The Evolution of Dance: A Caribbean Perspective

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Introduction

The evolution of dance in our region requires a clear understanding of the pre-colonial past of the Caribbean. Areito or areyto (plural areitos) was a ceremony associated with ancestor worship performed by the Taíno people of the Caribbean. These important ceremonies involved dances and music and played an important role in Taíno social, political, and religious life. Areitos usually took place in the main plaza of a village or in the area in front of the chief’s house. These areas worked as dance grounds and were limited by an earthen embankment or by a series of standing stones, often decorated with carved images of zemi, mythological beings or noble ancestors. The purpose of areito ceremonies was for the living to communicate with the spirit world. This was attained through music, dances and reaching ecstatic states through hallucinogenic substances.

Areitos were performed on a variety of occasions, including deaths, births, marriages, declarations of war and peace, or to celebrate the arrival or departure of important visitors (Oliver 2005:29). The religious ceremonies that took place at gatherings and festivals were accompanied by music and dance. In the areitos, the people would sing and dance, in a circle with their arms intertwined, to the sound of a drum. One member, either a man or a woman, guided the group. The dancers marked the rhythm of the music with their steps and sang in a choral fashion as they stepped forward and back while responding to the leaders phrases and repeating his dance steps. The songs were both an oral history of the people as well as a creative way of communicating news to the wider community.

It is inaccurate to claim that Caribbean indigenous dance forms disappeared with the decimation of the first native settlers. In reality they did not. Cuban scholars José Antonio Garcia Molina and Dailsy Fariñas in their book on Cuban indigenous survivals, argue that the forms of these early areitos impacted a Cuban spiritist cult, Danza del Cordón (dance of the cord), a ceremony still practiced in the eastern mountains and other parts of Cuba (Forte 2006:27). Caribbean dance, as reflected in this prime example, has remained untamed and in opposition to the hegemonic powers that have historically controlled the region. But despite successes in employing dance as a tool for survival, especially for many disadvantaged communities, Caribbean dance has been somewhat de-legitimised by the continued use of Eurocentric dance styles. This paper makes reference to the Taíno peoples of the Greater Antilles, who used areitos as an important organising principle in their way of life. The paper advocates restoring areitos to dance throughout the Caribbean as an alternative to the fast-paced, ever-changing chaotic reality of contemporary society.
Bringing Dance Back to the Centre

Cuban researcher and choreographer Ramiro Guerra, in his book *Caliban Danzante* (Dancing Caliban), associates Caribbean dances with Caliban, the wild character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In reference to the areitos, Guerra (8) explains how “the individual movement of the body, and in particular collective movement had the compulsive force to overpower that which existed and acted within nature’s realm.” 1  “These were”, continues Guerra, “inextricably functional ceremonies that once executed collectively would become part of the community’s everyday life” (8).2 For the inhabitants of the Antilles before 1492, putting dance at the centre of their lives was a successful enterprise. Therefore, this study proposes embracing the first dances as a way to evolve a pedagogical model that simultaneously focuses on the Caribbean subject, his/her body, and the process of embodying knowledge through movement. Should this model be implemented in the region’s educational system, students would be taught the importance of areitos in the evolving cultural dynamics of the Caribbean.

Academic institutions, in order to improve their dance instruction to students, must critically explore the dances of different ethnic groups of the Caribbean. The areitos danced by the Taínos were not only the native dances documented in these islands, but they constitute the only case study where dance was an intricate part of society at large. Dance rituals and ceremonies, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, created a state of stasis, (a term used in theatre to describe balance), among the indigenous populations; never achieved again by any other ethnic group in the area since the arrival of the Europeans. The study of the areito dances is a first step towards the development of a system that connects a very particular idiosyncrasy in the Caribbean to a dance-based learning model that has the potential to develop into a socio-economic, political socializing tool. The evolution of dance in the Caribbean should involve returning to a dance form, such as the areito, that reflects cohesion, change as well as cultural continuity with the region. Because of its shared history of colonization, neo-colonization, neoliberalism and an increasingly globalized economy, the Caribbean has been a very politically, socially and economically fragile area, where dance, as used by the Taínos is no longer a major feature of the cultural landscapes of most societies.

Restoring the Areito

The restoration of the areito as a dance practice aims at intersecting the ancient past with the present, creating a tool to empower new generations towards social and political action, to live in their bodies, to channel violence, to develop communities, to get high on dance. Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in America*, suggests the adoption of the word areito to describe “a collective act involving singing, dancing, celebration, and worship that claimed aesthetic as well as sociopolitical and religious legitimacy” (Taylor 2003:15). According to Taylor, the term is attractive because “it blurs all Aristotelian notions of discretely developed genres, publics and ends” (Taylor 15). Furthermore, it reflects the assumption that “cultural manifestations exceed compartmentalization either by genre, such as song or dance, by participant/actor, or by intended effect, meaning religious, sociopolitical or aesthetic, that ground Western cultural thought” (15). The broad, all encompassing nature of areito as “reiterative process” allows for the inclusion of
dance as part of a problem-solving engine by which political and economic power would succumb to aesthetic notions of the world and those who inhabit it in dance.

It is possible to recuperate the areito by putting together elements known through the Spanish chronicles from the 16th century and restore them in the “subjunctive:” meaning how the dances could have been as opposed to how they really were (Turner 2007:127). Furthermore, the subjunctive mood is an aspect of potentiality of *communitas*. However, communitas is only apparent when contrasted to the “norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure” (127). Hence, the juxtaposition of the two, areito and social structure, as was characteristic of the 15th century Taino, can be modeled to combine areito dance with current dance forms in the Caribbean. Information on the areitos, although interpreted through the lens of the biases of Spanish chronicles, remains a useful starting point for developing a dance model applicable to the contemporary Caribbean.

**Rebuilding Tradition**

Through the areito, the Taino “represented the elements they conjured, either with the earth and the powers that inhabit it, or with the air and its transparent beings that cross it and live in it” (Guerra 1993:10). This constitutes a powerful metaphor to develop awareness about the importance of protecting our natural resources and the animistic forces they contain. The restoration of aboriginal dances in the subjunctive offers an opportunity to rebuild a tradition that can regenerate a level of responsible behaviors among children, youth and adults from primary school to tertiary education. Assigning animistic qualities to natural resources, as done by the Taino, is a way of representing nature through dances and recreating the life cycle. Areitos can be utilised to reflect the impact of modern communities on Caribbean ecology as well as develop in students a heightened sensitivity to the environment. If as described by Guerra, “the convulsive and static movement … characteristic of these civilizations in which the movements were tense, animalistic, rude and without conventional gracefulness … brutal and menacing on occasions” was also “full of religious unction in others”, then the possibility for a new, all inclusive model to re-frame human emotions seems viable (Guerra 10.)

**Defining the Modalities of Action**

Guerra defines the choreographic guidelines of the areito in its different modalities of action: “they dance separate and holding hands, interlaced arm to arm, in a line, in the round forward and backwards, in a semicircular line or in an arch, in an angular line, forward and backwards in a counterpace manner” (Guerra 10). As described by Spanish Dominican Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566) the Taino of the Antilles, “promenading, jumping, turning”, along with “the beat in their voices as well as in their steps … their arms over each other’s arms”, give us the formula for a type of communal interaction hardly advocated in school systems, where children and young adults hardly interact with each other through dance (10). Las Casas emphasized the collective accuracy of the choreographic movement when he described how Tainos were “dancing and jumping and singing, all together with so much rhythm and order that the voices and jumps and torso movement seemed like one voice as the jumps and movements
looked like one.” Thus, the choral quality of such dance, when implemented in the school curricula or community centres, could develop a healthy sense of group dynamics, a useful awareness of who leads and who follows, and a collective consensus about reliability, accountability, responsibility, discipline, uniformity, rhythm, pace, and timing. The sense of oneness experienced in dances such as these, would not only lead to racial, ethnic, gender and religious integration of the community of learners and other community members, but also facilitate both mind and body integration.

Learning through Dance Activation

The art of narration (whether verbal or danced), is almost non-existent in a society that privileges printed text and media images over non-written forms of direct communication. This affects the learning processes to which students, at all levels, are exposed. Principal dancer Jacques d’Amboise, director of the National Dance Institute in the United States, has developed groundbreaking “formats in which engagement with the art of dance can promote enhancement of critical thinking ability, development of self-esteem and confidence, and higher order skills tied to cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic domains of learning” (Workshop Report: 2008). In the “Final Workshop Report: Art, Creativity and Learning” sponsored by the National Science Foundation, Christopher W. Tyler, a visual psychophysicist, creator of the autostereogram (“Magic Eye” pictures) and Head of the Smith-Kettlewell Brain Imaging, documented the work of an important number of researchers who found that musical experience and short term auditory training can enhance subcortical representations of the acoustic elements, known to be important for reading and speech encoding.

Tyler also brings to the fore the role of dance in “integrating the rhythmicity of music and the representational capacity of language” (National Science Foundation/report_final.pdf). The neuroimaging studies of dance, presented in the workshop, examined brain areas involved in the production and perception of dance. Based on the evaluation of perception studies, “neural expertise effects” clearly demonstrate brain activation occurs preferentially in people who are competent to perform the dance movements. Neuroscientific evidence suggests that music and dance activate two parts of the same motor-action-imitation system through mirror neurons. Furthermore, music and dance evoke emotions and stimulate visual images that expand the scope of the material being learned by maintaining attention, and allowing a higher level of memory retention.

Application of the New Model

The Taíno knew this intuitively. Through his writings, Las Casas revealed that the areitos sometimes lasted eight days with the participation of five hundred to a thousand Taíno men and women. However, a distinction should be made between dances with images and dances without. The collective dances without images (in lines, circles, serpentine lines) took place alongside dances with images in which there were imitated work actions. Guerra (11) references Las Casas as he describes how “one dancer represented the act of hunting [while] another one acted as if he was fishing”. Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara (1511 - 1566), whose
work was also quoted by Cuban ethnologist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (11), described how “some pretended to be blind, others limped, one went fishing, one weaved, one cried, one laughed.”

The foregoing descriptions clearly suggest that pantomimic actions of live characters, representing quotidian images, the embodiments of text narrations, stories and danced fables, were important defining characteristics of areitos. Based on this, the areito can provide new models of communication to acknowledge food production processes designed to show the interdependent connections between humanity and nature. Modern life lacks opportunities for students to have hands-on experience on how to make or build things for the community. An areito mimicking the art of creating things could develop with urban students a greater awareness of natural environment. The dynamic rhythms of areito, similar to those produced by early Caribbean natives, could provide a healthy outlet for students with conduct disorder, antisocial and pathological behaviors.

**Reconnecting with Physical Actions**

Areitos had an important social function. Besides the foregoing, they can be a vehicle for creating positive relationships within communities. Areitos, as practiced by the Taíno, created greater social cohesion among disparate groups. Essentially they were organised during important communal activities such as agricultural activities and house construction to protect people against the forces of nature such as hurricanes. The areito was more than song and dance; it was the center of the socio-economic and political life of the Taíno. It was also a collective way for the Taíno to organize and reproduce their cosmological world-view. They danced “with all their body muscles and not only with their legs” (Guerra 10). They jumped “a thousand times” and made “a thousand gestures” (Guerra 10). The “strong expression of early dance, in which the dancer became part of his/her surrounding universe”, was used to “reproduce his/her interior images in the enclosing space by recurring to all kinds of physical actions (Guerra 10).”

Caribbean men and women who have grown in modern societies that no longer offer a space for meaningful and essential dance, have lost connection with their surrounding space, their inner self, their sense of magic and their *ache* or power to make things happen. This lack is what Cuban theatre director and researcher Tomás González Pérez (2003: 203) in his essay “La posesión: privilegio de la teatralidad” (Possession: Privilege of Theatricality) has defined as a disconnection with the “original numen” (el numen original) or the sacred energy implicit in theatre and by extension dance.

**Conclusion**

The areitos were communal ceremonies that reflected the special relationship between human agency and the environment. The Taíno’s areitos marked the beginning of the evolution of Caribbean people as movement thinkers or people who placed much emphasis on the movement of their bodies in dance. Carnival, as an all inclusive expression of cultural, religious and political emancipation of the Caribbean subaltern collective, is an example of how dance can become a tool for convocation of the masses, the place for fruitful juxtapositions, and at the same time a sterile manifestation of nationhood that has no socio-political agency, despite its impact on the economy. However, by incorporating the areito in contemporary dance forms,
particularly during modern Carnival, dancing can become more spontaneous and more collective, but also more genuine and powerful. If we follow the Taíno example, we will be able to provide an alternative Caribbean space where political, social and economic decisions can become an embodied expression of the will of all. Restoring the areito as an alternative solution to increasingly disruptive socio-political models is the key to a Caribbean society where humanity and nature finally coexist in balance. The integration that occurs through the inclusion of people’s music, chant and dance expressions in community building dynamics, reconnects Caribbean aesthetic values to more representative, efficient and long lasting decision-making models.

References Cited


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Endnotes

1 Author’s translation of “el movimiento individual del cuerpo, y en particular el movimiento colectivo, poseía la fuerza compulsiva de dominar aquello que de por si existía y actuaba en el ámbito de la naturaleza.”

2 Author’s translation of “Estas fueron las ceremonias por excelencia, intrínsecamente funcionales y que, al ser ejecutadas colectivamente, formaban una intensa actividad de la vida comunal en la cotidianidad.”

3 Author’s translation of “representando los elementos que conjura ‘bien con la tierra y los poderes que la habitan, o bien con el aire y los transparentes y fugaces seres que lo cruzan y moran en el.’”
Author’s translation of “El movimiento convulsivo y estático... es una característica de estos estadios de civilización en que los movimientos son ‘tensos, animalísticos, y sin la gracia convencional [...] brutales o amenazadores en ocasiones y en otras llenos de unión religiosa.”

Author’s translation of “danzan sueltos, trabados de la mano, trabados brazo con brazo, en regla (hílera), a la redonda, yendo y viniendo (corros), en arco (línea semicircular), en muela (línea angular), adelante y atrás, a manera de un contrapás.”

Author’s translation of “pasean [...] saltan [...] voltean, era cosa de ver su compás así en las voces como en los pasos, [...] los brazos de los unos puestos por los brazos de los otros.”

Author’s translation of “bailando y saltando y cantando todos juntos, con tanto compás y orden, que las voces y saltos y meneos de torso, no parecían sino una voz y saltos y movimientos de uno solo.”

Author’s translation of “uno fingía que casaba, otro que pescaba.”

Author’s translation of “unos hacen del ciego, otros del cojo: cual pesca, cual teje, quien llora, quien ríe.”

Author’s translation of “con todos los músculos de su cuerpo y no solo con las piernas.”

Author’s translation of “dando mil saltos y haciendo mil gestos”.

Author’s translation of “La fuerte expresión de la danza primitiva en la que el danzante se incorpora al movimiento que lo rodea.”