Case Study 43

Mindusian Traditional Dance Performance[[1]](#footnote-1)

This case study of the *Traditional Mindusian Dance Performance* is intended to show an ICH element that is a performance in which gender relations are part of the subject of the enactment. In Mindusian society, traditional dance is a collective performance and expresses the life of the community rather than that of individuals and, while they may emphasize individual talent, dancers express communal desires, values and collective creativity. Dances are often segregated by gender, with many dances performed only by males or by females which reflects strict taboos in Mindusian culture concerning interaction between the sexes and indicates the existence of strong beliefs about what being male or female means. Moreover, this dance performance serves to reinforce prevailing gender roles and other community structures such as kinship, age and status.

In this traditional dance from Mindusia, although men and women perform together they have very clearly-defined gender roles and so it can be seen as a popular cultural form through which gender itself is performed. It is characterized by sensual and acrobatic movements which are driven by a polyrhythmic drummer, accompanied by men playing woodblock clappers and by women handclapping and yodelling. It is primarily a courtship dance that is performed during weddings and, when the young people in a particular village are ready for marriage, they organize a big ceremony where all potential partners meet. In this culture, people believe that the best dancer represents the best potential partner for married life. Men and women usually perform this dance in pairs with movements that are sexually suggestive and demonstrate virility and fertility. The dance contains a tale narrating a contest for sexual strength between men and women. A lover, impressed by the acrobatic skill and stamina of another dancer, moves towards them to meet them in a love contest; in most instances, female dancers win this dramatised contest contained within the dance. Rattles are tied on boys' legs to produce sounds and rhythms. The sound produced by the rattles become increasingly exciting as it is well syncopated, eventually displacing the main drum beat.

An associated ritual is a mask dance that is performed only by men but is directed by women, and which reflects the important role women play in the community’s life. Only men dance with the masks because women should not provide entertainment, as they are the ones being honoured. In addition, dancing with a mask is considered too strenuous for the female sex and masks are thought to interfere with the reproductive capacity of a woman which is seen as the basis for her power. This mask dance is designed to win favour with the Great Mother and the 'powerful mothers' (women) who represent her on Earth and, because of the dangers that witches and other anti-social elements pose to social harmony, the community publicly ridicules social evil through this dance. The dance festival begins with an all-night concert that features a dance with a male mask and uses satire to entertain and educate. The main ceremony takes place the next afternoon and involves a carefully choreographed mask dance with singing, music and, in particular, drumming. The mask dance performances are given only by men, wearing masks that feature sculpted images of scenes including animals and people or sewing machines and drums. The human costumes, however, draw attention to gender characteristics and to mannerisms in an exaggerated manner. During the mask dance, pairs of men masquerade as women to amuse, please and placate the mothers who are considered very powerful, and who may use their powers for good or destructive purposes. As it takes place within a patrilineal society, the mask dance serves to remind the community that it is important to maintain good relations between men and women through advocating a pronounced respect for motherhood, reflecting a belief that motherhood embodies special powers that can be used for good or evil. Although the mask dance society is open to everyone, women tend to outnumber men because the ritual celebrates women and motherhood.

1. . This case is based on an amalgam of several traditional African dances, including the Mbende Jerusema danced of the of the Zezuru Shona people of Zimbabwe, see: Kelvin Chikonzo ‘**Mbende/ Jerusarema dance,’** Panorama Magazine, 2013, available online at: <http://www.panorama.co.zw/index.php/archives/119-perspective/599-mbende-jerusarema-dance>**. Other dances include** the song and dance performances of the Acoli described in Benge Okot (2012) ‘Striking the Snake with its own Fangs: Uganda Acoli Song, Performance and Gender Dynamics,’ pp. 109-128 in V. Y. Mudimbe (ed.) Contemporary African Cultural Productions, Dakar, CODESRIA, 2012 and the Gelede ceremony (Benin, Nigeria and Togo) as described in Babatunde Lawal (1996) The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture. Seattle: [University of Washington Press](http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD/cgi/showpub.cgi?keycode=589). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)