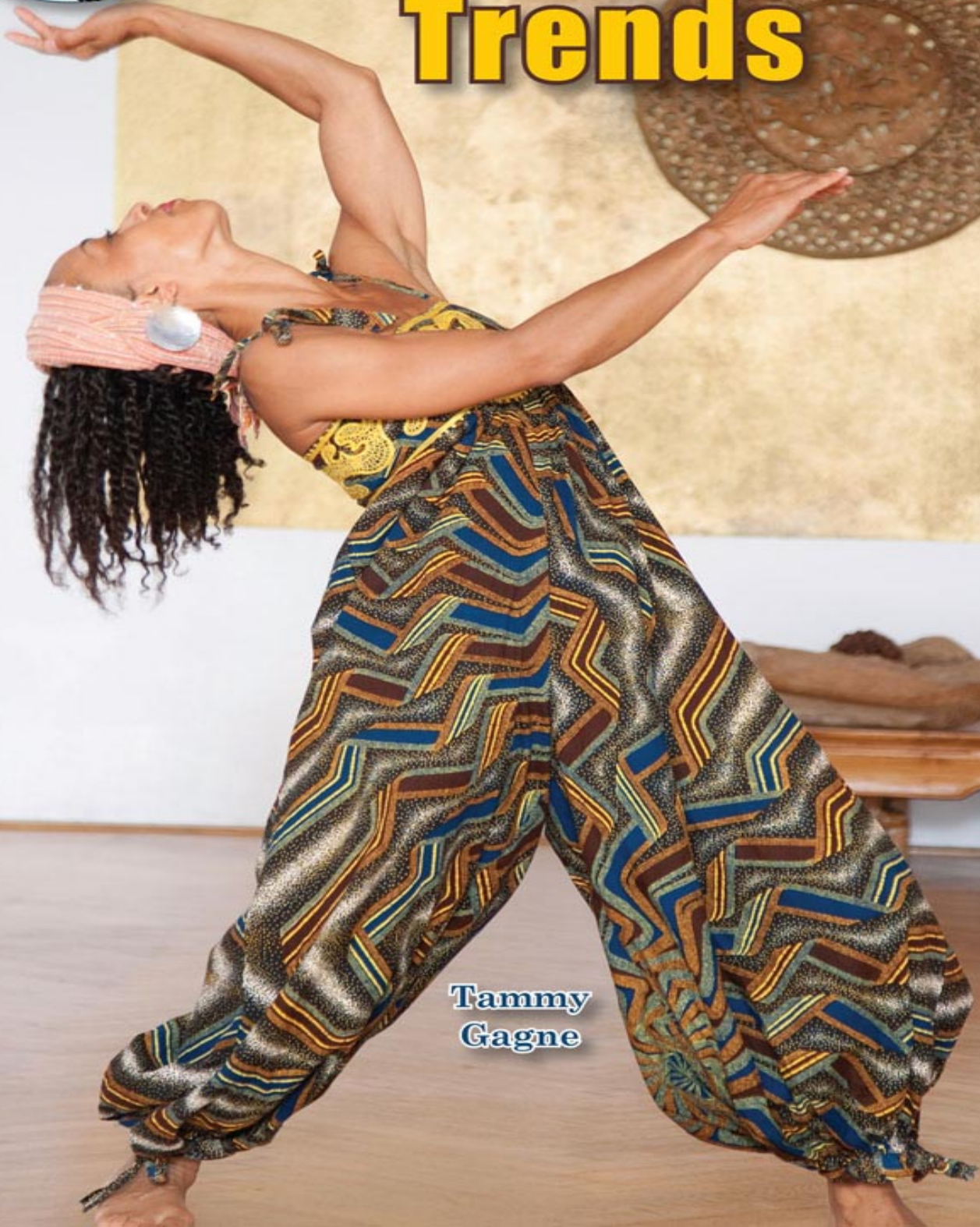




AFRICAN Dance Trends



Tammy
Gagne



African Dance Trends

Get Fit with Video Workouts

Line Dances Around the World

Trends in Hip-Hop Dance

Trends in Martial Arts

The World of CrossFit

Yoga Fitness

Zumba Fitness

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Introduction



The continent of Africa is rich in its many traditions including music and dance. Each country has its own unique variety of ceremonies and celebrations that utilize these forms of expression. In some villages dance plays a large role in religion. It also marks important milestones for tribe members, both young and old. Dance can honor a person's birth, marriage, or even death.

Some African tribes use dance as part of healing rituals. So-called witch doctors or medicine men may dance around a sick person, chanting or singing words offered for the sake of curing the illness. In South Africa, these traditional healers, called *sangomas*, dance to beating drums at increasing speeds and intensity before collapsing to the ground. Through this ritual the sangomas claim that they can connect to deceased ancestors in order to diagnose a person's past, present, and future. Some even say they can tell a person when and how he or she will die.

In West Africa dance has long been a way that leaders demonstrate their authority. In Nigeria, for example, the king of the Yoruba people once had to prove his leadership ability with a

traditional dance. Other community leaders, such as chiefs, would join him in this performance, each with a specific dance that represented his position. Every physically able person within the community was expected to dance at one time or another.

In modern-day Africa, most dances are performed for social reasons. They help the people celebrate their traditional cultures. African dance has also made its way to other continents around the world. Some types of dance have remained unchanged through the years, while others have been further developed in these new lands. Today African dance is also used as a form of physical fitness in many places. The energetic movements of the dancing combined with the pulsing rhythms of drumming help make African dance an enjoyable and effective way for people everywhere to stay in-or to get into-excellent physical condition.



Most African dances that were developed in the Western Hemisphere were a result of the slave trade. Many African slaves relied on dancing and singing to relieve the stress from the horrible experiences they were enduring. The dances retained many traditional movements and rhythms, but some became blended with other dances, resulting in new forms of dance.

Chapter 1

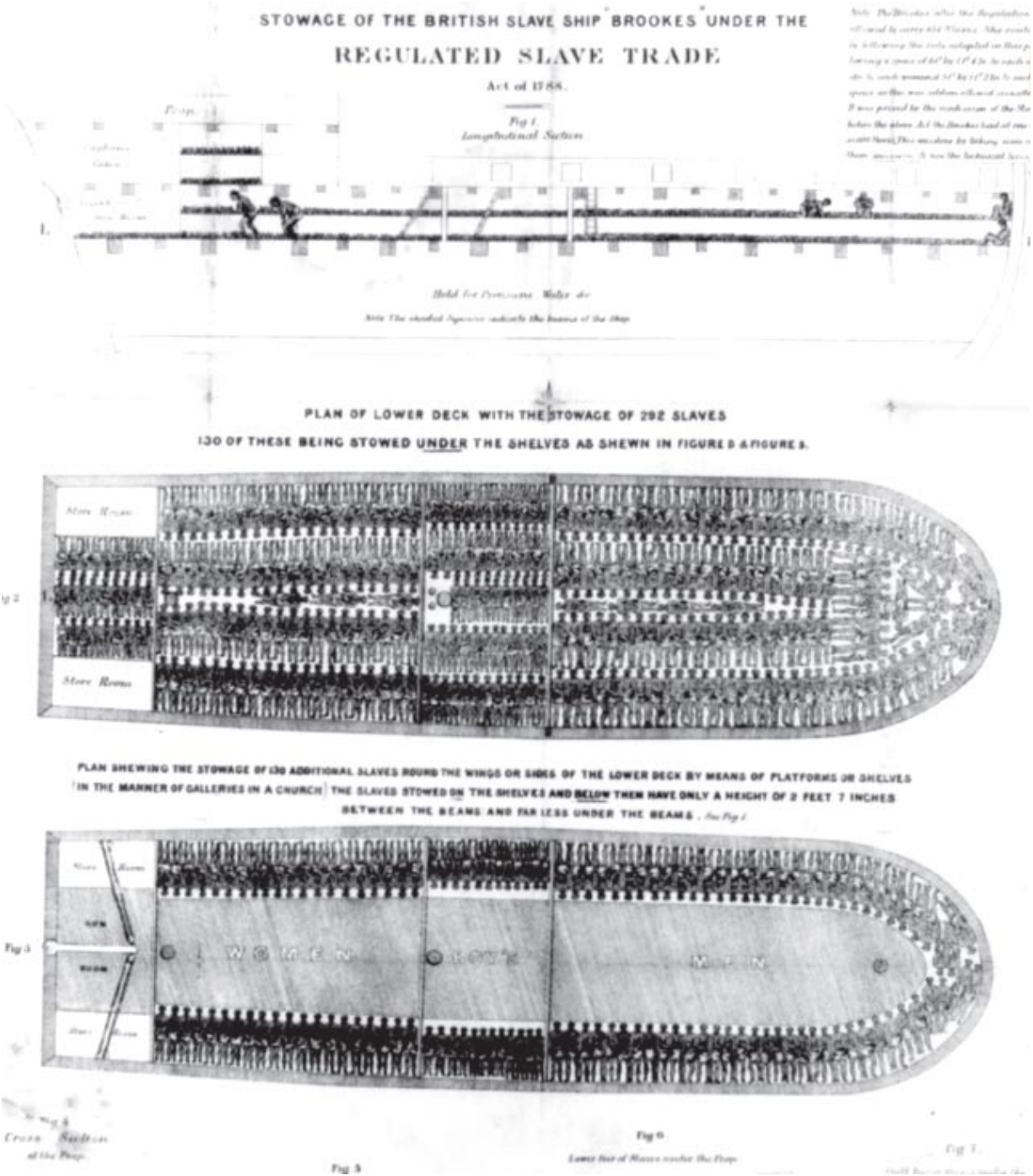
Can't Take That Away

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, millions of men, women, and children from West Africa were captured for the slave trade. These people were then forced against their will to board ships that carried them to the New World. Once there, they were sold as laborers to European settlers. This period in history is often referred to as the Middle Passage. During this horrible process, the African people lost nearly everything that had been familiar to them. They left their homes, their family and friends, and virtually everything else behind. Most of these people would never return to their home continent.

One of the few things that the Europeans could not take away from the African slaves was their culture. These beliefs and practices, including dance, were things the African people carried with them to the New World. Still, the Westerners did their best to force the African people to abandon their ways. Most of the Westerners were very religious. And they thought that their Christian religions were the only beliefs of any importance. Often Africans were not allowed to practice their own religions.

Many white slave owners saw the Africans as uncivilized beings that were more like animals than people. Perhaps this is how people involved with the slave trade convinced themselves that buying and selling human beings was acceptable. Many African people endured horrible treatment as slaves. One of the ways that they dealt with

their feelings of sadness and desperation was by holding onto as much of their culture as they could. A big part of this was dance.



Slave ships like this British ship called the *Brookes* carried hundreds of Africans to the New World on each trip. Often the African men, women, and children were so tightly packed that they could barely move during the journey.

Interestingly, the slave traders actually helped preserve the dance culture of the African slaves. The traders did not set out to do this. Instead, they were worried that the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean would weaken the slaves' bodies. If they didn't have exercise, how would the slaves stay strong? If they could not work, the Africans would be useless to the traders. Healthy slaves, on the other hand, would fetch high prices. They dealt with this problem by forcing the captured Africans to dance.

At this time there was no joy involved in the dancing. While traveling to the New World, most of the Africans were kept in horrid conditions below the decks of the ships. It was dark, dirty, and crowded. But for a certain amount of time, the captives were brought to the ships' decks for exercise. They were then made to move in various ways to the beat of a drum, all while chained to one another. This practice was referred to as "dancing the slaves."

The traders also used dance to keep the Africans from giving up on life. Many of them showed signs of serious depression as a result of their capture. The ones who felt the most despair tried to kill themselves to escape their dreadful reality. And to the captors, a dead slave was even more worthless than a weak or sick one.

Despite their self-serving reasons for "dancing the slaves," the traders were keeping African dance alive in the minds and hearts of the African people. Many Africans held onto this part of their culture. It likely helped some of them endure the further cruelty that awaited them on the other side of the ocean.

Many European settlers did not approve of African dance. They saw the ways the Africans moved their bodies as crude and offensive-in complete opposition to the slave owners' Christian beliefs. They would not allow the African slaves to practice their traditional religions, or the dances that these religions included.

Slaves responded by changing their dances to better suit the Europeans. In this way the slaves were able to hold onto at least some of their culture. They replaced movements that the white settlers deemed obscene with dance steps that the Europeans

performed in their own forms of dancing. The result was a mixing of these cultures that still exists today in many forms.

Not all the settlers felt so strongly about the Africans' ways of dancing, however. Many French and Spanish slave owners, for example, saw the Africans as merely primitive human beings. They saw dancing as a harmless form of entertainment, not a threat to their own belief systems. Although not all French and Spanish settlers embraced African dance, they didn't see a need to forbid it. They allowed the Africans to hold onto this part of their culture.

Clever slave owners also realized that dance could serve as an incentive for the slaves to work hard. These settlers would allow their slaves to have a night of dancing on the weekend if they got enough work done during the week. With so little else to look forward to in their lives, the slaves valued this rare recreational time.

Over time many European settlers discovered that they enjoyed watching African dance. Some even showed interest in learning it themselves. Performances called minstrel shows, which featured a merging of African and European dance and music, became very popular in the 1830s. In these shows white dancers performed dance moves normally done by blacks. The white performers would wear makeup to darken their faces. At this time blacks did not perform in minstrel shows-with one rare exception.

A black dancer named William Henry Lane went down in history as one of the most talented dancers of the nineteenth century. Although other black dancers performed in many minstrel shows after the Civil War (1861-1865), Lane was appearing in these shows in the 1840s. The talented dancer, also known as Master Juba, even went on tour with an all white American dance company as its star in the late 1840s.

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