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Dance, Drama, and the Spoken Word

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F. RITUALIZATION OF HUMAN CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Dance, drama, and the spoken word

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Animals dance, and so does man, and must have done so from his first beginnings. In its simplest and most primitive form dance is a communal activity in which a group of men perform the same gestures in time to a single rhythm. At this stage dance is not imitative, nor is it accompanied by song. It expresses some need that calls for release in exhilarating movement and its satisfaction is enhanced by a sense of common action, of individuals working so closely together that they have something like a group-consciousness. Such dances are, or were till quite recently, common among the Pygmies of the Gabon, the Yamana of Tierra del Fuego, and the Bushmen. But in them man had not advanced beyond the animals. The dance answers a need in him, but it has no conscious purpose and is not expected to produce any result. It is done because it always has been, and gives the same immemorial satisfaction. Its forms are strictly standardized and even when there is a musical accompaniment, as with the drum among the Bambuti Pygmies, it remains instinctive in the sense that it aims at nothing beyond itself. But beside this primitive form there are other forms which have far greater possibilities of expansion and development.

From the earliest known times dancers have imitated living creatures and based their movements on those of animals. Just as dancers of the Magdalenian age are depicted with antlers and horses' tails, so some Australians put on tails to resemble dogs or kangaroos. A common version of this kind of dance is for one or more dancers to take the part of animals and for others to pursue them. No less common are purely imitative dances still practised by modern Stone-agers. When Pygmies act the parts of baboons or wild boars, or the Andamanese of turtles, or the Tasmanians of kangaroos or emus or fish, or the Yamana of sea-lions, it is perfectly clear what they imitate, and no words are needed to explain it. The meaning lies in the action which is varied and vigorous and well coordinated. Such dances do more than satisfy an unformulated need. They have a conscious purpose, however simply it may be realized, and to this extent they mark an important stage in man's attempts to extend his knowledge and control of nature. Some of these imitative dances are intended to put him in command of the animals which he hunts. By acting the hunt in advance he attempts to ensure that it will go well when it comes. He anticipates in imagination and by suitably illustrative action what he wishes to happen, and in so doing he passes beyond his immediate consciousness into identifying himself with the animals which he hunts and with himself in the future as their hunter. His basic assumptions are those of Palaeolithic man when he painted pictures of bisons or horses dying from his arrows. To anticipate an action by such means is thought to be a way of controlling it, and it turns the hunter's mind from the immediate present into a clearly

imagined future in which he forms a close and detailed picture of what ought to happen.

Not all dances which imitate animals are to be explained in this way. When a totemistic system of beliefs prevails, as it does alike among African Pygmies and among most aboriginal Australians, it is normally forbidden to hunt the animal which is the totem of a group, and yet animal-dances are extremely common. Their purpose is to display what the connexion with a totem really means. When he takes the part of a kangaroo, an Australian really identifies himself with it and believes himself to be it, and to this degree his imaginative range is greater than when he acts the part of a hunted animal, with which he cannot finally or absolutely identify himself. Moreover, since totems are by no means confined to animals, their variety provokes a far wider range of imaginative rites than mere hunting can.

Such dances are commonly danced by groups of men or women who, after all, all join in the hunt or share the same totem. But the liberation of thought brought by these means encourages the emergence of individual dancers. In the twenty-fourth century B.C. the young Pharaoh Pepi II wrote in some excitement to a general about a Pygmy who had been captured and was said to dance 'the dances of the gods'. The famous 'Sorcerer' in a cave at Ariège has attributes of a stag, an owl, a bear, and a horse and is quite plainly dancing. He seems to be a prototype of the single performer who is common in primitive societies, and who through some special distinction or authority extends the whole range of the dance and its meaning. He may work alone, in which he is the approved representative of a group, or he may be the leader in it and perform the chief rites while others support him with subsidiary actions. His appearance indicates that the group-consciousness of the primitive dance has been diversified and enriched by something outside its regular round. He is the forerunner of the single artist who interprets to a group what its real intentions are.

The dance does not need words, but sooner or later it acquires them, and this increases and changes its significance. An elementary stage comes not with actual words but with meaningless sounds sung to a simple tune that fits the movements of the dance. Such are the only sounds used by the Yamana and the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego in their many dances. Though meaningless, they take a fixed form, and each dance has its own set of them which is never varied. When Messrs Waldron and Drayton landed on Tierra del Fuego from H.M.S. *Beagle* in 1838, a group of natives took their arms and jumped with them in time to the following song:

Ha ma la ha ma la ha ma la ha ma la
O la la la la la la la la

Traces of similar noises are to be found in other primitive songs, but seem in due course to be displaced by or to be mingled with real words. The change is of the greatest importance. Meaningless words are instinctive responses to some need just as the actual dance is, and though they are formalized into strict regularity, they add nothing to the understanding or explanation of the rite. They are not intelligent. But once real words begin to be sung, something serious happens. The purely physical sensation of dancing receives almost a new dimension. However simple the words may be, and they are often very simple indeed, they

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do something to explain what the rite means. So before hunting, the Bambuti Pygmies dance and at the same time sing:

Spear, spear, strike home, spear, spear
Strike home, *öïoö-o*, *öïoö-o*, strike home.

The words leave no doubt what the action aims at and somehow strengthen its appeal.

Once words make an entry into ritual acts, they develop their own idiosyncrasies and their own art. In their simplest form they are sung by a group of singers and illustrate the rhythmical actions which they accompany. So Tasmanian women, before hunting, would sing in chorus a song naming the various animals which they hoped to kill and, though the actual movements of the dance gave little hint of this, the words left no doubt about it, and the dance was thus made intelligible. When the Hill Dama of south-West Africa need rain, they ask for it together with suitable gestures of invocation, but their actual song formulates exactly what they want:

Father, bless us still!
Father reward us still!
May the land have onions!
May it have *ou*-berries!
May it have ground-nuts!
May the clouds still rain!

With this communal activity we may contrast the purely individual song on a purely personal theme. Just as some individual dancers perform just for the pleasure of it or to express some need in themselves, so words may be used to perform a similar task. This is what an Eskimo does when he sings of an accident which has befallen him when out hunting:

I want to laugh because my sledge is broken.
Because its ribs are broken I want to laugh.
Here at Talaviuyaq I struck hummocky ice, I met with an upset.
I want to laugh. It is not a thing to laugh at.

The song, with remarkable candour, relieves his feelings, and that is all that it is meant to do. Once this art establishes itself, there are no limits to it, and it is remarkable how common it is among very primitive peoples. The sense of rhythm which has been developed by the dance is detached from it and applied to the quite different technique of singing words. What might otherwise be no more than an emotional condition is given precision and shape and is entirely satisfying in itself.

Between the strictly communal and the strictly individual song there is a half-way station which is no less influential. In some important rites, which aim at a definite result, the leader of the company does most of the work and his fellows support him with a refrain, and this is certainly the origin of the refrain which has had so long a career in the poetry of most countries. When everyone wants the same thing, the refrain sets it out in general terms and the leader amplifies it. So in an Eskimo dance-song from the Coppermine River the subject is the preparation of a bow for hunting and the words are intended to strengthen it. The leader sings about it from various angles, and after each couplet from him the company sings:

He constantly bends it.
He constantly bends it.

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The Gabon Pygmies prepare for hunting the elephant with the same art on a richer scale, and many other examples show that, when some communal purpose is in the air, this kind of song is used to put it into effect. The leader speaks for all, but in his own way. But this art is no less popular when no such external end is in mind and can be applied to purely personal experiences which the singer wishes to share with his fellows. The Andamanese have a number of very short songs, in which the singer first states his theme, and then the company repeat the last part of it several times as a refrain. It is a condensed and difficult art, but succeeds in combining personal experience with a sense that this belongs to everyone. A striking example is that of a hunter who has been so frightened by seeing dead bodies in the forest that he has come home without pursuing his prey:

> Dead man's bones, where I am hunting!
> My heart is throbbing, O!
> My heart is throbbing, is pounding away,
> Throbbing it is, pounding away!

As they repeat the last line the company enter imaginatively into the plight of the hunter and feel that they are one with him. The individual gains by knowing that others share his feelings, and their experience is enlarged by his song.

Primitive song and dance are concerned both with visible and with invisible matters. In the first case what counts is the re-living of something that has happened or the vivid anticipation of something that will happen. Even when this is intended to affect the future, it deals with familiar matters of every day. In the second case the subject is concerned with the countless supernatural forces with which primitive man believes himself to be encompassed. In his pre-scientific world he cannot but provide explanations of almost everything by postulating gods and spirits in control everywhere. To understand them and to enter into some relation with them he uses song and dance, which are almost his only way of dealing with his spiritual and intellectual needs. Such songs are concerned largely with the human cycle of birth, puberty, marriage, and death, but they can do more than this, and when they do, they are the real beginnings of drama. Drama has its pre-history when men imitate animals in a dance, but when words are added and more than one part is taken, then true drama has begun. Very short but striking examples of this can be seen in the songs of Bathurst Island in which women hold short dialogues, with their dead husbands and though the women sing both parts, they assume that the husbands are speaking through them. The drama is complete, because the actors believe what is sung to be actually taking place. More elaborate are the short dramas of the Semang in Malaysia. The actors perform certain ritual actions, and their words explain what these mean. In fact the actors identify themselves with divine beings, such as the *chenoi* who are spirits of the spring and are thought to come down from the sky. The actors become the *chenoi* and speak in words entirely appropriate to them. The words and the gestures are enough to convince the imagination that something really is happening, and that is what is needed. Far more elaborate are certain Australians rituals, which illustrate totemistic beliefs by making them real to the eye and the ear. This is a more complex art then in any primitive society. The dramatic purpose is emphasized by painting the body and by the use of various symbolic objects; the accompanying words are often of great charm and immediacy; the action can

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be highly varied and exciting. When the Aranda take the part of birds or wallabies, they act the parts with total conviction, believing themselves to be birds or wallabies. This is true drama, and its aim is to emphasize the ultimate identity between a group and its totem.

In other parts of Australia this kind of drama is much more elaborate. The whole mystery of life, as interpreted by various religious beliefs, is acted in a series of scenes. Each section may be quite long, and the whole series covers a very wide range of action. Such are the Kunapipi and Djanggawul ceremonies of Arnhem Land. Ultimately they deal with very obscure matters, but these are presented in gestures and words of great clarity, with a keen eye for visible details, which stand for more mysterious workings behind them. The association between visible object and invisible power is not easy for us to grasp, but in fact it is no more than a highly elaborate system of symbolism such as we know in quite different circumstances. The long sequence of symbolic actions forms a complex ritual which appeals to the whole being through the eyes and ears. This is the most elaborate form of primitive drama and it embodies most of the elements of primitive dance and song. It differs from most modern drama in an important respect. The events portrayed are thought to have taken place in the beginning of things and still to be taking place now. They are outside any time-scheme, and yet they are always there. This kind of drama anticipates much that has happened in later drama. First, though modern drama and story-telling, which is akin to it, deal with specific actions in what seems to be a specific time, this time is transcended by being fixed in words and is to that extent permanent. Secondly, while primitive actors really identify themselves with their parts and for the moment do not so much act as live them, the better a modern actor is, the more he falls into his part and acts from some central conviction that this is what for the moment he is. Thirdly, though ritual drama deals with an unseen world by making it visible, the best modern drama usually implies much wider issues behind its particular events and invites us to think about them and discuss them.

Primitive dance is thus related to song and drama, and so to the art of words. Words have to be chosen for a special purpose and must possess special qualities. They must of course fit the rhythm of the dance but they must also have a special evocative power which engages our whole attention. Behind this lies the notion of the magical word which by itself can change a whole situation, and the belief in this enables man to enlarge his view of his own powers. But even when the word does not do this, it must still be as forceful and as evocative as possible. The remarkable concentration of most primitive songs, their arts of repetition and of alliteration, their many onomatopoeic moments, show that they are chosen with a very keen eye for their effect. And this effect lies in making us keenly aware not merely of things which we do not often notice but of much that we do not think of at all. So long as he confines himself to gestures, such as dance and ritual, man does not in fact improve much on the animals, but when he turns to words, he exploits something which is peculiarly his own. He may of course use them for the ordinary give-and-take of living, and of course this cannot fail in the long run to extend his knowledge, but when he uses them in all their power he does much more. By expressing as forcefully as possible certain feelings in himself, he not only gives them a concrete shape which engages his mind as well as his emotions, but in this he masters some situation which has troubled him

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and thereby strengthens his confidence in himself and in his relation with other creatures and things. By exploiting his whole nature and allowing his feelings to keep his mind at work he gains that 'unity of being' which keeps him awake and aware and provides him with a means by which he can continue to advance in his approach to phenomena and his mastery of them.

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