

# THE DANCING CHURCH OF AFRICA

## STUDY GUIDE

by *THOMAS A. KANE*

*The Dancing Church* aims to acquaint Western audiences with the liturgical developments within the wider Church, especially Africa. This study involves an exploration through images and symbols of the relationship of liturgy to culture. Today, inculturation is no longer theoretical research, but takes shape in a variety of communities where the parish or church leadership has begun opening up the symbols of the faith within the local context. This means using the experience and history of a particular tribe or community as the starting place to express the deepest Christian mysteries. It also involves the creative work of poets, musicians and dancers.

*The Dancing Church* was shot entirely on location in different African countries with the permission of the various congregations and religious groups and with Church approval. The material is actual worship; it is not artificial, nor constructed for the purposes of the project. The locations were selected because of the creative use of African elements in the worship, especially dance. Because there is no generic African worship, it is impossible for any one example of community worship to represent the entire continent. Each segment speaks its own language and culture.

The video presents the embodied worship of Africa, examining a variety of Church contexts: village worship, Cathedral/city worship and the worship of a cloistered community. The research was done on two different visits to Africa in 1987 and 1990. The first visit took almost six months, crossing the continent from East to West. On the second visit, the videographer retraced some steps and explored new areas, e.g. Ethiopia, which was not open to Americans on his first visit. The original footage was shown to a variety of African communities for discussion and feedback. These responses along with some new footage helped shape the present version.

Art and ritual can elevate and expand our spiritual horizons. Symbols can express what the heart feels and the tongue cannot articulate. *The Dancing Church* invites you to a ritual world of symbols and dance. Just as poetry transcends the use of ordinary, everyday language, even though the words are the same, so too does dance transcend ordinary body movement to elevate and uplift the spirit. A complete understanding of the poem is not necessary to experience the transcendent. Likewise, an understanding of every movement is not necessary for the dance experience to be felt and appreciated. Let *The Dancing Church* open new possibilities for worshipping God and celebrating the spirit. The following descriptions aim to guide the viewer.

### \* **ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia**

We begin in the Capuchin Church of Holy Saviour in downtown Addis Ababa. Before sunrise, people gather in the back of the church to sing the psalms of Morning Prayer. Traditionally, the Ethiopian Church has deep roots in the Jewish Tradition. Most significant is the *Allegro dance*, probably one of the oldest liturgical dances in Christendom, which has its origins in the early Church. This dance is the ecstatic dancing of David rejoicing before the Ark.

Since the majority of Ethiopians are what we might call "Ethiopian Orthodox", the Catholic Cardinal has adapted the Ethiopian Rite, which has been in continuous use since the second century, for the Catholic communities. The adaptation opens up the liturgical space. The iconostasis, or icon screen, has been removed to allow visual access. So too, the texts have been

adapted and shortened. Much is still made of the circular movements around the altar, the use of processions and blessings, and ample use of incense. These elements have had an influence on the *Zaire Rite*, the new African rite for the dioceses of Zaire.

This tape was made during the ongoing civil war in a time of food shortage. In these difficult days, faith communities continue their prayers for peace and reconciliation.

**\* NKHAMENYA, Malawi.**

The opening dance is *Ingoma*, the traditional Ngoni warrior dance. The Ngoni come from the Zulu stock of the "Nguni Peoples" of South Africa, having come north on a conquest trek in the mid-19th century and settled in the northern districts of Malawi. Today, the *Ingoma* warrior dance is performed through the district by different groups, including the Tumbukas. Note the use of the step and crossover. This dance is performed in a small village in Malawi; other Malawian visitors (men in business suits) are so taken by the dance, they join in. This is a good indication that dance is very much a part of the African experience. To dance is to breathe. This warrior dance is the basis for the next liturgical dance we will see.

The Sunday morning procession includes the young girls, who are part of a small liturgical dance group and the Legion of Mary (the women in white and blue) The choir is across the aisle on the left side of the church. Women play an active role in the Church life of Africa, as lay ministers and leaders, and in all liturgical ministries. The candle bearer and the book bearer continue to sustain the holding up of the book throughout the entire opening song.

The men who surround the priests dance without being conscious of their movements. It is a natural, comfortable thing to do. The dance has its inspiration from the *Ingoma*, which is performed after battle or killing of animals, like lion or leopard. The dance is then called *Mgubo*, the celebration of victory. *Christ has conquered, the battle is won, there is victory.* There is a cross-over step on Yeo, meaning Thanks. The text has been adapted to emphasize Christ's victory over death. Christ is victorious in the Easter Season. *God sent his only Son, to come and save all humankind / And we all say thank you, merciful God/ Jesus came to save us by dying on the cross/ but rose from the dead, we are saved indeed.*

Other examples include the young girl's dancing the Gospel Alleluia; and the celebrant, Fr. Alex Chima, joining: in with the Legion of Marv in a post-communion *Magnificat*.

**\* LILONGWE, Malawi.**

This is the Poor Clare's Monastery. We begin with Sunday Eucharist with the Matamando Choir in traditional African attire. For the Procession of Gifts there are two lines: the procession of the choir with flowers and wine and bread and the parallel procession of the sisters in their chapel on the other side of the altar bringing forth the chalice and the other gifts. The gifts are wrapped in silk, reminiscent of Japanese wedding presents. The presider is a member of the Society of African Missions.

Incense is used throughout Africa. During the Presentation of bread and wine, the sisters use full gestures along with the congregation. The sisters have written all this music and have been designing their worship gestures for many years. At the consecration, there is the use of the three claps as a sign of high reverence. The celebrant reverences first and then the entire congregation in a profound moment of awe. The eucharistic acclamation is both outwardly directed and inwardly directed. It contains elements of praise, thanksgiving and adoration, accented with different levels of body posture.

We next turn to the Feast of Our Lady of Africa. The statue is carved ebony in a blue dress

with pearls. The sisters sing and dance all their office and eucharistic celebrations. This particular celebration was very special because of the feast. For the opening, there is a hushed reverence to the a capella singing and then the first psalm uses the mortar and pestle and the sound of sifting wheat as percussive. These are sounds young women and all would hear in the early morning light of the village before it got too hot. The percussive elements blend with a unified sifting dance gesture all combining to bring out the depth of the psalm text. The sisters in blue are novices; the sisters with white veils are juniors and the sisters in brown and black are fully professed. The opening psalm is punctuated with the small group dance over against the community gesture.

The next dance shows full group movement. The sisters have great variety in the dances; some dances are solo, some small groups and some full community. Over the years they have choreographed over 100 liturgical dances for the seasons and for the office.

As morning prayer ends, there are the solemn clapping of the hands and the double bow -- one to the blessed sacrament in the tabernacle and one to the presence of Christ in each sister.

**Misa Chimalawi** is the result of many years' work by the sisters. It is still very much in an experimental stage and is not celebrated publicly. The Mass is based on the rich, traditional Malawian symbols. At the beginning, there are prayers before entering the sacred space and once inside there are prayers for the saints and ancestors to be present in the celebration. The presider is dressed in the style and color of a Chief. Highlights include the fire dance as part of the psalm dance; the presentation of bread and wine along with the symbols of a cloistered life: prayer and song books, farm implements, the fruits of the field, flowers and chickens and rabbits raised within the cloister. These are received and placed near the sacred fire. In place of incense, flour is used for the blessing. The Eucharistic Acclamation is a moment of intense adoration and celebration as the sisters prostrate before Jesus, their Chief.

#### \* **TURBO, Kenya**

This is a dramatic presentation of the Passion, showing the betrayal in the garden and Jesus and Pilate. From Pilate's house, everyone then follows the cross through the village as the Stations of the Cross begin. The entire event takes about three hours; notice the traditional thatch houses as the journey takes us through the village up to Calvary. This drama is also evangelical, proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ. As the procession moves through town, more people hear the proclamation and join in the prayer walk.

#### \* **KINSHASA, Zaire**

These are sections from the *Zaire Rite*, as celebrated in St. Alphonse Parish, Matete. The opening procession involves all the ministry doing a step together step dance, with spears as symbols of the chief and the chief holding the *symbole du chef* (the sign of the chief) a carved stick with horse hairs. The presider kisses the altar north, east, south, and west. The Gloria is a circle dance around the altar for the incensing. Again there is a patterned movement and hand-clapping pattern. The opening prayer includes the congregation in the energetic *orans* gesture and people respond with a longer phrase than "Amen". The homily is also energetic as the congregation participates as they respond to certain phrases, sing or are involved vocally in the homily. It is difficult to fall asleep because the preacher is so dynamic. Following the preaching, there is a penitential rite with a commemoration of saints and ancestors, followed by a sprinkling of water. This follows a more ancient order for the Liturgy of the Word.

This short segment is from the Alleluia procession before the gospel at St. Michel parish, Bandal. Notice the candle-bearers and the spear-bearers all dance in a processional movement. The movement is precise and well-rehearsed.

**\* YAOUNDE, Cameroon**

The Presentation of Gifts is a repetitive choir dance in which the gifts of bread (notice the baguettes) and wine, banana, fruits, etc. are brought to the presider and then danced around the church of St. Paul in the center of the capital city.

The next part is the full uncut section of the Sanctus through the Eucharistic Acclamation. Notice the choir is dressed in traditional African colors: white, red and black. The choir not only sings, but dances. In this version, the choir becomes almost a living iconostasis with incense between the people and the altar. The dancing is highly stylized. The women carry *abui*, white pompoms, symbols of respect, used traditionally to express joy and happiness. The men carry the *apback*, symbolizing the power of God. They are also called *chasse-mouche* or fly-swatters. The movement continues through the Eucharistic Prayer. This liturgy has been celebrated now for about ten years in this parish. This is in the middle of the capital city in a very African-urban setting. The people celebrating are city people. In previous years, the liturgy was celebrated in the open air. The modest church structure is new and originally everyone danced. Now the choir is "performing" more solo work.

**\* KUMASI, Ghana**

This is a brief example of some developing work in inculturation under the direction of Bishop Peter Sarpong at the Cathedral in Kumasi, the heart of Ashanti-land. Drawing on the traditional Ashanti greeting of the King with special drumming and dancing, the women greet the coming of the Lord during the Eucharistic Prayer. *The King has come. Let us ask the King for a blessing. Praises to the King!*

**\* NANDOM, Ghana**

This is the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi on the grounds of the Church of St. Theresa in the Northern District in the town of Nandom. After the Eucharist, each group in the parish is invited up to pray, sing and dance before the Blessed Sacrament. The monstrance is placed on the altar and for the next three-four hours, there is a variety of adoration styles. The people are basically agriculturalists, who live on the Southern Burkina Faso border. They are the Dagatti people, whose Ghanaian dance is quite complex. Notice the foot pattern, the isolation movements of the torso, the bent back with an impulse and the shaking head. The dancing is almost ecstatic, yet the people are aware of the Eucharistic Presence, notice the bowing or almost kneeling. Priests, sisters and parish groups spend most of the day praising God in the gift of the Eucharist.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What was your general impression of worship life in Africa? What did you learn about worship? movement? the holy? the missions? community life? Did the video change or influence your initial impressions?

2. What does one mean by culture? What role do the cultural elements play in the planning of the liturgy? What was the most striking cultural element for you in *The Dancing Church*?
3. What role did music play in the celebrations? How did the drum and other percussive instruments communicate throughout the liturgies? How was the drum used to express a variety of emotions?
4. Everyone seems to be participating in *The Dancing Church*? What is your experience on Sunday? What do you understand by participation? How can one get today's parishioners more involved?
5. How do color, fabric and vesture enhance the liturgy?
6. What did you learn about the use of symbols in worship? What symbols do Christians use that are universal? What symbols are particular to us?
7. While dance and movement may be an authentic expression of worship and life in an African culture, how can it be true in my country where dance is usually confined to the young?
8. How are we in our local situation adapting the liturgy to express who we are: our culture, our beliefs, our local context?

## **THE DANCING CHURCH**

*is dedicated to those who dance in the churches of the world*

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