

# IN THE RHYTHM OF THE BLACK MAN:

## West African Traditional Dances And Their Resurgence In Afrobeats And Hip-pop.



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# Introduction

On the global music stage, African traditional dances have emerged as a powerful force, shaping not only the rhythm but also the very essence of movement. As Afrobeats and Hip-Hop continue to dominate the charts, these contemporary genres owe much of their dynamism to the rich history and origins of traditional African dances.



Each new Afrobeats sound introduces a fresh dance, a fusion of tradition and modernity. But behind these infectious moves lies a profound cultural legacy. This research looks into the roots of these dance steps, tracing their lineage from ancient engagement rituals in pre-colonial Africa to the migration of rhythms carried by enslaved Africans during the colonial era. These dances, once embedded in sacred ceremonies and communal celebrations, now find themselves at the heart of global pop culture.



# Objectives

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To trace origins from ancient rituals in the pre-colonial era through the migration of dance steps by slaves during the colonial era, to their influence on Black American pop culture in the post-colonial era.

To intricately explore the essence of African dances, their purposes, and intent, xtray the fusion of traditional and modern dance steps and their global impact on music. We also consider the implications of these indigenous forms originating from Africa and future of invented dance emerging from Afrobeats.

To partly uncovering the sacred roles of female dancers in Yoruba culture, where they serve as priestesses, storytellers, and vessels of ancestral spirits. Highlight their defiant declarations of dominance in rituals of rebellion, challenging societal norms while preserving cultural heritage.



# Methodology

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Conduct an extensive desktop research by reviewing scholarly articles, books, and academic papers related to African dance history, migration, and cultural influence.

Identify and interview key informants such as traditional dancers, cultural historians, and community elders.

Listen to podcasts featuring experts, artists, and cultural enthusiasts discussing African dance.

Analyze news reports, documentaries, and media coverage related to African dance.

Respect cultural sensitivities and protect the intellectual property of indigenous dance forms.



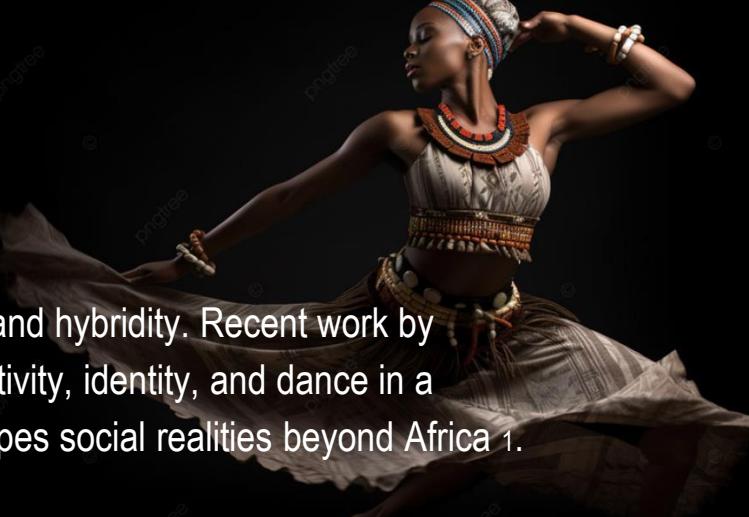
## Theoretical Lens

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Globalization theories emphasize cultural exchange and hybridity. Recent work by Plancke & Neveu Kringelbach (2019) looks into creativity, identity, and dance in a globalized world, showcasing how African dance shapes social realities beyond Africa <sup>1</sup>.

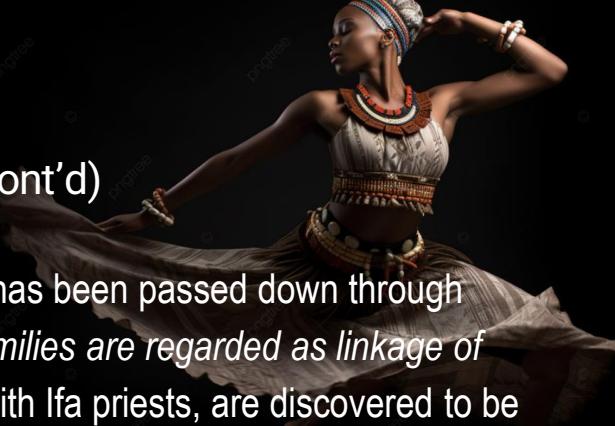
Investigate the future trajectory of dance within the Afrobeats genre Wanyama (2016) provides insights into researching African music and dance today, addressing contemporary and historical identities <sup>2</sup>.

The concept of diaspora highlights how African dance forms traveled across continents, influencing cultural expressions in the Americas. Consider Bernes (2019), who discusses the impact of African dance on psychosocial and educational outcomes <sup>3</sup>.



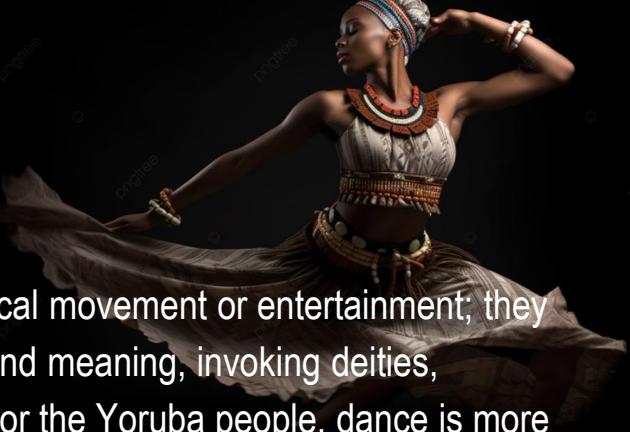
## Dance According to Yoruba People (cont'd)

- Yoruba traditional dance, with a centuries-old history, has been passed down through generations, preserving the cultural heritage. *Some families are regarded as linkage of drummers*, and certain individuals, after consultation with Ifa priests, are discovered to be destined (Ori) to become dancers.
- Originally performed during important ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, funerals, and religious festivals, traditional dance served as a means of communication, storytelling, and celebration. It allowed the community to come together and express their collective identity.
- Many dances are associated with specific Orishas (deities) in the Yoruba pantheon. Each dance has its own unique movements, costumes, and musical accompaniment, reflecting the characteristics and attributes of the associated deity 1.



# Dance According to Yoruba People

**Spiritual Expression:** Yoruba dances transcend mere physical movement or entertainment; they are a gateway to the spiritual realm. Each step carries profound meaning, invoking deities, celebrating life's milestones, or seeking divine intervention. For the Yoruba people, dance is more than an art form—it is a sacred language that connects them to their ancestors. Through rhythmic motion, they honor and communicate with the spirits of those who walked before them, bridging the gap between the earthly and the divine 1



**Symbolism:** In Yoruba dances, symbolism abounds. Each movement tells a story—a tale of gods, natural elements, and human experiences. When a dancer sways like a tree in the wind, they embody the ancient forest spirits. The flowing river finds expression in fluid choreography, mirroring the life-giving waters that sustain the land. Even animal movements—the graceful leap of a gazelle or the rhythmic crawl of a serpent—find their place in Yoruba dance, representing the interconnectedness of all living beings. Thus, every step becomes a brushstroke on the canvas of tradition, painting a vivid picture of cultural heritage and spiritual continuity 2.

# Dance According to Yoruba People (cont'd)

## Spiritual Expression:

### Bata Dance:

**Description:** Bata dance is a vibrant and energetic style of Yoruba traditional dance performed to the rhythms of the Bata drums.

**Deity Association:** Bata dance is often dedicated to Shango, the powerful Orisha of thunder and lightning. Shango embodies strength, passion, and transformation. The dancers' colorful costumes and elaborate headdresses symbolize Shango's majesty and influence 1.

### Gelede Dance:

**Description:** Gelede dance is a unique style performed to honor elderly women in the Yoruba community.

**Deity Association:** While not directly associated with a specific deity, Gelede dance celebrates the power and wisdom of female ancestors. It acknowledges the vital role of women in Yoruba society and their connection to the spirit world. The rhythmic movements, elaborate costumes, and colorful masks pay homage to the matriarchs and their spiritual influence



### Egungun Dance:

**Description:** Egungun dance is a captivating masked performance that honors ancestral spirits.

**Deity Association:** The dance is closely linked to Egungun, the collective spirits of the departed ancestors. Dancers wear intricately crafted masks and costumes, embodying the spirits' presence. Egungun dance allows the living to communicate with their forebears, seek guidance, and celebrate their legacy 1.



# Principles of Yoruba Dance Practice

## Bata Dance:



### Yoruba dance adheres to certain principles<sup>1</sup>

**Balance and Symmetry:** Dancers maintain perfect balance and move in symmetrical patterns. This reflects the harmony of Yoruba cosmology.

**Controlled Pace:** Yoruba dances are deliberate and controlled. Dancers express reverence and respect through their measured movements.

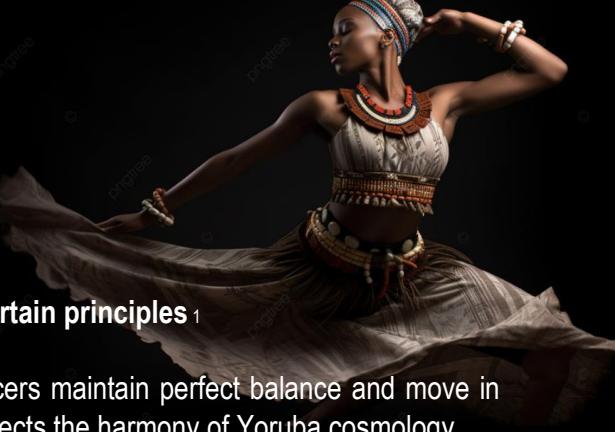
### Distinctive Body Movements and Energy

Yoruba dance exudes energy and grace. Notable features include:

**Circular Formations:** Dancers move in circular patterns, symbolizing unity and continuity.

**Synchronized Movements:** Precise coordination creates a mesmerizing effect. The body becomes a canvas for storytelling.

**Trance-like States:** Yoruba music and rhythms induce trance-like states, allowing dancers to connect with the spirit world.



# Principles of Yoruba Dance Practice

Bata Dance:



# Dance According to Yoruba People (cont'd)

## Spiritual Expression:

### Àyàn in Dance and Ritual:

Àyàn's influence extends beyond drumming. He is also associated with dance and music.

During Yorùbá traditional and professional drumming performances, the human drummers (also called àyàn) share the name with the deity Àyàn.

Àyàn Àgalú's identity is characterized by his role as a deity, spirit, and ancestor, emphasizing his multiple resonances 2.

The Igbájá Egúngún, a Yorùbá ritual, involves purifying the dancing arena before egúngún (masked ancestral spirits) perform. ÀyànÀgalú is invoked during this ritual 1.



*Àyàn's significance as a female egungun, orisa, and one of Orunmila's wives underscores the rich tapestry of Yoruba cultural heritage, where drumming, ancestral reverence, and artistic expression converge. Her role in shaping Yoruba traditions remains a testament to the enduring power of mythology and ritual in Yoruba society.*

*The egungun must not retire back into the igbale until he has danced to the entertainment of his spectators. The rituals of sango worship is not complete until his devotees dance the fiery sound of the bata drum, the hunter must dance to the music of ijala otherwise, ogun their patron deity will not be pleased with them.*

- Tayo Bello (Yoruba Cultural Historian)



# The Sacred Dancers of Yorubaland

In Yoruba Land women are regarded as Aje (often misinterpreted as Witches in English Language). Rather the word Aje is more suitable as enabler. In dance world of Yorubas, Women are seen as enablers

The significance of female dancers in Yoruba culture is deeply rooted in spiritual and religious beliefs. These dancers undergo rigorous training and rituals to prepare them for their sacred duties as priestesses.



Dance such as Gelede and Osun-Osogbo, honor the powers of the mothers, or "Aje," invoking protective energies and seeking blessings for fertility and prosperity. These dances are more than physical movements; they are living expressions of tradition, resilience, and spirituality.



# The Sacred Dancers of Yorubaland

According to Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi in Aesthetics of Yoruba Recreational Dances as Exemplified in the Oge Dance, Ijo Oge is a traditional Yoruba dance performed mainly for relaxation and entertainment. It takes place at social gatherings such as weddings, funerals, and child-naming ceremonies. Unlike more symbolic dances associated with specific events, Ijo Oge is a form of leisure expression that allows participants to communicate emotions related to the occasion being observed



*Yoruba women's dance is multifaceted, embodying healing, homage, representation, and pleasure. These sacred dancers held a revered position within their community, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage through rhythmic movements and expressive performances.* <sup>1</sup>

# The Sacred Dancers of Yorubaland

when and when a woman dances it is seen as the force of life is the one dancing, the force of life is the one that is dancing, the force of life that can give birth, give birth to meanings...so when a woman dances she ought to be appreciated

- Dr Felix Emoruwa





What then is African Dance?



There's no such thing as African Dance  
At best what we have is African Dances



# Misconception about African Dances

Dance in Africa emerges as a vibrant threads of tradition, expression, and resilience, defying neat categorization and encapsulating a multitude of styles that reflect the unique cultural contexts of their origins. The term “Afro-dance” attempts to capture this diversity but falls short, as African dance is not a singular entity but rather a mosaic of regional, tribal, and individual expressions.

Perceptions towards African dance forms versus Euro-American dance forms have often been influenced by historical biases and cultural hegemony. Euro-American dance forms have often been considered the standard against which other dance traditions are judged, perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions. 1

Common myths and stereotypes surrounding African dances include perceptions of it being primitive, exotic, or solely ritualistic, overlooking its complexity and sophistication as an art form.



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There is this dance we call contemporary dance, the one we do Africa is called African contemporary dance, the one in Europe is not called European contemporary dance...why do we do that  
Contemporary is Contemporary

- Frank Konwea



# Misconception about African Dances

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In Hollywood film like "Coming to America" they give you a particular choreography and say this is African dance that is not African dance. That is just one dance by a particular clan and that dance must have its own history, why they do it when they do it, who does it when they cannot do it, what is permissible within the culture of that particular people...and the kind of space patterns permissible

- Dr Felix Emoruwa



# Misconception about African Dances

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Western observers often focus on certain types of African dance that reinforced their stereotypes of Africans as sexualized and warlike peoples. Writers such as Joseph Conrad depicted African dance as an expression of both savagery and aggressiveness.



# Early Influence of African Dances In America

During the harrowing period of slavery, African diaspora communities demonstrated remarkable resilience in preserving their dance heritage despite immense challenges. Here are some ways they managed to maintain their cultural practices:

- Oral Transmission and Secret Practice
- Folklore and Storytelling
- Craftsmanship and Artifacts

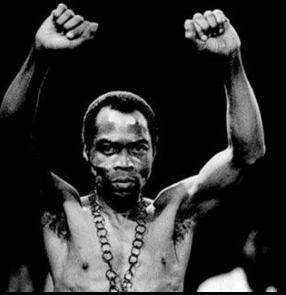
African diaspora communities adapted their dance forms to the New World context. They blended African traditions with European and American influences, creating syncretic expressions.



# On global Stage: Yoruba Dances Influence 70s - 80s



Hubert Ogunde, a multifaceted artist, made significant contributions to Nigerian theater. As the leader of the National Troupe of Nigeria, he showcased various traditional Nigerian dances on the global stage. Interestingly, his son later became a choreographer for Fela Kuti's Afrobeat group.



Fela Kuti, a trailblazer in the evolution of Afrobeat, left an indelible mark on the global music scene. His dance style incorporated elements from Bata Dance and Ijo Oge, while he also infused his unique body movements into his performances.



Juju Music, Fuji Music, and several other music genres have long embraced social dancing practices. However, it was King Sunny Ade who stood out with his distinctive Leg Work dance style. His captivating performances delighted audiences on the global stage.



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Ogunde himself was a dancer...he was contacted by the federal government to help them start of the Nigerian National dance troupe...most of what he gave his works, which are the things that are being recycled today

- Dr Felix Emoruwa



# Traditional Dances and The New Era of Afrobeats

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Afrobeats: This contemporary genre blends African rhythms, pop, and electronic music. Artists like Burna Boy, Wizkid, Davido and Tiwa Savage have revived traditional African dances, preserving their essence while infusing modern elements.



Hip-Hop: Hip-hop artists incorporate African-inspired moves in music videos and live performances. The fusion of old and new keeps African dance alive.



# The Dance called NaijaCrazy

As Afrobeat evolved, the dance practice began to become more creative. Dance groups in neighbourhoods emerged in places like Ajegunle, led by Daddy Showkey. In more recent times, in Agege, dance practitioners found it necessary to name these dance styles. Names like NaijaCrazy and Naija Fusion began to gain ground



*Cue from my interview with Ukalina Opuwari, Nigerian dancer and choreographer based in Spain*



# Invented Dance called NaijaCrazy

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**Alanta** by Art Quake

**Shoki** by Lil Kesh/Orezi

**Shakiti Bobo** and **Shaku Shaku** by Olamide

**Skelewu** by Davido;

**Konko Below** by Lagbaja

**Etighi** by Iyanya;

**Gaga Shuffle** by 2Face;

**Azonto** by Fuse ODG and Tiffany (Ghana)

which was later popularized in Nigeria by Wizkid;

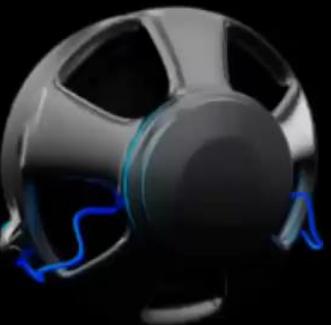
**Alkayida** by Guru (Ghana)



## Invented Dances: Kukere by Iyanya

The Akwa Ibom people are credited with founding Etighi. It has become widely known across Nigeria and is particularly popular among the Ibibio and Efik ethnic groups.

Etighi gained significant recognition when Nigerian artist Iyanya featured it prominently in his hit music video for the song “Kukere” .



*Etighi is often performed during significant life events such as weddings, initiations, and other rites of passage*



# Invented Dances: Skelewu by Davido

According to the music producer of Skelewu the beat was created as sound for a masquerade to dance to. That account the ring beats laced in the music all through

Bum shaking is major feature of this dance, derived from Ijo Oge

*Ileke idi yen o idi yen o  
Esu bo ko yoko esu bo ko yoko  
Owa degbo so na owa degbo so na  
Bebe idi yen o*



*Oya whine your hips like a this like a dat  
Like a this like a dat  
To your right to the front  
And your yansh to the back*

## Invented Dances : Zanku

Zanku Dance and Zlatan: The Zanku dance, characterized by legwork and energetic foot shuffling, gained prominence in Nigeria. Emerging artist Zlatan incorporated this dance into his hit songs like “Zanku (Leg Work)” and “Bolanle.” Leg Work is closely linked to Bata Dance



*In one interview with vlogger, Moni, Zlatan admitted that he had first seen the move during occasional trips to the New Afrika Shrine in Ikeja.*



## Invented Dances: Zanku

When Burna made it to the Empire Polo Club in California in the second week of April 2019, he brought the Zanku on stage with him, looping his own little innovations into the mix memorably.

*From California, the dance became a key component of Burna's energy-sapping sets as he performed in venues all over the world for his African Giant tour — playing an*



## Invented Dances: Zanku

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“love letter to Africa, Beyoncé’s ‘The Lion King: The Gift’ gets some benefits from the Zanku movement with Papi Ojo as one of the 11 choreographers on the project



## Invented Dances: Azonto

Azonto emerged in the early 2010s as a fusion of traditional Ghanaian dance moves, hip-hop, and Afrobeat rhythms.

It is characterized by playful, rhythmic movements, expressive gestures, and a sense of improvisation.

The dance often involves intricate footwork, hand claps, and body isolations.

Fuse ODG, a UK-based Ghanaian artist, played a pivotal role in popularizing Azonto.

His hit song “Antenna” featured Azonto-inspired dance moves and became a global sensation.

Artists like Wizkid, Sarkodie, and Itz Tiffany incorporated Azonto elements into their music and performances.



# Invented Dances: Azonto

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# Invented Dances: Twerking

Twerking and Mapouka: The origins of twerking trace back several African Cities, for instance in Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa, where the Mapouka dance is practiced. Both dances emphasize the buttocks and have existed for centuries.

Twerking, often misunderstood, has deep roots in black history and culture. As black women carried these dances across the transatlantic slave trade  
"the dance of the behind"



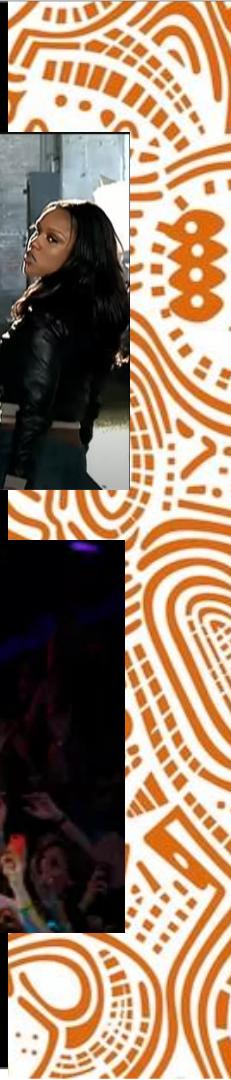
# Invented Dances: Twerking

Lizzo in her rendition of the Black history of twerking said

*"I want to prevent the removal of Blackness from twerking"*

The practice of twerking was promoted mainstreamed in 2003 by Beyoncé's song Crazy In Love. Years later Miley Cyrus mainstreamed twerking with a wide global attention through her 'We Can't Stop' with her performance with Robin Thicke on the V.M.As

Post event Lizzo said she wished that a black woman could have popularized twerking in the mainstream.



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# The Role Social Media

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Post Covid 19, social media has played a significant role in promoting African dances globally, particularly through platforms like TikTok

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Social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, have provided opportunities for dancers to share their work with a vast online audience.

## **Music and Migration:**

*With the increasing number of Africans living abroad, this also accounts for the proliferation of our music in Europe and America*

- *Yeni Kuti*



# Invented Dances

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...we feel that we already have license to recreate, we bastardize these our traditional dances, we will say well we have to manipulate the old to bring the new...

- Dr Felix Emoruwa



# African Dances on the global stage

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Exotic Dance for American and  
European pleasure?

Or

Merited performances  
beyond cultural inclusion?

Adebayo Adeniyi,

Nigerian dancer and choreographer base France



# Conclusion

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In the past, African traditional dances faced rejection and were deemed unfit. However, in a remarkable turn of events, they now enjoy global attention after a period of dismissal. These dances, infused with nuances from African traditions, have taken center stage on the global platform. Scholars have in publications emphasized the need for indigenous dances to adapt to contemporary aesthetics and societal trends while retaining their cultural essence.

But here lies an intriguing question: Must African traditional dances seek validation from pop culture? While reinvented dances may eventually become national treasures, do they hold the same heritage value as their traditional dances? If these newly invented dances manage to withstand the test of time (which remains uncertain), they must prove their ability to stand alone, less reliant on accompanying music.



# Conclusion

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Unfortunately, the spirit of community often gives way to individualism in these reinvented forms. Artists eagerly claim ownership of dance steps, each striving to create the next iconic move that will overshadow the rest. These challenges pose a threat to the heritage value of our newly minted dances, even if we meticulously document their curatorial processes.

Perhaps a deeper understanding of traditional dance—both in terms of technique and cultural context—can help preserve their essence. The visual analysis of performances by American artists like Beyoncé in “Black Is King” have shown more cultural understanding than other performances by any African artists. African acts need understanding of spirituality as it differs from religion, this understanding will help their performance acts.

