

Cover Letter from Latifat Saka

Title: *Training and Research in Historical and Social Malian Dance forms*

Date: *8th April 2011 - 9th May 2011*

Place: *Bamako, Mali*

Timescale: *Project lasted approximately four weeks*

Dear LUTSF secretary

Please find enclosed a cover letter and two hard copies of my report along with a CD-R and a DVD of recordings of my research and travels.

I am extremely pleased that I was awarded the LUTSF. It enabled me to successfully participate on a Professional Development Training and Research programme in Mali. The programme was designed specifically to help raise the profile and direction of my independent practice as a performer, dancer, choreographer and tutor within a national and international sphere.

The project was to follow two paths. The first being a training in Malian dance and Drumming forms with Papson Sylla at his '**Stage Africa 2011**'. The second focus was to research local social Malian dances within the village context as means for me to develop a movement vocabulary that encompasses African and Western structures.

Purpose and Achievements

The purpose of the project has been achieved to some degree as I have mastered five historical Malian dances, researched some social dances in social settings and made connections with people from all walks of Malian life. Also, I built contacts with a range of performers, dancers, musicians, teachers and guides. However, I did not work with Papson as intended as he did not make it to Mali. A significant part of the project is still to manifest. The reason being, since my return from Mali I have suffered an injury which has temporarily left me unable to dance. For the present, the circumstance I find myself in has made it impossible for me to action here in the UK any work in a laboratory/workshop environment. Nevertheless, once I am fit and well, I aim to draw from the knowledge and experiences I gained in context to help develop my choreographic expression, my dance technique and my dance practice in general.

Highlights

There were many memorable moments, though I have to say, my excursion to Mandingue Country and the village Siby was the greatest highlight. The landscape was breathtaking and the villagers were very accommodating.

Other particularly pleasing moments were when I met and viewed the work of students and staff at Conservatoire des Arts et Meti rs Multim dia Balla Fess k  Kouyat  and when I met drumming phenomenon Bassidi Kon  and watched his dance company 'Group Bwazan' in rehearsal.

Suggestions for future awardees

Planning and Preparation

I suggest that future awardees be prepared for 'the unexpected' and to have a number of plans in mind as back up should their original plan not fully manifest.

Funds and Finance

It is essential for awardees to have enough funds to support them throughout the duration of their project. They should have a realistic budget and access to more funds should they experience financial hardship.

Learn basic language

If they are travelling to a foreign country, they are likely to benefit greatly if they have a basic understanding of the language of that country.

Use small hand held recording instruments

I highly recommend that awardees use a small handheld sound recorder as they can document with ease their thought processes, soundscapes and any interviews they may have with people.

Video as much as possible when permissible

Lastly, I suggest that awardees take a lightweight camcorder with a tripod and ample batteries. They should record as much as possible when permissible. The disadvantage is they have hours of footage to sift through. The advantage is they have a great tool for documenting their processes with less scope for interpretation. Whatever is recorded is authentic.

Dissemination of information about project with others

My objective is to share information about my project through actualised performance and through teaching. Though audiences and students may not witness or experience every aspect of the project, I hope they will receive in essence the motivations and core of my study undertaken through the support of LUTSF.

Also, I will add excerpts of the film I made about my project on my website which is currently under construction. Lastly, I will share information through word of mouth.

I am very grateful for the support I received from LUTSF as I have been deeply inspired and had the opportunity to renew the direction of my practice. All-in-all, I have been deeply enlightened about a manor of issues concerning the means of how to approach a study of this nature and develop my passion. I have a great sense of hope for my practice in the future.

Yours sincerely,
Latifat Saka

REPORT

Introduction

I researched social and historical Malian dance and music forms in Bamako with the intention to develop a movement vocabulary that supports my choreographic and teaching practice, drawing on the knowledge and experiences I received in Mali.

Although this project proved a success, it did not arrive without some difficulties. In fact, through no fault of my own, the project was nearly cancelled. Days before I was due to travel, (my flight and visa having been paid) Papon, my proposed tutor and guide informed me he had cancelled the course and that he was unable to travel from France to Mali for my project.

I was undoubtedly disappointed with this news as I had been planning this project in close consultation with him for many months. I reminded him of my and LUTSF investment in the project and insisted it could not be abandoned without good reason at such late notice.

As it transpires, Papson, at the very last moment arranged for me and one other student to have intensive tuition with Vieux Diarra a well known dancer in Mali and two drummers, Souleymane Solo Keita and Moussa Diakite.

The Training

My daily training took place in a natural wild open landscape where shrubs had been cleared under some mango trees. The ground under my feet was hard sand. There, I and Claude (a drummer from Martinique) were put through our paces by our teacher Vieux in the sweltering heat. The training was without doubt challenging on the physical body and like no other I have received. An audience of children, adults, cows, horses, chickens, lizards and all sorts of wild life visited daily to encourage and inspire us in our training.



Lati, Vieux and Claude in dance class practising Sounou dance

As with all African dances, rhythm and song is intrinsic to the dance. The drummer dictates to some degree what movements the dancer can action and he instigates the pace of the dance. Therefore, I spent time familiarising myself with the sounds of the dances. In the afternoons when it was far too hot to dance I practised some basic drumming patterns and learnt the calls. I am eternally grateful to Solo Keita and Mussa Diakite the drummers who were forthcoming in teaching me hand techniques and for being very patient with me.

We started each session with a warm-up and progressed to learning the steps of each dance.

I learned five dances over a period of ten days:

Maraka is a dance that comes from the *Kegneba* region of Mali. The translation of the word '*Maraka*' is '*Tribe*'. It is a dance performed for the King's election and is sometimes performed following a heavy raining season to show appreciation for a new crop. This dance can be performed for periods lasting three hours.

It is a fast paced dance with the motion of the arms appearing to be thrown into space though it is executed with elegance and ease amongst those who are adept with the moves. The feet at times seem to mark time and at other moments create intricate rhythms. I learnt eight steps of the dance though there are many more.



Vieux and Lati practising Soukou Dance

Sounou is a dance that comes from the *Karata* region of Mali. It is said, that there was this young woman called *Sounou*. She was so beautiful and she loved to dance. Whenever there was a ceremony, she was invited to perform. When she danced people (men in particular) fell at her feet. Everyone who saw her dance wanted a bit of her and more importantly wanted to dance like her. Traditionally the dance is performed by women. Nowadays, it is acceptable for men to demonstrate their virility and virtuosity when performing this dance. Sounou is an up tempo dance with many intricate movements.

Soukou is a dance that comes from the

Mandingue region of Mali, an area very close to the boarder of Guinea. I fortunately had the

opportunity to visit Mandingue. It is a region steeped in history, and as far as stories go, the country we call Mali was given its name by two forefathers of Mandingue. One father had mystical powers, the other a mighty ability to fight. Together they had fought off a rival dictator in Country Mandingue and brought harmony amongst the local community who were at unrest. The dance was traditionally performed by elder men who wished to capture the hearts of young women.

Soukou is one of my favourite dances. There is a majestic feel and rhythm to this dance. For the most it is slow in pace though the movements become faster as the dance progresses. Again, the arms seem to be thrown into space but with precision.

Tansole is a dance that comes from the *Béledougou-Kolokarni* region. It is the dance of divination. It is normally performed outside the village at night time. Nowadays, all sectors of the community can dance all sections of this dance, whereas, traditionally women were not allowed to perform sections of the dance that is considered sacred.

Funnily enough the movements in this dance appear very playful and a dancer needs to be very agile to execute the movements well.

Dansa is a dance that comes from the region of *Kaye* which is in the Western area of Mali bordering Senegal. It is a dance for a gathering of young women. A woman within the group will call out “**stop**



where you are! I will dance for you!" and so she dances for the enjoyment of others until another woman calls out and performs their version of the dance.

Dansa is another favourite dance of mine. Again, the dance is full of intricate steps

Because the training was so intense, I feel the movements are ingrained in my body. I have considered how I can dissect these dances and select sections that I can reconstruct using techniques that I have been taught in Britain. I am so pleased that I recorded the training sessions on video as I can refer to this documentation when necessary. My camcorder became an extension of me as I filmed nearly every moment of almost every encounter I had.

Researching Social Dance in the Village Context *Reading and Rewriting Dance in a Social Setting*

A large part of my original plan was to work closely with people in one or two villages to exchange movement material and compose dances. This did not happen as Papson was not present and he was vital in the orchestration of such events.

So I exchanged the notion to create dances with people in the village to viewing and experiencing dances in the local settings of bars, clubs and live music venues in Bamako.

I went to the *Tea Room, Paradise Bar, Le Diplomate* and *Dominoes Nightclub*.

These establishments are meeting grounds for a variety of people who live and work in Mali. Unsurprisingly, these people come from all areas of the globe though, the venues tended to be more populated with people who came from the continent of Africa and in particular, the countries in the Western hemisphere of Africa (countries neighbouring Mali). As with many migrants they brought elements of their own specific cultures that in a social context fused more readily with the dominate culture of Mali, creating and informing new and different ways of being and of course dancing!

I found these informal settings to be a special ground for collecting material for a host of reasons. One reason being, I was introduced to various Malian dances, Ivorian dances, Senegalese dances, different versions of the very popular Afro American style of dance known as Hip Hop and dances from Guinea to name but a few.

What became apparent to me was that all these dances were instigated by the music played. People intrinsically knew what moves to do or what gestures to make with their hands, bodies and faces when they heard a particular kind of music. They automatically knew what proximity a body should be in relation to another. The codes and rudiments of each dance style were already known. Some people moved more comfortably from one dance style to another. I was one of those people! Unlike my formal training of the weeks past where I was taught dance through a rehearsed mode of practise, here, I found myself viewing, copying, improvising, experimenting and performing simultaneously. And to top things, it came naturally! In fact, many of the others on the dance floors unwittingly explored dance in a similar manor to me. Could this sort of environment be a more suitable setting for me to create compositions to place in or on different arenas or stages in the future?

At the Market!

The market was another good place for collecting movement material. I particularly liked visiting the local markets to hear the sounds and rhythms created by people while they went about their daily business. In the traditional pressing workshops, men beat out intricate rhythms as they ironed out creases from beautiful woven fabrics. Stall holders and shoppers unwittingly created dances amongst



themselves as they exchanged gestures and money. As a foreigner in their land, I was often seen as a target for a good transaction. Some stall holders would bow to me while others would do large sweeping gestures with their arms and hands as they beckoned me to their stall. One man made a path through the crowds of shoppers to lead me to particular stalls that he thought would interest me. I too danced with them; inclining my head as if to question the price they were charging me for an item that I thought was too high, frowning my face to show disapproval, shaking my hands vigorously to say no to something or as I did on a number of occasions improvised a dance on the spot to show my satisfaction when I had made a good purchase.



A traditional pressing workshop

I so loved the dances of the markets! I recorded all that I could and have some wonderful soundscapes to use in future works and some great footage to refer to when creating new choreographies.

Viewing Rehearsals and Staged Performances

I made connections with people from all walks of Malian life and built contacts with dancers, musicians, students and staff at Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers Multimedia Balla Fesséké Kouyaté. I met artistic director Bassidi Koné of the group Bwazan and watched his company rehearsals. Also, I was invited to a marriage ceremony where I saw dances performed by my tutor Vieux and other dancers and musicians from the local community. While at the ceremony I listened to Griots and Praise singers, ate Malian cuisine and for that occasion I wore a wax print dress that I had bought at a market in Mali.



Drummers playing at a Wedding ceremony

Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers Multimedia Ball Fesseke Kouyate

Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers Multimedia Ball Fesseke Kouyate is Mali's most renowned performing arts institution. It is located in central Bamako, very close to *Musée National* and *du Parc National de la Boucle du Baoulé*. Strangely enough, it is funded by the Cuban Government. The dance department places emphasis on practising Western

dance techniques and runs courses lasting five years. In comparison to specialist British training institutes, the students start their training at a later age of around 18 or 19. They receive grounding in contemporary dance, ballet, and composition with only one African dance class a week. This I found a little surprising.



2nd and 3rd year dance students at the Conservatoire in performance

I viewed some classes and student compositions. The standard of work emanating from the final year students was superb with a high level of technique and imaginative choreography. I wondered what scope they had for employment following their training. I was told very little if they stayed in Mali. Hence, the more determined ones travel to France or other European countries to try their luck.

Bassidi Koné and Group Bwazan

Bassidi Koné is a remarkable young versatile percussionist who directs Group Bwazan. Bwazan means “Bobo children” in the Bwa language. The group consists of nine of his siblings, two sisters, seven brothers and himself. They pay homage to their ancestors through their music, song and dance. They have performed in many West African countries since 2006 when the group officially formed and have built a reputation for being one of Mali’s most exciting and accomplished young bands. I had great pleasure in watching them rehearse. The sisters are the main dancers of the group and I found it particularly pleasing to watch and learn from female dancers as most of my formal training in Mali had been with male tutors. The women seamlessly transitioned between



Big sister at Bwazan rehearsal

showing strong dynamic movements to exhibiting grace and sensuality. “Big sister” as I called her, the eldest of the two women, actually had a tiny frame, but her energy seemed greater than her stature by tenfold; she taught me excerpts from their stage production. I managed to pick up many of the steps though I could not match her in quality and dynamics of movement. I am so grateful for what little I learned from her and my wish is to work with her again.



Country Mandingue

Excursions

Sadly, I was unable as intended to visit Country Dogon to see the mask dances, though I did go to Country Mandingue and witnessed the breathtaking views and learnt about two of the legendary heroes of that land. I also visited the village Siby situated in Country Mandingue and witnessed the tail part of a ceremony for the election of the village's new chief. It was fascinating to experience.



A view from the rocks over looking Country Mandingue terrain

Outcomes and Conclusion

Regardless of the difficulties I encountered at the start of this project, it proved to be a great success with many positive outcomes. I achieved to a large extent what I set out to do. I learnt many incredible things about Malian people: their music, dance and culture. I met a number of guides who have different knowledge of the geographical landscape of Mali and its peoples, festivals and culture. I made contacts with staff at various educational institutes and as a result I am planning my return trip to Mali next year and hope to spend at least eight months there. Whilst there, I intend to visit Country Dogon to see the mask dances and other regions with a rich history in dance and extraordinary architecture, notably, Kaye, Mopti, Djenné and Timbuktu. If possible, I will take part in some dance festivals. Lastly, I am very pleased to have been offered a contract to work at Bamako International Academy, consequently; I have a means to support myself while I continue my research.

Lati Saka 2011