

*Dance in West Africa: Analysis and Description in Relation to Aspects of Communication Theory.* Ulrike Groß. 2020. Münster: Waxmann. 55 figures, bibliography, 176pp.

I will never forget a Dance Anthropology class in France where my French-English professor and Ghanaian classmate argued passionately about whether or not dance was a language. My Ghanaian classmate took offence to the notion that dance could not be considered a language, while my professor emphatically argued that this is the case. In the end, we decided that, while not a language, dance can be used as a tool for communication. Groß' *Dance in West Africa* would have been a helpful resource in this argument. The book offers a descriptive analysis of the Adzogbo dance of the Ewe in southern Ghana in relation to the textual meaning that the movement represents and communicates to the audience.

At 176 pages long the book is straight to the point. Fourteen of those consist of a bibliography and using sequential pictograms forty-one pages are dedicated to the notation of the Adzogbo dance. Groß argues that African dance has been marginalised as a subject of research. Her hope is to contribute to research on dance in Africa, "to confront any prevailing prejudices surrounding the integrity of this means of expression" (2020: 10). What Groß fails to acknowledge, however, is the context in which these prejudices occur and how they have led to the marginalisation of African dance studies. As the book is predominantly addressed to a Western audience, I can only assume that she is referring to a prejudice that originates in Western academia. This assumption comes from Groß' use of "our" in her discussion on the prevailing preference of spoken text over communicating through dance and the disappearance of dance in daily life.

Each chapter in the book offers something interesting to those who want to learn more about dance research in the Western context. I was immediately drawn in by the first chapter which offers a brief discussion on the difficulty of defining something as diverse as "African dance." Chapter Two offers several definitions of dance and Groß reviews them to show the difficulty in defining an expression that is so diverse and ephemeral. What I found lacking in this discussion, apart from references to Nketia, is the inclusion of African scholars. While many of the scholarly voices such as Hanna, Kealiinohomoku and Wigman who Groß cites throughout the book are important in any introduction to dance research their voices come from a Western perspective. It would have been preferable to see more of a scholarly influence from Africa.

*Dance in West Africa* provides a brief lesson in the development of systems of dance notation. It also offers a discussion of the number of approaches to dance studies, from the ethnological to psychological, historical, semiotic, phenomenological and linguistic, along with mentioning the prominent theorists in each approach. Most of the book is taken up by a discussion of the approach to the eventual method of analysis that Groß employs.

Another argument that took place in my Dance Anthropology class was over the relevance of dance notation. This mostly arose out of many students' frustration in

having to learn Labanotation, but it also pointed towards an important discussion in dance research. A discussion that has similarly manifested in Ethnomusicology in relation to the exclusivity of music notation – is there a point in using notation when there is little benefit to those who cannot understand it? This question is especially pertinent when it comes to dance notation as current systems of notation, such as Benesh Movement Notation and Labanotation, take at least two years of studying for one to become proficient. What these systems of notation do offer to the researcher is a way of understanding the physicality of movement akin to learning it oneself. These systems may also offer an analysis of variation and the specificities of movement that separate and distinguish movement sequences. Groß' goal was to suggest a "future of dance analysis" by showing the process of arriving at an anatomical "description of the essential characteristics of dance" (2020: 11). By showing how she arrived at this mode of analysis, in light of the other possibilities of dance notation, she offers an interesting alternative to those who are in need of such a form of notation, including how they can create such an analysis for themselves.

This book will be useful to any dance scholar interested in using notation analysis in their research. Groß' descriptive analysis using pictograms provides a useful alternative to other forms of notation. One should compare Groß' analysis with Zelma Badu-Young's PhD thesis. The latter, not mentioned in Groß' book, provides a detailed descriptive analysis of the Adzogbo ceremony, which includes a musical analysis alongside movement description, the "interpretive emotional response" of the dancers, a "general summary of image" and a brief discussion of the "traditional meaning" (2002). Badu-Young's (2002) thesis could probably have benefitted from Groß' visual system, to complement her extensive descriptive analysis.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to dance analysis. While written for a Western audience, and despite it lacking in a more inclusive discussion, African dance scholars could benefit from the discussion and analysis in formulating their own approach to the dance forms in which they are interested. For scholars outside of dance studies, there are offerings of an introduction into the world of dance research.

My one major critique that I hope anybody interested in researching dance forms in Africa will keep in mind, is the potential for essentialising one aspect of a dance form as representative of an entire region of a continent. Despite the disclaimer and discussion at the beginning of the book, Groß falls prey to this trope herself by labelling a description of one dance style as a representative of "Dance in West Africa" and African dance in general. Pooley's (2018) critique of a "continental musicology" comes to mind and cannot be ignored in the context of dance research in Africa.

I agree with Groß that dance research, especially on dance forms in Africa, is a somewhat marginalised field of research. *Dance in West Africa* could be seen as a brief argument for the importance of dance analysis, especially in relation to the ability of certain dance forms to communicate meaning, much like a language. What analysis can provide is a way to understand something that those outside of the tradition have not had the privilege of learning through participating in the tradition. I am reminded

of watching my Ghanaian classmate perform and for the first time learning about how movement can be used to communicate messages. To him, his dancing was like a language with every movement communicating a message to the audience. The question is whether it is important that those outside of the tradition need to understand this aspect of movement, or if the analysis can be useful to those within it. This is a question I will leave to my classmate, and fellow dance researchers most closely associated with these particular dance styles.

### References

Badu, Zelma, C. M.

2002 *Ewe Culture as Expressed in Ghana West Africa through Adzogbo Dance Ceremony: A Foundation for the Development of Interactive Multimedia Educational Materials*. PhD Dissertation, McGill University: Montreal.

Pooley, Thomas

2018 "Continental Musicology: Decolonising the Myth of a Singular 'African music.'" *African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music* 10 (4): 177–193. DOI:10.21504/amj.v10i4.2239

**Heather van Niekerk**, University of South Africa, South Africa