

Covering letter from Ukachhi Akalawu

Title: West African Performing Arts course

Date: 12 July - 12 August 2008

Place: Gambia

Timescale: 4 weeks

The purpose of my project was to travel to the Gambia and study West African Performing Arts (dance, music, storytelling, circus, masquerade, and cultural and historical context). I undertook an intensive course featuring all these disciplines. The tutors were lecturers from the University of the Gambia (UTG), and local and international artists.

How far the purpose of my project was achieved

My aim was to gain an understanding of the integral nature of African arts and incorporate that into my work within education. Having been a professional dancer for a number of years, my career and further professional development have tended to be dance centred. However, I have been involved in enough African dance and African theatre to be aware that all artistic disciplines are incorporated into a performance piece, and that an artist is expected to be skillful in a variety of expressions. Thus, through the study and subsequent crystallisation of many aspects of West African performing arts, the purpose of my project was fully achieved.

Particular highlights

Performing with Mbeurody

I have observed Simba performances for many years, and never imagined being a part of it – for a start, it is a spectacle only performed by men. It is true street theatre and has the power to engage people of all ages, so it was a privilege to be a part of it.

Observing the Kumpo festival in Casamance (Senegal)

I find watching masquerade a very spiritual experience; one is able to see the beliefs of a people in action, and the importance of a festival in terms of their existence and worldview.

I have described both these experiences in more detail in my report.

Suggestions that could help future Awardees

Do everything you can, see everything you can, get actively involved, network, and savour every experience. Document everything – take pictures, video, notes, etc. I also found that writing a daily diary really helped me to reflect upon and understand many of the amazing things that I encountered.

Plans to share the information about your project with others

I will be writing an article on my experience for Hotfoot (an online magazine published by the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora [ADAD]) and will be approaching other publications with aspects of my research which have been developed through this trip. I will be incorporating many features of what I learnt into my teaching with view to developing a course in African dance studies that offers students essential knowledge about African dance in its wider context.

This was a powerful and unique experience in which I was able to consolidate many ideas as well as begin to put certain plans into action. I am truly grateful to LUTSF for giving me this opportunity to further develop myself as a dance professional.

Thank you

Sincerely

Ukachi Akalawu

REPORT

My project was to travel to the Gambia to study West African Performing Arts with a long-term view to develop a course in African dance studies in the UK (my ultimate plan is that this UK based course would incorporate a field trip to Gambia to study West African Performing Arts at the University of the Gambia). The Programme Directors for the course were Iris Walton and Emily Eller who are both lecturers at UTG.

The field of West African Performing Arts is a massive one, and to say 'West Africa' can be misleading as, for example, the culture in Nigeria is quite different to the culture in Ivory Coast which is different to the culture in Ghana, etc. So, in actual fact, the course sensibly focused on performing arts from specific regions; Gambia, Senegal, Mali and Guinea-Conakry. In order to give the course further structure, a theme had been chosen. This theme was spirits and Djinnns (supernatural spirits with both negative and positive qualities), and many of the dances, dramas and stories we learnt and observed, had a spiritual context. Djinnns were also a strong theme in two of the performances.

Dance and drumming

Dance was a major part of the study programme. We had dance class in the mornings followed by a drumming class. Intermittently we would have sessions in acrobatics, storytelling, improvisation, and meditation, as well as rehearsals, lectures and language classes. So the days were very packed, but the course was well scheduled but flexible enough to accommodate individual students needs. We studied a broad range of dance styles and were fortunate to be able to see them in a variety of contexts – the festival, the social occasion, the concert, the youth club, the night club, etc. I believe that in order to move towards full understanding of a dance style, it is crucial to see the various ways it is practiced. The morning dance classes focused on Djembe dances (i.e. dances that predominantly use the Djembe drum as accompaniment). These are the dances that form the basis of much mainstream West African dance performance, so whatever ones level of ability, one is expected to have even a rudimentary knowledge of these dances, as they are commonly practiced. The teacher was Yusupha Sonko from Ziguinchor in Casamance. (He was also an acrobat so assisted in the acrobatics classes). Yusupha taught the following dances;

- Kuku -from the Susu people of Guinea-Conakry
- Lenjen -from the Mandinka people of Gambia
- Wango -from the Toucouleur people of Senegal
- Lamba -from the Malenke people of Mali
- Kumpo -from the Jola people of Senegal

We learnt Sabar dances also (i.e. dances that use the Sabar drum as accompaniment). Our teacher for these sessions was Miesa Diouf who was the lead performer for the Mbeurody Simba group. I also managed to learn a little Sabar drumming from the Simba group as that is a particular interest of mine. The Sabar dances we learnt were;

- Simba (or Faux Lions) -from the Wolof people of Senegal
- Ndeup -from the Lebou people of Senegal
- Gumbe -from the Lebou people of Senegal

Our Djembe drumming sessions were with Almany Camara and Karamou Bangoura from Education through Communication and Culture Organisation (ECCO), and we mainly focused on Diolé rhythms from Guinea-Conakry. These sessions with the ECCO artists included two dances taught by Ayesha Bangoura (the niece of Karamou). The dances we learnt with Ayesha were;

- Shoshonah -from the Baga people of Guinea-Conakry
- Diolé -from the Mani people who live on the border between Guinea and Sierra Leone

For all the dances, we learnt the songs that accompanied them, and some background details about where and why they are performed. (To give a couple of examples of how the underlying theme was present in the dances; Kumpo is a spirit that descends on a village in the form of a raffia covered masquerade; Ndeup is a healing dance that is conducted when an individual is suspected of having a mental or emotional illness, or possession by a bad spirit). I found the dance aspect of the course quite advanced in terms of what was expected of the students, and it was very enjoyable to have that challenge.

The lectures

The course also included lectures on a variety of subject matter;

- Emily Eller gave a lecture on West African empires
- Ousmane Samba gave a lecture on the roles of the Griot (e.g. storyteller, event organiser, mediator, etc) and the important part that Griots play with regards to preserving history
- Dr Omar Jah (Head of Performing Arts at UTG) gave a lecture on the practice of Islam in Africa and the impact of globalisation and western thinking
- Dr Saja Taal (former editor of the Observer newspaper, and lecturer in Political Science at UTG) gave a lecture on the role of the media and changing social attitudes in the Gambia

These lectures provided a great context for us in terms of understanding issues that affect Gambian people. All the lecturers were very engaging, and hugely experienced in their respective fields, and it was encouraging to learn about the fascinating work that each of them is doing, and their belief in the importance of helping the country to progress.



KMC Youth Fans Club

Sense of place

There were a number of trips and events scheduled into the course that were to help students gain a sense of place, and understand the naturally vibrant and poetic nature of the region. We were

encouraged to investigate and integrate whatever we saw, read and heard into ideas for

the performances, whether it was physical, visual, auditory, or literary. In Kartong, we visited the sacred crocodile pool at Folonko where female elders residing by the pool from Muslim Madinka and Christian Karoninka communities prayed for us. We visited Lemonfish art gallery which showcases the work of West African artists, and we visited the

Gambian Reptile Farm which is a research and education centre as well as a reptile refuge. In Banjul, we visited Arch 22, a structure built to commemorate the coup of July 22nd, 1994. Within the arch is a museum displaying traditional sacred amulets, tools and textiles - some dating back centuries. And it was at the gift shop also situated in Arch 22 that I purchased *The Magic Calabash* by Gambian writer Nana Grey-Johnson; a story set in 1960s Gambia, involving local politics, corruption, desperation and a goblin's hat with magical qualities. A bizarre story, but filled with messages and symbols that actually made it very relevant to present times. We also went to an incredibly emotionally charged exhibition of Gambian and Senegalese artists at the Franco-Gambian Alliance entitled 'Painting Migration in the sub region'. The works used themes of emigration, immigration, integration, hope, and loss, with titles such as *Shipwrecked*, *Journey Without Success*, and *The Sacrifices of Illegal Immigration*. We visited KMC Youth Fans Club which is an after school club for girls aged 7 - 16. They do a range of activities including regular dance practice, performing at local and national events, and doing acts of kindness for the local community. The manager of the group - Abdou Njie - told me that the group receives very little financial assistance which limits what they do, but doesn't stop the girls' enthusiasm and commitment. Abdou Njie allowed us to watch a rendition of a piece they performed for the July 22nd celebrations. The piece was a fabulously fun mixture of marching band, cheerleading, and traditional sabar dance.



The Kumpo

In Casamance, we observed the Kumpo festival of the Jola people in Kafontine. There are various interpretations of the Kumpo festival - some say it has links with male circumcision rituals, some say it protects



the community from negative forces and that the community calls the Kumpo spirit which then descends for the festival. The Kumpo takes the form of a raffia covered figure with a long flag pole at its head. It spins, jumps, swings the pole and speaks. It was then joined by another masquerade figure who we were told was called Bos, (or Ayssamaye) which wore a large wooden mask with horns and carried a whip. Bos would bring people out to dance in the middle of the square under the threat that if they didn't dance well, he would whip them. However, it was all done with humour. The festival took place at 1am and the whole village came to participate through singing, drumming and dancing. The women played metal bells, the men drummed and sang, and everyone danced (including very young children). It was wonderful to behold.

Total theatre



Darai Njaxass

What I've described above are just some of the experiences that enabled us to begin thinking of our upcoming performances as 'total theatre' as opposed to dance with a bit of drama and music on the side. I recognised many recurring themes throughout the trip which influence much of Gambian artistic expression, such as; the role of the Griot, trance and healing, the overriding influence of the natural world, the

sea (both as a giver of food, and mode of transportation and migration), the importance of the crocodile as a cultural and spiritual symbol, and the fact that dance and music is not just practiced and appreciated by 'professional' dancers and musicians, but by *everyone* regardless of age, ability, or status. Being from West Africa (Nigeria) myself, this was not a revelation at all. Nevertheless it just confirmed to me the fact that the lives that people live in West Africa are quite different in terms of how they enjoy and share a creative event. The event is not something that is outside of them. They are an integral part of it, and there is little if any separation between performer and audience - in fact the roles are interchangeable. We were frequently encouraged to get up and dance at all sorts of events and celebrations. In Casamance, some of the group stayed in Melantane artists' retreat in Kafontaine. Melantane hosts local and international painters and sculptors, thus the whole compound was filled with conceptual paintings and strategically placed sculptures. It was at Melantane that we were visited by Darai Njaxass (a large local group of traditional dancers and musicians) who performed generously for us, and it wasn't long before we were encouraged to get up and join them.

The performances

In total, we put on three shows, each one radically different from the others. The first was a short site-specific piece performed around the hotel complex in front of a small invited audience (and some curious passers-by).



Ukachi and Miesa in the Simba performance

The second was the performance with the Mbeurody Simba group. The Simba (or Faux Lions) are a form of popular street entertainment from the Wolof ethnic group of Senegal, where a group of men (who say that they are descendents of the original Simba), dress as 'lions' and act out a legendary fable of a man who went into the forest and was attacked by a lion. Their blood mixed but the man managed to escape. In the ensuing days, he began to develop aggressive lion-like qualities, and the people of the village began to

fear him. A medicine man was called who created a magical white powder that when sprinkled on the Simba, would calm him down. The people were then able to control the Simba and others came from far and wide to see him do extraordinary feats of strength and agility in the safe knowledge that if the Simba became too hostile, they could sprinkle the white powder. Throughout time, the white powder has become a string tied around the wrist, or more widely, a ticket, and if an audience member is found without a ticket, then they are made to dance, or do all sorts of embarrassing antics until someone comes and either gives them a ticket, or pays the Simba to release them. There are variations on this story, but the premise is generally the same. The story is acted out through dance, acrobatics, sabar drumming, song, comedy, call and response, and much audience participation. We had a wonderfully challenging and multi-lingual rehearsal process with Miesa Diouf and the drummers, learning dances with quite complex rhythms, but whilst trying to convey elements of the Simba story. Getting ready for the show was also quite a feat as the Simba dancers wear very elaborate costumes of faux fur, fringing, amulets (gris-gris or ju-ju), cowrie beads, head-dresses and bright face paint. We performed with the five Simba dancers and six drummers in front of a crowd of people in the local square of Bakau, and the actual performance was true street theatre. It had bags of energy and spontaneity. The Simba were very skillful and persistent in how they attracted and gathered the audience, teased the children, danced outstandingly, and made the audience (and each other) laugh.

The third and final performance was a culmination of all that we'd learnt and was quite an extravaganza with a narrative involving a man with two wives, a love duet, a tree

that turned into birds, fire-eating, a Djinn, lions, an Abounyara (medicine woman), and lots more. In the context of the course, this all made perfect sense as essentially it was a presentation of what we had learnt, in a form fitting to the environment. The audience was a mixture of locals and ex-pats, who recognised and appreciated many of the themes and the mode of presentation. All the dance and drumming tutors participated in the performance, so it was a wonderful group effort.

Conclusion

I found this experience to be hugely significant with regards to deepening my understanding of the integral nature of performing arts practice in West Africa. I'm happy to say that as much learning happened outside of the studio as inside. I thoroughly appreciated having the opportunity to observe and participate in events, and meeting the most fascinating people. This has all served to broaden my knowledge and enhance my practice as a dance artist.

Ukachi Akalawu
2008

(Pictures courtesy of Paul Blore and Abdou Njie)