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# African Dance as Healing Modality Throughout the Diaspora: The Use of Ritual and Movement to Work Through Trauma

by

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**Abstract:** In the African worldview, dance is a conduit of individual and community healing. African conceptualizations of illness and health integrate social, spiritual, physical and mental realms, all of which are impacted by trauma. This paper will explore different forms of dance and ritual throughout the African Diaspora as they relate to the process of healing trauma. It will provide examples of African dance healing practices – from the Ndeup ritual in Senegal and Zar tradition in North Africa to the highly stylized dance techniques of Guinea and urban dance in the U.S. Psychological perspectives are incorporated to provide an additional framework for understanding healing dance rituals. **Keywords:** Dance, Ritual, Trauma, Psychology.

Traditional African dance is connected to ritualistic and spiritual healing practices, and addresses a range of ailments. The underlying belief is that in the community, mind and body must be incorporated into ritual systems in order to facilitate healing, as well as transform and empower the individual and the group. Ultimately, given their holistic structure, rituals benefit the society in many layers. They play an integral role in socialization, expression and communication; help to build and maintain a healthy sense of self system; and also offer an alternative cathartic experience for not only individuals but for the community as a whole.

In particular, rituals involving dance play an essential role in relieving and treating symptoms of psychological distress, as well as neutralize and lessen the impact of psychological trauma. In many societies, these noted benefits of dance, as well as the impact of related cultural processes, operate without an awareness of their mechanics; but have been observed and researched as valuable therapeutic byproducts in themselves. This paper focuses on the role of African dance as a healing modality throughout the Diaspora. It will describe healing customs and traditions practiced in the eastern and western regions of Africa, as well as explore dance styles utilized by individuals of African descent in the inner cities of the United States. In addition, it will examine the artistic and historical roots and therapeutic aspects of African dance as related to relieving and treating psychological trauma.

## **Traditional Conceptualizations of Health and Illness in Africa**

The African worldview is based on spiritual and communal paradigms that are useful in understanding indigenous and Diasporic healing approaches. At the same time, powerful cultural, historical, and economic forces; colonial experiences; independence revolutionary struggles; and conflict have also shaped indigenous and modern practices on the continent. Conflict and change have been a part of African societies for centuries and highlight the dynamic foundation of African culture (Sow, 1980). This dynamism, spirituality and communalism inform the following discussion of healing, illness, and the role of dance and ritual in the African worldview.

Dichotomous, either/or thinking is not part of African beliefs; instead complementary ideas predominate. The self is not separated into individualized parts with unique illnesses, such as mental and physical. In the African worldview, humans' spiritual root is thought to govern and be responsible for various manifestations of health and illness. General health is related to balance and equilibrium within one's spirit. This does not mean that the African worldview merges all attributes of self together without recognizing distinct qualities or traits. Rather, it is a harmonizing perspective that appreciates holism, but not at the expense of individualism.

Some of the themes linking the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors related to illness throughout Africa include: communalistic social structures; lifestyles that encourage harmony with environment/nature; the prominence of spirituality in the worldview; belief in both natural and supernatural causation of illness with the acknowledgement that most theories are culture specific; and the frequent use of religious/spiritual healers to treat illness.

For example, in traditional African societies, illness that manifests in psychological or mental symptoms is understood as a disruption in the natural order of humans' interactions with the spirit world, or, depending on the specific religion, lack of appropriate connection with God or the Supreme Being. This disturbance can occur for multiple reasons such as failure to properly honor the spiritual realm or one's ancestors, neglecting to carry out prescribed rituals, prayers or religious ceremonies, or losing personal faith in God. However, the state of imbalance which can lead to illness and distress is often temporary, can be rectified with corrective rituals and is not considered a part of the individual's personality. Specifically, in the case of mental and emotional symptoms, the causes and associated negative characteristics are not internalized by the suffering individual. The illness comes from outside the person and does not define who he or she is.

In addition, African societies emphasize the social causes and impact of illness in terms of the individual's relationship to the community and spiritual world. Some factors that influence illness are the transgression of society's social bounds regarding relationships and social roles, the harmful intentions of another person, angering God or spirits, and spirit possession (Sow, 1980). These variables are multi-faceted with complex implications regarding how people understand their world and their place in it.

Culturally prescribed interpersonal rules regulate behavior among members of the family, social groups, and broader community. Individuals are socialized very early regarding manners of greetings, relating within and outside of peer groups, understanding various social group distinctions, and specific duties, responsibilities and social obligations. Roles that prescribe daily functions and dictate expectations of family, friends, acquaintances and strangers are very important in traditional life. Often, a minimal level of hospitality and respect is mandated for certain groups such as elders, respected community leaders, people of a certain level of achievement, etc. In many ways, people are obliged by static social roles and expectations. Finally, those who are unable to navigate or appropriately engage the social and spiritual domains are vulnerable to illness as a result of being out of sync with community norms and the balance and protection they offer.

## **Traditional Treatments**

Traditional African healing methods and cures focus on realignment of the individual with the material, social and spiritual worlds. The sick individual has to be “reinstated” into these levels of his/her community (Sow, 1980). The body is prominently enlisted in diagnosing and treating disease such that many signs and symptoms are described physically, including how and what part of the body is impacted. Traditional healers in Africa are commonly classified as “herbalists” who specialize in the use of plants, roots and herbs or “diviners” who use incantations and divinations and act as spirit mediums (Odejide et al., 1989). Herbalists train by apprenticeship for at least one year. Diviners may have to go through a state of spirit possession in a ceremony with the primary features being music, dance, community participation and interpretation of dreams (Sijuwola, 1995). Healing becomes their life purpose as designated by God and the ancestors. Both types of healers usually have a considerable amount of insight into the patient’s experience. Some specific practices include ritual sacrifices, the use of herbal medicines, and extended residential stays at the healer’s compound (Sijuwola, 1995).

The beliefs described here center on holism and socio-cultural and psycho-spiritual themes. Causes and remedies are heavily community-focused. Movement may embody a natural way to address problems that develop from these dynamics. Movement – especially couched in ritual - can have an integrative function consistent with the driving forces of African conceptualizations of illness.

## **The Use of Ritual and Movement to Work through Trauma**

In her book, *To Dance is Human, a Theory of Nonverbal Communication*, Judith Hanna (1987) explores the anthropological study of dance, including its curative and functional properties. In the initial introduction to the exploration of dance, Hanna (1987) acknowledges that “to dance is human and humanity universally expresses itself in dance [through its ability to] interweave with other aspects of human life, such as communication and learning, belief systems, social relations and political dynamics, loving and fighting, urbanization and change” (p.3). Hanna also continues to point out the significance of dance in the biological and evolutionary development of the human species. Dance, especially as used in rituals, has also played a role in the spiritual and social development of many communities throughout the world, particularly in African cultures. Through its many functions, dance is not only a form of healing, but also represents a symbol of the personal, communal and social narrative of these societies.

Consequentially, the suppression of dance in many cultures, particularly in ritualized forms, has resulted in an imbalance in those spiritual, communal and interpersonal qualities that regulate the individual and unify societies (Hanna, 1987). Without these regulating structures, societies are apt to become increasingly vulnerable to environmental destabilizers.

Specifically, exposure to traumatic stimuli has been disruptive not only to individuals, but to entire communities and regions. Regardless of the origin, the effects of trauma are numerous and can lead to a deterioration of psychic functions; spiritual and mental breakdown; breaking one's sense of integrity; as well as produce internal and external disruptions in the form of mental and physical illness. Ultimately, the surfacing of trauma symptoms tend to function as a restorative response aimed at attempting to recover the psychological equilibrium lost due to the impact of such extreme distress (Carruthers, 2004). This restorative reaction appears to be a pre-requisite for processing traumatic stimuli with the hopes of re-establishing stabilization. However, often, traumatic incidents are processed, experienced and internalized without an integration of meaning for the event. This lack of symbolism interferes with the restorative process, which serves to retrieve an understanding of a process that lacks symbolic form.

The symbolic and meaning-making dimensions of African centered healing practices, in conjunction with spiritual transformation and the availability of sacred space, allow for individuals and groups to become equipped with the restorative properties necessary for optimal healing to occur (Csordas & Lewton, 1998). These mechanisms not only provide an avenue for symptom reduction, but allow individuals, groups, and communities to commune with each other, as well as communicate and connect with the spirit world, which is believed to be fundamental to the process of healing. Through spiritual transformation, individuals acquire a special relationship with spirits or God, which involve a shift that takes place within the body and the psyche. Spiritual transformation also provides those who experience it altered states of consciousness, which enhances ones capacity to commune with the spirits. This transformation may occur as a result of various interventions including, but not limited to, prayer, fasting, ceremony and dance. In particular, rituals involving dance forms incorporate the use of a sacred space, while utilizing movement to activate healing energy.

According to Hanna (1987), dance also represents a physical instrument or symbol for feeling and/or thoughts that can serve as a more effective medium than verbal language in revealing ones needs and desires. Given the importance of the body in diagnosing various symptoms and disease through traditional African healing methods, it would be essential for rituals to incorporate movements to not only access conscious and unconscious processes, but to offer a direct vehicle to address and transform their underlying causes. As a communicative behavior, "a text in motion" or body language (Kuper, 1968), movements in dance become standardized and patterned symbols, and members of a society may understand that these symbols are intended to represent experiences and give meaning to an individual's external and psychic world. Specifically, the nonverbal behavior of dance is an integral component to the calculus of meaning for many rituals as well as the mechanism that provides the interface between the spirit realm, the individual and group.

Given that ritual healing is embedded in a pervasive socio-centric worldview that focuses on persons not as individuals per se, but as integral parts of communities; interaction with the other is the basis for empathic exchanges, which are also fundamental in healing practices. According to Koss-Chioino (2006), these interactions foster social insight and through interpersonal sensitivity or interpersonal judgment, dance allows individuals to predict how another will respond to events and experiences displaying certain psychological properties. Empathy, through dance, creates an intersubjective space where individuals, whether acquaintances or strangers, enter into intimate relations with each other. According to Koss-Chioino (2006), through this space, individual differences are often times melded into one collective feeling and experience. This experience of being connected and the establishment of relationships through dance are viewed, in various therapeutic modalities, as the predominant catalyst for therapeutic change. Specifically, the African axiological focus on Man-Man places the highest value on the interpersonal relationship, which offers individuals a “feeling of being interconnected to the existence of everything else” (Nobles, 1978).

Koss-Chioino (2006) used the term “radical healing” to illustrate the healing relationship between individuals. In particular, he highlights relationships between traditional healers and patients, stating that through spirit possession, understanding and empathy are developed. He also coined the term radical empathy, which is viewed as the core component of ritual healing practices. Radical empathy provides a feeling of direct and deep connection with another person. According to Koss-Chioino (2006), radical empathy in ritual healing goes beyond recognition or acceptance of a sufferer’s distress by erasing individual boundaries between healer and patient.

Lastly, dance is a physical behavior that embodies many curative properties that are released through movement, rhythms, self expression, communion, as well as the mechanisms of cathartic release. These properties allow individuals to shift emotional states, often times, creating an experience of wholeness. The expression of emotion through dance is often stated to be organic, natural and immediate (Leseho & Maxwell, 2010). Alternating mood states are also elicited, which range from reduced arousal leading to tranquil states, to increased arousals leading to cathartic release. The rapid motion in dance is stated to be especially intoxicating; often times, leading to alterations in states of consciousness while facilitating feelings of internal bliss and elation. In many ritualistic forms, dance can be used to induce dissociated states of consciousness, which are often invested with religious significance and valued as techniques of divination and healing.

In many societies, rituals incorporating dance can make use of its ability to serve as a healthy psychological defense mechanism, which allows psychologically or socially unacceptable impulses to be expressed and worked through in sublimated forms. Dance forms, permit individuals to experience chaos symbolically and without danger. Emotions such as anxiety, fear, love and aggression may be incorporated in song and dance, and symbolized through dance and other cultural traditions. These sublimated symbols can then be readily accessible and explored through the purposive action of dance by individuals, groups or society (Hanna, 1987).

Through the process of ritual, many cultures are provided with social safety valves which control potentially disruptive behaviors. Ritualized forms of dance, in particular, offer anticipatory psychic management, or desensitization, which is described as the process of coping with a feared object or event by associating it, through speech or dance, with familiar situations (Hanna, 1968). In her field research in African Dance, Hanna (1968) describes how the properties of rituals and other cultural traditions utilize song, dance and other spiritual practices to prepare individuals for threatening experiences by rehearsing the stimulus through movement until potential emotions are reduced to manageable proportions. Ultimately, through these ritualized practices, individuals are offered a sense of mastery over overwhelming emotions and stimuli, which, in turn, promotes resiliency and an ability to address and work through traumatic stimuli or crises.

## **Ritual and Dance: Examples of Healing through Movement**

### **Ndeup**

Ndeup is a Senegalese therapeutic ritual used to heal a person who has been possessed by the spirits who established a contract with the community's original ancestors. Practiced by the Lebou fishing community and the Wolof and Serer ethnic groups in Senegal, the Ndeup ritual of possession is a way of reconciling with the ancestors and their spirits. This gesture may be necessary if one's family did not give respect to their ancestors, or did not properly follow the rules of ancestral offering (B. Diop, personal communication, May 31, 2011). In addition, the Lebou consider the practice a form of purification and "protection from evil spirits" (Mundus Maris, 2011).

Generally, the ceremony lasts 4 to 8, and sometimes 10 days. It is open to the entire community, but organized by a male or female traditional priest and his or her assistants. The first two days usually consist of setting up the altar site and beginning treatment of the "patient" by collecting offerings of milk, goat, cow or sheep, sacrificing animals, and massaging the patient with milk, millet, and the blood of the sacrificed animals. Ritual words are recited while pouring blood on the patient; drums are played and the patient may suddenly become alert and begin to dance. Most days from morning to sunset, drums are played while some of the women sing ritual songs to the ancestors and their spirits. The priests and their assistants are guardians of the ceremony and may dance, or go into a trance state along with the patient (B. Diop, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

Often, spectators of the ceremony who did not know they were possessed will also go into a trance. Non-choreographed dance and free movement are integral to the ceremony and heightens when the patient enters a trance. At that point, others freely join in. According to one cultural expert, for many, it is not the beat of the drums which brings about the trance, rather the formal evocation of ancestors and their spirits (B. Diop, personal communication, May 31, 2011).



However, clearly the dance, rhythmic drumming and singing are very significant to carrying out the service. In this case, movement can be thought of as creating a space and means of physical, spiritual and psychological release, as well as an opening for others in the community to join with the patient. Despite the public nature of the ritual, the music and dance actually act to break down any barrier or separation that may leave the patient feeling isolated, unprotected and vulnerable. The “treatment” is usually for problems classified medically as mental, psychological or emotional. Patients can self identify as needing the Ndeup ceremony if they feel uneasy, distressed or any symptoms that indicate they are possessed. Also, family can arrange an Ndeup ceremony for them.

Yoff (Senegal) community leader, Ibrahima Diene, provides an additional detail, “Every gesture has a meaning: the dances, the millet, the beat of the drums together with the litanies pronounced by the priestess. Very few persons are introduced into the secrets of this ceremony which get transmitted from generation to generation, each one safeguarding the secrets jealously” (Mundus Maris, 2011).

Another significant element is the multi-layered ambiance created for the ritual. From the immaculately and colorfully dressed attendees and perfume and incense adornment, to the display of food and choreographed introduction of the drum ensemble, all of the senses are stimulated and part of an integrated experience for the patient and guests. Skilled musicians use Senegalese sabar drums, played with the hand and a stick, to execute complex, polyrhythmic pieces, merging effortlessly with the dancer’s body which may twirl, jump, turn or wind energetically and gracefully.

### **Ndeup in Action**

In a story broadcasted on PRI World Radio, a patient who received treatment at an Ndeup ceremony was profiled.

Rokhaya Pouye had been suffering from years. She couldn’t eat. She couldn’t walk. She couldn’t sleep. When her family took her to the hospital, the doctors couldn’t find anything wrong with her. So her family decided if it wasn’t the body, it had to be the spirit – or spirits, to be precise. Madame Pouye says she turned to traditional medicine...She says she was healed by an ndeup ceremony...The women of this extended family whirl, jump and fling themselves around a courtyard. They move to the drums until they feel the spirits taking over their bodies. One woman falls to the ground, tears running down her face. Another picks up a drummer and carries him around. He doesn’t miss a beat. It’s beautiful to watch. But is this medicine? Mamadou Ngom oversees the traditional medicine sector for the World Health Organization in Dakar. His answer is an emphatic yes. (PRI’s The World, 2009)

This example illustrates how the powerful elements of ritual address spirit and can lead to healing for patients and their families in a way that Western medicine may not. A similar analysis can be made of the Zar ritual.

## **Zar**

Zar is a spirit possession deity system found throughout parts of northeast Africa and the Middle East. Thought to have originated in Ethiopia, it is a form of spirit possession, a ritual ceremony, and more comprehensively, an integral part of a cosmology and healing system that encompass the physical, spiritual and relational realms. Zar refers to the spirit that possesses individuals, the actual state of being possessed or afflicted, and the healing ceremony. It encompasses the spirit possession of the patient and spirit mediumship by the Zar priest who himself was afflicted with Zar, but has learned to channel his possession. It takes on both Christian and Islamic symbolism depending on the setting. So, for Christians, it can include calling upon saints for assistance or protection and for Muslims, it may include invoking the power of *jinn*, which are Islamic spirits, in a similar manner.

Traditionally, Zar possession is thought to be responsible for mental and physical illnesses, with the body as a major player. Possession usually begins as a serious trauma or other illness that has not responded to other treatments, with characteristic symptoms being physical paralysis, aggressive acting out or mental confusion (Aspen, 1994). It is believed to be passed down hereditarily, in some cases, or to be acquired due to some individual weakness or social vulnerability, such as being alone, mocking Zar spirits, or not being spiritually protected.

The Zar ceremony entails prolonged singing, dancing, drumming and trance-like states, gift offerings to the spirits and patient, and eating and drinking. All of this can take place over the course of hours or days, and in front of community spectators. While men play an important role, the Zar ceremony is the domain of women. It is a place where idioms of distress, particular to women, are communicated and worked through via a group healing process (Al-Adawi, Martin, Al-Salmi & Ghassani, 2001). Key elements of the ritual are percussive, rhythmic music and singing; appropriate setup of the location including food, incense, and props; costumes, including the woman being dressed as a bride and adorned with beautiful fabric, perfume, kohl, jewelry and henna; animal sacrifice; and participation of family and friends (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994).

Kennedy (1967) examined the Zar phenomenon among Nubian groups in northern Egypt and specifically outlined its social function and the psycho-emotional curative factors of the Zar ceremony. When Zar affliction is diagnosed, the patient, the Zar doctor and the community understand that the patient will have a life-long association with his/her particular Zar spirit. This means the spirit will have to be appeased with special ceremonies at least once per year, and the patient must attend other Zar ceremonies throughout. Often people solicit the assistance of the Zar doctor for problems other than Zar illness, as the doctor is thought to have a deep understanding of people's issues and concerns, particularly any history of traumatic experiences (Aspen, 1994).

From a psychological perspective, the Zar ritual's healing power is thought to come from emotional release and catharsis; empathic focus on the possessed patient; support of community and family; giving symbolic voice to the previously unspeakable; and the witnessing by participants who act as a container for the patient's distress during the ceremony. Zar has also been discussed as an instrument of freedom and discharge for women who occupy marginalized and oppressed positions in their societies. It provides a forum for expressing in ritual what is forbidden in real life. Finally, the role of Zar as a "conveyer and stabilizer of cultural values" has been highlighted (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994).

## **Guinea Dance**

There is a long tradition of dance in Guinea that serves as entertainment and also assumes a healing function in the society similar in some ways to Zar. "Guinea dance," as it is often referred to by Westerners studying the form and local artists in Guinea, is the term describing the specific style of traditional village and stylistic theater dance originating in the Republic of Guinea. This term does not imply one particular dance or ritual; rather, it represents the country's dance consciousness and use of traditional art forms as a tool in spreading its culture abroad and for healing at home. Guinea is a multi-ethnic nation with more than 20 ethno-linguistic groups. Many of these groups have unique, though closely tied, cultures and customs which include the use of dance and song in community life and ritual.

Considered Guinea's premier traditional dance company, *Les Ballets Africains* was formed abroad (in Paris) in 1952 by Guinean choreographer, Keita Fodeba. It eventually became the national ballet of post-independence Guinea (*Les Ballets Africains*, 2011) at the invitation of then president Sekou Toure. This company toured the world and became cultural ambassadors, presenting Guinea's rich traditions and history to international audiences.

*Les Ballets Africains* was part of what can be regarded as a cultural revolution to establish ethnic unity, national pride, and the power of tradition and art in post-colonial nation-building. It harnessed the notion that the various ethnic groups of Guinea have a long legacy of powerful song, dance and story-telling that is used to entertain, educate, and heal.

These various traditions were brought together and transformed into a stylized and theatrical experience for the stage. Dances and rhythms of some of the main ethnic groups, such as the Malinke, SouSou and Fulani, were choreographed against the backdrop of an epic African narrative (in the Mende tradition) adapted to engage and entertainment spectators. The multi-talented ensemble was supported financially by the government (Les Ballets Africains, 2011) and included dancers, drummers, kora masters, balafonists, other traditional instrumentalists, acrobats, tailors, and visual artists/set designers, among others. They toured the world, encouraging a sense of national honor and exposing the world to Africa's rich civilizations. According to the official website of *Les Ballet Africains*, the company carried "with them on their travels the pride and aspirations of their people. The company's ultimate mission is to foster a greater understanding of Africa with a view to creating favorable conditions for a healthy and fruitful cooperation between Africa and the rest of the world" (Les Ballets Africains, 2011).

At home, the ballet's success had the impact of stimulating interest in traditional art forms, which, perhaps, had been taken for granted by some of the younger generation as well as increasing numbers of urban dwellers. Other large ballets formed over the years, including the second national company, *Ballet Djoliba*, and the contemporary *Les Merveilles* founded by former *Les Ballet Africains* choreographer, Kemoko Sano (Les Ballets Africains, 2011). More recently, neighborhood ballets have sprung up in urban and surrounding areas, serving as community recreational outlets and as a bridge to village values and arts. Ballet du Matam, directed by Sekouba Camara, formerly of *Ballet Djoliba*, is just one of dozens in Conakry. *Les Ballets Africains* still performs and tours outside of Guinea.

There is also the tradition of dundunbas, community dance and music celebrations that take place in urban settings as well as villages. They are large gatherings to mark and celebrate important life events, such as birth, baby naming, circumcision, marriage, initiation rites, etc. The best musicians and griots, who are lyrical historians/praise singers in the community, come to play and sing, while spectator-participants sit or stand in a circle. At least one person comes out to the middle of the circle to dance as an expression of respect to the hosts, musicians and guests and to display cultural knowledge of various rhythms and dances. The musical ensemble is usually lead by an orchestra of djembe, dundun, sangban and kenkeni drums and plays various rhythms, each one accompanied by its own dance movements and songs. Often, members of local or professional dance companies attend to demonstrate their dance expertise and skills. The atmosphere incorporates multiple elements: community and group participation; shared experience of carrying out cultural values; freedom of expression within a structured setting adhering to implicit rules; dynamic individualism; participants, particularly dancers and musicians, operating in the present and losing themselves in the moment.

In short, among other functions, it serves as both group and individual cathartic release and healing. In village life, these gatherings may be used more explicitly as part of healing rituals and incorporate other symbolic markers such as use of masks, introduction of initiates, and demonstration of respect for ancestors and elders. The dance movements performed in the village are typically more basic and subdued in comparison to the elaborate routines developed by the professional dance companies and paraded at doundouba celebrations in the capital, Conakry.

Guinea dance is recognized by its rapid footwork, full arm accompaniment, controlled, but rhythmic and fluid mid-body movements, and exuberant style. As with most West African dance, the center is grounded and the dancer's posture is low and stable, as opposed to upright and rigid. Most importantly, there is a marriage between the music and the dance. There are no counts to direct the dance because the drummers' rhythm orients the dancer's moves and sets the tone for the dancer's improvisation and interpretation.

### **In the Field**

During our travel to Guinea to study dance, the authors of this paper (Monteiro and Wall) had the opportunity to witness Guinea dance as a conduit of emotional healing in the community. In this case, it was a spectator who was in need of support and catharsis. During days of participation in an intensive traditional dance class at a compound in Conakry, several dance students noticed a woman at a nearby mosque soliciting donations for herself and her baby who was afflicted with hydroencephalitis. His head was severely swollen with fluids, causing pain and discomfort for him and anguish and despair for his helpless mother. She did not seem to have the finances or access to obtain the proper medical treatment for him. Members of the dance group instantly connected with the mother, Fatim, and brought her inside the dance compound to eat, watch the rehearsals and relax. They also took Fatim to numerous hospitals throughout the city to see if a medical doctor could provide a hopeful prognosis and treatment plan for her son, Musa. All of the specialists gave the same grim news. At 2 years old, Musa had gone so long without any treatment there were no practical medical interventions that could help. Fatim did not seem shocked at hearing the official news. She was mostly silent and indicated that she wanted to return to the compound to observe the dance rehearsal and dundunbas. For days, she brought Musa and sat for hours as impromptu dance, singing and instrument playing erupted. By virtue of their presence, she and Musa became part of the dance. Fatim swayed to the rhythms, closed her eyes during singing and smiled and clapped when individual dancers performed solo routines. After about 4 days, Fatim went back to her home, visibly lighter in spirit. She kept in touch with the group's leader, and although there was no positive change in Musa's condition or prognosis, there was an acceptance and peace in her communication. Fatim and Musa had danced without standing up, sang without uttering a word, and connected to the intangible healing force of dance, just by being there.

## **Krumping, Krump Dance**

Hip hop is a form of musical expression and artistic culture that originated in African American communities. The role of hip-hop, break dancing and other urban dance cultures has long provided a collective identity, mode of expression, and sense of personal freedom for the urban communities where they originated. These dance styles also carry roots in practices of West African culture, which are manifested through ritual, artistic representations, rhythms, music and movement. Dancers in the hip-hop culture confidently claim that this form of dancing is not taught in schools; however, describe the culture as an expression of the unconscious that has “been implanted in [them] from birth” (Rize, 2005), describing the dance as taking them back to their ancestry.

*Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise*, otherwise known as Krump Dance or Krumping, is a derivative of hip-hop culture and received national recognition through the documentary, *Rize* (2005), which depicts the evolution of two related dancing subcultures referred to as “Clowning” and “Krumping” (Lifestyle Lounge, 2011). Krumping is considered to be a popular form of freestyle street dance created in 1992 by Thomas Johnson as a way of offering children and families living in an at-risk urban environment a constructive outlet and alternative to engaging in drugs, violence or gang activity.

In providing a backdrop for the evolution of this dance style, *Rize* (2005) begins by setting the stage of the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. In this introduction, the film depicts scenes in the city where more than a hundred square blocks were decimated by fire and looters, and unadulterated chaos reminiscent of war-torn cities, filled with unbridled lawlessness and destruction. Since the riots, there have been few changes to the violent climate that pervades many adjacent inner-city neighborhoods. It is in these neighborhoods where many of the original dancers “grew up” and still live to this day. As stated in the documentary, Krumping was created here to offer a space for individuals and the community “to grow from the ashes and overcome their hardships” (Rize, 2005). According to Duggen (2006), Krumping is unique, given this social reference. The dancers that reside in these communities face many hardships, deprivations and neglect, as a result of their social environment, which constantly exposes them to destabilizers such as exposure to violence, gangs, drugs, loss, deprivation, neglect and financial destitution.

Given this adverse setting, Krumping, in its original form, known as “Clowning,” places an emphasis on the need for holistic healing by incorporating aspects of community, values, ritual, and spirituality into its practices. Through these regulating structures, individuals in the community are offered a medium to build self-esteem, develop their identity, as well as establish a sacred space for empathy, personal growth and healing to develop. Through their involvement in the dance community, these individuals are also provided the opportunity for the gratification of needs that would otherwise go unmet.

As seen in many African societies, Krumping utilizes rules that regulate behavior, as well as prescribe culturally expected and sanctioned interpersonal roles for the individuals. Rules are minimal and are constructed to encourage the incorporation and practice of prosocial values such as: cooperation, striving for excellence, staying off drugs, and education. In regards to interpersonal roles, the dancers organize themselves into groups known as families or “fams” (Lifestyle lounge, 2011). Many of the primary family units of individuals in these communities are fragmented. In fact, parents are often times absent due to imprisonment, substance abuse or separated by violent loss. Given these deconstructed family units, many children are left to fend for themselves, often times resorting to recreating family substitutes through the streets. For most, Krump dance communities are the only prosocial network that these individuals have to depend on. These family units offer the dancers a space to develop a collective identity where the individuals' membership impacts their own identity in a positive way offering a sense of unity and belongingness.

In its original form, this dance style incorporates aspects of spirituality and has Christian roots. Though the extent of the assimilation of Christian doctrine is indistinct, incorporating fundamental Christian teachings and beliefs offers dancers a viewpoint that emphasizes the importance of faith, community and a way of life. In the documentary, a dancer regarded Krumping, not as a trend but a belief in itself, which provides a space to feel confident, to meditate, to make a statement, as well as give their lives value and meaning.

In regards to Christianity, Krumping also incorporates similar rhythms and movements said to be found in African American church settings. In addition, the dancers in the documentary describe the significance of attending church in order to gain a deeper connection with the spirit, which is believed to be created in the dance. In the film, the dancers describe the importance of the spirit that lies in the “midst of Krumpness” (Rize, 2005). As seen in many African cultures, the significance of spirituality and the connection to ones' spirit is viewed as essential for healing to take place, as well as help the dancers to break through feelings of oppression.

In many ways, this dance form serves a ritualistic function, offering a steady pulse that regulates, stabilizes and anchors their lives. Krumping, as seen in many systems that incorporate ritual as a part of healing, shares a similar philosophy on the nature of affliction and social suffering. It also defines rules for individuals; establishes a circumscribed place for the dance to take place; and, in addition to elements of spontaneity, it incorporates specific actions and movement that serve to promote healing and wellbeing of the community of dancers.

Costumes and masks are also incorporated into the customs of this dance form. Each family creates individualized uniforms to express their group identity. Dancers' faces are usually painted in colorful tones whose style has evolved to become a matter of personal choice and expression.

However, the purpose of the face painting is believed to keep the dancers identity hidden offering anonymity. The purpose of such anonymity appears to allow the individual to dance without restraint or consciousness of the self which paves the way for uninhibited self expression.

The utilization of spontaneous, as well as prescribed movements is also fundamental in this dance style. Krumping is described as very energetic, lively, vigorous, unpredictable and raw. The physical nature of the dance involves intense movements that are cathartic and provide the dancers with a means to release and express intense emotions such as anger, aggression and frustration positively, in a non-violent way. The intensity of movements often times results in dancers becoming “struck,” which is portrayed as a transcendental state which evokes alternate mood experiences and states of consciousness. Dancers in the film offered much support, nurturance and holding to individuals who transition into these vulnerable states, which is revered with much respect and value. Duggen (2006) proposes that “the capacity [of these movements to] facilitate ecstatic transcendence [make] this dance a healing art form” (p. 50).

Healing is an important outcome of this dance style. In the documentary, Krumping was described as a way to help contain the closed chapter of life that harbors feelings of hurt, sorrow and anger “that people don’t know about.” The individuals in the community are often described as carrying “a whole set of anxieties that they are confronted with on a day to day basis” given their social environment. Duggen (2006, p. 51) emphasizes that “the restriction of focus [seen in this dance style, also] permits a circumscribed self abandon which allows the dancers to vent their rage without actualizing the destructive potential of their emotions and wrecking havoc on the environment.” This physical expression of emotions lessens feelings of vulnerability, and offers a channel to release negative emotions, and work through feelings of deprivation and pain. This cathartic experience is particularly beneficial given the traumatic social context of these communities. Through dance, individuals are able to construct meaning, as well as develop a sense of control and mastery over powerful impulses which could often become destabilizing. Instead of internalizing the disturbing impact of their environment, they are offered a space to adaptively work through their struggles, which ultimately lessens the manifestation of psychological, behavioral and social difficulties.

As this style of dance has become popularized, it has gradually been followed and assimilated by people from various regions and cultures, resulting in continuously evolving dance styles. Given the rapid growth and recognition of this dance form, Krumping continues to evolve as an art form that offers immeasurable healing properties to the individuals and communities involved. Even though this dance form does not completely transform the seemingly static atmosphere of the inner-city communities where these dancers reside, the availability of this healing outlet fosters a sense resiliency in the dancers that allows them to thrive and grow without being inundated or constrained by the adversity of their surroundings.



## **Discussion: Contemporary Applications**

A number of salient themes can be gleaned from the exploration of traditional conceptualizations in Africa. Namely, the emphasis on holism as opposed to separation; integration of self parts and realms of existence; purposeful inclusion of the body in diagnosing and treating maladies; viewing psychological problems as temporary, external states; and understanding causation and remedies as rooted within the group or community. Movement and ritual can ground the individual and community, especially when faced with overwhelming trauma.

So, how does this traditional framework from an African perspective translate to the modern, industrialized Western context? In one respect, descendents of the African Diaspora have carried with them deeply-rooted cultural inclinations and unconscious memory of their ancestral traditions. And, in very practical ways, the manifestations of these institutions show up in day-to-day life throughout the Diaspora. By virtue of the influence that people of African descent have on the fabric of the mainstream societies they inhabit, traditional worldviews have both concrete and theoretical relevance in the West. Descendents of Africa live both the ancestral and the modern. Not surprisingly, they develop adaptive coping that encompasses both perspectives and embraces communalistic leanings, spirituality, and movement.

Dance is one form that clearly connects the contemporary with the traditional. Many urban, marginalized or otherwise disenfranchised youth have instinctively and consciously tapped into the artistic healing and movement traditions of the Diaspora. Dance forms such as hip-hop, break dancing, pop locking and Krumping have acted as vessels of inter-generational cultural transmission, as well as modes of community and individual healing. In addition, traditional African dance as taught and practiced in the West has also taken on a therapeutic function, e.g., women intentionally utilizing African dance for self-therapy and community-building.

It has become increasingly important and widespread for contemporary healing practitioners to integrate multiple therapeutic paradigms for diverse patient populations. There are numerous positive examples of this trend. One program for African refugees and asylum-seekers, the African Women's Wellness Group (developed by grassroots organization Na We Yone, Inc.) ran a single sex therapeutic group combining Western group therapy techniques and culturally-congruent interventions to support women. The group incorporated story-telling, dance, drumming and other music to foster a sense of familiarity and extended family, reduce social isolation and increase comfort with the process of talking about trauma and other problems (Akinsulure-Smith, Ghiglione, & Wollmershauser, 2009).

Another program used similar approaches for refugees fleeing war and conflict in an international setting. The Center for Victims of Torture's program for Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea used "creative methods of symbolization...contemporary expressive therapy with indigenous healing practices (e.g., songs, cultural stories, drama, drawing, dance/movement, letter-writing, rituals)" (Stepakoff, 2007, p. 400). The goal was to utilize verbal and non-verbal ways of giving form to traumatic war experiences and to counter the harm inflicted by silence (Stepakoff, 2007).

In addition, some dance therapists have included ceremonial and ritual aspects of Zar in their groups to make it "a more effective and inspiring experience" (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994, p. 120). These examples underscore the dynamic function of African dance and ritual in a multiple settings and contexts. The African worldview accepts, as central the importance of ritual and ceremonial healing for the individual, community and nation. Black dance, in its multiple derivations, represents the continuity of this paradigm.

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