

To: LUTSF

Research, Training and Development in African Dance

Dates: July to October 2004

Location: Ghana

The main purposes of the project have been achieved, are still being achieved, and will continue into the future. The project turned out to be much bigger than I first anticipated. Initially, I had in mind a short course of between a week to a month or so, but I was able to stay for 4 months (one month was courtesy of Ghana Airways, since they were unable to get me a return flight until a month after my due return date!).

I mainly trained and studied with Noyam African Dance Institute in Accra and also had free access to train with the Ghana National Dance Company. Because of the essential symbiosis between dance and drumming in Ghanaian culture, I was urged to study drumming, as well as dance. I accompanied Noyam and the Ghana National Dance Company on many of their domestic tours and performances, not just as an observer, but often as a 'technician'; helping out with stage setting, lighting, costumes ... chasing wire and packing and unpacking the van ... I took the opportunity to develop my drawing skills, often sketching dancers in motion, as another way of trying to understand or sense, through my own (necessarily) fluid pencil movements, what the dancers were doing. The choice to work on my drawing skills was because I envisaged having to communicate the design of dance spaces, stages, costumes ... storyboards ... I carried out study trips to the University of Legon and cultural centres and villages around Ghana.

All in all, I amassed quite a significant amount, in terms of research material, skills and new insights. I received an education I was not expecting, and I am very glad for this.

The whole project was a highlight in itself, and almost everyday there was some highlight, or something new I learnt or was inspired by. The unfolding process, for me, was quite intense. However, the Ghana Japan Dance Festival in Accra was a particularly highlight, because it touched upon the possibilities of dance as a way of transcending cultural, national and, perhaps, all sorts of other boundaries. This is especially poignant in a conflict-ridden world that seems to be fast becoming culturally and racially intolerant.

My suggestions for future LUTSF awardees is this: plan the project well in advance, and then add some extra time on top if you can. Things can change or go wrong, and they often do, so you will need time to sort out the possible consequences of things changing or going wrong. Think about getting match funding because it may well increase the scope and impact of your project. If at all possible, travel with someone else you can fully trust, with whom you can co-guide and bounce ideas and insights with. It makes understanding creative madness a whole lot easier!

I have run a number of African Dance workshops on my return from Ghana, and I have a few more in my diary, with much more to follow. I have been asked to present copies of my report, with the movies and sketches, with the view of giving presentations to local organisations in Hull; like Kingston Upon Hull City Arts Unit, VOLCOM (a local organisation dedicated to researching and implementing creative and innovative education in Hull), Creative Partnerships (pioneering creativity in education) and Hull Afro Caribbean Association. I plan to continue sharing information about my project well into the future.

Project report

Introduction (or, where it all started!)

I believe in dance, as a physically expressive medium, and as a catalyst for positive emotional and spiritual transformation. I believe that dance is essential to humanity and I have always wanted to develop my skills in dance and dance facilitation. Born in Ghana, I remember being surrounded in my early years by rhythm, on an almost constant basis. Rhythm was everywhere, from the pounding of grain, cassava and plantains, to fishermen at work, children at play ... to the deliberately orchestrated sounds of carpenters and builders on building sites and roof tops; rhythmically hammering and sawing; call and response; carefully punctuated and easily 'danceable' rhythms. I remember that sometimes the more enthused passers by would stop, and dance a little, in congratulatory appreciation of these building site 'musicians', and sometimes people would just walk by, because they were so used to rhythm being all around. This is a part of the Ghana I remember from my childhood.

The project

After much research looking for a reputable place to study dance; trawling through the internet, contacts in Ghana, UK and Europe ... I found some seemingly wonderful opportunities, and then lost them again. I spent many frustrating hours, days and weeks e-mailing, making long distance international phone calls and faxes, and then waiting ... for replies. It was often heartbreaking as seemingly fantastic possibilities were lost. At times it seemed like Ghana was on another planet; communication was often very difficult.

Perseverance eventually rewarded me with, perhaps, the most fantastic opportunity of all; I made and maintained contact with F. Nii Yaartey, scholar, principal choreographer of the Ghana National Dance Company and Director of Noyam African Dance Institute and, arguably, one of the most innovative and pioneering dance professionals Africa has ever seen. His replies and responses to my queries and requests were prompt, informative, encouraging and inspiring. He invited me to come and join his students at Noyam, on a short course in Traditional and Contemporary African Dance.

After many weeks of intense preparation, many ups and downs, forwards and backwards, standstills and being forced into making 'on the spot decisions otherwise it would all fall apart ...' I found myself rushing through Heathrow airport, minutes before take-off. After a relatively relaxing 6-hour night flight, I arrived in Ghana early the following morning. A newspaper seller offered me a copy of the Daily Graphic, hot off the press. The front-page headlines read; 'WE MADE IT'. An unrelated story, perhaps, but I could not have agreed more!

The following Monday morning, I was met with a great deal of warmth at 'Noyam House', as the dance school is affectionately known. My senses were jolted by the sinewy and taught-framed dancers I encountered; warming up with slow, unhurried, elegant and graceful stretches. What on earth had I let myself in for?

Before I had the time to start worrying, I found myself engaged in deep and philosophical conversation with F. Nii Yaartey, about topics ranging from African cultural history, the relevance of traditionalism in African arts and dance and the need to respond to contemporary culture. We spoke at length over coffee (I had water, because my resolve to reach a pinnacle of health had just been jolted all the more, by the dancers I had seen earlier). I confessed my fears to Nii and he eased them, by reminding me that the actual act of dance and dance performance is inexorably linked to so many other art forms, which can be made to serve each other. There are those

who teach and there are those who dance. There are also those who teach and dance and then ... it goes on and on to include nutrition, physiology, the design and creation of dance performance spaces etc. ... I felt like a naïve and single-minded student being reminded by a wise sage to look at the bigger picture.

My first lesson with the dancers of Noyam was thoroughly exhausting. After enduring the onset of aching, thighs, calves and feet, I soon learned to adjust my expectations. I decided to pace myself; to prepare more, my now aching body, for dancing in the relentless tropical heat, otherwise I risked injury or illness and, possibly, ruining the whole project. I had strived too hard to make it this far, and I was not about to ruin it all with acts of overzealous and youthful bravado, so I took stock and looked again at the bigger picture, the long term view. I mapped out a long-term strategy, which had dance at its core and on the periphery were skills, which I already possessed, that could serve the core. Whilst I prepared myself with a healthy diet and Pilates, I also went to work on improving or rather renewing my skills in drawing; This was influenced by Nii's comments about how different art forms can be used to serve each other. I am a competent visual artist, and I have had a long education in architecture, so the decision to spend time honing my drawing skills was an investment enabling me to be able to better communicate the design of dance space. I was awarded some measure of freedom to join in with classes as and when I wanted. So, initially, I joined the dancers in the warm ups and in some of the traditional and contemporary dance routines, until the pace got too much for me, and the sun got too hot for everyone. Throughout my time in Ghana, I was given free access to work with the Ghana National Dance Ensemble, where Nii Yaartey performed his day job as principal choreographer. I was advised to observe, research, document and participate. I also became a regular face at The Institute of African Studies at the University of Legon, where many of Africa's pioneering music and dance professionals had their training, including Nii Yaartey. I spent many hours watching African Dance and Drum classes, workshops and performances, often sketching and making notes about ideas and insights. I also spent many long hours in the university library, audiovisual archives and bookshop. In line with my 'go slow at first' strategy, I enrolled on a twice-weekly, open access evening dance class run by Professor Newman, another prominent dance pioneer from the University of Legon.

In Ghana, there seem to be less distinct boundaries between various arts than in the west. As a result, it is common to find artists who are proficient dancers, musicians, sculptors etc., without compromising each skill. Because of the essential symbiosis between music and dance expression in Ghanaian culture, I was also encouraged to develop my skills as a drummer. First I was encouraged to fine-tune my time keeping, with agogo bells. They are simple to play, but essential to the whole orchestra, and to the dancers. I saw many instances where dancers and drummers would hold long and often heated debates about what was the right rhythm and tempo to a piece of music ascribed as 'traditional'.

I learned rhythms and parts on a whole variety of instruments; shekere (gourd shakers), kpanlogo, apentima, kidi and sogo drums; always anchored to the rhythm and tempo of the agogo bells. Initially, I had wanted to learn at least a dozen or so complete traditional dances, from different regions in Ghana. However, my research revealed that there was an absolutely vast and prolific amount of traditional dances and their variations. Also, my growing understanding of notions of traditional and contemporary dance, or the idea that we can be free to create our own dances, released me from what was, in hindsight, a fairly restricting view. Thus, I made a decision to learn the dances to which I could play more or less all the drum/rhythm

patterns. Then, I would pick and choose from other traditional or contemporary dances; movements, motifs and gestures that I liked the look and feel of, or that I simply wanted to know how to do. The idea being that I could one day choreograph my own dances, as well being able to teach some traditional pieces. I feel this was a good decision because, as well as some traditional Ghanaian dances, I also learned movements and motifs from Ivory Coast, Congo Nigeria and West Indies, even some Capoeira and ballet movements too!

During my time at Noyam and the Ghana National Dance Company, I was fortunate enough to have met and had lessons with by H. Patten and Monty Thompson, internationally renowned dance professionals, and close friends of Nii. They brought inspiration, insight and their own techniques, developed from many years in dance.

I travelled on many occasions with the members of Noyam, and the Ghana National Dance Company (GNDC) to their performances. The performances ranged from requests and bookings from individuals, families, clubs, tourist groups etc., to high profile national and international events like the televised Miss Ghana show and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches conference, which attracted attending audiences from many countries all over the world, and was also televised live across the globe.

My research expeditions took me to places within Accra and beyond. I was a frequent visitor to Akuma Village, in Accra, a short distance away from the Ghana National Dance Company (After a hard day's training, at GNDC, this is where I would go to be refreshed by the seaside breeze and to take in more dance and drumming). 'VOLU' as the place is affectionately known is a seaside enclave (?), which accommodates a community of talented local artists, and international 'VOLUnteers'.

I also travelled on a number of occasions to AAMA (African Arts and Music Academy). AAMA is a short distance away from the capital Accra, at the popular seaside resort of Kokrobite. It is owned by the best drummer I have ever seen in my life (no joke!), master drummer, Mustafa Tettey Addey. I was transfixed when I saw him give his usual Sunday afternoon performance to residents of AAMA and locals. There was everything, and more, in what I heard and saw. Besides the magic of Mustafa Tettey Addey, I watched performances by the local dance troupe, Kokrobite Dance Ensemble. I had dance lessons with them, which were further variations on traditional dances, namely kpanlogo and slow agbekor.

My travels also took me further north into the rainforest region of Ghana, to 'The Garden City', Kumasi. During my time there, I visited Kumasi Cultural Centre, and took in yet more variations of traditional dances, this time as an observer and 'documenter'. A local youth dance group, The Palace Players, particularly impressed me. They displayed profound ability, skill and maturity in their diligence to training and performing, far beyond their years. In a world where the youth are increasingly being distracted by all sorts of shallow trappings, that tend to produce shallow people, what I saw here was more than a glimmer of hope.

In Ghana, I also made contacts with other dancers, drummers and artists. I was introduced to a talented dancer, Priscilla, who lived just minutes from where I was staying. Priscilla is an absolutely brilliant exponent of Adowa and Kete dance. On a number of occasions, she was accompanied on drums by Yaw, a friend of mine. Together, they helped me with 'homework'.

In Ghana, dance and drumming is vital to religious practices. I met a local priest, and accomplished drummer and musician, Pastor Azor, and his drumming

group. I met them quite by (divine) chance; after a hard day's training at Noyam, I was about to retire to bed when I heard drumming coming from somewhere very close by in the neighbourhood. I jumped out of bed, followed the rhythms, and ended up spending the rest of the night, and many nights thereafter, accompanying Pastor Azor, members of his family and the drumming group, on rich and complex 6/8 Ewe polyrhythms, mainly on agogo bells and kagan drums (like small, long congas). The immersion in 6/8 was a most valuable education, well worth rounding off the day to!

Whilst in Ghana I attended the annual Odwira festival where I was able to observe and document customary rituals of song, dance and celebration, alongside modern urban youth dance and music with its leanings towards imported American hip-hop, rap and R 'n' B.

Other significant events included a staggering performance by Gateway Dance Company, from Nigeria. The story, costumes, dances and intricate 6/8 polyrhythms that accompanied it all were truly outstanding. I also got a chance to watch a live performance of a young, emerging hip-life group, produced and choreographed by Ghana's foremost exponent of hip life, Reggie Rockstone. During my final few days in Ghana, I saw a perfect example of how dance can be used to express cultural unity and harmony: the Ghana-Japan Dance Festival, held in the children's park in Accra, attracted close to a thousand participants, perhaps more. The theme was of cultural bridge building. It was a cultural fusion project, aimed at bringing together elements of Japanese and Ghanaian music and dance, and expressing it through a carnival celebration. It was a fantastic day, which helped to lift my ideals even further; as to the purpose of music and dance.

I was delayed in Ghana for reasons beyond my control. At times this was very difficult, but in other ways it was a blessing in disguise because, although it brought on many unforeseen difficulties (particularly back in the UK!), at least I was in Ghana for an extra month, and I was able to see such events as the Ghana-Japan Dance Festival!

On my return to the UK, I have facilitated several successful African Dance workshops including two African Dance for Families workshops, organised by The City Arts Unit of Hull City Council, as part of their very first ever Hull Dance Festival. I have also facilitated several free 'full-day' workshops for Thoresby and Priors Primary Schools, in Hull, with several other dates in the near and distant future, with community groups and other organisations, like Artlink Exchange, in Hull. This is just the beginning, and I have big dreams for the future. I am glad I took those steps into the healthy world of dance.

Conclusion (or, another start!)

If asked to reveal one pearl of wisdom I have picked up from my studies and research with Noyam in Ghana, it is this: the notion of traditional forms of dance and music is often seen as something unchanged, which has to be, and can only be, danced and played a certain way. There seems to be an almost unexpressed, mythical sacredness attached to something defined as traditional. However, the truth is that different regions, villages and cultural troupes will play and dance a particularly defined piece, with their own particular flavour. Despite their many variations, they will all tend to insist that their way is the correct way to play and dance, and that it has always been this way, often citing parents, grandparents and ancestors. Given the contradiction between what is concretised in notion as a traditional piece of music or dance and, the truth about how its expression varies from place to place, then, obsessively holding too strongly onto something as traditional, to the point of stagnation, is inherently

problematic; it can be seen as a refusal to admit to the realities of contemporary existence. I am of the view that 'the traditional' can be worked on, enhanced, using all that is at our disposal in the modern world, and made more accessible to contemporary society, otherwise it runs the risk of being pigeon-holed, and functions as something akin to a museum piece, and may lose relevance and usefulness to modern society. It runs the risk of becoming 'something else' because it has not been woven into contemporary reality. And I take the view that when your roots, your essential foundations, become 'something else', marginalized and boxed in, an essential part of the self risks becoming out of touch, invisible or lost all together. It is important to have a broad and inclusive view of what is 'traditional' and 'contemporary' and how they can be inter-connected to create more possibilities beyond what we already know. This is a kind of innovation. Also, I sense, somehow, that when the traditional is made more useful in this way; i.e. it is recognised as a source of contemporary forms of creativity, then we may have greater respect for the traditional, rather than it becoming something which is kept hidden and only brought out for curiosity (for instance; in the case of traditional African dance and drumming vis a vis the culture of tourist consumption). Traditional forms of creativity are an essential part of contemporary forms of creativity (and vice versa); we never re-invent the wheel, and branches always spring from roots!

[Sketches from Ghana](#)

