

# **A Multicultural Comprehension of Traditional Dancing in Ghana and China: A Genealogical Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uncovers both Ghanaian and the Chinese various traditional dances in as much as multicultural comprehension is concerned. There is no denying of the fact that, China has a lot of rich and genealogical traditional dances as applicable to Ghana. Both countries have a peculiar historical traditional ways of doing things most especially dancing, in so far as their respective jurisdictions are concerned. Traditional dancing is not left out of the witness box when accounting for the genealogical analysis on both China and Ghana. Gone were the days when traditional dancing brings people together as one and also even provides a platform for people in meeting their life partners. This handful significance is still in existence.

**Keywords:** Traditional Dance, Ghana, China, Multicultural, Genealogical Analysis.

## **1. Introduction**

On March 6, 1957, the nation of Ghana declared its independence, becoming the first formerly colonized sub-Saharan African nation to do so. Formed from the combination of the Gold Coast and Togoland, two former British colonies, Ghana stretches from the dusty edge of the Sahara to the lush rainforests of the Atlantic coast. Prior to contact with European colonialists, numerous ethno-linguistic groups, each with distinct historical and cultural identities, inhabited these lands. Though colonial rule and subsequent African nationalism created a new political and geographical order, the cultural experiences of Ghana's people are still deeply tied to older ways of life. Traditional chiefs continue to retain power over many small claims and domestic issues in rural areas, and Ghana's cultural heritage still reflects its grounding in the greater history of West African civilization. As a result, music remains as integral to the everyday lives of Ghanaians as it has been for centuries. Intensely rhythmic and suffused with meaning, Ghana's many traditions of song, dance, and drumming remain intimately attached to the survival of its communities.

Music marks the cycles of life, animates religious rituals, and communicates social values. Dance in China is a highly varied art form, consisting of many modern and traditional dance genres. The dances cover a wide range, from folk dances to performances in opera and ballet, and may be used in public celebrations, rituals and ceremonies. There are also 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China, and each ethnic minority group in China also has its own folk dances. The best known Chinese dances today are the Dragon dance and the Lion Dance.

## Ghana and China Maps in Perspective

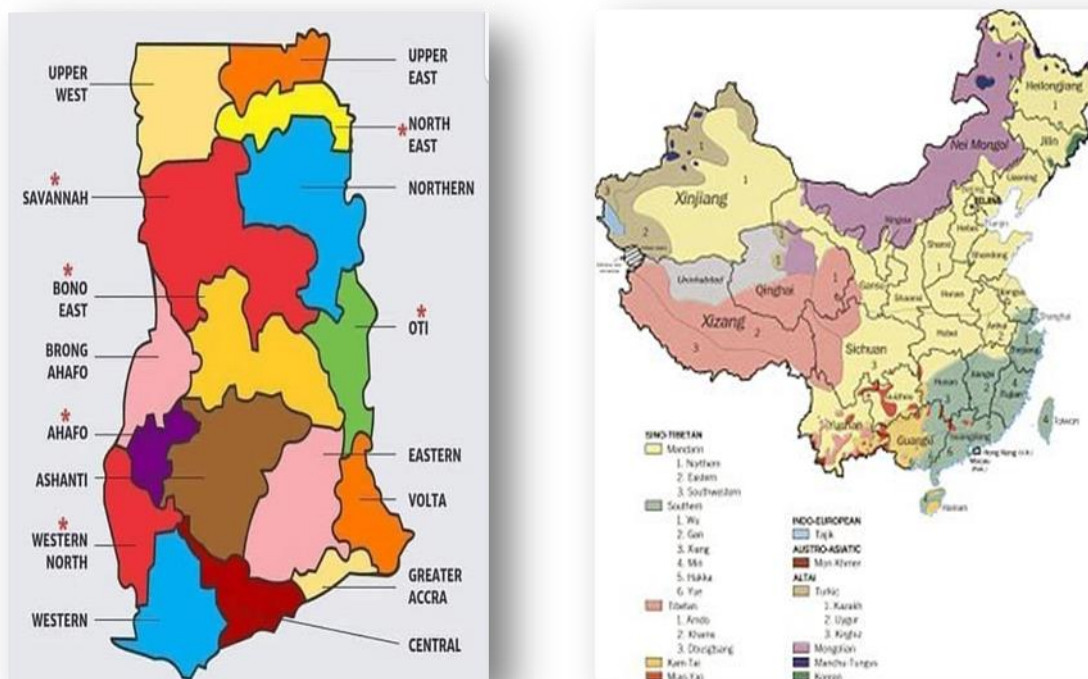


Figure-1 Maps of Ghana and PR China showing the various regions and Provinces Respectively

## 2. Traditional Dances in Ghana

Each ethnic group has their own traditional dances and there are different dances for different occasions. There are dances for funerals, traditional festivals, celebrations, storytelling, praises and worship. These individual dances give a diverse picture of the history and relevance behind traditional dance. Collectively each dance does not contain the same traditional relevance, but with the movements and history of each dance the author was able to point to the traditional relevance of each dance. Nonetheless, as a unit they give a broad picture on how these diverse dances have been re-appropriated in modern-day Ghana under the label traditional dance.

## 3. Bamaya Dance

Bamaya first originated in the Northern region of Ghana by the Dagomba people. This is the story behind the Bamaya dance. There was a drought in the Dagomba community because the gods were unhappy with the people of the community. The gods were dissatisfied because the people were not offering sacrifices to them. As an apology to the gods, people began to sacrifice animals as a way to rid the community of drought. In accordance with the sacrifices, the gods also demanded that a ritual take place at the river. When performing the ritual it began to rain. Out of joy at seeing the rain the men performing the ritual began to turn from side to side shouting, “baa maaya, baa maaya,” which means “wet stream” in Dagbani. At this sight of the men others began to join in.

Later due to the actions of the men, it was considered as a dance and referred to as Bamaya dance. When first performed, Bamaya was a dance for the royal clan that was only performed by men since it was discovered by men only. Bamaya was performed for festival, naming ceremonies, enstoolment of chiefs, etc.

In homage to the women of the community, the men performing Bamaya would sometimes dress in women’s clothing. Over time the restrictions on where and who could perform Bamaya had changed. Bamaya is no longer a dance only for the royal clan. Also, women are allowed to participate in the dance.



Figure 2. Bamaya dance being performed

Although Bamaya is a dance performed in a host of social contexts such as funerals and naming ceremonies, it is a dance, which stays true to its original form. As times pass and artistic liberations are taken with the moves a dance can stray from its original structure. Each move is grounded in the twisting of the body a waist much like the original story describes. Since movement around the body's central axis is so essential to the essence of the dance, great flexibility is required of the dancer in that region. The movement around the central axis creates a great deal of opposition within the dance. The twisting of the body creates a 2-part division of the body. The movement is an exaggerated twisting naturally happens in the body when walking. Throughout the dance a fan is used as a stylistic prop. The motion created by the wrist in order to keep the fan moving mimicked the movement of the body at the waist. In all, the dance demanded fluidity in movement that was stretch beyond a person's inherent opposition.

#### 4. Kpatsa Dance

Kpatsa originates in the Ga-Adamgbe community located in the Greater Accra Region. The dance is performed during festivals and when there is a full moon. Mainly, the danced serves as a time when the kids in the community can come together, when there is a full moon, as a way to entertain them.

The story behind Kpatsa in brief: When on an expedition, a hunter becomes very lost. As he travels deeper into the forest he happens come across some dwarfs performing a dance. The hunter is able to keep himself hidden and learn the dance of the dwarfs. When the hunter returns to the village he teaches the dance of the dwarfs to the other villagers. The name Kpatsa refers to the "limping gait" movements in the dance that are thought to resemble the actions of dwarfs.

Over time Kpatsa had been greatly influenced by the Agbadza dance of the Ewe people. Agbadza stems from the southern Volta Region. Many of the movements of the Agbadza dance have been incorporated into Kpatsa. In the performance of Kpatsa, songs can be tailored to convey a specific message to the audience.



Therefore, there is no standard song that is performed with the dance. It is the job of the cantor to make up the different song. If a cantor is very skillful then his skill will emanate through his singing abilities.



Figure 3. Kpatsa Dance

Unlike Bamaya there was a division between the choreography for the men and women. On the opening step the men's step differs entirely from the women's step. During other parts of the dance the steps for the men and women will be the same, but the positioning for the men will differ from the positions of the women. Kpatsa demands a high level of energy throughout the dance. Each movement demonstrates a quickness of the feet and hands that did not allow for smooth transitions between moves. This quickness of the movements also made each move smaller and less dramatic.

Also, unlike Bamaya, the hands and feet tend to move together and there is less opposition. The lack of opposition meant the flexibility needed in the torso for Bamaya isn't necessary in Kpatsa. In all, Kpatsa is more cardiovascular in nature and do not require the same precision in movement or flexibility required as in Bamaya.

## 5. Adzewa Dance

Adzewa is a dance of the Fante people originating in the Central Region. Adzewa is performed during the enstoolment of chiefs, festivals and the funerals of Paramount or prominent chiefs. Originally, Adzewa was a dance only performed by females but in its modern context the dance will feature men as well as women. The use of men in Adzewa has predominantly been used as a dramatizing element. The dramatization of Adzewa can come as the result of the song sung during the dance. Like Kpatsa, Adzewa doesn't have one standard song associated with the dance. Thus depending on the message of the song the role of the men in the dance will change.

The inclusion of men in the dance is rooted in new way(s) to present traditional dances. In their modern context, traditional dances are being influenced by the changes of gender roles in society as a whole. For example, in the Agoro dance company men participate in Adzewa, a traditionally female dance, while women are utilized as drummers. Historically, the role of drummer was reserved for men only. In this way, dancing companies are giving traditional dances a more modern social context for how the dances are performed.

Adzewa is performed by a sequence of solo dancers. There are main moves to Adzewa but a dancer may improvise during the dance. Adzewa is a very fluid dance. Each movement is much grounded but possesses a light quality. The movements are much hunched and close to the ground but the dancer are expected to contain an airy quality. The second movement in particular adds to the light feel of the dance due to the birdlike quality of the movement.

However, even during the second movement the body is never fully upright adding to the centered feel of the dance. During the 2nd move the arms move in and out in soft waves. When moving the arms out the elbow is never fully extended but there is care taken to elongate the movement to its outermost point and retract the arms in one fluid motion. The extension never looks like it comes to an end.



Figure 3. Adzewa Dance

Lots of improvisation takes place within the dance, especially between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> step. Between these steps the relationship between the dancer and master drummer is most intense. Also, this is a time when improvisational characters such as a spider and chief are acted out. Basically, whatever the dancer is moved to dance by the drums is what comes out. When coming out, the dancer is not confined to a particular style or step. In addition, it is only the responsibility of the first dancer to bow to the audience.

## 6. Traditional Dances in China

There is no denying of the fact that, China has genealogical traditional dances in various forms and types in as much as their respective provinces are recognized and taken into consideration. Up next is a concise history about the numerous and a handful of beautiful traditional dances associated with the People's Republic of China.

## 7. History of Chinese Dance

There is a long recorded history of various forms of dance in China. The earliest Chinese character for "dance" 舞, written in the oracle bones, is itself a representation of a dancer holding oxtails in each hand. Some Chinese dances today such as dancing with long sleeves have been recorded since the very early periods, dating from at least as early as the Zhou Dynasty. The most important dances of the early period were the ritual and ceremonial dances.

In Six Dynasties era (220 - 589 CE), there were strong influences from Central Asia in music and dance. The art of dance reached a peak in the Tang Dynasty, but declined in later dynasties. In more recent times, the art of dance in China has enjoyed a resurgence, and modern developments in Chinese dances are continuing apace.





Figure 4. Lion Dance

## 8. Traditional Dance

Many of the traditional dances have a long history. These may be folk dances, or dances that were once performed as rituals or as entertainment spectacle, and some may have been performed in the imperial court. Among the best-known of the Chinese traditional dances are the Dragon dance and Lion dance, and both dances were known in earlier dynasties in various forms.

A form of lion dance similar to today's lion dance was described as early as the Tang Dynasty, the modern form of the dragon dance however may be a more recent development.



Figure 5. Dragon Dance

In some of the earliest dances recorded in China, dancers may have dressed as animal and mythical beasts, and during the Han Dynasty, some forms of the dragon dance were mentioned. The Dragon dances of Han Dynasty however do not resemble modern form of the dance. Dragon dances mentioned include a dance performed during a ritual to appeal for rain at time of drought as Chinese dragon was associated with rain, acts in the *baixi* variety shows where performers dressed up as a green dragon playing a flute, and acts where fish turned into a dragon. Modern Dragon Dance uses light-weight structure manipulated by a dozen or so of men using poles at regular intervals along the length of the dragon, and some forms of the dragon can be very long and involve hundreds of performers. There are more than 700 different dragon dances in China

The Lion dance has been suggested to have been introduced from outside China as lion is not native to China, and the Chinese word for lion itself, *shi* (獅), may have been derived from the Persian word *šer*. Detailed description of Lion Dance appeared during the Tang Dynasty and it was then recognized as a foreign import, but the dance may have existed in China as early as the third century AD.

Suggested origin of the dance include India and Persia, and during the Northern and Southern Dynasties it had association with Buddhism. A version of lion dance resembling modern lion dance was described by Tang poet

Bai Juyi in his poem "Western Liang Arts" (西凉伎), where the dancers wear a lion costume made of a wooden head, a silk tail and furry body, with eyes gilded with gold and teeth plated with silver, and ears that moves. There are two main forms of Chinese Lion Dance, the Northern Lion and Southern Lion. A form of the Lion Dance is also found in Tibet where it is called the Snow Lion Dance.

### 9. Folk Dance

Folk dances are important historically in the development of dance in China, some of the earliest dances in court rituals and ceremonies may have evolved from folk dances. Rulers from various dynasties collected folk dances, many of which eventually became court dances. However, at various times there had also been antipathy towards some folk dances and some emperors attempted to ban them.

Many of the folk dances are related to harvest and hunting and the ancient gods associated with them. For example, the Constellation Dance was performed to procure as much seed grain as there are stars in the sky, while the Harpoon Dance was associated to Fuxi who according the mythology gave the Han people fish net, and the Plough Dance was connected to Shennong, the god of agriculture. Some examples of Chinese folk dance are Yanningge (common in Northern China) and Lantern Dance (common in Southern China).



Figure 6. Folk Dance

### 10. The Significance of Traditional Dancing to Both Countries and Beyond

Dancing is a holistic celebration of deity, communal events, and personal relationships. Within this genre are dances to praise God, to lament calamities, to prepare for war, to appreciate the victors, to encourage hard work, to prepare for marriage, and to release frustration.

This artistic activity is holistic so much so that it allows individuals to integrate physical, emotional, ideological, and spiritual aspects of life and one's being. Dancing gives meaning and satisfaction to one's self and others. According to Webster, to dance is "to move rhythmically to music, using improvised or prescribed gestures and steps."

Further, the importance attached to the dance does not lie only in the scope it provides for the release of emotion stimulated by music. The dance is also a social and artistic medium of communication. It can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions.

Through the dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility and cooperation and friendship held by others toward them. They can offer respect to their superiors, or appreciation and gratitude to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence of rivals, affirm their status to servants, subjects, and others, or express their beliefs through the choice of appropriate dance vocabulary or symbolic gestures.

### 11. Author's Perception on Traditional Dancing.

The author thinks that literature, music, and the arts are all necessary for the development and flowering of a student to form an integrated total personality. This proves that it is not only for the maintenance of one's identity but shapes personality likewise. Such education enables student to fully experience the joy of teaching-learning. It also enables them to fully appreciate and experience the beauty of the universe and helps in their healthy development.

Looking at past experiences, children learn faster through actions and song or in other words, they learn faster through the inclusion of dances and music while learning. This depicts the greatness and importance of such basis if included in formal education.

Interestingly, all these traditional dances need timing since they involve more than one person in the process. This is due to the fact that, coordination and uniformity in the dancing are essential since timing makes it look nice, uniform and entertaining. As Aphu. E.S & Cheng X. indicated, *"If you inject time as an antidote in your daily dealings, you will always have healthy moments cum fruitful results"* Its therefore very essential to take time into consideration in everything we do as humans in as much as dancing calls for uniformity and timing by those dancing groups. That's why there are dancing groups and these groups always practice together before going for an event or occasions.

Dancing is a natural method for learning and a basic form of cultural expression. Dancing embodies one of our most primal relationships to the universe. Children learn movement pattern as readily as they learn language. Just as all societies create forms of visual representation or sounds into music, all cultures organize movement and rhythm into one or more form of dance. Yet, while our educational systems for early childhood include drawing and singing, they often neglect to include dance. It is essential that education provide our children with the developmental benefits and unique learning opportunities that come from organizing movement into the aesthetic experience of dance.

### 12. Conclusion

In the nutshell, we can easily fathom from the perspective that, traditional dancing is really a laid down tradition handed over to us by our forefathers in as much as China and Ghana were the focus of this paper. These really portray the cultural heritage of the two countries and thereby, bringing people together as one, unification of ethnic groups and a podium where people get their life partners. Dancing is therefore a powerful helper for developing many of the attributes of a growing child a form of exercise too.

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