THE PROCESSION AS A SOURCE OF DANCE

by Ester Amrad

Probing the history of the procession takes us back to the very sources of human culture. The procession is deeply imbedded in the behaviour of human societies in diverse places and times. It is always connected with some social event, religious or secular.

Unlike everyday walking, procession is a rythmic way of treading, usually accompanied by singing and instrumental music. The unifying element of all the activities in a procession is rythm. Variegated rythmic walking, as opposed to uniform rythmic steps, as in a parade, is a sort of rudimentary dance. But not every rythmic walk is a procession. Therefore we are faced with the question: what constitutes a procession ?

In order to arrive at a definition encompassing all aspects, we'll have to break the question down into five separate queries:

1) Who are the participants ? (executants)
2) Why are they participating ? (object)
3) What are their activities during the procession?(content)
4) When does the procession take place ? (time)
5) Where does it take place ? (location)

The definition I arrived at is as follows:
A GROUP OF PEOPLE WITH A COMMON PURPOSE DETACH THEMSELVES FROM THEIR ROUTINE PLACE AND TIME, AND WALK ALONG A SET ROUTE FROM PLACE "A" TO PLACE "B", WHILE SINGING, MAKING MUSIC AND DANCING, IN ORDER TO TAKE PART IN A SOCIAL EVENT.

As the procession is an occurrence that takes place both in space and in time, the definition distinguishes between routine time and place, and a "different", structured, time and place. The crucial point in the above definition seems to me to be " a common purpose", which is evident in all the five aspects -- executants, object, content, time and location. This common purpose may change from one social event to another.

Following are several examples of different kinds of "common purpose" from procession observed in African communities:

NATIONAL INTEREST: On Independence Day in Kenya in 1964, a great mass of people of diverse ethnical origins went in a procession to an open field outside of Nairobi to listen to Jomo Kenyata.

ETHNIC INTEREST: People of the Mossi tribe in Upper Volta would congregate once a month, on a Friday, to watch their king mount a horse. This is a symbolic act witnessed by a single ethnic group, and they arrived at the ceremony in a procession.

FAMILY INTEREST: Among the Baga people in Conacry Guinea, the groom and his bride are led, each by his or her family separately to their betrothal ceremony The procession is a family affair.

AGE-GROUP INTEREST: In many African societies there exist ceremonies marking the passing from one age-group to a senior one. At such a ceremony of the Kabre tribe in Togo a procession of the participating boys and girls is a central part of the proceedings.

SEX-GROUP INTEREST: In the worship of the dead of the Senuofo people of the Ivory Coast only the men take part. In the processions I watched in 1961 only men participated. On the other hand, in fertility rites of the Senuofo only the women take part.

CLASS INTEREST: In 1964 I witnessed the ceremony in which a new village headman was introduced into the tribal council of elders at the court of the Kabaka, the king of the

Buganda in Uganda. In the procession only the elders participated. In many African rituals only the priests take part.

PROFESSIONAL INTEREST: The recognized sculptors of the Senuofo tribe live in a special quarter of Khorogo town in the northern Ivory Coast. An annual ceremony of asking the guidance of the spirits of the deceased takes place. In the rites and the procession leading to them, only the active members of the sculptors' guild participated.

The common interest, which, of course, varies from procession to procession, also determines the "why ?". For example, when the common interest is a national one, the reason may be the wish to reinforce the memory of an important historical event and to make it into an educational experience for the younger generation, as in the celebration of national independence.

In African countries it is usual to hold the Independence festivities in the capital city, in order to strengthen the ties of the diverse ethnic groups among themselves, to enhance the cohesion among these groups, and to foster national identification. In this case the national interest determines both the place and the time of the procession.

In modern times, especially in societies where science, computors and rational thinking are predominant, the procession is disappearing, and among certain groups (mainly the non-religious ones) it has vanished altogether. We shall examine first the few processions still extant in Israel today and then we shall proceed to examine processions of other times (biblical) and other places (contemporary Africa).

ISRAELI PROCESSIONS

The processions we find in Israel today may be divided into two categories, namely, the traditional and the secular. The secular ones comprise the processions of schoolchildren; youth movements; torch-and-mask processions, such as the Purim festival "Adloyada"; and dance-processions, such as the Haifa Independence Day one.

A military parade is the only procession which, in my opinion, can not be a matrix for dance development, as the uniform marching does not permit any degree of free self-expression, be it personal or social. (The participants, mostly soldiers, have to follow instructions, and the procession is a show put on for the benefit of the spectators and to demonstrate the power of the state; therefore, it is not at all surprising that the military parade is often used in totalitarian states).

Religious processions: the procession with Tora-scrolls in the synagogue on the Simchat Tora festival, "Hakafot", Hassidic processions, especially those of the Habad sect; processions of those who come to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem; and processions in synagogue at festivals.

Ethnic processions: the traditional wedding procession of the Yemenite Jews; at the "Mimunah" festival of the Moroccan Jews; the remnants of processions at the celebration of family and nature festivals of the Jews from Buchara and Kurdistan (see Friedhaber, 1974, 1976); rudiments of the funeral processions of the Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem (where the professional wailing-women used to walk to the rythm of their lament).

Traditional processions "resurrected" in modern times on a secular basis, such as the processions at harvest festivals and the "Chag Habikkurim" still practised at some settlements.

The differences between secular and religious processions are many. The secular is much less tied to a certain time and place than the religious one. Often the secular procession is, in fact, the social event in itself, while the religious one leads to a ceremony or event which is not a part of the procession.

In the Independence Day parade, the date is fixed, but it may take place in any town according to the national or political priorities of the moment. Such a parade is an event in itself, and the moment it is over, the spectators leave the place as after a show, and again as at a show, there is a clear distinction between actors and audience. On the other hand, in a religious procession, the bystanders may be attracted and join in the procession, and everybody is moving towards a place where a ceremony is about to commence. The goal is fixed, whether it be the synagogue, a holy wall (the Wailing Wall), holy mountain (Grizim in Nablus), the tomb of a saint (Rabbi Shimeon Bar-Yochai

at Meron), a holy well (the Shiloah in Jerusalem), a holy cave (Eiliahu's Cave at Haifa) or a holy tree (Abraham's tamarisc-tree).

AFRICAN PROCESSIONS

The reason for the great number of processions still to be found in Africa seems to be that nearly all social functions are reached by joining a procession, as seen in the following examples:

The Amahara people of Ethiopia go to church each Sunday in a procession.

People of the Galles-tribe in the Ogadan region in Ethiopia arrive at the weekly market in a procession.

The youths of the Kabre, in northern Togo, travel in a procession, when coming to the shrine where they are about to participate in their coming-of-age ceremony.

The Fon people of Dahomey arrive in a procession when they attend a public trial, which takes place in the courtyard of the judge's residence.

The Taita approach the cave at mountain Kilimanjaro where a fertility rite takes place in a procession.

The funeral rites of the Senuofo of the Ivory Coast last for three days, during which five processions take place.

When the president of Ivory Coast, Bokassa, arrived at an air strip, the populace would come to greet him in a procession.

In 1973 I was invited by the government of Togo to conduct a survey of the dances of the ethnic groups of that country. The Moba people arrived at the regional capital of Dapango in a procession, and started to dance for us after their arrival.

Though all these processions are dissimilar in object, form, place and circumstances, there are certain characteristics common to all of them: in each one the participants would sing and dance, and play instruments, and all were an integral part of the event they were leading up to. Later, while comparing these facts about processions, I discovered a certain structure of behavior common to them all.

Therefore, the question arises, what makes people of diverse cultures living in places (and times) remote from each other, structure their processions so similarly.

The answer seems to be that there exists a common need, which may be a most complex one, such as the need for creating a stable order in society, the will to consolidate the feeling of belonging to a certain society, the need to alleviate social tensions and to enrich the individual's group-experiences.

What does the laying-bare of this common structure of the procession reveal to us ? Through such an anlysis we are permitted to perceive the social function of the procession.

The following table shows the elements of such a structure and the functions they reveal.

The structural element:	The function:
1) All the ritual ceremonies I witnessed began and ended with a procession.	1) Structuring the "holy time", changing the secular time into a festive one.
2) All processions moved around foci, all within the dwelling-space of the given society.	2) The circumnavigation structures space, the route sanctifics it.
3) The procession build-up was gradual; the drummers announced it and the partipants joined gradually.	3) Each person taking part is allowed enough time to move gradually from secular time and place to their holy equivalents.
4) In most processions the drummers preceded the marchers.	4) Rythm as group-pulse.

5) The participants in all processions were divided into groups. Each had a different but constant, order of groups determined by family, class, gender or age-group.	5) The order of the groups in the procession is according to the hierarchy of that society, thus reinforcing social order.
6) All processions show a circular type of movement.	6) The circle as the symbol of the cycle, in nature, the universe, in human life.
7) The majority of the participants sang, clapped their hands or played instruments, the tune, rythm and movements being known to all.	7) Common elements reinforce the identification of the individual with the group he belongs to.

In addition to the reccuring elements which I have mentioned, and others, there was always a discernible movement pattern, of the individual and of the group, present in all the processions. Viewed superficially, there seems to be no structure, but looking deeper, one discovers, a fascinating movement pattern.

There are three focal points around which the movement procedes: the movement of the villagers or the members of an ethnic group around the group focus; each group within the general movement around its focus (family, age-group, sex-group); the individual turning around himself inside the group. To put it in graphic terms: movement in a general space belonging to the village; and inside this a smaller space, pertaining to the sub-group, and a still smaller one, that of the individual.

This structure is significant in many ways, but I shall refer only to the movement aspect of it. Such a structure enables the individual to retain his independence and his self-expression while moving within his family -- and the same is true of the family in the framework of the village. In the overall pattern there is enough freedom for improvisation by the individual. His dance is his own, yet he is surrounded by his relatives (and his family, by the general group), and he is thus secure, protected, and at the same time free due to his improvised movement.

In such a structure, which is fitted precisely to the rythm and the music, there is a situation most propitious for the creation of dance, in the extensive meaning of the term, as in all three spheres there are set movements, but the freedom to improvise endlessly is retained. Indeed, I did not watch a single social event in Africa where dancing was absent. The more complicated dances usually commenced after the procession reached its destination.

I am convinced that understanding the structure of the African procession provides us with insight of a more general significance. It enables us to apply it to the explanation of historical phenomena and contemporary social events as well. As an example I will now procede to discuss events mentioned in the Old Testament.

PROCESSING IN BIBLICAL SOURCES

We may assume that every social event mentioned in the Old Testament was preceded by a procession which included dancing. This assumption makes it possible to clarify several textual points which would otherwise remain obscure. Of course it is possible to contradict such a hypothesis by stating that where a procession is not explicitly mentioned, there was none. I hold that in spite of the fact that the term "procession" is not mentioned, the incidence of expressions such as "followed" or "came out" points to movement from place "A" to place "B", mostly "with timbrels and dancing", which is, in fact, a procession. The following are examples of such occurrences, in which the word "procession" does not appear, and yet it is clear that a procession takes place.

In Exodus 15:20-21, we find the description : And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, He hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.

The term "after" denotes both the time and the place, the women come dancing after her from place "A" to place "B"; "all the women" means all the women participating

in this historic event, that is, a mass movement.

There remain several open questions, three of which shall endeavour to answer.

1) From where to whence did Miriam lead the procession ?
2) Where were the men and what did they do simultaneously ?
3) Whom did Miriam "answer" ? (the Hebrew text uses the masculine form of "them", not the feminine one. In Hebrew the masculine form is also used in case both genders are meant.)

Partial answers may be found in the following example.

In Samuel I, 18:6, is the passage : And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy and with instruments of music.

And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

Both events are victory festivals. The first description includes a central figure (Miriam) who draws after her the multitude to join in the procession, while in the other "all the women" come out to welcome Saul returning triumphant from battle. Both are mass events.
The welcoming procession of the women in Judges, 11:34 is reported in the singular, thus: And Jephtah came to Mitzpe unto his house,and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances.

And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes...

Apparently it was common procedure that the women would go to meet the victor. Perhaps this is also the reason why the text says "Miriam, sister of Aaron", not mentioning Moses, who also was her brother, as he was with the army, and she led the procession towards him and those accompanying him.

This argument is substantiated by many victory dances in Africa. In a survey I conducted in Togo in 1973 about the dances of 28 ethnic groups I and my assistants recorded information about 252 different dances, 23 of which were war-dances. Of these 18 included similar elements, though they were danced at different times and places by several ethnic groups. To mention but a few: 1) The drummers invite the people to the village square, where the ceremony will commence, including the war-dance. 2) Always there were two processions, one of the women and children, and the other of the youths with the elders at its head, which would arrive at the ceremonial place several hours after the first one. 3) As the procession of the warriors approached, the women would run towards them dancing and singing, conducting the men to the square. 4) In most cases the warriors would arrive singing, the women would join in, but singing only the refrain. The singing became antiphonal, the men singing the strophe, the women answering with the antistrophe. 5) After the warriors arrived at the square, they would often start a war-dance, which as they stated, depicts past victories. It was a sort of dramatization of a common myth held by the ethic group. The dance about the past becomes a contemporary event, with which all present can identify.

If we apply these observations to the Biblical instances of the triumphs of Moses and Saul, a more complete picture emmerges.

In both cases the victors went from the place of the battle to the place of celebration. In both instances the women came to welcome the returning warriors. In both events the women sang in answer to the soldiers' singing. Miriam answered together with the other women by singing "Sing ye to the Lord [the Hebrew text has it "I'll sing to the Lord"] for He has triumphed, the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea," exactly the same words with which Moses and all the Israelites begin their chant earlier in the same chapter. Probably that was the women's antistrophe.

At David's triumph we find: "And the women answered... and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Obviously this was repeated many times, because just singing it once would not have made Saul mad with anger, as the text recounts. In both cases the women

answered the men, which is the reason "answered them" is in the masculine form and not the feminine.

In both instances there was a mass-event, and I tend to believe that as in the African triumphs, the men danced, while the women sang and encouraged them.

Why is the antiphonal structure missing at Jephtah's homecoming ? The text deals only with the tragedy of the two main protagonists and the happy mood is disrupted immediately, "when he saw her he rent his clothes... ," because Jephtah had vowed to sacrifice the first one to meet him. Thus the procession, the singing and the dancing ceased right at the beginning of the festivities.

Surely there will be objections as to the speculative nature of my hypothesis. But each time I contemplate the historical events "frozen" in the words of the biblical texts, whenever I try to understand the role of dancing in our ancient national heritage, my thoughts carry me over to events I witnessed in Africa. Suddenly a fragmentary description becomes a living reality in my mind. Understanding the nature of the procession and the attending dancing makes ancient stories come to life.

As I watch contemporary processions of believers praying, Yemenite nuptual processions or the "Mimunah" feast of the Moroccan Jews, I am sure that right there is the matrix from which dance emerged, so similar is their structure to that reveeled in African processions. ■