

Dancing the goodness of God: A rainbow of movement aesthetics or a universal representation?

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Abstract

This paper aims to unpack and provoke critical examination of the hegemonic messages and assumptions laden in some widely practiced models of Christian dance ministry. In this paper the author argues that some Christian dance ministry practices are antagonistic to indigenous movement aesthetics as appropriate doxologies, and only serve to maintain the church's historical relationship with non-western dance expressions as that of the persecutor and critic rather than the preserver and celebrator of them. The paper antithetical to God's cultural declaration that every tribe, tongue and nation contends that these practices dangerously promote a monolithic notion of movement worship will proclaim his goodness and which stands to alienate many of God's creation.

Keywords: indigenous movement; Christian dance; postcolonial

I have been involved in the use of various forms of dance as art in Christian worship in my homeland Jamaica since 1993, and I am delighted to still be on that personal journey today even as I now live miles away in South Africa. Throughout those many years, which exposed me to myriad teachings about dance in church, being a Christian artist in the marketplace, and dance ministry groups and their practices, I have matured as a worshipper, teacher, dancer, a person and also as a critical thinker. It is from my critical musing on some of these lived experiences that I pose the question of dancing the goodness of God, meaning God's bounteous gifts and blessings to mankind, His values, attributes, and creation: A rainbow of movement aesthetics, or a universal representation?

Beside the body's natural movements, the first dance languages my body spoke were the indigenous and urbanized dances of my ancestors that were integral functions of Caribbean societies. I later studied ballet and modern dance, thus rendering my body a site of multiple embodied aesthetics, able to express the elongated symmetrical lines and shapes of the upright, contained and ethereal classical ballet as well as the grounded, loose-jointedness and asymmetrical zest of Afro-Caribbean dance. It has been my experience however in some Christian dance ministry circles that appropriate embodied doxology is perceived and practiced, be it conscious or subliminal, as a particular universal look and a particular aesthetic, usually Western or Jewish influenced. In these

spheres, indigenous movement languages, such as my Afro-Caribbean movement aesthetics, even when used to express praise and worship to Yeshua can be misunderstood, labeled, and promoted as something “other” than worship dance; that “other” which is brought out on Mission’s Sunday, or as an attraction for outdoor church and community events.

Through the lens of postcolonial thinking and the Bible this paper aims to unpack and provoke critical examination of such practices in contending that such phenomena dangerously promote a universal and narrow notion of movement in worship that can potentially exclude or alienate many indigenous movement cultures and peoples. I will argue that disregarding indigenous movement aesthetics as appropriate doxologies in church worship reifies the church’s historical colonial relationship with non-western dance expressions and runs counter to God’s cultural declaration in Philippians 2:11 that every tribe, tongue and nation should proclaim Him, and by extension His goodness.

The paper commences with a brief glance at the history of dance in the Christian church. A critical discussion on the importance of promoting and validating indigenous movement cultures as “good” acts of worship and why such diverse and colorful movement offerings matter to God then follows on. It concludes with a call for action for dance leaders and dance ministry organizations to shift away from an ethnocentric representation of Christian dance and toward reflecting the rainbow heart of God in their dance practices.

Brief history of dance in the church

Of all the arts, the use of the body as an instrument of expressive worship and praise has been the most contested in the life of the church. Historical records dating back to the period of the early church fathers suggest that within many branches of the Christian church, dance was prohibited from church liturgy. Simultaneously, historical records show that some early church leaders such as Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis on Cyprus (AD 367), accepted dance as a legitimate act of worship for both clergymen and congregants. Dance, meaning liturgical dance, in the Christian church has had a chequered and uncertain existence. By the time the Roman Empire fell in AD 476 dance in the church began to become less common and was almost completely rejected as an act of worship during the Protestant Reformation.

Why was dance so problematic to early church leaders? Multiple scholarly voices have posited that dance was often banned from the sanctuary due its common association outside of the church with profane paganism and licentious behavior (that is drunkenness and sexual immorality). These scholars also attribute dance’s demise in church worship to the dualistic worldviews often held by church leaders. Such dualisms ontologically separated the body from the mind and spirit, and divided reality into the secular and the sacred. These dichotomies necessitate that in order to keep the sacred (the spirit) pure one must censor or abstain from the practices of the secular (the body). The logic in sum was that since dance emanated from the body, it could by no means feed the spirit or the

mind and so dance was justifiably eradicated from or marginalized in Christian religious worship. Added to this milieu was the Protestant's emphasis on the intellect, which perceived the mind of greater importance than the body in religious growth.

Today, in the modern era, the relationship of dance and the church has been far more promising, showing signs of healthy growth. Even though there are some branches of Christianity that still regard dance as sinful, there are many in which dance has flourished. I think of my own evangelical brethren background, which made a complete turn-around in the 1990s from prohibiting dance in the church on the basis that dance was secular, to actively establishing dance as a part of church ministry. In the modern era, there are historical examples of the church or religious bodies as being major patrons of dance. Two such examples are the Judson Memorial Church, a Methodist church in New York, which served as an incubator for the global postmodern dance movement in the 1960s and whose legacy lives on today in contemporary dance practices. Another example is ICDF that has over two and a half decades supported and promoted the growth and development of dance in Christian ministry across the world.

It often goes unacknowledged, however, that this history of dance in the church, which I have briefly traced, is not a universal one but one that in fact more accurately depicts the relationship of Western, and to an extent Jewish dance traditions and the church. Indigenous, non-Western movement aesthetics and dance expressions in the Christian church articulate a different narrative. Indigenous dance expressions have had a long and consistent history of being silenced and invisible in the Christian church. This estranged relationship has its genealogy in the 19th century missiological process of evangelization via colonization, that saw dance, an integral part of the religious and social practices of non-western societies, eradicated from their religious worship as missionaries baptized indigenous peoples into Christianity; baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Ghost and the West. A new dualism of West and "the other" or West and the rest was introduced in the dance and church relationship. A cultural dualism that suggested that life in Christ meant the death of the native cultural DNA and the appropriation of Western cultural values. It was a dualism that propagated Christianity in its Western packaging as holy and subjugated everything else as evil. In other words the Western body kinetics was good but the indigenous was abominable.

According to dance anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna (1999), dance as a religious ritual was represented as evil as early Christian missionaries imposed their negative views of the body on the natives along with their ideas of civility and modernity. One repercussion of such fallacious beliefs was that non-Western believers were stripped of their unique embodied aesthetics and identities once they were baptized into Christianity. Using African dance as an analogy, in an embodied sense, the indigenous body with its grounded energy, poly centric, percussive and talking torsos and hips was submerged under the waters of baptism and miraculously re-emerged with controlled spine, censored hip, and ethereal movements devoid of vocalizations. Since motor research proves that engrained motor patterns simply cannot be erased by an act

such as baptism, a lack of visibility of non-Western movement expressions in the Christian church suggest that such expressions are being restrained or silenced.

The need for indigenous movement acts of worship in dance

Why should indigenous movement representation matter in Christian dance and the body of Christ? Why is a notion of Western universality in Christian dance problematic?

First, It matters as cultural writers Dr. Ed. Lapiz (2001) and Sydnie Mosley (2007) put forward, to rewrite the Christianity that was taught in the missionary and colonial eras. It matters as acts of embodied social justice to which the church has been called. As Lapiz argues, if Jesus is truth and just, and His truth sets men free, then cultural communities must be set free to become Christian, and I add anointed worshippers, in the context of their cultural heritage and sense of being. It is important to their sense of self, personal truth and dignity before the very God who created them and the cultures in which they exist as good.

Anecdotally, I recall teaching Afro-Caribbean dance at a Christian worship conference and participating in one of the conference outreach dance events. The dance was a warfare dance that interpreted in movement Philippians 6 that speaks to putting on the whole armour of God. True to the Africanist aesthetics, one can envision that every body part was given life and pulsated with the drumming accompaniment. When the time came for my workshop presentation, the dance was preceded by a lengthy explanation to those in attendance that the next dance to be seen was a cultural dance. Never before had I had this experience at this particular conference. As I reflected in the moment, my heart sank, as emotions of feeling judged, hurt, and disappointed set in and my head was filled with questions. Was this a disclaimer to my workshop being perceived as a worship dance? Was my dancing the goodness of God in my indigenous way not deemed as worthy or as spiritual as the Judaic tambourine, flags and other Western dance forms that preceded it?

As leaders in the dance, we must be careful not to create yet another divide for dance in the church, that of worship or praise dance (indicative of dances that use western or Jewish dance traditions to honor God) and cultural dance, (the sum of all other forms of expression that honor God). Such divide de-spiritualizes indigenous worship, reflects historical, colonial attitudes towards indigenous embodiment and must be guarded against in contemporary Christian dance ministry practices.

Second, if God's cultural mandate that every tribe, tongue and nation will worship him is to be fulfilled, it must be understood that God's expectation is a rainbow of movement aesthetics in the worship of Him and not a universal or uniformed representation. His cultural declaration shows us that God draws all people to himself

without distinction
or discrimination and embraces not erases their cultural differences.

Third, diverse movement expressions, which include indigenous body languages, emphasize the vastness and greatness of God's goodness and salvation. To restrict dance in worship to Western or Judaic dance forms is to limit the work of God on the earth. The greatness of God cannot be contained in one culture. The beauty and creativity of God cannot be displayed by the art of just one culture. The power and wealth of God cannot be felt in the influence of just one culture. Christian dance in the liturgy of any church, be it multi-cultural or not, that celebrates varied cultural aesthetics of God's people can help a congregation see God in fresh and new ways and provide glimpses of heaven (Reynolds, 2011). Movement diversity in Christian dance is necessary to magnify God's work in heaven and on the earth, in the past, the present and the future. If God desires every nation, tribe, language and people to worship Him, then we can start doing it that way in the church and prepare ourselves for eternity.

Fourth, meaningfully embracing other cultural traditions in our movement ministries connects us more with each other and the global church. De-homogenizing our embodied practices and de-centering the West in our dance ministry practices can provide godly examples of celebrating rather than terrorizing difference. In a world where difference divides, the church through dance and the arts can model difference unified through the Spirit of Christ. It is an opportunity to model, in our hearts and bodies, God's egalitarian love, and the more that love is modeled in our churches, the more, we can help change the world outside our churches.

Lastly, de-homogenizing our embodied practices and de-centering the West in our dance ministry practices can also safeguard us from being legalistic in our ministry operations as with knowledge and awareness of other cultural ways of being and doing, we are better able to distinguish between God's unchangeable precepts and socio-culturally constructed ones. Reverting to my earlier anecdote at this particular conference, I struggled to communicate the African embodied way of worship, using the prescriptive garments of worship that were declared mandatory for the conference. The beautiful but very long and bulky dresses restricted the hips and feet in some way and extracted some of the power from the communication. Drawing on another example, countless times I have heard dance leaders tell their dancers not to sing the song while they dance as it detracts from the dance. That is a Western paradigm that does not apply to all cultures. To sing or vocalize and dance in African cultures is customary and deepens rather than detract from the dancing experience. It matters therefore that Christian dance ministry training not promote a particular image as universal to or mandatory to all cultures as it yet another form of dominance and oppression to alternative cultural frames and existence.

In the modern era, there have been signs of change towards redeeming or restoring the church's historically estranged relationship indigenous culture. Some religious bodies, such as the International Council of ethnodoxologists, purposefully use theological and anthropological frameworks in their missions approach to guide all cultures to worship God using their unique artistic expressions. Christian ethnomusicologists and individual Christian dance pioneers such as Dr. Ed Lapiz of Kaloob Dance Ministry in the Philippines, Pat Noble of Jamaica and Seth Newman of Ghana have courageously sought to redeem indigenous dances, not only from the devil as some may understand this process of redemption to be, but from the church's Western negative attitudes toward them. These courageous individuals have sought to find, embody and by example encourage Christian dancers to worship in their heart language rooted in an authentic ethnic and kinesthetic experience to the glory of God.

Call for Action

What practical steps can dance leaders and organizations take to actively ensure that dancing the goodness of God does not depict an ethnocentric idea of goodness in form and message?

1. Be self-reflexive and critical about your ministry practices. Check for negative elitist, colonial, dominant or fearful attitudes towards embodying indigeneity in our dance practices and deal with them before God. These attitudes can mask issues of racism, pride, privilege, or internalized colonialism.
2. Be open to and intentional about researching, experiencing and encouraging indigenous movement aesthetics of your homeland and elsewhere in your dance ministries as a means of embodying social justice and helping yourself and others become true worshippers of the true God in ones own cultural context.
3. Ghana is a great place to start. Connect meaningfully with believers of diverse cultures and encourage them to move in their native body language if they can dance it.
4. Be careful not to assign or privilege some styles of praise or spiritual dancing with greater honor than others. Jewish dances, African dances, Caribbean dance European dance, Australian Aboriginal dances, Asian dances are all horizontal before Almighty God and even if God has placed a particular nation on your heart, do not alienate or forget to embody the rest of the church in the life of your ministry.
5. Shift from a passive position of indifference to being actively concerned with

reclaiming and redeeming non-western embodied expressions as appropriate acts of worship in small and large ways. We need to never be comfortable with ethnocentrism in our worship. We need not explore with fear of man, or fear of breaking tradition, or fear of rejection as the bigger goal is not the dance or the body itself, but manifesting the rainbow heart of God towards people, and God's work in developing our heart towards others. His goodness is too large to be contained in one movement culture.

Conclusion

As I have articulated throughout this paper, diversity matters to God and as dance leaders, we must be careful not to establish or continually promote a universal, often Western or Jewish representation for dance in our churches that makes invisible or diminishes the goodness of God to mankind in its myriad forms. God desires unity, but not homogeneity. Dancing God's goodness to its fullest means being inclusive and intercultural in our embodied practices, and may require some epistemic rupture of particular ways of thinking and doing (Dewerse, 2011) a shift that de-centers us and opens us up to being changed by the "other". Such ruptures may not be comfortable as they shake the structures in which we have operated for a long time but such ruptures are important to understanding the heart of God.

The seminal research of Ed Lapiz in deconstructing the process of redeeming cultural dances for use in Christian worship is a useful read for understanding how to re-contextualize indigenous dances for ministry in the church as I am by no means suggesting that all aspects of any culture is appropriate for worship. More research is warranted in this area, even as I acknowledge the slippery slope of understanding indigenous dances through Western epistemological and ontological frames. Nevertheless God's wisdom transcends human thought and His Spirit is able to make clear that which the mind finds difficult to perceive. Hence we need not fear embracing and exploring indigenous dance traditions in movement as acts of worship. As Harbison and Jones (2004) point out in their article "Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention", the rapidly increasing numbers of Christians in non-Western nations is challenging the Euro-centric understanding and characterizing of the Christian faith and demands something different which the arts can provide. I therefore challenge and call each of you, as ICDF seeks new directions to be relevant and visible, to break free of your movement sanctuaries, and find, acknowledge, and experience indigenous cultural expressions in worship, so that the mosaic imprints of God's goodness can help others connect deeper to themselves, and help us all connect deeper to each other, the global church, and ultimately to God himself.

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