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**DANCES OF NORTHERN GHANA:  
POSSIBILITIES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	1
Study Area	5
Methodology	6
Why Dance is a Good Cross-Cultural Communicator	8
Approaching a Study of Ghanaian Dance	10
Why Do We Dance?	12
Baamaya	16
Tora	23
Conclusion	28
References and Informants	32
Appendix: Photographs	34

## **ABSTRACT**

(Dances of Northern Ghana: Possibilities for Cross-Cultural Communication Electa Behrens May 2000)

This study set up a system of examining traditional dances to determine their potential as cross-cultural communicators. It looked at the dances Baamaya and Tora of the Dagombas on four levels: cultural, aesthetic, artistic, and physical. The researcher studied with two teachers, one dancer and one drummer, learned the dances, made the costumes, performed them in a variety of situations, interviewed drummers, dancers, and observers, and observed the dances in many contexts. The results showed that Dagomba dances have changed a lot over time to incorporate new audiences and functions of dance. Some changes are successful and others are not. Americans appreciate the changes which increase the artistic and physical value of the dance. Dagombas, while they too appreciate these changes, require that the dance remain true to its cultural roots and aesthetic tradition. This suggests that for a Dagomba dance to appeal and be understandable to Dagombas and Americans alike it must have a balance of cultural, aesthetic, artistic, and physical value. Baamaya has been more successful in finding this balance than Tora.

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## INTRODUCTION

The world is quickly becoming a smaller and smaller place. Cultures which once had no contact are now close neighbors. New means of communication must be determined whereby these cultures can interact peacefully and successfully. I believe the performing arts can be used as a doorway for this communication. Through the creation of intercultural performing arts cultures can create safe forums in which to discuss issues of conflict. Before coming to Ghana I wrote a grant proposal for a project of this kind. It would send student from the U.S. to Ghana, vice versa, and culminate in an original performance created jointly by the artists of the two cultures. The project was designed on the idea that one has to immerse oneself in another culture and understand it before one can attempt to use it to create new art. I came to Ghana to immerse myself, to make connections, and to test my hypotheses about the potential for using old traditions to discuss new social issues.

Once here, my goals became twofold. One, to find a specific community whose traditions contained elements which would make them interesting and understandable to Americans, and two, to closely observe the instances of what westerners call performing arts (i.e. dance, music, and drama) to try and discover what makes a successful performance for both foreigners and indigenous people of all interest and knowledge levels. I chose to focus my study in Tamale on the dances of the Dagomba, specifically Baamaya and Tora as representative examples. The dances of the Dagomba have a sense of movement, athleticism, competition, and costume which appeal to American sensibilities, as well as a rawness and focus on expressive improvisations which have more universal communication value than the gesture heavy court dances of the Ashanti, for example. I also found a great variety of dance - from traditional to tourist performances being done side by side and often by the same people. I believed that through observing how two representative dances have

changed over time due to various influences and how they appear today, I would be able to determine what elements of the dance serve what purposes and what potential changes in the dance may destroy its integrity while others would be progressive improvements. As one of the key elements of Ghanaian and most African performing arts is participation by all members of the community, I decided to attempt to master the two dances. I have a background in dance, specifically Jamaican and west African which gave me a base knowledge of movement styles and dance structure from which to begin.

Ghanaian dance, as Ghanaian culture, is holistic. The layout of this paper attempts to mimic the multi-layered nature of Ghanaian culture as much as possible through presenting information from the scientific to the personal side by side with no judgments made on their relative worth. In order to create a systematic analysis for linear written documentation of such a holistic activity, I wanted to look to Ghanaian scholars for a method of dissection. The theoretical background for this study are the findings of leading Ghanaian scholars at the Institute of African Studies such as Professors Opoku, Adinku, Sowah, and Nketia. This basic structure is supplemented by Judith Hanna's book entitled To Dance is Human: a theory of nonverbal communication (1979), the previous writings of other SIT students, other pertinent publishing's, and my own observations. Adinku and the other IAS scholars suggest that dance functions on three levels: contextually, aesthetically, and artistically. Hanna's study examines how dance functions as well on a purely physical level. These four criteria form the theoretical base of my study of Baamaya and Tora in their many incarnations.

I chose to study these two dances because of their differences. Characteristics of Baamaya include: it is a mans dance, it can be practiced alone, it has an elaborate costume, it is popular with both foreign and local audiences, it has developed many

movement variations, it contains movements not every individual can do, and it is a dance traditionally done for entertainment. Tora on the other hand is a woman's dance with little or no costume which requires at least three but preferably a whole crowd of dancers to practice, it much more enjoyed and exciting in its traditional setting, has developed few visible variations, consists of a simple repeated basic movement, and is a dance traditionally done only on specific special occasions, though nowadays it is used by school children and social groups almost like a game. I hoped that through studying two vastly different dances from the same tradition I would be able to determine which elements of each dance were cultural concepts and which were ideas specific to a certain dance. I learned these two dances mainly from two teachers: one dancer and one drummer, and observed them in as many contexts as possible to gain a comprehensive picture of their uses over time in this society. From observing and experiencing the many incarnations and their success I hoped to discover how they might be used in the future.

This study is divided into six chapters. The study itself approaches the issues like an upside-down triangle; beginning on a universal level and ending up with a discussion of the very specific. Chapters One and Two examine the theoretical background for a study of dance as a form of communication. Chapters Three, Four, and Five contain the field findings. These chapters address the research questions, which include: why do people dance? what elements of Dagomba dance make it interesting or understandable to Americans? how do dances change over time? and what kind of changes destroy a dance and what kind of changes enhance it?Chapter Six is the conclusion. It assess Baamaya and Tora and their potential to be used in future cross-cultural situations. It also discusses other issues surrounding performances in non-traditional settings such as time frame and money. Thirdly it offers warnings about issues a researcher or potential dance student should be aware

of when working in this area. Lastly it suggests areas of fault in this study's execution and suggestions for further work. The hope is that this study will help future innovators in this field, both in connection with Dagomba dance and otherwise, to look critically at the many levels of cross-cultural interaction and to maintain respectful of the two cultures at all levels while simultaneously creating new and meaningful art.



## **STUDY AREA**

This study is based in Tamale, the largest city in the northern region of Ghana, and situated near Yendi the capitol of Dagbon. The major occupation is farming. The population is estimated at around 250,000 people. (Briggs, 1998) The population is predominantly Muslim, though Christianity asserts its presence through several churches and aid institutions. The British used the north of Ghana as a source of slaves and raw materials and consequently placed less emphasis on creating schools and boosting economic growth. This is part of the reason for the great amount of poverty seen in Tamale today. (Alooma, 28 February 2000). This also explains the lack of modern buildings and abundance of traditional round mud houses with thatched roofs even close to the city center. The climate is one of the hottest in Ghana, and the landscape is characterized by flat dry plains.

The culture of the Dagombas, the major ethnic group of this region, has a strong drumming and dancing tradition. Drumming is an occupation passed down through the father's family line, and Tamale boasts many drumming families. Both drumming and dancing accompany most events of any importance. Common instruments are the talking drum, or luga, bass drum or gongon, and flute. Dances are done by people of all ages and occupations. Traditional religions and Islamic beliefs have mixed over the years, and Muslim influences can be seen in certain festivals and events.

## METHODOLOGY

One of the basic ideas upon which the methodology of this study was based is that to fully understand how a dance fits into a society, one must experience this dance in as many contexts as possible. This includes: observing the dance, interviewing dancers, drummers and observers about the dance, and learning the dance from as many teachers as possible. My attempt to study just with two different teachers caused conflict because of the local idea, with both cultural and monetary roots, that a student should learn a dance from a single teacher. After much discussion, I was allowed to study with both teachers. Any researcher working in this area I would advise to be very clear with local informants and teachers about the purpose and methodology of their study from the very beginning. I do however believe that this multi-perspective approach to learning dances was very beneficial to this study.

Originally I had hoped to study with these two teachers for one week, then to study with a third teacher in a village for a week, and then to choreograph a new solo piece for myself during the last week. Upon arrival this changed. The conflict mentioned above necessitated my focusing on these two teachers and eliminating the idea of a third teacher in a village. Local attitudes about maintaining the integrity of the dance and the short time available made me decide that this was not the context in which to attempt to create an original piece.

As it was actualized, this study consisted of three different forms of research. I studied intensely with two teachers, one a twenty-seven year old drummer and leader of a cultural dance troupe, Yakubu, and the other a sixteen-year-old dancer with the Center for National Culture dance troupe, Suale. This study included informal interviews, creation of costumes, training in Baamaya and Tora, visiting dancing events with them, and performing with their respective groups. Secondly, I

conducted interviews with dancers, drummers, observers (both black and white, foreign and local). Lastly I conducted participant and non-participant observation of dance in both traditional and performance contexts such as funerals, festivals, outdoorings, weddings, performances for whites and blacks, and as a recreational activity. This field research was compared to, supported and contradicted by information gathered from written sources found mostly at the Institute of African Studies at The University of Ghana at Legon as well as preliminary interviews done with dancers and professors at this same Institute.

## **WHY DANCE IS A GOOD CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATOR**

To be a good bridge between people of different cultures an event must use means of communication which transcend cultural barriers, create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance, teach people about other cultures, and engage them as fully and honestly with both body and mind. Dance, because it is non-verbal does away with the language barrier between different cultures. Studies have been done which suggest that the physical nature of dance help it transcend the cultural structures and return people to a more universal level of emotion. Hanna writes that "...in body communication the contrast between emotion and cognition is not clear..." and that "...adults may find dance a release for stress, a return to prenatal-like primacy of emotion." (1979) As my friend writes of her experience after an African dance class:

"...I feel my body slowly moving from the rhythm of the fast-paced world to the rhythm of my heart and the drums in that time and by the end I feel like I walk hearing myself." (Worthen, 7 April 2000).

Dance is in most cultures a peaceful and celebratory event. People from other cultures are often eager and excited to participate in or observe dance because it is uplifting and non-threatening. Especially in a Ghanaian or African context where dance is so integral to the culture, dance is a ready educator in cultural norms and values. As Oh!Nii Sowah, Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble says: "If you want to know Ghanaians, visit our dance." (30 March 2000). Dance is also used to discuss issues too explosive for normal discussion. "Philosophical utterances and ideas which are difficult or risky to proclaim verbally are embodied in symbolic dance movements. " (Ampofo-Duodo, 1994). A form of communication which can peacefully breach culturally explosive issues would be very helpful in a cross

cultural situation. The full body involvement in dance means that a greater level of commitment is needed from participants than in a verbal discussion.

"The efficacy of dance-play messages on social relations may arise from their being multisensory. Education specialists recommend that to change opinions and attitudes sensory experience should be as complete as possible." (Hanna, 1979).

Dance is also used as a period of restructuring in traditional societies. "Dance creates a milieu for anti-structure during the period of liminality, which once more re-creates and renews the culture." (Fischer, 1998). Why not use dance to recreate culture on an international level? For all these reasons, I believe dance performances and participation can be beneficial avenues for opening discussions about social change between members of different cultures.

## **APPROACHING A STUDY OF GHANAIAIAN DANCE**

Members of the Institute of African Studies, created by Nkrumah at The University of Ghana, dedicated themselves to researching Ghanaian dance by recording traditional forms and discovering new ways of using the dances to create a unified Ghana. (Fabian, 1996) As they are Ghanaians themselves and have successfully created new pieces of dance, I will use their research and methods as a basis for my study. Professor Adinku recorded some of their findings in a booklet entitled African Dance Education in Ghana.

Herein he writes that dance is a cultural, aesthetic and artistic activity ( 1994). Culturally dance functions as a part of specific festivals and rituals, connects people to their ancestors, and serves as a means of personal expression. As Professor Opoku says, Ghanaian dance exhibits "collective individualism" (29 March 2000), where an individual simultaneously asserts themselves as an individual and a member of a larger group. Dances to fulfill their cultural functions must be performed in certain contexts. They often also contain gestures whose meaning is specific to an ethnic group. In searching for a definition of aesthetic which would distinguish it from artistic, I found this quote from Ampofo-Duodo: "The aesthetics are the expressiveness of the dance within the traditional context" (1994) .The Cultural Studies for Junior Secondary School Pupil's Book Two states: "...the actions and gestures of a (Ghanaian) dancer makes when dancing go with the culture of the people" (1988) These are movements, which, although they are improvisatory, when made by someone from the culture are unconsciously informed by a basic cultural knowledge. Thus they have aesthetic value. Artistically a dance has value as well. This is the ability of the dance to be viewed as art irregardless of its cultural significance or reference. This is dance as art for art's sake.

One level upon which dance communicates which Adinku left out was the purely physical level. Judith Hanna supplies the missing piece. She suggests that there are rhythms which underlie all of human life. It is upon these universal rhythms that dance, especially Ghanaian-African dance with its emphasis on drum beat, is built. "...there is a rhythmic structure which interrelates internal organ systems" (1979) Fischer suggests that music and dance came before the spoken word as a form of communication.

"Earlier species of Homo Sapiens engaged in ritualistic dance, but as the brain developed, a greater feeling of well-being filled the human-heart by means of the physical activity and the variegated drumming and dance, now embellished with reflective song, reiterative call and response, and shouts of various emotions. D'Aquili now takes his former metaphor and gives it a new twist: (in the beginning was ) the dance, which gave birth to the word, which then danced its incarnation" (D'Aquili, 1986 in Fischer, 1998).

She suggests her own model for dissecting the different levels of dance which is more scientific than that of Adinku. She describes the "surface patterns and deep structures of dance" (1979). The deep structure includes the "Innate Structuring Capacity of the Brain and Culture". Culture consists of the "pragmatics, syntax and semantics modulating body use in space, rhythm and dynamics." These are the unconscious factors mentioned in the JSS textbook which inform a dancer's movements, and which Adinku names the aesthetics of dance. The surface structure, or empirical reality, consists of choreographed, improvised and imitative dance performances. This corresponds to what Adinku names artistry.

### **3: WHY DO WE DANCE?**

The first two chapters outlined the theoretical background for this study. The next three chapters contain the findings from the field. This section addresses the first basic question that must be asked when studying dance: why do we dance~ As this study is focusing on the use of Ghanaian dances in the context of Ghanaian and American interaction, the answers center on reasons Dagombas dance and what these reasons have in common with why Americans dance.

Culturally Dagombas dance for many reasons. They dance for festivals, life - changes like weddings, funerals and outdoorings, for religious functions, and for recreation. (See Appendix 1). Recently dance is also being used in political rallies to gather people, as a way to maintain culture, educate the youth, and for performance. (Performance here is used in the western sense as an event, which is rehearsed for, has a defined audience, a time frame, and often involves a form of payment). Americans dance for recreation, education, festivals, celebration, to stay fit, to learn about other cultures, and for performance.

Both cultures dance for similar reasons, but many of the reasons Dagombas dance are too dependent on cultural context to appeal to Americans. When Americans dance for festivals or social events, the dancing is usually fairly free-form and does not have the corresponding cultural symbolism as it does in Dagomba culture. This means that as well as not understanding the cultural significance of many Dagomba dances, Americans aren't familiar with the concept of having specific ritualized dances for different occasions.

An example is the sessions where individuals dance singly at a wedding or funeral. These dances, like Kulinoli and Nanungo, involve little physical exertion' flexibility, or artistry, but are culturally very rich (See Appendix 2). The master drummer will call individuals out to dance because of their relation to the event



which has just happened. The different dances people dance have meanings, which communicate to the crowd how an individual is feeling. Where are dances only a chief can dance and others which are so embedded in a family's history that when a woman hears a certain tune she becomes possessed and has to start dancing wherever she may be or whatever she may be doing. There is a rhythm played at a funeral where a calabash is placed on someone's head and if they were good and kind to the deceased when they were alive, the dancer will become possessed and begin to dance. If they were not kind, they will not become possessed. (Yakubu, 27 April 2000) Observers who understand these meanings and have personal connections with the individuals dancing are very excited when people come to dance and immediately begin to shower them with coins. "Many people would come to see the same old dances or take part in them because they bring a renewal of experience" (Nketia, 1965). Out of their context, however, the dance steps which are repetitive and simple become boring to someone without the cultural background. I danced them one day for three hours in a room with a drummer and found them very dull. When I saw them at a wedding, however, they were alive and magical. Seeing a dance in its context and watching how much people enjoyed and appreciated it made me see the dance in a new light. It made me eager to understand it as they did so I could share the joy. Out of its context, another incentive is needed to want to understand the dance. A dance that appeals to American values and artistic ideas can provide this inspiration. It can create admiration in Americans of Dagomba culture, and admiration often sparks a desire to better understand the admired one.

Dagomba dances have elements which are interesting to Americans. The dances value the elements of athleticism, complexity, speed, variety of movement, and competition which are also elements attractive to the average American. The

physical difficulty of these dances appeals to the American value of hard work. The fast, often linear, and progressive movement in space reflect ideas of 'getting somewhere' which is missing in some of the more sedentary dances of the Ashanti and Ewe. The movements often have a sharpness and a speed which dances of other ethnic groups of Ghana lack. This definition of movement appeals to American aesthetics of clarity of line, as in ballet, and impressive dramatic movement, like in acrobatic routines. Americans also enjoy learning these dances because of the physical exertion required. This satisfies their desire to use dance as a way to stay fit as well as giving them the satisfaction of the release of emotion that accompanies exertion.

Dagomba dances have developed these artistic and aesthetic qualities for reasons independent from why Americans value them. The nomadic history of the people and the presence of agile savanna animals are suggested as reasons for the large amount of progressional movement in Dagomba dance. (Oppuku, 31 March 2000). The one on one competition which is apparent in everyday life due to limited resources and individual strength necessary to survive creates the competitive nature of the dances which excites the American enjoyment of watching people strive for excellence. Fatawu, Suale, Kamiru and Awal, all dancers, say that while dancing even your best friend becomes a fierce competitor (Suale 21 April 2000, Awal 22 April, 2000, Fatawu and Kamiru 17 April, 2000). This also creates a pride taken in elaborate costumes and presentation which appeal to American ideas of exoticism and create an aesthetic not dissimilar to that of American musicals, full of smiles, energy, costumes, and flashiness. As both Ofei and Yakubu said to me, smiling is one of the key elements in performance. (Ofei, 18 April 2000, Yakubu, 17 April 2000). Yakubu will not allow a dancer to perform if they are in a bad mood or angry with

someone. When asked why the dances and costumes have changed, the most common answers he gave were: to please the audience and to make it more beautiful.

Dagombas dance for many culturally specific reasons which most Americans are ignorant of. Dance is such an integral part of life, that to distinguish between the two is almost impossible. Any attempt to fully explain the cultural significance of a dance requires a full explanation of the culture on all its different levels. It is not possible to give this description here or at the beginning of a performance. Thus an attempt must be made through the elements of the dance itself to keep the cultural value alive while still keeping the interest of a foreign audience. Dagomba dances contain artistic and aesthetic elements which correspond to some American values and ideas. These similarities can be highlighted to create a dance experience enjoyed by people of both cultures and perhaps spark Americans curiosity about Dagomba culture and aesthetics

## **BAAMAYA**

This chapter focuses on Baamaya, a popular Dagomba dance. It outlines the basic movements of the dance, its history, story, and the different ways it is used today.

### **Basic Step, Rhythm and Costume**

The basic movement, and originally only movement, involves a twisting of the waist and a shuffling of the feet in time with the drums (See Appendix 3). The basic Baamaya rhythm is often called Tubaankpuli as well as Baamaya (Yakubu, 16 April 2000). The costume consists of a belt worn on the waist which has a series of pompoms strung on the end of beaded ropes hanging off of it. This is called a Yebisa, and wearing it enhances the basic dance movement and makes it more visible in space. The Chayala are bangles worn on the ankles which cause a rattling noise when they are shaken. These are used to help enhance the beat of the drums. Dancers are usually men, but they wear skirts to look like women. Earrings, scarves, and other women's clothing articles are sometimes worn. A monkey skin cap or a scarf are worn on the head. The dance is danced in the early mornings of the last day of a funeral from the hours of about three till seven.

### **Story**

Each Dagomba dance has a corresponding story, which tells how the dance was, first began. There are many variations in the story of Baamaya's origin. Some say the dance is about mosquitoes. The constant shaking of the waist is an attempt to get them to go away. But the most accepted story is that of chief Baawa. He was a very powerful Dagomba chief who traveled around conquering many villages. Finally he settled at Zeng, in a valley. He hoped that here he would find fertile farming land. The first year there was little rain and much hunger. The gods weren't

happy about the amount of bloodshed. So the people decided to make a sacrifice and then the rain fell. So there was much rejoicing. The women tied their veils around their waists and started shaking them. After a while the men decided to join them, so they dressed up like the women and began dancing. They wore monkey skin caps to indicate that they were men (Yakubu, 16 April 2000). Variations of this story dispute over whether it was men or women who began the dance, the origin of the Yebisa, now also known as a loma, the town that began the dance, and the cause of the drought. A possibility is that these variations came about when different villages learned the dance. When they told the story they changed the details to fit their personal situation, the towns near them, or their own common store of historical stories. One of the largest discrepancies is that of the Tubaankpuli rhythm. Salifu Mohammed writes that originally the Baamaya costume consisted of a scarf tied around the shoulders, and that the Yebisa and Chatalas were added when Tubaankpuli and Baamaya, two distinct dances, were merged. (1994) Yakabu and Suale assert that Tubaankpuli was never its own dance, and that it is just the name for the basic rhythm (Suale, 17 April 2000, Yakubu, 16 April 2000). All agree that Baamaya means "the valley is cool" and that this is a recreational dance of celebration that arose out of a crisis situation. How Baamaya has changed

When transplanting this dance out of its context, which traditionally is performance in the early morning of the last day of an old person's funeral, how much of what story should be preserved? Should performers and/or audience be aware of all stories or should an 'official' versions be chosen? Dagombas themselves are giving the dance new symbolic meaning in certain specific contexts. At a celebration of the North receiving money for education and housing, the director of the Center for National Culture in Tamale introduced Baamaya as a dance which exemplifies what

we must do with culture. He said that just like the movement in this dance, culture must move backwards and forwards, but never stand still (4 March 2000). Another way to use the story is to try to incorporate it into the dance in a dramatic or dance interlude, because as it stands, the dance itself does not tell the story (Sowah, 30 March 2000). These examples show first how a new story can be given when the dance is danced in a context where the dance is familiar and the 'real' story may be known to audience members, and secondly, how the story can be incorporated into the dance to use the dance as an opportunity to educate.

There are small logistical changes which have been made in this dance as it has been modernized which have not seemed to disrupt the integrity of the dance. As mentioned above, this dance is usually done in the early morning of a funeral. It is a dance for anyone who wants to do it, and has the proper costume. Due to this, members of the Dagomba community are not offended when young people in dance troupes or foreigners learn this dance, unlike dances which are reserved for particular times, places or people. When Baamaya was to be danced in the old days, the elders would have to be alerted and the women told to prepare a large meal for the dancers to eat at dawn. (Dukurugu, 29 April 2000). Though this is a nice ritual, it doesn't carry the cultural weight of some rituals which accompany other dances and its exclusion from the dance when it is performed in other contexts doesn't seem to cause much controversy.

The major changes in Baamaya have been the addition of new rhythms and steps. These changes are accepted in varying degrees. An older dancer says that although there are changes, the dance is still the same. He is in favor of the changes because he thinks they make the dance more exciting and beautiful (Yepeli-Naa, 29 April 2000). An older drummer, on the other hand, says that the rhythms have |

changed so much that if you don't watch carefully sometimes you don't know what they are doing (Dukurugu, 29 April 2000).

These changes began with the drummers introducing new rhythms and then the addition of new moves to fit these beats. Sometimes rhythms and moves from other dances like Bla and Tora were incorporated (Yakubu, 21 April 2000). It isn't known when these innovations began, but there is a great possibility that they coincided with the creation of performance groups like the Center for National Culture and Nmbagba, Yakubu's group. This occurred around the time of independence, due to Nkrumah's dedication to the preservation of culture. In creating dances for performance outside of their traditional context the artistry, complexity and sometimes costume of dances were heightened or altered to be more dynamic. This consequently increased the level of physical fitness needed to dance the dances. This led to the inclusion of younger and younger dancers in such cultural troupes.

In such a performance setting, the basic Baamaya now consists of about 4-7 rhythms and 10 or more different steps which correspond to these rhythms (Suale, 17 April 2000). (See Appendix4) The step and rhythm for entering the dancing ground is standard but after the rhythm changes to the Baamaya rhythm, individual groups and individuals have much control over what order they choose to dance the steps in and for how long. Sometimes a dancer may signal a rhythm change by raising his hand (Yakubu, 16 April 2000), and sometimes the drummers dictate the structure of the dance. This freedom maintains the tradition of open fluid communication which occurs between drummers and dancers, the flexibility of performance length, and opportunity for individual expression which are all key aspects of Dagomba drumming and dancing. This flexibility also allows for the audience to present appreciation to drummers and dancers in the form of money on their foreheads in the

middle of the dance. This adds to the excitement and drama of the dance, as well as encouraging audience participation. That the time frame of the dance has changed from several hours to several minutes allows the rhythms to be faster and the movements to be more complex and difficult. This allows for individuals to show feats of great physical strength and skill. Songs were originally interspersed in the dance to allow dancers to rest. The songs contained stories with varying themes from rivalry to peaceful advice. (Yakubu, 16 April 2000). Now, since the dance is shorter, they are used more to add artistic richness to the performance. Hence their meanings are rarely explained to foreign audiences.

This new Baamaya maintains the integrity of underlying cultural values of Dagomba dance while separating the dance from its traditional context. It is an elaboration of an old theme while still maintaining pieces of the original dance. This Baamaya is appreciated by both dancers, drummers, and observers, both Dagombas and foreigners. New innovations in an old dance will never please everyone, but the overwhelming popularity of Baamaya among audience members and performers alike suggests this new form of the dance will survive and become part of the Dagomba tradition.

### **Innovation taken too far?**

Sometimes attempts to add artistry to a dance can be taken too far. Many dancers from the North scoff at the choreographed pieces being done in Accra which blend dances, rhythms, and costumes. Yet why is it accepted to place Tora rhythms in Baamaya but not Damba rhythms in Takai? Yakubu says that the rhythms of Damba and Takai are too different and that both use smocks as costume pieces is not enough to justify melding the two into one (21 April 2000). Mohammed Ofei, senior dancer of the Center for National Culture troupe says that the choreographers in



Accra are out of line because they are using dances which aren't part of their own tradition. He says that as a Dagomba himself, he can choreograph Dagomba dances however he likes, but that if he is to learn Adowa, an Ashanti dance, for example, he will take care to learn it exactly how his Ashanti teacher teaches him. His Adowa will be a direct copy of his teacher's (18 April 2000). The question becomes an ethical one: who has the right to make alterations in a dance? Learning Baamaya

The context in which a dance is learned has a great effect on how an individual perceives the dance and the culture from which it comes. If dance is going to be used to educate foreigners about another culture, the context in which these individuals learn the dance must be paid attention to. I used my month in Tamale to experiment with as many forms of learning as possible. I learned Baamaya from a dancer and a drummer in one on one sessions in both large and confined spaces. I learned drum rhythms and made my own costume. I watched the two troupes perform for both whites and Ghanaians, and participated in a few of these performances. I believe that in learning a Dagomba traditional dance as a foreigner, it is necessary to learn the dance from as many different people and situations as possible. This helps one learn the dance not just as a set of steps but as part of a living tradition which changes each time it is recreated.

Since the dance leaves so much room for improvisation, and the drummers gain energy and excitement from an innovative dancer, the dance very quickly ends if the dancer is relying on a standardized format of moves. This became crystal clear the day Suale let me dance alone instead of having me follow his lead. Music isn't accompaniment to set dance steps, in Dagomba dance it is a fluid and equal partner with the dancer. To make the dance successful I had to listen carefully to the rhythm. "While the dance is going on, the drummer may give directions to the

dancer, quote proverbs, praise individuals and so forth" (Nketia, 1965). I had to participate in a two way conversation where I didn't know what was going to be said next, but which I would have to respond to through the language of dance. "While the dance lasts, the dancer and the musician must each be so absorbed in his activity that he loses himself in it" (ibid.). When dancing alone I was responsible for using the dance to express myself and make active informed decisions. Having observed and participated in the dance in many contexts allowed me to have a wider vocabulary of moves to choose from and to be able to distinguish between the aesthetics of an individual teacher and the aesthetics of a culture. It allows me to be an active interpreter instead of a copier of culture.

"...each person has the freedom to work out different elaborations of the basic movement in relation to the rhythm patterns played by the master drummer. Here there is an attempt to interpret the rhythm of the music in a definite way" (ibid.).

## **TORA**

### **Basic Step, Rhythm and Costume**

The basic step consists of a single linear pattern of movement which is repeated by dancers sequentially, like a round in music. The dancers stand in a line and one by one take a skipping motion out onto the floor circling back to bump butts with the next dancer on the second phrase of movement. The first dancer must complete the pattern twice to set up the pattern. The second time she begins the pattern the second dancer begins too, and there the butt-bumping begins. Each dancer bumps butts twice, first as the second person in line on the dance floor, and then as the first. After bumping twice, the dancer moves to the end of the line and waits her turn to begin again (See Appendix 5). The rhythm is called Tori Gorele, (Suale, 22 April 2000). Originally dancers wore a simple cloth just covering their breasts (Dukurugu, 29 April 2000), though nowadays they wear a simple traditional cloth, or anything they happen to be wearing at the time.

### **Story**

The Tora story concerns NaaYing Zoo, a paramount chief of the Dagombas. He had a friend, NaaZoo Bla, whom he greatly depended on. The people in his village were dissatisfied and wanted change in their community. When they approached the chief, however, he consulted his friend and his friend convinced him not to appease the people. After a while this annoyed the people so much they decided on revenge. The chief's wives snuck out of the compound at night, had contact with men and became pregnant. They agreed with the elders to answer when questioned that it was the chief's friend who made them pregnant. The chief upon hearing of the pregnancies was furious and saddened to hear that it was his friend's fault. As it was NaaZoo Bla's job to watch after the wives, he couldn't deny his responsibility. The

chief ordered that his friend be executed. Upon this order the women got together to celebrate and created this dance. Thus it is a dance both of sadness and celebration (Yakubu, 29 April 2000). This story was consistently the one given to me with very few changes. This may be because the dance is not danced as often as Baamaya, and hence there has not been as much opportunity for the story to change as it is passed from mouth to mouth.

### **How Tora has changed**

As the basic dance move has to stay same, (i.e. the same pattern through space must be carved for the butt-bumping, which is the identifying characteristic of the dance, to happen), most innovations have occurred in the rhythms, songs, and choreographed movement for dancers standing in the line. As with Baamaya, any ; date for the beginning of these new styles is unknown. Zamanduniya has been added as the sochanda, or traveling step, which the dancers use to enter the dancing arena. Other rhythms that have been added include Nyaboli, (which Baamaya later borrowed), Damdu, Saligbandibiga and Konduliya (Suale, 22 April 2000). The repertoire of songs is huge, and contains many themes usually relating to women. Any song which fits the rhythm can be used, as is shown by the use of a rally song during a funeral celebration session of Tora.

Tora's history suggests that it is traditionally more selectively used than Baamaya. In the olden days it was only danced at the funeral of an important person, and if a chief heard the Tora rhythm, he had to send someone to discover what had happened. Dukurugu mentioned how Tora used to be such a respected dance and that now that respect has left it. Traditionally the lead singer would kneel down before the master drummer and praise him with sweet songs until he would begin the Tora rhythm and then she would begin the Tora session (Dukurugu and Yepeli-Naa, 29 April 2000). I didn't see this done at all during my stay in Tamale.

In the case of Tora, traditional context holds a lot of meaning and goes a long way into creating the magic of the dance. I observed the same set of girls dance Tora once at a wedding in the morning as part of a performing group in costumes, and a few days later at the Tora session of a funeral at nine at night under a tree. Despite the similar movement of butt-bumping, the two experiences almost felt like two different dances to me. At the wedding the dancing began seconds after the drums introduced the rhythm, the clapping and singing was organized, words and rhythms were clear and easy to hear, and everyone was smiling. The dance progressed through different pieces of choreography and ended after a few minutes. At the funeral the drummers drummed for a while until a large enough crowd had assembled. Then the dancing began. As it progressed, the beat got faster and more complex, different girls started competing as song leader, clapping was more erratic and varied, there was pushing and shoving in line, and the atmosphere was one of wild abandon. Girls whom I had seen mildly bump butts while slightly smiling a few days ago were pushing each other down and hurling themselves at their butt-bumping partner with competitive zeal. Each dancer had their own style of moving coming into step with their partner for that one moment of contact and then moving off in their own style again. In its traditional context, this dance felt fascinating, vital, and alive to me, whereas sometimes in performance it feels staid and repetitive.

Tora doesn't work as well as Baamaya does as an adaptable dance. It has a specific context and cultural purpose for dancing it which to disturb is both disrespectful of the culture and takes away from the mood of the dance. The standardization of movement and style which occurs when a dance is choreographed eliminates the personal improvisation which creates much of the dynamics in the dance traditionally. The mixed audience of males and females in a performance setting also curtails the freedom of expression of the young female

dancers who are culturally trained to be more submissive in the presence of men. There is even a Tora song whose words describe how energetic the Tora dancers are until they know that their boyfriend is coming near and then they begin to feel shy (Yakubu, 27 April 2000). Sometimes because of a lack of female dancers men dance Tora dressed as women. This brings a new mood to the dance which can turn it into a comedy about cross-dressing males instead of a celebratory dance of female power (See Appendix 6). The competition in the dance which makes Baamaya so electric (i.e. individual dancers exerting themselves to show their superior skill), is not as visually apparent in Tora. It is hard to tell who has bumped butts hardest unless someone actually falls down. Appreciation in the form of coins which heightens the excitement of a Baamaya performance is not a part of a Tora session because the movement doesn't allow it. Traditionally the drummers have to be prepaid to come drum a Tora session. Locals who have danced Tora enjoy watching it because they know how it feels and understand the body language of the dancers. Foreigners who have never danced the dance tend to see more its repetition and movement style which is unfamiliar to them.

### **Learning Tora**

I learned Tora from the same teachers I learned Baamaya from, participated in performances with them, danced with a community group, and at a Tora session of a funeral. Learning Tora, despite the simplicity of the movement was extremely difficult. The elements of individual improvisation which make the dance interesting cannot be taught in a class setting. They must be learned and absorbed through constant exposure in a traditional context. A large amount of people are needed to truly create the mood necessary for the dance, and a few people dancing in a small room or outside cannot simulate this, especially if the learner is unfamiliar with how the dance is traditionally danced. The momentum of the dance in a traditional setting

which creates a lot of the excitement and makes the dance "happen" is a successful way is one of the elements which allow a foreigner to forget about their self consciousness and let down their guard. This must happen if a foreigner is to understand what makes Tora.

## **Tora**

Since the steps of the dance are easy more weight is put on the aesthetic mood of the dance and cultural meaning. The cultural context cannot be fabricated. American ideas of learning a dance with a name come from traditions of ballroom dancing and ballet where dancing means learning how to do a prescribed set of steps elegantly, systematically, and consistently. The aesthetics of Tora are about freedom, energy, strength, and power. They are exhibited through a total release of the body's muscles, constant undefined motion like jumping in place, and explosive energy at the moment of contact with a partner. There is no corresponding aesthetic I can think of in American dancing traditions. It is a combination between crowd dancing at a concert and a field sporting event. This is hard to communicate without taking an individual to witness the dance in person, which is hard to arrange in a short time frame. The hour that I spent at a funeral Tora session I learned more than in the hours of individual instruction I had received before-hand.

## CONCLUSION

"The art of dancing, therefore, is a language to speak, a book to read, and a mirror to see..." (Ampofo-Duodo, 1994).

Dances communicate on many levels, from the universal to the culturally specific. We are all physical beings. There are basic concepts of physical exertion, body rhythms, and energy which we can all relate to because of our humanity. "Invisible rhythms underlie most of what we assume to be constant in ourselves and the world around us" (Luce, 1971 in Hanna, 1979). On top of this is our cultural conditioning which unconsciously shapes how we use our bodies to express emotion and what we find aesthetically pleasing. "...dance...develops out of the influences of the society's artistic heritage and movements are linked to various ideas and feelings of the society" (Adinku, 1994). There is also the concept of art for art's sake which suggests that a piece of art, such as a dance, can be judged on values which do not correspond to culture at all. "...observable features alone are enough criteria for analysis and judgment (of dance)" (ibid.).

Some scholars suggest that one of these levels has more importance or value than the others. From studying traditional Ghanaian dance, I would assert that while different dances place different emphasis on different elements, all must be present for the dance to be a full and rich experience. In using dance in the context of cross-cultural communication the two cultures must be understood on all these levels. The reasons why and contexts in which people dance in the two cultures must be determined and the different aesthetics of the two cultures involved must be acknowledged. The dance to be used must be examined for universal physical elements and artistic value. To be a successful cross-cultural communicator, a balance must be maintained between these four levels so that it can appeal to those



familiar with the culture from which the dance originates as well as those who will understand it only on a physical or artistic level.

Baamaya is a good example of a Dagomba dance which can appeal to both a Ghanaian and American audience simultaneously because it has a balance of these elements. It is a recreational dance, which means that it is culturally used for entertainment and pleasure. This means it can remain true to its original function in the context of a tourist performance, for example. The aesthetics of this dance which include shows of individual skill and flashy costumes appeal to American aesthetics as well. It is a physically challenging dance, and has a complexity of different movement styles and dynamics which give it artistic value. Tora on the other hand does not work so well in a cross-cultural setting. The cultural role it has to play is too important to use it for performance purposes. The aesthetics are difficult for Americans to understand either in observation or practice. The physicality is difficult for Americans because of their culturally ingrained ideas of acceptable movement. Artistically it has not developed much complexity.

Besides a balance maintained within the dances themselves, an organizer of a dance event must be aware of the expectations of the audience because of their respective cultures. What I observed from the two troupes in Tamale was as follows. When performing for Ghanaians, performances start when everyone has gathered, dances are suggested by audience members, people will join the performers when they feel like dancing, and the dancing continues until everyone is tired, or no more money is being offered. When performing for tourists or students, performances start at designated times and payment is arranged beforehand since Americans are time conscious and do not commonly know the Dagomba tradition of paying for dance through coins of appreciation during the performance. There is a set program of dances to be danced, and each dance is introduced with a short history before it is

performed. Though these differences are small they help an audience feel comfortable, and one of the first steps to opening up to another culture is feeling safe.

Problems which may arise when working in communities in northern Ghana studying dance include issues of money and American attitudes towards tradition. Tamale is not a wealthy town by any means, and the acquisition of money is central in many people's minds. This means that when an American goes to study dance there is a great deal of enthusiasm because there is the possibility of economic gain. To facilitate a study being about dance and not money, it is key to be very clear with all informants and teachers about your mission for being there and what they can expect from you in terms of money. The desire to get the most of what you can give also adds to the desire of most dance teachers to have you study with them and them only. If you wish to study with more than one person, this has to be clear from day one. This was a problem I encountered, and which took about a week to work out. Secondly, any study of dance here will discover that there are many incarnations of each dance, its story, costume, and many other elements. Americans sometimes have a preconception of their being an 'authentic' version of a dance. In Tamale I saw the same people dancing what might be termed the 'authentic' or traditional form of a dance, and the next day dancing for a tourist group without feeling like they were destroying or cheapening their culture in any way. On the contrary, many believe they are strengthening it. I think that this is a characteristic of an oral tradition which is made more rich by the variety of different versions present at a given time instead of a written tradition which values the preservation of one 'true' text. I believe this is Professor Opoku's collective individualism on a wider scale. It is each individual or troupe of people expressing their version of a cultural dance which makes it both intensely personal and part of a timeless tradition.

The major shortcoming of this study was that there was only one researcher. This means that all artistic judgments are based in my own personal aesthetic. I see this study really as the first step in a project which will bring a large group of dancers and choreographers to Tamale to work intensively with the groups which I made contacts with. This would create a more multi-layered understanding of the dance than a single person can discover. Dance is a collaborative activity which cannot be fully realized by the individual alone. I hope in future that I or another researcher will be able to bring more people back to study here and create new pieces of art which are a fusion of both Dagomba and American culture.

This study which attempts to put theoretical logical words to subconscious communicative activities is done on the simple hope that this will allow dance to be used to help people of different cultures speak to each other. To attempt to understand the cultural barriers and potential ways of breaking them down so that people can speak freely face to face. As Professor Opoku told me one day without telling me who had said it: "...he who speaks to your heart is not a stranger to you." We are living in a world where we can no longer afford to be strangers.

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1. Dancer at the Fire Festival.



2. Women dancing at wedding.



3. Twisting of the waist in Baamawa



4. Performance of modern Baamawa at a wedding by a performing group.



5. Basic Tora movement.



6. Males and females dancing Tora at an outdooring.