

DANCING WISDOM: EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE IN HAITIAN VODOU, CUBAN YORUBA, AND BAHIAN CANDOMBLÉ

by Yvonne Daniel. 2005. *Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 324 pp., 13 photographs. \$55.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.*

Noted scholar of Cuban dance Yvonne Daniel has written the book of her life with *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, covering nearly thirty years of research in Haiti, Cuba, and Bahia, Brazil. Through the accumulation of her anthropological fieldwork; her dance and religious studies of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé; and her work as dancer, educator, and arts administrator for some of the key Cuban-U.S. cultural exchanges, *Dancing Wisdom* places the author front and center in her quest to understand the continuing influence of African religions in the Americas and their centrality in complex dance and drumming traditions.

Daniel covers a great deal of her own scholarly, spiritual, and personal experiences in this sweeping panorama of African-based religions and dance. As anthropologist Sheila Walker states in her book endorsement, *Dancing Wisdom* is “[a]n ambitious, foundational book that could not have been written by anyone else.” It is precisely because Daniel is so intimate with these traditions and culture bearers over such a large span of her life that she is able to go well beyond the participant-observer model of anthropology, like a twenty-first-century Katherine Dunham or Pearl Primus. She dissects similarities and differences of the three religious practices and their use of dance ritual, discusses cosmic theoretical frames within the ritual experience; discerns previous scholarly analyses and further explicates historical antecedents

among the West and Central African nations from which the three religions were spawned; enumerates her development of teaching models to enable U.S. dance students to learn some of the depth of this cultural material; and, at the same time, entices us into the center of personal transformation through the experience of the dance movements and corresponding rhythms. Daniel allows herself to be at once an acute scholar, a precise and knowledgeable dancer, and a fully participating religious seeker.

In chapter 1, “Deciphering Diaspora Dances,” the author immediately offers the reader snapshots of dance rituals in all three geographical sites. We are allowed into her first trip to Haiti in 1974 as a young dance student of the Dunham Technique and Haitian dances with Lavinia Williams Yarbrough, then living in Haiti. From her first attendance at a *ceremòni* for the *lwas* (Haitian divinities) officiated by the *oungan* (priest), she draws conclusions about the centrality of dance when she observes:

During that first ceremony I realized how much I had learned from dancing in Haitian dance classes. I recognized and understood a great deal about Haitian religion just from the process of learning the dances. I knew that the dance ritual’s ultimate purpose was to bring transformation of the believing community, such that particular spirits would appear in the bodies of ritual believers. (12)

She found the same purpose through the dance at a Cuban Yoruba ritual fourteen years later in 1987 in Matanzas, when she was doing her doctoral fieldwork. Yet she notices differences in the use of dance in Cuban ritual, where, “unlike in Haiti, more specific information guides each dance performance; that is, the personality and domain of each divinity” (15). Then, four years later in 1991,

the fully degreed dance anthropologist draws us into a Bahian Candomblé ritual. Here she is taken by her friend Gracinha to one of the most recognized *terreiros* (Candomblé temples), Axé Opô Afonjá, in Salvador da Bahia. She observes that these *terreiros* were like “cathedrals” or large compounds with structures for each of the *orixás* (divinities) and living quarters for the participating members, making the Candomblé ceremonies much more formal than those held in the Cuban *casa* (devotional space in a home) or Haitian *peristil* (thatched ritual space). In this way, the three sites and their respective religions and dances are immediately personalized, allowing the reader insider information in order to understand the “embodied knowledge” of the complex cosmology underlying these danced religions.

Many of Daniel’s key concepts developed throughout the book are introduced in the first chapter. One such concept is “intra-African syncretism,” a mixture of different cultural traits from different African nations both in her three sites in the Americas and on the African continent itself. Daniel identifies the Fon nation of old Dahomey, now Benin, the Yoruba in what is now Nigeria (who were involved with cross-cultural influences with the Fon even before the Atlantic slave trade), and the Kongo-Angola region of West Central Africa as forming what she calls “national religions in the diaspora,” which “continued to blend both beliefs and practices in the Americas” (96). Chapter 3, “Days of Remembrance,” explores this concept in depth; yet what is interesting about this chapter is that it develops as a dialogue between the author and two of the divinities of the religions: Elegba (Cuba), Exu (Bahia), Papa Legba (Haiti) as the first deity to be invoked at the crossroads of life within the religions, and Ogun, the deity of war and iron. Information from the divinities is in italics,

ostensibly obtained through spiritual means of divination or as “manifestations” in ritual. Ogun explains, “Yoruba belief from Nigeria and Benin became Nago *nayson* (nation) in Haiti, and Yoruba, Lucumi, or Santeria in Cuba. In Brazil, it is *naçao* (nation) Nago, Ketu, or Nago/Ketu . . . Also, the Kongo-Anglo religions of Central Africa became Congo, Petwo . . . in Haiti; Kongo, Bantu, Palo, or Palo Monte in Cuba and Angola in Brazil” (99). Daniel, therefore, conveys intricate historical information about the syncretization of African cultures forming the sources of these danced religions of the African diaspora, conveying their similarities yet discrete developments in her three sites. She does this by privileging different ways of knowing other than scholarly inquiry. The information provided by the divinities themselves intermixes with her scholarly research to provide a fuller picture of the history and contemporary expressions of African diasporic religions.

Central to *Dancing Wisdom* is the concept of “embodied knowledge” in the subtitle. Early on Daniel states that she assumes an “African Diaspora Dance Perspective” that positions dance and music to “reference other dimensions beyond the social arena, . . . [including] spirituality and spiritual development in Diaspora cultures” (51). Implicit in this perspective toward academic inquiry is a rejection of the Cartesian mind-body split underpinning much of Western epistemology. The cultures under investigation necessarily rely on unspoken texts—embodied and sounded knowledge through dance and music—that carry poignant information about the social, historic, economic, philosophic, and spiritual dimensions of life. In so doing, the ritual context of the sacred Vodou, Yoruba, and Candomblé dances and rhythms creates sacred space where “the three realms”—the living, ancestral, and cosmic—

can be cognized and brought into communication with each other. According to Daniel, this communication between the three realms is facilitated by the “superhuman body” resulting from the goal of the ceremony: spiritual transformation or embodying the *lwa*, *oricha*, or *orixá*. Because of intra-African syncretism many of the divinities’ movements are universally symbolic and often recognizable across her three diaspora cultures.

Chapter 2, “Body Knowledge at the Crossroads,” and chapter 9, “The Dancing Body and Embodied Wisdom,” clarify in detail the ways in which the dance and music of these religions both constitute and are constitutive of ancient wisdom that has been transferred across time and space.

The dance and music forms “housed” . . . theoretical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual information. These data became blueprints with choices for possible action. When or if circumstances change, ritual believers could choose from their repository of wisdom among differently powerful divinities and adjust appropriately, giving power and relevance to many social circumstances. (64)

Grounded on this understanding, and aided by many charts and diagrams, Daniel contends that these embodied religious practices contain scientific wisdom, including “Embodied Botany,” “Embodied Physiology and Psychology,” as well as “Embodied Mathematics of Drum Performance.” All of this flies in the face of lingering uninformed perspectives of these religions as superstitious pagan rites at best, or frenzied “devil worship” at worst. Illuminating her purpose throughout the text as trying to transmit “what the dance does,” she explores the “channels of sensory perception” (246) of her own dancing body. She captures Oya’s quality of power as the transformative wind, for example, through

the explanation of her triplet movement and the graceful use of her *iruke* (ritual flywhisk) waving above her head as the symbol of the wind. She invokes the strength of Chango, as the Cuban deity of thunder and procreation, through the description of his forceful arm movement that “pulls energy from the skies towards his genitals” (262). In turn, the celebration of these universal forces through the body by the ritual community creates a balanced social body politic.

Although there has been much written from anthropological, musical, religious, and cultural perspectives regarding African and African diaspora religions, Daniel’s project is particularly comprehensive and comparative, while privileging dance and the body. The depths of African cosmology were captured by Griaule in 1948 (reprinted in 1965); the truths of African social organization and its recreated sensibilities among U.S. blacks was illuminated by Herskovits in 1941; the concept of New World African cultures was explained by Jahn in 1961; and in 1974 Robert Farris Thompson published his *African Art in Motion*, offering a typology of aesthetic qualities that to this day allow us to draw connections and parallels across the African diaspora as well as the many African cultures on the continent. Of course there have been many texts explicating Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou, including Dunham (1983) Deren (1953), Bastide (1978), Murphy (1988), Brown (1991), and Brandon (1993), as well as many indigenous scholars from those cultures such as Ortiz (1950) and Cabrera (1940) in Cuba, and Desmangles (1992) in Haiti. However, what makes Daniel’s text unique, besides its emphasis on the dancing body, is its extensive comparison of religious practices across the African diaspora (perhaps only one other previous text has done this: *Flash of the Spirit* [1984] by Robert Farris Thompson). In *Rum-*

ba: *Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* (1995), Daniel examined a signature secular dance in one culture of the diaspora; in *Dancing Wisdom* she makes a giant graceful leap into many sacred dances and their contexts across the diaspora. In the process, she advances dance anthropology through ambitious meticulous scholarship, acute comparative analyses, riveting ethnographic description, and a sensual sense of the dancing body that makes one feel the movement in the muscles and the spirit.

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PERFORMING KONARAK, PERFORMING HIRAPUR: DOCUMENTING THE ODISSI OF GURU SURENDRANATH JENA

by Alessandra Lopez y Royo. 2007. SOAS, University of London, AHRC Research Centre for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance. £10.00.

INTERPRETING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING INDONESIAN DANCE AND MUSIC HERITAGE

by Alessandra Lopez y Royo. 2007. SOAS, University of London, AHRC Research Centre for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance. £10.00.

Two recently produced films by Alessandra Lopez y Royo focus on dance innovation in two different cultural contexts, each demonstrating how new aesthetics are forged within and between traditional practices. Both films are well crafted, thoughtfully edited, and will be very useful for pedagogical purposes. They illustrate dance innovations not in terms of rupture or as dismantling classical canons but rather as continuous reinventions existing in relation to tradition.

In *Performing Konarak, Performing Hira-*