

MFA STUDENT, DANCE, GHANA

African dance is expressed embodiment of traditions, myths, legends, and rhythms. It is a lived text that manifests philosophical and aesthetic traditions both on the African continent and in the Diaspora. The acknowledgement and emergence of African dance techniques help make a template for in-depth examination and exploration of African culture and traditions. African dance, and in particular the Umfundalai African dance technique, ritualizes events, occurrences, and festivals and makes them accessible in a holistic mode. In viewing African dance as text, the ephemeral nature of the movements and rhythms are rendered permanent by understanding the philosophical and cosmological worldview. Multi-sensory, multi-dimensional, and polycentric, African dance yields valuable information about bodies, cultures, and languages.

I visited the University of Ghana at Legon in Accra, Ghana during the summer of _____ as a part of the Temple in Ghana program to broaden my studies of African dance and culture. During my stay I participated in dance classes with members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble and I introduced them to the Umfundalai African dance technique (hereafter called Umfundalai). The introduction of Umfundalai to the Ghanaian dancers illuminated for me the unique Western and African American characteristics that are present in the technique.

Umfundalai, which means "essence" or "essential" in the Kiswahili language, is a contemporary African dance technique that is grounded in African culture. Contemporary in this context is defined as created by an African American woman, coming into existence in the past thirty years, created in an urban environment in the United States, and structurally influenced by Western dance forms. Grounded in African culture, Umfundalai is Pan African in its scope because it is comprised of artistic motifs, core movements and dances from key regions of Africa and the diaspora that symbolize cultural patterns. The holistic nature of African culture is reflected in Umfundalai through its holistic ideology of integrating the body, mind, and spirit in the dance experience.

Umfundalai's primary functions are to train and articulate the body to negotiate the multicultural, multi-dimensional, and polyrhythmic qualities of African and African-based dance forms. The underlying premise of Umfundalai is that in order to understand the dance it is essential to understand the culture of the dance. The codification of Umfundalai provides a framework where through the dance the dancer simultaneously learns about African and diasporan cultures. Umfundalai serves as a limitless vehicle for expression with a philosophical and theoretical underpinning that is open-ended and Pan African.

I returned to Ghana in March of _____ as a visiting lecturer and conducted a weeklong residency teaching Umfundalai to several classes of dance students and the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Professor _____, Head of the Department of Dance Studies, and dance faculty Mr. _____ and Mr. _____ observed and participated in the residency. Prior to my departure we discussed my return to the University of Ghana at Legon to conduct my research.

The proposed study is a ten-month (four months in Philadelphia and six months in Accra) multi-method examination that uses participant-observation, description, and journal content analysis. I have studied various African and African-based dance forms for seventeen years and Umfundalai intensely since 1996. I am presently teaching Umfundalai in the dance department at Temple University and will use my past and present experiences to facilitate my research.

The core of my study will be to teach a beginning level Umfundalai technique class to dance students at Temple University and dance students at the University of Ghana at Legon. My goal is to conduct a descriptive comparative study of movement motifs in the Umfundalai dance technique on the Temple University dance students and the University of Ghana dance students. The purpose of my study is to view the similarities and differences of the manifestation of this contemporary African dance technique on Temple University dance students and the University of Ghana dance students.

The foundation of my descriptive data will use seven core movements in Umfundalai to compare to seven movement motifs found in Ghanaian dance: Nigerian stomp, Kanaga arms and legs, Ibo arms, Zulu shuffle, African triplet, Sankofa arms, and Hongwe. The comparative Ghanaian movement motifs come from the following seven dances that represent a range of Ghanaian dance styles as well as ceremonial and contemporary dances: Adowa, Kpanlogo, Akom, Bawa, Togo ataia, Gahu, and Kete. I will describe the following dynamics of each movement: (1) rhythm-the accents

within the pattern: (2) shape-the size, form, angle, curve, and outline: (3) weight-heaviness, groundedness, lightness, and sustainment; (4) flow-free flow or bound flow; and (5) effort-the bodily sensation of pressing, gliding, floating, and flicking.

The description of dynamics will serve as foundational data to enable me to articulate similarities and gradations of difference between the two dance forms. Next I will examine how the dynamic elements are combined in each movement motif relative to the following: (1) the use of the arms in relationship to the torso; (2) the articulation of the hands; (3) the position of the torso; (4) the posture of the body; (5) the relationship of the legs to the body; and (6) the articulation of the feet. This data will inform my class observations of the Temple and Ghanaian students learning Umfundalai and the proclivity to process Umfundalai in a particular manner.

The students will journal their lived experience of learning Umfundalai and describe how they embody the movements. The content of the journal will be analyzed for similarities and differences of experiences and descriptive themes. My analysis and synthesis of all the descriptions composed, collected, and analyzed will inform my larger research agenda of cross-cultural teaching and learning methods.

My methodology is guided by the ethnographic construct participant-observation as used by Yvonne Daniel in *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* and the phenomenological construct kinesthetic empathy refined by Deidre Sklar in *Invigorating Dance Ethnology*. Daniel utilizes her role as an observer of rumba danced in Cuba and as a participant in the dance forms of salsa, mambo, and rumba to inform her examination of the social, political, and religious conditions that context its structure and meaning. Sklar's refinement of the term kinesthetic empathy goes beyond participation and observation of the dance and uses the feel of moving in the total environment of the native dancer to provide a full impression of the dancer as well as the dance. Daniel and Sklar's research methods will help elucidate my research in my role of teacher, dancer, and researcher in Philadelphia and Accra.

I hope to achieve a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural transmission and learning of African dance, specifically the Umfundalai African dance technique. The uniqueness of this study is that it crosses the disciplines of the humanities and the arts and incorporates the lived experience of dancing and learning as told by the students. My research will impact the larger field of dance by shedding a new perspective on the cross-cultural dance exchange and the present comparative dance research models. Specifically related to the field of African dance, my research will bring forth new knowledge that goes beyond descriptions of traditional dances and cultures and looks at African dance in a contemporary context.

It has been twenty years since Umfundalai was taught in Africa; therefore making this research historically significant in the continuing evolution and progression of the dance technique. My research will yield three formal documents: a descriptive analysis of Umfundalai that will become a chapter in the Umfundalai teachers manual; a report to the Fulbright committee; and my dissertation that will be housed at the libraries of Temple University and the University of Ghana at Legon. Upon the completion of my research and dissertation defense I plan to return to Ghana to share my findings and contribute copies of materials gathered during my stay to the dance department library.

My preliminary and comprehensive exams will be completed by November _____. Dr. _____, my dissertation advisor, has approved my dissertation project/research statement and I am progressing towards a dissertation proposal defense date of December _____. I plan to depart from the United States in July of ____ in order to conduct initial research of the Ghanaian dances stated in my proposed statement of study. This time will also be used to locate the resources that will be accessible to me during my fieldwork and examine the theses and dissertations on Ghanaian dance housed in the International Music and Dance archives at the University of Legon.