

West African Dance Explanation

West African dance embodies dynamic athleticism and a graceful beauty flowing with rhythm. In fact, dancing is a natural and instinctual way people respond to music—movement is something that is ingrained in us. Similarly, in West African performance events, dance plays a central role and it is common that everyone is motivated to participate. There are few barriers between performer and audience; in fact spectators often become part of the performance by dancing, singing, or clapping. This reflects the importance of making individual artistic contributions to a collective creative whole. Through dance, anyone can express themselves through movement and participate in a West African performance event.

West African dance is distinctive and is characterized by total body articulation and simultaneous emphasis on various parts of the body as it moves in time to the music. For example, shoulders, chest, pelvis, arms, and legs can each move independently along with the different rhythmic layers of the drumming. As well, different ethnic groups in West Africa emphasize different parts of the body. For instance, the Ewe people of Ghana emphasize the upper body and hands, while the Kalabari people of Nigeria emphasize subtle movements of the hips. Dancers often use symbolic gestures, masks, props, costumes and body painting to further heighten the affective power of their movements.

In West Africa, dance forms an important part of ritual ceremonies that mark the experiences of one's life, teach social values and offer praise, depict stories and re-enact histories of the community, communicate with ancestors, and work therapeutically to heal the sick. Dance plays an important part in ceremonial rituals and rites of passage.