



Chapter 3

Dance of the Realm

The professor is dancing. With a kind of dignified gusto, he leans into the music, the moonlight catching in his white hair, his bent knees taking up the strain as his sandaled feet palpate the ground and his bare arms carve almost visible waves in the dense air. He is a heavysset man who moves like an athlete. Wrapped around his waist and torso is a green, black, and gold-striped Asante robe, a long rectangle of cloth with one corner thrown over his left shoulder. When his fluid but vigorous body movements shake this corner loose, he flings it back over his shoulder without missing a beat; the gesture becomes part of the dance.

Professor Albert Mawere Opoku is seventy-six years old. He is dancing to the music of a small group of musicians in the garden behind the Hotel Georgia in Kumase, the second largest city in the west African nation of Ghana. Thirty years ago the professor founded Ghana's national dance ensemble. He has taught at universities in Ghana and

in the United States. For the last month he has been helping to organize a major festival of his people at the palace of the Asantehene, the elected king of the Asante (pronounced ah-Shan-ti). Now the professor is making eye contact with the group's lead drummer, a man who has been playing three drums more or less simultaneously. In response to the professor's glance the drummer picks up the pace, adding yet another layer to the intricate mix of percussive patterns that speak to dancers in a language understood by all those who participate in Asante culture. "You're looking good so far," the drumming seems to say, "now let's see what you can do with *this*." And the professor, his joy transparent, responds with his whole body.

During a break in the music Professor Opoku chats with the leader of the group, a musician and composer named Ko Nimo. The word is that tomorrow's festival will bring together more than fifty thousand Asante from all over Ghana to reaffirm their identity as a



people. Ko Nimo acknowledges “the prof” as his mentor, referring to him as “a library on fire” because he is one of the last of his generation with a comprehensive knowledge of Asante traditions. The professor, Ko Nimo says, comes from an Asante clan with close ties to the palace: “He knows who we are and what made us. He wants to make sure that all this outlives him.”

One of the Asantehene’s proudest titles is “master of the music and the drums,” which is another way of saying “master of the dance,” since drumming and dancing are all but synonymous to the Asante. Drums in Ghana come in all shapes and sizes and tonal variations, but the largest and most impressive, called fantomfrom drums, are the perquisites of chieftaincy. If, as the Asante say, “drums are what make a chief,” the deep-toned fantomfrom is the chief of drums. Fantomfrom drums may be playable for more than a hundred years. Each is hollowed out from a single, carefully seasoned tree trunk and stands

about five feet tall with finely carved fluting all around like a Greek column. Stretched across one end is a thin slice of elephant ear whose tension is controlled by wires attached to seven wooden pegs. The drumsticks are cut from springy branches, with short tips that slant back at a forty-five-degree angle.

Fantomfrom drums are used for warrior or heroic dances. In the hands of accomplished drummers, they can be made to “talk.” The Asante language is one of a family of west African languages that use pitch to distinguish meaning. By rhythmic and tonal mimicry the drummer can carry on an elaborate dialogue with the dancer, who may be a member of the Asantehene’s entourage, a lesser chief who has come to pay homage to the Asantehene, or the Asantehene himself.

At one time, being a good dancer was one of the qualifications for election to the post of Asantehene. The king of the Asante is expected to dance before his people on certain occasions to display

his royal virtues and to honor his ancestors who are also the heroes of Asante history. In one dance, the fantomfrom beats out a challenge heard and understood by all: “Some men fight, some run away. Which kind of man are you?” The Asantehene responds with a choreographed display of strength and virility that says, “Try me and see!” He jumps in the air, hops on one foot then the other, shifts his weight from side to side, plants his left foot and pivots around it, stamps the ground. He extends his right arm in a sweeping gesture whose meaning is clear: “You are my people; I gather you all together.” Then he clenches his right hand into a fist and brings it down on top of his left hand, which signifies “I sit on you, I am your chief.” His movements, while energetic, are never hurried or jerky because, as the professor says, “a king is more majestic when he moves slowly, elegantly. It was the same at the court of Louis XIV.”

For his most impressive entrances the Asantehene rides in a palanquin woven

of wicker and carried by members of his court. But this does not hinder his dancing since in west Africa, as in most of the world, dance involves the whole body. Seated in his palanquin, the Asantehene dances to remind his people of the victories that he and his ancestors have won, beginning with the Asante war of independence against the kingdom of Denkyera in 1700. Holding a sword in his right hand and a musket in his left, he mimes an entire campaign in which the Asante, dividing their army into three columns, confused the Denkyera with deceptive maneuvers, feigning attacks on first one, then the other flank, before striking a decisive blow where the enemy was weakest. Staring first to the right, then to the left, the Asantehene rears back in the palanquin before thrusting his upper body forward and slashing out with his sword.

Dancing at court is not the Asantehene's responsibility alone. Chiefs at every level maintain ensembles of drummers and dancers to do honor to their own position and to pay homage to those higher up in the hierarchy. And theoretically, anyone can step out of the crowd and dance before the court. But critical standards are high; a dancer who fails to live up to them—by making an inappropriate hand gesture or by failing to bare his shoulders in respect or by thrusting the pelvis forward and backward in a lascivious manner instead of moving it decorously from side to side—may fall victim to “drum censorship.” Suddenly, in midbeat, the drummers cease playing. In the awful silence, the inadequate dancer has no choice but to shrink back into the crowd and make

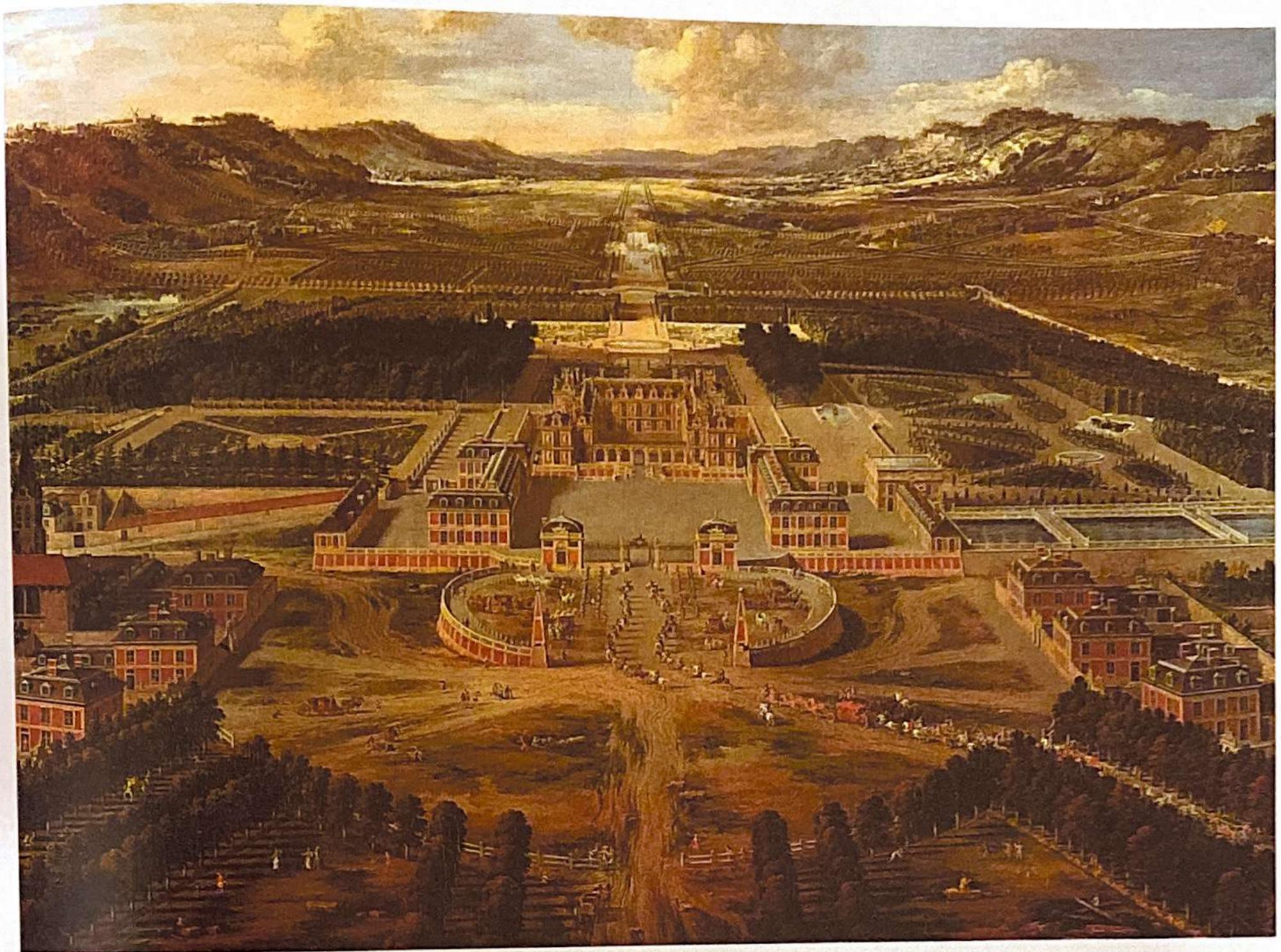
way for the next soul brave enough to try his or her best before the caretakers of Asante culture.

In the history of its people, the court of the Asantehene—like other royal courts around the world—has been a center of power, patronage, and pageantry. Wherever rulers have gained dominion over large territories and large numbers of people, communities of the talented and ambitious have sprung up to help them rule. These communities were typically organized in a pyramid of power, with the ruler in the royal palace at the top and his or her ministers, advisors, retainers, and hangers-on arrayed in more or less clearly defined ranks below. In one sense, all these courtiers enjoyed a life of privilege, abundance, and leisure; wealth was one index of a ruler's power, and life at court was often a lavish round of feasts, sports, and other pleasurable activities. But in another sense, a courtier was always on duty. In the days when a position at court was both a mark of royal favor and a badge of authority over the less fortunate, a courtier's clothes, speech, manners, and bearing attested to his or her status at all times. Indeed, virtually every event at court, each solemn ritual, each entertainment, was an occasion to demonstrate rank. On many of these occasions, dancing of some kind was central to the display of power. Dancing at courts everywhere tends to be deliberate, dignified, measured, hierarchical; training is required to do it properly, and, throughout history, public embarrassment (or worse) has awaited those who fail to meet the court's high standards.

Most of the courts that once deter-

mined the destinies of entire peoples have either vanished entirely or lost their hold on the levers of power. Some—like the Asantehene's court in Ghana, the royal courts of central Java, and the emperor's court in Japan—have survived the transition to other forms of government because the ideals of behavior embodied in their court rituals came to be viewed as emblems of a cultural, even a national, identity. In other cases, courtly ideals survived the demise of the court itself; this is what happened in Western Europe where the court dances of the kings of France evolved from an instrument of political control to become the basis of theatrical and social dancing in the West; long after the fall of the Bourbon dynasty, the legacy of elegant movement passed down from the ballrooms of Versailles can be seen on ballet stages throughout the world.

A thousand miles north of Kumase, at about the time the Asante were banding together to throw off the yoke of the Denkyera, a courtier at Versailles described the shattering embarrassment of a young man who had suffered the French equivalent of drum censorship: “This young man, who up to then had attended court little or not at all . . . had been asked if he danced well and had replied with a smugness that made everyone eager to find fault. They were satisfied. He lost his countenance at the first bow: He was out of step from the start. He tried to hide his mistake by drooping to one side and waving his arms: This proved even more ridiculous and prompted laughter which soon came in bursts and then turned to jeers



despite the respect owed the presence of the King, who could hardly keep from laughing himself. The following day, instead of fleeing or keeping silent, he claimed that the presence of the King had upset him, and promised to outdo himself at the ball to follow. . . . As soon as he began to dance at the second ball, everyone stood up pushing to see, and the jeering grew so loud that it led to clapping. Everyone, even the King, laughed heartily, and most of them explosively, in such a manner that I doubt whether anyone else ever suffered the like. After that, he disappeared, and did not show his face for a long time."

The year was 1692, the king was Louis XIV, the dance was the minuet, and the would-be courtier's failure was no minor contretemps. Louis had found a way to control the obstreperous nobility of France, by structuring his court

quite literally around the dance floor.

The use of dance as an instrument of political power in Europe had roots in the court spectacles of fifteenth-century Renaissance Italy. The newly invigorated study of classical literature provided mythical characters who were immediately recognizable to educated audiences and endlessly adaptable stories that could be recast into allegories with contemporary significance. The spectacles performed at the courts of Italian princes came to be called *balli* (from the Italian word for "dance," *ballare*). Like all such entertainments, the *balli* required enormous expenditures of time and money; the talents of painters, set designers, costumers, musicians, librettists, and dancing masters were brought together to produce a spectacle that might never be repeated after a single performance. The dancers were

Louis XIV may have started coming to his father's hunting lodge at Versailles in 1661, when he was twenty-three years old. The renovations that created the grand chateau we know today were begun in 1668, when Pierre Patel painted this bird's eye view in which the king's carriage, followed closely by the queen's, is seen arriving for a visit. At this time the chateau was still a modest country estate; it had about twenty rooms and a dormitory for men.

The Ballet Comique de la Reine (1581) at the Louvre is considered to be the first court ballet. It was choreographed by Balthasar de Beaujoyeux, an Italian violinist, composer, and choreographer, who came to Paris with a group of violinists about 1555, and made a career of organizing fetes at the court. He became a personal servant to Catherine de Médicis.



courtiers whose participation in these extravaganzas was a public display of their own status as well as an acknowledgment of their dependence on the prince of the realm. To succeed at court, a man of ambition had to be as accomplished in dancing as he was in riding, fencing, and fine speech. The proper bearing for a courtier, according to Baldassare Castiglione, who wrote the book on it (*Il Cortegiano*, 1528), was to “preserve a certain dignity, albeit tempered with a lithe and airy grace of movement.”

Like Renaissance music, painting, and literature, dance evolved under the stimulus of the new humanistic scholarship. Dance manuals with detailed instructions on how to perform the new, complex ballroom dances began to appear as early as 1444. Some of the postures that courtiers struck in the court spectacles consciously imitated models from classical sculpture. The taste for elaborate court spectacles, along with the know-how to produce them, was brought to France by Catherine de Médicis, daughter of the pageant-loving Lorenzo II, duke of Urbino. In 1533 she married the man who was to rule France from 1547 to 1559 as Henry II; after his death she remained a power behind the throne for another thirty years during the reigns of her three sons. It was an era of dynastic, religious, and civil wars. Legitimacy was in the eye of the beholder. No prince with pretensions to greatness could afford to maintain a less lavish court than his rivals. In a competitive frenzy, the royal houses of Europe were soon emptying their treasuries to outdo each other in the production of court specta-

cles, which in France were known as *ballets de cour*.

The spectacle that set the standard for all subsequent *ballets de cour* was the "Ballet Comique de la Reine," which was staged for a royal wedding at the Louvre on October 15, 1581, during the reign of Catherine's son Henry III.

Grateful to be chosen for a part, courtiers rehearsed for as long as two weeks under the eye of the king's dancing master. Combining steps also used in the ballrooms of France and Italy, they worked their way through complex floor patterns that held symbolic meaning for knowledgeable spectators: for example, two equilateral triangles within a circle signified Supreme Power.

Alternating with these dances were interludes of music and songs, declaimed poetry, mime, acrobatics, and ingenious theatrical effects created by specially constructed mechanical devices. One memorable device was a three-tiered gold and silver fountain on wheels, lit by a hundred candles and spouting perfumed water, that carried the queen and eleven gorgeously costumed high-born ladies, representing naiads, around the dance floor. Later that same evening a courtier impersonating Mercury, messenger of the gods, descended from the ceiling in a mechanical "cloud" accompanied by a clap of thunder, followed in due course by Jupiter, king of the gods, mounted on an "eagle," to do honor to the monarch of France. Some ten thousand people of quality are said to have packed the Louvre's Great Hall to see this performance, which began at ten in the evening and lasted till half past two in the morning.

Until the second half of the seven-

teenth century little distinction was made in Europe between what we call theatrical and social dancing. By the age of two the future Louis XIII could already do "all sorts of dances to the music of a violin"; at four-and-a-half he donned a mask "to dance a ballet" for his father. The pressures of ruling did not dim Louis's enthusiasm for dance. After succeeding to the throne in 1610 the king undertook a number of roles, noble and comic, male and female, in *ballets de cour* that he himself helped write.

His son, the future Louis XIV, was similarly groomed to take his place in the center of the dance floor; gossips noted that the young Louis loved dancing so much that he spent more time at his dancing lessons than his grammar lessons. He was four years old when he succeeded his father as king in 1643; his widowed mother was regent, but for the next eighteen years the real power in the land was the prime minister, Cardinal Jules Mazarin, who also supervised the young king's education. In 1649 opposition to Mazarin's policies took a violent turn, the mob took to the streets, and the court, with the young king in disguise, fled Paris. Once the rebellion against the regime was suppressed, Mazarin orchestrated a court spectacle designed to impress all of Europe—but especially the restive nobility of France—with the pre-eminence of the young monarch whose name was soon to become synonymous with the "divine right" of kings. A medal minted at his birth had proclaimed him "Orbis Solis Gallici" ("The Risen Sun of Gaul"). Fourteen years later he appeared in "Le Ballet de la Nuit"

performed at court during Carnival season in February 1653. Among his roles, which he repeated six times in succeeding weeks, was *Le Roi Soleil* (The Sun King), around whom masked courtiers circled like so many planets revolving around the sun in the still controversial cosmology of the late Nicolaus Copernicus.

Of course, the young Louis was actually portraying *Apollo*, the Greek god who had passed into the allegorical conventions of Christian Europe. But the intent of the symbolism was lost on no one; to the end of his reign Louis XIV was apostrophized as the *Sun King*, and he lived his life as if the universe revolved around him. "In exercising a totally divine function here on earth," he wrote in his memoirs, "we must appear incapable of turmoils which could debase it."

What Louis did, in practice, was to enshrine himself as an object of worship, not just for the common people but also for the higher nobility who had long been accustomed to thinking of the king of France as no more than "first among equals" atop the feudal system. Louis built a number of elegant palaces where his world might do him homage, but the central temple of the Sun King cult was Versailles, which he constructed in a drained swamp eleven miles southwest of Paris, at a safe distance from the fickle mobs of the capital. A new city was created to house the twenty thousand people attached to the court. But anyone who was anyone fought for the privilege of living in the palace itself, which had apartments for a thousand titled gentlemen and ladies and some four thousand servants. And

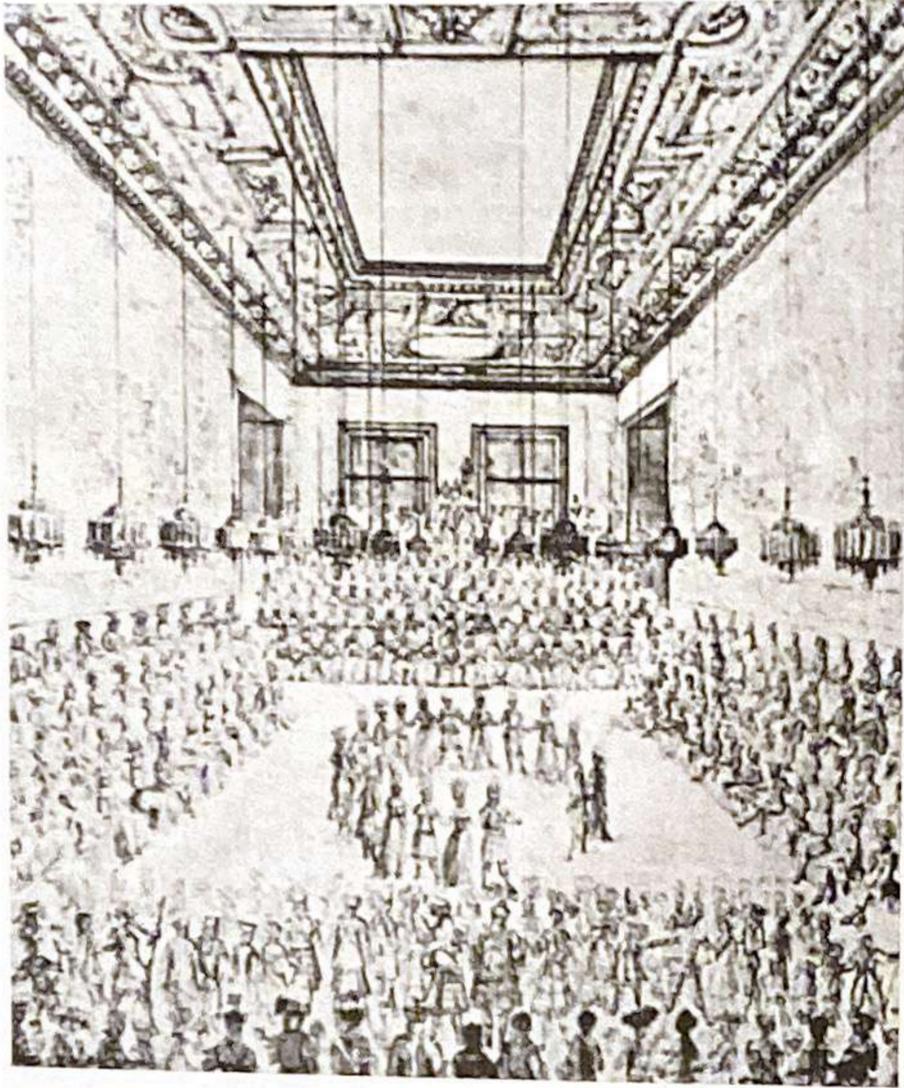




Opposite: The fourteen-year-old Louis XIV as Le Roi Soleil (The Sun King) in Le Ballet de la Nuit, performed at court during Carnival season in February 1653. Although this was the role that came to symbolize his reign, he also danced other parts in court ballets, including a gypsy fortune teller, a village maid, and a monkey.

This page: The choreography of large groups need not be limited to dancers. Louis XIV's "Grande Carrousel" (left) celebrated the birth of his son, the Dauphin, in 1662, and gave the Place du Carrousel in Paris its name. The festivities, seen here in a contemporary painting, involved hundreds of horsemen riding in carefully designed formations. The Tuileries Palace, in the background, was destroyed by fire in 1871. Court spectacles that are direct descendants of the Grande Carrousel are still found in Europe. An example is this military tattoo in front of Edinburgh Castle (below). In the United States, holiday parades and pageants like the half-time festivities at football games carry forward the tradition of mass choreography established in the Renaissance courts of Europe.

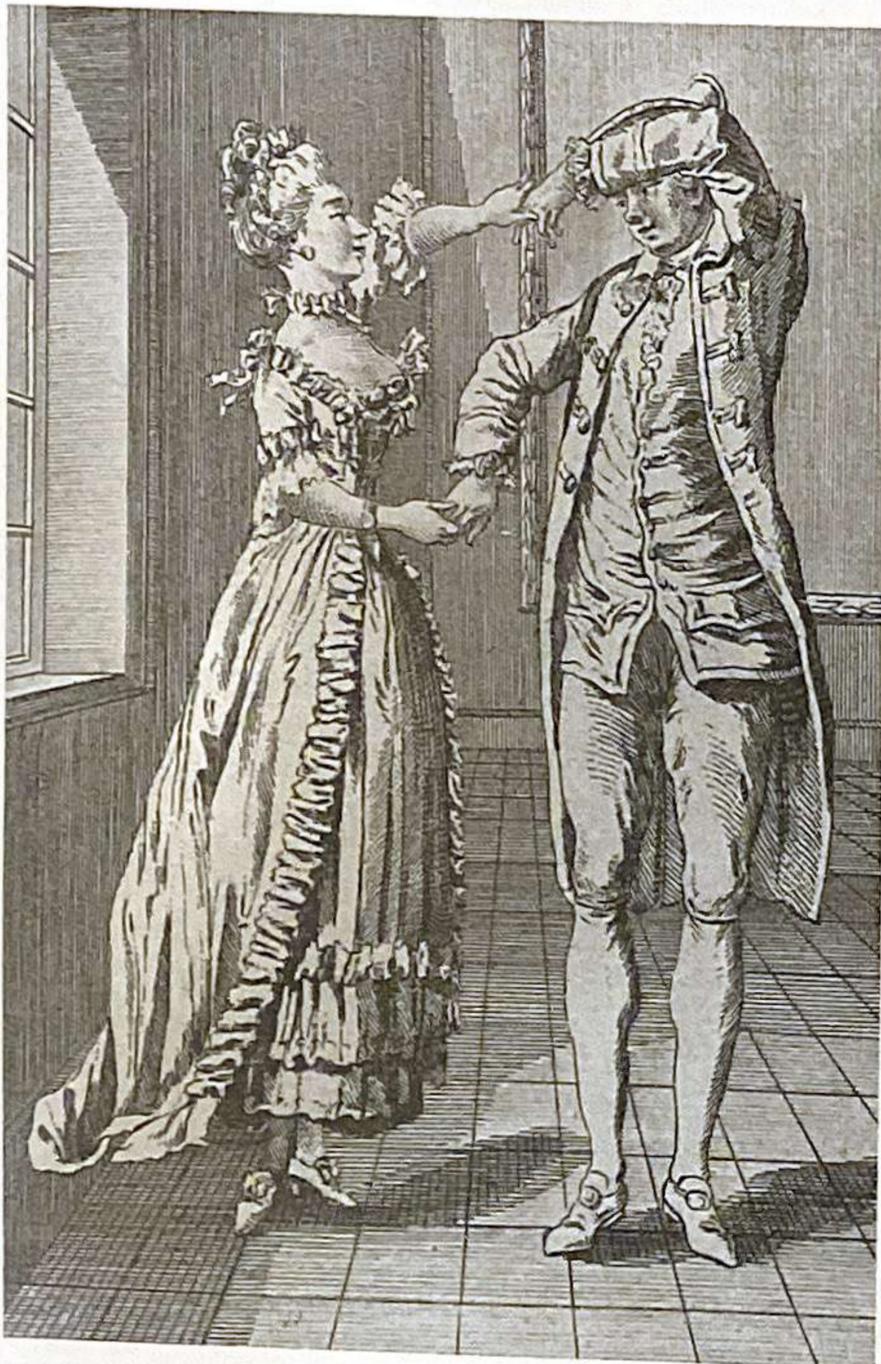




In the branle (left), which opened all formal court balls before the eighteenth century, couples joined a linked line in order of social rank, with those of highest rank coming first. In the danses à deux that followed, one couple danced at a time before the critical eyes of the assembled guests. This engraving, by Israel Silvestre in the second half of the seventeenth century, shows a branle at the Louvre.

The allemande (below left), a sixteenth-century court dance probably originating in Switzerland and Germany, was characterized by a figure in which the gentleman turned the lady under his arm, and vice versa. This is an illustration from Simon Guillame's dancing manual of 1770. The allemande step familiar from American square dancing may have been suggested by this dance.

Jean Ballon (1676–1739; below right) began choreographing the ballets of Louis XIV from about 1700. Before then, he had been a dancer and, since 1691, a member of the Paris Opéra Ballet. It was Ballon who choreographed the ballet in which Marie Camargo made her debut in 1726.





A wedding reception at the French court for the sister-in-law of Henry III, in a painting of c. 1582 by an unknown artist. The couple in the rear to the left is dancing a lively volta, in which the man lifts the woman off the floor. This was a favorite dance of Queen Elizabeth I.

what did the courtiers lucky enough to be granted such an apartment actually do within the palace grounds? They danced—both figuratively and literally—in attendance on the king.

By force of personality, by ruthless operation of the machinery of power, by clever manipulation of a system of rewards and punishments, Louis drew the lords of the realm to Versailles and kept them there as hostages to ambition, forcing them to spend fortunes they did not have to keep up with the extravagant ways of the court. The actual work of government was in the hands of ministers chosen from the bourgeoisie. When the king went to war, which was often enough, the job of the aristocrats was to fight; during interludes of peace they fought for positions close to the king's person. To hold a candle for the monarch as he climbed into the royal bed was a much-desired plum; to be evicted from an apartment in Versailles by the king's order was a devastating blow; to be invited to dance at a ball in the king's presence was an honor that might launch a fledgling career. Louis himself first danced in public at age seven; he was a portly forty-one when he

took his last recorded turn around a ballroom floor.

While the king was in residence at Versailles and no war claimed his attention, he hosted as many as two or three balls a week. The protocol governing these social occasions was as rigid as the laws governing the planetary orbits that Johannes Kepler had worked out at the beginning of the century. The balls invariably opened with a double-file dance known as a branle, in which the men lined up behind the king, the women lined up behind the queen, and the company circled the floor one couple after another. The order was so strictly by rank that anyone observing the branle knew immediately who stood above whom at court.

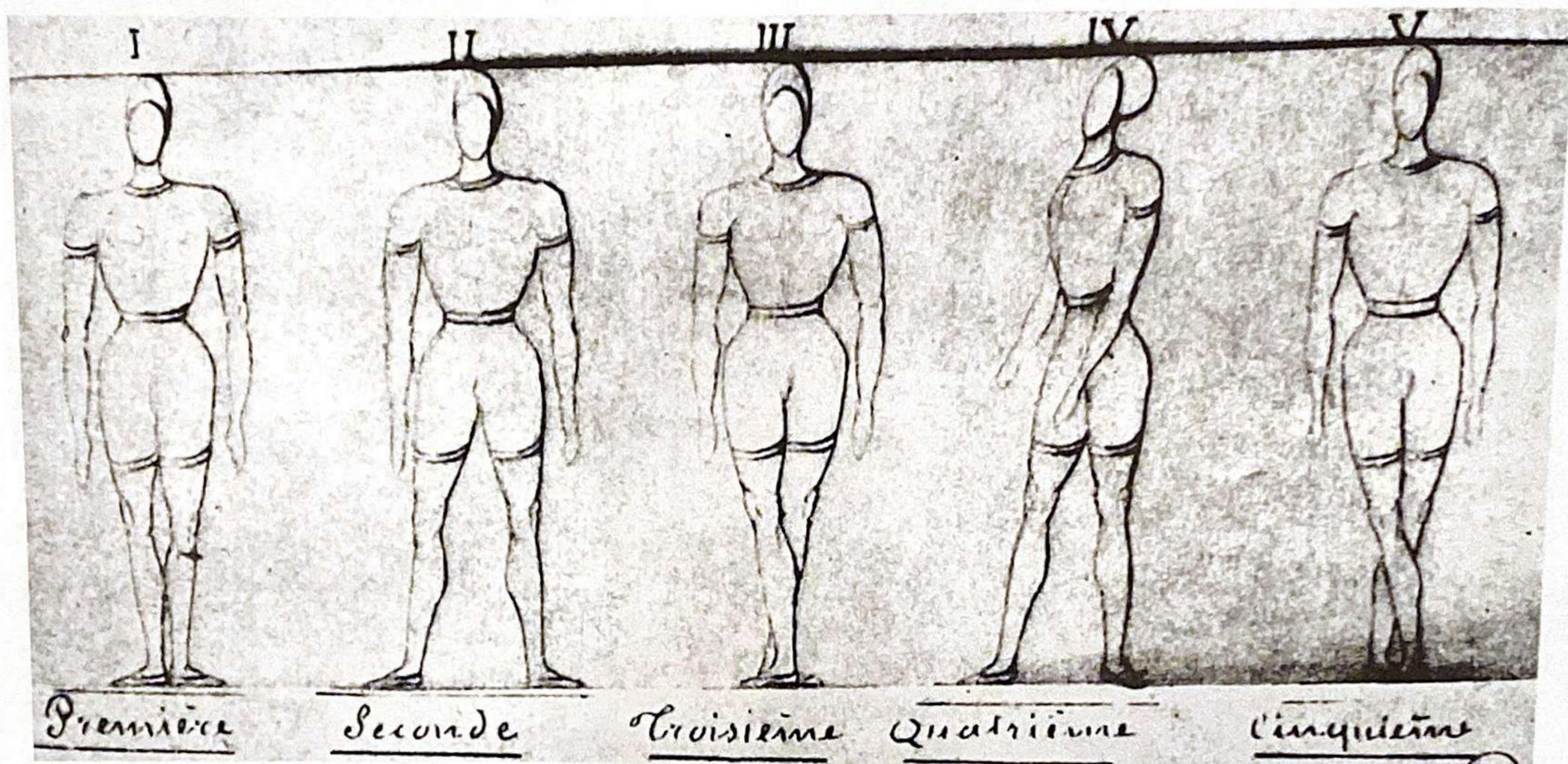
The branle was followed by the first of the *danses à deux* or couple dances. These were also hierarchical and pitilessly judgmental, since only one couple danced at a time while everyone else watched from chairs or from temporary bleachers erected around the walls of the ballroom. First the king and queen danced together, then the queen danced with the highest ranking gentleman; that worthy then danced with the high-

est ranking lady, and so on down the social ladder.

In Louis's youth, the dance that followed the branle was the solemn and dignified *courante*, his favorite, whose varied figures he practiced several hours a day and, according to an early eighteenth-century dancing master, "danced . . . better than any member of his Court, and with a quite unusual grace." The machine of fashion that was the French court required regular infusions of novelty; as many as four new dances were introduced each year. By the 1690s a new genre of formation dances known as *contredanses* (possibly adapted from English models) were popular. Resembling the reels and square dances of today in form, they allowed two, three, or more couples to take the floor at the same time.

Meanwhile, the minuet, a name apparently derived from the French for "small step," replaced the *courante* as the first couple dance after the branle. The minuet was a flexible *danse à deux* in which facing partners went through a kind of ritualized courtship—approaching, passing, retreating in S or Z figures, presenting their hands to each other at

The five positions of the feet seen in this early diagram are the foundation of classical ballet technique. Based on the turnout of the legs first defined in 1588, the five positions were codified at the end of the seventeenth century by Pierre Beauchamps, Louis XIV's dancing master.



arm's length while exchanging discreetly flirtatious glances. To dance a proper minuet required schooling at the hands of a dancing master, who typically also taught fencing and etiquette to would-be courtiers. It was important to maintain a "noble carriage," to keep the torso upright as a still center of gravity while movements of the head, forearms, wrists, fingers, legs, and feet flowed into each other without awkward breaks.

Even the "reverences," or bows, which the lady and gentleman exchanged to begin a dance were highly stylized. As time went on, the minuet grew slower, more sedate, and more mannered until it became (for eighteenth-century commentators like Voltaire) the very model of the effete amusements of a terminally decadent court.

When the young Louis XIV danced the role of the Sun King in 1653, he was expressing the pretensions of the House

of Bourbon to absolute power. The reality, as we have seen, was something else again. Cardinal Richelieu, prime minister to Louis XIII and Mazarin's mentor, had spent nearly twenty years bolstering the royal authority. But neither civil wars nor administrative reforms could strip the nobility of its feudal prerogatives until Louis XIV built Versailles. By detaining the peers of the realm in an elegant playpen-cum-prison, the king cut them off from their natural bases of power in the provinces. These strong-willed men, quick to take insult and ever ready to avenge their honor at sword point, became in effect wards of the state. It is not clear that Louis set out to emasculate an entire class of titled troublemakers by ensuring their attendance at an endless round of court fetes and hunts and balls and ballets. But it is on record that he believed "people love spectacles; by these we

hold their minds and hearts more often perhaps than by rewards or benefits."

It was Louis XIV who drew the first clear line between amateur and professional dancers. In 1661 he established a Royal Academy of Dance to systematize the rules governing the kind of virtuoso dancing that he admired and that he lamented "few among those of our Court" were able to do. Pierre Beauchamps, the king's own dancing master, stressed the five basic positions of the feet on which classical ballet technique rests. (The precise placement of the feet has varied over the years, but the fundamentals of the technique are traceable to Louis's academy.) To make it easier to train new dancers and teach new ballets, an entire hierarchy of steps and sequences was worked out and assigned names like *balancé* and *entrechat* that have survived to this day (although the movements they refer to may have



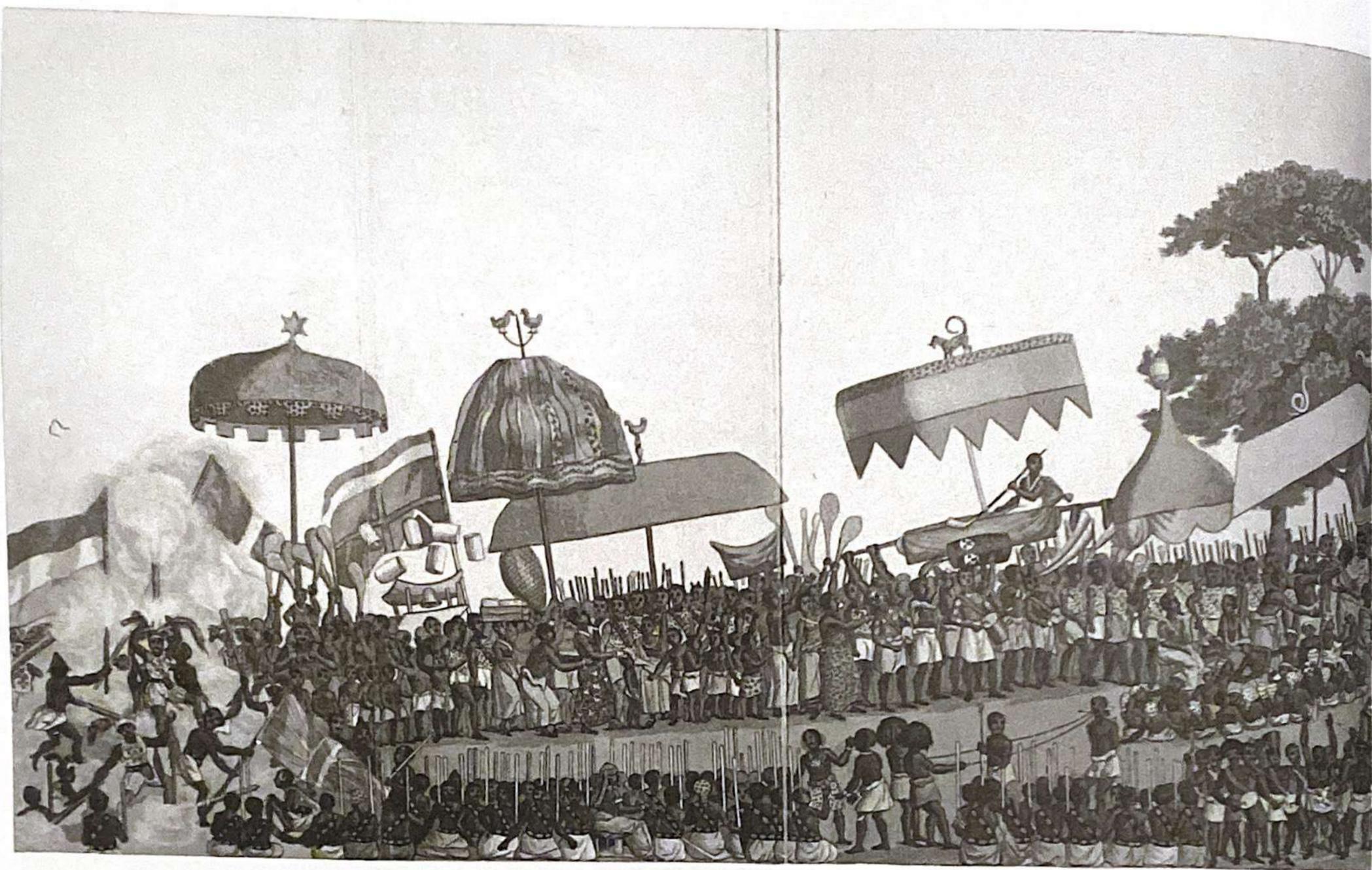
changed). The opening of the Paris Opéra in 1671 gave the newly codified court dance a public showcase under the direction of Beauchamps and Jean Baptiste Lully, an inspired music master (and celebrated dancer) whose librettists included Corneille, Racine, and Molière.

Even as the French aristocracy began to lose its purpose and vitality as a class, the ideal of the manly courtier was transferred to the professional stage in the figure of the *danseur noble*, who typically portrayed heroes or gods out of Greek and Roman mythology. In amateur productions at court, female roles had often been played by young boys; in 1681 professional female dancers made their debut at the Opéra and were an immediate hit, a ballerina named La-Fontaine being acclaimed “queen of the dance” in her first season.

The political system centered on Versailles survived the death of Louis

XIV in 1712, but without his commanding presence the center could not hold. Having reduced the nobility to the status of supernumeraries, the French monarchy was exposed to the anger and frustration of the middle and lower classes whose taxes supported the structure of the state. The Revolution of 1789 swept away much of the old order. Never again would a European monarch’s person be accorded semidivine status. Late Bourbon manners, dress, and diction, once considered the touchstone of Europe’s rulers, became proverbial in the next century for ineffectual foppery. Yet the ideal of the courtier, as expressed on the dance floors of Louis XIV’s France, endured as a model of noble deportment in painting, sculpture, opera, and ballet—a model from which succeeding generations in post-Revolutionary Europe drew both pleasure and inspiration.

Louis XIV attends the theater at Versailles. The production is Les Fêtes de l'Amour et de Bacchus (1678). Here, one can see the origin of the relationship between performer and audience that came to characterize classical ballet. The king's position is central and unobstructed, and the action is oriented toward that central viewing point.



It was always an exciting and dangerous place. The great officers of the kingdom, even the King himself, were subject to rapid changes of fortune. Their patronage was a way to power and wealth, attracting supplicants and followers, but patterns of alliance were ever-shifting, and a prosperous group might quickly find itself in difficulties. Around the King and court, men maneuvered, calculated, spied on each other and were spied upon. Alliances by marriage, trade or favor were made and broken. A large number of supporters showed a man's power; they also cost him money."

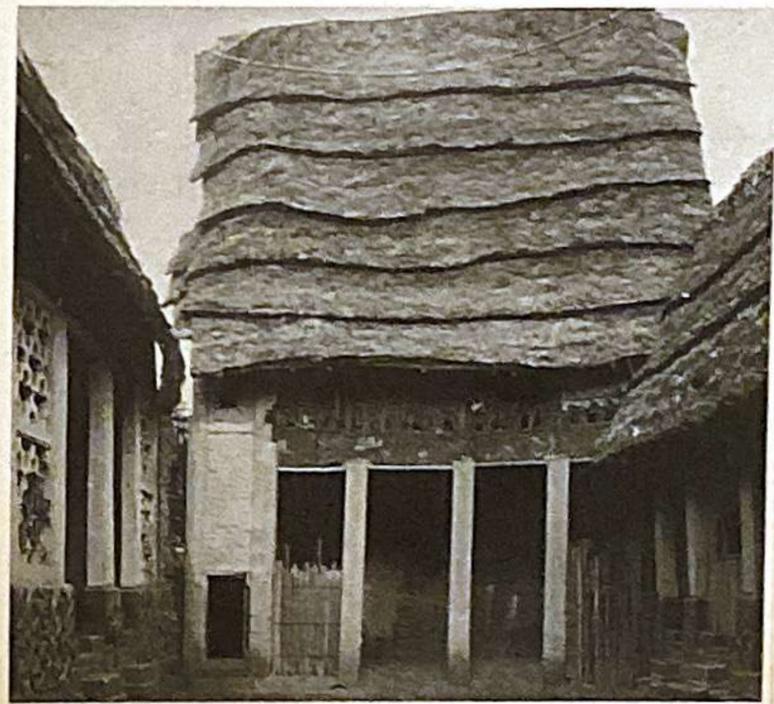
These words might have been written about the Versailles of Louis XIV and his successors. In fact, they describe Kumase, the capital of the Asante, as it was in its heyday in the early years of the nineteenth century.

A century earlier, a confederacy of small states calling themselves Asante gained control of the region around Kumase. The survival of the Asante as

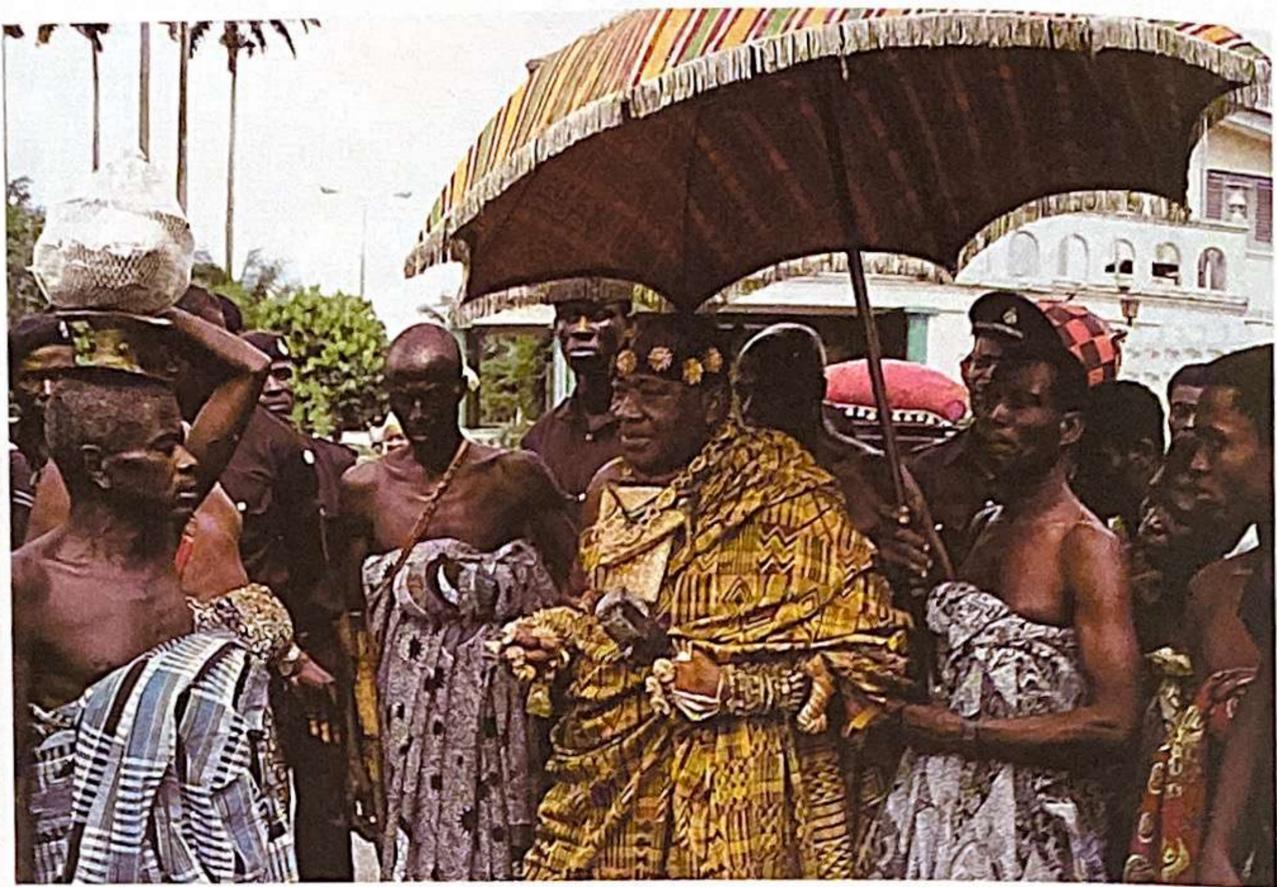
a distinct people is due not only to the legendary prowess of their armies—whose emblem was the many-quilled porcupine—but also to their genius for political organization. One of the founders of the confederacy was a priest named Anokye, who along with the first Asantehene, Osei Tutu, constructed a strong but flexible polity that combined elements of centralized empire, feudalism, and representative democracy. The Asante ruled their confederacy without benefit of an indigenous written language (although they staffed their treasury with literate Muslims). They made a fetish of cleanliness; European travelers commented on the broad, well-swept streets of their villages and towns. The official currency of the land was gold dust. Expanding by war or by diplomacy backed by the threat of war, the Asante established dominance over most of the area of modern Ghana; only the encroachment of the better-armed British in the late nineteenth century ended their power.

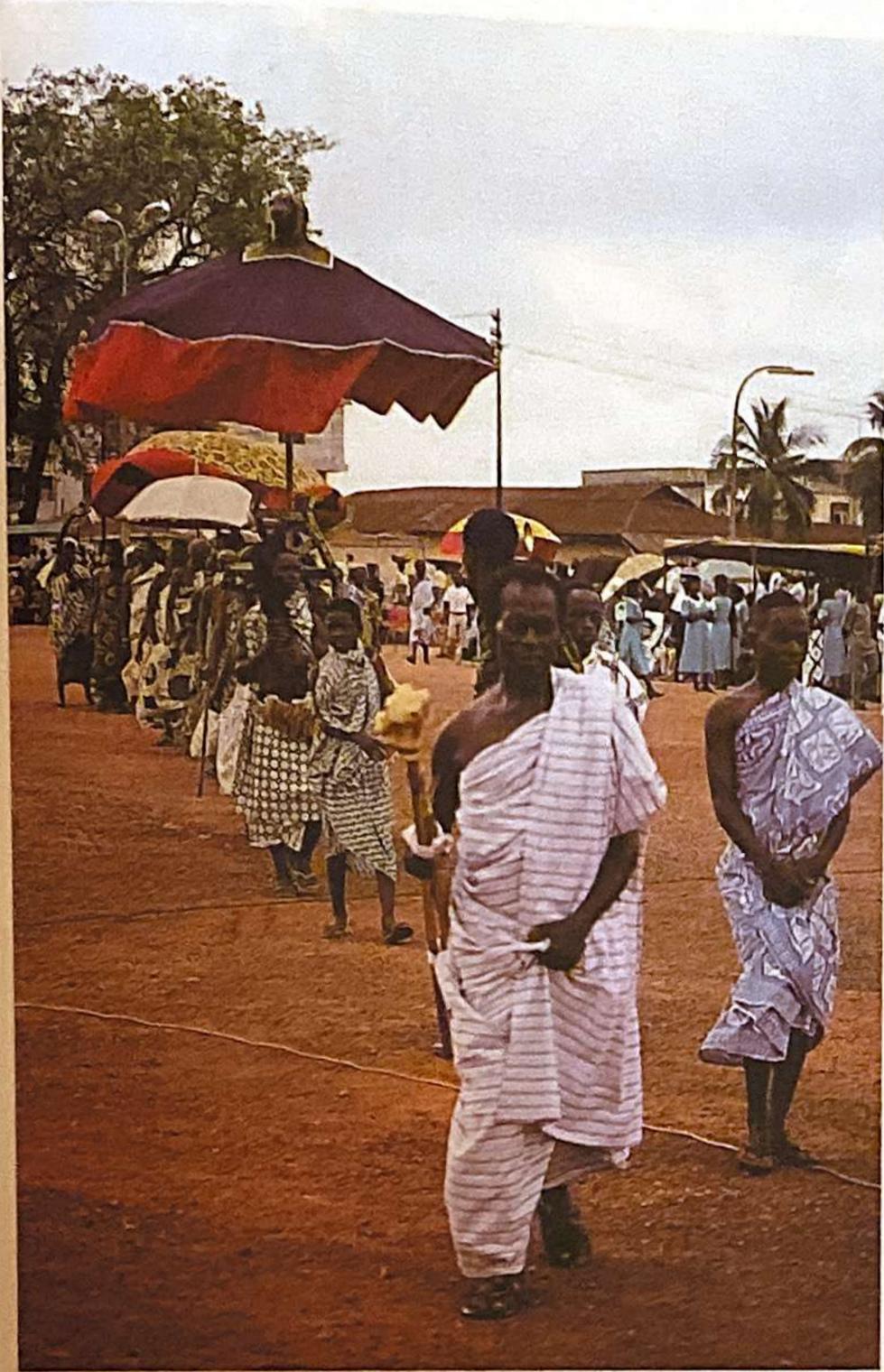
Above: Reception for the British Embassy at Kumase, 1817, from T. E. Bowdich, Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee (London, 1819). Bowdich wrote that upon entering the city, "more than a hundred bands burst at once on our arrival, with the peculiar air of their several chiefs."

Opposite: Asantehene Kwaku Dua II receiving a British official at his palace, 1884 (left). Each chief has his own umbrella; and, as at Versailles, the closer a courtier is to the king, the more status he has. As is the tradition in many royal courts, the ruler is seated on a raised dais. The Asantehene's palace, constructed of wood and clay, was the largest building, or rather group of interconnected buildings, in Kumase. It was not only the primary residence of the king and many of his wives and servants, but part of it also served as the forum in which the council of the realm decided important matters. At right, the great courtyard, c. 1890.

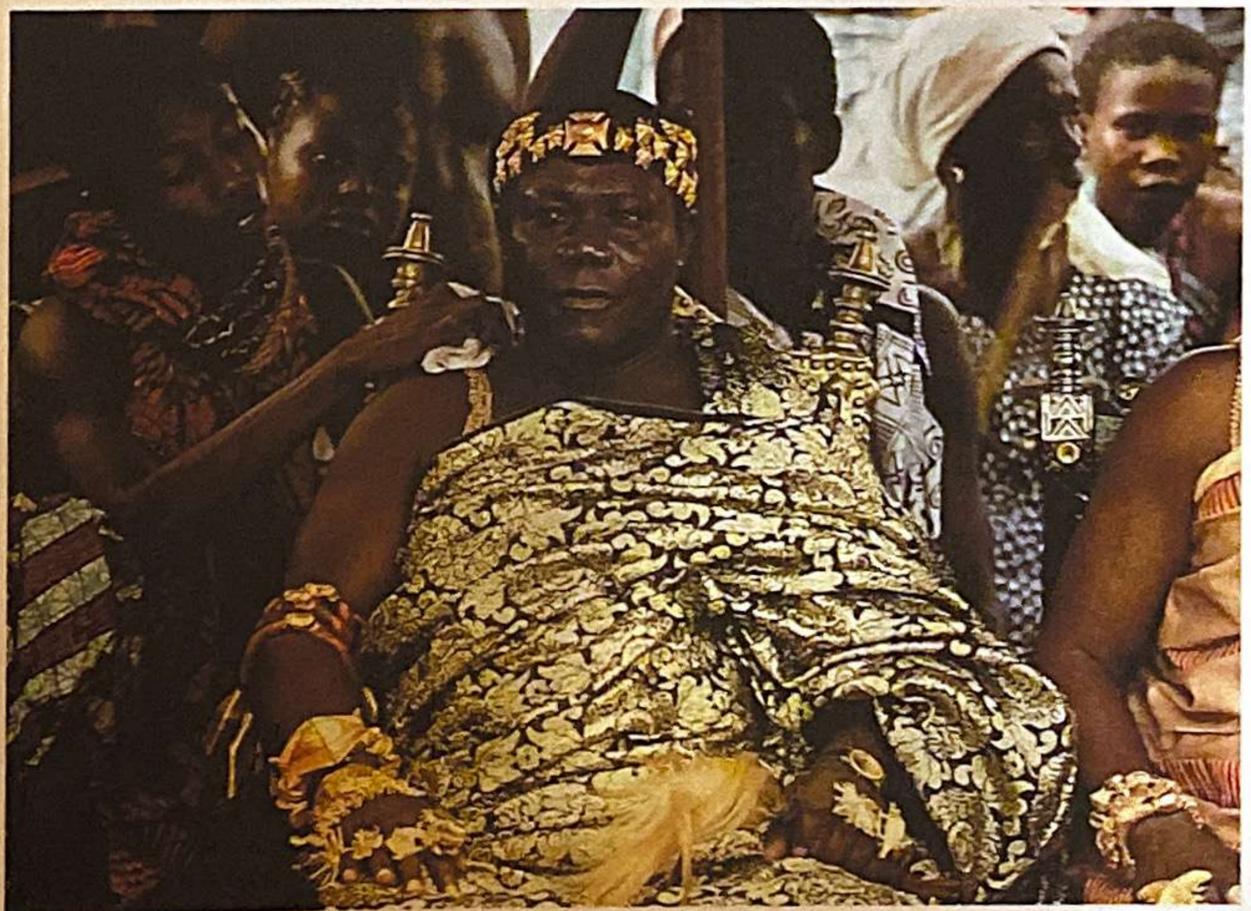
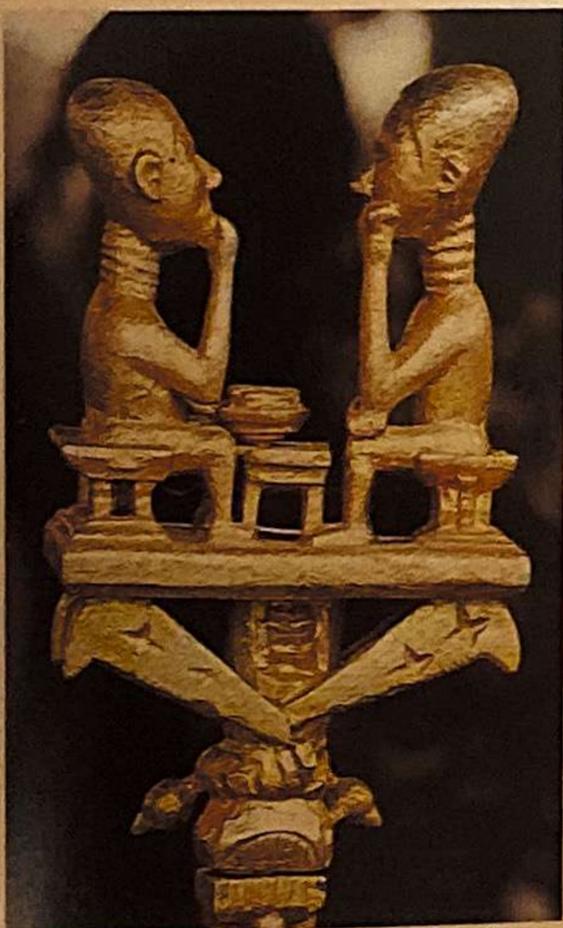


The umbrellas used to shade the Asantehene and senior chiefs and signal their appearance in public are among the most striking articles of Asante regalia. Their purpose is not only to keep the chief physically cool, but to signify his spiritual coolness, or *dwo*, as well. The umbrella-bearer makes the umbrella "dance" to the music of the drums and horns in the chief's entourage. At a Big Adaye in Kumase in 1991, the Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II (right) and a group of senior chiefs (below) are shaded by umbrellas.





A chief and his court (left) arrive at the assembly ground in Kumase for a Big Aday. Each chief wears his most ornate robes and gold jewelry (below right). Almost as conspicuous as the umbrellas among Asanti regalia are linguist staffs with elaborate gold finials (below left), which are carried as a badge of office by chiefs' spokesmen among the Akan peoples. These elaborate gold staff tops are of relatively recent development, and among the Asante were not used until 1924, but the custom of providing messengers—that is, translators or linguists—with such staffs to vouchsafe their authority can be traced back to the silver-topped canes that European merchants brought to the Gold Coast in the seventeenth century.



When the British got their first glimpse of Kumase in 1817, they were impressed by its generous layout, and by the golden treasures of the Asantehene and his court: "The sun was reflected, with a glare scarcely more supportable than the heat, from the massy gold ornaments, which glistened in every direction." Modern Ghana, which achieved independence in 1957, took its name from an ancient west African kingdom that was first mentioned in the eighth century by Arab travelers who knew it as "the land of gold"; they described the king of Ghana holding court literally weighed down with gold necklaces and bracelets; the hair of his attendants was "plaited with gold," and even his watchdogs wore collars of "gold and silver."

Most of the land under Asante control at the beginning of the nineteenth century was tropical rain forest, so dense that sunlight penetrated to the forest floor only where the Asante had cleared farms and living spaces and the narrow footpaths that connected their smaller villages to the larger towns. They built their capital Kumase on a hill overlooking a river. In the early nineteenth century it supported a population of twenty thousand. Of its twenty-seven major streets, the largest was half a mile long, and fifty to a hundred yards wide, and lined with clay-and-wattle buildings whose outer walls were sealed with white plaster. These were maintained by leading chiefs and court functionaries who conducted business in airy rooms entered directly from the street. The most impressive buildings, some of them two stories high, belonged to the palace of the

Asantehene. Formal audiences and council meetings took place in a Great Court, which was connected to other courts and buildings by passageways and galleries. As at Versailles, numerous attendants, court officials, royal consorts, and servants had apartments in the palace complex.

The unity of the Asante nation was symbolized by a Golden Stool, carved in wood and encased in sheets of gold, which, according to tradition, descended from heaven in 1700 onto the knees of Osei Tutu, who became the first Asantehene. No one, not even an Asantehene, has ever sat on the Golden Stool, which enshrines the spirit of the Asante people. Although he combined in his person the powers of head of state, head priest, and commander in chief, the Asantehene was never an absolute monarch. Any man who belonged to the royal clan by descent on his mother's side was a candidate for succession. When the office fell vacant, a new Asantehene was named by a council of subordinate chiefs, who were themselves named to their positions by councils of lesser chiefs, who in turn owed their authority to lesser councils on down to the village level. On each level a place of honor was reserved for a woman known as the "queen mother," who represented the women of her community, played an important role in nominating new chiefs, and often served as a power behind the chief, in the manner of a Catherine de Médicis. If the performance of any chief, including the Asantehene, was found wanting, he could be removed from office by the vote of those who had elected him.

On certain occasions fixed by the Asante calendar the entire hierarchy of chiefs, subchiefs, elders, and court functionaries gathered in Kumase at the palace of the Asantehene. They came with their retinues, resplendent in their best robes and finest gold jewelry, to ratify the ties of political and religious authority that held the community together—a web of mutual obligations made manifest through the exchange of gifts and services, ritualized flights of rhetoric, and the display of objects of symbolic value like the Golden Stool, but most of all through the dynamic symbolism of dance. The festival that the current Asantehene, Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, has declared to be a Big Aday (Ritual Day) continues this centuries-old court ceremony; it takes place at the hilltop palace complex in the center of Kumase, a modern city with a population of four hundred thousand.

A century after the British subdued the Asante (they sacked Kumase twice, in 1874 and 1896), the court of the Asantehene remains a force to be reckoned with. The national government in Accra, Ghana's capital on the Atlantic coast a hundred miles south of Kumase, recognizes the authority of the traditional institution of chieftaincy in certain legal and cultural matters. But while the Asante region is the country's most prosperous, comparatively few Asante have been welcomed into politics on the national level. As a result, the last few years have seen a renewed interest in chieftaincy among the Asante, a development that Professor Opoku views with some skepticism: "Successful Asante have money and few

outlets for their ambitions. So they want to be chiefs even if they know nothing about our traditions. At the same time the court has money problems, so you get people buying a stool, buying their way in. Not only do these people not know how to dance, they don't even know enough to appreciate good dancing. Without knowledgeable patrons who understand the culture, how can the best survive? Happily, there are still a few chiefs with close ties to the people who take their political, cultural, and spiritual responsibilities seriously." The professor also worries that the dances that helped to define Asante identity for nearly three centuries are being forgotten by a younger generation that is more interested in imitating the moves of Michael Jackson: "I don't mind telling you, we are in deep trouble. The British couldn't stop us from dancing, but the TV might."

The present Asantehene, a British-trained lawyer who was taught the requisite dances after his elevation, has invited all Asante to join him in observing the Big Adaye; and he has called upon all Asante chiefs to reaffirm in person their allegiance to the Golden Stool. The public display of the stool and other regalia is designed to reassure the assembled nation that their hallowed treasures are in good hands.

The public part of the ceremonies will be held adjacent to the palace complex on the assembly ground, a fan-shaped expanse of red-brown earth with two low rostrums at one end: a circle of whitewashed concrete for the Asantehene and a smaller concrete square for the queen mother. Other than these and a few red and yellow canvas canopies

along the periphery to keep the sun off visiting dignitaries, the area is without decoration. No flags, no banners, no posters, no triumphal arches, no frills of any kind. The only markings on the bare earth are parallel lines of white lime laid down around the perimeter at right angles to the outer edge, as if to define so many parking spaces. Between each pair of lines a small wooden sign on a stake bears the name of the particular chief whose entourage will soon occupy that space: "Amantinehene," "Agogohene," "Adansihene," "Kenyasehene 2," "Essemejahene," "Acherensuahene." Each of these men will sit surrounded by his own entourage, including musicians and dancers. But when the moment comes to pay homage to the Asantehene, each will know exactly where in the hierarchy he fits, with lesser chiefs going first and the most powerful and prestigious going last—the exact opposite of the progression at Versailles, where the king danced first and others followed in decreasing degree of status.

According to the professor, every courtier has a responsibility to pass along the traditional songs and dances to the next generation. The Asantehene's head drummer, a man of eighty-two who carries the entire court repertoire in his head, had a son who showed promise on the drums but ended up as an accountant in Chicago; the head drummer is now training his two youngest boys, twelve-year-old twins. Even before they learn the dances of their people, the professor says, Asante children are told stories that make plain the central role that dancing plays in their world: "There's the one about a

greedy chief who thinks only of himself and who is cautioned that his stool has a taboo against dancing. So he says, 'Don't worry, I understand, no dancing.' His sons, who have been so neglected by their father that they are starving, dig a tunnel under the palace, and one day while the chief is taking a bath, they start drumming; he can't help himself, he starts moving to the beat and someone says, 'What are you doing?' and he says, 'Oh, the water was so cold I was just shivering.' And the person telling the story mimics the drum with his voice and acts out the chief's movements, and the children learn to imitate him. The whole idea of a chief who can't dance is so silly, it makes them laugh."

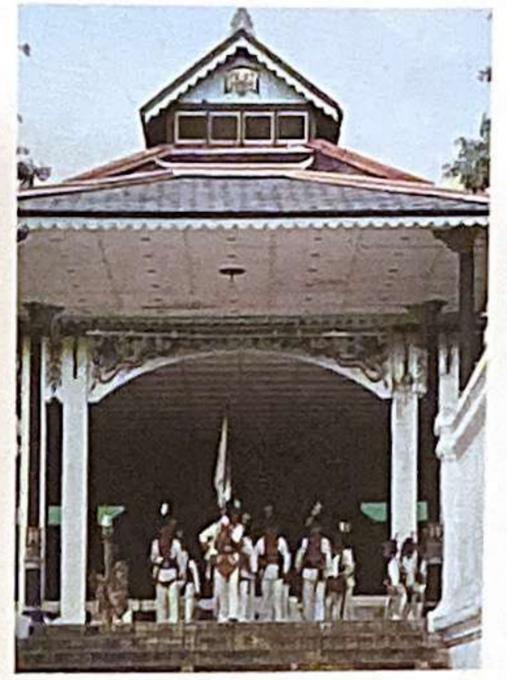
There is a quality of life known and prized throughout tropical Africa that the Asante call *dwo*. This can be translated as "spiritual coolness" or "inner peace" or just plain "cool." It does not refer to air or body temperature, although a metaphoric connection to the large-leaved shade trees that dominate the main streets of even the smallest Asante villages can hardly be accidental. The professor remembers gathering under such a shade tree as a child with a group of friends to learn new dances. His grandniece Esther Boateng, who at the age of five danced for Queen Elizabeth II when that monarch visited Ghana in the 1950s, says that when you dance at court (or for that matter anywhere else) the important thing is to be relaxed, to stay flexible, to remain cool. "The opposite of cool is nervous," she says. "When you start dancing and you feel cool, you feel like the whole world belongs to you."

The Buddhist monument of Borobudur (c. 800) in Central Java manifests the cosmic mountain in mandala plan. The massive structure has nine levels, or terraces, with bas-reliefs lining the galleries that surround each level. The images relate the story of the Buddha's life and the lives of his disciples; some depict dance postures that suggest the astonishing continuity of dance forms in Indonesia.



Java, the fourth largest island in the island nation of Indonesia, is one of the world's most densely populated areas, with over 1500 persons per square mile. Six hundred and twenty miles long and 125 miles across at its widest point, its population of over a hundred million shares the mountainous land with over fifty active volcanoes, seventeen of which have erupted in recent years. Mt. Merapi near Yogyakarta in central Java erupts every five years or so, causing death and destruction, but also coating the all-important rice fields with fertile volcanic ash. The devastating eruption of Krakatoa, which blew up in the strait between Java and Sumatra in 1883, was heard two thousand miles away. Earthquakes and tidal waves are all-too frequent occurrences. What these disasters have in common is that they are recurrent, yet, unlike seasonal storms and floods, there is no way to predict when they will occur next. Perhaps it is not surprising that people who live at such close quarters with natural violence should cherish a court aesthetic that is rooted in the cultivation of a profound tranquillity.

Following a dynastic split in the eighteenth century, two competing royal courts were established in central Java fifty miles apart, one at Yogyakarta and one at Surakarta. Each court has evolved its own versions of the classic Javanese court dance, the sublimely tranquil bedoyo. This dance commemorates a three-hundred-year-old tradition according to which a Muslim ruler of the state of Mataram, the ancestor of both Javanese royal courts, was ritually married to the goddess known as the Queen of the Southern Sea, who taught



Bedoyo performance (above) in the main pendopo of the sultan's palace at Yogyakarta, Central Java. This court dance commemorates the ritual marriage of the sultan's ancestor to the deity known as the Queen of the Southern Sea. The identically dressed dancers, who usually move in unison, represent aspects of a single person, concept, or theme. Top, the sultan's palace guard.



him this dance. Javanese traditions linking royalty and divinity go back even further, to the god-kings of the ninth and tenth centuries who developed a unique blend of Buddhism and Hinduism and built the island's two greatest monuments, neighboring temple complexes at Borobudur (Buddhist) and Prambanan (dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva.) A thirteenth-century ruler of Java was extolled by a court poet as an incarnation of both Shiva and Buddha. After adopting Islam the rulers of Mataram were provided with genealogies linking them to all previous gods as well as to the line of Mohammed.

As a danced ritual attributed to an indigenous ocean deity, performed at a Muslim court and incorporating Hindu myths with overtones of Buddhist quietism, bedoyo appears to be a typical product of the Javanese aptitude for combining disparate, even opposing, elements into a harmonious whole. While some bedoyos are considered more sacred than others, all are performed to proclaim the glory of the ruler, to affirm the court's ancestral ties to a divine source of power, and to embody clear teachings about the Javanese way of life—how to compose your inner life, how to present yourself to others.

Everything about bedoyo suggests the public projection of the disciplined self. It is danced by nine identically dressed women whose synchronized movements and indistinguishable facial expressions signify that they are not nine individuals but rather nine different aspects of one individual or of some abstract idea or theme. Nine is considered a "perfect" number. Depending on the commentator, the dancers are said to represent

the nine orifices of the human body or the nine human desires or nine constellations or the nine ceremonial gates of the palace.

A focal point of every Javanese palace is a permanent structure built especially for court dance and spectacle. So important is the enactment of rituals of legitimacy in this part of the world that one scholar has referred to the traditional nations of southeast Asia as "theater-states." The courtiers of Louis XIV would have had no trouble understanding the connection between statecraft and stagecraft. In Yogyakarta court dances are performed in an open-sided rectangular pavilion—called a *pendopo*—with a high peaked roof supported by carved black and gold pillars; similar structures can be found in bas-relief on the walls of ancient Javanese temples, along with carved figures of dancers whose graceful postures are similar to those seen in today's court dancers.

As with all court dance, preparations for bedoyo are elaborate and time-consuming; it takes several hours just to dress the dancers in the costume of a royal bride. Each dancer wears a velvet bodice embroidered in silver-gilt thread, a scarf secured around the waist by a gold belt, silver-gilt or gilded leather armlets in the shape of dragons on the upper arms, a gold or silver-gilt breast plaque set with tiny diamonds, and, tightly wound around the legs, a length of diagonally striped batik whose free end falls to the floor and passes between the ankles like a train. The dancer's bare feet move soundlessly over the marble tile floor to the fluid sounds of a court gamelan—a predominantly per-

cussive orchestra that includes a variety of tuned gongs, cymbals, xylophone-like instruments, a drum, a flute, and a two-stringed lute.

The essence of bedoyo is balance or equilibrium, which is a quality the Javanese prize highly. Much of the time the nine dancers move in unison. To initiate each slow-motion step, a dancer arches her instep and curls her toes upward as she lifts one foot just perceptibly off the ground. Knees turned out and slightly bent, she replaces this foot on the ground heel first and shifts her weight forward to the toe in a continuous movement that seems to invest the everyday act of walking with aesthetic significance. As in ballet, the basic steps are highly stylized and are referred to by name; in the *gedruck*, for example, the dancer balances on one foot while scooping her batik train back out of her way with her other heel and then tapping her toe on the floor behind the supporting foot.

Like the geometric figures of Louis XIV's *ballets de cour*, the stylized movements and smoothly flowing floor patterns of bedoyo have symbolic significance; for example, the transition from asymmetrical to symmetrical grouping (three rows of three dancers each) represents a change of inner state—from a conflict between flesh and spirit to a reconciliation of all aspects of the human being. At other times the dancers may depict scenes from the history of the dynasty or from the classic Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which have never lost their currency in Muslim Java. But even when two of the dancers separate from the other seven to enact a love duet be-

Opposite: Pendopos at the early-seventeenth-century royal palace of Kasephuan in Cirebon, West Java. In Indonesia, the pendopo is used in architectural settings ranging from modest homes to elegant palaces, as well as in Hindu temples and Islamic mosques. At Yogyakarta and Surakarta the main pendopos, built in the early nineteenth century, are much larger and more elaborate than the ones shown here.



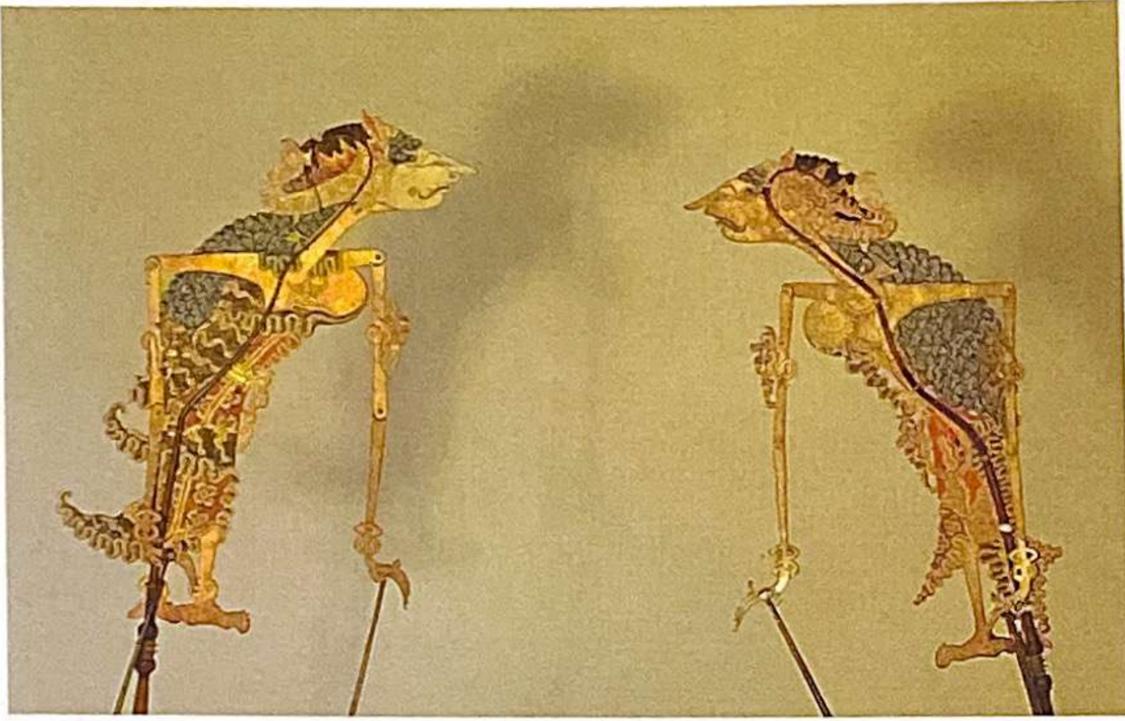
tween the ruler and the Queen of the Southern Sea, bedoyo dancers betray no emotion; they remain exemplars of Javanese demeanor—calm, inwardly focused, deliberate, modest, restrained.

In other court entertainments, such as the wayang wong spectacles in which both men and women perform, two radically different styles of male dancing are found: one employs abrupt, forceful,

expansive movements to portray robust warrior types and ogres; the other, marked by smooth, flowing, refined gestures, is reserved for thoughtful heroes like Arjuna and Rama, protagonists of the classic Hindu epics. While unrefined characters may fight on the side of Good against Evil, it is significant that the most revered heroes are invariably refined types. In bedoyo, all hint of

The Water Palace at Yogyakarta was originally built by Sultan Hamengku Buwono I in 1758 and once had underwater corridors leading from women's bathing pools to a partly underwater mosque; the water motif recalls the dynastic connection to the locally revered sea goddess.

No account of the performing arts patronized by the royal courts of Java would be complete without a mention of *wayang kulit*, or shadow play. The puppets (left), made of buffalo parchment, are manipulated by a lone puppeteer so that an overhead lamp throws their lacy shadows on a white cotton screen. The stories come from Indic, mostly Hindu, sources as well as indigenous legends. As can be seen from these two nineteenth-century examples from Cirebon, West Java, the stylized form of the puppets reveals a kinship to both *bedoyo* and *wayang wong*.



The elaborate dance drama called *wayang wong* (below and opposite) was first described in the eighteenth century; during its "golden age" in the early decades of this century performances at court could last up to four days, with long scenes of ritualized combat based on episodes from the *Mahabharata*. The influence of the shadow puppets is strong: the sultan is considered the puppeteer of the performance, and some sultans actually collaborated with their court literati in writing the stories, composing the music and choreographing the strictly disciplined movements. These are performances at the Yogyakarta palace.







East of Java in the Indonesian archipelago is the far smaller island of Bali, which, unlike its larger neighbors, never forsook Hinduism for Islam. Bali is known for its astonishing variety of dance forms, some of which overlap with Javanese dances. The destruction of the royal courts of Bali in the early twentieth century led to the dispersal of court dancers into the villages and countryside. Here Balinese wayang wong dancers, c. 1930, perform a scene from the Ramayana.

conflict has been submerged in an elegant style of movement that once served as a standard against which the bearing and manners of Javanese nobility might be measured.

From the early nineteenth century, when Dutch commercial interests consolidated their political and military hold on Java, the two royal courts redoubled their competition in the only arena allowed to them: the arena of culture. The language and etiquette of the courts became ever more refined; beautiful pools and gardens (symbols of heavenly bliss in Islam and emblems of the rulers' association with the Queen of the Southern Sea) were constructed; and the custody and ritual display of the royal heirlooms, considered to have great spiritual power, became even more important. These heirlooms, or *pusaka*, which had been divided between the two courts when the dynasty split, range from gold crowns to gold-leafed umbrellas to ceremonial daggers to classic court dances like the *bedoyo*.

There is a deep-running paradox in Javanese culture concerning the nature of power. On the one hand, power is connected to specific possessions; in a battle over succession in the late seventeenth century, a contender for the throne whose father had lost both his army and his treasury nevertheless triumphed because he possessed certain *pusaka*. On the other hand, true (i.e., spiritual) power is held to be invisible, all-pervasive: if you need to flaunt it, you must not have it. In striking a balance between these two opposing attitudes, the Javanese courts competed as patrons of what was held to be the best of ancient Javanese culture. With

material resources unmatched elsewhere in their society, and with the leisure to study the traditional arts and embellish them, the courts of central Java focused attention on a history and a spiritual heritage that all Javanese could look to with pride.

Unlike the court dances of the Asante and Bourbon France, the dances of the Javanese courts were not originally open to outsiders, even those associated with the court. Until 1918 the *bedoyo* at Yogyakarta was performed only by female relatives of the sultan; it was even forbidden to teach classic dance outside the palace walls. In fact, other than invited guests, few Javanese ever saw the court dances. Their performance was considered a sacred trust, necessary to the well-being of the people and the continuity of the dynasty, but out-of-bounds for all but the highest dignitaries; even the costumes and seating arrangements of the spectators were hierarchically coded. Those of lowest rank wore black and sat nearest to the palace kitchen; those of highest rank wore white and sat nearest to the ruler—whose throne was elevated so that his head was higher than any spectator's or performer's.

Commoners have never been allowed to view or learn the court dances of Surakarta. But during the reign of Sultan Hamengku Buwono VIII (1921–39) the court dances and spectacles of Yogyakarta were opened to the people. In a momentous step analogous to Louis XIV's founding of his Royal Academy of Dance, a school was created outside the Yogyanese court where anyone could study what had once been the exclusive province of the nobility. The goals were

to invigorate court arts by exposing them to new influences; to raise the standards of popular dance forms by bringing them into contact with highly developed court forms; and to reinforce an historically rooted Javanese consciousness against the modernizing pressures of Western colonialism. Hundreds of performers were recruited from the domain of Yogyakarta to learn the dances and the movement styles associated with such spectacles as *wayang wong*. The most accomplished of these performers became full-time servants of the court; and many thousands of Javanese got their first look at the centuries-old treasures of their culture that the court of Yogyakarta had maintained.

The next sultan, Hamengku Buwono IX (1940–88), was a leader in the fight for independence against the Dutch. The struggle brought together leaders from Java, Sumatra, Bali, and the other islands that now make up the nation of Indonesia. But it was by no means certain in 1945, when independence was proclaimed, that the different islands, with their distinctive peoples, histories, and cultures, would continue to seek a collective future. Although the sultan was a lover of dance and a choreographer himself, he worried that local traditions like the court dances at Yogyakarta would weaken his people's allegiance to the central government, so he suspended all performances at the palace. Deprived of their principal patron, dances like the *bedoyo* might have died out except for the efforts of former palace servants who now taught outside the court.

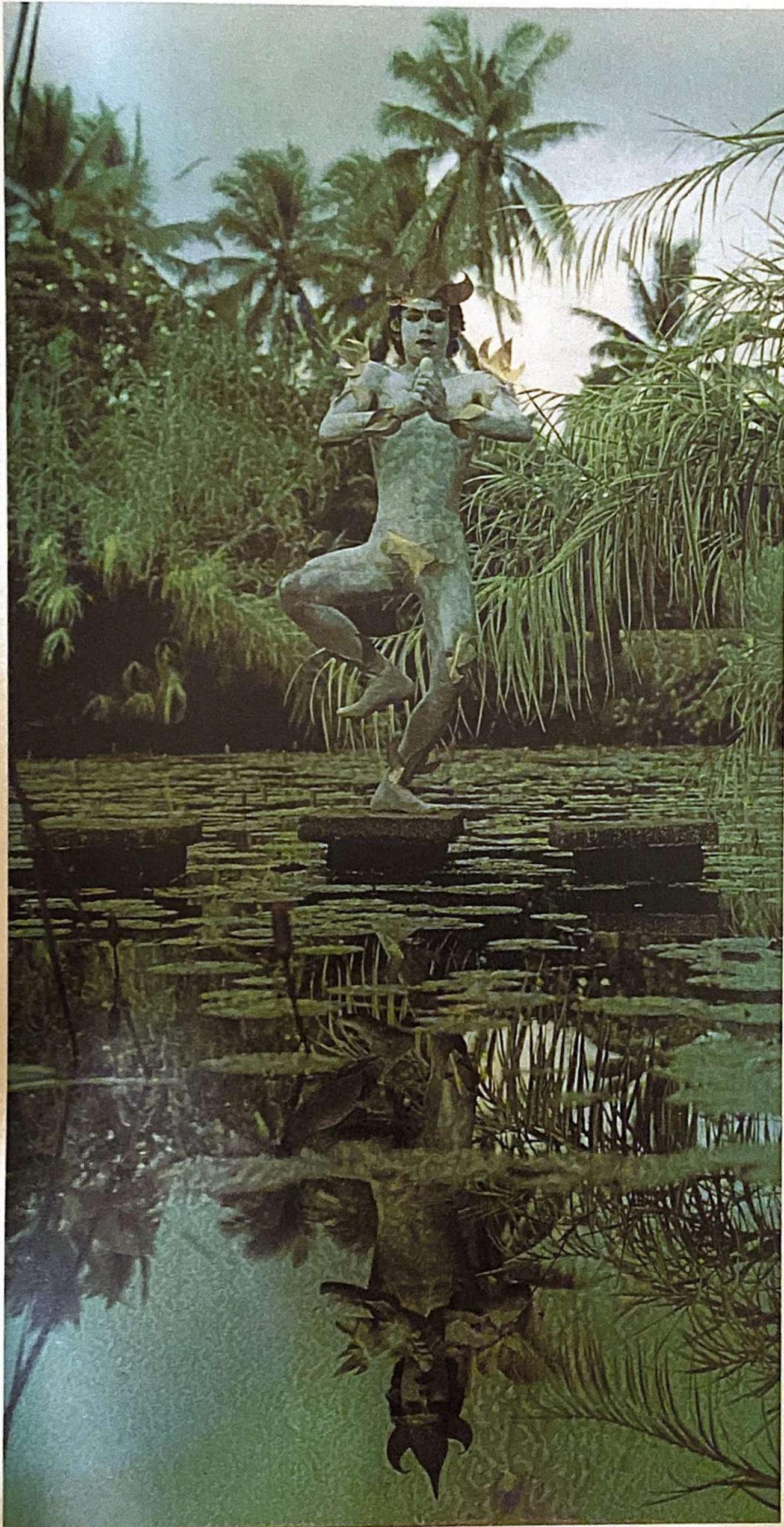
The present sultan, Hamengku Buwono X, has revived performances at



This page: The classically trained Javanese court dancer Sardono Kusumo has created a modern dance inspired by temple bas-reliefs. In these photographs, one can see dancers covered with mud, which, when dried, gives them the look of carved, stone figures. The relief figures—monkeys from the Ramayana—come alive and dance with contemporary bedoyo dancers.

Opposite: As in Java, traditional dance in Bali has spawned contemporary interpretations that adapt elements of ancient Balinese culture. Here, a Balinese dancer personifies the oldest of Balinese divinities, Sanghyang Tjintiya, with fire-energy issuing from the junctures of his limbs. The dancer, in a meditative posture, stands in the middle of a lotus pond whose flower is a symbol of the cosmic womb. This deity is the Balinese counterpart of the Indian god Shiva Nataraja.





the palace and given new life to Javanese dance in general. He believes that classic dance, especially bedoyo, is an indispensable asset of his court. In his view, such dances represent a “tool of legitimacy” because they express values—a code of behavior and a spiritual heritage—that “continue to color the life and customs of Javanese society today.” Taking the dances out of the palace has inevitably led to changes. Some have been shortened and simplified to appeal to modern tastes; the performing arts in general, and dance in particular, have become major tourist attractions in Java. Innovative choreographers have mixed stylistic elements from different regions (and even combined them with Western steps and music) to create new hybrids that excite some audiences while dismaying traditionalists like Romo Sas, choreographer and dance master to the Yogyakarta court.

Romo Sas, who considers himself first and foremost a palace servant, deplores the new emphasis on crowd-pleasing physical virtuosity in dance, at the expense of traditional content that the Javanese see as both practical and spiritual: “Dance is tending to become a form of entertainment, when it should be a means of education. For example, anyone who learns how to dance automatically knows how to sit the *sila* way, decorously, legs crossed and fingers crossed Javanese style. The etiquette of the dance tells us how to sit, how to walk, how to kneel, how to get along with other people, how to adapt to our situation in life.”

*Bugaku performed by a Shintō priest
on the terrace of the Itsukushima-jinja
shrine, Miyajima Island, Japan.*



lottery = bugaku

Tadamaro Ono is also a palace servant. His job is to play gagaku ("elegant music") at the Imperial Court of Japan. The austere, stately dances performed to this music are called bugaku. Members of Ono's family have been performing at the emperor's behest for close to twelve hundred years. His is the thirty-ninth generation in an unbroken line of court musicians.

Gagaku and bugaku represent the world's oldest continuing tradition of court music and dance. For centuries, these performances were a closely held secret of the palace, heard and seen only by members of the aristocracy, government officials, and official guests. Since the end of the Second World War performances have been open to the public in a theater on the palace grounds. Even for the Japanese, the glacially paced gagaku and bugaku are an acquired taste. Yet more than fifteen thousand people apply for admission each year. Since the performance hall holds only seven hundred and there are only about thirty performances a year, a lottery is held to determine the lucky ticket winners. The losers can console themselves with a compact disk of the music, sales of which have been rising. In Ono's words, "there is a boom, something like nostalgia," for gagaku and bugaku.

Outsiders who try to understand modern Japan are struck by the apparent contradiction between the Japanese appetite for the new (whether in electronics, economics, or politics) and their concern with preserving the past. This contradiction is itself nothing new. Except for a three-hundred-year period of isolation from the world that ended in 1868, the Japanese have characteristi-

cally adopted new ideas without letting go of tradition. Often, today's novelty becomes tomorrow's tradition and takes an honored place in the ever-expanding gallery of Japanese culture. A classic example is the way Japan enthusiastically adopted Buddhism, imported some thirteen hundred years ago from the Asian mainland, while keeping up the rites of Shintō, the indigenous religion. Many Japanese families maintain two household shrines, one Shintō and one Buddhist. At the Imperial Court, the same impulse can be seen in the survival of gagaku and bugaku, which bonded native traditions and exotic foreign novelties into something fundamentally Japanese.

The word Shintō can be translated as "continuity." Shintō has no founder and no set scriptures, no myth of creation-out-of-nothing, no apocalyptic world-ending. From the first Japanese historical records in the fourth century, Shintō is already there, channeling the energies of its people toward the worship of myriad divinities, ranging from tutelary spirits and deified ancestors to personalized forces of nature and abstract concepts such as purity and truth. The first Japanese emperors known to history were both political and religious leaders; and through centuries of political upheaval in which the Imperial Court was often little more than a pawn of powerful warlords, the religious role of the emperor has remained crucial to the self-image of the Japanese.

The imperial family claims descent from Amaterasu, the sun goddess, whose favor is necessary to a successful rice harvest. Disgusted by the boorish behavior of her brother, Amaterasu shut

herself up in a cave and the world fell into darkness. To lure her out, the goddess Ame-no-uzume danced half-nude on an overturned tub before the assembled divinities; her antics so amused the gods that their laughter awakened the curiosity of the sun goddess, who peeped out of the cave and was drawn back into the world. Ame-no-uzume became the patron of music and dance in Japan—the Land of the Rising Sun—and dance as "entertainment for the gods" became a part of Shintō ceremonies. But in the seventh century, when Buddhist dance-drama processions and gorgeously costumed banquet entertainments were introduced from Korea and China, the Imperial Court of Japan quickly embraced the new imports.

Over the centuries these were adapted to Japanese taste and combined with surviving Shintō rituals to make up a suite of spectator dances, known as bugaku, for performance at court functions and religious festivals. What is most remarkable is not the survival of the native Shintō elements but the preservation, in something approaching their original form, of the imported dances and music. The original Chinese and Korean forms have long since died out on the mainland, where they are known only through literary and pictorial sources. The Japanese, however, saved what they borrowed, as if to proclaim their pride in recognizing quality no matter what its origin.

In the Imperial Palace theater, gagaku and bugaku are performed on a square platform (measuring just under six yards per side) covered in green brocade and resting on a slightly larger



This page: Thirty-four figures perform Bugaku dances across an oversize screen (above) by Hanabusa Itchō, a Japanese painter who worked in Edo in the early eighteenth century. Bugaku screens were fashionable in both temples and at court since at least the fifteenth century, although no early examples survive. This is one of a pair that was probably commissioned by a rich merchant or military ruler eager to acquire the traditional trappings of the aristocracy. A hanging drum like the one visible in the screen can be seen right, behind a bugaku dancer performing in the theater in the Imperial Palace, Tokyo.

Opposite: Bugaku dancer at the Iwashimizu-hachimangū shrine, near Kyōto, Japan.





square of black-lacquered wood. A red railing runs all around the larger square. During dance performances the orchestra sits in an alcove behind the stage, between two huge drums. Some bugaku dances depict legendary battles, others enact encounters with divine personages or mythical beasts like the phoenix; one famous set-piece shows two dragons frolicking! The splendid costumes include long flowing robes of solid blue or deep crimson, gold-brocade leggings lined with scarlet silk, elaborately embroidered breastplates, black-lacquered "stovepipe" hats or golden helmets, ceremonial swords, lances, and shields, and spectacular face masks: the two dragons, for example, frolic in hairy blue masks with sharp silver fangs. But whatever the subject matter, the dancers move almost imperceptibly through simple geometric floor patterns punctuated by long pauses in which the performers strike significant poses. Although most pieces are choreographed for two to eight dancers, they are actually a series of "solos" in which a single character may be represented by four identically dressed dancers who repeat identical movements in the four cardinal directions.

Repetition is as basic to the bugaku aesthetic as is the deliberately slow tempo. One Japanese commentator has compared the performing of bugaku to the process of making color woodblock prints: "When color printing is being done, the platen revolves several times putting on colors: first yellow, then blue, then red, and in the end black. The same idea is applied in the performance, repeating the same melody and the same patterns several times . . . the element of

sound and the element of movement are piled up on top of each other and create intensity."

The musical accompaniment also works on the principle of achieving maximal effect with minimal material. Musicians are expected to play their instruments—drums, lutes, flutes, harps, reeds and pipes—as if they were themselves dancers, although they usually remain seated. For example, the player of the biwa, a short-necked, four-stringed lute, will lift his arms just so as he runs his ivory plectrum across the silk strings to produce both a pleasing sound and a pleasing gesture. And the pounder of the large drum that sets the tempo will shift his weight from heel to toe as he strikes the drumhead, making a grand gesture out of what might otherwise be a metronome-like operation. A centuries-old instruction manual gives some idea of the refinement of movement and posture that gagaku and bugaku strive for. In certain pieces, dancers are urged to emulate "tinted leaves blown about in a storm on a mountain in autumn," while in other pieces they should resemble "a willow waving in the spring breeze."

The unchanging nature of gagaku and bugaku over the centuries manifests the role that the Imperial Court has played in Japanese history. The court retainers who developed these arts had time to shape and reshape each element of each piece until they were satisfied that something of lasting beauty had been created. At the brilliant eleventh century court described in *The Tale of Genji* (recognized as the world's first novel), emperors and nobles not only attended performances but took an active part in

them. But from the end of the twelfth to the middle of the nineteenth century the Imperial Court at Kyōto functioned solely as a symbol of Japanese unity while real power was wielded elsewhere by military leaders known as Shoguns. Although some Shogunate courts sponsored music and dance performances of their own, the survival of the Imperial Court depended on the perception that the soul of Japan resided in Kyōto. The regular production of gagaku and bugaku, with due attention to all the nuances, was essential to this perception, even if only a handful of people witnessed the performances. The Japanese not only revere the past, they feel a sense of duty to keep it alive.

During the Onin Rebellion (1467–77) Kyōto itself was sacked, and court musicians and dancers scattered to take refuge in shrines and monasteries. Some stayed away even after order was restored, and to this day their descendants perform gagaku and bugaku at important shrines throughout Japan. When the Tokugawa Shogunate consolidated its power in the early seventeenth century, the third Shogun organized a gagaku and bugaku festival in Kyōto in 1626 to impress the people and the emperor with the power of the new rulers of Japan. In 1661 the Shogunate placed the production of court music and dance on a firm financial footing and ordered a competitive examination every three years to maintain a pool of talented performers.

Having preserved their Imperial Court in a kind of suspended animation for so long, the Japanese turned to Kyōto when the Shogunate lost power in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The precipitating event was the failure of government forces to defend the country against the incursions of Europeans. Rallying under the slogan "Revere the Emperor! Drive Out the Barbarians!" a broad political alliance restored direct imperial rule. In 1868 the emperor's residence was moved from Kyōto to the Shogunate capital of Edo, which was renamed Tokyo.

In the rush of modernization that followed, the Gagaku Department of the Imperial Household Agency was reorganized, and performers were required to learn Western music, including polkas and military marches. The emperor also ordered his musicians to compose Western-style music with traditional melodies; one of these compositions evolved into the Japanese national anthem.

Japan's defeat in the Second World War nearly brought about the end of gagaku and bugaku. There was agitation (which continues in some quarters) to abandon the performances as an expensive anachronism. But the Japanese reverence for tradition won out, and in 1955 the court musicians and dancers were declared Important Intangible Government Properties, more commonly known as "living national treasures." A six-week tour of the United States in 1959 brought worldwide acclaim and renewed interest in Japan itself.

Today, Tadamaro Ono sees no more reason for gagaku and bugaku to die out than for the Japanese to turn their backs on the tea ceremony or the Nō theater which also, in his view, reflect "the Japanese national character." Court music and dance continue to be passed down from generation to generation of

palace servants by a time-honored process of oral instruction. The families who have been entrusted with the tradition choose the most talented boys from each generation to be trained; their training in all the details of gagaku and bugaku may begin as early as the age of five. Ono himself was skeptical about the efficacy of this early selection when his turn came to judge the younger members of the family. "However," he says, "it must be done to keep the tradition, and our family, alive."

All morning long, under the increasingly forceful African sun, the chiefs arrive at the assembly ground outside the Asantehene's palace. They arrive by bus or car or on foot from nearby houses where they have spent the night. Each chief is wearing his most ornate robes and gold jewelry, and each comes in procession with as many attendants as his rank and purse warrant. The attendants range from small boys and girls to women in high heels and white-haired men in traditional black-leather Asante sandals. In their everyday lives they are farmers, teachers, students, office workers, homemakers. Today they carry chairs and heft brightly colored umbrellas and large fringed canopies, and beat drums and strike clapperless metal bells with sticks, and dance and sing as their chief leads them toward their assigned area, where they arrange themselves in a U-shaped formation that constitutes a temporary court.

Soon there are some fifty of these courts, side by side, around the perimeter of the assembly ground. At the bend of each U, shaded by an array of fancy

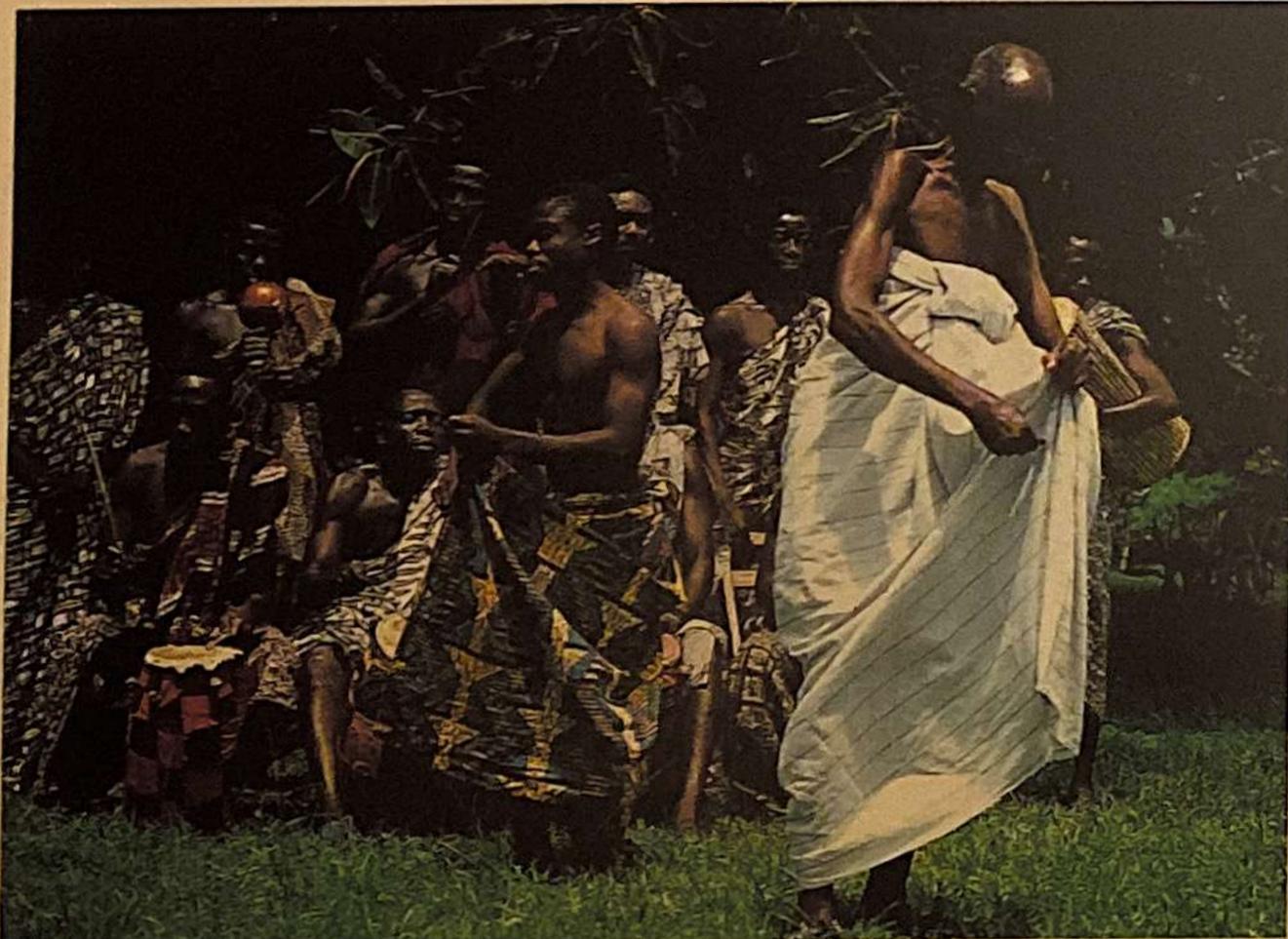
umbrellas held up by young attendants, sits the chief flanked by his most important counselors. The others in the entourage take their places along both arms of the U, with a row of younger children sitting on the ground and one or two rows of older people on stools or folding chairs behind them. Everyone faces the narrow aisle between the arms of the U and everyone sits as close together as possible, which reduces the distance between the people on the far ends and their chief, whom everyone addresses with the honorific "Nana."

The drummers and other musicians stand in a knot behind one arm of the U and lay down interweaving rhythms; a few people at a time—a man and a woman, two men, three women—get to their feet, slip off their sandals or high heels as a sign of respect to the chief, and begin dancing in the space within the U. They bend their knees and elbows, turn slowly clockwise in place with their eyes closed, take small steps that keep contact with the ground, shift their weight gracefully from hip to hip, and move in a counterclockwise direction between the open end of the U and the closed end where the chief sits, while making arm-and-hand gestures that proclaim: "I depend on you" and "Wherever I go, I belong to this land" and "We are one people." From time to time, the chief stands up and dances down the aisle toward the musicians, whose efforts he rewards with a handful of paper money while the rest of his entourage claps and cheers. If a chief is derelict in his duty to his musicians, a drummer may beat out a complaint: "Nana, I have been drumming all morning, I need a drink."



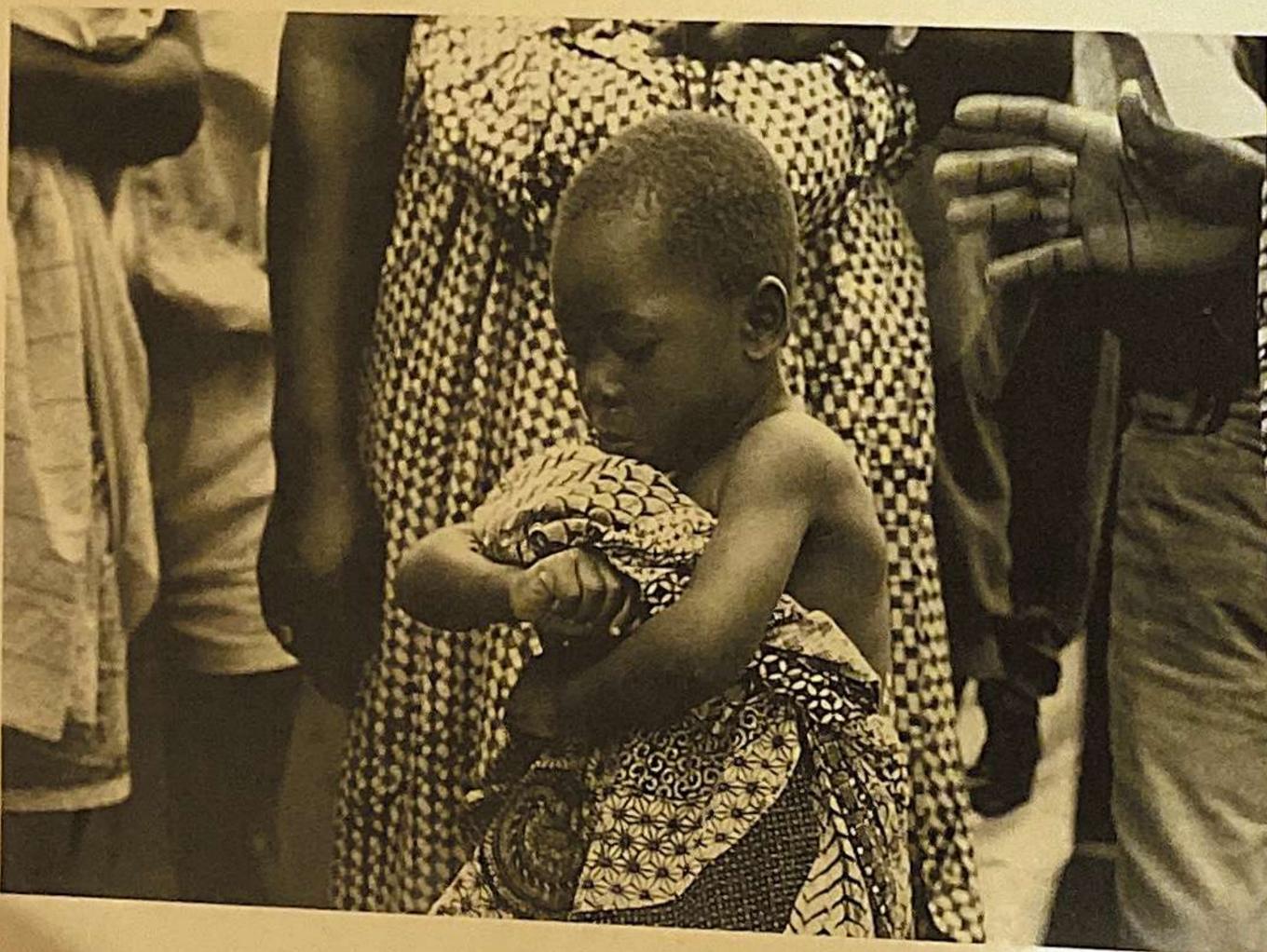
Royal drums (left) in the entranceway to the Asantehene's palace, c. 1890. The skulls and bones decorating the drums are of defeated enemies. Prior to the British subjugation of the Asante in the late nineteenth century, war was one of the most important activities of the state, as it was for Louis XIV. Below, Asante dancers (on the left a queen mother) on the grounds of the Asantehene's palace, 1991. Behind the dancers are the fontomfrom drums of the Asantehene.





Asante dancers (above) in Kumase dressed in red during the mourning period for a recently deceased chief, 1972. Dancing plays a significant role in funerals among the Asante. Left, the Asantehene's head drummer in white, then in his early eighties, dances on the grounds of the Asantehene's palace, 1991.

Adults and children alike practice dance moves at the Big Adaye in Kumase.



At first it may appear that each little court is an island of dance and music apart from all the others. But as the day progresses, a surprising pattern emerges: the entire assembly area, which holds more than fifty thousand people, has become one huge dance floor. Processions of lesser chiefs (accompanied by their musicians and dancers) wind through the packed crowds to pay respects to their superiors in the hierarchy; when two processions encounter each other, their heralds shout "Agoh! Agoh!" ("Make way!") and the attendants who hold the largest and most colorful umbrellas over the most important chiefs twirl them like pinwheels and flap them up and down in a kind of dance within a dance. The sound of drumming comes from all directions. Only when the Asantehene finally makes his appearance in his palanquin, in a grand procession accompanied by all the court regalia, do the events of the day come into focus. Significantly, the place of honor at the head of the procession goes not to the Asantehene himself but to the Golden Stool, the symbol of the nation, which is held aloft by its own bearer and shaded by several umbrellas and its own fringed canopy. Once the Asantehene has taken his seat on his rostrum, the exchange of visits between lesser and greater chiefs—and the sharing of dance and music that is an essential part of Asante life—resumes.

Professor Opoku is sitting in the dining room of his hotel, sipping a cold beer and looking back over the day. Despite his apprehensions about the future of Asante traditions, he is not at all displeased with what he saw. One moment especially stays in his mind. A

young man was dancing a very expressive adowa—a dance named after the graceful movements of the pigmy antelope—before the queen mother and her court. Seeing how well he danced, the queen mother got up to join him. Immediately, the young man began dancing in a properly respectful, subordinate position. With her hand gestures the queen mother said to him: "Brother, support me, and let's do it well." And the young man linked his two index fingers in front of him, like two links in a chain, to indicate: "We are together, we cannot be separated, we are one people." Then came the moment that the professor relished. When sweat broke out on the queen mother's face, one of her women attendants took a cloth and wiped the queen mother's face while she danced. "And what was really so beautiful," the professor says, "was that the way she did it, it too became a part of the dance."

Courts come into existence as instruments of political, military, spiritual, and cultural authority. Their primary purpose is to manifest power. While this may be accomplished in the short run by brute force, long-term survival depends on the ability of a court to reflect the needs and aspirations of the population at large. By providing a secure home for those who look after the society's spiritual and cultural well-being, a court may outlive its military and political power. In its administrative structure and in the content of its performances, court dance typically embodies the hierarchical organization of the court itself. Court dances, like other court arts from painting to architecture, tend to be conservative in the

literal sense; they conserve attitudes about life that were deemed essential to the society in the past. But depending on the attitude of the court, they can also change in response to major changes in society.

Courts and court dances are expensive, and ultimately it is the people who pay the bills. Where court forms, like ballet and bedoyo, are encouraged to migrate outside the court, new participants, spectators, and patrons become involved. Schools and academies, museums, orchestral societies, public grant-giving agencies assume the burden of support that was once the monopoly of the court. Ballet might have died with the Bourbon dynasty if Louis XIV had not entrusted its future to his Royal Academy of Dance in 1661, and if the ballets offered to the public had not found an enthusiastic audience among the middle and upper classes of eighteenth-century France. The subsequent development of ballet into an art of worldwide appeal raises the question of whether other court forms may follow a similar course. In Yogyakarta, the establishment of a dance academy outside the court has let loose creative energies whose impact on the classic court dances cannot be predicted. Bugaku has appeared on Japanese television and toured the world, but its protected status as a "national treasure" would seem to restrict opportunities for further development. The court of the Asantehene continues to provide a focus for the self-image of the Asante people; adaptations of court dances figure prominently in the programs of Ghana's National Dance Company, and a community of Asante who live in New York

City has organized around an elected chief who takes his place proudly in the hierarchy that culminates in the court of the Asantehene in Kumase.

Whether or not courts and their dances survive would seem to depend on how successful they are in holding up a mirror to their society. The power of dance to communicate the past glories of a community—and by so doing to bind that community closer together in the present—is eloquently expressed in the words of Professor Opoku: "All our public occasions end in dance. When you hear the drums, it sweetens the inside of your head, as we say in the Asante language, like sugar, and you become aware that you belong to a great people."