

Column

Dancing the Patjah in Ghana

Loes Magnin



Frank was my teacher at the Ghanaian national dance academy. He taught me how to dance the *Patjah* and explained to me the traditional meaning of this dance from the Ga-area of Ghana. It is part of a puberty rite for girls. When girls get their periods for the first time, they are placed outside their villages for two weeks to be taught how to be an adult woman. A group of older women from the village teach them practical skills like cleaning and cooking.

But they will also teach them about sex. I'm trying to find out how much room there actually is for female sexuality, but as Frank is an African man it is difficult to get to the bottom of this. I don't know if I should believe him when he says that the girls are taught how they themselves can enjoy sex. For one, he is telling me how the girls are checked by the older ladies for their virginity, as well as being taught how to please a man in

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quite some detail. I try not to sound (or look) too cynical, but Frank sees I don't believe this rite can be much fun for the girls. Somewhat angry he points out the functionality of this rite: when women have not gone through the ritual they are not considered mature, meaning they are of no interest to men. Frank says it's a good protection against rape and paedophilia.

I hope (and wish) he is right, but I have heard too many stories that contradict this.

At the end of two weeks of *boot camp to womanhood* the girls have not only learned how to be a woman, but they can now also dance the *Patjah*. All the men from the village gather around a field and as the girls dance their dance the men pick out the woman they will marry.

I'm having quite a hard time getting this dance. It's supposed to be graceful, delicate, feminine and sexy. But I'm quite frustrated to see how thin bony Frank, *the skinny mosquito* as he likes to call himself, looks more feminine than I do when we're dancing.

Luckily, I don't have to worry about potential husbands-to-marry around here. My blonde hair, my white skin and my big bum make me a favourable marriage-candidate. To keep up my good spirits (and boost my ego) after four hours of dancing in the sun, I decide that – today – my attractiveness is not related to my Western passport, nor my European wealth when I'm whistled at and proposed for marriage. I mean... I do really have an African bum.

Loes Magnin studied Communication and Literature in Amsterdam and wrote her thesis on development aid dilemmas in Southern Africa. She worked as a travel guide and took dance classes in different African countries.