

Dance Clubs

Introduction to Dance Clubs

Among the *Ajlo-Eve*, traditional dance-drumming is organized into formal institutions called *habobowo* (in English, *dance-drumming societies* or simply *dance clubs*). It's because of these clubs that ancient and modern traditions both survive and adapt to serve new generations. As you will see, there is no adequate English term for these clubs because of the many ways they enhance the lives of their members, and also because of how inseparable they are from the culture in which they exist.

There are several kinds of dance clubs and the terminology for them gets confusing, but they have many things in common. Most groups practice and perform one specific style of dance-drumming, such as *Atsiã*, *Gahũ* or *Agbadza*. Group membership is normally restricted to interested men & women from a particular district and of a specific age group. The groups are usually governed by formal leadership and strict rules; sometimes they even have a written constitution. The most important rule requires members to attend rehearsals and performances, with failure punishable by a fine. Other rules might govern social behavior among members and financial donations.

Beyond these similarities, the features of these organizations can vary widely. Some societies are generations old, while others have been formed more recently - especially those organized in cities by immigrants from rural villages. Some groups meet weekly or monthly, others may come together only for funerals or special events. In some clubs, especially in the cities, members make monthly contributions to the treasury. Others ask for money only from new members, or only when they perform at a funeral (contributions to help the grieving family).

Why People Participate

Another aspect that can vary is whether participation is voluntary or compulsory. Dance clubs are sometimes formed to recreate the more specialized cultural, historical or sacred dance forms like *Gahũ*, *Agbeko* or *Gadzo*. Performing these dances properly requires unusual dedication and commitment, so these groups are voluntary in nature and the members tend to be a small subset of the community.

But in the larger sense, dance-drumming is considered a compulsory obligation to one's family and society. It is the very core of community life and everybody participates, especially in rural areas where traditional values are still strong. At most secular or social dance performances, every able-bodied community member turns out to help make the event a success. Everybody dances, sings and/or plays an instrument to the best of his or her ability.

These activities are obligatory because dance-drumming is a demonstration of the collective will to work together towards a common purpose. Much of the acculturation required for people to live and act collectively happens at these performances. Because it's so important, the consequences of non-participation can be severe; self-isolation is a bitter experience in a communal society where members survive and prosper largely from their own collective efforts.

Social obligations aside, there are positive and compelling reasons for individuals to participate. For instance, the dance clubs provide a social life and a cohesive community to depend on in difficult times. Of particular importance, the group will help out when an active member dies or loses an immediate relative. The family of the deceased can count on having musicians and dancers for a proper funeral, and probably financial contributions as well. For religious reasons, the threat of being denied the proper rites of passage upon one's death is severe.

Another good reason to belong is that participants earn status and recognition as active members of the community - not just performers, but their financial sponsors as well. Dance clubs attract wealthy patrons of the arts for the same reasons that Western orchestras, operas, and dance companies do.

Starting a New Dance Club

When a new dance club is formed - usually by young people - there are standard procedures which the founders follow in order to be taken seriously and to receive financial backing. First, they must thoroughly learn the material they will be performing. A club wishing to adopt an existing dance-drumming style will send representatives to live for months or years among the originators of that style. They will stay as long as necessary to properly master the music and dance. The teachers are eager to pass on the tradition correctly, and the young people want their teachers to be proud of them, so everyone takes this process seriously.

Then, back home in secretive night rehearsals (*hakpa*), the club will rehearse for many months before subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of chiefs, dignitaries and nearby communities. The group leaders teach the songs, musical structure, discipline and customs required for a respectable performance to the rest of the group. If necessary the core members will return to the founders for more instruction, as often as it takes to get everything just right. Although great care is taken to preserve the essential stylistic elements of the music and dance, it is also common practice to carefully add original material to the old - but to do so without spoiling the original style requires the best efforts of a master composer and choreographer.

When the performers and their advisors finally feel the group is ready, it's time for the outdoorings (*digo*). This is the critical point in the life of a club when their art is first presented to the public. The group must adopt a name at this time if they haven't already. For example, a club performing *Gadzo* may call themselves *Gadzoviawo* (The Gadzo Society or The Gadzo People), or they may use a larger name, like *Kofi Gadzoviawo* (Kofi's Gadzo Society). An *Agbeko* group from Anyako might call itself *Anyako Agbekoviawo* (the Anyako Agbeko Society).

On the day of the performance, the group starts out early in the morning with appropriate prayers and blessings, then processes into town at dawn with bells and songs calling attention to their event. Since preparations are sometimes made in secret, the performance may be a pleasant surprise to almost everyone in town. Spectators of all ages gather excitedly at the community circle to watch and participate in the show, which may last all day. Other neighboring communities also come to watch and hopefully admire the proceedings.

The reaction of the chiefs and elders is vitally important at this stage, since they are the undisputed caretakers of tradition. If your club does not live up to their standards, the response is swift and harsh; put simply, that is the end of your group and you will never live it down. Your family, your entire district is disgraced. As one man put it, "A hundred years later they will still be laughing at you." Harsh as the criticism can be, it is not mean-spirited. Everyone understands the need to preserve the potency and vitality of these traditions. A poor performance can weaken society and dishonor the ancestors; both are shameful and potentially dangerous things to do.

Traditional Leadership Roles

Although the entire community puts its best effort into dance-drumming performances, individuals do participate to varying degrees depending on their experience, leadership and artistic abilities. The most experienced members fill a hierarchy of leadership positions which remain pretty much the same across all dance clubs.

At the top is a committee of male and female *elders* (*vumegawo* and *vudadawo*) who represent the chiefs and dignitaries of the community. They are like a Board of Directors, providing a respected source of authority and advice to ensure that performances are based on solid traditional values, and also filling necessary administrative roles.

Below them is the *master composer* (*hesinɔ*), followed directly by the *master drummer* (*azagunɔ*). These two provide the experienced leadership which makes good performances possible. The composer is the guiding creative force of the group. This master artist is responsible for writing fresh songs and music to keep the tradition alive, and often acts as head song leader as well. He or she creates the distinct artistic texture which makes the club's music unique. No new dance club can survive long without at least one competent composer in its ranks, although a well-established club may outlive its original composers on the strength of accomplished singers who can remember the song repertoire.

The master drummer is the artistic director who guides the entire ensemble in their pursuit of excellence. He is almost invariably the group's best and most experienced drummer, and is ideally an accomplished dancer as well. He leads rehearsals, drilling the performers until they meet his high standards. In performances, he acts as master of ceremonies and controls many aspects of the event; he starts and stops the music, chooses tempos and musical sections, corrects musicians who forget a part, interacts with the dancers, and chooses the order and duration of their dance movements. If things

start to get dull he exhorts the performers to greater enthusiasm. The success of each performance rests largely in his hands.

Beneath the composer and master drummer are several supporting roles. The *ringleaders* (*tonuglawo*) are experienced participants with leadership potential; they inspire and exhort the performers along the dance arena and provide them with noble examples of participation for them to emulate. The *support song leaders* (*haxiawo*) assist the composer in leading and directing the singing. The *whips* (*kadawo*) enforce group discipline and secure the attendance of community members at every performance. In clubs that perform styles like *Agbeko* or *Gahũ* where the dancers are specialists and separate from the general community of spectator/participants, there may also be male and female *dance leaders* as well. These men and women represent the dancers to group leadership, and act as role models and counselors to the other dancers.

The next level of performers are the *supporting drummers*, who assist the master drummer in creating a solid musical foundation for the singers and dancers to build upon. The rest of the ensemble occupies the lowest level of the performing hierarchy; they sing and dance, and at times accompany the music with rattles and clapping. From composer to novice hand-clapper, everyone understands that each person must give his or her best effort in order for the performance to succeed and for the community to remain strong.