A Dynamic Blend: The Study of Traditional Ghanaian Dance in Connection with American Hip-Hop and Tap

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A Dynamic Blend: The Study of Traditional Ghanaian Dance in Connection with American Hip-Hop and Tap

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Abstract

• **Title**: A Dynamic Blend: The Study of Traditional Ghanaian Dance in Connection with American Hip-Hop and Tap

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• **Objective**: The goal of this study is to explore the composition of dance that blends traditional Ghanaian dance with movements from American hip-hop and tap. In order to achieve this goal, the objectives were:
  
  i. To study traditional dances from West Africa, especially Ghana, including the movements, histories, and meanings
  
  ii. To learn about the process of choreographing traditional dances for the stage, particularly as dances from other cultures are blended in
  
  iii. To investigate the risks and rewards of the cultural exchange and transformation that occur when traditional dance is mixed with other forms

• **Methodology**: Research involved learning several traditional dances from West Africa in addition to a few dances choreographed using both traditional and contemporary African movements. Research also consisted of composing a piece using the vocabulary from traditional dances learned and from hip-hop and tap from America. Furthermore, research included observation at dance rehearsals at two schools: at an international school, which involved participation in drumming; and at a senior high school, which involved participation in dancing and including students in the blended choreography. Finally, interviews were conducted with various members of the Ghanaian dance community.

• **Findings**: The movements of traditional West African dance have many similarities to the movements of American hip-hop and tap. The styles are aesthetically pleasing when fused together in a composition. Still, traditional dances express cultures that must be respected and not distorted when modified. It can be exciting to blend different forms of dance and to note the universal qualities, but one must be aware that preserving culture through maintaining traditional dance is an important part of multicultural appreciation.

• **Conclusion**: Research must be approached with respect for other cultures. Learning about traditional dance and drumming before creating a composition was necessary. More time could have been spent understanding what a range of people in Ghana think about the study, and it would be interesting to compare the perspectives of different generations.
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“Good friends are like stars. You don’t always see them, but you know they’re always there.”
(Old Saying)

I thank my family first. My experience in Ghana will impact the rest of my life, but it has also been impacted by my first twenty years. So thank you to my parents, my sister, and my entire family—including my friends and dance families because friends are the family we choose—for making me the person I was as I entered this incredible semester. I am grateful that Yemi has noticed my “home training,” and you all are responsible. Thank you for supporting my decision to study abroad, allying my constant fears, and pushing me to take this rewarding risk. And thank you for being my home to which I can always return as if I never left.

Thank you to my dance teachers, every single one. I am sorry that I cannot name you all. You have helped me to become the dancer I am today, and I do not know what my life would be without dance. In Ghana I have learned the importance of learning the right way from the right teachers. Alex, Niki, and Sean: thank you for being the right teachers and for sharing your wealth of knowledge with the next generation. Your sacrifices are not unnoticed, and every day I appreciate the wisdom that you have shared with me. Thank you for never stopping and never allowing me to stop. Dance is the language I know and love because of you.

To Columbia University, thank you for encouraging an environment suitable for lovers of all kinds of learning. I do not know of another institution with a dance department of such a high quality that welcomes any and all students to learn from master teachers in the middle of New York City. This is the very same institution that has taught me to strive academically in all subjects. I can study classics and still have time to enjoy classes that reveal the significance of researching the African Diaspora while living in Harlem. I know that my education is in good hands.
Yemi, Papa Attah, and the entire SIT staff in every region to which we traveled: I thank you for your spirit of positivity. Your presence has brought me great comfort away from home, and your support has gotten me through struggles I never saw coming. Please know that we appreciate the work that you do all year for us, including work about which we do not even know, although we may not always show our appreciation. You have taught us countless lessons about Ghanaian culture and about life. I carry these lessons with me.

To the group of SIT students: it was never easy, and we did not solve all of our problems. But I truly thank all of you for sticking with the group. I sincerely am changed because you taught me the benefits of sharing honestly. I have grown because of each and every one of you, so thank you for being the group you were.

Maame Vida, Auntie Louisa, Auntie B., and Papa and Vivien: thank you for opening your homes to me. You truly understand that your comforting words and home-cooked meals can go a long way when we are far from home.

Kofi Owusu, thank you for being the first one to make so clear to me the importance of tradition. You encouraged me to take drumming seriously and to learn the rhythms the way that they were meant to be. I will never forget how you explained your desire to preserve your culture with such earnestness, and I am forever grateful that you shared a piece of your culture with me.

I thank all of the dancers and drummers whom I have met in Ghana along the way because your energy is contagious and inspirational. You have taught me the power of dance and rhythm in all settings. To all the cultural groups we met, thank you for sharing your tradition. And to anyone whom I have seen dancing, even for just a moment, thank you for putting a smile on my face.
Throughout the final month of the semester, it is the people who have shaped my ISP. I thank my informants and friends. Francis, thank you for welcoming me into your home and reminding me that we all dance whenever our hearts are beating, and thank you for including me in the thousands of people who have been touched by your passion. Albert and Austin, thank you for generously donating your time and talent as drummers and for offering your insight about the composition. Kwakutse, thank you for stepping in with your usual prompt and helpful nature, writing down the song in Ewe as soon as I asked. Thank you to the teachers and students of Precious Gift International School for welcoming me at every rehearsal and for showing me what it means to teach the next generation to know their culture and history. Sir Robert and the Odorgonno Senior High School, thank you for supporting this venture from the very beginning and for making it possible for me to learn alongside so many wonderful student dancers and drummers. And I thank these dancers and drummers for working hard all of the time and for learning difficult choreography and rhythms—you motivated me to keep going and to always push through. You inspired me from the very first time we met, and you made this project what it has become.

Kofi, I thank you last. We both know that words are inadequate. You always knew when I was nervous and scared, and you always told me not to worry. You could tell when I was overwhelmed, and you reminded me that stress can stand in the way of productivity. You heard me say that I could not and told me that I could. You saw the beauty when I had lost sight of it, and you never let me give up. You know that you have an impact on everyone whom you meet, but let me remind you of this power. Thank you for continuing to do so much for others even when they do not return the favor. I have loved hearing of your dreams for the future, and I know that they will become a reality. Here is my promise that I will always remember you.
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- E: *Damba takyi*
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**Introduction**

“Getting the balance right between the infinitely varied textures of local history on the one hand and broader, impersonal forces of change on the other has been an issue for historians of all regions of the world. But the need to overcome the hoary racial myths of the past while at the same time capturing the distinctiveness of the African historical experience has made it a particular concern for Africanists. By emphasizing the autonomy of the African history, the danger is to underline the old idea of the continent’s essential difference and isolation. But by emphasizing Africa’s interconnectedness with the world beyond, the danger is to submerge what has been distinctive about its history in a unilinear process dominated by ‘the rise of the West’. This problem has been compounded by a growing anxiety about the ‘appropriation’ of indigenous forms of knowledge and representation by the Western discipline of history. How suited is academic history, with its rules of evidence and its aspirations to ‘universal truths’, to represent the African past on its own terms and according to its own logic?”

*(Parker and Rathbone, 2007)*

Throughout this semester in Ghana, I have been trying to absorb all the sights and sounds around me, attempting to gain understanding from what I have learned, and reflecting repeatedly. As my time here nears the end, I am realizing how much I have found to be new as well as how much has felt familiar. Making general comparisons between Ghana and America is an easy trap into which to fall, and it is important to be aware of the dangers that follow, especially in imposing my own cultural framework onto another. And yet, my natural inclination to draw comparisons has been beneficial in framing this project. Before coming to Ghana, I simply knew that I wanted to dance, and it was only recently that I decided to investigate dance through a comparative lens. How can dance be both universal and yet culturally specific? I desired to understand how traditional dance could make me feel at home in Ghana, with movements similar to hip-hop and tap in which I have trained in America, while simultaneously staying true to a rich culture unique to Ghana. I would research traditional dance and the process of choreography and modification, and I would evaluate the positive and negative impacts of blending traditional dance with American dance. This topic, including the composition of traditional West African
dances combined with modern American dances, seemed to fit well with the theme of the program: Social Transformation and Cultural Expression.

Even in orientation, all the way until the end of the educational tour before this independent study began, the program has been rich in dance. During my first week in Ghana, I experienced a taste of live dancing and drumming, and this set the tone for the next few months. Dance would be fun, and we would always have the opportunity to participate after observing. There would be communication between drummers and dancers, changing movements each time a rhythm was played for example. There would be meaning in the dance, for instance moving back in history as we moved backwards around in a circle. And there would be togetherness, with the entire group coming as one, hands on the next person’s hips as we moved in the circle. These elements were maintained in all of the dancing that we experienced, including at our first performance.

It was at the end of the program’s stay in Accra when we went to see this first performance by Calabash Dance Africa, directed by Kofi Gademeh, who would later become my advisor and teacher for this study. That performance in New Town was exploding with incredible energy as drummers and dancers alike poured their hearts into executing the traditional rhythms. I was enthralled with each dance: *adzgbo* from Benin, *bamaya* from Northern Ghana, and *sintai* from Senegal. With each dance, Gademeh explained the history and message, and I scrambled to record all of my observations. Once again, I wanted to absorb and make sense of everything. During the performance, we were all invited to learn a few movements, and it was the first time I had felt such inspiration since arriving in Ghana. The steps were difficult, but it was empowering to grasp a few of them, and the same joy that I feel when I dance at home brought a smile to my face thousands of miles away. There is nothing like
dancing, and every day here I am grateful to be immersed in a culture that deeply appreciates it. After the performance by Calabash Dance Africa, I promised Gademeh that I would call him about working together for my project; I knew anything else would fall short. As the semester continued, we learned *kpalango* and *kpatsa* from teachers in Kumasi who encouraged us to create our own choreography and perform; we danced at shrines, churches, funerals, and festivals; we experienced the dances of the North in Tamale; and again we stood up to dance at performances in the Volta and Eastern Regions. I could not get enough of the infectious energy I felt, drawing me in to know more. I absolutely had to dance for my project, and I knew returning to Gademeh in Accra was the best decision for me. Nothing else in Ghana has felt more right or more meaningful than dance. I love that dance allows me to study another culture and that I will always love dance no matter in which culture I am. This very paradox discussed earlier, with dance both culturally specific and universal, is the subject of this study.
Statement of Objectives and Literature Review

The goal of this study is to explore the composition of dance that blends traditional Ghanaian dance with movements from American hip-hop and tap. In order to achieve this goal, the objectives were:

i. To study traditional dances from West Africa, especially Ghana, including the movements, histories, and meanings

ii. To learn about the process of choreographing traditional dances for the stage, particularly as dances from other cultures are blended in

iii. To investigate the risks and rewards of the cultural exchange and transformation that occur when traditional dance is mixed with other forms

Soon after I began my research, I discovered a tension between dance remaining traditional and not becoming static. I started to see it when Kofi Gademeh, Director of Calabash Dance Africa, first taught me a piece of his choreography: a combination of traditional and contemporary. I heard this tension still when I interviewed Francis Kofi, Artistic Director of Hayor Bibimma African Dance Company, about the importance of respecting tradition while traveling abroad in a new context. And I felt this tension when I struggled to make appropriate, innovative choices in my own blended choreography. After two weeks of trying to make sense of this tension, I turned to literature for further insight.

Scholar Judith Lynne Hanna, a pioneer in the field of dance anthropology, remains a trusted expert. Reading her works allowed me to view my research as anthropological, fitting more specifically into the anthropology of dance, which emerged in the 1970s. Hanna explains, “In the history of anthropology, there has been tension between particularistic description of a single people and universal aspiration…For some researchers, a dance study is viewed as historically unique; for others, the study of dance falls within a generalizing social science”
(1975). In considering myself one of these researchers, I had to figure out where I stood. Would I find that categorizing dance infringed upon the power of a universal language, or would I find the importance of preserving difference over assimilation? Hanna’s texts were also important to the framework for my research. As in much of anthropology, I needed to find a discourse with which to discuss the dance as filming alone would be insufficient, and it was essential that I observe, train, participate, and perform (Hanna, 1979). Furthermore, Hanna emphasizes completing methodology courses and approaching dance from the social science (1968). If done properly, my research as a dancer could be useful to me as a performer, teacher, and choreographer (Hanna, 1968). I hoped that I would benefit not only myself but also those with whom I was dancing, in a kind of cultural exchange. The idea that we can all learn from one another no matter how great our differences may be, became a theme throughout my study and my entire time in Ghana.

I also read works by scholar Mary Jo Arnoldi to help focus my research. Arnoldi has studied syncretism in African arts, and she questions the definitions of African traditional arts and African popular arts. Like Hanna, Arnoldi explains that “imposing external categories on the African material” can be detrimental, and this starts with the discourse one uses (1987). It is very limiting to consider contemporary African popular arts as the combination of African and Western. This relies on the paradigm that makes the terms “traditional” and “popular” mutually exclusive; if contemporary African popular arts are said to combine traditional Africa and the modern West, then Africa is being called unchanging or static compared to the advancing West (Arnoldi, 1987). This image of a frozen, closed-off African continent has dominated scholarship for many years, and it lingers still despite efforts to abandon it. Arnoldi rethinks the scope of African popular arts in light of the true dynamism of even “traditional” arts. This informed my
research on a syncretistic art form that is based on traditional Ghanaian dance, a form that is both traditional and always evolving.

Finally, I reflected on one of the first lectures that I had heard in Ghana: Professor E. John Collins’ lecture on Ghanaian highlife music, a fusion of African, Western, and Black American. In the African Diaspora, percussion, blues, and syncopation traveled from Africa to America; later on, ragtime, samba, and jazz traveled from America to Africa (Collins, 2014). In this reciprocal fashion, American rap and hip-hop have influenced highlife and hiplife music in Ghana: the “completion of a Trans-Atlantic black performance feedback cycle,” a type of homecoming (Collins, 2004). Collins’ examples immediately brought hip-hop and tap dance to my mind. Both forms of dance were born in Black America, for which the African Diaspora is responsible. I became very interested in the blending of hip-hop and tap with the dances of West Africa, where they are rooted in the first place. Although the scope of my project did not allow for thorough background research on the history of hip-hop and tap, nor on their presence in West Africa today, the idea of Collins’ “Trans-Atlantic black performance feedback cycle” sparked my interest from the beginning of the semester.
Methodology

Throughout this study, I sought success as a research and as a dancer, as a writer and as a choreographer. Before beginning the project, I did not know how it would all come together, and I thought that time spent dancing was time lost in terms of research. Fortunately, after a few days, I realized how my dancing had a significant place in my study. As I began writing, I realized more definitively just how connected all the components of my research were, including the countless hours spent dancing; no hour spent dancing had been a wasted hour. And in each aspect of research, I worked to use proper technique. Scholar Judith Lynne Hanna reminds her reader that dancers need to study methodology in order to be great researchers, not just dancers (1968). I drew upon the methodology and ethics course from the program and upon previous courses I had taken. In past semesters, I have been in classes on anthropology and Africana studies that discussed research as a discipline, a history of cultural insensitivity, and warnings for more respectful studies in the future. During the past month, I constantly worked on using the best possible research techniques in order to produce a well-supported project.

Before I even began the research period, Dr. Olayemi Tinuoye, academic director and co-advisor, warned me about not getting stuck in ideas from my own background. He explained that dancing solo was a Western concept and not generally found in traditional African dance. In that moment, I decided that I would not let my project become a solo experience. It is true that my lessons with Gademeh were one-on-one, but this was the extent of it. Gademeh and I continuously collaborated, bouncing ideas off of one another, and the final composition is a reflection of this. It is a combination of styles—traditional West African, contemporary African, hip-hop, and tap—and of choreographers’ visions—both Gademeh’s and my own. I have learned from the other dancers in the piece, and I hope that they have learned from me as well. I taught
them some hip-hop movements and then asked them to teach me some steps from current
popular Ghanaian dances that most young people here know and love. Believing strongly in the
idea that we can all learn from each other, no matter how similar or different we may be, I
dedicated myself to participating in a cultural exchange, not a solo study.

Gademeh and I first met on 5 November at the Institute of African Studies, University of
Ghana, Legon, to discuss my project. I explained my idea, although not yet more than a basic
concept: to learn traditional dance and then to incorporate hip-hop movements with the same
traditional drum rhythms, seeing what would result. During that discussion, it came up that Kofi
had once worked with a Norwegian student in mixing traditional dance with tap. Immediately I
was excited to hear this because I love tap dance. I had not thought about bringing tap in to my
project because I more strongly found visible similarities between traditional Ghanaian dance
and hip-hop, I thought three dance forms might be too much to handle, and I did not bring my
tap shoes to Ghana. The rhythms in tap can surely be connected to those in traditional drumming,
which I remember thinking while watching cultural groups perform, but I thought this might be
too subtle visually since I could not very well demonstrate the sounds without my tap shoes.
However, I soon realized that Gademeh could help me to intertwine movements from all three
styles of dance seamlessly in one piece, which would ultimately become my presentation. This
discussion with Gademeh was more than just an introductory meeting. It allowed us to think
through ideas together, which would become an important method in my project. As the proverb
states, “Two heads are better than one.”

On 7 November, I met Gademeh for our first lesson in the morning. We began together
with a stretch and warm-up. Although I was in a new place—a large room at the top floor of a
building in Accra, New Town—with a new teacher, beginning rehearsal with a stretch and
warm-up felt familiar. University of Ghana professor Oh! Nii Kwei Sowah discourages teachers from teaching traditional dance to American or European students in the Western style, beginning class with balletic technique exercises, for example (2014). It has become clear to me that Gademeh adapts his teaching style for American students, and this first warm-up may have been an example. However, following that day, Gademeh and I stretched independently and then engaged in warm-up exercises that were based in traditional movement.

At that first lesson, Gademeh taught me a piece that he had choreographed. This was a fitting introduction to his style of choreography in that it was a combination of traditional and contemporary movements. In fact, I did not always know which steps were traditional because of how they were blended. I realized that an important research method would be asking Gademeh many questions throughout our lessons. I would interview him separately as well, but I needed to ask whenever I had a question about what I was learning. For this first piece of choreography, Gademeh used counts more than drum rhythms. I was surprised by this because I had an idea of how important the relationship between dancer and drummer is. I am used to counting dances at home, although I have learned from many teachers (in various styles) who dislike counting and make sounds instead. Especially in traditional dance, counting can take away from truly feeling the complex polyrhythm’s (Sowah, 2014). I did not question Gademeh’s method, but I wondered if he would be using counts if I were a Ghanaian student.

On that same morning, Gademeh taught me two traditional dances, and I experienced a very different teaching method. Gademeh first gave a brief description of the meaning and history of the dances, called *fume fume* and *sintai*. Drummer and dancer Francis Kofi always educates his audience about the messages of the dances in order to instill great appreciation for the traditions (2014). Gademeh then taught the movements, this time using drum language. It
was not reasonable to always have drummers at our daily lessons, and Gademeh could not dance and drum simultaneously. Therefore he used his mouth to speak the drum language. Studying the language became a part of my research as I sought to understand its importance in dance. Drummer and choreographer Albert Dzah believes that it is always beneficial to understand the language, and drum language is like any other language (2014). My research would have been unsuccessful if I had not learned about drum language at all, and this began with dancing to the rhythms Gademeh spoke.

The final stage of our first lesson was an assignment in choreography. For 30 minutes, I worked to come up with one or two minutes of choreograph, combining movements from the three pieces learned. This exercise was an overwhelming challenge. After just learning the movements, I was supposed to make them a part of my own vocabulary and use them to create new phrasing. As difficult as this was, I knew that the process was one of the most important steps in my research as one of my goals was to compose a piece of choreography.

At our second lesson, we started by going over the three dances taught the last time. I had practiced over the weekend but did not remember all of the movements. I made sure to bring my digital camera to every meeting or rehearsal from then on in order to take video recordings from which to practice at home. After practicing Gademeh’s choreography, *fume fume*, and *sintai*, Gademeh began teaching two more dances: girls’ *adzgbo*, a traditional dance, and *sogbosa*, a piece that Gademeh choreographed and is often performed by his company. These two dances were taught again with a verbal description first and then the sequence of movements in conjunction with the drum language. It was not possible to master all of these dances in the short time, but Gademeh would focus on different elements for different movements. He would
explain that the body should be lower, the arms wider, or the chest more exaggerated. I needed to take these notes very seriously if I were to incorporate the movements in my own choreography.

Our third lesson allowed for ample time to work on all of the pieces learned so far, and it concluded with another choreography assignment. This time I had one hour to create a combination of hip-hop and tap I knew from home and any of the movements Gademeh had taught me. I spent the hour working through ideas, sometimes only in my head, at least initially. I ran through the traditional dances and found steps that reminded me of hip-hop or tap and then worked to blend them together. Sometimes I would complete this process the other way around, first thinking of a tap or hip-hop step and then deciding upon a similar traditional movement. After settling on a series of steps, I showed Gademeh, and he took a video recording so that we could watch it back. This allowed us to critique the choreography and improve it, seeing what worked well and what did not. This process, watching videos over and over again for the sake of continuous revision, became a main part of my study. The composed piece has been edited every day for weeks as we have aimed for the best possible presentation.

On 12 November, we began with an ordinary lesson: warm-up, going over the dances previously learned, and two new traditional dances from the North of Ghana called *damba takai* and *jira*. This lesson brings up an important point about the methodology used in this project. The dances are generally danced by men, but Gademeh taught me the movements anyway. A Ghanaian woman probably would not learn the dances as I did, but it is not traditional for anyone in Ghana to learn in a one-on-one lesson in the first place. Traditionally, dances are learned by watching and picking up the movements; teachers do not hold lessons in classrooms, slowly breaking down each step for students (Sowah, 2014). As a foreigner in Ghana, many exceptions have been made for me, and sometimes I do not even realize. It was important for me to be
aware of such exceptions in my project. Gademeh knew that the movements of *damba takai* and *jira* had many similarities to hip-hop and tap, especially in the rhythmic qualities, and so he taught them to me. Still, he explained that they were men’s dances before we began, and he showed me a video of his group performing so that I could see how the men hold sticks even though we did not have any to use that day.

Following this lesson, the next chapter of my research began as I went with Gademeh to the Odorgonno Senior High School. We walked into a very large hall with about 30 students getting ready for their weekly Wednesday afternoon practice with Gademeh. Most students were female with a few male drummers and two male dancers. (There were no female drummers.) The scene that followed became a regular observation: Mr. Robert Owusu, the school teacher who leads the group, and Gademeh hurried the students to get the drums, clear and sweep the floor, and change out of their school uniforms. From the very beginning, I was trying to figure out whether I should take on a leadership role alongside Gademeh or become part of the group of students. Both options would have positive and negative effects. It did not seem justified for me to become a leader in the group when the students knew more about traditional dance than I had learned so far in just a few days. I was an outsider at the school, and I did not want to presume a position of authority. Yet whether or not I chose to stand out, I would and the students seemed excited that I was there. Being just another member of the group might foster a sense of camaraderie, but it also might become disruptive and distracting. On that first day, I danced together with the girls in the back line and warmed up alongside them. I did my best to be friendly without pulling focus away from Gademeh. For the rest of the rehearsal, Gademeh treated me as a member. He included me in the choreography he was creating for them, and we all prayed together at the end. This type of participant-observation informed much of my study.
The next morning, Gademeh and I met to both dance and discuss the project. After warming up, we practiced all seven of the dances learned, each two times. In the first round, Gademeh danced next to me, but in the second round, he clapped and spoke the drum language while I danced alone. This method showed me which steps I knew well and which ones still gave me trouble. I sometimes did not remember the sequence of movements, and I sometimes struggled to correctly execute parts of the dance. While it proved difficult to dance without Gademeh on whom I could rely, it was a valuable and eye-opening exercise. Furthermore, in between the first and second round of each dance, Gademeh taught me new movements. This included some of his own hip-hop choreography and some steps from South African mining dance, on which American step is based. I was excited to see the style of hip-hop that Gademeh knew, and I found the South African dance very intriguing. Just by teaching me a few sequences of short movements, Gademeh inspired my study by demonstrating how he understands hip-hop and by displaying a traditional dance with similarities to American hip-hop and step.

The next part of that day’s lesson was a discussion of the piece we would compose together. This and future discussions were a way to solidify my project throughout the weeks. We worked on the concept, considering adding in hiplife music, and we decided that some of the Odorgonno students would dance in the piece with us. The students had been so welcoming and kind to me, and their talent was impressive. Gademeh and I eagerly stood up and began working with his choreography (hip-hop, contemporary, and traditional) so that ideas could start flowing. During the entire study period, Gademeh often would suddenly think of an idea, and it was most effective to immediately start working through some movements in this way. The day’s lesson then concluded with a choreography assignment: at the end of one hour, I was to display a great number of hip-hop and tap movements (the two genres separately) so that Gademeh could see
from where I was coming in my training. I drew upon choreography I remembered from home, some of which was my own and some of which my teachers had taught me, and created a hip-hop sequence and a tap sequence. I considered which movements might blend well with traditional dance, but I kept an open mind and did not exclude any steps simply because I did not find them similar to what I knew of traditional dance. Then when I showed Gademeh, he pointed to the movements that stood out to him as exciting and potentially easy to blend together. Gademeh’s expertise made this possible, and I knew for certain that I would not have the burden of choreographing alone.

With the dancing and choreographing coming along, Gademeh arranged for the next type of research to begin: interviews. He took me to the home of Francis Kofi, who was painting drums when we arrived on a Saturday morning. As I was observing and engaging in a conversation with Kofi, Kofi arrived, and Gademeh’s brother and drummer Austin Amewuga was also at the house. I first interviewed Dzah about the benefits and risks of fusing traditional drumming and dance with other cultures’ art forms, recording his responses in a notebook with his consent. Although I did not allow my predetermined questions to constrain the interview, instead letting Dzah take the lead, I used the following questions as a guide:

- What is the importance of traditional dance and drumming here in Ghana?
- How do you see traditional dance being mixed with contemporary dance and any dances from around the world?
- What do you think about mixing traditional dance with other movements? How can this be positive or negative?
- How do you see traditional dance change as it is choreographed for performance?
How would you describe the relationship between dance and music? How is it different when there is live drumming and when there are soundtracks?

After my interview with Dzah, I had the opportunity to dance with live drummers for the first time since the project had begun. While Gademeh and I danced each of the seven pieces on Kofi’s front porch outside, Dzah, Kofi, and Amewuga drummed for us. It was a necessary part of my research to have this opportunity. It is a different experience to have a group of drummers playing than to have Gademeh producing the rhythms vocally. It was a difficult adjustment to understand the drum language as it was played, and I sometimes could not hear the signal to change movements or did not understand how a certain movement fit with the music. As difficult as it was, it was valuable in learning about the communication between traditional drumming and dancing, a complex relationship with the rhythms of the music generally manifest in the basic movements of the dance (Nketia, 1965). At the end, Gademeh taught me to play a few rhythms on the drums. Participation brought new respect to the skill and further helped me to learn about the drum language.

Kofi and I then went just across the road for an interview. I asked him similar questions to the ones I had asked Dzah, but I again chose to allow Kofi to lead the conversation as I took notes. I could tell that he had a wealth of knowledge, and he was more than willing to share stories of his experiences in Ghana and America as a drummer, dancer, choreographer, teacher and director. Kofi’s responses meant that the conversation also became about the importance of ancestry and spirits, which helped me to find direction in my research. Both Dzah and Kofi spent much time discussing the significance of teaching methods, which I found very interesting and continued to research later on. After two interviews, dancing, and drumming, the family invited
me to eat with them. I felt very welcomed and comfortable throughout the day with the family, and this allowed for fruitful conversations that aided my project.

Throughout the next two weeks of research, my project began to take shape as I continued dancing and choreographing as well as adding in literary research, further interviews, and more time with Gademeh at two different schools in Accra. In my rehearsals with Gademeh, we started working on the beginning of the composition. We saw how it would work out to use the hip-hop movements that I had shown him at a previous lesson. With much trial and error, Gademeh and I figured out a combination of his choreography (traditional and Westernized together) and my own (hip-hop) for the beginning. The next step was to compose my solo within the piece. Again, solos are not generally a main component of traditional dances, but I decided that including one solo part would be appropriate. This made it so that I could spend many hours working on the choreography at home without also needing to teach it to Gademeh or the student dancers. I felt it was important to teach the students, which is why I included them in the hip-hop as discussed earlier. However, teaching them my blended choreography would have been too difficult in the short time span given the students’ inexperience with the American styles. As I choreographed my solo, I made an effort to display movements Gademeh had taught me, hip-hop, and tap simultaneously as separate and blended. I wanted the audience to notice the three different styles and understand that a fusion was occurring. Still, I did not want the composition to feel disjointed or unnatural. This was an experiment in understanding the similarities across genres of dance. The process would have been easier if I had begun recalling some of my favorite tap and hip-hop movements earlier on in the month as I ended up rushing to choreograph the solo over a couple of days (having been modified continuously since then).
My experience choreographing the solo propelled me to conduct literary research. I looked through the references of previous SIT students’ Independent Study Projects to find potential sources, and I also recalled notes from the semester’s lectures and searched the online database JSTOR (Journal Storage). I consulted scholarly works by anthropologists and Ghanaian professors in dance. After reading about a clear tension between dance as universal and culturally specific, I brought my confusion to Professor Oh! Nii Kwei Sowah, whom both of my co-advisors had recommended. Sowah helped me to sort through ideas, and his expertise helped to tie together loose ends in my research. It was especially helpful that he shared his writing on how to appropriately teach traditional African dance to Westerners or in the context of the formal education system. Sowah immediately understood what I meant in that dance seems universal yet not, and his interview turned out to be very informative.

In addition to literary research and interviews, much of my study period was spent conducting participant-observation at the Precious Gift International School. A few days a week in the early afternoons, I would accompany Gademeh to the school, where he was preparing a group of about twelve girls around nine to thirteen years old for a beauty pageant. Each student would represent her region of Ghana by performing a traditional dance from that region and giving an oral presentation on the dance. Sometimes it seemed that my time would have been better spent elsewhere because it did not relate to my research to observe rehearsals for the casual walk or catwalk, other portions of the pageant that would be held on 7 December. Still, I felt that it was important to be present at the school as much as possible because I learned much from the students and teachers, as well as from Gademeh. I would hear Gademeh explain to the girls how important it is to know about their language and history, and this idea of preservation of culture was in line with my study. It did not make sense for me to dance with the students
because they had already learned the dances before I began coming, but I was able to drum with Gademeh while they danced. As before, learning to drum helped me to value the tradition and to understand the language. At the end of a rehearsal, I sometimes danced with a few of the girls as they did choreography to a very popular Ghanaian song. This was a fun way to interact with them, and it even helped me to learn some of the movements that the students at Odorgonno taught me for the composition as part of our exchange. Finally, with the instruments and space available, I sometimes practiced the composition while Gademeh drummed after the girls had finished rehearsing.

After leaving the Precious Gift International School, I would go with Gademeh to the Odorgonno Senior High School, a short walk away. We began to officially include students in the composition, which meant that I would take on a more active leadership role by leading warm-up and teaching hip-hop choreography to the students. (See Figures i and ii.) It also meant that Gademeh and I needed to select the few students who would be part of my final presentation. It would not have been possible to accept all of the members of the group because of space and because of their varying levels of experience and strength in dance. I gave Gademeh my suggestions, but he made the final decisions because he knew the students’ capabilities better than I could judge after meeting them only recently. We encouraged all of the members to continue practicing with us, especially because they will perform the composition (with modifications) at their school, but only the selected group of students was called to extra rehearsals in addition to Wednesday afternoons.
As mentioned before, revision of the composition was a crucial research method. The initial idea to blend Ghanaian and American dance is all that has remained the same. When Gademeh asked me to think more thoroughly about the concept, I wrote down my ideas about the message and how it might be represented in the beginning of the piece. I thought about how everyone can learn from everyone else, no matter how great our differences may be. The beginning would involve Gademeh and me responding to the drumming in different styles of dances, and we would all end up dancing the same blended choreography, with drumming melding into a hiplife soundtrack. After discussing with Gademeh, this idea changed, and it has transformed more and more as I completed research and heard insight from Dzah and Amewuga while they drummed for us at the senior high school. They could see the piece in its entirety and give suggestions with a fresh perspective. For example, Dzah recommended taking out the South African gumboot section because it would not have its full effect without a costume change. Even though this was one of my favorite parts, I understood Dzah’s point and removed it from the composition. Gademeh and I also decided not to use a hiplife soundtrack, considered adding text to be spoken aloud but abandoned this idea, and concluded the piece by adding a song in Ewe. Learning this song was important for my research because many traditional dances are not
the same without their songs (Sowah, 2014). I worked on the pronunciation and on projecting my voice with power and emotions as I would lead the call and the group would respond. Kwakutse, SIT Program Assistant, helped me to write the song in Ewe for the purpose of recording it, and I used my camera to have an audio recording of Gademeh singing so that I could practice on my own. Throughout the month of research, I saw the value of recording my observations using photographs, videos, and hand-written notes. As I began writing the final paper, I realized how beneficial my detailed notes from the first week were. If I had continued this log for the entire study period, I would have more easily compiled my observations and thoughts in this paper.
Findings

Chapter 1: Description of Traditional Dances

In line with the first objective to study traditional dances from West Africa, especially Ghana, including the movements, histories, and meanings

The following are descriptions of several dances that Gademeh taught me during our initial lessons. In addition, the Ewe song that concludes the composed pieces is at the end of this section. Information on the dances has been provided by Gademeh, and information on the song has been provided by Kwakutse, SIT Program Assistant. Please note that there may be more than one acceptable spelling for many of the words below that are not in English.

**Damba takyi:** This is a traditional dance from the North of Ghana. The chiefs can be seen performing it at festivals.

**Fume fume:** There is some controversy surrounding the origins of this dance. It may be from Ghana or from the Ivory Coast. It was choreographed by Mustafa Addy, who used rhythms and movements from *nenebe* and *zigee* (originally from the Volta Region of Ghana).

**Girls adzgbo:** This dance from Benin came to Ghana and was rechoreographed by Professor Opoku. In Benin, men and women perform the dance together; Opoku separated the genders. The women perform before the rest of *adzgbo* as a sort of warm-up. The women make sure that the men are safe from any juju in the dance and pick up any raffia that may fall from the men’s legs because the raffia could bring them harm if it falls into the wrong hands.
**Jira:** This funeral dance, for the dwarves, is from Tamale in Northern Ghana. It is a dance for the Dagombe people, performed normally at the funeral of a prominent person. The dance begins at midnight and continues until the next morning. Now the dance is performed at all kinds of social gatherings, not only funerals. Dancers have incorporated charm, or magic, displaying tricks such as revealing money from their mouths.

**Sintai:** The Senegalese dance is performed for the parents of a newborn baby. It is danced at naming ceremonies eight days after birth and especially at ceremonies of male circumcision.

**Sogbosa:** Gademeh and his friends choreographed this piece to create a celebratory dance. In the Ewe language, *sogbo* means hips, and *sa* means dance in the Akan language. The dance that I learned is a series of excerpts rechoreographed from the whole work, which is very long.

The song is from the Volta Region of Ghana but cut across all Ewe-speaking African countries.

*Fika tutu kaleowo tso yi adzo gbe*
*Emo lee*

*Amede du auanu magbe aua mayi,*
*Gbayisa woe be modzi memyo*
*mekae be modzi memyo*
*amewo du auanu*
*magbe auamayi*
*emo le nye yi*

The first call and response, each one line (repeated twice), loosely translates:

*Where is the path to war?*
*This is the way.*

The general meaning of the song is that some warriors ate the food prepared for them before war but did not go to war. They are complaining that the path to war is not good.
Chapter 2: Description of Composed Piece

In line with the second objective to learn about the process of choreographing traditional dances for the stage, particularly as dances from other cultures are blended in

This section includes a full narrative description of the composed piece previously discussed, which is to be displayed on 7 December at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, as part of the oral presentation for this project. The pictures, although not as effective as a video or live presentation, serve as a visual aid.

The piece opens first with drumming. Just after, a group of dancers, including me, enters from upstage left while the remaining dancers are in position in the upstage right corner. This first group dances along the diagonal until they have reached their positions and face the front, now spaced out. (See Figure 2.) The very beginning is my own hip-hop choreography. All of the movements fall into the category of hip-hop as I have been taught it, but it should be noted that hip-hop is a broad umbrella term in dance. (See Figure 3.) Next the dancers transition, changing positions with the simple direction to move with energy and purpose. (See Figure 4.) Then it is a series of dance moves from popular Ghanaian hiplife songs that the students taught me. (See Figures 5, 6, and 7.)
The dance steps are this generation’s way of making traditional dance new and exciting on their own terms, and I noticed many similarities to traditional Ghanaian dance. The movement quality also has much in common with American hip-hop. Next is Gademeh’s hip-hop choreography, which does not differ much from my own. (See Figures 8 and 9.) The dancers then use one of the hiplife popular dance steps to exit upstage left, while at the same time the second group enters from upstage right with a traditional Senegalese movement modified by Gademeh. (See Figure 10.) The same drum rhythms have been played throughout the piece so far, and they continue now. None of the beginning hip-hop or hiplife choreography was conceived with the drum rhythms in mind, but everything goes well together. Hip-hop dance is most often paired with strong beats, which the live drumming certainly can achieve. The movement must be slow enough to be well executed, so the drummers set two different tempos: slower for the first group and slightly faster when the second group enters.

As the second group of dancers continues to face the diagonal, they execute another traditional movement (the Senegalese dance is called *sorsorni*) and then switch to Western movements that Gademeh choreographed. (See Figure 11.)
Then all the dancers join the stage, scattering around and mixing the two groups together with the same movement with which the second group entered. (See Figure 12.) Repetition is a key part of choreography and of traditional dance in particular. Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia, Ghanaian musicologist and composer, writes on traditional drumming, “Repetition is a predominant characteristic in this music, and it may be reflected in the organisation of the dance itself” (1965).

With all dancers onstage, the movements of sorsorni continue, facing different diagonals, and the drum rhythms change dramatically, giving the movements a different dimension. (See Figures 13 and 14.) As the dancers go down to the floor, Gademeh’s choreography is not traditional. It is rooted in counts rather than drum language: four counts to go down to one’s knees, eight counts to raise the arms, and eight counts to lower them. (See Figure 15.) Gademeh’s choreography seamlessly alternates between traditional and non-traditional as the next movement is still done kneeling but is now traditional and based on a prayer position. (See Figure 16.) The dancers use a repeated modern step to stand up and then face the front with traditional steps. (See Figures 17, 18, and 19.)
Gademeh next adds his own choreography, but anyone untrained in traditional dance would not likely guess when the switch occurs. (See Figures 20 and 21.) The section concludes with all of the dancers performing a traditional movement as they exit the stage, splitting to leave on both sides. I am left alone at the center as I continue this same movement up until another dramatic change in drum rhythm signals the beginning of my solo. (See Figure 22.)

My solo begins with a combination of *damba takyi* and tap movements. For example, the first step is tap dance in the feet but uses an arm motion similar to that of *damba takyi*. (See Figure 23.) Another example is that a quick tap step is inserted between steps from *damba takyi*. (See Figure 24.) The dance then mixes a classic tap step, which is from an old dance that tap dancers around the world know, with a step from girls’ *adzgbo*. The two steps feel related because of the way the legs cross and because of a motion forward just to go backward again. (See Figure 25.)

Next my choreography combines girls’ *adzgbo* with hip-hop. The traditional movements include jumping side to side, clapping, and shaking the hips, all of which are commonly found in hip-hop dance, so the movements lent themselves to the combination. (See Figures 26 and 27.)
What follows is a return of *sorsorni* succeeding hip-hop. With the arms in the style of locking, a type of hip-hop, circling up and down starting from the wrists, the legs jump to the side and down. (See Figure 28.) Then the legs again jump and step out, but now the motion is completely traditional from head to toe, the arms following the sequence of *sorsorni*. (See Figure 29.) The motion of the arms blends into the next step as they swing back and around into a series of sliding steps from tap dance. (See Figure 30.) The tap sequence ends with a step in which the right leg swings forward and to the side in a small circular motion. (See Figure 31.) A very similar step from *jira* follows with the pelvis initiating this leg movement. (See Figure 32.) Next is a quick succession of steps from hip-hop, *jira*, and hip-hop again. (See Figure 33.)

The next movement, with both the arms and legs crossing the body and opening, could be considered traditional or choreographed by Gademeh. (See Figure 34.) Because Gademeh calls upon vocabulary from countless traditional dances that he knows, movements may appear traditional but cannot necessarily be assigned to a specific traditional dance, particularly if Gademeh has made modifications or arrangements. The next step is another sliding tap step that is in line with the crossing feeling of the previous step. (See Figure 35.)
There is a brief step from *fume fume* before more tap slides, and then comes *sintai*. The movements of *sintai*, with the knees bouncing and the arms outstretched, might easily be mistaken for hip-hop. (See Figure 36.) And so I tagged on a related hip-hop step, with the knees still bent deeply and a bouncy feel. (See Figure 37.)

The next step is directly from *sogbosa* but with more emphasis on a wave motion through the body as is typical in hip-hop. (See Figure 38.) This is followed by a turning sequence that combines *adzgbo* and tap. (See Figure 39.) Next is a brief moment of *jira* into hip-hop. The only difference between the two steps is the pace and whether or not the hands are closed into fists. (See Figures 40 and 41.) Those movements transition into Gademeh’s choreography, pushing the right leg back outstretched behind the body. (See Figure 42.) The trenches (tap) that follow keep the body low with one leg reaching out to the back just as in Gademeh’s movement. (See Figure 43.)
Next is another repetition of the movement from *sorsorni* with which the second group entered at the beginning of the piece. (See Figure 44.)

Here my choreography again combines girls’ *adzgbo* with hip-hop, first with the true *adzgbo* step and then adding a twist of the feet and changing the arms of the original step. (See Figures 45 and 46.) Then there is a sequence of fast jumping in and out, from *adzgbo*, with hip-hop inserted between. (See Figures 47 and 48.) This transitions into some of Gademeh’s warm-up choreography. (See Figure 49.) The contraction of the chest and pushing of the arms is mimicked in the following hip-hop step. (See Figure 50.) Next is the first movement of *sintai*, which continues a similar bouncing action. (See Figure 51.) And the next hip-hop move picks up on the way the *sintai* step has the feet chugging along the floor. (See Figure 52.) The choreography continues with a step from *sorsorni* from earlier. (See Figure 53.) A change of only the arms might qualify the next step as hip-hop. (See Figure 54.)
And the very next movement is first hip-hop, then Gademeh’s modern choreography, again only changing the arms and leaving the legs the same. (See Figures 55 and 56.)

Following is the first movement of *fume fume*, which merges into the main repeated movement in *sogbosa* and a hip-hop movement that uses the same shoulder motion as *sogbosa*. (See Figures 57, 58, and 59.) For Just a moment, there is another step from the end of *sogbosa*. (See Figure 60.) And after that comes a movement, with the knees coming to the chest, which might be considered from *sintai* or *adzgbo* depending on the arms. (See Figure 61.) My choreography also adds hip-hop arms to modify the step. (See Figure 62.) The next sequence finds similarities in hip-hop, *sintai*, and tap (in that order). I played around with how movements in all three dances present the heel of the foot and create different steps with the dancer’s weight on the heels or toes. (See Figures 63, 64, and 65.)
A large jump, choreographed by Gademeh, and a step from *adzgbo* take me around to face the back. (See Figures 66 and 67.) While facing the back, it is a motion from *fume fume*, and it is a motion from *adzgbo* that brings me to face the front again. (See Figures 68 and 69.) The jumping turns that follow are also from *adzgbo*, but I added a hip-hop jump kick at the end of the turns. (See Figures 70 and 71.) The same step discussed earlier as from either *sintai* or *adzgbo* then continues into a twist step from *adzgbo*. (See Figure 72.) Immediately following is a hip-hop step that resembles this twisting. (See Figure 73.) As the solo then concludes, there are three moves from *jira*, the second of which is duplicated with arms swinging in the fashion of hip-hop. (See Figures 74, 75, 76, and 77.)
Now it is time for all the dancers to join me onstage with a traditional step. (See Figure 78.) Then the drum rhythm changes dramatically for the last time, and the movement is from a traditional dance from Togo. (See Figure 79.) This goes straight into a movement from *adzgbo*, which Gademe modified by extending the arms and slowing the motion down. (See Figure 80.)

Next is a step from *damba takai* seen at the beginning of my solo. (See Figure 81.) And then it is an *adzgbo* movement. (See Figure 82.) The dancers now mix around, space out, and create a new formation (close together farther upstage) using the same *sorsorni* movement used earlier to scatter around. (See Figure 83.) Once grouped together, everyone begins one of Gademe’s moves with only the pelvis and feet moving. As this happens, a few dancers at a time leave the group, using another of Gademe’s moves, creating a line circling around the stage until reaching the downstage right corner. (See Figure 84.) After everyone has reached the corner, the pelvic step resumes. It is here that Gademe considered adding spoken text and a pause in drumming in order to make the dance’s message clearer, but we decided to keep the flow of the piece and not include it. The text that I wrote for this part is below:

*Our culture belongs to us. We must protect it. But our culture does not stand still. Forever this is a transformation.*
The dancers then face the upstage left corner and dance Gademeh’s movement. (See Figure 85.) The next step is from sogbosa, which is still Gademeh’s work. (See Figure 86.) From Gademeh’s choreography, the movement transitions into a step from fugu, a dance from Benin in which the chest shakes rapidly. (See Figure 87.) This is the last energetic dance movement of the piece. The South African gumboot section used to be here, but Gademeh and I realized that it would be inappropriate and ineffective without time to change costumes and put on the boots required. In order to tie the piece together, there is now a repetition of Gademeh’s pelvic step, and then the dance stops suddenly as the drumming ceases. After smiling during the entire piece, the dancers take on a serious mood immediately, and I call out the Ewe song written at the end of Chapter 1. As the group responds to my call, we all gesture with our right arm to show the path to war. (See Figure 88.) The call and response occurs two times, after which the group begins singing altogether with clapping and reaching out to the sides. (See Figure 89.) And after four fast claps, everyone steps backwards and kneels down slowly. With one more clap in unison, we all bow down fully, and the piece concludes. (See Figure 90.)
Chapter 3: Risks and Rewards

In line with the third objective to investigate the risks and rewards of the cultural exchange and transformation that occur when traditional dance is mixed with other forms

In order to evaluate the risks and rewards of blending traditional African dance with dance from other cultures, one must begin to define dance. If dance is defined as universal, then any blend does not seem threatening. If dance is defined as culturally specific, then blending different cultures’ dances could mean more is lost than gained. Scholar Judith Lynne Hanna writes about her experience at the CORD (Committee on Research and Dance) Conferences, interdisciplinary and international meetings at which dance in all aspects is discussed. One conference posed the question: do all the phenomena called dance (called such by Western scholars or by all peoples) have common characteristics that make them “dance” as opposed to “nondance” (Hanna, 1973)? Hanna’s response is the following definition of dance: “human behavior composed of (a) purposefully, (b) intentionally rhythmical, and (c) culturally patterned sequences of (d) nonverbal body movement and gesture which are not ordinary motor activities, the motion having inherent value” (1973). Hanna’s definition encompasses all of what most ordinary observers would consider dance, yet it maintains the idea of culture, which just keeps this from being a definition based in universality. In an earlier work, Hanna describes the utilities of field research in dance with an understanding of dance as culture. Because dance can be “as a microcosm or mirror of society, or as one of the means used to fulfill any of a multitude of society’s needs,” then researching dance allows students to meaningfully understand socio-cultural contexts and significances, and it allows choreographers to borrow from other cultures and to share meaning with different audiences (Hanna, 1968). Professor Oh! Nii Kwei Sowah explains that dance is universal in that it is movement in space, but the diversity of dance comes from difference in content and function (2014). Dance is an expression of culture and experience,
so diversity in culture and experience results in diversity in dance (Sowah, 2014). Sowah gives the examples of a feeling of vastness in dances from the Northern Savanna plains and a feeling of closeness in dances from the forest region (2014). He gives further examples of how Ghanaian culture is revealed in dance: dancers are taught to not “stand tall like a cassava stick” but to keep the knees bent as in agricultural labor; and there are many instances of the circle as a symbol of closeness, spirituality and belief in God, and ancestors always remaining important; furthermore, much circular movement is counterclockwise just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and Ghanaian culture dictates that people shake hands and greet a group of people from right to left (Sowah, 2014).

Albert Dzah, choreographer for Abibigromma Theater Company, allows for cultural fusion in dance but explains that the disparities can become problematic as the gap must be bridged between different settings (2014). There may be a difference in audience, either interactive and surrounding the performance or stationary and sitting in front of a stage (Sowah, 2014). And there may be a difference in music, either live drumming or prerecorded soundtracks. Sowah emphasizes the importance of drum language in traditional dance, explaining that a lack of available instruments does not justify using soundtracks, which may be full of mistakes, because one can speak the drum language vocally (2014). In traditional dance, the interrelations of music and dance are complex and essential, varying from the drummers motivating the dancers and setting the beat to the drummers and dancers matching each other’s intricacies (Nketia, 1965). Musicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia includes a discussion of some dances, such as the Ga kple and Akan akem, that combine music and drum instruments (1965). The composed piece for this study ended up exploring how hip-hop and tap movements can be done to traditional drumming, but it did not explore how traditional dance might be done to soundtracks
or *a cappella*. This decision was made mainly because of the strength and value of live drumming in Ghana as I came to understand it. Traditional music is the foundation for festivals and worships in churches and through priests and priestesses; the spirits are inspired to move only by the rhythms of powerful drumming (Kofi, 2014). Much of the choreography was created without specific drum rhythms in mind, but the process of adding in the drummers was a way to build the relationship between dancers and drummers, and it was a way to respect the power of the drums in traditional dance, even if much of the choreography was nontraditional.

Much of how Sowah describes the risks of blending cultures in dance is by outlining how to teach traditional African dance in a nontraditional context. (Sowah has taught at the University of California, Irving, and at the University of Ghana, Legon.) For example, teachers must include drum rhythms and traditional songs, teach without Western-style counting so that the students feel and understand the complex polyrhythm, and even educate on traditional foods, vocations, and languages so that students almost feel immersed in another culture (Sowah, 2014). My own study of traditional dance in Ghana has not been wholly in line with Sowah’s methods, but it has been part of a semester of immersion. There can be many issues when teachers lose focus of their mission to teach all aspects of traditional dance. When teachers are focused on the immediate task at hand, the “economical” solution is to get quick results by working with students on only the execution of dance movements rather than a full appreciation of culture (Sowah, 2014). Similarly, some performing artists are too excited to show off their flashy dance steps in tight costumes that flatter their figures, which is a waste of costumes that have significance in tradition; the audience should feel the dancers when they start dancing in the traditional costumes, and it is about more than just the visual aspect (Kofi, 2014). These artists display traditional dance without authenticity, selling out in order to create a work that may be visually
pleasing but is “rubbish” and nonsensical as the cultural language is distorted (Dzah, 2014). Dzah will always stand by what he knows and not distort the traditional dance and drumming, which is difficult because there is always something changed or lost in translation, even in a simple interview (Dzah, 2014).

Master drummer Francis Kofi agrees that it is wrong for African artists to travel to America to sell music without faithfully making their audiences understand and therefore appreciate the meaning and tradition. An American audience might be unable to understand the language of a song, but if they are first given a description and background information, they will be prepared to feel and appreciate the music (Kofi, 2014). When artists instead disregard tradition in haste, the kind of change that occurs is disrespectful to the forefathers who long ago created the drum rhythms and to the ancestors who shed blood for the current generations to benefit (Kofi, 2014). Kofi explains that the traditions must be preserved without being changed: they are like strong antique furniture that must be polished, dusted, and maintained so that it will last for many family gatherings to come over the years (2014). If you do not respect the ancestors, you may make millions of dollars, but the spirits will never forgive you; traditions are priceless because they are God-given (Kofi, 2014). Some people just assign names to repertoires and tell Americans that they are masters without really knowing the traditions, which is especially disgraceful in Ghanaian culture because of the value of naming as seen in naming ceremonies eight days after a baby is born (Kofi, 2014). Kofi explains that you should not use an herb if you do not even know its name because you might accidentally poison someone, and so the people who teach traditional dance and drumming without even knowing the names get what they deserve from the spirits—a haunting spirit can turn someone from performing to a life of alcohol abuse (2014).
So much, therefore, is in the hands of the teachers of traditional dance. Dzah insists that students must learn the right way, and teachers should step in to correct students who have learned the wrong way (2014). Dzah tells the story of an American student who told him that what he was teaching her was wrong, but then the young woman could not even give the history or story behind the tradition (2014). When elders see children walking around and practicing drum rhythms with their hands on their chest, the elders must make quick corrections so that the children do not continue to practice incorrectly and later pass on mistakes in teaching others (Dzah, 2014). If teachers take their time to teach what is right, that is to be preferred just as an old, well-made American car in Ghana is preferred over a new, poorly-made Indian car (Dzah, 2014). When foreigners come to Africa, Kofi urges that they do not learn dance and music just for fun (2014). They will be received with open arms and hearts, but they must not be taken advantage of by teachers desperate to make money (Kofi, 2014). Artists who can perform a dance should not teach it unless they know the meaning, and they can instead refer the students to a more informed teacher for that dance (Kofi, 2014). Kofi finds the problem amplified when it comes to foreigners because they are vulnerable in their ignorance and likely to learn from the wrong teachers, and many will then go back home to their countries and share false information (2014). Although I feel confident that I have learned about traditional dance from expert teachers, I will not try to share more than I know when I go home. I may be able to perform a dance, but that does not qualify me to teach it.

Perhaps more importantly than foreigners or students in the formal education system learning the tradition properly, Ghanaian children must be raised to see the importance of knowing their culture, including music and dance (Kofi, 2014). Today, especially in the city, many parents want their children to be “civilized,” only speaking English and not learning about
their language or customs—these children are called “lost children” if they visit their family’s village (Kofi, 2014). Kofi explains that people who live in the village may not have money, but they “really have something” in their shared celebration of culture (2014). In observing Gademeh teaching children at schools, it has become clear how much he is devoted to preserving tradition through dance. The government does not pay him to teach in the public school system, but he feels that it is worth his time and energy to teach children about their culture. He has told them that they should already know their songs and languages and encourages them to go home and ask their parents. With the next generations at risk of knowing less and less about traditional dance, it seems that this should take priority over any blending of cultural dances.

Nevertheless, combining traditional dance with other movements may intrigue audiences to study the tradition. Dzah explains that a fusion of Western and African worlds is new and exciting, making people pay attention (2014). Part of the reason why African popular arts are newsworthy is that they involve what is expected as standard first and something new and creative second (Arnoldi, 1987). Sowah points out that the Ghana Dance Ensemble (first founded as the National Dance Company of Ghana in 1962 at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon) was built upon the idea that culture must be valued, so why not say that all cultures internationally should be valued (2014)? If traditional dance is taught successfully around the world, which would inevitably lead to dance fusion forms, then we will have a chance at a more interconnected multicultural world with a global community that appreciates all peoples and traditions (Sowah, 2014). At the University of Ghana today, choreography classes emphasize both traditional and abstract movement, as well as adapting customary movements into new forms (Adinku, 2004). Professors A.M. Opoku and Nketia led the Ghana Dance Ensemble from the beginning in “a creative experiment in finding the best ways to employ
traditional dances both for cultural identity and for new artistic developments” with a mission “first, to preserve and present the original movements of traditional dances and second, to use the traditional background as a basis for new choreography which reflects modern values and concerns” (Friedler, 1997). This original mission has changed over the years but has maintained its twofold nature. In 1997, Director Emmanuel Ampofo Duodo, an original company member, stated, “I am a choreographer, not a caretaker of dance…Dance is not static” (quoted in Friedler, 1997). One of Opoku’s successors, Professor Nii Yartey, has engaged in “dialogue with dance cultures from other parts of the world,” and current director Ben Obido Ayettey “maintains the discipline of the early classics but continues to expand its repertoire and to explore dance as an expression of contemporary issues” (University of Ghana website). A similar mission is presented by Abibigromma: “to be engaged in research, performances, and experimentation in Ghanaian and African Art forms paying due attention not only to their roots in society, but also to cultural developments elsewhere in the world” (University of Ghana website). Yet such experimentation must be done carefully, as described by Dzah, one of Abibigromma’s choreographers and drummers. The positive and negative effects of blending traditional dance are far from simple, as these findings have demonstrated.
Conclusion

For one month, I have dedicated myself to making the most of this independent study project. As I did throughout the entire semester, I wanted to absorb as much as possible. I knew that this was the opportunity of a lifetime and that I may never again have the chance to research Ghanaian culture or to study dance in this way. It is a daunting task to both conduct fieldwork and to reflect on data obtained at the same time. I know that I will consider this project for many years to come, and my reflections will certainly change overtime. As of now, I can conclude that research must be approached with caution and respect for other cultures. This study would not have been successful if I had rushed to blend hip-hop and tap without first carefully learning about traditional dance and drumming. And the project would have been more successful if I had spent more time discussing tradition and dance with a greater variety of Ghanaians. I have learned about the importance of immersing myself in the culture I am studying, and I am grateful to have attempted this type of research for the first time as an undergraduate student. Future studies might approach the topic, modifying traditional dance in cultural exchange, by comparing the viewpoints of different generations. It would be interesting to study how elders may focus more on the risks while the youth may focus more on the rewards.
References


Informants


Albert Dzah. (15 NOV 14). *Interview on modifying traditional dance.* School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon: Accra, Ghana.


Oh! Nii Kwei Sowah. (27 NOV 14). *Interview on whether dance is universal.* School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon: Accra, Ghana.
Other Resources


Previous SIT Independent Study Projects on dance by the following students:

Maia Stam          Spring 2014
Grace Bella Harman Spring 2012
Adrian Graham-Chesnavage Fall 2011
Ariel Guinn        Spring 2011
Sarah Levy         Fall 2010
Latrina Bowman     Fall 2009
Nancy Wong Sick Hong Fall 2008
Emily P. Cox       Spring 2006
Adrien Zabriskie    Spring 2002
Appendix A: Additional Photographs of Dance Movements

A: Girls’ Adzgbo

B: Sogbosa
C: Fume fume

D: Sintai
E: Damba takyi

F: Jira