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Art of Black Dance and Music

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An Interview with DeAma Battle

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Classically trained in dance, DeAma Battle became interested in Africa-rooted dance in the 1960s. She started performing the traditional dances from Africa that spread, via the Atlantic slave trade, to the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. She not only has performed those steps and movements, Battle has studied them, with master dancers from West Africa, Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba. One of her teachers and mentors was Chuck Davis, a leading African American teacher of traditional African dance. Her research has probed deeper, into the field abroad, on dance-study tours to Haiti, Jamaica, Ghana, Senegal, Morocco, and other countries with an African cultural heritage. Battle regards modern dance pioneer Katherine Dunham, who studied the cultural traditions of Haiti, as a role model. A dancer, artistic director, and choreographer, Battle also considers herself to be a dance archivist.

In 1975, Battle founded the Art of Black Dance and Music in Somerville, Massachusetts, to perform and teach Africa-derived dances. One of the company's goals has been to unify people of African descent "through the study of African-rooted dance, music, and folklore" to illustrate "cultural similarities within the African Diaspora."

Dancing in Africa's Shadow

DeAma Battle, an artistic director and choreographer who has researched Africa-derived dances for decades, performs traditional steps while clad in the garb of her ancestral continent. Her studies and travels have documented steps and movements common to dances done in Africa and different countries in the Diaspora. Photo courtesy of DeAma Battle.

In this interview with *Trotter Review* editor Kenneth J. Cooper, Battle discusses specific dances that Africa-descended people partake in in the Americas that incorporate traditional movements still performed in West Africa. Within the Diaspora, she identifies similarities between the traditional *capoeira* of Brazil and the break dancing popular in America in the 1970s. The African way of moving is so embedded, Battle notes, that it shows up even in the way black people who live on different continents walk. The interview was conducted in late 2013 at the Boston Conservatory of Music, where Battle teaches.

Trotter Review (TR): In broad terms, how much similarity in movements and steps is there between and among dance in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and the African American community?

DeAma Battle (DB): Well, let me look at that from more of a cultural group experience, such as your farmers, your fishermen, your general community folk. Wherever they are, whatever they are, if they're agriculturalists or if they're industrialists, those movements reflect that kind of environment. When it moves out of its environment, it becomes fused with other traditions and cultures, obviously.

But there are a lot of things that remain the same, the way we move our body with contractions, our movements, and things that more or less express what we're feeling inside and according to what the drum plays for us, what the music plays for us. There's an old saying that the rhythms and the movements of people in the African Diaspora are embedded in our backbone. I don't want to say DNA, but that's basically what it is. It's in our DNA, our backbone. It's in every generation, all the way back to the beginning.

So when the right rhythms are struck, when the right songs are sung, they evoke a certain type of movement, and that can be global. Some of it stems from religion. Some of it stems from just being in social settings. Some of it stems from how people move when naming a child, [present at] weddings. Essentially, the movements that follow us are the movements that help us celebrate different phases of our life. Some of those transition to those new cultures and become something a little different. But the root of where that movement comes from is always evident.

The root of it is still the same, because it's expressing a bodily feeling as well as a musical feeling. When certain rhythms happen, they evoke a certain type of movement.

It's like break dance and *capoeira*. Those are two very similar styles of dance. When the young people here started doing break dance, they had no idea that *capoeira* was the forefather of that style.

TR: In what ways are *capoeira* and break dancing similar?

DB: They're similar because they both require a certain type of strength, a lot of acrobatic movements. *Capoeira* was once used as a form of protection. It's still a battle. It's still a martial arts form. During the Brazilian resistance, it moved under the ground because they were not allowed to dance it. All way up until 1888, somewhere around there, African people were not allowed to dance that. So what they did instead was to take it underground, make it a dance form, where the people could still practice those movements and keep their strength together.

Some of those movements are the way the young teenagers used to start their break dance form. One of the steps in the Brazilian form was called *ginga*. It was a forward, step back, forward, step back. Then they would go into their movement. When the break dancers did it, it was a forward, step back, forward, step back. It had a little rhythm to it. Then they would go into their spins and all of that, cartwheels, flips. All of those movements are seen in *capoeira*. They're also seen in the traditions of the Fula acrobats of West Africa. In stick fights that were done in Trinidad in the Caribbean, you could see some of those movements.

TR: You said African movement is in the backbone. Saying it's in the backbone suggests it has a physical manifestation. I'm wondering about a simple movement like walking. Is there something similar about the way people in Africa and various places in the Diaspora walk?

DB: Well, there is, actually. There's a certain swing and sway as we walk. I think the younger folks used to call it a hip walk. It was definitely a rhythm within the body that could not be duplicated by other cultures, but they've learned how to do it.

You know how the guys used to walk, and the whole body would be involved in the rhythm. When you see people walking that way, whether they have something on their heads, they're still a kind of swing and sway motion in the body that I've seen all the way from different parts of Africa into the Caribbean. The ladies have a way of swinging their hips from right to left as they walk. It's more of a sway. I guess the word now is swagger. [laughs]

It's like when you hear certain rhythms, even though you've never been exposed to them before, they make you move a certain way. If you know what that was about, you would know how to identify it. It has never been awakened in you from a traditional point of view, so you have no clue where it comes from. You just know you like to move this particular way when you hear this particular rhythm. I think that is what has followed us as people around the globe because it helps to identify where we are coming from, even though we may not know ourselves.

For instance, you can look at somebody and just watch how they walk and how they move. I can almost tell if they're from the Caribbean or if they're coming right out of Africa, if they're from New York City. It's an identity for people, to some degree. I guess I'm more sensitive to it because I do the research and I see these similarities everywhere I go. I just don't know how to identify all of them. But that's part of my life as a dancer as I have moved around to different countries, to notice the similarities of people.

TR: A great many African cultural practices were deliberately extinguished during slavery. But dance doesn't need any kind of artifact to do it. Is that why it survived, even though in Brazil they tried to put a lid on it?

DB: Right. When people went underground with it, as I see it, it was structured so that it was an acceptable dance form that you could be invited to do at any event. Underneath that was the practice itself.

TR: You mention that *capoeira*, break dancing, the Fula acrobatic tradition, and stick dancing in Trinidad have similar movements. Are there other kinds of analogous steps from Africa across the Diaspora?

DB: Sure there are. They don't have names. Let me look at it from a religious point of view. If you follow the Yoruba religion out of West Africa, there are certain songs and certain rhythms and certain ways of moving to those songs and rhythms that have followed African people from Dahomey, Nigeria, and Togo. Wherever the Yoruba people are is where you will find those similarities. The Yoruba of Nigeria have become the Yoruba of Cuba, of Puerto Rico, in some cases. It's become Shango Baptist in Trinidad.

The dance I remember in Jamaica is called *kumina*, which is a dance that originally came out of Ghana—the slow movement with the feet sliding across the floor, or the ground, with very little body motion happening. Then there are dances that have the big leg lift things. They used to call it the old sailor's dance, when they did that kind of step, where they rocked back and forth. That's an extension of the Yoruba religion, like the *kumina* dance.

You get into Trinidad with Shango Baptist. Shango is one of the Yoruba deities. Even though, from country to country, the colors may change, in terms of what that dancer may wear, basically Shango has a certain type of rhythm, a certain type of force that he moves with. That must always be included in his dance.

The same with Yemenya, Oshun. There are a lot of deities that have motions that we still see in Caribbean dance, where they do the little, it's like, one foot in front, one foot in back. [demonstrates with feet] They dance all around—Yemenya's dance goes like [demonstrates]. Oshun's dance goes like that [demonstrates]. So when you see those motions you kind of identify them with those deities. That Yoruba flow has permeated the globe. It may not be exact today, but there's always some kind of underlying movement or rhythm or words of a song.

Things changed but things stay the same. That was one of the only ways we could hold on to a leaf from the tree of life from Africa. That was our connection. I think in a lot of cases maybe what destroyed that, obviously, was the institution of slavery.

TR: I seem to have read that there were a number of very popular dance steps in the United States that had an African origin, not so much right now, but the Charleston and, more recently, the funky chicken.

DB: Those are derivatives. Those are the pieces that we held on to. Even in my day, when we had the dance called the jerk, the monkey. Those are derivatives. Those were the small pieces that we were able to hold on to and unfortunately cannot tie into in terms of location or language or origin. But they're there. How come they're there? It's in the backbone. [laughs]

TR: You've done a lot of research on dance in different countries. So when you went to different places in Africa, did you see traditional dances that reminded you of something that's done in the United States?

DB: Right. When you were talking about the funky chicken, there's a dance where the arms go out, which was a dance we called *lengen* that came from the Gambia-Senegal region of West Africa. What we did was tuck those arms up here and maintain that movement. Why did we do that? That's how it hit us from this point, where the arms go out or even to the back.

TR: And the legs?

DB: Where the legs do the Charleston—the rubber legs is what I want to call it. That's Senegal, though not strictly. It's what we call the Wolof tradition, and we did that way back in the twenties, thirties, and forties when those dances were popular. So that's like we see those similarities in a lot of different dances. Everybody knows how to do those steps. By the time we got it, it was called the rubber legs and then it went from that into the Charleston.

TR: In Africa, dance movements, from what I understand, have a ritual function, a meaning. An African immersed in his cultural traditions, the steps, and the meanings, then comes to the United States and sees black folks born in America doing something similar without any idea of the ritual or other significance. Those Africans may say, "Those people don't really know what they're doing. There's a cultural ignorance about those people." Is that a legitimate view?

DB: It is. That's kind of one of my pet peeves too—is the African people who are here or who come here to teach dance don't take enough time to explain the connections. I think because of that we can't make the links to dance origins unless you spend time there, live amongst the people and see how the dance evolved and kind of what ceremony it was for or how many times a year it happened. It might not happen for two years. But that's what being immersed in the culture is about. People who live there or at least are there for a long length of time so that they can get an idea of what happens over 365 days—how is the culture celebrated, what dances they do in May, as opposed to December.

Now when the young people come here to teach, they bring that with them, but their whole thing is, let's make something new out of what we have. They have that right, because they're the next generation. The thing that I feel in some cases is those of us who studied African dance never made the connection between why we did moves, like with your head going up and down. What did that mean? A dance like *lamba* or *danza* was the beginning of a state of possession in order to heal someone.

TR: Where are those dances from?

DB: Some of them were from Mali. Some of them were from Senegal. Some were from Guinea.

TR: So when you move your head back and forth—

DB: If the rhythms are right, if the songs are right—we're going back into the religion of it, to the lifestyle of it—when those things are all in place, then possession takes place.

Church is a perfect example. When you go to black churches, people start talking in tongues. Where did they learn that? How did they learn that? It's in the backbone. When you get possessed in church, it's the same as being out in the countryside and you've got 19 drummers playing the rhythms, and the rhythms affect you in a certain way. One of the drummers was telling me one time that the drum is the healer, depending on how you use it, the way you play it. Certain tones affect certain parts of your body. If it's affecting the head, there's a good chance

you're going to become possessed, so if you are the one who's in need of a healing, that would be time for the imam or the medicine person to come forward and work on you. Out in the bush, that's the doctor.

TR: You mentioned church when you talked about possession. There's dance in church too, right?

DB: Yeah. There's a church shout where your feet don't leave the floor. Ring shout dances, plantation dances of the South, are very close to the traditional. In ring shouts, you move around in a circle, and your feet barely leave the ground. A lot of dances are done in a circle in Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil. When you get into church, you have that small group of people sometimes that comes right up front. If [the church is] oblong, it still comes down to people wanting to move around in a circle, if they're in the front of the church and shouting. Sometimes the feet will kick up and down, or sometimes they just shuffle back and forth.

In the *kumina* dance I mentioned earlier, the feet very rarely leave the floor. That becomes like a creep almost between the toe and the heel of the foot, while the rest of the body is circling. The concept of that is the contact with the spirit world, the same as in church. How did we learn that? Through the backbone.

TR: The last time we talked, you talked about the cultural similarities across the Diaspora, into Africa and back. You said something about trying to keep people from fighting each other by getting them to see these similarities. This knowledge of dance and other cultural similarities, how does that bring together an African descended population in this country that's becoming more and more diverse with the waves of immigration from the Caribbean and Africa?

DB: Well, if we choose to recognize nations of people, the Haitian people will relate to the Ibos of Nigeria and the people of the Congo. That relationship is what keeps the connection to Africa. In Cuba, it's the same thing. In Puerto Rico, it's the same thing. There are dances, there's language, there's music, there's movement that people still know comes direct from the African ancestors. There are many gaps

between what it was originally and what it is now. For the people who hold onto that African tradition, they will always know where they come from. There will be no doubt about it.

People here in America have been the most deprived of their culture. This was the hardest institution of slavery in the world. As a matter of fact, I was watching *Roots* for the third or fourth time the other night, and I happened to pick it up where Kunta Kinte was being beaten for not saying his name was Toby. The reinforcement for him after that event was the community came around and said to him in so many words, it doesn't matter what they want you to call yourself, you know who you are and you know where you come from.

That's that little leaf I was saying that comes off the baobab tree, the tree of life; that's the leaf that is the only connection in some cases that many of us have to the continent. Even though we seem to be waking up nowadays, we are still very, very oblivious of who we are and our culture. I think the biggest thing that made it happen was the whole research thing on DNA that took families back—as far as they could, anyway—to where they came from.

Many people found out that most of their family was white, or Portuguese, or some mix like that, but the actual African person has been so diluted with other cultures that sometimes they don't even believe that they're African-rooted people. They don't identify with it at all. So that much of the population is lost until they wake up.