

*When social or political forces threaten dance traditions, their fate is often determined by dancers and musicians who work to preserve the legacy of the past. The exquisite legong in Bali was once performed by young women who were trained in the island's royal courts. With the destruction of the courts by the Dutch in the early twentieth century, the dancers returned to their villages, where they kept the dance alive. Today, legong is thriving and the values it embodies are widely admired, but the political system that nurtured it is long gone.*



After careful consideration, anthropologist Joann Keali'inohomoku has proposed a somewhat more elaborate definition: "Dance is a transient mode of expression, performed in a given form and style by the human body moving through space. Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements; the resulting phenomenon is recognized as dance both by the performer and the observing members of a given group." For all its scholarly breadth and depth, the most admirable thing about this formulation is that it leaves the final decision about what is and what is not dance to the people with the most at stake: the dancers and their audiences.

Even in the most traditional settings, the forms and meanings of dance change when dancers feel the need to come up with something new, or to alter or adapt something old, to fit new circumstances. Perhaps nowhere is the adaptability of dance in a dance-centered society so vividly illustrated as in the history of the Zezuru, a branch of the Shona-speaking people of southern Africa who are noted for their artistic metalworking. During the intertribal wars of the nineteenth century the Zezuru developed a unique form of military strategy based on dance. The moment that enemy marauders were spotted approaching a Zezuru village, a troupe of young women rushed out of the village compound and formed a kind of chorus line. While the old men of the village beat a polyrhythmic accompaniment on wooden blocks, drums, and gourds, and the young women shook their shoulders and undulated their hips enticingly, the village's own warriors assembled out of sight.

At a signal, the chorus line parted and the warriors burst forth to do battle with the distracted invaders. With characteristic wit, the Zezuru called this dance mbende, which means "mouse that runs fast."

The advent of Europeans in Shona territory ended the native wars, and the missionaries who arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century outlawed mbende as "licentious, lustful, and indecent." Anxious to have the prohibition reversed, the Zezuru Council of Elders sent a chief to a leading missionary to recount a prophetic dream he had had. In his dream, the chief said, he had seen his people journey in spirit to the holy city of Jerusalem, where they danced in praise of the infant Jesus, who was greatly pleased. Unwilling to condemn such devotion, the missionaries rescinded the ban on the mbende, which was now renamed the *Jerusarema*.

Over the next two decades, changes in the economy of colonial Rhodesia drastically altered the lives of the Zezuru. To hold down jobs as servants, clerks, and laborers in the white man's homes, offices, and factories, Zezuru men left their villages and settled in newly built townships. The social center of each township was a beer hall. Old village customs lost their hold; getting drunk and dancing the *Jerusarema* became the principal leisure-time activities. The dance became wilder and lustier; its sole purpose seemed to be sexual arousal—the very snare that the Zezuru had originally devised for their enemies.

Just when its reputation among both whites and traditional Zezuru could sink no lower, the *Jerusarema* was resurrected

as a theatrical dance. This was accomplished by families of drummers and dancers who worked with tribal elders to restore pride in what had once been a unique Zezuru tradition. Festivals were organized, prizes were awarded for the correct performance of the *Jerusarema*, feats of acrobatic skill were added to the basic vocabulary of steps—fully upright hip-shaking for women, darting leg extensions for men in a squatting position. Although the basic movements look simple enough when performed in isolation, it takes long practice to learn to combine them in improvised sequences at ever-increasing speed and with mounting intensity. The best dancers become known throughout the country and are held up as exemplars of Shona culture and history.

Today, the *Jerusarema* is featured in performances of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe. It has become the dance of choice at funerals, where both men and women dance bare-chested and wear traditional grass skirts with ankle rattles. At *Jerusarema* clubs in the cities, men and women dance close to each other but they never touch; the Zezuru, like other Shona-speaking peoples, are offended by European cheek-to-cheek dancing, which violates their idea of proper public behavior.