

MFA STUDENT, DANCE, ETHIOPIA

Few cultural phenomena have aroused as much global discourse as that of female rites of passage. With the extensive body of knowledge surrounding these phenomena, they have yet to be analyzed and elucidated through the vantage point of dance studies with its own distinct and evolving methodologies and epistemologies. The lapse in the discourse is what makes the proposal significant and timely. "We must look for African women's voices in women's spaces and modes such as in ceremonies and worksongs . . . Women also speak in silences." Often in these silences, the body "speaks" volumes through the dance.

I intend to investigate the relationship between Ethiopian dance traditions and female rites of passage using the region of Shewa (one of 14 regions) of Ethiopia as a case study to collect descriptive and interpretive data in order to identify how Ethiopian dance traditions have shaped and informed ritual female rites. As relevant to women in Ethiopia during present times, the guiding premise of the research is that the dance is "read" as "text"--rich and inundated with significant socio-cultural meaning. Female rites of passage have been studied extensively on the continent of Africa, yet the dances performed during various phases of the ceremonial rites have been sketchily documented and noted as merely subsidiary. Kariam Welsh Asante, African dance aesthetician/scholar writes, "What [scholars] did not know, understand, or come to acknowledge was that dance facilitates all phenomenon in African societies, and there was little chance that one could witness any event without observing dance." So when Pearl Primus, dance anthropologist, clarifies that, "Dance in Africa is not a separate art [as is the ethos of art in most European/North American contexts], but a part of the whole complex of living," then we understand that it is insufficient to study female rites of passage in Ethiopia without studying Ethiopian dance. Additionally, the female dancing body as axis to dances in Africa and ritual rites has been inundated by pejorative representations and images of eroticism, barbarianism, and primitivism. The "Western" gaze that oftentimes appropriates women in Africa as "other" has decidedly impacted my choice of research methods; hence, I have selected methods which focus upon Ethiopian women's shared cognitive and kinesthetic intelligences with the understanding that the *body* as knowledge is holistically conceptualized, not truncated within specific historical and cultural contexts. Indeed cultural assumptions, including my own, are present during any research process. It is my attempt, however, throughout the research to illuminate and question many of the homogeneous and imperialistic assumptions held about dance, female rites, and the female dancing body in African, specifically Ethiopian, contexts, which are far from monolithic or fixed across time and space.

I have chosen Ethiopia because it has a vast cultural tradition with artifacts dating dance traditions back centuries, as is the case in most African nations, yet research on dance in Eastern Africa is extensively less than the Western, Central, and Southern regions. This gap in research may be due, in part, to the geographical inaccessibility of Europe and North America to Eastern Africa. Where research on dance in Ethiopia is insubstantial and almost non-existent, research on female rites of passage is not-particularly the practice of female circumcision, which is fundamental to many rites of passage. The Amharic term for female circumcision is girizat. All four different types of girizat are found in Ethiopia in every segment of the population - regardless of economic status, religion or ethnicity - from clitoridectomy, which involves the removal of the tip of the clitoris and is the most widely practiced type of circumcision in Ethiopia's urban areas, to infibulations or "pharaonic circumcision," which is the most drastic of the four types and entails the complete removal of the clitoris and labia and sewing up of the vagina, leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual blood to pass. Statistical data taken from a 1995 UNICEF-sponsored study in five regions and an IAC survey in administered regions indicate that Ethiopia has a prevalence rate of 85-90 percent and the region of Shewa remains the logistical choice based upon demographic data that indicates a heterogeneous population with most of the 13 other regions surrounding its provincial boundaries.

Noteworthy is the sensitivity of the topic of rites of passage, specifically the element of female circumcision, to Ethiopian culture. Based upon an extensive review of the literature that I have done on female rites of passage and female circumcision, I have identified a "silence" that surrounds the cultural tradition. However, female circumcision is not "some hidden ritual of which people are guiltily ashamed . . ." Critics have tended to mystify the whole subject . . . The subject of female circumcision is not taboo, rather, it is painful.' When women feel they are in a safe environment, they are `desperate to talk about it.'" Thus, it is imperative, as the researcher, to be cognizant of this when situating many of my data gathering techniques.

To insure the highest level of feasibility for the proposed research, I will conduct a month long pilot study in January_____ to do the following: confirm contacts for a more intensive field study under a Fulbright Full grant; begin archival research at Addis Ababa's Institute of Ethiopian Studies (inaugurated in 1996) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia that houses approximately 3000 bound volumes, 500 periodicals, and a vast collection of manuscripts, private letters, correspondences, microfilms, photographs, and archival records essentially to promote Ethiopian studies; establish a network for accessing female informants for the proposed research period; and, finalize field site selection.

During my intensive research period, I will employ dance research multi-methodological techniques to include: (a) audiotaped and videotaped documentation of in-depth individual interviews with focus group informants, as well as conversational interactions with community members encountered during participation/observation; (b) audiotaped and videotaped documentation of in-depth focus group interviews (the multi-modal approach becomes necessary with my emphasis on the collection of kinesthetic data). It is my intention to meet with approximately five groups of five women once a month over the research period to gain a diverse and longitudinal perspective. Each group will include women from age eighteen and over from various socioeconomic, educational, religious, ethnical, and generational backgrounds. Groups will consist of women from a homogeneous grouping based upon age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and educational background to allow informants the highest level of comfort; (c) videotaped documentation of dance performances by women that are--according to their vantage points--connected to and disconnect from female rites of passage; (d) a "thick" descriptive analysis of videotaped and live documented dance performances; (e) an analysis of journals kept by focus group informants for patterns and themes about their relationship to dance and rites of passage. The use of journal keeping by focus groups will allow informants to further elucidate questions, concerns, and/or issues in a private manner; and, (t) archival research at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies' Library; which is recognized as housing the finest collections of materials on Ethiopia anywhere in the world.

I will engage in participation/observation in various contexts including dance, social, familial, religious, aesthetic, cultural, and educational to enhance and substantiate my other methods of data collection. Advantageous to my entire research experience will be language classes in Amharic that I will take from the University of Pennsylvania's African Languages' Program for two semesters prior to my intensive field research. Some 70 languages are spoken in Ethiopia, and while regional languages are in common use (such as Oromo, Tigrinya, and Somali), I have chosen Amharic because, as the country's official language, it is the most widely used and understood language throughout the country serving as the mother-tongue of the 12 million or so Amhara people in central and northwestern Ethiopia. Because English is also widely used in Ethiopia, particularly the central region of Shewa that surrounds the capital city, Addis Ababa, my developing proficiency in Amharic will allow me a greater practicability to conduct my research. To further facilitate my research accessibility, I have applied for Institutional Affiliation with the Research and Publication's Department of Addis Ababa University and have elicited support from the Center for Research, Training, and Information on Women in Development of the Institute of Development Research of Addis Ababa University to serve as a research counterpart (see attachments). The collected primary and secondary data in the Shewa Region of Ethiopia serves as the principal data for my dissertation.

The goals of the project are ambitious, yet achievable, and significant to discourse surrounding female rites of passage and Ethiopian dance. I completed and passed my comprehensive exams during the start of the Fall semester . I have been working within the guidance and full support of my primary dissertation advisor for the past two years in the proposed research topic beginning with an extensive review of literature through to my current endeavors of solidifying funding for the necessary field work for the research proposal. With the full support of my dissertation committee, I am currently preparing my dissertation proposal for defense in December_____. My project will take place from September_____to July ____ (based upon Addis Ababa University's academic year). Beyond the scope of using the collected data as the primary source material to complete my dissertation, my objectives include: giving a copy of my completed dissertation to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University, as well as the department under which the research was conducted; adding my data to those of noted women's groups in Ethiopia as they continue to address female rites of passage both nationally and globally; and, completing a follow-up report for the Fulbright Committee. I am committed to the methodological, theoretical, and epistemological convergence that is occurring across disciplinary and global boundaries. My commitment as a dance scholar/artist/educator remains firm to the voices of women as I contribute to the ways we, as researchers, can fully understand the power of dance to illuminate and trouble some of the assumptions with which dance, cultural practices and the female body have been laden. It is my hope to reaffirm this commitment in my artistic, scholarly, and educational pursuits.