask dances created before the Mali expansion were transported along with the people during the expansion.
- 50 See Weil, "Women's Masks," 28.

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Part 4

Sofa, warrior dance

Mandinka dance and cultural decolonization

Introduction

Identity is intimately tied to African dance systems. Fittingly, knowledge of the history of African dance systems can facilitate an understanding of the formation of, and performance of identity in Africa. This is particularly true during intense phases of eventful phenomena comprising multiple historic undercurrents. In such volatile periods it is not difficult, during the research process, to miss pertinent but less obvious discourses. The decolonization era in Africa is a prime example. A knowledge of African dance history can be particularly useful for grasping indigenously perceived notions of what it meant to be liberated from European hegemony – culturally and intellectually. The same holds true for the postcolonial period. A historical study of African dance systems would provide clarity with regard to intentions of historical actors, and it would facilitate an in-depth look at inexplicable or historically misconstrued behaviorisms. As such, Part 4 will examine Mandinka dance systems and their applications during decolonization and the early postcolonial period.

In the era directly after colonization was dismantled, dance was utilized to culturally decolonize the African mind. Throughout the colonial period, African cultural systems were destroyed or distorted, and African identity was devalued by colonial governments and their officials. As a result, the belief that Africans were inferior began to take root in the minds of the masses of African people throughout the continent. After independence, leaders of new states recognized this phenomenon and how its crippling aftermath could deter the development of a socially healthy and prosperous nation. Fortunately, many of these new leaders understood the potentialities that resided within African dance systems. For example, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Modibo Keita of Mali, Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea-Conakry all established national African dance companies shortly after independence. Other heads of state also understood the transformative power within African dance and established national dance companies after independence as well. Accordingly, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana established a national dance company within the first few years of independence, and Robert Mugabe established a national dance company shortly after Zimbabwe's independence

in 1980. African leaders in other parts of the continent followed their lead. These visionaries realized that dance was the quintessential manifestation of African identity and an unadulterated foundation and repository of African culture and history.

The objective of Part 4 and Chapter 7 is to expose the diverse uses of traditional African dance systems in general and Mandinka dance systems in particular. In addition to a repository of history and culture, traditional African dance systems have been used as a political tool for alleviating the debilitating social effects caused by the colonial system. This section also highlights the usage of African dance as a political platform for a new African regime and for the restoration of African identity.

7 Fodéba, Touré, identity, and dance

Dance and the restoration of African identity

A hefty number of the heads of newly independent African states maintained that indigenous African dance could restore the self-image, culture, and history of the masses that was lost during colonization. Accordingly, many heads of state established or nationalized traditional African dance companies to represent their national heritage and encourage and display cultural cohesion. During the partition of Africa, colonial powers created borders and countries that often-times cut through or divided traditional nations and ethnicities. In many cases, these borders also grouped together traditional enemies as African concerns were not taken into account when the colonized countries were created. At independence, the foreign-created territories became the newly independent countries of Africa. In response to this dilemma, many heads of state contended that traditional dance could be used to bond the diverse sets of people and cultures they inherited at independence, and to instill a national identity. Lastly, these new heads of state were concerned with decolonizing the culture and history of their nations.¹

Keita Fodéba and Les Ballets Africains

One man took the utilization of the national dance company a step further – Sékou Touré, the first president of Guinea. Before Touré and his cultural strategy can be effectively examined, it is necessary to briefly discuss Keita Fodéba, the founder of what became Guinea's first national dance company – Les Ballets Africains. Keita Fodéba was born in a family of jalis in Siguiri, Guinea, in 1921. He attended elementary school in his village and in 1937 he enrolled in the Upper Primary School in Conakry. Fodéba attended the Ecole William Ponty in Senegal from 1940–1943. He graduated and remained in Senegal to teach school for a couple of years. Fodéba traveled to France to study at the Faculté de Droit de Paris. Although he received a law certificate by 1948, dance theater was his true passion.

While studying in France, Fodéba was exposed to West African artists who were also there to study such as Facelli Kanté and Soba Diele. As a result,

the Ensemble Fodéba Facelli-Maungué was founded in 1947, the precursor to Les Ballets Africains. The dance company's repertoire consisted of dances from Guinea and Casamance and centered around Mandinka dance and cultural systems.

Fodéba was a consummate artist. He was a poet, musician, dancer, choreographer, singer, and jali, among others. By 1948, he had already garnered a following in Europe as a solo artist. In 1953, he began to expand by recruiting dancers for the creation of a new dance company. Fodéba traveled to the Senegambia region as a scout for talent and for more material for his company. He conducted exhaustive dance and music auditions in each territory of French West Africa but used Dakar as a base. Fodéba incorporated traditional local dances into his ever-expanding repertoire and invited selected talented individuals to join him in Dakar. From 1953–1954, Fodéba remained in Dakar rehearsing and refining his group. In 1954, his group was launched, Les Ballets Africains de Keita Fodéba.² The group included some thirty-seven performers and toured a number of European countries in the eastern and western regions of the continent for its European debut.

In addition to bestowing fame on Fodéba, this tour provided an opportunity for him to meet a figure who would significantly alter the trajectory of Fodéba's dance ensemble – Sékou Touré. Fodéba met Touré (who will be discussed in detail later in this chapter) in Paris when Touré was elected as a deputy in 1956, to the French National Assembly. Touré's election required him to travel to Paris. However, Fodéba was already familiar with Touré's reputation due to his popularity in the Parti démocratique de Guinée (PDG).³

In 1957, influenced by the Négritude Movement in Paris, Fodéba's objectives rose above the simple purpose of pure entertainment. Africans were agitating for independence in European colonies, and Fodéba felt this momentum as well.⁴ Fodéba's writings in 1957, depicted African dance as a more purposeful device. He spoke of the survival of Black culture despite the atrocities committed against Blacks globally. Fodéba asserted that coherence of African societies was achieved through dance.⁵

Négritude, Keita Fodéba, and the future of Les Ballets Africains

The Négritude Movement began in the 1930s in France. Its major advocates were Black francophone intellectuals from Africa and the Caribbean. Among its founders were Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, and Léon Damas of Guiana.⁶ The Négritude Movement was more than simply an affirmation of the validity of African culture through literature, and the values – or flaws – of its tenets were intensely debated. Indeed, the Négritude debate in Africa and in the Diaspora had been a vivid one, which reached its peak in the 1950s. It may have begun as a literary philosophy, but it evolved. Senghor described the Négritude Movement and those who opposed it succinctly:

The most recent attack comes from Ghana, where the government has commissioned a poem entitled “I Hate Négritude” – as if one could hate oneself, hate one’s being, without ceasing to be. No, Négritude is ... neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation of one’s being. Négritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality. It is no different from the “black personality” discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro movement. ... Perhaps our only originality, since it was the West Indian poet, Aimé Césaire, who coined the word Négritude, is to have attempted to define the concept a little more closely; to have developed it as a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century.⁷

Regardless of any opposition pertaining to Négritude that may have existed, the debate concerning the merits of an African identity took root in the minds of the new generation of African leaders. The only question remaining was which cultural tool would be most effective to both obliterate the inferiority complex of the African masses and kick-start the restoration of African cultural systems. For Keita Fodéba, dance was the ultimate tool for Africa’s rebirth. Thus, within the context of dance, the ideology of the African identity that was advocated by the Negritude movement formed the foundation for the ballets choreographed by Fodéba. Consequentially, Fodéba’s experiences with Négritude changed – or refined – his worldview. After being immersed in the movement, he was no longer the same person. This transformation was readily apparent in everything Fodéba created; especially with regard to Les Ballets Africains.

Keita Fodéba’s contributions to Mandinka dance systems

To fully appreciate how and why Sékou Toure was able to utilize dance to culturally decolonize the Guinean masses, a review of the alterations Mandinka dance underwent at the behest of Fodéba is necessary. Keita Fodéba introduced a new genre into the traditional African dance arena – the ballet. Prior to Fodéba’s ballets, traditional Mandinka dance was performed primarily in, for, and by the people of the rural villages. Everyone was a participant in the dance festivities. The dances all retained age-old wisdom regarding history and culture (housed in root steps). Everyone at the function either joined in the circle of dancing – usually one, or sometimes two at a time – participated in the call and response singing, or clapped their hands, and so on. All of such functions generally occurred in the circle and continued for time periods ranging from several hours to days. Drumming or some other form of musical accompaniment complimented the dance.

In an effort to adapt the traditional dance systems to the concert stage outside of the African village, considerable changes had to be made. It is important to note that the ancient African core remained, but its outward expression had to be altered in form, to fit the new environment that it was to be portrayed

in. Although several modifications to traditional African dance practice can be witnessed, there were some additions or adjustments that were more significant. For instance, the dance was transferred from the village to the stage. As a consequence, there was a different dynamic between audience and performer. In Fodéba's ballet format, traditional dances from different regions and different ethnicities were strung together to create a narrative. Subsequently, different traditions, sometimes without prior interaction, were combined to tell one story. Foreign sensibilities were taken into account with regard to dance attire. Thus, dances that were traditionally performed in seclusion and either nude or topless were being performed in public by fully clothed performers. Finally, breaks or signals were added to the drumming, which transferred the authority to dictate the rhythms and dances that were to be performed from women to men.⁸ When considering his modifications to traditional Mandinka dance particularly, and Mande dance in general, Fodéba's contribution to traditional Mandinka dance systems is invaluable. He is virtually responsible for the modern representations of traditional Mandinka ballets on today's concert stage.

In 1958, Guinea-Conakry obtained independence. One year later, in 1959, Les Ballets Africains de Keita Fodéba was nationalized and became Les Ballets Africains de Guinée. In the same year, Fodéba became Minister of Interior in the government of Guinea and was no longer associated with the dance group. Yet, Les Ballets Africains survived its founder. Fodéba became embroiled in the politics of Guinea and in 1969, Fodéba was arrested, convicted of conspiring to overthrow the government and executed. Despite Fodéba's unfortunate demise, Les Ballets Africains lived on and evolved into something more than merely a dance company. Sékou Touré was responsible for nationalizing Fodéba's brainchild, the African dance ballet format, and Les Ballets Africains.⁹ Accordingly, he was also responsible for putting them on global display as a representation and repository of African identity and cultural history respectively. We will now turn our attention to Sékou Touré, Guinea-Conakry's first president.

A note on Ahmed Sékou Touré

Many people – academicians and laypersons alike – highlight the deeds of Sékou Touré after his regime descended into an authoritarian government. This chapter, however, will focus on his contributions to traditional Mandinka dance evolution and utilization, specifically traditional Mandinka ballets. This must not be construed to mean that this work condones or attributes any value to Touré's actions and endeavors during those repressive years of his regime. However, by the same measure, one must not disregard those contributions that he did bequeath to the traditional African dance world.¹⁰ Touré recognized the virtues of indigenous dance systems and used them to their fullest potential. In so doing, he facilitated the proliferation of an efficient method for delivering and conserving knowledge of African history and culture.

Sékou Touré recognized the social ramifications of colonialism. He asserted that colonial imperialism not only destroyed cultural and social systems, but it produced the degradation of morality among the colonized.¹¹ Consequently, Touré believed that the most effective tool to combat the detrimental effects of colonialism was the renewal of and spread of that very phenomenon that imperialism sought to destroy – African cultural systems. Touré envisioned the national dance company as a means to alleviate the social ills of colonialism and as a device to project an African presence in the world. He also believed that dance could be utilized to convey political ideologies and to usher Guinea into a more modern state.

From humble beginnings

Ahmed Sékou Touré was born on January 9, 1922, in Farana, Guinea into a poor Mandinka Muslim family. He was the great-grandson of the famous Samori Touré.¹² Although Touré attended school, at fifteen years of age, the Georges-Poiret Technical School charged him with insubordination and expelled him in 1937. Despite this educational setback, he was able to secure a job as a postal worker. While a civil servant, Touré became a hard-working union organizer. In 1945, his efforts gained him the post of general secretary of the union. The RDA's Guinean branch was the PDG.¹³ Touré became the head of it in 1952. He founded a trade union hub for the French colonies of West Africa, Union Générale des Travailleurs d'Afrique Noire, in 1956. In that same year, he was elected the Mayor of Conakry, Guinea's capital. Subsequently, he was elected Deputy of Guinea in the French National Assembly. This post required travel to Paris where he met Keita Fodéba.

In 1958, France devised a referendum to approve its new republic referred to as the French Community. The African countries that were colonized by France had the option to vote "yes" to remain in the French Community, or "no" to obtain immediate independence in every sense of the word. General Charles de Gaulle, the head of France at the time, traveled throughout France's African colonies to assure that they would vote "yes." To his surprise, Guinea, under Touré's tutelage, voted "no" (the only French African colony to do so). Shortly thereafter, France withdrew all economic and administrative support, vandalized and destroyed pertinent infrastructure in Guinea, and warned Western powers such as the United States against assisting Guinea in any way. From that point forward, Guinea became an independent state. Touré was the leader of the Parti Démocratique de la Guinée (PDG) from 1952 until 1984, and became Guinea's first president in 1958.¹⁴

Sékou Touré and the elites

Sékou Touré was a civil service worker who received all his education in Africa. He had been suspicious of African European-educated elites since before independence. His suspicions of colonial educated elites were illustrated poignantly when he stated:

Colonialism, through its diverse manifestations, praising itself in having taught our elite in its schools, science, technology, mechanics or electricity, began to influence a number of our intellectuals to such a point that they finished by therein discovering the justification for colonial domination. Certain ones go so far as to believe that by acquiring the true universal knowledge of science, they must necessarily misunderstand the moral, intellectual and cultural values of their country by submitting to and assimilating a culture that to them is often strange in a thousand ways.¹⁵

Sékou Touré's distrust of elites grew exponentially within the first ten years of independence. From 1959 through 1969, events occurred in Guinea that escalated his contempt for African elites and aroused his suspicions of Europeans in general. The 1961 protests of the teachers and students, and the ensuing shut down of Guinean schools as a result, served as confirmation in his mind, to justify his skepticism.¹⁶ Space does not permit an exhaustive discussion on all the political events that occurred in Guinea during Touré's administration. However, the first ten years of his regime are significant. During that period, *Les Ballets Africains* – which was no longer under the direction of Fodéba – flourished.

In 1968, there was a turnaround. Sékou Touré began to view the work of *Les Ballets Africains* from the period of 1958 through 1967 as elitist.¹⁷ He began to believe that the works of the dance company during that period was indicative of an elitist political agenda. Subsequently, Touré took it upon himself to change the direction of the ideologies of *Les Ballets Africains*. This reorganization resulted in a greater effort to align the national dance company, and all that it produced, with what Touré thought was the more “authentic” culture that existed among the masses in the countryside. Touré professed that the true revolution would take place among the peasants in the rural areas in Guinea, particularly the youth.¹⁸

From 1968 and beyond, Touré started a movement which he coined the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution sought to accomplish many tasks, but two of them are especially significant for our discussion. First, he sought to return African culture in Guinea back to its original source, which to him, was the peasants in the rural areas. Second, the Cultural Revolution was to serve as a tool to align Guinean culture with the ideologies of the political party in power, the PDG, and to align the transmission of those ideologies to the Guinean people. Thus, Touré endeavored to align the transfer, practice, and preservation, of traditional African dance with the political agendas and ideologies of the PDG, and with the most authentic expression of African culture possible. The Cultural Revolution embodied Touré's efforts to progress as far away from French colonization and French culture as possible. It was his way of pursuing cultural independence. Although other measures were taken, in Touré's mind, the national dance company was the major vehicle through which cultural independence was going to be achieved.

Touré's Cultural Revolution was launched in 1968, but he began preparations for it years earlier.¹⁹ In 1964, Touré commissioned the Minister of Culture in

Guinea to begin a recruitment process for another national dance company. Some 500 artists were recruited and transported to an island off the coast of Guinea's capital, Conakry. After nine months of grueling training, forty-five artists remained to become the founding members of Guinea's new national dance company, Le Ballet National Djoliba (or simply Ballet Djoliba). Touré also built a stage for Ballet Djoliba in his palace. Although Ballet Djoliba occasionally traveled overseas for performances, its primary function was to free the Guinean people from cultural colonization and to be the "face" of cultural and political revolution in Guinea. Les Ballets Africains, by contrast, was the major dance company that was to teach the world about true African culture and history.

Touré's Cultural Revolution and his use of his nationalized ballet company internationally had a significant impact on Africans in the diaspora, in and outside of the dance community. Similar to their counterparts in Africa, diasporic Africans – African Americans, Afro-British, Afro-Caribbean people, and others – had also been bombarded with fallacious propaganda about their African heritage, thus creating a fissure between continental Africans and themselves.²⁰ Africans in the diaspora were socialized by the oppressive systems they lived in, to believe that all Africans resembled minstrel caricatures in complexion and behavior.²¹ Due to such conditions, they were made to believe that they had nothing in common with Africans from the continent of Africa, or other African descended people in the diaspora. Indeed, such notions were advanced in all forms of the media. A newspaper article in the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper in 1960 underscores this phenomenon. The article is titled "Afro Goes to the African Ballet." The title is followed by the caption "The company of Les Ballets Africains is currently on tour throughout the United States. Most viewers are stunned to discover that Africans are no different from what they are."²² The article discusses the fact that perceptions formed by Africans in the diaspora about Africans from the continent of Africa were constructed by western society, advanced and continually validated by the media therein. More significant, is the fact that the encounter between African Diasporans and Les Ballets Africains changed the erroneous perceptions that African Diasporans held about Africans for centuries. The article portrayed this when it stated:

The initial shock on seeing these dancers perform is the startling realization that Africans are not necessarily black... The performers of the African Ballet are of as many different hues as colored people in any other part of the world. ... Were they dressed in Western-style clothes, they would look no different from any colored American. ... Americans for years have subscribed to the movie stereotypes of Africans.²³

Sékou Touré, the young, and the old

Touré's primary focus after independence was on liberating the African mind through the decolonization of African traditional systems. He endeavored to

achieve this through the use of culture – specifically dance – as a means of political mobilization. It was because of his efforts in this regard that he was able to overturn so many of the coups d'états that were orchestrated during his administration.

In truth, Sékou Touré as a figure in history should be understood in two respects; the old Touré, and the young Touré. It was the young Touré who courageously opposed de Gaulle and mobilized such a politically conscious mass base that numerous attempted coups were thwarted. The young Touré was the first to nationalize a traditional African dance touring company, and therefore successfully put into practice an effective process for decolonizing African culture in Africa and the diaspora. Under his tutelage, Guinea was the first African country to openly oppose FGM, and he was also the first to nationalize an all-women militia-orchestra.²⁴ Finally and most significant, it was the young Touré that countless African heads of state emulated by forming national dance companies of their own after independence. The first World Festival of Black Arts in 1966 held in Dakar, Senegal, underscores the impact Touré had on other African nations in this regard. More than twelve African governments sent their nationalized dance companies. The list of countries who sent nationalized dance companies include: Chad, Niger, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Egypt, Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroon, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and others.²⁵ All of these was manifested before he was reduced into the old Touré; head of an authoritarian regime centered on a personality cult.

Sékou Touré and demystification

Touré's Cultural Revolution lasted decades, which rendered it very visible and therefore the object of many studies. However, Touré was also the catalyst for another very significant phenomenon that occurred in Guinea immediately after independence, Demystification. Touré's Demystification campaigns were launched from 1959 through 1961. In the short period of three years, with the ballet format as his tool, Touré was able to transform the power structures in Guinea.

Although the ideologies of the Demystification campaign were to be applied to the entirety of Guinea, its focal points were the Sande and the Poro secret societies in the southeastern forest regions of Guinea. Both were Mande age-grade organizations and the most prevalent in Guinea. However, other such initiatory groups produced by diverse ethnicities were not exempt from the Demystification campaign. The rationale for the Demystification program, according to the Touré regime, was to combat the continuance of archaic practices, such as fetishism, FGM, and ethnic alliances, and to usher Guinea into becoming a developed independent state. The primary strategies applied were shock and revelation. In initiation societies such as the Sande and the Poro, the elders ruled with an "iron fist." They made all important decisions concerning the youth and the communities. It was asserted by the Touré regime that the elders' authority was reinforced with ritualistic masks, artifacts, secrecy, and

fear.²⁶ Beginning in 1959, officials of the state traveled throughout the countryside in Guinea and destroyed masks and other ritualistic artifacts.²⁷ At traditional ceremonies, they abruptly removed masks from practitioners, exposing their identities to the uninitiated public, and thereby humiliating the elders wearing the masks and other elders in the community. Demystification activities such as this continued until 1961.

To Sékou Touré, the ballet was most effective in sustaining and conveying the ideologies of the Demystification campaign. He believed that traditional dance theatre – as opposed to drama – was most effective in eradicating fetishism.²⁸ In fact, Touré did not regard drama as theater. Instead, he consistently referred to African ballet as “theater.” His faith in the potential that existed within dance theater is revealed in his assertion that:

[Dance] theater acts not only upon the intellect, but also upon sensation; by the physical presence ... the materiality of the decors, the compartment of the characters on stage, it delivers an expression more complete than that of literary work. The margin of interpretation left to the spectator and, consequently, the possibilities of error in interpretation are infinitely less. ... It is for this reason that we consider [dance] theater an important element of revolutionary mobilization, education, and formation.²⁹

In essence, Touré’s use of the ballet altered tradition. In the ballet, the masks and items that were traditionally used in the age-grade process became primary agents of communication. According to Touré, the elders were using the masks and other artifacts to perform various types of ritualistic practices based on fear and intimidation. The ballet was viewed as a way to demystify and to eradicate fetishism. Thus, in the dances, the masks that were traditionally perceived as frightening, secretive, and threatening, were exhibited openly in the ballet format and were presented as a secular item – as opposed to a sacred one. They were secular not only in the sense of being nonreligious, but the masks were also presented as functional items used to explain everyday life. The masks and artifacts, via their portrayals in the dances, were also to be the vehicles through which public knowledge of Guinean history and culture was to be conveyed. As a consequence, these masks were showcased in the ballet in front of uninitiated publics. Sacred masks portrayed in this manner was customarily forbidden. Traditionally, the masks would have only been displayed during secret ritual practices that were always done away from public view.

Within the ballets the masks were also reduced to a cultural position that was smaller in significance than they were traditionally. They were auxiliary or secondary items, appearing in a large narrative where the dance movements held center stage. They became a small piece of social creativity and control. In contrast, in the past, the masks held a much more central position in initiation ceremonies. They had a much larger role within the collective imagination of the masses, and the social hegemony of the land. The Touré administration

maintained that a process of demystification would assist in eradicating deeply felt fears of ancient practices among Guinea's youth.³⁰ These fears were amplified by the unknown, and by actions performed in secret. As such, the ballet brought the masks to the realm of open discourse, thereby assassinating any ignorance and/or fear associated with them. In Touré's mind, the ballet was most effective in demystification, and in the eradication of fetishism more so than any other type of art form.

Demystification in theory and practice were comparable to night and day. Practices employed by Touré's regime under the guise of Demystification often-times produced shock and shame among spectators and victims alike. The mass destruction of centuries-old sacred objects and unmasking elders at public ceremonies in plain view undoubtedly created alarm, confusion, and disruption. Additionally, revealing the identities of masked dancers removed symbolic aspects of the dance and altered its meaning. Understandably, it is these elements that scholars appear to focus on in the very scarce literature on Demystification in Guinea. Yet, other dynamics must be considered if one is to endeavor to produce a more balanced portrayal of this process.

Demystification has much more significant ramifications when one considers the fact that Guinea was the first country to outwardly publicize that it was dispensing with FGM. If Demystification functioned as it was professed to, then FGM was eradicated because it was considered a remnant of fetishism and therefore one of the items that had no place in a modern developing Guinea. It is fitting that revolutionary ballet was launched in the forest regions; the very same areas that became the targets of Demystification.³¹ The masses resided in the rural regions that, as a result, consisted of the majority of people practicing these fetish rituals – as Touré called them – which Touré was endeavoring to eliminate. Subsequently, the Demystification process via revolutionary ballets, focused on the areas where FGM was most prevalent – the rural and forest zones. The overall ramifications were that Guinea was the first country that immediately after independence, rebuked FGM as a nation. Over the decades after 1960, as other African nations gained independence, heads of states have emerged who spoke against FGM and other practices perceived as detrimental to development. However, during the early stages of African independence, Touré was the only head of state who sent an entourage of people to the forest regions to assure that such practices were eliminated.

There were other striking dynamics of the Demystification process that must be discussed. One of the larger primary targets of Demystification was the age-grade organizations – specifically, the Poro and the Sande. Yet, it is noteworthy that the actual initiations were not completely eradicated or wholly targeted. It was the ritualistic practices that were perceived as fetishes, such as FGM, and other acts that were ostracized. Additionally, the element of fear in these initiations was contested. Touré asserted that elders were using ritualistic masks and artifacts to instill fear into the initiates for the purposes of social control. In Sékou Touré's modern independent Guinea, social control would be achieved by state officials elected by the masses.

Interestingly, the process of Demystification was meticulously selective. There were specific targets, which were often only a particular portion of an age-grade ceremony or ritual. In so doing, it advanced the provision that all things traditional were not bad. What is more, when Touré's agents ventured about the countryside destroying the symbols of fetishes, it must have been traumatic to participants in ceremonies that depended on such items. It was done without warning or preparation. However, the void was filled with the revolutionary ballet process.³² Touré replaced these ritualistic items or the making of these ritualistic artifacts with a revolutionary ballet procedure. In the age-grades and other social groups (discussed in Chapter 1), dance was the vehicle of delivery for learning lessons, preserving history, and reflecting cultural change. Subsequently, after Demystification, the practice and reinterpretation of traditional dance movements, and the reformatting of how they were to be conveyed to large audiences, were moved to the center of the lives of rural youth. Additionally, there was a reinterpretation of unscathed traditional masks and artifacts that were not destroyed during the execution of Demystification.

Moreover, Demystification did not preclude the reproduction of "new" masks and artifacts. These new masks and other articles would be impregnated with historical transparency – which breaks from the tradition of being shrouded in secrecy. Consequently, these masks and artifacts are witnessed within the Mandinka ballets performed in the present day. The overall significance is that the meanings of such were reshaped to reflect modernization, development, the political ideologies of the PDG, identity – Mandinka specifically, but African identity in general – and the modern direction toward which Guinea was attempting to move. All of this was accomplished by retaining foundational root steps, creating auxiliary dance steps and movements within the dance system themselves, and through the revolutionary ballet process.

Another dynamic worthy of discussion is that the elders perceived that they were being humiliated when they were unmasked in public and when their secrets were revealed to the uninitiated. However, these acts were actually part of a different phenomenon operating under the guise of Demystification. The elders were being overthrown or removed from power.³³ To achieve such, their public image of superiority had to be assassinated, torn down; and it had to be done in public. Although artisans could not obtain political power since Sunjata's era (see Chapter 1), they were able to become powerful authorities in their own right as elders in charge of the dance systems and all else that accompanied the age-grade process. As a result, the elders were able to control people with political authority from their post as elder of the age-grade system. The Demystification campaign was Touré's banner under which he unseated the traditional elders through revolutionary ballets. Touré thought that he had to first unseat the powerful traditional gerontocratic institutions. He believed that afterward he would be able to more effectively initiate a modern power structure where the masses would be brought together under a banner of a nation, and not under the banner of an elder, king, chief, or an ethnic group.

Thus, in this regard, Demystification was an excuse. What was really at play was the dismantling of the formidable traditional elder system; the gerontocratic institution.

Conclusion

Colonialism impacted Africa a number of ways. Natural and human resources, educational systems and political institutions were affected. Culture and spiritual systems were not exempt. However, there were other detrimental effects that were not as visible as the aforementioned, the social effects of colonialism. Yet, at the dawn of Independence from the colonial powers, and the early years of postindependence, the values of African identity were questioned by the masses, and self-esteem was at an all-time low. African heads of state in this era of renewal turned to traditional African dance and culture to decolonize African culture and repair self-confidence. These visionary leaders asserted that the social effects of colonialism were paralyzing the African masses and preventing the implementation of modernization. Sékou Touré, the first president of Guinea, believed that traditional African dance was an indispensable device for achieving modernization, and when coupled with his Demystification program, success was inevitable.

According to Sékou Touré, without a Demystification process, the country could not be ushered into a state of modernization. Touré did not totally abolish traditional institutions during Demystification. His goal was to dethrone the power structure or to transition the power structure to a modern Socialist state. Touré's intentions were not to dismantle authenticity and traditional culture, because he utilized these principles to reenergize and to reinstate African identity. Instead, he was endeavoring to break the hold that the elders had on the youth – who in his mind were the epitome of the revolution. Touré alleged that the elders maintained a hold on the youth through mystification and fear. Fear of the masks, artifacts, and magic – which were the major sources of mystification. By destroying masks, unmasking elders in public and revealing their secret identities, and exposing secret masks to the uninitiated, fear of the unknown dissolves along with the power of and the reverence for the elders. Demystification represented a power swing. The power swing was from the elders, or authorities of the age-grades, to the political figures who were going to govern the people in the new modern state. As a whole, for Touré, Mandinka dance systems crystalized and defined African identity. They served as a device for culturally decolonizing the minds of the Guinean masses, and as a political tool for transforming Guinea into a modern state.

Notes

- 1 For example, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Modibo Keita of Mali, Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, all established national African dance companies shortly after independence. Kwame

- Nkrumah of Ghana established a national dance company within the first few years of independence, and Robert Mugabe established a national dance company shortly after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. See the introduction to Part 4 for further discussion on African heads of states nationalizing traditional African dance companies.
- 2 Unfortunately, Fodéba is scarcely represented in African historiography. His contributions are surmountable. Fodéba is mentioned with regard to Ahmed Sékou Toure in a small number of literature. See Jay Straker, "Stories of 'Militant Theatre' in the Guinean Forest: 'Demystifying' the Motives and Moralities of a Revolutionary Nation-State," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 211. For an interesting discussion on Fodéba's thoughts on authenticity with regard to traditional African dance, see Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*, 63–4.
 - 3 Sékou Touré became the first president of Guinea. His political party was the Parti démocratique de Guinée (PDG).
 - 4 For more information on Keita Fodéba, see Jay Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*, 95–100; and Lansine Kaba, "The Cultural Revolution, Artistic Creativity, and Freedom of Expression in Guinea," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 202–5.
 - 5 See Kaba, "Cultural Revolution," 202–3.
 - 6 Léopold Sédar Senghor became the first president of Senegal in 1960.
 - 7 See Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, & Representation*, 629.
 - 8 For a lengthy discussion of changes created by Fodéba's ballet format, see Chapter 4.
 - 9 Although Touré's first name is Ahmed, he is popularly known as Sékou Touré.
 - 10 Authoritarian regimes often revitalized cultural traditions generally, and dance specifically, to legitimize their positions. For example, Yahya Jammeh established the Roots Festival in The Gambia in 1994, the same year he came to power through his coup d'état.
 - 11 See, Ahmed Sekou Toure, *African on the Move*.
 - 12 Samori Touré was a Jula trader in West Africa at the dawn of colonialism who held off French encroachment in Senegambia for nearly two decades. For more information on Samori Touré, see "Islamic Jihads" in Chapter 6, and see A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, 50–3.
 - 13 The RDA, or the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, was a political party that was instrumental in the decolonization process of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. It was organized by Africans and had divisions in various countries in Africa. The PDG, Parti Démocratique de la Guinée – the party of Sékou Touré – is Guinea's division of the RDA.
 - 14 The PDG became the ruling party of Guinea in 1958. Touré died March 26, 1984.
 - 15 Sékou Touré and Jesse Sloan, "The African Elite in the Anti-Colonial Struggle," 4.
 - 16 For information on the political events in Guinea during Touré's administration, see Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey, eds., "A Frontal Attack on Irrational Elements: Sékou Touré and the Management of the Elites in Guinea," in *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, 195–215.
 - 17 See Kaba, "The Cultural Revolution," 208.
 - 18 See Straker, *Youth, Nationalism and the Guinean Revolution*, 21. Youth in this regard means young men and women from the onset of adolescence to roughly thirty years of age.

- 19 See Kaba, "The Cultural Revolution," 207–8.
- 20 Continental Africans are people of African descent who were born in Africa. Diasporic Africans are those of African descent who were born outside of Africa. It is also noteworthy to understand that people of African descent who were born in Africa, but immigrated to the diaspora are considered New African Diasporans in this study. Their migration outside of Africa was voluntary, and occurred after the abolition of transatlantic slavery.
- 21 Minstrel or minstrelsy is an infamous form of entertainment created in the United States by white artists where performers painted their faces with jet black paint, but outlined the eyes and lips to create a disturbing caricature of African Americans. The minstrel caricatures would then behave as buffoons. Entertainers utilizing the minstrel format traveled to Europe to perform and became quite famous there as well.
- 22 Editorial, *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 22, 1960.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Female Genital Mutilation. FGM is practiced in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The practice removed or mutilated all or part of the female genitalia sometimes causing severe infections, chronic birth complications, and fatalities in young women.
- 25 For an extensive discussion on the first World Festival of Black Arts in 1966 held in Dakar, Senegal, see Esther A. Dagan, *The Spirit's Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation, and Continuity in Sub-Sahara*, 156–9.
- 26 For an excerpt of Toure's thoughts on rehabilitating African culture with regard to political power, see *Africa on the Move*, 456–60.
- 27 See Ahmed Sékou Touré, *Africa on the Move*, 441.
- 28 See Mike McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*, 214.
- 29 Sékou Touré, L'Action du Parti démocratique de Guinée en faveur de l'Emancipation de la Jeunesse guinéenne, 74–5.
- 30 See Ahmed Sékou Touré, *Africa on the Move*, 458.
- 31 Sékou Touré often referred to Mandinka dance as revolutionary ballet. He coined the term as a result of his Cultural Revolution.
- 32 See Touré, *Africa on the Move*, 467.
- 33 See Jost Dulfër and Marc Frey, eds., *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, 195.

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Conclusion

Soli, rite of passage dance: where do we go from here?

African cultural sources in general, and African dance systems in particular, provide a viable solution to the primary source scarcity problem for research on Africa. Indeed, scholars and students from diverse disciplines – history, cultural anthropology, sociology, African studies, cultural studies, performance studies, and so on – would benefit from the information bestowed upon them from ardent study of African dance. For too long, Africanist scholars have based the core of their research on written documents and other sources provided by people and institutions which exist outside of the continent of Africa. At best, such sources lead to superficial conclusions based on second hand information void of rich cultural insights, African intentions, and the type of detail that sets a work apart from the others. At worst, a dependence solely on such sources breeds misconceptions, errors in the African historical narrative, and gaping holes in the cultural representation of Africa. More tragic, is the fact that such works contain a vacuum in the area where Africans – those whose experiences the history is supposed to be reflecting – are voiceless.

Mandinka dance specifically, and African dance in general, can prove to be a solution to a problem that has existed with regard to Africanist scholarship from the moment it was brought into the realm of Western study. The standardization and use of oral history as a methodology has alleviated a portion of the African source paucity dilemma. However, it is not enough, particularly when other cultural options exist. The study of African dance systems alongside oral tradition can validate prior unsubstantiated claims, refute fallacious notions, and reveal previously unknown facts.

The study of African dance systems can also be valuable in areas in Africa where there is no tradition of an oral historian profession. As discussed in Chapter 1, the profession of the oral historian in the Mandinka cultural institutions emerged with centralized governments. Yet, there are also societies without centralized governments in Western Sudan – and other regions in Africa – that did not develop an oral historian profession. It is safe to conclude that constructing a history of such societies would be challenging at best. However, African stateless societies do have dance systems. They have dance systems that were created with age-grades, and dance systems that were created prior to the establishment of the age-grade system. Many of the dance systems

in these societies have existed for millennia. Rock art, which spans the entire continent of Africa, provides evidence that dance systems in Africa are at least tens of thousands of years old. As such, dance systems in stateless societies in Africa contain at least a millennium worth of information.

Similar to conducting research in any field, the study of African dance systems yields the most enlightening information when procedures are followed that are germane to the topic. That said, the most effective approach for engaging the extremely diverse topic of African dance, is one that identifies one culture to study at a time – in the case of this book, the Mandinka – and one dance system at a time within the selected culture. Focusing one's study on one dance system reveals nuances in cultural practices and philosophies that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Because dance systems in Africa are ancient, it is unrealistic to assume that the dance systems witnessed today are exact replicas of the systems created thousands of years ago. The root steps of those dances that survived historical ordeals were retained, but the auxiliary components to dance systems may have undergone a great deal of adjustment. As a result, scholars and students pursuing the study of Mandinka dance systems in the Senegambia region must examine the process of slavery – transsaharan and transatlantic – and its effect on Mandinka dance in particular, and Mande culture in general. Additionally, the phenomenon of dance transmission throughout indigenous systems of servitude, and the cultural fail-safes protecting the dance process, deserves attention from scholars as well. It is also necessary to examine how traditional dance was handled by religions introduced into the region – Christianity and especially Islam – and the impact of colonization on dance systems. Modernity and its detrimental effects on indigenous Mandinka dance practice and transference must also be assessed to gain insight into the ordeals the dances, their practitioners, and their creators, shouldered in order to endure, and the sacrifices and innovations made along the way.

Concentration on the details of the traditional Mandinka dance systems themselves must also be a priority for scholars. The study of dance systems should be approached in a fashion similar to the study of a foreign language. For a language to be understood it must be decoded. Comprehension of dance systems and its eloquent symbology also necessitates a system of decipherment. As a result, access to the previously unknown cultural significance of the dances and details concerning the auxiliary items will be obtained. In addition, insights regarding how dancers, dance musicians, spectators, and society at large perceive and practice the dance systems will also be disclosed. Lastly, recent cultural developments such as the African dance Ballet, will also be identified along with its purpose within Mandinka dance systems, its contributions and limitations.

Dance is perceived solely in the realm of performing arts and entertainment in the Western mindset. Yet, this manner of thinking must be discarded in order to gain access to the plethora of information wedged within Mandinka

dance systems specifically, and African dance systems universally. Once this limited thinking is shifted, the principles that exist within dance systems will be apparent in the philosophies, language, religion, educational institutions, visual arts, and so on of the society under study. Indeed, an abundance of hitherto unidentified data would be at the disposal of historians, scholars, and students if they would only embark on an academic study of African dance systems.

Glossary of terms

African Diaspora The territories, countries, and continents outside of the continent of Africa where people of African descent reside. These communities were created with the forced migrations that resulted from the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Age-grade In many regions in Africa groups of men and women are initiated into collectives based on age and gender. Each age-grade is comprised of multiple ethnic groups and the members of age-grades form alliances with each other that last for life. Age-grades are also called age-sets, age-regiments, and rites of passage.

Aimé Césaire An African-Caribbean francophone intellectual from Martinique who was one of the founders of the Negritude movement.

Arab Slavery A system of slavery brought into Africa from the Middle East with the Islamic invasions of North Africa. Although forms of Arab slavery were also introduced to East and Central Africa, this study focuses on Arab slavery in the Senegambia region.

Artisans Professional craftsmen/craftswomen. The four primary artisan groups in Mandinka society were oral historians, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and weavers.

Auxiliary Items Objects that accompany the dance and facilitates comprehension of the message that the dance attempts to convey. Auxiliary items include; instruments, musicians, songs, attire, masks, fire eating, all props, and so on.

Auxiliary Steps A series of body movements added to a dance to enhance the dance message, a dancer's ability to express him/herself through improvisation, or the dancer's ability to convey the dance message. Auxiliary steps are not consistent and change with circumstances, dancers, and so on.

Balafon Comparable to a wooden xylophone. The balafon contains long wooden keys that are fastened to a wooden frame usually with a material similar to raffia – a type of plant in the grass family – or ropes. Calabashes in a variety of sizes are hung underneath the keys to amplify the sound. The wooden keys range in size successively from large to small. The balafon is played with two mallets, and the size differences of the keys facilitate the ability to produce different tones, notes, and pitches.

- Ballet Djoliba** A Guinean national dance company founded after Les Ballets Africains by Guinea's first president, Ahmed Sékou Touré.
- Ballet Format** Jali, choreographer, dancer, Keita Fodéba, created the African dance ballet format, or the African dance ballet. African dance ballets are when several dance systems are performed successively to tell a narrative. The dances do not have to be related, nor do they have to originate from the same or similar ethnic groups. All auxiliary items enhance the overall theme or the particular scene in which they appear.
- BCE** Before the Common Era. Includes all dates before year one.
- Caste** See Endogamous Guild. To avoid confusion with the definition of caste in India, this study utilizes the terms endogamous guild and artisan groups interchangeably, instead of caste or caste group.
- CE** Common Era. Includes dates occurring from year one through the present.
- Contraction** A contraction is an isolated movement forward and backward of a particular body area. The body areas that are contracted are typically the torso and the pelvic regions. There are also semi, or partial, contractions where the body part is contracted only half, or a quarter of the way.
- Cultivator** A person who engages in farming for his/her livelihood.
- Cultural Hegemony** The act of imposing one's culture onto another. The culture of the subordinate group is rendered either unimportant or is treated as though it is invisible or nonexistent.
- Dance Artist** A Dance Artist is a dance practitioner who engages in dance for enjoyment. See Master Dancer.
- Dance Circle** In the village, Mandinka traditional dances are performed in a circle. The drummers and the villagers form the circle with their seating arrangements or standing placements. As the drumming intensifies, a villager enters the circle to dance. Solos are customarily short, and the dancer may enter the circle several times if he or she wishes. At the conclusion of the solo, the dancer leaves the circle and another dancer emerges to perform a solo.
- Dance Step** A dance step is comprised of more than one body movement.
- Dance System** Dance systems are comprised of successive body movements which form dance steps, dancers, auxiliary items such as masks and props, musicians, instruments, dance attire, and so on. Dance steps in dance systems may be comprised of root and auxiliary steps, as well as sophisticated and fundamental steps. All of these items are components of each dance system.
- Daughter-group** Offshoots of larger or primary language groups. For example, Mande is the primary or mother language group, and Soninke, Mandinka, Susu, and so on are factions of it. Similarly, Mande is a daughter-group of the larger Niger-Congo language group. The designation as a daughter-group is not meant to insinuate miniscule in size. Countless daughter-groups are nations in their own rights.
- Dimba** A Mandinka support group in Senegal for infertile women of all ethnicities. Provides consultations, herbal aides, and spiritual aides to combat infertility among its members. Dimbas also tackle women's societal issues such as discrimination and all semblances of sexism.

Djembe See Jembe.

Djola See Jola.

Dundun Also called dundunba, the dundun drum is part of a family of drums. Each drum in the dundun family is constructed from a single log. The log is hollowed out and the rough outer portion of the log is smoothed. Skins are attached to the top and the bottom. Cow skins are traditionally used in the dundun family of drums and are attached via metal rings and ropes.

Dyula See Jula.

Endogamous Guild Associations of professional craftsmen/women who are only allowed to marry other guild members. The four traditional guilds in Mandinka culture are Blacksmiths, Jalis (oral historians), leatherworkers, and weavers. When Sunjata constructed the Mande Constitution in the thirteenth century, he made the guilds endogamous. They are referred to as artisan groups in this study.

Epic A lengthy narrative poem on a vital subject displaying characters of heroic stature in undertakings of great historical importance.

FGM Female Genital Mutilation. FGM, practiced in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, is the practice of removing or mutilating all or part of the female genitalia. This practice sometimes causes severe infections, chronic birth complications, and fatalities in young women.

Franz Fanon One of the founders of the Negritude Movement. He was of African descent born in Martinique (1925–1961). In addition to a trained psychiatrist, Fanon was a philosopher, revolutionary, poet, and author. His philosophically charged discourses on colonialism, African identity, and culture have influenced academicians and laymen alike for more than half a century.

Fula/Fulani/Fulbe The largest nomadic ethnic group in the world. However, many Fulani are not nomadic and live sedentary lives in urban settings. They are found throughout West Africa and have played decisive roles in the history of Senegambia.

Fuladu A kingdom whose formation came about in the nineteenth century when Fulanis from Futa Jalon (Northern Guinea) defeated the Mandinka kingdom of Kaabu.

Ghana Not to be confused with the modern-day Republic of Ghana. Ancient Ghana is a Mande polity that existed in West Africa and was founded by the Soninke people. The exact date of origin is the subject of debate; however, it was established sometime before the seventh century and fell into decline in the eleventh century.

Heterarchy A system of governance by which no one person is placed in authority. Instead, political power is dispersed among the members of the society. Decisions are made by majority consent.

ISS Indigenous Servile Systems are institutions of servitude that existed in Africa before the advent of Arab slavery and transatlantic slavery.

Jali/Jeli Historian, poet, singer, responsible for memorizing generations and oftentimes centuries of historical information. The jali reveals the information through spoken word, chanting, or song, sometimes with the

accompaniment of music. The difference in spelling represents regional variations in pronunciation.

Jembe The jembe drum (djembe in the French spelling) is one of the major musical instruments traditionally played for Mandinka dance systems. The jembe is shaped similar to a large mortar bowl on top of a slim neck. The entire instrument is hollow, carved from a single piece of wood, and has a goat skin attached to the top. Metal rings and roped strings facilitate the secure attachment of the skin, and the exquisite sound it makes. Although jembes are played with bare hands, several different sounds can be produced.

Joking Relationships Also known as dankuto, joking relationships are the process by which interactions between traditionally antagonistic parties are conducted amicably and in a spirit of loyalty to one another.

Jola Not to be confused with the Mandinka group of merchants called Juula/Jula (French spelling, Djula). The Jola (French spelling, Djola) are an ethnic group found primarily in Senegal and The Gambia. Small numbers of Jolas are found in other areas in West Africa.

Jula Mandinka merchants. They were called Jula in regions south of the Mali Empire, such as Cote d'Ivoire and so on. French spellings are Djula and Dyula.

Kaabu Mandinka kingdom founded in the thirteenth century with the westward expansion of the Mandinka Empire. Kaabu became independent in the fifteenth century with Mali's decline in power.

Kankurang/Kankuran A masquerade dance performed as part of the age-grade ceremonies. The Kankurang is reputed to provide protection for newly circumcised boys and to administer justice to lawbreakers.

Kansala The capital of Kaabu.

Kanyaleng A Mandinka support group in The Gambia for infertile women containing diverse ethnicities. Women in this organization engage in activities that challenge society's traditional roles for women.

Keita Fodéba Founder of the internationally renowned dance ensemble, Les Ballets Africains. Fodéba revolutionized the way Mandinka dance in particular and African dance in general would be presented to the world.

Kirina The location where Sunjata, founder of Mandinka culture, won the final battle against the Susu king, Sumanguru. Kirina was located in Mali near present-day Bamako, Mali's capitol.

Kora A traditional Mandinka string instrument that is played by jalis and other musicians. It consists of a large calabash, a long neck, and twenty-one strings extending from the calabash to the top of the neck. The calabash is covered with goat skin.

Kutiro The Kutiro drum family consists of three drums in successive sizes from small to large – the kutirindingo (the smallest), the kutiriba (medium-sized), and the sabaro (the largest). Kutiro drums have an elongated shape with a wider opening at the head where the goat skin is fastened by wooden pegs. Kutiro drums are also carved from a single piece of wood or log.

- Kwame Nkrumah** First president of Ghana, Pan-Africanist, and friend and supporter of Ahmed Sékou Touré.
- Leopold Sédar Senghor** One of the founders and a vehement advocate of the Négritude Movement. Senghor was the first president of Senegal.
- Les Ballets Africains** Founded by Keita Fodéba and nationalized by Sékou Touré, the first Mande dance company to tour internationally after independence in Africa.
- Mande Diaspora** The areas of Africa created by successive waves of migrations of Mande peoples through time.
- Mandinka Diaspora** The area in Africa created by the expansion of the Mali Empire. Also see Senegambia.
- Master Dancer** A Master Dancer is a dance practitioner who has studied traditional Mandinka dances for twenty or more years. He/she knows the history, purpose, auxiliary items, root step techniques, and auxiliary steps for a vast number of Mandinka dances. This requirement could also be applied to a specific dance system that would render the practitioner a master of that particular dance system – that is, a master Dundunba dancer. The Master Dancer is also familiar with and can readily recognize the rhythms for all of the dances he/she knows how to execute. He or she can play the rhythms as well. Albeit, probably not as well as a Master Drummer but well enough to make the rhythms recognizable to dancers and drummers alike. The Master Dancer knows traditional attire for each dance, the gender of the dance – for example, if it is a woman's age-grade or a man's masquerade dance – and the times and locations where the dances were done historically.
- Mende** A daughter-group belonging to the larger Mande mother-group.
- Mother-group** A primary group whose characteristics serve as an umbrella for factions that split from it. For instance, a mother language group is the Niger-Congo, and the Mandinka and Fulbe are daughter language groups that fall under it. Mandinka and Fulbe are mother-groups with myriad subgroups that fall under them.
- Movement** See Body Movement.
- Nationalized Dance Companies** Dance companies owned, funded, and operated by the state. Nationalized dance companies represented the identity, history, and culture of the nation as a unified whole.
- New African Diaspora** The territories, countries, and continents outside of the continent of Africa where people of African descent reside. These communities are the recent result of voluntary migrations of African peoples.
- Nyama** Spiritual/elemental/metaphysical energy that only members of the endogamous guilds had the ability to command. It is through this power that the blacksmiths, jalis, leatherworkers, and weavers are able to create their products.
- Nyamakala/Nyamakalaw** Endogamous guild member. The letter w denotes the plural in the Mandinka language.

- Négritude Movement** In the 1930s, French-speaking Black graduate students from Africa and the Caribbean who were studying in Paris launched a cultural movement coined Negritude.
- Oral History** Rather than reading historical events, oral history is spoken, sung, or performed, and experienced audibly and visually. African oral historians are trained to memorize large amounts of information.
- PDG** Parti démocratique de Guinée. In English, the Democratic Party of Guinea. It was a branch of the larger assembly, RDA.
- RDA** Rassemblement Démocratique Africain. In English, African Democratic Assembly.
- Right of Passage** See Age-grade.
- Root Step** A series of body movements that have been passed down through the generations since the origin of a particular dance system. Root steps do not change over time.
- Senegambia** For the purpose of this study, Senegambia will be understood to mean the territory resulting from the expansion of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. It includes the modern-day countries of Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau.
- Slave Trades in Africa** In Africa, by 1500, three distinct servile institutions, and hybrid mixtures of slavery institutions could be witnessed. Indigenous servile systems (ISS) were products of Africa, but Arab slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were foreign.
- Social Groups** Associations of peoples within a society based on specific commonalities. Artisan guilds, for instance, are social groups. They are comprised of members who are all craftsmen and traditionally barred from political power, from marrying outside of their groups, and so on.
- Social History** A branch of history that studies the life experiences of ordinary people.
- Spectator-dancer** Audience members in a dance circle who move from watching the dance being executed, to entering the circle to perform the dance themselves, and then back to the audience to be a spectator again.
- Step** See Root Step, Dance Step.
- Sumanguru** Susu king defeated by Sunjata in 1235 CE. His defeat marked the inception of the Mali Empire.
- Sunjata** Founder of the Mali Empire. Creator of the Mande Constitution and initiator of endogamy among the traditional craftsmen associations. Sunjata is credited with founding modern Mandinka culture.
- Transatlantic Slave Trade** Chattel slavery introduced to Africa by Europeans.
- Transsaharan Trade System** A trade network across the Sahara Desert that predates the transsaharan slave trade. Before slaves were traded across the Sahara in substantial numbers, trade items in the transsaharan trade system included gold, ivory, and salt, among other things.

Transsaharan Slave Trade Also referred to as Arab slavery, it was introduced to Africa along with Islam with the Arab invasions in North Africa in the seventh century.

Wolof An ethnic group of West Africa that exists in large numbers in Senegal. The Wolof are responsible for founding the Senegalese kingdom of Jolof.

Wangara Like the Jula, the Wangara are members of the Mande merchant class. Wangara is an earlier term that originates during the era of Ancient Ghana.

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