

Afro-Haitian: Danse Kongo



When Africans were brought to the Caribbean island of Haiti as slaves, they carried deep within themselves their rituals and cultural traditions. Songs and dances from many parts of Africa, and from diverse African cultures and ethnic groups crossed paths and mixed and fused there, creating new, uniquely Haitian expressions. Some of the old traditions, songs and dances remained, predominantly from the Congo, and the Dahomey region, but they evolved through time, and mixed with elements of the Haitian indigenous Indian (the Arawak), and the French, who occupied Haiti.

Like in the neighboring island of Cuba, the Africans who found themselves in a new land with new rules were innovative and ingenious in maintaining their beliefs, customs, and sacred and social art forms, while surviving arduous, restrictive, and oppressive conditions. Important religious traditions involving dance, music, and spirit possession, were transmitted orally through generations and continue to this day.

French dances that originated in the courts and the upper classes, such as the Quadrille, also color the style of Haitian social dance, while incorporating the torso, pelvis, and leg movements and the strong rhythmic accompaniment hailing from Africa.

Afro-Haitian dance has greatly influenced the Modern dance world, largely through the research and exposure of Katherine Dunham. Haiti captured Dunham's heart in the 1930s, when she arrived as a dancer and anthropologist to study the country's culture, history and, particularly, its dance. Dunham made the dances of Haiti and the Caribbean internationally known in the Modern dance world. Recently, they are interpreted and performed as a Folkloric art form, in the secular context of the proscenium stage.



In *People Like Me* 2001, Group Petit la Croix interprets "Danse Kongo," a flirtatious social dance between a young man and woman, named for the people of West Africa who originated in the Congo region. The actual significance of this dance is not clear but it is thought that the Kongo started out as a ritual dance, and then evolved into a social dance. It is still danced at rituals, as a social break in the ceremonies.

There are several Kongo rhythms, and in this piece, the drummers are playing a rhythm called "Kongo Paillette." This rhythm differs from the other Kongo rhythms in that the head drummer plays with sticks instead of hands. This particular rhythm and the playing of sticks on the drums was borrowed and evolved from the drumming style of the French marching bands.