



Nana Korantemaa

Ayebofo

drum

was my introduction
to my life

from an interview
recorded, transcribed
and edited
by Elizabeth Sayre

Nana Korantemaa Ayebofo was the first daughter in a family of nine. Born in Philadelphia in 1951, she grew up “being a ruffian— always hanging out with boys, and doing things that boys do, like playing sports, and climbing fences, and playing drums.” As a child, Nana asked for music lessons, but her mother functioned as a single parent and there was no money except for the bare necessities. Nana used big oatmeal boxes and Crisco cans, making drums out of anything in the house that made sound. In the summer of 1968, she happened to discover a master drummer from Ghana, John Eshun, playing music in her neighborhood, there because he was working with performer Arthur Hall. Nana was electrified by what she heard, and began to sit in to

listen to rehearsals. Eventually, she found her way to the dance classes at Arthur Hall’s Ile Ife Center. The women there took her under their wings. Evangeline Brown was her first dance teacher. Carol Butcher, another member of Hall’s company, began to teach her African songs. She was invited to go along with Hall’s company as a singer on a concert tour. It was an “enriching and empowering experience” for her. The place became a second home, and she was hungry to soak up everything. She was dancing, but she was always hanging around the drummers. She credits Robert Artis for taking her on as a student. She describes what happened in her own words.

*Nana Korantemaa
Ayebofo, 2003. Photo:
Thomas B. Morton*

I was dancing, and after the dance class the musicians, Farel Johnson, Robert Artis, George Cannon, James Corry, and Joseph Williams, would still be drumming and working out different things without the dancers. I would always still be there. So, Bobby Artis said to me, “What, you want

to play? I was like, “Yeah.” He said, “You serious?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Sit down, then.” So he’s the one that was responsible for me playing. And he would say, “All right, I want to hear a 6/8.” After I learned cabildo, I had to go from 6/8 to 4/4 and back. He was the one that really helped me with

my timing. He was the lead drummer of the company.

Some of the other musicians worked with Ghanaian drummer Saka Acquaye, like Baba Crowder and Sonny Morgan. Bobby Artis used to talk about all of these

[Continued on next page →]



Nana Korantemaa
Ayebofo
Photo: Thomas B.
Morton

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people. Bobby Crowder had his own company, you know. They said he was very strict with his musicians. In fact, they said, if I was in Bobby's company I never would have been able to play drums, because they wouldn't let women play drums. So, Bobby Artis used to say to me, "That's why you have to be good. Because when they come around, I'm going to say, 'Yeah, that's my

drummer, and so what?'" Bobby Artis is the person responsible for my really knowing about African rhythms.

I started on congas. Cabildo is the first rhythm that I learned how to play, but I had to play it on the bell first, while Bobby played it on the drum. He's the one who would say, "Drumming is not physical. It's a spiritual thing. You have to have your mind together.

And you have to concentrate, and you have to practice. It's not about showboating. It's not a commercial thing, where you go out there and play on stuff, to let people know, 'Oh, yeah, I know rhythms.' It's not about that, so forget that. I don't want to hear you banging on stuff anymore. If you're gonna play, you sit down and be serious, OK? And a drummer's supposed to play every day. If you don't play everyday, you're mediocre." That's how he was. But he really loved drumming, and he just wanted you to play well. He always said, "If you're going to play, you must put your heart into what you play. And once you learn the rhythms, that's just the beginning. You have to have your tones. What's your tone quality like? It has to have definition. An open tone has to be an open tone every time you hit the drum, not some of the time."

He then showed me the different styles of drumming, Haitian drumming, and what you hear in Ghana, and how you approach the djembe as opposed to the congas. Bobby Artis didn't want me to play the maman drum, the lead drum in Haitian vodou. He said, "If a lot of men are sitting down playing drums, you don't play the maman. You let them play the bottom and you play something else. You don't always have to drum. If you're gonna play the bell, play it, really play it. And keep the time. Each instrument is equally important. Don't feel that you have to play a drum. Play a bell, just be in the battery. And that's good." Also, he said that you play your experience. It's not so much about the patterns, but you play your experience, and when you play your experience, then you can really put yourself into it. It is important for drummers to play for dancers. He said, "If you're playing for yourself, that's one thing, but as soon as you start playing for dancers, there's a whole other concept that you must have. This is the only real marriage in the world." He said the only real marriage was the one

between the drum and the dance. Bobby Artis, he was great. A really, really, great drummer.

The drum was my introduction to my life, really. Because I didn't know who I was. I was floating, not really knowing what I was going to do, where I was going. I had the kind of threats that a child in this kind of community probably has from her mother. "You're not going to do all that. You're going to have to do something meaningful in your life." But what? I just knew I didn't want to have a thousand kids. I didn't want that. And seeing this guy jumping up and down with a drum between his legs, and these people singing in another language, with tights and stuff on. I didn't even know what tights were! My first time to Baum's to buy tights and leotards—I mean, that was an awakening. You know what I mean, because what did we have? From a very poor family in the neighborhood, what do you know about a dance supply store? And modern dance shoes—I'm wearing modern, I got ballet shoes, I got tap shoes! It was like my life just took a whole other turn. I went from this meager little pea, to this... I'm on concert stages all over the country. You know what I mean? C'mon! Then we were on TV, and we're at Lincoln Center, and Kennedy Center, and you're at all of these places, and people stand up and give you a standing ovation. I'm standing on stage in this pose going, "OK, God, what's this really all about?" And the intensity that the drummers and dancers brought to those concerts was phenomenal. It was just transforming. So the drum really gave me life, a life that I just couldn't imagine, and this is before Africa.

Back then I had all of Celia Cruz's records. I mean, after I got out of the tour, I had all of Celia Cruz's records, I had all the orishas, singing songs to the orishas. Then I got initiated in Francisco "Pancho" Mora's house. Carol Butcher took me there. "Pancho" Mora was one of the



What I learned in Ghana about women drummers was quite to the contrary of what I heard before I went. People in Ghana said, "...if you are there at the drum, you're supposed to be there."

babalawos responsible for bringing the Lucumí religion from Cuba. He's dead now.

Once I went to Africa, that just changed and took me on another trip. But before that, I was happy to let my father's Mayan or Latino face show. My Mom used to joke and say, "Well, she's part red person." Anyway, so, my playing congas and singing Spanish songs, it was like I could let that out, I could rejoice with that part of myself, because I really felt it. The drummers were saying I was getting good. They said, "You play well." People used to call me

Shango. Or, they would say, "You must be Shango." So I went and found all this information about Shango. I bought a big medallion of Shango. I had a Shango bracelet, I had a Shango anklet, I had gold earrings—I was Shango! I wore all this red, it was crazy, because I was Shango, c'mon! They said if I was a lady drummer, I had to be Shango, so you know, Shango was my orisha and that was it, I was Shango! Can't you see I'm Shango? I went all the way. And so, Carol took me to her padrino's house where she was already initiated,

[Continued on page 38 →]

and they really opened arms to me, especially when he found out I could sing, and we would sing! So, they scheduled me for a reading, and I got a reading— I wasn't Shango. Is she this orisha? Is it that orisha? No. Yemayá. He said, "Ahhh!" Because he too was Yemayá. But I was so happy because I didn't like those cigars, I really didn't. But it went with the act. So I was happy that I wasn't Shango.

But by then I had an altar to Oshun in my house, an altar to Shango, I was buying the double axe, everything. That's all I played, Spanish music, orishas' music, everything, because it just had the feeling, and there were drums all the time, and I could play drums, and I had my own set of drums now, and it was like, "I've arrived." Then I got my guerreros and my elekes, and in fact had started saving money because they said, "You need to make ocha to Yemayá." And so I met some of the old santeros to Yemayá, little short ladies from Cuba, and I mean, oh my, we used to go there, and they would start singing. I would be trembling, it was so beautiful!

I had always wanted to go to Africa. I had a little bit of savings. I had to go to Africa, there was no way I could pass it up. And so, my padrino divined for me, and said, "OK, when you go to Africa, you're going to meet a very powerful priest there, and they will initiate you. But if you make priesthood there, we will not recognize it, because it's not our order. But you're going to meet this very powerful person, and you're going to be very much a part of that, but it's very far." So, he really gave me information, but he was also trying to get me not to go, in a way, because they wanted to train me as the person who sings in the bembes. They wanted to train me to be one of those singers. Because if I would start singing in a place, somebody would get possessed. But there was no way stopping me from going to Africa that time. It wasn't Arthur's first opportunity to go, but he wanted

to go with his group. I went as the lead singer, and a lead female dancer.

It was 1974. When we went to Larteh, that was it. That was it. That was the powerful person that came out in my reading. Larteh is about 35 miles from the capital, Accra. It's up the mountain. It's an old town, but it was developed. There's literally a church for almost every Christian denomination you could think of: Holiness, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, plus there's one of the oldest sanctuaries of spiritual and psychic healing on the continent there at the top of the mountain. When we arrived in Accra, we all got off the plane in African clothing. We were home, we were psyched up! All these kids—we were psyched up to the hilt! I was 22 or 23 years old.

Arrangements had been made for us to stay at the girls' school, and there was a big air-conditioned bus there to take us to the school. So, it was like a welcoming. One of the important places to visit was the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healing Institute at Larteh. What's customary there is that they would send a messenger ahead to inform people that we were coming. So they had contacted the high priest to let her know that we were coming. When we reached Larteh and started to go in the house, someone shouted, "Ago, Nana reboo!" which means "Listen up, Nana is coming." So I see this black umbrella twirling, you know, before I see her. And when I saw the woman, Nana Oparebea, that was it. My body went into gyrations and I didn't know what was going on. Then someone asked me, "What is wrong with you?" And I said, "I don't know!" But I was weak! So they said, "It's all right, it's all right, calm down, calm down." So we get in the house, and there was an area for us to sit down. We sat down, they gave us water, performed the customs, and asked our mission. Then we all had to get

up and go and greet her.

I didn't want the woman to touch me. Because she exuded this kind of energy. I couldn't look at her, I wouldn't look at her: I had to greet her, and I wouldn't look at her. We went and sat down, and I was sitting there, and still today, I can't remember whether I dreamt this, I read this, or somebody told me that I would meet a very powerful person, and it was a woman. So, this person, I knew it was her. This was not the reading that I had from Pancho, but I knew this was the woman, but I can't remember whether I read that as a child or what. But, in any event, that time she wanted us to perform, but we didn't have our costumes and instruments. We just went on a visit, we didn't know that we would be expected to dance. So she called her priests and drummers, and they drummed and danced for us. Later Arthur asked for a rain check so that we could come back and perform there. So, at that time she took us into her divining room and made prayers for us. She told each person what family their soul belonged to. That's when I received the name "Korantema," "Crown of the Ancestors" and heard that I came from a family of healers, and that I had a mission that she would tell me more about at another time. Because that information had to be given privately. I didn't care what it was— I wanted to get out of there, get back on the bus and go home! Ooh! It was the scariest thing.

So we went back, maybe a week or so later, with our drums and instruments. We had this performance, and she had organized all of these chiefs, and everybody was there. We did African dances all the way up to modern dance. I had a solo in the Haitian dance. So I had on my scarf, I had on my bandana, I had scarves in my hand, and I had on a big skirt. When my solo started, I stepped out and did these turns—that was it. I went into possession. They say I was speaking Twi, the

language that people speak in Larteh, and that it was one of their deities. Meanwhile, the company finished the concert; there was one dance after that. I don't know anything about that. When I did come to myself, the woman is sitting on her stool like this. I'm on my knees with my head in her lap. So, I'm looking at her, and she doesn't speak English, and she's asking her secretary, who's standing there, to ask me did I see it. "Did I see what?" And I just wanted to get away from the woman because her energy was too intense for me; I started shaking. But I couldn't. My legs wouldn't hold me. I went to get up, and they said, "No, no, no, no, take it easy." So, I said, "Look, I just have to get away from this woman." They led me in the room with the rest of the dance company. When they finished the concert and were packing up, they said, "Oooh! You didn't tell us you could do that." I said, "Come on, come on, y'all." They said, "Nana, you were speaking their language, you sounded just like them." I said, "No, no, no, no." They said, "Well, the lady was talking to you, and you were talking to her." And so, after that, we had lunch, and then she instructed one of her priests to tell me to come back, and she would give me some other information.

After we left there, every time I would get close to drums, the entity would come back again. If I heard "Da boom boom boom!"—forget it. Forget it. So Arthur and them, they were so sick of me. I couldn't get myself together. They were putting Florida water on me and everything, trying to get me together. Because I still had to sing a leading part.

So, I decided then that I should go back to talk to the old woman, Nana Opabea, because I had to come home and face my mother, who was going to say, "Now what are you into?" It was then that I learned that I had a calling, and that this obosom had called me, that I was from a line of healers, and I was to use what I knew to

help people spiritually, and to help with the suffering in my community. I was told that the obosom wouldn't leave me. I had the option of studying at Larteh to learn the ways of the obosom or I could pay a fee to have the old lady appease the entity, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't come back. She said, "It's not going to leave you, but we can appease it to allow you to do whatever you think you want to do." So, I said, "OK, well, give me a chance to think about it." Then there was a priest in training who had been a schoolteacher before the obosom caught her. She actually was an interpreter for me. When the old lady left the room, she said, "You know what? That lady doesn't offer to train novices anymore, so if she's going to train you, you better accept the opportunity." At that time I didn't know that Nana Opabea was seventy-something. That was 1974, so she was 74. But I thought she was in her fifties, something like that. I had no idea she was that old because of how she moved and how she looked. Maggie, the priest in training, said to me, "If you know what I know, you better jump at this."

The dance company had an itinerary, and we literally performed all over the country. My allegiance was to the company, and making sure that I was there. I think we had a weekend off, and that weekend is when I went back to Nana Opabea at Larteh. I decided that I would study with her. I didn't have any money to appease anything—and I didn't know what was going to happen.

So, there, women didn't generally play the drums, but there wasn't a taboo. I mean, it wasn't that they couldn't. While I was there, when the drummers saw that I wanted to play, they would say, "Oh, play this." "Oh, great, play this." They liked it. And, in fact, whenever there was a festival or visitors, the old lady would call me and say, "Go on and play for us." I played, and they liked the idea that I could play. And in the Twi language, "pa" means "very good." I

was from Philadelphia, "PA." So that helped. And the word really went around. I had people come to me at Larteh and say, "You know what? I heard about you, and I had to meet you." So, I mean, the drums changed my life totally.

What I learned from that pantheon and order of spirituality is that the drum is the core of the spirit realm for healing—to this house. Everything comes from the drum. My mother hollered and screamed, but she couldn't stop me. Even though there were times when I would drum at Ile Ife in the studio, and I would have men come in and roll their eyes and stand in front of me, and grit on me, nobody ever really tried to stop me. The drummers who played always encouraged me. The drummers who could play, they said, "Go ahead and play! Great! Sounds good to me!" That's what they were concerned with. So it was fascinating to know that the rhythms that I had learned here as part of the dance company, that you find in Cuba, that you find in Brazil, are the same, and it transcends. Like the 6/8, it transcends these geographical boundaries, and it's like the same personage. And I think that, moving into this realm of healing, it's really important to have that understanding or experience, that there is a core, there is a root. To be able to allow others to have a connection with that sort of activated healing process. I'm grateful. What I learned in Ghana about women drummers was quite to the contrary of what I was told before I went. People in Ghana said, "No, you'll find women drummers. You won't find a lot of women drummers, but when you find a women drummer, she's good, and they have a very significant purpose in this whole spiral of spiritual energy. So, don't worry about it. If you're there at the drum, you're supposed to be there, and when you're called to be there, you're supposed to be there." It's a blessing and an honor.