

## LUTSF Covering Letter

Cleo Alberta Lake travelled to Accra, Ghana, 5th December 2009 - 16th January 2010, spending time at the Akomapa training centre.

The purpose of my travels was to train with the Akomapa dance company and to collaborate with one of its members on some new choreography.

The highlight of my travels was attending the open day at the centre, meeting the Director of Akomapa, Mr Aikins Hyde and being invited to collaborate with another artist under Directors supervision.

I was so happy to hear the news that I had been awarded the scholarship to travel to Ghana and at the time of application and receiving the good news, I was unaware that I was pregnant. I was anxious about this as I was aware that it was not possible to postpone the award until the next year and I also felt uncomfortable having to ask to change my travel dates, although this didn't seem to be a problem.

I was able to do some dancing with Akomapa but due to the baby and the recovery from a c-section, I couldn't do as much as I had planned. I did however spend just as much time with the company as an observer and took some lessons with one of the principle dancers as well as starting some new solo choreography.

I have delved back into my books since returning and I hope to continue with my research and write an essay exploring the nature of African dance and its spiritual connections. I would advise any other fellows to also do background reading relating to their travels and dance.

My suggested reading list include:

Let The Circle Be Unbroken - The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora - Dona Marimba Richards - Red Sea Press, 1980

Ethnomusicology and African Music: Collected Papers, volume one: Modes of Inquiry and Interpretation - J.H. Kwabena Nketia - Afram Publications (GH) LTD. 2005

Choreography and Dance Studies, Volume 2: Doople, the Eternal Law of African Dance - Alphonse Tierou - Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992

Sacred Dance: Encounter with the Gods - Maria-Gabriele Wosien - Thames And Hudson, 1974

I had a great experience in Ghana and my advice to any future fellows would be to make the most of their time and try to build lasting relationships with artists in the various countries and continuing the dialogues. Let things happen organically as what is meant to be will be.

# **Fetish and traditional dance within a contemporary framework, Motherhood and Sankofa: Dancing the Akomapa experience in Ghana**

**by Cleo Lake**

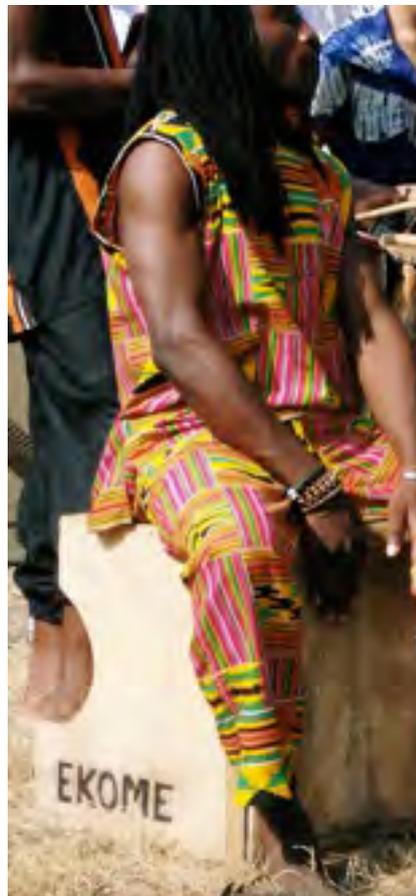
**The news that I had been awarded a Lisa Ullmann Traveling Scholarship to cover the cost of a flight to Ghana was music to my ears. However my original plans of traveling in festival season of August 2009 were deferred until December 2009 when I discovered that I was pregnant with my third child and first son who was born on the 30th of September. I also made the decision to take all my children with me (Ashante 13, Romany 6, Fitzroi 9 weeks) on what I believed would be an incredible journey through dance and culture. It was in many ways a poignant year for me, I had reached 30 years of age, and it was also the 20th year anniversary of the death of my father, a Jamaican who was keen even in my smallest of ages to tell me what he could about the reality of slavery and of what it meant to be an African descendant.**

Following the death of my father I found myself expressing myself through dance as a way of escapism. I began in my teens dancing to 'Jungle' dance music at the underground clubs in Bristol to DJs and producers such as Roni Size and DJ Die. The music was very British but at the same time had major influences of Jamaican Dub and Reggae and further beats that could be linked in some way to an African drum. As time went on I also took various workshops in African dance attending events such as Tribe of Doris and taking classes by Bristol based dance teachers Norman 'Rubber' Stephenson, David Dravie-John of PAX Productions and Issa Sawaneh. Bristol can also boast that it was the first city in the UK to launch an African dance company. Ekome Arts was formed in 1976 and took the UK and beyond by storm. My long term interest in African and Black peoples dance was not compromised but was challenged during my University Career. I was faced with new methods and ideas of what dance was and what dance could be. I always struggled with the contemporary techniques but was in some ways freed up by exploring dance theatre, abstract dance and improvisation. The idea of narrative dance as a tool to telling a story through the body and also the possibilities of dance and technology really fascinated me. Having said that dance rooted in the African aesthetic has always been my absolute passion and I've never been a fan of choreographers who feel the need to do certain things with contemporary dance as they feel a pressure to 'move things on' or worse conform to a Western aesthetic. Unless of course they fuze the forms well such as choreographer Bawren Tavaziva from Zimbabwe.

After studying part time I finally graduated from Bath Spa University in 2008 with a 2.1 BA Dance. My interest has remained in African dance forms and I am now a member of Akumapa Dance Ensemble, Bristol, arguably the only troupe in Bristol capable of achieving anything like the success of Ekome in the 1970s and 80s. I had been training and collaborating for sometime in Bristol with resident

Ghanaian dance artist, leader of Akumapa Dance Ensemble Bristol and former Akomapa Artistic Director, Ghana, Mr Tetteh Amatey. I wished to understand more about the depth of African dance and of how I could find my place within it and was encouraged when Tetteh suggested I could spent time at the Akomapa centre in Ghana. Akomapa translates as 'Pure Heart.'

I'd had an inkling of a great power that came with dance that surpassed a mere breakdown of steps and counts in a dance studio. I longed to find a successful marriage of the power of African dance with the possibilities of contemporary dance concepts. I hoped to discover and witness amazing dance in Ghana but had no idea that I would in some ways find this marriage of the forms and so what I did find greatly out weighed my expectations.



**Left an Akomapa drummer plays the Gome drum which originates from Jamaica and was carried to the Ga tribe of Ghana via Sierra Leone, by the freed slaves who returned home to Africa. Notice that the Gome is inscribed with Ekome ('Unity').**

Tetteh had mentioned several times that the **Director and founder of Akomapa, Mr Akins Hyde**, known simply as Aikins, was back in Ghana. After founding Akomapa in 1996 in the town of Teshie in Accra (which is a Ga tribe region), Aikins moved to Germany where he continued on his journey through dance. I wondered somewhat about the Director and who he was going to be, all Tetteh had said was that; 'He could talk and speaks often in parables' and described him as 'very free'.



**Mr Akins  
Hyde,  
Director and  
founder of  
Akomapa,  
Ghana.**

On the first visit to the centre we nervously stood on the grounds as a bench was fetched for us to sit on. Members of the group steadily arrived for their regular training session (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 5-8pm) and I was surprised to see that the group trained outside on what was effectively concrete. Back in the UK we often rant on about the need for wooden or sprung floors yet here they were these highly skilled dancers, barefoot on concrete bricks which reminded me of the times my mother would say to me: 'Its not where you live, its how.'

After a while three notable men entered into the training ground. An older man lead wearing a hells angels esk headscarf, black skull t shirt and a long bondage skirt. Following was a dancer wearing a red tight ripped t shirt with rings in it and a long tartan skirt, and the third man was similarly dressed in black. 'Why are they dressed like emos?' My 13 year old daughter asked as we hid our smirks. The presence of these characters brought a smile to our beings as they all had a very intriguing aura surrounding them which was enhanced by their outfits. We later learned that the older man (all be it with a body of a much younger man and having our vote as owning the best legs there), was Mr Aikins Hyde the Director. Our days at the training ground were filled with admiration and curiosity at what Mr Hyde would be doing and wearing next! He would start the sessions occasionally by watching works on the laptop, but for the most part by creating an environment where dancers could play with and act upon his direction. Most sessions also featured an element of 'freestyle' dance where Aikins would pick at dancers with the ever present clicking castanets in his hands, snapping rhythms at their feet as he shouted and encouraged more energy. It was a delight to watch and it was clear that Aikins had not only a mastery of African dance forms but also an interest and ability in what could be described as more Eastern or Arabic styles. He often donned a flowing skirt and encouraged the female dancers to wear bells and jangles around their hips.

In terms of physical dance I participated in some of the warm ups, and I did enjoy a brief moment of glory as I was directed by Aikins and the Artistic Director to move to the front and lead part of a warm up. Wow! What an honor! I'd joined in the warm ups a couple of times and attempted to follow some choreography but alas it was all a bit much. These dancers need only see movement once or twice before replicating it, me I needed longer plus, the watchful eyes of a company of incredible dancers did put the pressure on. Standing there learning the dance phrase amidst 20 plus pairs of expectant eyes I heard the sound of the clicking of the castanets coming from the balcony above as Aikins instructed me on how to execute a particular movement. In some ways I was saved when I heard the cry of my son and the dancer who moved like lightening attempting to teach me a particular traveling move, suggested I stay with my baby. Not that they were a company who were anti children. Two dancers in particular always trained with their children there, one even taking the measure of strapping her unsettled toddler to her back as she marked through some new choreography.



**Female dancers making shapes at the training ground**

My days spent at the training ground were not compromised by the lack of my physical activity. I was often called upon by Aikins to give my view and observations as an outside eye on the nights explorations. This was a useful tool for both myself as an artist and I hope for the company. It can sometimes be hard as a dance artist to be on the outside of the action but circumstance found that this was where I had to be at this time and I made the most of it. I shifted around the training ground always keen to grab a different viewpoint. As a choreographer I have often danced in my dances so it was refreshing to observe and what a company to observe upon. I was physically able nearer the end of my stay to take some lessons from one of the principal dancers Apelety. Apelety is one of my favorite of the dancers as he is always giving so much energy and fullness to his movements, to the extent of which that the Director had once mentioned to him to tone things down. The sessions with him were slightly challenging but well worth it as I learnt most of a dance that is part of the repertoire of the group back in Bristol. I also regularly joined the circle to close the training sessions which involved heartfelt Christian and Spiritual prayers and songs, the degree of which I had not before witnessed at a dance training session.

The return of Aikns to Ghana had brought an element of change to Akomapa as well as new members. During his stay Aikins endeavored to launch a new '**Centre of African Contemporary Dance**' and whilst there he had a small number of students both from inside and outside of the company under his wing on a training course largely exploring contemporary dance forms with an emphasis on improvisation. This contemporary emphasis transferred over into the training of the company which didn't prove to be popular amongst all members. It was clear that during some explorations certain dancers were out of their comfort zones. Resident dance instructor and long standing Akomapa member 'Frank' often served as an 'in between,' executing traditional styles in amongst the improvised dances, and to the relief of other dancers who were then able to follow him. Other members in wanting to remain true to the traditional risked being expelled by moonlighting with other groups.

The walls outside in the training ground were painted with dancing figures and upstairs was a study room with numerous available books, or a space to try out new dance ideas. The upstairs room was cluttered with bits and bobs to improvise with and be inspired by. Items ranging from hats and children's toys to masks and sticks. The most notable thing about the room was the art work at the near end wall. Bizarre, freaky, out there, eerie, dark: all words that originally sprang to mind and as a consequence, really drew in my attention. Painter and dance artist **Nathaniel Nelson** explained the meaning of the depictions along the following lines: The union of Europe and Africa; the knowledge of self; the negative emotions that a dancer may experience; the importance of faith and 'God'; The journey through life and the Tree of Life. I was impressed at how dance had been placed in this wider and spiritual context. Within the Tree of Life were aspects including Might, Knowledge, Heart and Intelligence.



Versatile dance artist, teacher and traditional dance master 'Frank,' with my daughter Ashante in the background playing the shaker.



Above; The Tree of Life and other profound paintings in the study room at the Akomapa Centre.

## New Centre for Contemporary African Dance Open Day Christmas Eve 2009



One of the highlights of my trip was the open day held at the Akomapa Centre on Christmas Eve. It was an occasion where the students studying with Aikins for the last three months showed the public their choreography. Certificates were also issued to various members of the company. The most notable guest on the day was a member of the Dance Factory Ghana, which now serves as a kind of dance council and works closely with the National Theatre.

The event started in a traditional manner with song, music and dance which was very joyous (see above). As the program unfolded one by one the students showcased their works, which they had spent the last few weeks teaching the company. Early pieces fused traditional dance with contemporary dance and later dance theatre, incorporating dynamic lifts and movements. I had been observing one dance over the previous weeks yet my perception of the dance changed greatly at its premiere performance. It was the use of costume and not to my liking the use of recorded classical music at the start of the dance that gave it new meanings.

A later interview with its choreographer Nathaniel Nelson revealed more details about this dance entitled **'The Secret Of African Dance'**. The piece starts with Nathaniel struggling in to centre stage with a Panlogo drum, a traditional drum of Ghana, which he finally sets down and collapses on

top of. He enters a dreamlike state and wakes to discover the presence of other dancers around him. There is a build up and then the climax consists of frantic cowbell and drums send a kind of mania through the spine. In rehearsals it was clear that at this moment (especially when the musicians were tight) some of the dancers just wanted to crack into some explosive dance. For me the rise in tempo towards the finale made it impossible and irresistible not to move to it.



Me pictured with dance artists Nathaniel Nelson (Lf) and 'Yellow.'

In an interview with Mr Nelson, he often inter passed full answers to my questions with ‘So much things to do but not a moment to reflect on the cycle of life.’ His own reflections had provoked a determination to leave a dance legacy with plans to one day write his own books. It was refreshing to be in the company of clearly a like minded creative dance artist with such skill. It came as quite a complement when in my final week Aikins and Nathaniel revealed to me their plans of a collaboration with myself. They had visited my website and were interested in filming a new improvised work between myself and Nathaniel. The suggested title of the work was ‘Birth: A Mothers Pain’ and would involve a minute of improvisation from myself and two minutes by Nathaniel. The brief was that I was in a distant land about to give birth with nobody able to hear my cry. An angel of Lord from Africa however saves the day so to speak. This all came as quite a surprise to me as I read the brief off a laptop that had a photo of me on one side and a photo of Nathaniel on the other holding a shell that can be blown as an instrument, which coincidentally I had been searching for. The collaboration didn't happen this time around for various reasons but i'd like to think that the offer is still open.

The last dance of the open day was the most profound. After a short break the audience were offered drinks and tasty but very spicy hot Jollof rice. We took our seats as the action (which was a blend of improvised movements, narrative dance and fetish dance) unfolded in front of us. This last dance was about a lost son who finally became acquainted with his parents and becomes a man. His journey was in some ways symbolized by starting with contemporary dance and ending with spontaneous fetish dance. In the middle was an exploration which included a number of dancers painting their faces and playing with various props including picture frames.



**Dancers paint their faces in an impressive performance that blurred the edges between contemporary dance theatre and fetish dance ritual.**

Fetish dance can generally be described as dance that connects to God or lesser gods, and typically dancers become possessed or enter a trance like state. As with many fetish dances, the use of improvisation or freestyle is the essence of the form within a form and although certain elements are always present, such as quick turns and stamping feet, musicians and dancers alike revel in a realm of divinity and duende. And here it was in front of me, this exciting cacophony of action that shifted around the stage and saw the musicians and dancers exchanging energies with a sense of freedom in their performance. At one moment a dancer is thrown into the musicians and later a drummer is up and away from his drum to duel a dancer in a pocket of action. Had it of not been for the fact that I was privileged enough to be capturing this on camera, then I would surely have been on the edge of my seat. All the boundaries between contemporary dance theatre and traditional dance were now absent. This was something special and at last it felt like there was a new pioneering movement happening right in front of me and that I was in some small way part of it.

In Ghana I began to create new solo choreography and consolidate ideas for future projects, including my latest project entitled ‘Gold Creole Earrings’ which seeks to connect communities of women in Bristol and beyond through the sharing of stories expressed through dance. The horizon, the waves, the sand, the people, the sun, the way of life, the history of this country and not least the strong women carrying goods to sell on their heads and small children strapped to their backs, were all strong inspirations and it was hard not to feel a spiritual connection, to this country once known as the Gold Coast. My children and I visited the old slave castle at the Cape Coast and entered through the ‘Passage Of No Return’ where millions of enslaved Africans were shipped out on the high tide of crashing mammoth waves to meet a fate that both ripped them from their culture and paved the way for the wealth of many cities in the West including my own home city of Bristol. Here we stood my children and I in our varying shades of ‘African-ness’ having at last returned.



**Left: My daughters Romany and Ashante at The Old Castle at the Cape Coast.**

**Right: Me and my children standing in front of the Tree Of Life.**

But have I truly returned? The answer of that will be proof in the dance activities that I will be doing in the foreseeable future. I now have a new layer of respect for dance and as Aikins suggested one evening to the group, dancers do not exist in some void where they are free and able to do everything and anything. No dancers are made and must (at least in the early days) follow instruction from a dance master. After watching those magnificent dancers I now realize that the process of dancing is also a way of connecting to something bigger than oneself. Dance appeared to be a vehicle to delivering an ancestral message passed down through the body. The dances I witnessed and the dances that I began to learn with Apelety carry with them a sense of history that hasn’t been written down and to that end, dance is a way for me to discover and connect to my own unknown histories and provides me with a living dialogue with my ancestors. Ghana is full of symbols one of which is the Sankofa, sometimes represented as a mythical bird able to turn its head through 360 degrees and holding a golden egg in its beak, representing the phrase ‘Back To Your Roots’. I wish to stretch myself further as a dancer and commit fully to the Akumapa group in Bristol with an aim of getting back to optimum fitness so that I may reach the potential to really dance what is in my heart and in my blood, and at the same time conducting more academic research. I am sure that I will return to Ghana soon, hopefully this time in the festival season, and to other African and Caribbean Countries to discover more about the power of dance and I am sure as I travel back through my roots, my father will be with me every step of the way. My father came from the Parish of St Thomas in Jamaica which is known for its practice of Kumina, a ritual rooted in African traditions fusing drums (including the Gome) with dance and song and is believed to have the power to heal.

On my last night at the training ground once my baby had settled in his push chair under the mosquito net, I went and stood next to the musicians as the dancers recapped an incredible dance from Guinea. Moving and mirroring on the sidelines I became emerged in the music and I can say it was at that point that I truly re found a part of myself that took me back to the same feeling of being with my community on the dance floor at the Jungle nights of my teens in Bristol. The buzz, the flowing feeling and sheer exuberance of being carried and moved by the music and becoming one with it. As the light faded on the training ground and as the company gathered round, one gave the call ‘Akuma Pa’ and everyone responded ‘Tsui mli,’ translated to ‘Pure Heart’ ‘Open your Heart.’ I have opened my eyes and my heart to a new chapter of dance and vow to continue on my journey of understanding and enlightenment, to the benefit of not only myself, but for future generations and my ancestors.