

Culture in Motion: The Nguzo Saba

By
Benita Brown, Ed.D

Culture in Motion: The Nguzo Saba (Kwanzaa's Seven Principles) will empower and enrich learners through the arts, specifically dance, music, and theatre. The Nguzo Saba is resplendent with the concepts of African-derived coping mechanisms for the individual and community. Dance and the inclusion of music and theatre, thus implementing the performing arts (dance, music, and theatre) as a creative process. This process is a mechanism that helps to uplift the socio-cultural and socio-psychological well-being of the community by interspersing the seven principles as an academically, Afrocentrically inclined curriculum of dance, music, and theatre. These artistic expressions can help with the individual's mental, physical, and spiritual well-being through dance, where movement can express innermost connections of presentation that provide coping mechanisms. Implementing the adage of life mimics life, and life imitates art – the performing arts can demonstrate, talk about, and bring about social change for the community. Many performing artists find themselves as activists for social change by creating their own stories through dance, music, song, poems, theatre, and the fine arts.

Culture in Motion: The Nguzo Saba uses dance to espouse various psychological and physical assets to strengthen and empower the inner workings of the mind, body, and soul. Therefore, studying dance in the context of the Nguzo Saba will help fortify the understanding and encourage the expressions and practice of the Nguzo Saba among our community. Their underlying principles speak to the celebration, respect, and acknowledgement of our ancestors fortifies our ability to grow and liberate the spirit of justice among the people of our community. Furthermore, through the encouragement of artistic expression and dance as a performing art, learners will find outlets to showcase dance (not to exclude music and theatre) and present them in professional formats on theatrical stages.

In Africa, dance serves an essential cultural and educational purpose. In addition, in the African American community, dances serve as a socio-cultural event where proper male and female roles and behaviours are skilled. Partially through the significance and practice of dance as a ritual conceptualization that indulges music, song, theatre with clothing, oratory, and foodstuffs that reflect within the socio-cultural, political, and religious/(spiritual) environment. The core values of black culture like freedom, justice, equality, African heritage, and racial parity at all levels of humans are raised to ultimate levels and legitimated by the black sacred cosmos. (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1992, p. 7)

Spiritual sustenance and creative, passionate responses connect to dance and music. Dance movements using the head, torso, limbs, and pelvis coupled with expressive hand and face gestures reveal the results of internal stimuli created by performances of dance movements. The properties of dance remain internalized. The dance and the dancer are used to uplift the innermost feelings of the immediate and surrounding community. Dancing keeps us healthy, sane, balanced, strong, vital, energetic, continually growing! It does so by enlivening and often revitalizing the transformational process of living. The concrete act of dancing affords the immediacy of both the learned and intuitive realms of knowledge that empowers humans and transforms and identifies them with and as spiritual entities. (Yvonne Daniel, 2001). The creative

act of dancing found at a secular activity such as hand-dancing at the club on Saturday night or receiving the *Holy Ghost* during Sunday morning church services. There remain dance performatives that are ritualized activities of ecstatic dancing.

Kwame Gyekye writes the following:

Art in traditional African culture has functional and purely aesthetic dimensions. An outstanding feature of artistic performances such as music and dance is their participatory character. Music-making and dancing are communal activities aimed—apart from their purely aesthetic qualities—at deepening collective sentiment and consciousness. Among the criteria of aesthetic value and judgment are appropriateness and fittingness. Music, dancing, and even clothing must be appropriate to the occasion. Beauty is seen in art, the human figure and human conduct, humanity itself, and a person's character (1996, 178).

Consider the theory of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903). Among African Americans, there lies the dual relationship between dance as a socio-cultural event that addresses the mental state of the community and the ecstatic spiritual dance that addresses African spirituality and acknowledges the ancestors and the cosmos. While these things express evil among our European counterparts, they are essential to the African mindset and its socio-cultural survival and practices. In the fertile ground of theatre and dance, this dialogue fervently produced and experienced.

The elements of holistic health and well-being experienced through dance are essential to note. Knowledge of movements in traditional African-derived dances such as Mandiani, KouKou, Sunu, and Orisa dances such as Yemoja, Osun, and Shango contain many holistic physical and mental health elements based on ritualistic belief systems grounded in traditional and neo-traditional African culture. The use of rituals based on the Nguzo Saba and movement based on African-derived kinesthetic dance moves are paramount to work through the trauma resulting from racial bias and discrimination.

Dance has many elements of positive holistic health, and the use of African-derived rituals such as the Nguzo Saba and African-derived kinesthetic dance moves to curtail psychological and physical trauma is paramount.

In her book, *To Dance is Human, a Theory of Nonverbal Communication*, Judith Hanna (1987) explores the anthropological study of dance, including its curative and functional properties. In the initial introduction to the exploration of dance, Hanna (1987) acknowledges that "to dance is human and humanity universally expresses itself in dance [through its ability to] interweave with other aspects of human life, such as communication and learning, belief systems, social relations, and political dynamics, loving and fighting, urbanization and change." (p.3). Hanna also continues to point out the significance of dance in the biological and evolutionary development of the human species. Dance, primarily as used in rituals, has also played a role in many communities' spiritual and social development throughout the world, particularly in African cultures. Through its many functions, dance is a form of healing and represents these societies' personal, communal, and social narratives. Consequentially, the suppression of dance in many cultures, particularly in ritualized forms, has resulted in an imbalance in those

spiritual, communal, and interpersonal qualities that regulate the individual and unify societies (Hanna, 1987). Without these regulating structures, communities are apt to become increasingly vulnerable to environmental destabilizers. (*The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.4, no.6, September 2011.)

Culture in Motion: The Nguzo Saba will operate as an academic-infused discipline based on Afrocentric philosophical thought and adherence to African-derived cultural belief systems such as the Nguzo Saba. Its curricular goals are to prepare learners for creative work on stage, the studio, the Internet, and the silver screen. Its curriculum will offer classes in African, jazz, modern, hip-hop, urban dance, Yoga, and meditation. It will also offer courses in African aesthetics, history, culture, therapy, and kinesiology. The goal is to present a professional stage presentation of dance, music, and theatre by using the Nguzo Saba through dance and the performing arts. The principles of the Nguzo Saba will serve to infiltrate everyday living and activate forethought as well as serve as a mechanism for the realization of justice and liberty.