

4-1-1996

Professional Dance In Ghanaian Society: The Development And Direction Of The Ghana Dance Ensemble

Krista N. Fabian

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/african_diaspora_isp

Recommended Citation

Fabian, Krista N., "Professional Dance In Ghanaian Society: The Development And Direction Of The Ghana Dance Ensemble" (1996). *African Diaspora ISPs*. Paper 27.
http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/african_diaspora_isp/27

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the African Diaspora Collection at DigitalCollections@SIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora ISPs by an authorized administrator of DigitalCollections@SIT. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

**PROFESSIONAL DANCE IN GHANAIAN
SOCIETY: THE DEVELOPMENT AND
DIRECTION OF THE GHANA DANCE
ENSEMBLE**

Krista N. Fabian

C.S.A. Ghana

May 1996

Advisor: A. M. Opoku
Institute of African Studies
University of Ghana, Legon

*... Our life and soul, and the realities, perceived,
conceived, or felt that make us the people that we
have been and are at present, are revealed to the
serious seeker in our dance.*

A. M. Opoku

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Mr. Emmanuel Duodu and the members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the inspiration for and center of this project, especially Adjei, Okaidja and Pierette, for their invaluable help and friendship.

To my family in LaPaz, the Ayesus, and my family in North Legon, the Grants, for welcoming me to Ghana, their homes, and their lives.

To two beautiful women, Fati Andani and Lynn Mathias, pure embodiments of the spirit of African dance.

To Jacque, for her support. One day I will do Adowa en pointe for you.

To Jasper at the International Center for African Music and Dance, without whose help on the computer this project would not exist.

Most of all, to Professor Opoku, for all his advice, his inspiration, his time, his stories, his friendship and his wisdom. Peace.

ABSTRACT

In 1962, the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the National Dance Company of Ghana, was started as an experiment between Ghana's educational and governmental systems, aiming to prohanaian culture and national unity. By preserving traditional music and dance through contemporary, theatrical and creative presentation, the Ensemble has been a driving cultural force in Ghana for over 30 years.

Yet presenting the traditional performing arts in these new ways brings new challenges to the choreographers and dancers. This is their story- a project about the company, those who began it and those who, with their energy and dedication, continue the tradition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Methodology	2
Introduction	6
Chapter I: The History and Formation of the Ghana Dance Ensemble	8
Chapter II: The Challenge of Professional Dance	13
Chapter III: Preservation vs. Innovation: The Choreographer's Challenge	17
Chapter IV: The Company	21
Conclusion: The Future of Professional Dance in Ghana	26
Endnotes	28
Appendix A: Ghana Dance Ensemble Repertory	30
Appendix B: Photographs	34
-Rehearsal	
-Performance	
References	47

Methodology

This is a project less about a dance company as an institution, or dance as an art form, than about the people who make this art form and this particular dance company the cultural force that it is. Therefore, most of my information comes straight from the people themselves, through both formal and informal interviews with the founders, original members and current members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble.

Lucky for me, when Professors Nketia and Opoku designed the plan for a National Dance Company of Ghana in 1962, they connected the dance company to an educational institution, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. This facilitated my research, for in one cluster of buildings at Legon, I had all the resources I needed at my fingertips: the "academic" side- Professor Opoku and his colleagues at the Institute of African Studies and the School of Performing Arts- and, right next door, the "practical" side- the dancers of the Ensemble, rehearsing each day in the Dance Hall and the Mirror Room.

It was at this area of the University of Ghana, Legon, where I spent the three weeks of my field work, observing and absorbing. I found the written materials that I needed to back up my project in Professor Opoku's office, in the Institute of African Studies Library, and at the International Center for African Music and Dance. I conducted formal interviews with Professor Opoku, Dr. Adinku and Mr. Duodu, as well as countless interviews with the members of the Ensemble, both dancers and musicians. I also accompanied the Ensemble to three of their recent performances, at ABC Achimota Breweries, The Golden Tulip Hotel and The Drama Studio at Legon.

Two specific rooms held a special magic for me throughout this project. The first is Professor Opoku's office at the Institute of African Studies. Whether I came in the morning armed with my tape recorded and pages of questions for him, or just to say a quick "hello", each time I set foot in that room, I never emerged sooner than two or three hours later. I

was continually enticed by Prof's wealth of knowledge, his love of dance and the stories he told with both humor and wisdom.

The second such place for me was the nearby Dance Hall, where the Ghana Dance Ensemble rehearses each day. In the past, through both my own dance training and the research I have conducted in other areas of dance, I have often found that the rehearsal holds even more magic and beauty than the finished, polished product that is presented on stage. Although works presented on stage have their own energy, I am often more attracted to the raw energy that exists only in the studio- where dancers wear ripped-up, old leotards instead of elaborately beautiful costumes, where they work and sweat, striving towards that which looks so effortlessly beautiful on the stage.

Each day that I came to watch the company rehearse, I felt more than a little bit frustrated by the fact that they were the ones dancing and sweating to the drumbeat, while I sat quietly on the stage, writing and observing. Knowing the experience of being on their side of the room, it was sometimes hard for me to accept my role as a researcher rather than a performer.

For I believe that one cannot truly understand dance, and particularly African dance, with the mind alone, without experiencing it through the muscles. Luckily, I was introduced to two amazing women, former members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, beautiful dancers who brought me to their home late in the evenings to teach me Ghanaian traditional dances- the Adowa, Bawa and Bambmaya. Although I did not have nearly enough time to learn from Lynn and Fati all they have to offer, even the few hours I spent with these two women were enlightening and inspiring.

The majority of interviews I conducted took place either inside the rehearsal hall or in the surrounding grassy areas outside where the company relaxes and hangs around together before and after work and during their lunch break. Nearly all of the interviews I held fall into the area somewhere between formal and informal- I feel no need to choose and classify them as one or the other.

My original idea was to introduce myself to the company when they were all together, state who I am, my mission and the goals of my project. I had prepared a questionnaire that I was going to pass out to each member, then re-collect it in a few days when they were finished filling them out, read through them and begin interviewing, using these questions and answers as a starting point in our discussions.

However, what would a research project be without unexpected problems that need to be overcome? In this case, the problem was that for the first four days of my project, the dancers were never together in one place. They were not rehearsing, but scattered about, demonstrating with other junior workers of the University, members of the TAWO workers' union, for increased wages and back pay. I did not know for how many days the demonstrations would continue and I could not afford to let those days slip by without beginning my work. Since I could not identify on my own which people walking around the School of Performing Arts area were Ensemble members, and introduce myself to them all individually, I agreed when two company members who are friends of mine offered to make it their job to pass out my questionnaire.

This ended up causing some problems. Understandably, some company members were wary when they received the questionnaire, not understanding the purpose behind it. I, in the meantime, tried to introduce myself to as many people as possible, but could not talk to everyone.

It was almost one week later before rehearsals resumed and I was able to finally introduce myself and explain my project. I had sensed a feeling of distrust during that first week from some company members, which dispelled as soon as I was able to make this introduction. Gradually, the dancers came to warm up and open up to me, trusting that I was there in good faith and not to exploit them and their work. Unfortunately, three weeks is no time at all to develop a relationship with people, then do the interviewing and gather all the information needed. Just as many members of the company were beginning to open

up, getting to know me and supporting my work, I had to say "Listen, sorry, but that's it, my time here is up."

But, that is the reality of doing a research project in four weeks. Therefore, I look at this project as merely a beginning...

Introduction

In many Ghanaian societies, as in most of West Africa, dance is an integral and important part of everyday social life. In the early 1960's, soon after Ghana's independence, through President Nkrumah's National Theater Movement, an effort was made to promote Ghanaian culture and unity through the performing arts and the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the National Dance Company of Ghana, was started in association with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. This company is currently one of the two professional dance companies in Ghana.

Although a considerable amount of literature has been written about the role of dance in the traditional African social setting, this study is an attempt to go one step further, by chronicling the challenges that accompany the formation of a national, professional dance company in Ghana.

In Chapter I, I look at the original aims of the National Theater Movement and its quest to promote national unity through the performing arts. I begin with how Professor Nketia and Opoku met the challenge to form a national dance company, chronicling the history of this company from its inception through to the present day.

In Chapter II, I look at the challenges and problems of presenting professional dance in a society where dance is traditionally for everyone. Specifically, I trace the different concepts of what "professional" means in terms of dance, the ways in which traditional dance must be modified when adapting to a theatrical setting, and the evolving relationship between performer and audience in Ghanaian dance.

Chapter III focuses on the developing art of choreography in Ghana. Here, I look at the differences between choreographer and dance arranger and how the two are bridging old traditions with new ways, acting as both preservers and innovators of Ghanaian dance. I trace choreographers from Professor Opoku, the originator of the art in Ghana, to the

In Chapter IV, I look at the dancers themselves, in an attempt to find out first hand who they are and why they do what they do with such love and dedication. Whereas the founders of the Ghana Dance Ensemble and professors of dance have their own story to tell of dance in Ghana, there is another perspective, that from the point of view of the dancers themselves, that I feel is important to tap into and understand.

To conclude, I look to the future of professional dance in Ghana. Like with most dance companies, the hope and desire to thrive is strong, the largest obstacle is financial, and the future cannot be foretold.

My aim for this project is to present Ghanaian professional dance from a variety of perspectives. It is an attempt to paint a realistic picture of this profession, while further promoting the creative performing arts in Ghana and paying tribute to the dancers, of both the past and the present, who supply this dance company with an endless amount of energy and vigor, enabling it to survive for over 30 years as one of the strongest cultural forces in Ghana.

Chapter I: The History and Formation of the Ghana Dance Ensemble

Traditionally for the societies that comprised the Gold Coast that is present-day Ghana, as in many African societies, dance is a way of life. Nearly everyone dances- at funerals, weddings, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, and festivals of all sorts. Some dances are done to show respect, others to affirm status and yet others to express religious beliefs or personal feelings such as joy, sorrow, hostility, restlessness or friendship. Dance is not something that certain people learn and others do not- it is an integral part of each member of the community's life. Dance serves as a means of unification within the community, as well as a means of communication. As Professor Opoku explains it, "You've got to learn to dance. It isn't enough to say to a friend, 'I'm sorry to hear your mother has died'. You have to dance it." (1¹)

During nearly 100 years of the Gold Coast's colonial period, the British tried to impose their beliefs and values onto the society they governed, aiming to mold the lifestyles of their subjects to their own European model. Whereas there had already been a strong tradition established, colonizers now preached 'Ignore your tradition and take mine'.

This caused an underwriting of many of the traditional cultural systems of the people who now constitute the state of Ghana, as well as a division between the older generation, who felt more strongly connected to tradition, and their children, who were more easily and willingly accepting of British norms. (2²)

One such belief that the British colonizers tried to pass on to their subjects in Africa was the Christian notion that dance, as a bodily expression, was immoral and evil. People were discouraged from dancing, and dance and the related performing arts were pushed to the back burner of society.

But although suppressed by colonialism, Christianity and an imported educational system, dance, as a soul of the people, was never forgotten. When Ghana gained

independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah, the nation's first president, was wisely aware of the power of the arts, including dance, as a common denominator of his newly united people. He believed that the cultural emancipation of Ghana, in particular, and Africa in general, was linked to its traditional arts. As Professor Nketia explains it, "African nations cannot afford to lose their cultural identity, for it is this that will enable them to contribute to the enrichment of other world cultures." (3³) In addition, Nkrumah believed that the strong sense of community fostered through the traditional arts could work on a national level, contributing to the building and unification of the new nation. In 1959 he established a National Arts Council

to foster, improve and preserve the traditional arts and culture of Ghana and examine the practical ways and means to encourage a National Theater Movement, which at once reflects the traditional heritage of this country and yet develops it into a living force, firmly rooted in and acclaimed by the modern Ghanaian today.(4⁴)

He appointed J. H. Kwabena Nketia and Albert M. Opoku to find the best ways of employing Ghanaian traditional dances for new artistic development. Nketia and Opoku's answer was to establish a National Dance Company, in connection with a school, in order to unite Ghanaians from different cultural backgrounds through the common denominator of the dance, which could then be performed on national occasions in a contemporary context. They developed what they termed a "creative experiment"- a collaboration between a government department (The Institute of Art and Culture) and a university department (The Institute of African Studies). While the government's main objective was the promotion of African art forms, Nketia and Opoku firmly believed that their National Dance Company must be linked to an educational institution in order to facilitate research into the traditional arts. A school was necessary, they felt, to train Ghanaians "professionally to perform not only the dances of their tribal areas, but also those of other parts of Ghana, a school where Ghanaians can study music, dance and drama, an African school of dance which can offer opportunities for dance education similar in objectives to comparable schools abroad, a school which will ensure continuity in the dance traditions of Ghana."(5⁵)

Because of its central location, Kumasi was originally considered as the home base of this national dance school and company, but Accra was finally chosen for its close proximity to the national government, in order to keep the company near for performances on official occasions. (6⁶) At the University of Ghana, Legon, Nketia and Opoku designed a certificate course to supply their dancers with the necessary training. Ads were put in the local papers searching for

candidates with a good basic education and aptitude for the dance, not less than 18 years of age or more than 25 years old, prepared to undergo rigorous training for a period of two years in dance techniques and theater studies, on completion of which they would be expected to join the National Dance Company. (7⁷)

After auditioning those who answered the ad, Nketia and Opoku chose 13 young men and women to train for the National Dance Company. During their two-year training period, learning was not restricted to the University of Ghana campus alone. The group traveled to numerous towns and villages throughout Ghana to learn original dances and drumming in the traditional setting. While still studying to complete their certificate, the students began performing as the National Dance Company of Ghana. Nkrumah, realizing the importance of cultural development as a political policy, as well as the creative potential of the art of dance, invited the group to perform for official parties and political rallies, to entertain visiting ambassadors while promoting the cultural tradition of Ghana. "The most sensible thing that happened was when politicians saw the power of dance," remembers Professor Opoku. (8⁸) In October 1964, the first students had finished their certificate course and officially formed the National Dance Company of Ghana, entitled the Ghana Dance Ensemble. By 1966, when they traveled as ambassadors of culture to the Dakar festival, the Ghana Dance Ensemble had established a strong repertory of traditional dances, researched in the villages they came from and choreographed by Opoku, who was later appointed Artistic Director of the company. In the following years, they completed a six-country Eastern European tour,

as well as other politically-orientated performances in Moscow and Leningrad and an appearance at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico.

The Ghana Dance Ensemble and the School of Music, Dance and Drama continued their work in dance promotion, research and performance under the Institute of African Studies until the early 1970's, when the university appointed K.A. Busia to investigate the structure, aim and objectives of the company and school. Concluding that the aims of the School of Music, Dance and Drama transcended the boundaries of Africa, Busia, who was later to become Prime Minister of the Second Republic of Ghana, proposed that the School of Music, Dance and Drama separate from the Institute of African Studies. This split was implemented in 1975 and the school changed its name to the School of the Performing Arts. The Ghana Dance Ensemble, however, remained under the Institute of African Studies in order continue its connection with traditional African dance research.

The Ghana Dance Ensemble continued its role as the professional, national dance company of Ghana until 1994, when Mr. Abdallah, Minister of Education and Culture, in an attempt to draw the spotlight onto himself and his country's dance, tried to get the company to leave its home at the Institute of African Studies and move to the newly built National Theater. Opoku and Nketia, standing firm in their belief that the company must be linked to an educational institution, refused to move, in spite of the lure of financial rewards.

"You don't sell things you believe in that cheaply," affirms Professor Opoku. "Not when you're doing dance." (9⁹)

However, some members of the company did chose to go, including the then Artistic Director, Nii Yartey, taking with them the Ghana Dance Ensemble name. In addition, Abdallah, leading the government to believe that the Ensemble received its subvention from the culture half of the Ministry of Education and Culture and not the education half, transferred all government funding to the company at the National Theater,

leaving the original Ghana Dance Ensemble of the University of Ghana struggling to regain its name and its funding.

Two years later, in spite of these hardships, the Ghana Dance Ensemble, under the artistic direction of Mr. Emmanuel A. Duodu, is still fighting to regain its name and subvention, while continuing its role as a cultural and creative force in Ghana. While Nii Yartey's company at the National Theater has taken a more contemporary angle to Ghanaian dance, Mr. Duodu and his Ensemble keep to their original aim of ensuring the continuity of tradition in African dance.

Although due to lack of funding less research is being done now than in the past, the Ensemble continues to present traditional and creative African dances, backed by research, to foster and develop the strong traditions of Ghanaian art and culture. The Ghana Dance Ensemble of 1996, like the company that began over 30 years ago, "stands for tradition as well as creativity, for the best in African dances, for quality, and for the values which Africans look for and cherish in their dances." (10¹⁰)

Chapter II: The Challenge of Professional Dance

The emergence of a professional, national dance company in a society where dance is an integral part of everyday social life brings about new challenges to both the choreographers and the dancers. Especially since the whole idea of dance as a profession is a relatively new concept in Ghana, introduced by the National Theater Movement and the formation of the Ghana Dance Ensemble.

To begin with, there's the question of what "professional" means when speaking of dance in this society. To some, including Professor Opoku, the term has very little defined meaning:

"Dancing was a gift from the gods to everyone", he states. "No one thought of making it a career." He believes that 'Professional means quality, in the sense of dance at its best. And the best may not be making a living by it. " (1¹¹)

Selete Nyomi, Director of the Agoro Project in Cape Coast, holds a similar view:

"Who trains who to become a professional dancer?" he asks. "A professional may be trained and has done research, but what about the one who has never gone to school, but has learned from all those around her and has spent many hours training? It makes it very difficult to classify who is professional and who isn't." (2¹²)

Although many quality dancers may rightfully and respectfully be called "dance experts" or "dance masters", the fact is that the professional dancers, even in a society such as that of Ghana, are the ones who are making their living by dancing on stage.
Emmanuel

A. Duodu, original member and current Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, remembers how he felt when this foreign notion of being able to make a living from dancing was originally introduced to him:

"I never thought that one could take a dance and pay you to do it," he says. "I thought it was crazy to pay you when you do it out of enjoyment."

When he first heard of the audition for the school and company, Duodu thought:

"Wow- I go and dance and you pay me? Why not?" (3¹³)

Yet when a professional dance company attempts to take Ghanaian dances out of the social context of the village and theatricalize them for the stage, this creates a new challenge, which J. H. Nketia compares to that of displaying functional, ritual objects in (3 museums for aesthetic contemplation. (4¹⁴) Precise care must be taken "to work out a form of dances which highlights and clarifies the essential forms of the dances, without destroying their basic movements and styles, their emotional and cultural values, or their vitality and vigor." (5¹⁵)

Therefore, a choreographer must be extremely sensitive and adaptive in catering to his or her audience. Sensitive in the sense of taking care that the original essence of the traditional dance is not lost in its adaptation to the stage. For example, in a traditional dance setting, the audience is free to move around and view the dance from different angles. To compensate for the loss of this liberty in the theatrical setting, Professor Opoku often modifies the dances he choreographs so that the dancers rotate directions instead of the audience.

In addition, arrangements and formations must be interesting enough to keep a passive, contemplative audience entertained. For, as Professor Opoku explains, "When you're dancing, it's fun. So you don't need to change. But when you're watching, it can be boring." (6¹⁶)

A second challenge faced by the Ghana Dance Ensemble, as well as by other amateur groups who present their dances in a theatrical setting, is how to deal with the changing relationship between performer and audience. In the traditional setting, audience participation is a fundamental part of African dance. People who are in the audience one minute become a member of the dance the next, entering into the arena to join the dancers or show their appreciation by wiping the dancer's face then dancing together and

embracing, or by fixing coins on the dancer's forehead, or raising the right arm with the third and forefinger stretched in a signal of approval.

This participation, in the traditional sense, fosters a strong sense of community through the dance. As Professor Opoku writes, •! We, the people, accept the dancer's role as the center of our lives...Thus he dances, not alone, but with us and we with him. We are not spectators, but co-creators and participants in the dramas of the African ways of life."(7¹⁷)

As for members of the outside community, Africans find no better way to welcome them as one of their own than through the dance. Participation in dance breaks down barriers, creating tolerance and acceptance.

"People accept you more here if you dance with them, rather than if you sit down with them and discuss politics," says Dr Adinku. (8¹⁸)

"An invitation to dance is an invitation to participate in our culture," explains Selete Nyomi. "And nothing is as sustainable as letting a people know you are willing to enter into their culture. Here, the emphasis is not so much on the art, but just the fact that you have accepted my invitation to participate in my culture." (9¹⁹)

"People like you better when they see you try to learn their dance," explains Mr. Duodu, citing nightclubs as another venue where people get up to dance with the ones they like and are interested in. "It's not a matter of whether you are doing the dance its best or not. For, as the Akan proverb *Asa bone nkum asase* states, 'Bad dancing does no harm to mother earth'." (10²⁰)

However, when dance is presented on stage or in a theater, traditional audience participation is not always practical, or desired. For the stage has its own norms. When forming a National Dance Company, the founders were aware of "the fact that in our new society, we shall have spectators who will not be participants." (11²¹) Thus new forms of presentation, aimed at clarity, had to be developed in the presentation of African dance. Constraints on duration, content, quality and, in particular, the needs of different audiences

who may not understand the messages, symbols, humor, wit and sarcasm of the dance movements must be considered for each performance. (12²²)

In addition to catering to a passive, rather than active audience, a choreographer in Ghana must also consider that he or she may be presenting to an impersonal, as opposed to a personal audience. According to Dr. Adinku, a personal audience is the people who know the dance that is being performed because it is a part of their culture. They are the ones who will judge it most harshly if the original meaning and symbolism have not been adhered to. An impersonal audience, on the other hand, may not understand the meaning of the dance. They will be more likely to judge the dance solely on its aesthetic beauty.

"A sensitive choreographer," Adinku says, "knows who he is presenting to. The Ghana Dance Ensemble does a wonderful job of trying to relate to the two audiences." (13²³)

These are some of the challenges the Ghana Dance Ensemble faces as professionals presenting traditional dance to an ever evolving society. Challenges that are being met in new ways each day by the choreographers and dancers who are combining the preservation of tradition with contemporary artistic innovation.

Chapter III: Preservation vs. Innovation: The Choreographer's Challenge

"For a work to have permanence, it must have roots in tradition, reflect the present, and cast a shadow into the future."

Professor Opoku (1²⁴)

The job of presenting traditional dance in a contemporary context, while catering to both personal and impersonal audiences, is the challenge faced by today's Ghanaian choreographers. Relatively speaking, choreography in Ghana is a new art, beginning with Professor Opoku's pioneering work in the 1960's when the National Dance Company was first formed. Today, the art of choreography is emerging in Ghana, slowly developing to meet the needs of a society which values both its rich traditional heritage and its modern ideals.

There is therefore two aims to the art of choreography in Ghana: first, to preserve and present, in an interesting and entertaining manner, the original movements of traditional dances and second, to then use this traditional background as a basis for new artistic creations that reflect the modern values of changing society.

When choreographing a traditional dance, one of the most important factors to consider is in insuring that the proper research is done when extracting the dance movements from the villages. This is the rationale behind Nketia and Opoku's imperative that the Ghana Dance Ensemble remain linked to an educational institution, in order to facilitate such research.

"We do the real thing and that's why people like to go and see the Ghana Dance Ensemble," says one member of the company. (2²⁵) Audience members can come to see the dances of their region, arranged in an exciting manner, as well as the dances of other regions of Ghana, which they may not be familiar with.

But, to quote Dr Adinku, "It is not everybody who presents dance in a theater who is a choreographer." (3²⁶) A difference, which can sometimes be hard to define, exists between a dance arranger, who simply studies traditional dances and reproduces them on stage, and a choreographer, who attempts to dig deeper, employing his or her own creativity in designing a work based on traditional movements, expanded and embellished to cater to a varied audience, without losing the original essence and vitality of the movement.

"The arranger may be speaking in very good prose," explains Professor Opoku, "but the choreographer is writing good poetry in movement." (4²⁷)

Perhaps the most essential element in creating poetry in movement, next to understanding the meaning of the movement, is in the connection between the movement and the music. "Movement is very beautiful to watch," says Professor Opoku. "But it's at its best when it's seen in relation to sound. As my old teacher, the master drummer Kankyire Boo used to tell me, 'A good dance is one in which you are made to see the music and hear the dance'." (5²⁸)

This relationship extends beyond that between the choreographer and the master drummer to that between the dancers and the other musicians. In the Ghana Dance Ensemble, nearly every dancer also knows how to drum and vice versa. This creates the necessary unity between movement and sound, the two manifestations of the rhythm.

Aside from researching and preserving the traditional dances, a choreographer in Ghana must also rise to the challenge of bridging old styles with new, for "African identity is not established only by reference to the past." (6²⁹)

"If our traditional arts are to survive and be meaningful in present-day Ghana," said Mr. A. K. Deku at the formal inauguration of the Ghana Dance Ensemble nearly 30 years ago, "as well as engage the interest and study of foreigners, they must be kept alive not just by mere repetition of the same age-old traditions, or by a museum approach to the art, but by artistic imagination which clarifies their aesthetic values and renews their vitality." (7³⁰)

However, "artistic imagination", in the form of original choreography, still remains a new and slowly developing art in Ghana:

"All along we have been restricted to the traditional dances," explains Dr Adinku. "But no society is static, and we cannot remain with the traditions alone, because our perceptions are changing." (8³¹)

Adinku believes that since choreography, in the sense of artistic innovation, is an art form which developed in the Western world, to be a choreographer in this sense, one must travel to the West to learn how to recognize the choreographic elements in a traditional dance and employ them for creative purposes.

Professor Opoku, on the other hand, believes that the term "choreographer" is an invented word that many use merely as a prestigious expression. According to him, choreography is much more all-encompassing:

"Even a traditional festival," he says, "is choreographed, in the way that it is planned out from beginning to end." (9³²)

This differentiation between two generations of Ghanaian choreographers serves as an example of the varied perceptions of a changing society. And the dances, as expressions of society, reflect these changes. Emmanuel A. Duodu, Artistic Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble and one of the leading Ghanaian choreographers of the 1990's, represents the new generation of dancers and choreographers who believe that their dance must be linked to, but not restricted by, tradition.

"I am a choreographer," he states, "not a caretaker of the dance." (10³³)

Through his choreography, Duodu aims to bring out the best in Ghanaian dances, enriched for the 1990's. "Dance is not static," he explains. "After five years, I want to rearrange all the traditional dances." (11³⁴)

This rearrangement of the traditional works, choreographed by Professor Opoku, that comprise the majority of the Ghana Dance Ensemble's repertory is possible because Opoku purposely left his works uncopyrighted. Recognizing that traditional movement

belongs to everyone, he wanted to keep the field open for new arrangements and interpretations by those of generations to come, like Duodu, encouraging what he terms "variations on a theme". (12³⁵)

In addition to these such variations, Duodu has been active, particularly in the past two years, in choreographing new dances and dance-dramas that are inspired by, but not limited to, traditional movement. These works include Nsrabo, his 1976 parody on military recruits' arms drills, and four pieces completed in 1995: The Slave Trade, The Power of the Talking Drum, Dwabo, and Ayaresa (Holistic Healing). This year, he finished his fourth dance-drama, Women's Emancipation, a work stressing the value and importance of women, something which Duodu had formerly taken for granted.

Taking the direction of choreography one step into the future, Duodu recently set a precedent in the Ghana Dance Ensemble by challenging his senior dancers to experiment with their own choreography. Two young dancers, Tagoe Akwetey and Nii Okaidja, have taken up on their director's challenge. The company has recently been rehearsing two of Tagoe's works, entitled Prince of Peace and The Marriage of Princess Emefa in African Paradise. And an as yet untitled, ritualistic work-in-progress, choreographed by 22 year-old Nii Okaidja, premiered this April at the Drama Studio, Legon.

Meanwhile, there are other, junior members of the Ensemble who are eager to receive the go-ahead from their director to reveal their works and materialize the choreographic ideas that are now in their heads. Aside from tradition, they are inspired by Ananse stories, things they see in town, the environment and relationships between men and women. Through them, the tradition, began by Professor Opoku, and passed on through the likes of Dr Adinku and Mr. Duodu, continues.

Chapter IV: The Company

*They know in their bones and their tired muscles and their
-imagination and energies which arouse again at the next
command, the first drum beat, that they represent life itself*

Agnes de Mille

The Ghana Dance Ensemble today, under the artistic direction of Emmanuel A. Duodu, is comprised of nearly 40 dancers and musicians. They come from all over Ghana, as well as one dancer from Togo. Some of the oldest members have been with the company for over 20 years, whereas a few of the newest dancers are not yet 20 years old and have been in the company less than one year. Many joined two years ago, when Nii Yartey and other's move to the National Theater created several vacancies.

Age is not the only eclectic factor of the group. The dancers' shapes- from fleshy and heavy to lean and long, from petit to tall and fair-skinned to dark- are as varied as their dancing styles. Some move with a mature subtlety, as beautiful to watch, yet completely different from, the energetic, acrobatic style of others.

Although the majority of Ensemble members have learned and performed with amateur dance groups and even started their own dance clubs, a few came to the Ensemble with no training but were chosen for their natural ability and potential. Others taught themselves in front of the bathroom, where they still practice and refine their technique. Nearly every dancer's number one reason for wanting to join the company is to learn.

"I want to grow," explains one veteran female member. "I want to move somewhere I don't know." (1³⁶)

Another woman knew she was a good dancer, but did not know much about culture. She was inspired by a beautiful dancer that she watched at an amateur show to go to the Ensemble audition, in hopes of learning more about dance and culture.

Many received encouragement from family members, schoolteachers or dance club leaders who recognized their dance ability and potential. Others were discouraged by their parents, who disapprove of dancing as a profession, but in spite of this, left school or their jobs as secretaries or mechanics to follow the path of dance. One dancer was spotted at an amateur performance by members of the Ensemble, who encouraged him to audition.

Another young girl had never seen the company, but "kept hearing 'Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ghana Dance Ensemble and went to the audition to see what it was about."
(2³⁷)

The auditions, the last of which was held several months ago, are conducted by Mr. Duodu, his assistant, William Diku, Professor Opoku and a few lecturers from the School of Performing Arts, including Ms. Patience Kwakwa, an original member of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. The hopeful dancers are first given movement technique to test their strength, speed, stamina and ability to pick up choreography. "A good dancer," explains Professor Opoku, "can find the changes (in the movement) and change with them." (3³⁸)

The individuals are then asked to perform two or three of the traditional dances that they know best. Afterwards, they are tested in their ability to sing and play the drums, as well as their theatrical ability to cry, act mad or imitate certain animals. Finally, they are each interviewed by the directors, who ask questions about their backgrounds, why they enjoy dancing and why they want to be a member of the company. The audition process lasts three days, although some do not return after the strenuous day one, realizing that they do not have the stamina to dance professionally.

Body type and age have of late become more of a factor when selecting new members. When Professor Opoku was artistic director, he did not prefer any particular body structure:

"It depends on how the person uses the type and size of the body to express herself," he says. "When you see the real thing, it's beautiful, and a fat person can still dance like she's floating." (4³⁹)

But Mr. Duodu feels differently, judging a dancer's build quite strongly when choosing new recruits. He prefers dancers with a slender build who can perform the vigorous movements in the repertory as well as the delicate ones and has begun encouraging larger dancers to loose weight. (5⁴⁰) He also prefers to hire young dancers, especially amongst the women, so they will stay in the company for several years before leaving to have children.

The Ghana Dance Ensemble's policy regarding pregnancy has recently changed. In the past, under Opoku and Yartey, a dancer who became pregnant was allowed a leave of one year, after which she had to petition to rejoin the company. Today, a woman can take off from the time she is six months pregnant until three months after having given birth, after which she returns to light duty, performing the less strenuous roles until she regains her full strength and stamina.

Another change from past years is in the weakening of ties between the Ensemble and the School of the Performing Arts. Whereas the original school and company members were one and the same, there are no graduates or students from the school in the current company, a factor which Mr. Duodu regrets:

"Personally speaking," he says, "I would have loved to employ students from the school." (6⁴¹)

But only two graduates attended the last audition, and they did not show as much talent as other dancers. One Ensemble member proposes the theory that "If you go to school too much, you cannot do the dance, You know theory, not movement." (7⁴²) Turned off by the low salary that would await them, most School of Performing Arts graduates do not show much interest in becoming an Ensemble member, choosing instead to go on to teach or perform in "greener pastures" abroad.

Nonetheless, relations between members of the company and the students at the school remain close, as they try to learn from and encourage each other. Recently, however, feelings of frustration have arisen over the shared space. A School of Performing Arts class has begun occupying the Dance Hall in the early morning, when the Ensemble formerly held their technique session, leaving the company with no place to warm up before rehearsal.

As for the salary, most of the dancers try to look beyond their low wages, knowing that they have chosen this profession for reasons other than the hope of financial reward.

Their salary is "only lorry fare", as one dancer describes it, yet they must find ways to get by, finding solace instead in the enjoyment they get and bring to others through the dance.

"We the dancers are always happy," says Nii Okaidja. "Not only money can make you happy. Maybe sometimes I don't have money, but if you leave me on the stage, I'm happy. Always happy, whether you have money or not. (pause) Until you go home." (8⁴³)

Always a dancer, "even eating, dancing", "even when you are walking, you are dancing", "even if I'm sleeping and you call me, I'll dance", say Ensemble members. They dance to promote their culture, to promote friendship and to get to know new people and places. They dance to continue the tradition of their ancestors, because they know they "cannot leave their roots". They dance to make other people happy, to cheer them up with their smiles, "so they will say 'me too, I want to dance'". They dance for the energy that comes to them on stage, and for the satisfaction they get from the approving applause. They dance because they "feel it", because it is their inheritance, and their gift.

"Dance is in the blood," explains Adjei Abankwah. "I can't stop it." (9⁴⁴)

In the future, some Ensemble members plan to go on and teach, to "train young girls to know the dance and join the group in the future". (10⁴⁵) Others want to experiment with choreography, or hope to switch to the drumming side of their art. Some would like to go back to school, or to make money in order to provide the Ensemble with new costumes.

What everyone in the company shares is the desire to grow, by polishing their technique and style, as well as through learning more about dance and culture.

"There are dances that I'm doing now that I'm not satisfied with," says Abu Mohammed, reflecting the group sentiment. "I want to learn more. Education has no end." (11⁴⁶)

Conclusion: The Future of Professional Dance in Ghana

Like with many dance companies from all over the world, the future of the Ghana Dance Ensemble will largely be determined by the amount of financial support it receives. Since the split with Nii Yartey, the National Theater company has received all of the Ensemble's former government subsidy. "They're sucking our blood," admits Mr. Duodu. (1⁴⁷)

An effort is currently underway to resolve the conflict over the rights to the title "Ghana Dance Ensemble" and to restore the original company's funding. In the meantime, the Ensemble at Legon was forced to take out loans to continue its existence.

Two of the areas hardest hit by the loss of funding are those of costumes and research. One young choreographer has set his piece on the Ensemble, but must wait for costumes in order to present his work on stage. "If you choreograph a dance and you don't get the costumes," he says, "it's a waste." (2⁴⁸)

The second area affected has been that of research. Without the necessary funds, opportunities to go out in to the field and look for new material are restricted.

"Dances are dying," explains Professor Opoku. "After I left, people teaching dance have not made an attempt to go out and look for fresh material. Movements are being used by people who don't understand what they're doing. The feeling is not there." (3⁴⁹)

Opoku is currently working to obtain grants for more research and documentation. His prayer is that more young people will get interested in the dance and curious about what their culture has to offer.

"People are willing to pay sums for athletics, which we don't have," he complains, "but not dance, which we do have. Instead of this "Miss Ghana" and these things, I would like them to give out prizes for the best newly created dances which are based on traditional African dance forms. That way, at least it is going to be copied and danced by people, and

if it is really good, it will stay in the repertory and become an evergreen. This is the kind of thing which I am dreaming about." (4⁵⁰)

The dancers of the Ensemble, however, seem hopeful:

"You have to suffer," says Okaidja. "You pass through some things before the chance opens. (5)

"I believe in the future," says Tagoe Akwetey. "I think the future of our country is going to alight at a high stage." (6)

With the energy and dedication of these two men and other members of the Ensemble who devote themselves to their country's dance and culture leading the new generation of dancers in Ghana, Professor Opoku's prayers may be answered.

GHANA DANCE ENSEMBLE REPERTORY ~

- does not include instrumental numbers
- * all dances are traditional and choreographed by A.M. Opoku except were otherwise noted

Adowa - Twi social (funeral)

dance Adzogbo - Benin (Dahomey)

Afrafra/Nsasaawa

Akan Ceremonial Dance Suite:

-Mpintin - processional

-Fontomfrom - dance of the warriors

-Kete

Akom - Akan ritual possession dance

Alange

Anlo Dance Medley

-Nzoma

-Ahanta

-Kundum

Anlo Dance Suite

-Slow Agbeko I - processional

-Slow Agbeko II - processional

-Fast Agbeko - warrior

-Atseagbeko - "to show off"

Apotampa - Fante

Asadua - Asante, "the tree of sweet remembrances"

Asafo - Fante military dances

Atanga - Ewe Ayaresa/Holistic Healing (choreography: Duodu 1995) - dance-drama

Azao Azaa - extension of Adzogbo

Bawa - Dagbani recreational

Bambmaya - Dagomba social dance

Bima - Frafra recreational

- Kasena

- Nankani

- Akampa

Dagbani Dance Suite - court dances of the Dagbon

- Damba - processional

- Takai

- Tora

- Butcher's Dance - solo

- Sofo Kaagyi Kaagyi!

Dwabo (choreography: Duodu 1995)

Gadzo - Anlo recreational

Gahu - Anlo recreational

Gobi - Anlo recreational

Gombe - recreational

Gota - Anlo recreational

Have Etoi Boboobo

Highlife - recreational

Kpanlogo - Ga youth recreational

Kundun - Ahanta harvest dance

Lamentation - "for freedom fighters" (choreography: Opoku 1964)

-Husago

-Achea

-Husago

Lobi Dance Suite - Dagbani

-Sebire

-Boobena

-Koobena

Nagla - Paga recreational

Ngoma Kpeng - depicting ties between drum rhythms and dance movements

Nsrabo - (choreography: Duodu 1976) parody on military arms drills

The Power of Talking Drums - (choreography: Duodu 1995) dance-drama

Sanga - Asante youth recreational

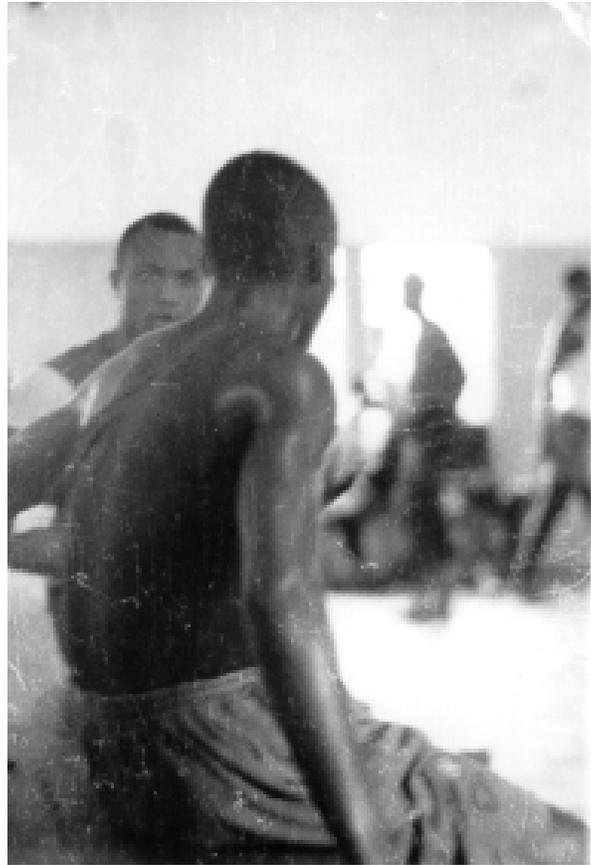
Sikyi - Akan recreational

Slave Trade - (choreography: Duodu 1995) dance-drama

Sohu - Ewe cult dance

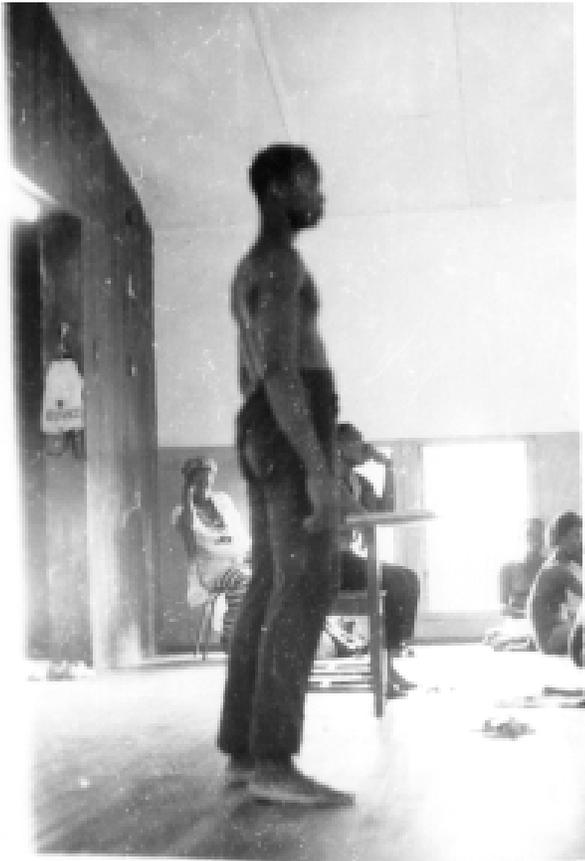
Togo Atsea - Ewe

Unity in Diversity - Opoku medley Women's Emancipation - (choreography: Duodu
1996) dance-drama











Akan Ceremonial Dance Suite



Queen Mother's Fontomfrom Duet



Bima





Bambimaya

REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adinku, W. Ofotsu. African Dance Education in Ghana. Accra: Ghana University Press. 1994
- Nketia, J.H.K. Development Programmes for Music and the Performing Art. Legon: Institute of African Studies. 1977.
- Nketia, J.H.K. Ghana. Music, Dance and Drama. Accra: Ministry of Information. 1965.
- Nketia, J.H.K. Guidelines for Action Programmes of the Arts Council of Ghana. Legon: University of Ghana. 1977.
- Opoku, A.M. ed. International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Legon: University of Ghana. 1993.
- Seavoy, Mary. The Ghana Dance Ensemble. Accra: Pierian Press.

INTERVIEWS

- Adinku, W. Ofotsu. Senior Lecturer, Department of Theater Arts. Legon: School of Performing Arts. 19 April 1996.
- Doudu, Emmanuel A. Artistic Director, Ghana Dance Ensemble. Legon: Institute of African Studies. 16 April 1996.
- Nyomi, Selete. Director, The Agoro Project. Cape Coast. 17 March 1996.
- Opoku, Albert M. Founder and Former Artistic Director, the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Legon: Institute of African Studies. 11 April 1996, 15 April 1996, 18 April 1996, 23 April 1996

Members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Legon: University of Ghana:

George Adjei Abankwah 24 April 1996

Pierette Aboady 18 April 1996

Tagoe Emmanuel Akwetey 18 April 1996

Ophilia Blasu 25 April 1996

Michael Boni 23 April 1996

Emmanuel Eku 18 April 1996

Faustina A. Dugbenu 23 April 1996

Edward Gbordzi 17 April 1996

Esther Gohoho 19 April 1996

Mary Gyamerah 23 April 1996

Abu Kari Mohammed 19 April 1996

Florence Mottey 19 April 1996

Nii Okaidja 15 April 1996

Kwaku Sebe 18 April 1996

Veronica Sagbo 19 April 1996

Moses Kwasi Worwui 25 April 1996

¹ Chapter I

A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996.

² W. Adinku. Interview with the author. 19 April, 1996.

³ J.H. Nketia. *Development Programmes for Music and the Performing Arts*. 1977. p. 2.

⁴ 4. Arts Council mandate. 1959. Cited in J.H. Nketia. *Development Programmes for Music and the Performing Arts*. 1977. p. 19.

⁵ 5. M. Seavoy. *The Ghana Dance Ensemble*. p. 3.

⁶ 6. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996. ;

⁷ 7. *Daily Graphic*. 1962. Cited in W. Adinku. *African Dance Education in Ghana*. 1994. p.6.

⁸ 8. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996.

⁹ 9. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996.

¹⁰ 10. J.H. Nketia. "A Bold Experiment". In A.M. Opoku, ed. *International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble*. 1993. p. 13.

¹¹ 1. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 15 April 1996.

¹² 2. S. Nyomi. Interview with the author. 17 March 1996.

¹³ 3. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.

¹⁴ 4. J.H. Nketia. *National Development and the Performing Arts of Africa*. 1995. p. 14.

¹⁵ 5. J.H. Nketia. "A Bold Experiment". In A.M. Opoku, ed. *International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble*. 1993. p. 12.

¹⁶ 6. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996.

¹⁷ 7. A.M. Opoku. "The African Dance". In A.M. Opoku, ed. *International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble*. 1993. p. 3.

¹⁸ 8. W. Adinku. Interview with the author. 19 April 1996.

¹⁹ 9. S. Nyomi. Interview with the author. 17 March 1996.

-
- ²⁰ 10. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.
- ²¹ 11. A.M. Opoku. "The African Dance". In A.M. Opoku, ed. *International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble*. 1993. p. 3.
- ²² 12. J.H. Nketia. *National Development and the Performing Arts of Africa*. 1995. p.12.
- ²³ 13. W. Adinku. Interview with the author. 19 April 1996.
- ²⁴ 1. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 18 April 1996.
- ²⁵ 2. M. Gyamerah. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ²⁶ 3. W. Adinku. Interview with the author. 19 April 1996.
- ²⁷ 4. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ²⁸ 5. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 11 April 1996.
- ²⁹ 6. J.H. Nketia. *National Development and the Performing Arts of Africa*. 1995. p. 18.
- ³⁰ 7. A.K. Deku. "Formal Inauguration of the Ghana Dance Ensemble". In A.M. Opoku, ed. *International Reviews on the Ghana Dance Ensemble*. 1993. p. 9.
- ³¹ 8. W. Adinku. Interview with the author. 19 April 1996.
- ³² 9. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 18 April 1996.
- ³³ 10. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.
- ³⁴ 11. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.
- ³⁵ 12. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 18 April 1996.
- ³⁶ 1. F.A. Dughbenu. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ³⁷ 3. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 18 April 1996.
- ³⁸ 4. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ³⁹ 5. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.
- ⁴⁰ 6. E.A. Duodu. Interview with the author. 16 April 1996.

-
- ⁴¹ 7. N. Okaidja. Interview with the author. 15 April 1996.
- ⁴² 8. N. Okaidja. Interview with the author. 15 April 1996.
- ⁴³ 9. G.A. Abankwah and other members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Interview with the author. 15-23 April 1996.
- ⁴⁴ 10. M. Gyamerah. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ⁴⁵ 11. A.K. Mohammed. Interview with the author. 19 April 1996.
- ⁴⁶ 2. N. Okaidja. Interview with the author. 15 April 1996.
- ⁴⁷ 3. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ⁴⁸ 4. A.M. Opoku. Interview with the author. 23 April 1996.
- ⁴⁹ 5. N. Okaidja. Interview with the author. 15 April 1996.
- ⁵⁰ 6. T. Akwetey. Interview with the author. 18 April 1996.