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Learning African Dance

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Abstract

This project is essentially a chronicle of four weeks of private dance lessons, as I attempt to address two aspects of learning African dance: How an African teaches the dance, and how I learned it. The findings demonstrated that both the manner of teaching and the manner of learning were based on experience, and that this experience is deeply rooted in the dance traditions of the respective cultures involved. Therefore, aspects of these traditions and differences between West African and Western movement styles are also given assessment.

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Definitions

From The Music of Africa (Nketia, 1974)

- Adowa. Musical type of the Akan of Ghana, formerly performed at funerals, but now also performed on some ceremonial and festive occasions.
- Agbadza. A recreational musical type performed by the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana.
- Sikyi A recreational music and dance type performed by the Akan of Ghana.

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Introduction

My study of West African dance Began by chance three semesters ago in Middletown, Connecticut. Through some phenomenal stroke of luck, batch course registration allowed me access to one of the most popular and highly demanded dance courses Wesleyan had to offer: West African I. The instructor, Helen Mensah, could dance circles around any one of her 20 something-year-old students at an age when she insisted that these students call her 'Grandma.' She strove to make the classroom as much like an African village as was possible, and starting with her name, she tried to instill in her students a family-like responsibility for one another as we attempted to make her system of movement ours.

To accomplish this objective, the first thing that we as a class needed to lose was our inhibitions. Promoting a family-like atmosphere helped tremendously, but it was her pre-class warm-up that was the most effective. Each class began with the group of about 40 students forming a large circle. To the tune of Highlife music on the stereo, we were expected to enter the circle and lead the class in a dance movement or two. This exercise left us well prepared for class, but it also produced some unwanted tension for those of us who were not accustomed to either learning or teaching in this manner (all of us!). I, for one, distinctly recall the feeling of waiting for my turn to enter the circle, and how much I thought about the impending movements and the attention. I wanted my movements to be impressive, to be original, and by all means to be indicative of the fact that I did know how to dance. Heaven forbid that someone close to my position in the circle would perform a movement that I had just spent minutes mentally preparing! It was enough to almost

ruin the day.

In retrospect, I am impressed by both my terror at having to dance publicly, and the sheer brilliance inherent in such a deceptively simple exercise. As a class, we learned to be more expressive, and how to improvise movements to West African dance music before we were later exposed to traditional steps. It also introduced us to a new way of learning dance: conscious imitation. It was conscious because we not only had to imitate, we needed to make sense of another person's style of dancing through using our own bodies. Dance was fun because everyone in the room was expected to dance in the center no matter what kind of a dancer one considered themselves to be. In her classroom, dance was a social affair. It belonged to everyone.

It was precisely this presentation of Ghanaian dance and culture that brought me across the Atlantic Ocean and to the birthplace of that culture. It was my intention from the moment that I applied for this program to study traditional dance in Ghana, but that study threatened to become encumbered by perceptions of what would be a valid academic study. I did not want to limit myself to the study of one dance or dance style. I wanted to study dance as much as humanly possible, and frankly, I also wanted to hone my own skills as a dancer. The advice of my academic director, Professor Opoku, helped me arrive at the decision to explore learning African dance, and to develop its two-fold research objective: How an African teaches the dance and how I learn it. This would also enable me to discover to what extent my previous dance experience would be helpful or a hindrance to my new study of dance in Ghana. I was also interested to know what the study of Ghanaian dance in Ghana would add to the quality of my dancing

To best undertake this type of project, I needed to rely first and foremost on my own experience in dance prior to and during my time in Ghana. The only way that one can perceive any aspect of another culture is through their own eyes, or through a filter of their own culture. John Miller-Chernoff(1979) writes in his introduction to African Rhythm African Sensibility:

In such an investigation, we can learn as much about ourselves as about other people because we must see through our own eyes and we must find our own words to describe their world. And again, our eventual appreciation.. will imply that African music [or dance] has assumed an additional dimension of influence as our traditions of understanding stretch and adjust to encompass it.

It is with this attitude and philosophy in mind that I approached learning and writing about Ghanaian dance in the interest of removing the confusion that academia tends to produce. I wanted to use my own words most of all to describe my experience, and not someone else's.

Most literature written on the subject of Ghanaian dance focuses specifically on music, dance, and song. There is little to no literature written on the process of learning the dance. One thesis on dance written by Comfort Maboah entitled, 'Rhythm and Movement Training for Young Dancers in Ashanti' comes closest to the directives laid out by this paper. In it, Maboah seeks to address through what means young Ghanaians become acquainted with African rhythmic structure. Basically this training begins from the day a child is born and continues into childhood in the form of games played with other children. John Collins addresses this issue briefly in his book Highlife Time (1996) as he discusses African polyrhythms:

.. The first stage in learning to play African music is to acquire the discipline of the separate rhythms. A training that, in Africa, starts in infancy on the dancing mother's back, or form the myriad of children's rhythmic games that abound on the continent.

This type of training, as described, represents one aspect of this project: the differences in rhythmic training that will exist between myself and my instructor, Faustina. This type of past experience will have an effect on the manner in which the dance is taught, and my lack of training will affect the manner in which I learn the dance. As a result of these differences, partial assessment will be given to comparisons between African and Western dance styles.

Methodology

The objective of this project was two-fold. First, I wanted to explore the manner in which traditional Ghanaian dance would be taught by a Ghanaian who was exposed to dance through imitation. Second, I wanted to determine the manner in which, I as a Westerner with primary exposure to classroom or lesson based dance training, approached learning the dance. To accomplish this goal, participant observation in the form of intensive private lessons formed the bulk of methodology. I spent four weeks, five days a week, two hours each day, learning dance from Faustina Dorgbenu and Rocky Kporxah. As dancers with the Ghana Dance Ensemble, they were well versed in traditional dance movement and music, and they provided me with several intense and humbling hours of study. The final objective of the lessons was not only to attain a greater understanding of African dance, but the performance of an 'amalgamated' dance piece fusing the steps I learned from Faustina.

with jazz dance: sort of an African meets African-American type of exercise.

As the lessons progressed, I began a course of daily informal interview with my instructors to answer any questions that arose as they arose. I also made recordings of the drumming that Rocky did and the songs that they taught me to sing as a means of facilitating my learning the material away from the studio. After each lesson, I kept a journalistic account of the day's work. I paid special attention to certain aspects of the lessons such as: the manner in which new steps were introduced, how much time I needed to perform a movement correctly, how my previous knowledge of a given step affected my current performance, and what my most common errors or trouble spots seemed to be. This account was used as the primary

data source for the paper.

I wanted this paper to be about my first-hand experiences, and not someone else's experience or words. Therefore, I used the literature and a small amount of informal interview to introduce new perspective to what I was experiencing, and to temper my own views. One day of non-participant observation of a dance technique class served to bring me a lot of perspective which I came to realize I was lacking.

The most frustrating aspect of completing this project was that things always have a way of turning out in unexpected ways. The best mind to bring to any situation is an open one without preconceptions. However, when a paper and a significant portion of a grade relies on some type of planning, frustration is inevitable. Regardless, I would change nothing about the period except the university strike which prevented me from accessing the two pitifully referenced theses from the library. All in all it was a wonderful ride

Chapter One:

Show Me What You Know

I had danced Adowa. I had stepped its graceful steps and memorized its bell pattern. I had danced it twice in front of groups of appreciative Ghanaians. I had thought that I had danced Adowa, until I had my very first lesson with Faustina. That was when I realized that there is always room for improvement, no matter how much training a person has had.

In the States, I was introduced to the dance in West African Two. It was there that I attained a very basic knowledge of a highly intricate dance with several gestures of varying significance. For the purposes of teaching a class of foreign students, Grandma focused on teaching only the very simplest of these gestures. When I came to Ghana, I was given the opportunity to dance adowa at two separate public occasions, and I had done so simply and to what may have been little more than good-natured Ghanaian support for a group of Obrnoni dancers. Nonetheless, I was encouraged.

On the day of my first lesson, Faustina asked me to name the dances that I had already studied, and requested that I show them to her. This was to be the truest test of my knowledge, and past experience considered, I opted to begin with Adowa. I got on further than a few steps into the dance when the teaching began.

'Your arm movements are too limited,' she said as she moved to my right side and started to dance. I did my best to imitate her movements, but it became clear that this dance would come to me in its new form one limb at a time.

This aspect of each lesson was perhaps the most difficult to deal with and master. I needed my body to have a memory for each correction. If Faustina wanted

my right arm to sweep outward in an arc, that was not a problem. The problems inevitably arose when I was supposed to add the movement of my left arm, which was changed to involve less wrist and more shoulder. Additionally, as I tried on these newer, less limited arm movements, I would repeatedly slip into my first-learned gestures like a favourite pair of sweat pants. Thankfully, my feet were okay after the addition of a turned out right foot, and I could claim to know the bell pattern. This basic knowledge of bell patterns and rhythms was the most common way that my previous West African dance training helped my current training.

After that first day, we left adowa for a time but would periodically return to see which movements I had kept, and which I had 'spoiled.' As my skills improved overall, Faustina would add on smaller and smaller bits of what I referred to in my journal as 'refinements.' Again, as each new refinement came my way, I would lose an aspect of the dance until the new became familiar. My whole body felt as though it were doing something unfamiliar, as each limb or body part kept its own track of divisions in the timing.

The second principle concerns movements of various parts of the body - the hands and the trunk - which may be coordinated with the steps in relation to the divisions of the time line. It is here that the dynamic accents of the drums, which may coincide or lie athwart the regulative beats of the time line may be articulated in definite movements of some part of the body. (Nketia, 1974)

This can create a sensation in the novice dancer that is not unlike corporal chaos. However, once mastered, the effect is gorgeous to watch and hard to imitate initially. In an attempt to understand the whole, I needed to master the parts and their relation to the time line. Once that was done, I only needed to remember.

Faustina, for her part, was a very observant and dynamic instructor. I soon became familiar with her 'something is wrong here, but I don't know quite what it is'

look. She would cock her head to the side and stare at my dancing figure intently, as though she really was searching for that one small twist of the wrist or straightening of the leg that was standing between me and satisfactory execution of the movement. At one point, her dissatisfaction with something in my adowa movement led her to sit down at home and think about why it looked so odd. This led her to conclude (correctly) that with a small stretch of the left leg as I placed the right foot flat on the ground, I couldn't fail to attain proper waist articulation every single time. Instruction like that is priceless.

Starting with this adowa instruction, the approach to teaching and learning the dances followed a basic pattern of several stages, each more descriptive than the last. The first involved the imitative aspect, and it is precisely this method through which most Africans learn their native dances. Faustina would start dancing and would watch as I imitated her gestures. From this point, the dance was broken into limbic components, followed by exaggeration. As my proficiency increased, the movements were embellished with Faustina's own stylistic preferences. These embellishments helped turn my basic understanding of a movement into an actual dance. Performing these movements with the music was always the last and most crucial step.

Chapter Two:

A Rhythm Runs Through It

The dancer must listen to the drum. When he is really listening he creates within himself an echo of the drum - then he has started really to dance. (Miller-Chernoff, 1979).

The true test of whether or not I had mastered a dance was whether or not I could successfully perform it with the music behind it. Far from just the simple execution of a few gestures or steps, African dance movement is closely intertwined with the rhythms and beats of drums, drums that can 'talk' and dictate the progression of a dance from beginning to end. If was to be considered a good dancer, I needed to form a relationship with the drumming. I needed to know where in the music the drum told me to step, and how fast those steps should be.

There were good days, and those were very, very good. And then there were those other days. .. They happened right at the beginning, thankfully, when my ear for the music was still 'green' so to speak. One especially painful and humbling lesson stood out in my memory as it was also the day that I learned the most. We had taken a small three-day hiatus from dancing, and therefore, the first thing that Faustina wanted to do was review. Rocky started to play the mater drum portion of the dance that we were preparing for performance, and Faustina sat back near him to watch. My task was simple: I needed to place the agbadza steps we had covered three days earlier at the appropriate places in the music.

Dancing next to Faustina made it completely possible for me to imitate unconsciously, and dance without an understanding of what I was doing. I watched when she put her foot straight down, when she took a step to the right or left, and did make an effort to elucidate the overall timing. However, left to my own devices

without Faustina for a model, things quickly fell apart. Not only did I not know where in the music I should step, I had zero sense of the overall timing. My problem, according to her, was not with finding rhythm. I just couldn't find the right one.

African music is mostly polyrhythmic being composed of multiple rhythms each with its own particular pattern or meter and the friction between these criss-crossing strands of rhythm is what generates its acoustic energy or heat. (Collins, 1996)

As we sat down with my tape recorder, Faustina explained how it was possible to be on rhythm but offbeat due to this polyrhythmic nature of African music. She told me that I needed to look for the 'strong beat' in order to have correct step placement and timing. As Rocky played the master drum parts to agbadza and other traditional dances, Faustina clapped out the strong beat for each. She then compared finding this beat as a dancer to singing acapella. A group of twenty people can all sing the same song without music or other rhythmic accompaniment if all twenty are keeping time mentally. I needed to dance acapella, so to speak, or 'create within [myself] the echo of the drum.'

After a few more lessons and a few homework sessions with the tape recorder, I became able to 'hear' the steps in the music. It was as though a light was turned on in a dark room. I could suddenly make enough sense of the pulsating drum beats to know where my feet belonged. The music actually began to talk to me, 'Pa-pa-pa,' or 'Step down, step out, step now.'

Faustina later told me that her education in hearing the strong beat came only after she had joined the Ghana Dance Ensemble and experienced an analytical approach to African music interpretation. Before this point, she said that she would be able to dance agbadza but could never really be sure where she was stepping, and compared her understanding of the music to being able to speak English but not being

able to write. This was a comforting confidence, as it made me feel more hopeful about my ability as a dancer, in general. It did take me a long time to understand.

As newcomers to analyzed Ghanaian dance (albeit at our own respective points in time) we shared an amazement at how a group of dancers could be told when to start or stop a movement simply by listening for changes in the drumming of the master drummer. The amalgamated piece we worked on for performance relied heavily on master drum dictated transitions. It was a wonderful feeling to be able to dance without counting, only listening. The once foreign beats that were simultaneously gorgeous and personally unmeaningful, began to say 'Get ready,' and 'It's time to stop. ' Speaking to one another during the lessons, Rocky, Faustina and I would refer to places in the music by imitating the drum language. The music became, for me, a dynamic language without words. And a rhythm, strongest and meant for my feet, ran through it all.

Chapter Three

Sikyi Times Three

After learning adowa and agbadza movement and finally mastering the drum communication, Faustina proceeded to teach me sikyi. The situation here was similar to that of adowa, as I had studied it before, not once but twice. I was first introduced to the dance in the States, and the second meeting occurred here in Ghana at the University. Both situations involved large groups of students, and were different in that regard from the lessons I had from Faustina and Rocky. They also came to be very different from the later lessons with regards to the style of sikyi movement that I was taught in each case.

Because the dance movements I had learned in the States were so similar to those I encountered at the university the second time, I had no reason to suspect that there was any difference to be seen whatsoever. Therefore, I waited stealthily for the right moment to show Faustina what I already knew. When Rocky started to play the familiar drum pattern, I decided to let loose and impress my instructors for a change. To my complete dismay, Faustina responded by cocking her head to the side and frowning quizzically. Rocky said something to her in Ewe and she said, 'Rocky says you learned this from Helen. Helen wouldn't dance like that.' Since my bubble was effectively busted, I decided to pay attention and stop trying to be a diva.

'You are dancing like the students,' she said, gesturing towards the dance hall where I had just recently been considered a pretty good student. I told her that that the sikyi I had been taught there was very different from the one she had shown me. I was then informed that what she was teaching me was authentic, traditional sikyi, and I needed time to consider my two previous exposures.

I through first about Grandma's class in the States and Faustina's assertion that she would not have taught me to dance sikyi the way that I danced it for Faustina. It was true in many ways as I distinctly recall Grandma's frustration with our class when we could not properly execute the foot placement. Somewhere along the line, a sort of a compromise was reached. When over 50% of the class started to perform some semblance of a sikyi-like movement, she let the issue drop.

In the dance class in Ghana, the situation was a little different. The movements that we were shown then were more like the sikyi that Faustina would later teach me, but still felt very different. On the same day that I was informed the difference between the versions of sikyi, Faustina and I ran into Professor Opoku outside of the dance studio. She related to him my experience with the dance steps, and he repeated Faustina's assertion that the one that I was currently learning was the correct one. As he demonstrated the movement, he said, 'That's what sikyi means.' I: later asked Faustina what he meant, and she told me that the word 'ositi' (her spelling) means roughly 'on the ball of the foot,' which describes the movement succinctly.

I then came to appreciate the mission of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, which preserves the traditional dance of Ghana through research. This mission does not assume that traditional dance will not be influenced by or allowed to change over e; time. It simply presents the dances responsibly, and accurately. Any dance instructor | who seeks to responsibly transmit knowledge of traditional dance should feel obligated to research the dance in its present authentic form, or realize that what they are passing on as authentic is truly not.

The process of deconstructing my old understanding of a dance that had been twice taught and misinterpreted previously, was long and arduous. The incorrect

'step-hop, step-hop' movement of the feet needed to be replaced by a relever and a twist. My arm movements required little change, but my body posture did. This along with the new foot placement is what contributed to the significantly different feel of the dance. Faustina was very patient, knowing that bad habits are hard to break. This is especially true when those habits are three-years-old. And from this point on, I did not trust my knowledge of a dance step until Faustina supported it.

Chapter Four:

'White Men Can't Bend'

Inherent to the very research questions posed at the introduction to this paper is the idea of a difference between my dance experience and that of Faustina. The differences between Western and West African dance styles do exist, and they have been verbalized in many ways as people attempt to grasp onto certain qualities of each dance style. In the words of Helen Mensah, 'White men can't bend.' She would say this laughingly after trying to show our class how to perform just about any movement. More often than not, the problem would be that the students were not bending their knees, and would look odd as a result. Or it would be the back, held rigidly straight at a time when a movement required rapid contraction and release or flexibility.

The problem then was that the students, myself included, were relating the West African system of movement to our own understanding of dance in the Western tradition. In my dance journal, I referred to this as 'imposed artificiality,' as I would interpret Faustina's movements in such a way as to force an unnatural action that need not exist. My wrists tended to be the biggest problem area. This was true of adowa, sikiyi, and agbadza, as I would invariably add some type of wrist flick or twist to an arm movement that required none. 'Look at your wrist,' Faustina would say. Every time she did, my right or left wrist would be operating on its own agenda.

I would also impose artificial or excess movement in the execution of walking steps. As I would dance adowa or certain steps in sikiyi, I tended to over-exaggerate the walking steps, or I would bounce along to the drum instead of gliding smoothly.

assertion that I should 'look natural.' This made even more sense to me when I spoke to Professor Opoku about my lessons. 'A lot of our dances are like walking,' he said. But he stressed that someone dancing these steps should put their own way of walking into the dance. The same is true of dances that include jumping. This would secure that these steps would look natural and not forced.

The chest contraction and release involved in agbadza was yet another area in which I imposed a more forceful movement than was called for. As I watched Faustina dancing, I would analyze her movements piece by piece, in much the same manner as she had to analyze the dance in order to teach it. When her chest contracted and released, it appeared as though her arms moved forward and backward as well. Performing the movement myself, I made the arms move as I had seen them, and I was always corrected. 'It's natural,' she said, and she showed me in exaggerated fashion how the arms followed the chest naturally with out the imposition of any movement.

Faustina's attitude and relativity regarding our respective dance backgrounds helped me through this potentially difficult aspect of my lessons. There were several times in which she compared my difficulty in trying to execute a West African dance step to the difficulty she would have trying to execute ballet movements. Basically, where I would need to be reminded to bend forward and pile, she would need to be reminded to straighten up. Just as one perceives another culture through their own eyes, it could be said that one also tends to see another culture's dance through their own bodies.

Naturally, someone raised in a given culture will have an easier, time learning the dances native to that culture. Every time I was told that it wasn't an, y harder to

teach me to dance West African dance than it would be to teach any other West African, I sincerely doubted it simply because we started from different places. One student at Legon told me that he had not learned any of the traditional dances until he came to the university, and that he struggled with them as a result (Opong Bah, interviewed 27APRIL993). This fact surprised me, as did several assumptions that I discovered I had brought to Ghana with me. These revealed themselves when I watched a dance technique class for a small bit of non-participant observation. It wasn't what the students were learning that surprised me, but the way that they responded to what they were taught. I saw students struggling to identify timing and spacing as they performed some modern dance and ballet movements during warm up. I saw Africans struggling with Western dance movements, and I came face to face with the realization that I lacked relativity on the subject.

I decided instead to focus on similarities between the two dance types, and attribute differences to little other than environmental and geographical influences.

Geographical condition is also a determining factor. . . .
Dance movement as noted by Haskel (The Wonderful World of Dance) 'grew out of time and place, ever changing as man shapes environment to change his way of life.' Thus dance steps are shaped by natural surroundings (Botwe-Asamoah).

Dance has been referred to as many things, among them 'a pleasurable motor reaction' or 'a game forcing excess energy into a rhythmic pattern' (Sachs, 1937).

Regardless of why humans do it all humans are capable of understanding it, making it the most universal of all forms of communication. This universality explains why Professor Opoku was able to choreograph adowa to classical music, and why he was able to draw parallels between adowa movement and ballet positions. Dance truly belongs to everyone, despite the Western convention of placing age and body type restrictions on certain styles (Jowitt, 1984). It is the world's most widely spoken language.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I asked two basic questions: How would an African teach dance, and how would I learn it? The simple answer to both questions is through a filter of experience and a bridge of commonality. Both Faustina and myself came to the dance room with a set of dance techniques and training that affected our responses to one another.

Faustina's background involved learning dance to such an extent that analyzing it (particularly with agbadza) was for her like analyzing the act of walking movement by movement would be for me. This type of analysis became necessary when she had to teach, not as an adult would teach a child growing as a conscious imitator, but as a dancer giving finite lessons in the university setting. Academia allows little to no time for one to grow into a dance.

With this background experience, Faustina was able to help me, a lifelong student of the finite lesson, learn movements as natural to her as walking. Steps that were once given years to mature now needed to thrive in four weeks. The same is true for the music and my understanding of its rhythmic structure. Gone were the days of carefully counted steps and canned music. This music was alive. It spoke to and moved me with its language, a language of which I only had time to scratch the surface.

The most difficult aspect of reconciling differences between my past experience and my present was the tendency for me to force West African movement and body posture into Western dance systems of movement. This would obscure ability to learn through imitation because I would see things that weren't there, and this always called for thoughtful correction. In the barest essence, the answer to the

questions I asked at the outset is the same. In room E6, under the cooling whirl of the fan and to the beat of Rocky's drum, my experience met Faustina's and we danced.

For the next researcher who wishes to study dance through their own eyes, I recommend that you do just that. Use your own experiences and not someone else's words to understand the dance. It is the road less traveled, but is by far the most rewarding.

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Informant

1. Victor Opong Bah, African dance major.

University of Ghana, Legon

Interviewed: 27APRIL99 .

2. Faustina Dorgbenu, Dancer.

Ghana Dance Ensemble

3. Rocky Kporxah, Dancer.

Ghana Dance Ensemble

4. Professor A.M. Opoku

Advisor meeting: 28APRIL99