

**English: Poetry Commentary**  
**'Haven't I Danced the Big Dance? By Jack Mapanje**

The poem 'Haven't I danced the big dance?' by Jack Mapanje concerns the traditional rain dance of a proud tribesman. The modern representation of his dance that he sees today provokes this nostalgic and emotional response.

The speaker, a formal tribal rain dancer, is thinking back to the time when he used to dance this traditional dance, and looking at the new generation, dancing only for show, with sadness. The poem is divided into three stanzas, the two first ones being dedicated to the past, when he was a dancer, and the last one to the present. The first stanza talks about the way he used to dance this traditional rain dance, in a circle around the drums, with amulets, anklets and snakes. The second stanza is insisting on the energy he put into this dance, on how good he was. The third stanza brings us to the present time, now that his daughters are doing the dance, more as an attraction for tourists than as a real tradition, and the speaker is not able to show them the real meaning of the dance.

This rain dance is part of the speaker's traditions, and he seems to be very attached to it. He remembers the way they danced it in the arena to the sound of the big drums. They used to wear special clothes and use specific accessories,

'Skins wriggled with amulets  
 Rattled with anklets'

to make the dance seem real and magical, at the same time. It had a real value for the speaker. However, this dance, in which he had put so much energy into when he was younger,

'How I quaked the earth  
 How my skin trembled  
 How my neck peaked'

had not kept the same value. He talks about the way the new generation, his daughters' generation, dances the dance now, and emphasised the lack of authenticity it has. He says they just wear 'babble-idea-men-masks', to make it look like a traditional rain dance to tourists, while it is not really. He compares the 'mystic drums' he used to dance to, with the 'slack drums' his daughters dance to now. Finally, he lets us understand he would like to show the new generation how the big dance is supposed to be danced, what its original value.

However, this helplessness is not the only emotion felt in this poem. At the beginning, the speaker reminisces on the old days, his glory days, both with

happiness and excitement and with sadness and regret. As he describes the different characteristics of the dance and the way they danced it,

'With spears in these hands  
Then enticed them back  
With flywhisk's magic?'

we can feel a certain kind of excitement rising in his voice.

And at the same time, he only uses questions, and repeats the phrase 'Haven't I?' at the end of the stanza, which shows that he is sad this time seems to be so far away and that it is not like that anymore. In the second stanza, the speaker keeps talking about the time he used to be a dancer. In this stanza, the speaker insists on how good he was, and we can feel some pride in his words.

'How my neck peaked  
Above all dancers  
How my voice throbbed  
Like the father-drum'

Even if I think this is a way to express his nostalgia, I also think he feels somewhat sad this old good time is over. As he used to be a good dancer, he is looking for satisfaction. Again, he finishes the stanza by 'Haven't I?'. In the last stanza, he is very sad that the tradition had changed; he is disappointed the rain dance does not have the traditional value it once had. He is embarrassed his daughters now use 'babble-idea-men-masks. Also, he feels guilty he cannot show them how to dance it the way it should be danced.

The emotions are also expressed through the rhythm and structure of the poem. First of all, the poem is made of eight questions only

'Why does my speech choke  
Like I have not danced  
Before? Haven't I  
Danced the bigger dance?  
Haven't I?'

showing his uncertainty about the change of the dance and whether he has to keep dancing it the traditional way or not. Eight questions and forty lines, with only question marks and few commas. This lack of punctuation gives a quick and unstructured rhythm, just like the rhythm of the dance really is. This continuous flow of motion is also shown by examples of enjambements (run-on lines with no end-stops):

'Skins wriggled with amulets  
Rattled with anklets  
Scattered nervous women  
With snakes around my neck  
With spears in these hands'

The last way used to express this motion is the choice of the verbs: 'stampede', 'wriggled', 'enticed', 'moved', 'dancing', 'quaked', 'trembled', 'peaked', 'throbbed',

'ululate', stand up' are all verbs of précised action, to represent the dance, quick and with a lot of movement.

The contrast between the past (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza) and the present (3<sup>rd</sup> stanza) clearly shows his nostalgia of the old times: the vocabulary used is much more positive at the beginning than at the end: 'flywhisk's magic', 'mystic drums', 'songs of praise, of glory', in the first two stanzas and 'cheating abstract', 'slack drums', 'babble-idea-men-masks', 'choke' in the last stanza. This also expresses his disappointment.

His confusion is also shown by another type of contrast: the length o the line. The general pattern is that in each stanza, the lines get shorter and shorter:

'Haven't my wives at mortars sang  
Me songs of praise, of glory,  
How I quaked the earth  
How my skin trembled  
How my neck peaked  
Above all dancers'

The speaker keeps trying to justify himself about all the things he did in the past, in order to get some satisfaction and comfort.

The look for comfort is essentially expressed at the end, where we have four questions in four lines, especially with the rhetorical question 'Haven't I?'. Indeed, his questions get shorter and shorter in the end, just as if he expected us to answer 'Yes, you have'. He insists with this idea throughout the whole poem, with the 'Haven't I?' question at the end of each stanza.

Another important repetition is the one of the word 'dance', written ten times in total. This simply shows his attachment to that rain dance, how important it is, or at least used to be, in his culture.

I think the speaker has clearly shown his regrets of the old times and frustration and disappointment now that he sees the modern representations of it. I also think it is very interesting to use only eight questions to write the poem to try to transcribe the rhythm of the dance into the poem itself. The numerous verbs of action make the poem very active and moving: when he describes the dance, it almost feels like we are there, watching them dancing.