Transnationalism of West African Dance: A Dance Ethnographer’s Perspective

By Anisha Rajeev Kumar
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Sharon Kivenko is a doctoral candidate in Social Anthropology at Harvard University. The title of her dissertation is “Mobile Modes: On the Transnationalization of Malian Dance and Music.” Sharon is also an avid dancer, having studied West African dances (from Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Cote D’Ivoire, and Ghana) since 1999. She is a former member of Maputo and Mawenyega Mensah’s Colorado-based Ghanaian dance ensemble, Logo Legi, and has performed and studied in the greater Boston area with a number of Malian artists including, Mohammed “Joh” Camara and his Malian dance ensemble, Troupe Sewa as well as with Seydou and Michelle Bach-Coulibaly, and Moussa Traoré. In 2009–2010, while conducting field research for her dissertation, she spent 10 months apprenticing in Bamako with the award-winning Troupe du District de Bamako and with other renowned and respected Malian dancers and musicians, including M’ba Coulibaly and Brahim Coulibaly. Currently, Sharon teaches Malian dance classes in Boston, and she is an Instructor in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University, teaching a course of the Anthropology of Performance and Embodiment.

The following excerpt is a dance ethnographer’s reflection on West African dance, based on an interview with Sharon Kivenko:

West African dance exemplifies the intertwined nature of art, spirituality,
and communal experiences. Though the term “West African dance” can refer to various dance forms from countries such as Mali, Senegal, and Guinea, there are certain shared traits of West African dance forms: polyrhythmic percussion, movement of the whole trunk and head, the “get down” body posture, and the call-and-response pattern between the individuals and the musicians. Through the globalization of information and transnational movements of bodies and traditions, these cultural dance forms have gained prominence in West African communities and African American communities across America.

Kivenko’s dance experiences in West Africa and Boston suggest that the dance forms of the Mande world have undergone transformation as they have crossed geographic boundaries. The primary difference is that West African dance in Boston is conducted in a dance-studio setting. The class starts at a specific time and ends at a specific time, often in a Western-style of conducting a dance class: people placed in different lines with the lines moved across the floor in sequence. Another difference between the dance forms practiced in Boston compared to dance forms practiced in West Africa is the role of improvisation. Improvisation is extremely important in Mali and West Africa—it is a form of celebration. People will dance in front of the drummers, and communication builds between dancer and drummer. However, improvisation in West African dance in Boston is limited and done differently; in Boston, improvisation implies either letting loose completely or doing a very structured, choreographed dance. Yet, the principles of improvisation in West African dance exist between both those extremes.

When Kivenko was completing her Master’s degree in Theological Studies, she thought a lot about translating dance for the stage from a ritual context. But she was not satisfied with merely reading and watching footage of dance performances. It was important for her to go to the places where the dance was performed and to see the translation of dance in action. She found that the best way to understand dance performance was through the field of anthropology. Anthropology gave her the methodological tools as well as the academic structure through which she could consider the concepts of embodiment. In particular, she became interested in how international movement and transnational migration affect people’s habits and how they move their bodies in life and in dance.

According to Kivenko, dance ethnography is a difficult field because in scholarly circles, explaining the validity of dance as a research subject is an immense challenge. It can be difficult to convince scholars that ephemeral moments, such as dance, need to be examined not only in a scholarly way but also through physical experience. However, the challenges of dance ethnography are also beneficial because they continue to encourage Kivenko to return to the question about the purpose of her work and its scholarly value.

Kivenko’s role as an ethnographer influences her experiences as a dancer. As someone who has been studying these forms of dance for 11 years—dancing multiple times a week, performing, going to West Africa—she invariably assesses the skills of the dancers as she observes performances and classes. Through her ethnographer’s lens, she asks herself about the cultural and historical context of each dance piece. Furthermore, because she conducts research not only on West African dance but also on moving bodies, it has been incredible for her to move through the world and watch bodies navigate in the street, in the library, and at the supermarket. These experiences, in turn, inform her scholarship.