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The Origins of the *Fanga* Dance

Abstract: The *fanga* is a dance taught throughout the United States to children in elementary music classes, students in African dance classes, teachers in multicultural workshops, and professional dancers in touring ensembles. Although the history of the *fanga* is a path overgrown with myth, this article offers information about the dance's origin, development, and dissemination. Also included is an introduction to Asadata Dafora, the first dancer to stage the *fanga* in the United States; an extensive examination of Pearl Primus and her role in adapting and popularizing the *fanga*; and a commentary on the period when the *fanga* moved into the elementary school classroom.

Keywords: Asadata Dafora, dance, dance history, elementary, *fanga*, multicultural, Pearl Primus

In the 1990s, the *fanga* dance entered the realm of general music classrooms in North America as part of expanding multiculturalism. This new educational setting called for discussions of authenticity and an explanation of the relationship of the dance to the music and culture from which it originated. Music and dance teachers are held to high standards in the effort to eliminate stereotypes, promote diversity, and foster global awareness. In the case of elementary music repertoire in the 1990s, most songs and dances came from textbooks. "The textbook holds a place of unparalleled importance. . . . [These books] not only define a substantial portion of the content, sequence and aims of the curriculum, they also influence the way in which certain topics will be regarded."¹ In a 1998 survey of elementary music specialists, more than half the respondents reported using the *Share the Music* general music series.² The 1995 grade 5 textbook in this series included "Funga [sic] Alafia."³ The one-page lesson included a misleading description of "Funga Alafia" as "a greeting song from western Africa"

and a "western African welcome dance." Fanga thus entered the curriculum through the textbook and teacher workshops as a "ready-made" African dance of greeting from Liberia, perfect for a Black History Month program. However, the *fanga* dance, as described, is not a traditional African dance. Although the history of the *fanga* dance is a path overgrown with myth and fabrication, this article contains information about its origin, development, and dissemination. After reviewing this information, music educators will no longer refer to *fanga* as African; they can, instead, share the dance as a way to teach students about those who introduced and popularized it in the United States.

The *fanga* dance does not have a clearly documented and direct connection to a specific culture as is found in the many other ethnic or folk dances shared in dance classes and recitals. Cultural historian Richard Long defined African-derived dance as "dance primarily informed by traditions originated in an African milieu, and created by people of African descent who are key participants

The fanga dance may be part of your elementary curriculum; here's the backstory.

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in expressing their reality.”⁴ *Traditional* is a fluid term, particularly as it relates to dances from Africa, but if the fanga dance never existed anywhere in Africa, can it be called an African dance?

African dance . . . is a story of a people. It is not a series of steps to be learned as a dance style. Like other traditional dance forms, it has specific movements or gestures that represent particular ideas, expressions, or emotions, but it is not the dance vocabulary that is important. What is significant is the story of the people. Teaching African dance steps out of context is like taking the dictionary and learning some words of a culture rather than reading a story of the culture. Teaching African dance steps out of context as a mixture of steps or movements is more of a co-option of a tradition rather than a respect for diversity.⁵

In discussing the preservation of traditional African music (and by its association, African dance), ethnomusicologist John Storm Roberts wrote that

Afro-American music consists of various blends of European and African ingredients, all of which have been molded into a new and original music. The African origins of this music are more difficult to pinpoint, because even when we can isolate African strands they are so changed as to have become broadly “African” rather than narrowly Yoruba, Ashanti, Congo-Angolan, or whatever. “Neo-African” music consists of elements which are totally or very largely African. The origins of this music are fairly easy to establish by comparison with present-day Africa or, at times, because its practitioners themselves still remember where it came from.⁶

According to Roberts’s classification, the fanga dance is an Afro-American dance rather than a neo-African or African dance. There is no credible evidence to trace fanga dances now taught in the United States to a specific ethnic tradition in any African country (e.g., Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria). In her doctoral dissertation, Andrea-LaToya Davis-Craig used the term *African theatrical dance* to describe “traditional African dance

FIGURE 1

Asadata Dafora, Dancer/Choreographer, Dancing at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival (Becket, Massachusetts), 1942



Photograph by Eileen Darby, Courtesy of Eileen Darby Images Incorporated, Burbank, California

forms interpreted by African-Americans, choreographed and presented as stage productions in concert halls, theaters, churches, and festivals.”⁷ Davis-Craig addressed issues of traditional versus authentic versus neo-African drumming and dance:

Throughout the United States of America it is not uncommon to see an advertisement for a “traditional” African dance class or performance; nor is it uncommon to hear the word authentic when referencing the movements, style of dress, or rhythms. But what is traditional and authentic? . . . The traditional and authentic debate normally stem from a place of credence. My preference, however, does not stem from the belief that what we are doing as a form is less than, but more from the standpoint that what we are doing has been informed and

adapted to work within our current culture and time.⁸

Teachers who present the fanga dance to their students and subsequently perform the dance for various public performances can take the opportunity to teach about the pioneers of Afro-American dance in the United States: Asadata Dafora and Pearl Primus. Today’s “African” fanga dance originated with these and other dancers who popularized the fanga as stylized “African” drumming and dance for staged entertainment.

Origin of the Fanga Dance

Asadata Dafora (Figure 1) laid the foundation for professional African drum and dance troupes in the United States. He is credited with being the

first to successfully stage African ritual in a Western-style stage production.⁹ In 1938, Asadata Dafora and his New York dance group Shogola Oloba performed an African dance-drama called *Zunguru* that featured a dance of welcome called fanga.¹⁰ Dafora sometimes called this same dance “fugule” or “the dance of welcome.”¹¹

Asadata Dafora Horton (1890–1965) was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone. His great-great-grandfather had returned to Africa after living as a slave in Nova Scotia, where he had adopted the surname of his master. Asadata Dafora dropped his surname and moved to New York in 1929 and began teaching traditional West African dances to a group of dancers, drummers, and singers.¹² In 1934, Dafora staged *Kykunkor*, a dance program based on the folklore of the Mendi ethnic group of Sierra Leone.¹³ The show attracted enthusiastic audiences who had never seen authentic African dances and who were drawn to the intense energy created by the symbiosis that exists between traditional West African dancers and musicians.¹⁴ In 1943, Dafora and his company were featured at the *African Dance Festival* at Carnegie Hall. Dafora featured a young Pearl Primus in this program, who performed a dance identified as “African Ceremonial.”¹⁵ Dances in Dafora’s productions included a welcome dance of special significance, which he called fugule but was known to Primus and her students as fanga or funga.¹⁶ There is no known video or description of Dafora’s welcome dance.

Dance historian Marcia Heard hypothesized that Pearl Primus learned fanga from Asadata Dafora.¹⁷ Heard interviewed Primus, but “Primus gave no indication of her knowledge nor possible discovery of *fugule* or *fanga* as she called the dance.”¹⁸ Heard lamented that “Primus never credited Dafora for his contributions to her formative years as a dancer and choreographer.”¹⁹ Primus “never stated in any terms that Dafora was the first to bring *fanga* to the United States.”²⁰ Heard explained that Primus did “borrow” other dances from Dafora, so “It is possible that she borrowed *fanga*.”²¹

Pearl Primus was born in Trinidad in 1919 but grew up in New York City. After completing college, Primus was unable to find employment in her field due to racial discrimination. She found a wardrobe job with the National Youth Administration dance program but soon began dancing on stage.²² Primus, inspired by the dances of Africa, applied for and was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1948 to visit Liberia, Senegal, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Cameroon, Angola, and the Congo to learn more about the function and meaning of African dance. While in Africa, Primus performed a dance she called fanga. In *The Complete Guide to Modern Dance*, dance writer and critic Don McDonagh provided a brief review of the dance as it was performed in Liberia by Primus. This information must have been given to him by Primus since he gave no indication that he traveled to Africa in 1949 to see her perform fanga:

Set to traditional Gio Fanga orchestra music. . . . First presented at a performance . . . at the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, Liberia, November 1949, by Pearl Primus and indigenous musicians who danced as they played in authentic fashion.²³

McDonagh also provided a detailed synopsis of the dance; perhaps he had seen the dance performed in the United States, since the dance guide was published twenty-six years after Primus’s Liberian premiere of fanga:

The sound of drumming is heard before the curtain is raised. When it does rise we see a group of singers and percussion players seated at the front of the stage at the left. The solo dancer enters from the rear of the stage on that side and moves forward in a diagonal. She bends to the ground, pushing and retracting her hands from it. She stands and looks straight out, extending her hands, palms upward, and waggles her head gaily. She pushes her hands upward and does a series of little leaps. She walks alternately to the right and the left, shaking her head happily, then she goes to the rear of the stage and passes off once again, pushing her hands toward the earth and withdrawing them

as she had done when she first entered. Taking small steps, she re-enters with a cloth draped across her outstretched arms. She bows to the musicians, places the cloth down at the front of the stage, and with her hands on her hips pumps her elbows forward and back in a flapping motion as she walks off. She returns in a moment, again making the flapping gesture, and then begins to whirl kerchiefs in the air with each arm as she vibrates her legs. With her feet together she moves to the side, progressing by pivoting first on the ball of the foot and then on the heel. She enlarges the circles she makes with her arms and then stops to place her hands in front of her face. She waggles the fingers then spreads her arms widely, gives a few ecstatic wags to her head, and runs off, kerchiefs trailing.²⁴

While this synopsis gave fanga a link to Liberia, McDonagh clearly stated that the dance was an “adaptation.” He also noted that the most dramatic alteration to the dance was that Primus changed it from a women’s ensemble dance to a solo:

The dance of greeting is one which ordinarily would be performed in West Africa by a large group of women. Primus has artfully extracted the essence of the original and shaped it as a solo for presentation in the proscenium theater. . . . The dance is relatively short but contains a wealth of friendly hospitable gesture, and represents one of the more accomplished adaptations of folk dance materials for the contemporary stage.²⁵

In her unpublished paper “Dance—A Survival among Black People in America,” Primus included fanga in a list of African dances, which, she explained, “have influenced the dances of Black people in the United States of America.”²⁶ Her description indicated that she was not inspired by a dance unique to Liberia in the creation of her fanga dance:

Fanga is a dance which has many versions. Primarily associated with the Poro (male) and Sande (female) societies of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Ivory Coast, it is characterized by rapid, disciplined foot movements. The dancer

seems to be dancing on air. The splendid use of arms, head and face often determines the finest dancers.²⁷

Here, the path to discover the origin of the fanga dance disappears into the shadows. Whereas we might expect to find the details about Primus learning a traditional dance in Liberia and a description of its indigenous cultural context, we find only that she performed an "adaptation of a West African greeting dance." A direct connection to a traditional Liberian dance is absent from the very inception of the Primus version of the fanga dance. Handwritten program notes by Primus describe her fanga as "a dance of welcome found among the people of the hinterland of Liberia and some of the West African coastal areas."²⁸ Similarly, in a typed program for a 1951 "Dark Rhythms" dance recital by Pearl Primus and Company, it was written that "The fanga is a dance of welcome done in the Hinterland of Liberia to welcome a chief."²⁹ "Hinterland" is vague, and Primus's journal of her travel to Liberia gives no account of visiting a particular village on a particular date and seeing or learning the fanga dance of welcome. I carefully studied archival material such as programs from early Asadata Dafora and Pearl Primus recitals, diaries and personal writings of Pearl Primus, rare videos and unpublished footage of Pearl Primus (as well as the dancers and drummers who worked with her), and audiorecordings of Pearl Primus talking about her dance. These noncirculating materials are held in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the American Dance Festival Archives held in the Special Collections Library at Duke University. There is no passage in the diaries of Pearl Primus in which it was written, "Today while visiting the X people in a village in northeastern Y, I encountered the most amazing dance of welcome which the locals told me is called the fanga. I asked to learn the dance, and a large group of women were happy to teach me this beautiful dance. The lead dancer, whose name is Z, explained the

meaning of the many lyrical movements of this amazing dance." The absence of such an account supports the hypothesis that Pearl Primus learned fanga from Asadata Dafora.

We know that Dafora staged a welcome dance, that Primus later staged a welcome dance in Liberia, and that she ultimately performed an adaptation of this dance in the United States. At this point, there is no way to confirm that Primus learned her fanga dance from Dafora or that she learned it in Liberia. Primus did eventually see and learn numerous other dances in Africa and confronted the challenges of staging them in the United States. Context and function determine many artistic parameters, and as a dance is moved from a communal setting to a staged performance, it is only natural that adjustments will be made. In 1953, Primus provided a lecture-demonstration on the "art of performing" as part of the Walter Terry Dance Laboratory series in New York. It was in this program that Primus explained the numerous changes to the African dances she was programming in her dance recitals:

1. The wooden stage is very different than the dusty earth.
2. Various parts of the body (i.e., the bare bosom and buttocks) are of major importance in certain African dances but must be deemphasized for American audiences. For example, movements in which the dancer holds her breasts, touches her buttocks, and moves her hands between her legs would be difficult for American audiences to accept. Additionally, there is an aural effect that results when women dance bare-breasted, but dancers in America have to cover their bosoms.
3. Western audience attention spans are short, so dances could not have as much repetition of movement as would be found in the traditional setting.³⁰

Therefore, the dances Primus choreographed lacked many of the movements found in the original dances, had many

movements that were changed or shortened from the original, and featured costumes not worn in Africa.

Primus toured internationally and performed expanded programs of her African-inspired works throughout the 1950s. In the 1953 interview with Walter Terry, Primus specifically talked about the fanga dance:

The fanga is the dance of welcome. It's a dance in which you give to your guest. You ask the earth and sky to help you welcome your guest. And from your heart, you give all that is good in you. And from your head, all that you can think of for the comfort of this person.³¹

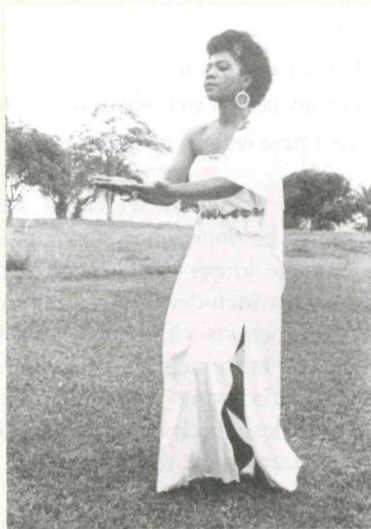
In 1953, Primus journeyed to Trinidad, her birthplace, where she met Percival Borde, a lead dancer whom she married in 1954. Primus's dance company, which included Joan and Merle Derby and others, performed dances that Primus and Borde choreographed.³² In 1958, Pearl Primus and her company performed at St. Martin's Playhouse in New York. The critic for *The New York Times* was especially impressed with the two numbers danced by Primus, which, he wrote, "constituted a high spot in the proceedings."³³ These two dances were identified in the review as *Fertility*, "the Nigerian fertility dance," and *Fanga*, "a festive Liberian dance of welcome."³⁴ From the beginning, reviewers accepted these Primus adaptations without question as authentic African dances.

In 1959, Primus accepted an invitation by the government of Liberia to develop and direct an African Performing Arts Center in Monrovia (see Figure 2). She remained in Liberia for two years, where her mission was to discover, revive, and expand African dance and allied cultures. She trained and recruited dancers, learned dances and songs from tribal dancers, and developed this material into programs for the Performing Arts Center.³⁵

In 1961, Primus returned to the United States and continued her choreography of African-inspired dances. During the 1960s and 1970s, Primus presented these dances (see Figure 3) in the United States to young children

FIGURE 2

Pearl Primus in Africa



Photograph from the Pearl Primus Collection; courtesy of the American Dance Festival Archives and the Special Collections Library at Duke University

in school settings and at dance studios.³⁶ Primus performed the fanga dance for a television broadcast as part of a series called *History of the Negro People*. The episode was titled “Pearl Primus: *Omowale* (Child Returns Home)”³⁷ and featured her explanation of the meaning of the fanga dance gestures as well as a performance accompanied by three drummers. According to the Worldcat database, the New York Public Library is the only library worldwide that holds this noncirculating video of Primus performing her fanga dance. The first part of the video is Primus speaking a dramatic monologue through which she translates the meaning of the dance:

Oh earth, Oh earth, you embrace the bones of our ancestors.

Help me, lend me your strength. Help me welcome my guests.

And drums, drums, lend me your voice. Help me welcome my guests.

Sky and earth, sky and earth. Sky, help me, bless me. Help me welcome my guests.

Then like the [darting?] bird, I will search their hearts to see if there's anger.

And when I find none, into the yard to find a fowl for their table.

Welcome from my heart to you, all that is good in me.

From my head, all I can think of for your comfort.

You are welcome!³⁸

In 1974, Pearl Primus worked directly with Judith Jamison, principal dancer of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Jamison subsequently performed a faithfully reconstructed version of the fanga dance.³⁹

Contemporary Issues

Fanga is a dance that is now recognized in the United States and Canada by thousands of people who have learned one of its many versions through various

modes of transmission. The fanga dance is taught to children in elementary music classes, students in African dance classes, teachers in multicultural workshops, and professional dancers in touring ensembles. “The single term ‘dance’ hides within it the struggles of dance makers over the control of their product; the circulation, consumption, and proliferation of dance beyond an original locus of production.”⁴⁰ Defining “the ‘real’ dance becomes a common question in dance practices that are borrowed, infused, or considered a hybrid form of a traditional dance.”⁴¹ Concerning this transformation, Chasteen wrote,

Dances are forever changing, and they are forever changing names, too. In 1830, tango meant something entirely different from what the word means today. It was not a specific dance at all, but rather, an event involving any

FIGURE 3

Pearl Primus and Accompanying Musicians Performing Fanga



Courtesy of the Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City, Inc., and the Kansas City Public Library

kind of dancing that black people did to drums. Samba had a similar meaning in the 1800s.⁴²

Fanga has morphed into several dance varieties and no longer reflects the version that Primus danced and taught. Primus, as well as dancers and drummers who worked directly with her, voiced concern over the lack of accuracy as her fanga was passed down from one dance company generation to the next. When Primus was asked about fanga at the April 1983 Dance Black America conference presented by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and State University of New York, she made the following comments:

What is the dance of welcome called fanga that was being bastardized all over the country? For years I didn't dance fanga outside of my household. I said it was being so destroyed I didn't want to have anything to do with it at all.⁴³

Chief Bey, a drummer who worked with Primus, stated in a 1983 interview published by *Attitude* magazine:

Many uninformed audiences still think that African dance is a lot of jumps up and jumps down, not knowing the significance of the dances being performed. A case in point is the oft-performed funga [*sic*]. . . . The hand movements indicate a dance of welcome.⁴⁴

Dancers associated with Primus made commentaries concerning modern versions that did not use scarves, were not integrated with African drums, and were not performed in a fluid style. For example, in a 1998 interview for the *Free to Dance* video, Merle Derby said,

Now as part of the tradition in African dance, specifically communal dance and tradition, handkerchiefs, scarves, props are used and so when we originally learned fanga, we used scarves to extend the movement. When Pearl introduced the fanga, we listened to the rhythms very closely because the music and dance were closely integrated, they were one.⁴⁵

Merle Derby and her sister Joan had been students of Pearl Primus until they

joined the dance company formed by Babatunde Olatunji, the Nigerian-born "father of African drumming in the United States." Olatunji's repertoire of songs and dances included the fanga, which was contributed by the Derby sisters who had learned it from Primus.⁴⁶ Similarly, in a 1999 interview for the *Free to Dance* video, Marcia Heard made these statements:

Fanga is a dance that Pearl Primus said is lyrical. It is beautiful, it is a dance of welcome. . . . I heard Pearl Primus speak about the dance. She said, "There are many people who are performing this dance, and they have sort of gotten off the track." She was a little bit more stern than I am being right now. She intimated that the dance has an inherent beauty from its slowness. She was very adamant that the dance was not to be done in a rush and that you should not throw away the movements as if you are flailing your arms about. There was control. And yes, it shouldn't look as if the movements are rigid because of course, the dance was very fluid.⁴⁷

In a 2005 article, African dance historian Doris Green wrote that during the 1950s, fanga was an "essential part of the repertoire of every student of African dance." However, "certain liberties have been taken and the dance is not the same as it was fifty years ago." She also asked what the fanga dance will look like in the next fifty years and concluded that "Perhaps the name will remain, but the movements will definitely not be recognizable."⁴⁸

Fanga in Elementary Settings

The fanga as performed in elementary school settings is not faithful to the Primus adaptation, as Green predicted. Some supplemental materials used by music educators, such as the children's book *The Laughing River*, have encouraged the dissemination of nontraditional dance movements for fanga into elementary classrooms.⁴⁹ *The Laughing River*, inspired by Janet Greene's idea for a conflict between two fanciful tribes, the Funga and the Alafia, grew out of the "Funga Alafia"

song. The song lyrics as provided in the *Share the Music Grade 5* book included a section to be spoken freely while performing simple, corresponding gestures:

With my mind, I welcome you.

With my words, I welcome you.

With my heart, I welcome you.

See? I have nothing up my sleeve.⁵⁰

The book provided welcome song motions to be done while standing and bending the knees to the beat of the music. Also included were additional dance instructions with photographs for three basic movements to go with the "Funga Alafia" song. Again, the fanga dance, as described, is neither a traditional African dance nor is it faithful to the Primus adaptation.

In a 2011 biography of Pearl Primus, authors Peggy Schwartz and Murray Schwartz wrote in response to (1) controversy over whether Primus was the first to perform fanga, (2) the dissemination of the many "bastardized" versions of the dance to other dance companies, and (3) the "watered-down" dances taught to elementary children in public schools that "Perhaps what is important is that it [fanga] is still performed . . . and that all those who encounter it are, for the brief time they dance it, finding connection to those they dance for and with, and to others around the globe."⁵¹

True Origins

Although dozens of books, articles, and websites include information stating that fanga is an "African dance of welcome from Liberia," and many teachers and performers claim their fanga dance is a "traditional African dance," these statements cannot be substantiated. The evidence indicates that the fanga dance was created and performed in the United States by Asadata Dafora as part of a movement beginning in the 1930s to stage "reconstructed African dances" as theatrical productions, was adapted and popularized in the 1950s by Pearl Primus and others, and finally was simplified in the 1990s for children in elementary music classes. It is perfectly

acceptable to teach and perform a fanga dance of welcome, but when presenting its relationship to history and culture, it would be best practice to talk about the contributions of Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus, Chief Bey, and Babatunde Olatunji rather than to characterize the fanga as an African dance.

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