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Influences on Contemporary Ghanaian Dance:
An Exploration of Viewpoints

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Abstract

Influences on Contemporary Ghanaian Dance: An Exploration of Viewpoint

The objective of this study was to examine some of the outside influences on Ghanaian dance and to explore the perspectives that the people of Ghana hold towards those influences and contemporary dance in general. The research methods used in this study were library research, non-participant observation, and formal and informal interviewing. The results demonstrated a range of sentiments regarding the effects of outside influences on Ghanaian dance and culture. Some people foresee the influences leading to the degradation of tradition and culture, while others see them as an avenue for Ghanaian artists to fully express themselves and pursue professional dance opportunities. The findings of this study showed that both perspectives co-exist in Ghana and the disagreement can actually serve to strengthen both fields of the dance community.

Acknowledgments

To the dancers of Ghana: Thank you for allowing me to delve into the wealth of knowledge that exists in your beautiful country. You have taught me about grace, strength, subtlety and power. I have enjoyed my time here observing and taking part in your lives.

To my friends and family in America: Thank you for supporting me in my journey. My love for you has grown tremendously in my time away.

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Introduction

(The modern dancer) utilizes the principle that every emotional state tends to express itself in movement, and that the movements thus created spontaneously, though they are not representational, reflect accurately in each case the character of the particular emotional state.

~John Martin
In "Dance as a Means of Communication"
(Copeland 22)

As a mode of expression, dance is a unique art form because of its universal ability to convey emotional states. The principle mentioned in the above quote is not unique to modern dance or any other genre of dance. Every person who has ever expressed emotional states through movement has utilized the principle, and has therefore danced. It is this principle that justifies the preservation of traditional dance as well as the creation and development of contemporary dance. Although the quote by John Martin validates all dance forms, traditional or contemporary, as they are forms of human expression, there is a controversy among members of the Ghanaian dance community about the validity of contemporary Ghanaian dance that incorporates influences from non-Ghanaian dance forms.

In Ghana, traditional dance has always played an integral role in the cultures and lives of the people. Throughout history, the people of Ghana have been expressing their emotions and experiences through dance. The dances created out of their expression are now considered traditional and it is crucial that they are preserved, for they hold the history of the people. The significance that traditional dances hold today is in the history of emotional states that they embody. Traditional dance is even more functional than an expressive art because it can serve as documentation of history for a people who have little written history (Sowah 2 MAY, 2000).

Contemporary Ghanaian dance holds significance with the people of Ghana as well, but for different reasons. The borrowing of movement and

structure from non-Ghanaian dance forms to create contemporary Ghanaian dance is, on a more individual level, also based on Martin's principle. In order for Ghanaian dancers to express themselves and their present condition fully, they must be able to expand their movement vocabulary. This is accomplished through creative movement as well as exposure to non-Ghanaian dance forms (Chidi 28 APRIL, 2000).

The first influence the western dance forms had on traditional Ghanaian dance was not in the form of added movements, but the concept of a non-participant audience. Not only did the role of the audience member emerge, but the performance setting had to change as well. The traditional circle formation is not effective if the audience is not participating in the dance. The western model of the performers facing a seated audience became more common in Ghana during the last century (Nicholls 51).

With time the influence of western dance styles on Ghanaian dance has increased. Movements from jazz, modern dance, ballet and other forms are combined with traditional African movements (Snipe 69). Some people feel that this fusion expands and increases the Ghanaian artists' possibilities for expression while others feel that the use of western movement will lead to the deterioration of traditional Ghanaian dance.

Some questions must be posed to the members of the dance community. Can traditional dance be preserved while dancers acquire influences from other dance forms?

Can these influences actually serve to maintain the dynamic quality that is crucial to culture? The purpose of this study is to present both sides of this issue and to uncover the existing common ground.

It was the ever-presence of traditional dance in Ghana that initially attracted me to studying in the country. I expected to use my independent study time to learn traditional dances in the traditional context, but during my journey through Ghana, I found that I was most interested in the changes that had occurred and were continually occurring in Ghanaian dance. Contemporary dance interests me, not because it is flashier or because I am more familiar with

the movements, but because of the controversy surrounding it. I wanted to explore this young dance form and its power to stir up controversy among the Ghanaian people.

Definitions

Traditional dance: dances handed down through generations in a localized area, which conform to the relevant cultural practices of the people who perform them (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000)

Modern dance: a style of dance usually performed in a theater, which is very expressive and does not have many rules for the dancer's movements (Cambridge International Dictionary of English)

Contemporary dance: "Contemporary is, of course, a general term, but it may be taken to mean an approach to dance limited only by the movement capability and sensitivity of the performer, and the imagination, courage, and craft of the choreographer. Performed patterns such as steps, routines, or combinations are not used. Rather significant movement sequences are drawn out of human experience and the very act of moving. Form develops from the manipulation of these movements according to the dictates of the choreographer. While basic content may come from ancient as well as current sources, it is expressed primarily by the movement selected - colored by the character of the choreographer and performer, and unhampered by conventional ways of moving (Asante 177)."

Methodology

In order to conduct this study, I utilized non-participant observation, interviews, and library research. My initial idea was to learn and perform Ghanaian dances, but as I narrowed my topic to the interest I have in the growing genre of contemporary Ghanaian dance and the surrounding debate, it was no longer necessary or applicable for me to spend a majority of my research time dancing. I did take lessons with Veronica Gbetsedzi, a member of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, in two traditional African dances called Bima and Gota, which helped me become more familiar with some traditional dances and also helped me make contacts in the dance community at the University of Ghana.

Because my topic focuses on contemporary dance, I chose to conduct my study in Accra. Accra is the capital of Ghana and, as the largest city in the country, has experienced the largest degree of westernization. The base of the contemporary dance community is located in Accra. I studied primarily at the University of Ghana in Legon. I see the University as playing a central role in the debate because students in the dance degree program are the professional dancers and choreographers of tomorrow. The amount of exposure they have to non-Ghanaian dance forms will, to a certain extent, determine the amount of influences that exist in the professional dance community in the near future. The faculty at the School of Performing Arts in the University has chosen to require students to study both traditional and non-traditional dance styles. Because of this, students are being exposed to dance movements and concepts that are controversial. I was also able to observe both traditional and non-traditional dance classes at the University. This helped me see exactly what the students were being exposed to in a formal classroom setting, which in itself is an example of western influence.

I conducted library research at the International Center for African Music and Dance Reference library at the University of Ghana. This gave me background knowledge about contemporary Ghanaian dance. I looked for what had been published on the subject and what holes needed to be filled. My

research helped shape my fieldwork and become aware of perspectives that, while widespread in Ghana, are not commonly held in Accra.

I attended rehearsals for the Ghana Dance Ensemble, a group headed by Professor A.M. Opoku. The Ensemble performs traditional and contemporary dances. In the rehearsals I attended, I saw works that were based on traditional dances, but had been altered to fit in a stage setting. I also attended a rehearsal of the Hayor Dance Company. This group is based at the W.E.B. DuBois center and also performs a combination of traditional and non-traditional dances. I was able to witness a choreographer for the Hayor Dance Company at work. Frank Chidi, a second year dance student at the University of Ghana was setting a piece of choreography on the dancers that incorporated traditional African movement with some modern dance movement to which he has been exposed.

Towards the end of my research, I came into contact with Nii-Yartey, the Artistic Director of the National Dance Company. I was able to watch one of the company's rehearsals, which gave me the most concrete example of contemporary Ghanaian dance that has been heavily influenced by western dance forms. At the rehearsal, the company performed a piece entitled "Solma" and segments of a piece entitled "Musu" both co-choreographed by Nii-Yartey.

While I was conducting my research in Accra, I was able to compare my observations with those that I had made watching traditional dance in Tamale, Krobo-Odumase and Klikor during the first part of the semester.

I conducted formal interviews with Kofi Gademeh, a dancer in the Hayor Dance Company; Veronica Gbetsedzi, a dancer in the Ghana Dance Ensemble; and Nii-Yartey, the Artistic Director of the National Dance Company. In these interviews, I focused on the informant's respective company and what they hoped to contribute through the work of the company to the dance community. I also interviewed Frank Chidi the previously mentioned second year dance student and Oh!Nii Sowah, a lecturer in the Department of Dance Studies at the University of Ghana and the Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. In these interviews, I focused on dance at the University of Ghana. I asked them questions that targeted the informants' perspectives on what the people of Ghana

need to do to maintain their dance traditions and what role contemporary dance could play in that process.

In Tamale, I had a formal interview with Fuseini Yakubu, a leading member of the Mbamba Cultural Group. I asked him questions concerning the need for preservation of dance traditions and the differences between the dance community in Tamale and that in Accra. I also had informal encounters with several dancers in Tamale. Unfortunately, I was unable to use a Dictaphone until I conducted my last two interviews, both with Nii-Yartey.

Chapter One: Influences on contemporary Ghanaian Dance

The concept of dance fusion or the blending of seemingly distinct dance styles (African, modern and ballet or any derivative of the three) is on the increase in the dance world... Africa is bound to be affected by these changes because of the role that the arts play in this society even though such changes may provoke some criticism and controversy.

~ Tracy D. Snipe
in "African Dance: Bridges to Humanity"
(Welsh Asante 69)

Dance is an expression of culture and culture is inherently evolving. It is therefore unrealistic to expect Ghanaian dance to remain static. Dance in Ghana has and always will change with the culture. This fact is indisputable. The controversy arises from questioning which direction the changes should take. There is a range of opinions among Ghanaian people concerning this question. All are valid and all can be used to promote dance in one form or another in and outside of the country.

Dance in Ghana has been heavily influenced by outside cultures. In rural and traditional villages these influences are more apparent in the format and context of the dances than in the movements of the dances. Generally in traditional Ghanaian dance, there is no distinction between performer and audience member. Every person present is involved in creating the music and dance (Nii-Yartey 5 MAY, 2000). A circle formation is typical for this type of event. Due to interactions with western cultures, the western notion of a non-participant audience has now taken hold in Ghana. The use of a stage or a stage format is common in many regions of Ghana (Nicholls 51).

Even in villages, dances that had always been performed for specific ceremonies have begun to serve as entertainment as dance does in western societies; however, the effects of western influence are still subtler in villages than they are in Accra. The students at the University of Ghana learning

traditional and non-traditional dance are having a very different experience with Ghanaian dance than people living in more traditional regions. While you wouldn't find movements from a western style of dance in a rural Ghanaian village, it is possible to see dances performed out of the traditional context. Visiting tourist groups can, at any time, request to see dances that are traditionally performed for specific occasions (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000).

Since dance is an expression of daily life in Ghana, regions in which daily life is heavily influenced by western cultures will produce dance that is heavily influenced by western dance styles. Accra is the city in Ghana that has been most profoundly influenced by western cultures, so it is logical that the art coming out of it demonstrates ~) the effects of those influences. The areas where people are leading more traditional lives are still producing traditional dance (Nii-Yartey 5 MAY, 2000).

In Accra, contemporary dance has had to struggle to maintain a balance between tradition and material from imported popular western culture. During the 1980's, the national dance competition was flooded with popular dance from the U. S., inspired by such artists as Michael Jackson and MC Hammer. This was not acceptable for many of the organizers of the event. To counterbalance the trend, Nii-Yartey suggested a change ~ in the requirements of the competition. In the early 1980's, his suggestion was taken and each contestant was required to perform one dance style of their choice and one traditional dance. Eventually, another component was added to the competition in which the dancer had to perform a dance of their own creation using elements from popular dance and traditional dance. This addition led to a Ghanaian champion at an international dance competition (Nii-Yartey 5 MAY, 2000).

This is where advocates of contemporary Ghanaian dance see the future of dance in Ghana. They believe it is possible to preserve what has already been created while continually creating new forms and making Ghanaian dance marketable in the rest of the world. Critics often frown upon the concept of 'choreography' as it is found in the example of the competition, believing that it is

necessary, especially at the international level, to stay true to Ghanaian traditions.

Chapter Two: Critics of Contemporary Dance

The subject matter of African dance is all inclusive of every activity between birth and death - the seed which trembles to be born -the first breath of life -the growth, the struggle for existence - the reaching beyond the every day into the realm of the Soul - the glimpsing of the Great Divine - the ecstasy and sorrow which is life, and then the path back to the Earth. This is the dance!

~ Pearl Primus
in "African Dance"
(Welsh Asante 6)

In Accra, the overwhelming majority of the dance community is in favor of borrowing movements and concepts from non-Ghanaian dance forms to create a new dance form. However, this opinion is not widely held in smaller communities where the influences of western culture on daily life are less pronounced than in Accra. People in villages are not familiar with contemporary dance or the benefits seen by its advocates. They know traditional dance to be a significant and necessary part of their lives from birth to death. They know dances that are so old that the choreography could never be attributed to a single person. They are determined to preserve their dances in the pure form that has been meaningful to their culture for centuries. In order to do this, they feel they must prevent the infiltration of foreign elements (Sowah 2 MAY, 2000).

Because dance plays such an integral role in traditional Ghanaian communities, the people of these communities feel that diluting the movement and meaning with nontraditional movement is a threat to the longevity of their culture. Traditionally, dances are not simply forms of entertainment. They are symbols of the culture from which they come. Every movement, costume and song included has a purpose (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000). When practitioners of the

art form hear that new, non-Ghanaian movements are entering their dances, it does not make sense. All the movement necessary for them to express their heritage is available in Ghana (Yakubu 24 FEB, 2000.)

Traditionalists are often opposed to the concept of choreography. Traditional dances were at one point created by people. It is, however, not viewed as the achievement of a single person. Traditional Ghanaian dance is not about individualism. Rather, it is about community. The concept so common in western dance forms of an individual making a dance is foreign to Ghanaians. Many do not accept the practice of choreography because of the spirit of individualism that it embodies (Sowah 2 MAY, 2000). The word 'choreography' alone causes problems for many traditionalists. Although all dances were at one point choreographed, traditionalists find a negative connotation with the word. They take it to mean the use of non-Ghanaian movements even though, technically, the word does not denote such use (Nii-Yartey 5 MAY, 2000).

Ghanaians are not the only people who voice their opinions against contemporary Ghanaian dance borrowing movement and structure from western dance styles. Frequently, westerners fight for the preservation of African traditions as well. Many westerners express disappointment in finding heavy influences of western culture on African cultures. They do so in recognition of the rich cultural traditions of Africa. Many people from western cultures are determined to preserve the traditional artistic practices of Africa because they have value to all people. Many of the westerners concerned with the preservation of traditional African cultures agree with the traditionalists in the belief that the influence of western art forms will lead to the degradation of tradition (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000).

Chanter Three: Creators of Contemporary Dance

In the course of social evolution, a modernizing, urbanizing people need to see reflections of their emerging new identity mirrored in their popular arts.

~ Robert W. Nicholls
in "African Dance: Transition and Continuity"
(Welsh Asante 50)

There are several reasons that members of the contemporary Ghanaian dance community do not feel the need to limit their exposure to western dance styles or the influence of such styles on their choreography. There is the practical reason that stems from the belief that dance is one of Ghana's largest commodities and in order to market it, it must be appealing to a wide audience. There is also the artistic reason that stems from the belief that expanding a dancer's movement vocabulary only expands their capability to express themselves. These reasons are supported by the trust that contemporary dancers have the ability to create new dances while simultaneously maintaining traditional dances (Chidi 28 APRIL, 2000).

If the dancers of Ghana are ever to be able to support themselves financially through dancing alone, they must be able to attract an audience. The concept of dance as a performance is relatively new in Ghana and that fact alone makes drawing a Ghanaian audience to a dance performance a difficult task. There is an added challenge to drawing a Ghanaian audience when the dances performed are traditional because Ghanaians already know the dances. There is no reason for a person to pay money to attend a performance of dances that they know. Performers have to add something to their performance that is unrecognizable to their audience. It is exciting for an audience to see familiar elements fused with unfamiliar elements. This principle also helps draw a non-Ghanaian audience. It is often difficult for foreigners to appreciate traditional Ghanaian dances because the movements and stories are too unfamiliar. Adding

elements with which foreigners can connect helps attract a larger audience (Chidi 28 APRIL, 2000).

Another reason that many dancers and choreographers continue to promote and create contemporary dance is that they feel the need to express their feelings and experiences that stem from the world around them. Because the generation of Ghanaians]4 currently in the dance community is having experiences that were entirely foreign to their predecessors, it is logical that the dance they create would need to involve new and different movements. Most of the movements necessary for this expression come directly from the Ghanaian dancer or choreographer, but they also see no reason to avoid using movements that already exist in other dance forms. As Nii-Yartey said, " Why reinvent the wheel (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000)?"

The contemporary dancers and choreographers that I spoke with were not worried that traditional dance forms would die out. On the contrary, they feel that their utilization of the traditional dances as a base for their choreography gives the dances the dynamic quality that they are meant to have. Some of these dancers take offense to westerners imposing cultural preservation on Africa. Nii-Yartey sees it as an attempt to prevent Africa from evolving naturally. He states, "Africa must move with the rest of the world and if the rest of the world doesn't like Africa moving, too bad for the rest of the world. Because the rest of the world wants to see Africa in jungle attire. . . ." Speaking about the necessity for dynamism within a culture, he adds, "We all go to the old to take, but it's sacrilegious, it's a crime, it's a sin to feed on what has been created yesterday. If you don't create anything for tomorrow, what's your use?" He and many others believe that as long as the use of outside influences is conscious, acknowledged and relevant, the traditional dance will not be lost in it (Nii-Yartey 4 MAY, 2000).

Discussion

Every form of dancing is good in so far as it expresses the content or subject with which the dance deals; and that form is the most natural which is most suited to the purpose of the dancer.

~ Michael Fokine
letter to "The Times" July 6, 1914
(Copeland 258)

Art in Africa is an expression of the lives and the history of the people. It is functional. Given the diversity that exists among the people of Ghana, these functions cannot be served for every person in the same way. It is most important for some people to honor their history, traditions and ancestors through dance while for others, dance serves them best as a means to express the emotions and events stemming from the modern world around them. The struggle between the two sides is not overt from what I have seen. On the contrary, each member of the Ghanaian dance community knows his/her stance on the subject and conducts their career accordingly.

This subtle struggle is beneficial to both forms of dance in Ghana. Practitioners of traditional dance view westernization as a threat to the preservation of their culture and traditional practices. In light of this perceived threat, they make an extra effort to preserve the dances as they see fit. This is beneficial for the country because the only thing they need to make their endeavor successful is the education of children in traditional beliefs and practices. As long as the community has passed this knowledge down to a group of people in the next generation, it will live. Children are taught by the opponents of contemporary dance to continue in the preservation of traditional dance.

On the same token, advocates of contemporary Ghanaian dance are only fueled by the criticism that they receive. They are confident in their belief that Africa must move forward and this must be done through art. They do not intend to meld into dance forms that already exist, they intend to borrow what is relevant

to them in order to create their own dance form that will allow Africans to express their current situations as they have been doing for centuries.

The threat of losing tradition by adopting new movement that is felt in the traditional communities is not a concern for contemporary dancers and choreographers. The people I spoke with said that they use traditional African dance as the base of their choreography and feel that in this way they are doing their part to conserve the knowledge handed down to them by the previous generations. They feel that it is not enough to preserve the past. One must also give future generations the same gift that was given to them. This gift must be a reflection of the world as they see it. In a country where nearly every aspect of life has been influenced by western culture, dance as a reflection of life cannot go unchanged. As Nii-Yartey stated, " Yes, we borrow. We borrow with a knowledge of the past. We borrow with a knowledge of today. We borrow with relevance. We borrow to express ourselves as people living in today's world (Nii-Yartey 3 MAY, 2000)."

I see the significance of the traditional dances of Ghana. Each one carries the weight of generations full of struggle and celebration. It is crucial that the future generations of Ghanaians are educated in traditional dances. The people of this country must be aware of the meanings of these dances, because it is their history. Video alone as a form of documentation cannot do justice to the traditional Ghanaian dances. The people must be educated about the people and cultural traditions in order for the dances to be meaningful.

However, there is not only significance in traditional Ghanaian dance, there is significance in the Ghanaian tradition of dance and dance creation. It is of extreme importance that the people of Ghana are encouraged to use dance as a tool of expression. Each individual will find their expression in different movements, some traditional and some new. Entire dance forms can be developed through using this diversity. If a person connects to a movement they find in a non-Ghanaian dance form, they should, by all means use it to enhance their expression. This process should not inhibit the preservation of traditional dances.

If I had this research project to do over again, there are a few things I would do differently. I was fortunate enough to have been exposed to a few dancers in the Northern region who were of the opinion that contemporary dance and choreography utilizing western movements would lead to the degradation of the traditional dances and therefore, the traditional culture. However, my time in Accra was so much greater than my time in more traditional areas that my findings are imbalanced. I found myself with a majority of sources that supported the development of contemporary dance. From the reading I did and the limited encounters I had with people in more traditional areas, I think that studying in depth in one of these regions could have resulted in a more balanced presentation of the opposing viewpoints.

Because African communities highly value the art of dance, it is not in danger of dying out. As long as forms exist that enable each member of Ghanaian society to express their lives, emotions and histories as they see fit, dance will be serving its purpose in the culture. Conflict has the power to strengthen both opponents. Both contemporary and traditional Ghanaian dance styles can flourish as a result of this struggle. Neither side is too weak to survive the debate.

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