Artistic Engagements: The Significance of Dance in Ghanaian Culture

Honors Research Thesis

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by
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Heaving from the rough mountain climb and sweating profusely, it was intensely gratifying to look out from a stopping point in my ascent up Adaklu and to see tiny figures milling about in a village below and to hear the steady pulse of the drums. I could not differentiate clear movement patterns from such a height, but the sound of singing voices rang clear. This is one example among many of the capacity of art to deeply penetrate everyday Ghanaian life and to define Ghana uniquely from neighboring African nations as well as the rest of the world. Though there is a variety of artists throughout the Western Hemisphere that perpetuate the idea that art is socially and culturally necessary, whether it be in organizing political thought or in translating emotion into physicality, Western perspectives of art-for-frivolity's-sake remain. This notion is particularly relevant when considering international dance practices and occasions of dance. Deeper investigation of the political and sociocultural layers within what can be referred to as Ghanaian dance or dance in Ghana reveals that traditional and contemporary movement aesthetics shape the community and individual experience by providing historical relevance, solidarity, and existential purpose. Dance in Ghana persists for life's sake.

Following a period of strict colonial rule by the British, Ghana celebrated independence in 1957, marking an extraordinary shift along Ghana's historical timeline (Schramm 2000, pg. 340). The man to head the transition was the newly elected president, Kwame Nkrumah, who found himself swiftly faced with the challenge of uniting the liberated nation (Schramm 2000, pg. 340). How could the citizens under his care be equipped to take pride in their country, and from where would the draw to the homeland stem? What celebrates a culturally unique Ghanaian nation and serves in its endurance? One of the decisions that Nkrumah made when considering such questions was to institute the National Theater Movement through which traditional art

forms were revitalized and the population was familiarized with aesthetics that claimed ancestral origins (Schramm 2000, pg. 348). Part of this process was especially significant to the existence of dance and involved charging Albert Mawere Opoku and J.H. Kwabena Nketia with the creation of the Ghana Dance Ensemble (Fabian 1996, pg. 9). This ensemble was an affiliate of a larger arrangement known as the Institute of African Studies, which became a department within the University of Ghana and intended to school maturing Ghanaian students in aspects of traditional African culture including the visual and performing arts (Fabian 1996, pg. 10). Bringing in students from all over Ghana to study under the artistic counsel of Opoku and Nketia, the Ghana Dance Ensemble began to produce a repertoire of dances and specific movement vocabularies that referenced Ghanaian history and reflected modern influences (Fabian 1996, pg. 10). A plethora of these dances may be viewed today in the various regions of Ghana and they remain important to countless areas of the community.

One such dance that continues to be rehearsed, performed, and treasured is Gahu, a sequence of steps that originated during the marriage rite ceremonies of the Yoruba people of Nigeria (Peek and Yankah 2004, pg. 530). Anglo-Ewe women in the southeastern region of Ghana, predominately the Volta Region, dance Gahu to call attention to their physical beauty and to incite proposals of marriage (Penniman 2002, pg. 15). One version of the dance begins with all of the female dancers entering the space in a slow shuffle-step pattern. As the young women enter, they look first at their raised right palms and then at their left palms, alternating back and forth. This mimics the action of looking into a mirror and provokes the idea that they are beautifying themselves for the purpose of romantic presentation. Once the women have fully circled the floor performing this movement, a sudden increase in the intensity of the drum

accompaniment cues the participating male dancers to fill the spaces between the females. Changes in movement accompany the driving rhythms of the drums, and the torsos of the dancers drop lower, deepening flexion at the hip joints and propelling the elbows forward into alternating strikes with the lateral sides of the forearms. This movement proceeds in a circular fashion, as do a majority of Ghanaian dances when they involve a large group of people, until another bass-tone combination from the drum signals the dancers to begin threading in and out of each other, creating a rounded kaleidoscope effect.

Knees bent, shoulders pulsing, and arms bent at the hips, the dancers take two sideways steps away from each other, and then, with one arm shooting into air and the feet coming quickly together in slight elevation, each dancer ceases outward motion and proceeds into the center of the ring. The timing of steps in such a series and the transitions between movement sequences are never precisely calculated; in fact, in most cases, the dancers are subjected to the amusement of the accompanying drummers (interview with Derrick Double, June 2012). Musicians may choose to sporadically insert a sustained drum roll, requiring the dancers to maintain dramatic poses, or they may choose to quicken their tempo, challenging dancers to retain the integrity of the movement while moving at a rapid pace (Aning, 1966 pg. 43). Humor colors occasions during which drummers exercise their liberties of speed and volume, as well as the conclusions of the dances when, even as dancers make to exit the dance space, they are coerced back by the insistence of the musical notes.

Circularity of motion is a characteristic that Gahu shares with many other Ghanaian dances and is one that carries great symbolism, referencing the steady continuation of life and the interconnectedness of individual choices and responsibilities within a wider group base

(Penniman 2002, pg. 47 and Blum 1973, pg. 29). Historically known to have been utilized during times of war, Atsiagbeko begins as the participants advance symbolically onto the battlefield and then proceeds to a faster section during which everyone moves in unison in structured spatial patterns (Blum 1973, pg. 31). Aside from building stamina and increasing flexibility, such movement decisions reflect the togetherness and discipline possessed by the warriors as well as their readiness for battle. Atsiagbeko also features a cycle in which the participants hop backwards three times and then promptly spring forward; according to F. Nii-Yartley, director of the National Dance Company, this honors the Akan proverb, Sankofa or "go back and get it" (Penniman 2002, pg. 37). A great deal of symbolism in Ghana, reflected not only in dance but in other aspects of artistic life (e.g. adinkra images found on jewelry and ornamental cloth), cherishes the idea that a culturally united group of people must respect their ancestral heritage and learn from the past to move successfully forward. Prominent and deeply influential figures such as President Kwame Nkrumah lived monumentally by this principle, delving passionately into the heart of Ghana and cultivating the country's ancestral roots to capture that which was inimitably Ghanaian.

One evening, as I and the other women with whom I was studying abroad were strolling home after a night out with new friends, a Ghanaian I had just met began filling my ears with a story. Affectionately named for his Friday birth, Kofi and I became very close during my four-week stay in the village of Ho, and this night was one of several during which he shared with me a piece of Ghanaian culture. Both of us being dancers of very different backgrounds and understandings, we had begun talking about where dance fit in the course of his life and how he was raised to consider the act of dancing. Listening respectfully at their grandfather's feet, Kofi

and his younger sister Wilma would receive oral histories concerning the prevalence and importance of dance generations ago, among a variety of other reasonings for why and how Ghana exists as it does at present. Of the stories he had heard first-hand from his grandfather, Kofi chose to tell me of an ancient city in Ghana called Notsie where the people were ruled by an evil king. To keep his subjects from escaping his reign, the king had built a sturdy wall through which no one could enter or exit. Soon the people grew desperate to free themselves, and, seeking advice and inspiration, turned to a wise elder who told the Ghanaian women to take their wash water and pour it exactly on the same spot on the wall each day after the laundry had been finished. The women did as they were told, and sure enough, the area they had selected gradually wore away. Finally, one evening everyone gathered to push away the weathered bricks and successfully escaped, pouring quietly from the city walls. To cover their path of escape, the people of Notsie decided to walk a series of steps backwards, confusing anyone sent to retrieve the fleeing citizens. Through such beautiful tales, flowing from the mouths of people for whom young children are raised to have great respect, reason is embedded in the inclusion of dance as an essential component in Ghanaian life.

Another aspect of dance that made its purpose more and more apparent to me as my days in Ghana continued was the fact that it creates a cohesive community characterized by effective communication and allocated responsibilities. Derek, a resident of Ho who spent time with us during our hours of leisure and who instructed our afternoon dance lessons, told me that people in Ghana do not arbitrarily dance in the streets for several reasons. First, bystanders would think such a person insane or unwell for dancing alone without the signal from the drum, but perhaps most importantly, an instance of dance must be given a symbolic or ritualistic purpose (interview

with Derrick Double, June 2012). Events such as the installment of a chief, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one binds the community in celebration or in mourning, and dance appears to facilitate the healthy expression of such emotion (Blum 1973, pg. 15). Furthermore, dancing during times of distress or disagreement eases tensions that may be present among the participants and restores calm to the community at large (Penniman 2002 pg. 49). Dance allows people to set words aside and to share the space with the soft communicative method of movement. Measuring verbal exchanges and crafting verbal responses holds the potential to arouse further anger and resentment, whereas there is an unspoken understanding and ultimate relaxation in the synchrony of movement. For example, every other week, churches in Ho host funerals in remembrance of those who have passed, and during these ceremonies, everyone is expected to engage, whether it is through instrumentation, vocal contribution, or dance. In selecting one or two of these methods of bereavement, Ghanaians are acknowledging the contribution that each member of the community makes to the village and are offering condolences even to those with whom they often quarrel (lecture by Divine Gbagbo, June 2012).

Almost immediately upon arriving in Ghana this past summer, I noticed the way in which mothers will carry newborn children on the small of their backs. Using a length of thick cloth, Ghanaian women will secure their children firmly to their lumbar spines, fastening and tucking away loose ends and pulling the cloth up to sit just below the clavicle. I found myself wondering if the cloth was truly tight enough to safely hold the babies as their mothers proceeded through their daily activities, but the strength of this transportation mechanism was proven one evening when a local choir came to perform for us. One of the women remains distinctly in my memory because as she shuffled step-by-step with the others, a young child slept soundly behind her,

bouncing steadily to the rhythm created by the drums and reflected in the pace set by her feet. Integration into the dance scene begins at birth, as exemplified by the woman previously described, and after Ghanaian children grow too large for their mother's crafted sling, they begin to shadow the steps of their parents and older siblings. Our drum instructor who we called Big Francis frequently came to our practices with his son Jonas tagging at his ankles. After we had concentrated every afternoon, drumsticks in hand and drums clutched between our knees, trying to copy the rhythms Francis demonstrated with particular precision, it was absolutely shocking and equally impressing to watch as Jonas joined the group of drummers that performed for us at the end of the trip. Young Jonas could not have been more than seven or eight years old, and yet he relentlessly pounded on the skin of the djembe with confidence and accuracy. How wonderful a thought, that art can be created by anyone and everyone, even the very young.

Speaking to the healing power that dance has in Ghana, Naima Penniman (2002) claims, "the pain of abuse that [one] sometimes carries within, the trauma of unfulfilled dreams, and the sorrow of loss...they fuel our drive for violence, and they eat at our spirit…ritual, realized through the dance and music, offers [an] opportunity to relieve a tension from which words can no longer release us" (Penniman 2002, pg. 50). As I spoke to Ghanaians to assess their interest and commitment to dance, I noticed a common thread of responses when their answers to my questions involved describing why dance was so holistically important. Music was consistently described as something that brought the spirit to life and dance as the result of this spiritual connection deep within the body. Many Ghanaians simply repeated that music and dance, one non-existent without the other, couple as one entity and made them happy. Origins for and dimensions of such happiness were inexplicable, but the feeling was fierce nevertheless. This led

me to a conclusive point that dance was significant to Ghanaian life because to access dance correlated to the access of happiness. People are physically and psychologically healed through the sequencing and steadiness of movement and are provided existential purpose in a world naturally inclined towards disorder (Penniman 2002, pg. 22).

Studies show that the readily observable benefits of dance include enhanced neuromuscular connections, blood flow, cardiovascular health, muscular strength and endurance, and endorphin release (Penniman 2002, pg. 22). As well, there is evidence that dance connects people and urges them to participate in the group dynamic; dance relaxes individual and group tensions, by enabling forgetting through music and movement (Penniman 2002, pg. 49 and 50). Nonetheless, though all incredibly important assertions for the significance of dance and other art forms, the idea that has grabbed my greatest attentions is the idea of purposeful existence. Life moves at a steady rhythm, and music, particularly that of the African drum, makes the rhythm tangible, providing reassurance through drive and consistency. Palpations of the ever-beating heart match the rhythms of a pair of shuffling feet; the unevenness of exasperated or fearful breathing may match the downward rotation of the shoulder blades and the release of the head to the sky. Life in Ghana is ruled by armloads of hard work, dashes of luck, and mountains of faith, and when hardship forces the people into a distressing spiral that they cannot control, solace is found in the gathering of drums, the clasping of hands, the raising of voices, and the swaying of hips. Dance in this way allows for investigation and response within the comfortable bounds of a community structure.

When I started in on this process of building and developing a dance piece that was reflective of my experience in Ghana and of my research interests inside of the country as well as out, I

began with very clear goals in mind. I wanted to play around with this idea that dance has three distinctive and definitive purposes in Ghanaian life—historical/cultural relevance, community solidarity, and individual healing. My plan was to incorporate some of the traditional steps that I had learned, including two of my personal favorites, Gahu and Atumpa, and to explore what it meant to be healed through dance. What about the active and passive practice of dance has been especially relieving and revealing for me, and what body placements and transitions echoed a deeper emotional connection? How did these connections differ for Emma, and what about dance, if differently from my own histories and remembrances, gave reason for her continued involvement in the art form? Little did I know how effectively and how fully my work with Emma and with these continually fluctuating thoughts would direct my pathways of interest and how it would change what I wanted to share with an audience.

Reflecting on the piece now, looking through photographs that were taken, viewing videos that were shot, listening gratefully to feedback from witnesses, and running our flower-printed dresses through the washing machine, I comfortably realize that, had I initially intentioned it or not, I felt an honest and invested community develop and endure between Austin, Emma, Kristen, Kyle, and me. When the final months before the Spring Dance Festival closed in swiftly around us, we found ourselves falling into a repetition of what we knew. Austin and Kyle rolled with the circular guitar sequences as Emma and I followed the changes in their rhythmic sequences, persevering through movement that took us, unforgiving, in and out of the ground with quick muscle initiations and charging travel phrases that capped in brief suspensions on air. Despite boughts of anxiety and pre-show jitters, I found myself eased by the presence of my fellow performers, the members of our small community, knowing that they were going

faithfully with me, one movement to the next. Furthermore, with Austin and Kyle so close to Emma and me in the space, I felt a resounding connection, as opposed to the separation I normally feel to the music as a dancer. Much like the singular entity of music and dance displayed by the drummers and dancers in Ghana (drummers always grouped close to the dance space and dancers cognizant of the drumming presence) I felt imperative to the function of the musical notes coming from Austin and Kyle and the music was undoubtedly imperative to the structured patterns of the dancing steps.

The breathtakingly beautiful song rendition that my cousin Kristen performed with me sealed my explorations with a satisfying bow, tight enough for clarity but loose enough for further inquiry and analysis. “I Look to You” became quite literally a reference to the strength of community that I have felt in my life, and to the people that made my experiences in Ghana and with my senior project so validating and rewarding. Originally a song my mother and I bonded over and claimed as an artistic representation of our relationship, it carefully broadened to include those with whom I was privileged to perform and those in Ghana who opened their arms to a young, Midwestern girl who entered their country with naivety and exited with extraordinary lessons to relay and to cherish. I would do nothing differently; my only wish was that I had had more time in Ghana to ask, to converse, to see, and to understand.

To say that I am walking away from this deeply personal and internally investigative process would not be pertinent because I find it impossible to continue on with my artistic career or with my interests unaffected. I think that it is important to allow lessons of Ghanaian traditional dance practice and relevance to bleed into our school systems and that children should be exposed to the position and views of art in other cultures. Programs designed to explain African history and

global integration would encourage acknowledgement of and intensify appreciation for the continent of Africa and its rich diversity. Furthermore, as an artist, I adore pieces that evoke profound musings and intelligent discussion, including works that challenge convention and even arouse discomfort. However, amongst the ambiguous and the abstract, the work I love most aims to incite a smile. There is something to be said of dancers that simply, yet powerfully, allow happiness to seep from their core and through their pores and then offer such happiness to onlookers as a gift for serving as momentary witnesses. This is the delightful work. This is the endearing dance. This is the art that deeply endures.

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