

“SO YOU WANT TO BE A MAN?” ON GENDERED LANGUAGE IN DANCE



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About once a year I take a trip to Europe and visit a few places so that I can continue to improve my kizomba. I take lessons from top teachers – always as a leader. Then I attend parties and get to dance in a range of styles – most of

the time as a follower, except with people I know personally. I am currently enjoying myself at Summer Sensual Days in Rovinj, Croatia.

I am a cis-gendered woman. That means I have the sexual reproductive organs that made them say "It's a girl!" when I was born, and I identify as a woman. I also present as a woman: I have long hair, I wear makeup on my face and shirts that hug my breasts.



(http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Rachel_Promo_Shoot4.jpg).

Jessica Keener Photography

Yet ever since I started leading in kizomba three years ago, these have been the questions I receive in a group class in Europe, as all-female followers come down the line or around the circle:

"Are you a man?"

"You want to be a man?"

"Are you learning to be a man?"

"I don't understand. You don't like to be with men?"

"You prefer to be a man?"

Uhhhh....

No matter how many times I hear them, these questions make me feel annoyed or uncomfortable. I have to suppress the urge to respond bitinglly:

"Do I look like a man?"

"Yeah, major penis envy here."

“Oh, I didn’t know this class was about becoming a man!”

“Actually I enjoy dancing with people regardless of their sexual organs.”

“I prefer to keep my options open.”

I don’t answer like that, because I know that most of these people have no idea their questions might bother me. In several languages, there is no way of describing dance roles in a way that is not gendered, and quite a few literally use that expression “learn to be a man” and “learn to be a woman” to refer to learning to lead and follow, respectively. Some of them come from cultures that do not acknowledge the existence of a gender spectrum and believe that acting outside heterosexual roles is a perversion.

That is why I don’t ask all the girls to dance when I’m at a social dance in Europe. Unless someone knows me, or has already seen me teach as a leader, she may perceive my request as an unwanted sexual advance. Obviously I don’t agree with such assumptions – the implication would be that she can only dance with people to whom she is sexually attracted. (Go on, think of all the people you dance with regularly. Is that the case?) Nevertheless, I don’t want to fight that cultural battle every 10 minutes, so I prefer to enjoy following in a setting of such diverse dance backgrounds. Sometimes I get annoyed when there are clearly lots of women waiting around to dance, but at such festivals I try to make connections in class so I can dance with those ladies in the evening.



I’m also well aware that my lot could be much worse. Our use of such heavily gendered language in dance classes serves to exclude people who are trans, intersex, or nonbinary (who do not identify as strictly male or female). It also strongly discourages attendance of those who are not heterosexual.

I was once at a small European festival where attendance was such that I could reasonably aspire to dance with everyone. There were a fair number of people who had seen me teach at recent festivals not too far away, and by the time I had danced

as both leader and follower with that population, the others were pretty used to the idea of my dancing with everyone. I also danced with nearly all of the teachers present at the festival, dancing the corresponding role to what was usual for them. When I asked one female teacher, however, she responded in a way that I will never get out of my head:

“I think kizomba can only work between a man and a woman.”

Again, I had to bite back a scathing response. “A simple ‘no, thank you’ would have been fine! Don’t let me ask how you feel about gay marriage!” I don’t think that head-on conflict is going to change these kinds of ideas.

Of course, quite a number of people I encounter at festivals do come from countries that theoretically acknowledge the complexity of gender identity and condone legal partnerships regardless of gender. I have to wonder if these people also ask androgynous types whether they’re male or female, or ask which lesbian partner “is the man” of the relationship.

Inappropriate or not, I will not be able to avoid the questions in class so long as I want to attend with the intent of improving my lead. So I have tried to come up with answers that are honest and hopefully a bit subversive.

“I’m not a man, but I am leading in this class. Why shouldn’t a woman be the boss?”

“I enjoy leading. I get to be the creative director of the dance. I can shape the dance to fit my idea of musicality.”

“I would be happy to lead men, but there aren’t too many that admit to interest in a supposedly submissive role.”

– and no wonder we have so few men trying to learn to follow. It’s quite stigmatized in our culture for a man to “act like a woman.” That’s much larger than our dance scene, of course.

For those who protest based on cultural or historical grounds, that kizomba has always had male leaders and female followers, I remind them that in semba (kizomba’s predecessor), men have frequently danced with each other. See how in this video the male leader dares much riskier tricks when he has a male follower:

I can also point to videos of women dancing with each other in Angola, both old and young.

Posted by **Hilário João**
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I do think things are improving – this year I haven't been heckled by any men in class. I could wish that the compliments I receive from my partners weren't always expressed with such surprise, but it's still nice to hear "You're the first one that led me clearly" or the ubiquitous "You're doing better than the men!"

I would love to see more teachers undermining social expectations by inviting "anyone who wants to lead today, stand on this side! Those who want to follow for this class, over here!" Better yet would be to encourage people to dance outside their society-assigned role. Most professionals agree that being able to dance both roles provides better mastery and an enhanced appreciation for your partner's efforts. And having more flexibility could also make our dance scene more inclusive.

I receive a lot of defensive reactions to these ideas. Why feel threatened? My learning to lead as a woman doesn't prevent men from leading or women from following if that's what they prefer to do. I also don't think we can hide behind the excuse that people don't understand what's meant by "leader" or "follower" – the more people who use this vocabulary, the more people will recognize it. We might find that some people are initially slower to respond to such language, but all societal change is slow. Consider what language was acceptable even 50 years ago when referring to someone of a different ethnicity, compared to today. Consider what jobs were open to women 50 years ago.

I'm not asking for dramatic action; no need to organize marches or burn bras in the street. Still, we owe it to ourselves to see our dance communities come into the twenty-first century. Let's fight the oppression of gender-based expectations with something simple yet mighty – our words.

NOTE: Following an advocate's comments outside LDC, this article was edited to include language more inclusive of the trans community.
