• A Ga outdooring
  Barbara L. Hampton

• Ione Nash and Kulu Mele
  Katrina Hazzard-Donald

• African dance
  Kariamu Welsh

• To be young, gifted, and Black
  Shawn P. Saunders
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Front cover:
Opening procession at Philly Dance Africa
1998. Photo: Thomas B. Morton
What a web of relationships is traced in this special issue of Works in Progress! An often retold foundation narrative, cited in these pages, describes what happened when Saka Acquaye came to study at Philadelphia’s Academy of Fine Arts in the 1950s. An accomplished Ghanaian musician (and dancer and track star!), Acquaye began to share and make music with young African American peers. It was a riveting experience for culturally-minded members of the community, who had scarce opportunities for ongoing study and practice of African dance and drum. Fifty years later, some of Acquaye’s circle—for example, Ms. Ione Nash and members of Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble— are counted among the city’s most significant proponents of African dance and culture. It is fitting that we recall now that Saka Acquaye was a Ga artist, from the Ga people of Accra, Ghana, and that one of Philadelphia’s most enduring artistic lines of descent is indebted to Ga tradition and culture. The powerful ceremony that will be observed in this year’s Philly Dance Africa is only the latest in a series of deep connections between the Ga people and the people of Philadelphia.

Our long-running Philly Dance Africa collaboration celebrates African dance and its legacies here, and works to develop some concrete supports for those dedicated artists who practice and sustain African dance in our city. In previous years, Philly Dance Africa has incorporated workshops, deliberate pairings of African continental and diasporan artists in performance, and considerable technical assistance both to artists and community groups. Philly Dance Africa has been realized in festival and concert formats, indoor and outside, on the stages of ODUNDE, and through ongoing artist residencies.

In its current incarnation as a collaboration with Gadangme Association and ODUNDE, Philly Dance Africa includes a traditional “outdooring” ceremony, a Ga ritual done to publicly announce and celebrate someone’s change of status. At Philly Dance Africa this year, we are pleased to be celebrating the first honorary titles granted by the Ga people. The outdooring at Philly Dance Africa honors the new ritual statuses of Christine Wiggins and Alonzo Matthews, respectively the founder and an elder of Philadelphia’s Imhotep Institute, which offers African-based culture and education to young people in the African American community. A special recognition award enabling her to make a long overdue first trip to Ghana will be given to Ms. Ione Nash, at 79, one of the city’s cultural treasures and a dance pioneer. (It is noteworthy that she will travel to visit Saka Acquaye.)

This special issue provides background to the Philly Dance Africa program. We invite you to read more about Ga traditions and the outdooring ceremony in Barbara Hampton’s article in these pages. Katrina Hazzard-Donald tells us more about Ms. Ione Nash, and the Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble, setting them and their art in historical and political contexts. Shawn Saunders profiles two artists from a younger generation of local dancers, women who in different ways build on the legacy of their elders. Kariamu Welsh explores the complex aesthetic layers in African dance traditions. Finally, Tom Morton, who has documented so much of Philadelphia’s African American cultural history, contributes photographs from nearly 30 years of work. The essays in these pages (and Philly Dance Africa itself) reflect both long-standing relationships and ongoing commitments. We are moved by the seriousness of purpose, sense of responsibility, and connection to community that are made through the creation and practice of dance in our region. It is a great privilege to be part of the Philly Dance Africa collaboration.

We are happy to thank, for their support, the National Endowment for the Arts, Dance Advance (funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by Drexel University), and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council.

—Debora Kodish
Toni Shapiro-Phim
On behalf of the Gadangme Association of Greater Philadelphia, welcome to the outdooring of our Asafoanyε and Asafoatsε, and to Philly Dance Africa 2002 which this magazine celebrates.

We are honored by the presence of Naa Dedei Omaadru II, who succeeded her grandmother as the Ga Mantse of the Ga state, of Accra, Ghana. When she smiles, her gorgeous beauty emanates from head to toe. Her grace overshadows you as you approach. She stands tall and majestic. The longest reigning Queen of the Ga state, and the longest reigning Queen in Ghana, she is the niece of the famed teacher Nii Kwate Ofuso Koranteng, who taught for many years at Kinbu Elementary School, which graduated many renowned Ghanaian. The name of her sei (or “stool”) is Naa Atswei Okpenor. Naa Dedei Omaadru III presides over disputed and failing marriages and other matters of state. She has a special interest in the situation of battered women in Ghana, and is building a refuge there. She has also maintained a long interest in education. She has received many heads of state, including Bill Clinton, and is always next to the Ga Mantse Nii Amugi in such matters. She worked with several presidents of Ghana, including Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Lt. General Joseph Ankrah, Busia J. J. Rawlings, and our current president Kuffour. We are graced by her presence.

We are greatly honored, as well, by the presence of Naana Kaki Balerkie Kpentey I, Queen Mother from Ada, Ghana. We extend our congratulations to Christine Wiggins and Alonzo Matthews, Asafoanyε and Asafoatsε, respectively, for their new roles in the Ga Kingdom. We wish them luck. May God bless them. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the Philly Dance Africa committee members for bringing on this extravaganza.

Many artists are contributing to our event, including the renowned Nat Brew with Amanizeba group, and the young people of Imhotep Institute.

I am especially happy to introduce some of the Ga artists who are teaching young people at Imhotep, and who will be present at Philly Dance Africa.

Dan Nii Armah Hammond, born in the Asere region of southern Ghana, in the city of Accra is a drummer and dancer. Hammond learned to play music at a very early age. He lived in his grandfather’s palace, which was filled with drums used for various occasions. As a child raised in a royal family, Hammond was expected to serve and entertain the elders who visited his grandfather’s home for business, ceremonies, and special festivals. At the palace, Hammond first learned from his father to play the Bele (a traditional flute) and the Katamanton drum (played for chiefs). After his years of training and performing, Hammond plays and dances to many traditional rhythms.

Ayikuma Adjin-Tettey is pictured in these pages as the otsaamε during our Homowo celebration. He was born in Accra, Ghana. He was drawn to the storytelling that occurred at funerals, childbirths and child-naming ceremonies, and to the drumming and singing that would occur then, as well. He used to go out with the musicians and storytellers (including Tettey Makola, a great storyteller). His own performing career began when an Islamic group wanted to do a drama, but lacked people to do it; he volunteered and it was a success. He continued to drum. After coming here, he began performing again when the Gadangme Association began to undertake a Homowo festival, in which he participated. His son is Ismaila.

Ismaila Adjin-Tettey, raised in Accra in Ghana, West Africa, is a young drummer carrying on his family’s musical tradition. Adjin-Tettey learned many traditional rhythms while watching his grandfather, Yacub Tettey Addy, leader and master drummer of the group Odadaa. Adjin-Tettey started imitating rhythms at age five. By the time he was in Abossey Okain Junior High School in Accra, Adjin-Tettey was leading the school’s drum group and winning competitions. He came to Philadelphia in 1996 and remains inspired and committed to drumming.

To all of these people, and the many others who are helping to make this event a success, we extend our thanks.
A Ga outdooring in Philadelphia


Right: Otseams, Asafoante, and Asafoate, with Queen Mother, Homowo, 2002. Photos: Ron Taiver
The bright orange and burgundy autumn leaves rustle in the quiet of the early morning as Samuel Nii Kwate Quartey begins his daily commute into Philadelphia. In one day he might attend a meeting of the charter school board on which he serves as Vice President, followed by a meeting of the Ga’dangme Association of Philadelphia, of which he is a co-founder, after spending the day making clinical rounds and seeing patients at his private practice. As the sun peeks through this crisp October morning, Dr. Quartey appears warm, even jovial, but he is also a meticulous professional and dedicated community leader. Equally comfortable in a white lab coat, a custom-made Armani pinstriped suit, and the agbada dress traditionally worn by Ghanaian men, this podiatrist from Adabraka-Accra is now known among local expatriate Gans as the maŋts. (Ga political leader) of Philadelphia. This fall saw the beginning of his thirty-third year in the United States, and August 10, 2002 marked his seventh year as onukpa (elder) in the local observance of the Ga H-mwɔ harvest festival. Over the same quarter century, the Ga population in the Delaware Valley grew to critical mass, allowing the H-mwɔ not only to take root and thrive here over the past seven years, but also to welcome the increasing numbers of Gas throughout eastern North America, including Canada, who travel to Philadelphia to join in its celebration.1

The traditional Ga homeland comprises six towns along the Guinea Coast of Ghana and their outlying, politically dependent villages.2 With a land area that stretches from the Densu River in the west to the Laloi Lagoon in the east and from the coast inland to the Akwapim Scarp on the northern boundary, their strategic location became the site of the national capitol (Accra), the country’s principal harbor (Tema), major industrial parks, and a refinery to accommodate some of the 700,000 barrels3 per day of crude oil produced since May 31, 2002.4 Like trans-national or rural-to-urban migrants, the early Ga people were forced to undergo significant adaptations after they settled the region (ca. sixteenth century)5 and dispersed to the coast, solidifying a central position for themselves in the trans-Atlantic trade of gold and kola by the seventeenth century. As many inland African populations shifted away from the trans-Saharan trade,6 the Ga’s economically strategic location invited attacks by Akan imperial powers (the Akwamu in the seventeenth century and the Ashanti in the eighteenth), who sought to eliminate them as middlemen in the coastal trade, acquire direct access to the sea, or simply annex valuable land.

Each time the Ga emerged victorious. They divided the duties of priests (who were traditionally their leaders, even in war) between two individuals: one, the wulɔm, was in charge of ritual and religious duties, while the other, the maŋts., assumed the political and military duties. In war campaigns the maŋts. led a warrior company, headed by an asafoats. (“father of the warrior company”) on war campaigns. Since men and women shared power and responsibility in pre-colonial Ga society, wulɔm worked with wɔyɔi (women priests), the maŋts. with the maŋyɛ (“mother of the town,” or female political leader) and a Council of Elders (male and female), and the asafoats. with an asafoanyɛ (“mother of the warrior company”). Likewise, associated ensembles of men (asafo) and women (adowa) musicians, while separate and distinct ensembles serving quite different purposes, performed in support of these positions.

Each group that moved to the coast had a somewhat different history and its own set of officials; each settled in a distinct quarter within the towns (akutso); and all collaborated when appropriate or necessary. The chief priests did not retain politico-military functions, but the political and military officials took on the roles of lesser priests. Today, each akutso (town quarter) has its own set of priests. The chief priest Nai Wulɔm commands respect from all Ga. Having never initiated a war, the Ga transformed a theocracy into a state with the war machinery necessary to ensure their safe and vigorous conduct of trade.

When the Europeans’ trading interests changed, the Ga found their geographic location a disadvantage, as their new institutions could not completely defend them against the onslaught of panyarring (slave raids).7 The Portuguese came and left cognates in the Ga language; the Dutch and Danish came and left forts and castles; the British came, did all of the above, officially colonized the Ga and did not leave until 1957, when the Gold Coast Colony became the politically independent Republic of Ghana. Overall, the result was a peculiar form of underdevelopment carefully described by Walter Rodney.8 In addition to the removal of the country’s vast productive potential (in the form of people in their prime years) and a plethora of valuable natural resources, women were subjugated and indigenous social structures were destroyed or permanently altered. Among these latter were the political and military positions that were established in the seventeenth century.

Under the British "dual mandate" or Lugardian principle of indirect rule, the maŋts., maŋyɛ, and maŋkralo for every akutso were subordinated to a chief created by the British and called the Ga Mashie maŋts..9 In other words, the traditional structures of power were weakened and placed under a chief created by the British to provide themselves with a centralized authority, a

[Continued on following page]
convenient alternative to dealing with four to seven akutso-based authority structures in each of six towns. The Ga Mashie maŋtsε acted as their agent for purposes of census-taking, collecting hut and head taxes in the form of currency or forced labor, and recruiting labor and military conscripts. Today the Ga have returned to their traditional allegiances and the Ga Mashie political structure serves primarily ceremonial functions and mediates relations between necessary to accomplish their economic objectives. This included roads leading from the cocoa plantations and gold fields to the sea and railroads whose routes facilitated extracting and exporting natural resources, rather than connecting people and the towns in which they lived. Utilities—electricity, clay-pipe plumbing, telegraph and telephone lines—were built primarily to support mercantile and colonial administrative functions, along with some missionary work.

After political independence the warrior company became a public works organization. Today they repair roads and bridges, maintain the sewer system, dig wells, and bore holes for water. When a child is lost in the bush, they organize search parties. When the rainy season brings floods to poorly drained areas, they perform rescue efforts and try to improve the drainage. They build schools, facilitate health care delivery, whether from the national government or the World Health Organization, and launch other projects for the welfare of their communities. Asafo musicians perform at durbars, ceremonies to pay tribute to the political leaders, and at work sites to inspire their members as they work. Ga designate adowa as their special funeral music; the adowa company performs at other ceremonial occasions, including durbars for their maŋtsεmi.

Rather than abolish the position that they did not create, Gas have chosen to build traditional socio-political structures around the Ga Mashie maŋtsε, charging them to serve twenty-first-century needs in their communities. Within the past year Dr. Quartey proudly delivered an appreciable quantity of computers to Ga schoolchildren through the Ga Mashie maŋtsε. Africans in the Americas have forged strong ties with Ghanaians over the past 45 years; recruiting their skills, labor, and resources to help fulfill some of the most pressing public needs of Ga people is one of the goals of this new step to install U.S. citizens as asafo leaders. Bringing them into the Ga Mashie maŋtsε’s organization, which is highly flexible, is entirely appropriate.

**The asafoatsε, asafoanyε, and their warrior companies, as pre-colonial institutions, were pacified under British rule and marshaled to build the colonial infrastructure.**

**The outdooring.** The outdooring ceremony that will be part of Philly Dance Africa 2002 focuses on Christine Wiggins, founder in 1998 of the Imhotep Charter School at West Oak Lane where 450 students in grades nine through twelve are
currently enrolled. A coed school, Imhotep achieved a 100% college acceptance rate for its class of 2002. Students come from a wide range of socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, although a considerable number come from Harambee, a nearby school for students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Both of Ms. Wiggins’ parents were educators; her mother established the renowned Prince Hall Elementary School. The Imhotep Charter School has just acquired I-20 status, which makes it legally eligible to start an exchange program with Ghanaian students.

Imhotep has adopted a framework that combines principles from contemporary North Atlantic psychology and Ga traditional rituals. (Thus, the school day begins at 10:30-11:00 a.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m., recognizing recent research on the sleep cycles of adolescents and also working parents’ desire to limit the time students spend unsupervised after school.) Each school day begins in the yard with a libation by an elder or a student, showing respect for traditions.

The outdooring ceremony also focuses on Mr. Alonzo Matthews, a special education teacher and the onukpa or Elder leaders’ roles. “As royalty we don’t put royalty in bunkers and send the people off to war; we lead the people in war and protect the people. My job is to be out front and protect and shield the teachers and students from bureaucratic mayhem. I tell them to take care of the children and I will always be out front fighting the necessary battles for them. The African approach is not that people take care of their leaders, but that the leaders take care of their people,” explains Ms. Wiggins. When it comes to school governance, teachers and staff sit in a circle and all contribute to decision-making. Ms. Wiggins attributes the striking similarities between Ga views of leadership and the ones she and Mr. Matthews share to African Americans’ epic memory.

Any outdooring ceremony has six basic components: (1) an address by the otsaame, who opens and guides the ceremony, (2) the libation or Ṳkpai, (3) the presentation and the formal naming of the initiates, and (4) greetings, music, and dance.

The otsaame. The otsaame is chief of protocol and spokesman or mouthpiece for the maitse. In traditional settings the maitse never addresses the public directly. Instead, the maitse makes a statement and the otsaame repeats it immediately, but not always using the maitse’s exact words. Listeners are supposed to assume that whatever the otsaame says came directly from the maitse’s mouth, and are to disregard any other utterances. Many maitsemii are highly eloquent individuals who are learned in Ga traditions and also, today, have gone through Western higher education. The otsaame, however, has special qualities of fluency, tact, and accuracy; he possesses extraordinary eloquence, oratorical skills, and a deep knowledge of the society’s orature. Similarly, when people wish to address the maitse, they speak to the otsaame, although the maitse may be within hearing distance.

When messengers were the principal means of

[Continued on page 22 →]
Madame Ione Nash

and the Kulu Mele
African American Dance Ensemble
Traditional African aesthetic values are manifested in a range of New World expressive forms, but they are especially visible in music and dance. Traditional African postures and gestures, organizational patterns, internal dynamics, and characteristics are used and expressed whenever and wherever the most popular New World dances are performed. Sacred dance and theater dance also exhibit the aforementioned qualities less conspicuously, but significantly nonetheless.

In West and Central West Africa, dance had a meaningful part in nearly every aspect of life. First and foremost, dance was linked to the sacred, the affirmation of life and the mystery of death. As African scholar John S. Mbiti has stated in his Introduction to African Religion, "African religion is found in music and dance." New World African dance traditions, whether they are sacred or secular, draw their power and authority from the vital legacy of traditional African dance. Cross-referencing the legacy of the sacred, contemporary New World dance traditions derived from Africa are being nourished, molded, modified, and recreated by local dancers. Among the most important and most longstanding of such Philadelphia dance entities are Madame Ione Nash and the Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble.

Madame Ione Nash is uniquely poised between the worlds of traditional African dance, contemporary modern dance, and African American folk/vernacular traditions. Unlike many of her contemporaries who find their niche in one form of dance or another, Ms. Nash has worked to unite the vocabularies of several dance forms. By creating a New World African contemporary style, Nash has distinguished herself as an artist and innovator. She combines forms and moves easily across the artificial lines which separate one dance form from another. Ms. Nash and her art have witnessed and endured the ebb and flow of interest in African and African derived dance, and other struggles. She was once dragged into court and questioned about her use of drums in her dance classes; her students’ parents offered supportive testimonies to the judge.

By most standards, Ms. Nash was a latecomer to the world of dance. Her family observed the religious prohibitions against dancing found in many black Baptist and fundamentalist Christian churches. Struggle between such prohibitions and the supremely important African tradition of dancing for nearly every occasion has beset the African American community since its first contact with Protestantism under the British colonial regime and, later American slavery. But Ms. Nash, who will be seventy-nine this year, has lived, performed, experienced, and taught the dance she so loves for more than half a century.

Though she dates her start in dance to age twenty-eight, she actually studied and performed clandestinely in the late 1930s at West Philadelphia High School, where the gym teacher organized a group of students and presented a concert. Ms. Nash, then a high school student, fabricated a story about a student meeting for her very religious parents and took part in the performance. A few years later, married and the mother of a young daughter, Ms. Nash went to a "clothesline" art exhibit and stopped in front of a portrait of a ballerina. "I wish I could be a dancer," she said to her daughter. A stranger, overhearing, gave her a
Ms. Nash and Kenneth “Skip” Burton, percussionist and long-time artistic partner. Photo: Ron Tarver, 2002

doing in the spirit/continued from p. 11

card with contact information for dance teacher Olive Bowser. Bowser worked out of her basement. Ms. Nash would study with her for the next three or four years.

Later, Ms. Nash studied and performed with Marion Cuyjet, who was initially so challenging that the girlfriend who went to the first class with her never returned. Ms Nash was not so easily discouraged and worked her way up into Madame Cuyjet’s company despite what some would say were the intragroup color restrictions that plagued the black community in pre-black consciousness years. Still later, Ms. Nash studied with dance master John Hines, who drove to New York each week with a carload of students to work with a Katherine Dunham contemporary, the now legendary Syvilla Fort. Ms. Nash would go on to immerse herself in modern dance, ballet, tap, and eventually traditional African dance under Ghanaian dancer and drummer Saka Acquaye.

Saka Acquaye was a student from Ghana, living and studying in Philadelphia in the culturally and politically turbulent 1950s and 1960s. This was a period of self discovery for the nation and especially for African Americans, who began to redefine their national identity by laying claim to the glory of the African past. This was done on numerous fronts, but no cultural activity allowed blacks to lay claim to and identify with the African homeland in quite the same way as learning and performing traditional African dance. During this period all forms of “black dance” took on new life, new meaning, and new direction. Doing African dance allowed one to connect with something that dancers would speak of as “indescribable.” The children of Africa came to class in search of and hoping to reclaim a bit of the “lost self,” a self they viewed as stolen by the American slave experience and by post-emancipation white supremacy.

African dance was seen as a balm for the injuries to the racial soul of African Americans. Studying traditional African dance opened a door to a wealth of knowledge. Students of the high art of African dance learned history, sociology, music, cultural traditions, and language that they had been isolated from in their daily lives as Americans. Exposure to the dance allowed students to handle challenges to the black presence in America, enabled them to debunk prevalent denigrating and shameful myths about Africa, and gave them a new sense of self, a new confidence in their person and their people. Drummers and dancers alike testify that African dance saved their lives and gave them a livelihood as well as a way to serve their communities. Dance held out hope where there was previously a void. Unlike ballet or modern forms, this dance was community oriented, much as the traditional village dances had been. Uniting dancers spiritually and politically, traditional African dance was a practice through which black nationalist and sometimes white radical values coalesced. In these classes dancers moved as a unit connecting to each other and to their African past, and though the body was American, the dance verified that a bit of the soul, the spirit, was indeed walking with the African ancestors. This experience uplifted the participants to new heights of cultural euphoria. The euphoria was magic.

Where Madame Nash is eclectic, Kulu Mele is focused, working
would become the cultural bridge

Bobby Crowder, and Arthur Hall

"senior circle" of Ione Nash,
influenced many others, but this

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edge and experience—probably
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i initiates who have gone through
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traditional dance to which its

Afro-Cuban traditions. The ensem-
bled is well known for its role in
erving and disseminating the
ored Orisha dances of the Yoru-
and Lukumi traditions. Like the
ditional dance to which its
members are dedicated, Kulu
e has longevity and inner
roup cohesion; half of the four-
-person group are original
bers from the late 1960s or
early 1970s. Its current
ship boasts more than a century
of devotion to the dance tradition
and, like Madame Nash, shares
the legacy of dance and drum
transmitted by master Saka
Acquaye. Like that of Asadata
Dafora in an earlier period, Saka
Acquaye's influence would be
far-reaching, touching lives in
anticipated ways.

Kulu Mele, meaning “voice of
our ancestors,” in part traces
its origin to classes, rehearsals, and
performances under the direction
of Mr. Acquaye. Attending those
early classes and performances
were artists who would become
minors legends in the Philadelphia
African dance circuit. Among
the participants was Arthur Hall,
founder and director of Ile Ife
Center, who went on to create artistic
statements about the experiences
of blacks in the Americas. Hall also
delved into the Ghanaian material,
introducing me to the traditional
Agbadza song and dance of the
Ewe people of Ghana.

Bobby Crowder, director, now
senior drummer, advisor and unof-
official godfather of Kulu Mele, was
both a dancer and drummer
under Saka Acquaye’s guidance.
Credited as the founder of Kulu
Mele, Crowder, known as “Baba”
the term means father), is a strict
taskmaster. Revered for his knowl-
edge and experience—probably
more so than any drummer in the
Philadelphia cultural area—Crowder
is known up and down the east
cost. One of a relatively few per-
cussionists familiar with the sacred
bata drum, he is a humble tradi-
tionalist who “lives his drum” daily.

Saka Acquaye undoubtedly
influenced many others, but this
“senior circle” of Ione Nash,
Bobby Crowder, and Arthur Hall
would become the cultural bridge
over troubled waters for many in
the turbulent late 1960s and early
1970s, and would nurture many
many, others who would
come after.

Kulu Mele, like other traditional
African dance companies in
Philadelphia, has had a shifting
and interlocking membership.
Because of the limited pool of
trained and committed perform-
ners, dancers from other traditional
companies (and other traditions)
have sometime performed as
needed. A well-trained traditional
African dancer who expects to
perform in Philadelphia should be
familiar with several “stock”
pieces, much as a well trained bal-
lerina should be familiar with
Swan Lake, La Sylphide, Coppelia
and the Nutcracker. The stock
pieces from African dance tradi-
tions include but are not limited
to “Fanga,” popularized by Pearl
Primus, “Mandiane,” and
“Lamba,” from the Senegambia,
“Agbadza” and “Kpanlogo” from
Ghana, and Orisha dances from
Nigeria and Cuba. They should
also be familiar with some of the
New World African dances,
including Brazilian samba, Cuban
rumba, Dance Congo, and various
Haitian dances—not those forms
taught in the “Arthur Murray”
social dancing studio, but the
original folk forms. In addition,
they should be familiar with the
traditions from which those
dances derive as well as the drums
and rhythms and vocal music nec-
 essary for their performance.

Anyone who embarks on the
African dance odyssey is eventual-
ly led to African traditional
religion. Kulu Mele is no excep-
tion. A number of the members
practice, believe in, and observe
the traditions in which they work:
their life and work are seamless. In
Kulu Mele, one finds a number of
initiates who have gone through
the traditional ceremony marking
a drummer, dancer, or priestess,
for it is only through the initiation
process that the secrets of the
tradition are revealed, thereby
deepening the knowledge and
commitment of the student and
performer.

The current artistic director and
choreographer, Dorothy Wilkie,
joined the company in 1973.
When another local African dance
company, Jaasu Ballet, folded,
Dottie incorporated some of the
Senegambian material from Jaasu
into Kulu Mele’s repertory.

Though Kulu Mele is familiar with
Ghanaian dance, they do not
perform it. Their plate is full with
Yoruba, Cuban and Senegambian
material, and they receive many
requests to play and dance at
religious rituals, bembés, and
initiations. As Kulu Mele may very
well have the strongest battery of
bata drummers in the area
between New York and Washing-
ton, D.C., members are frequently
called upon by Cubans, Puerto
Ricans, African Americans, and
others who need the drum, dance
and song rituals that they perform
with expert precision, sacred
power and dignified grace. Most
of the drummers in Kulu Mele’s
battery have studied for decades
and performed within a range of
traditional African and New World
African drumming and percussion
traditions.

John Wilkie, Dottie’s husband
and music director of Kulu Mele,
had studied and played the Orisha
rhythms for over thirty years,
learning from Cuban drummer
and dancer Enrique Admiral
Adorno from Havana and with
others. Mr. And Ms. Wilkie carry
the legacy of Orisha dance in their
work and daily lives.

Like traditional West and Central
West African dance, Kulu Mele’s
presentation of Orisha dance uti-
izes subtle symbols of philosophi-
cal and religious significance in
the dancers’ gestures as well as
costuming. Their dances clothe
the dancer in religious raiment.
The costumes’ colors refer to deep
and longstanding human issues,
concerns, and life cycle patterns.
In the dance of the Orisha Oshun,
goddess of high civilization, the
culinary arts, aesthetic sensibility,
and the female principle, the
colors yellow, gold, amber, and
orange are a reference to Oshun’s
favorite food, honey, as well as her
sacred metal, brass. But yellow
reflects more than this Orisha’s
craving for honey. Honey reminds
us of the sweetness of life; lemons,
[Continued on page 25 →]
Many dance companies rooted in African dance traditions were born of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, when African Americans felt free to embrace the cultures and traditions of Africa. The growth of African American dance companies and dance classes in the 1960s and 1970s is reflected in the large number of established African and African American dance companies and dancers in Philadelphia. Working with Philly Dance Africa led me to wonder about the legacy of these established companies. To gain some insight into what African American dance means to this next generation of performers, I interviewed some emerging artists: Tamara Xavier, a Haitian American dancer, and members of the African American dance company Griot Don!.

Born in Haiti, Tamara Xavier moved with her family to New York when she was three years old. She grew up with communal and cultural dance forms and later studied both dance technique and history. She cites Katherine Dunham’s activism in Haiti as the impetus for her own study of the Dunham technique. Later, Ms. Xavier studied modern dance, and now, as a doctoral student at Temple University, she is studying the Umfundalai technique with Dr. Kariamu Welsh.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Tamara Xavier’s performances is her interpretive use of Haitian vodou dance. Her primary instructor in Haitian dance was Mona Estimé Amira who teaches in New York. According to Ms. Xavier, “What makes Mona Amira, important [as my mentor] is that she’s a Haitian woman who openly states that she grew up in the vodou way of life. Many people do not claim their vodou heritage because of the stigmas attached to the religion.” Ms. Xavier chose to focus on Amira for her dissertation on dance pedagogy and the Haitian dance Yanvalou.

Given her exploration of African and Haitian dance theory and techniques, it seems appropriate that Ms. Xavier has begun to explore dance as a vehicle for activism and healing. In fact one of her maxims, “Se moun ki pase maladi ki kone remèd,” is a Haitian Creole proverb meaning, “The person who was sick knows the cure.” Pointing to her own need to be a voice for peace and healing, Ms. Xavier uses her talent as a dancer to help other people realize the power inside them. She says, “I describe what I do as ‘(e)motionally bodied experiences.’ It is a reinterpretation of the concept of embodiment. My art is a collection of emotion set to sound or rhythm.” As evidence, she points to her use of Yanvalou which has an undulating spine motif. The basic movement is wave-like, but Ms. Xavier uses an interpretation that speaks to both the flow of the universe and the ebb and flow of emotions. Ms. Xavier wants her audiences to create their own meanings from her dances.

I find Ms. Xavier’s work poignant because of her ability to combine social themes with artistic expression. Rather than a staging of traditional Haitian vodou dance, Ms. Xavier combines dances of her native country with spoken word, African dance techniques and various rhythms.

Ms. Xavier’s activism against violence and abuse, especially that perpetrated against women and children, informs the dances she performs. Reflecting on her trip to Haiti in 1999, she remains amazed at the contradictions between the beauty of the countryside and the extreme poverty of the cities. In particular, she points to a system of servitude called rest aveks where young children (often girls)
are sold to other families. Before the end of her summer in Haiti, Ms. Xavier wrote to her parents to thank them for immigrating to the United States, yet she remains grateful for a chance to revisit her homeland: “Returning to Haiti was a magical experience for me. I dreamed so vividly when I was there. It is a beautiful place... [and] the grace I saw in people's faces was amazing.” Tamara Xavier uses the experience of returning to Haiti to illustrate why she dances and what the legacy of African American dance is for her: “Personally, I dance because I am Haitian American. Dancing allows me to connect with my parents, my parents’ parents, and so on.”

Griot Don! is a young dance company in a couple of ways. Formed just two years ago, the ensemble includes members who range in age from 18 to their mid-twenties. Yet their experience in dance belies their youth. Several are veterans of local African American dance companies. The dancers (Joslyn Duncan, Kimberly Gibson, Cachet Ivey, Najuma Lagbara, Mecca Madyun, and Make da Squirrel) and the drummers (Omar Harrison, Mala Makalou, and Matthew Simon) have performed with the Arthur Hall Dance Ensemble, Jaus Ballet, and Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble. The artists of Griot Don! are members of the first generation of African Americans who grew up having access to a wide selection of African dance classes. Because of this, many of the members have over ten years experience learning and performing West African dances. Their teachers and mentors represent a wide range of African dance teachers from Philadelphia, as well as dancers who have taught here: Jeanine Lee Oseyande, Hodari Banks, Dorothy Wilkie, Tenenfig Dioumbate, Youssuf M'Bassa. Their mission is to educate the community, particularly African Americans, about African culture using stories told through dance, storytelling, and music. Their repertoire includes dances from several West African countries, such as Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast. In addition, their use of the African griot tradition in the form of storytelling during performances is a way to bridge the gap between African dance and culture and American audiences.

At the same time, Griot Don! often faces obstacles related to the performers' ages. Pointing to the limited performance opportunities for African American dance companies in Philadelphia and throughout the country, Mecca Madyun and Cachet Ivey explained that presenters tend to offer performing opportunities to older companies. All of the members were adamant that they would love to reach a higher level of recognition in Philadelphia. “Only certain groups are considered as representatives of African (American) dance,” observes Joslyn Duncan, the group’s business director. “We would love to rise to that level of recognition and have a chance to show what we can do.” The group realizes that recognition depends on increased visibility in the community. They have developed a performance calendar, impressive for anyone, that includes the Community Education Center, the University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers University, Community College of Philadelphia, and an appearance at “Sistas” presented by Power99 radio station. In addition, to continue to develop artistically, the group is preparing for an extended residency in Senegal and the Gambia for 2003 or 2004.

Like many of the dancers from the generation before theirs, Griot Don! is more than a performing group in several ways. The dancers feel that providing affordable African dance classes in their community is just as important as performing. In fact, because of the commitment of each member to passing on African cultural traditions, they teach at community-accessible sites such as Hawthorne Cultural Center in South Philadelphia and Rhythm & Blues in North Philadelphia. “Teaching is just as important as learning and performing African dance. You actually learn by teaching in some cases,” Ms. Madyun states. Indeed, Griot Don! proves that the concept of passing on what one has learned continues in the African American dance community in Philadelphia. Building upon the lessons and examples of their own teachers, these young adults have taken to heart the communal...
Above left: The group Cumbaye, remembered as the first to introduce Havana traditions of Afro-Cuban dance and percussion here. Led by Enrique Admiral Adamo, Kikuyu and William Powell, and with dancers including Carol Butcher, Omonola Iyabunmi, Evelyn Smart and Dorothy Wilkie, c. 1978

Above right: The Arthur Hall Dance Ensemble performing “Obatala” at an antecedent to Philly Dance Africa at MTA, c. early 1990s.


Photos: Thomas B. Morton
African Dance:

like this we dance to the limits of the universe

In any discussion of African dance, one must state the obvious. “African dance” is an enormous and amorphous topic. Like the continent itself, African dance has been viewed as vast, unknown, exotic, and undefined. It defies categorization in many ways because of its vastness and the wide range of ethnic diversity. For the purposes of this essay, the label “African dance” identifies a genre of dances reflecting an aesthetic, historical, and cultural sensibility that connects the dances of Africa in a non-linear way. Language, region, and customs are transcended even as the distinctions, contradictions, and comparisons among the various groups individuate the aesthetics. Thus, African dance is discussed here in much the same way that dance historians discuss “American modern dance” or “European ballet” in generalizations, focusing on selected aesthetic characteristics of metamovements that overarch specific and particular cultural dances.
Above: J aasu Ballet members dancing Wolofsodong at Africamericas Festival, Hawthorne Recreation Center, Broad and Christian Streets. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

Left: Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble members practice a Haitian-influenced Cuban “Voudou” dance. Photo: Ron Tarver, 2002
Within African dance, trends, patterns, and commonalities provide cultural and historical continuities. There are sub-categories within categories and sub-divisions within that, but therein lies the challenge for artists and researchers. To know the dances of Africa and her Diaspora, one must dance them, embody them, and study about them. The complexion of African dance is dependent upon where you learn and study. Nuances and unique intricacies render each dance a separate template to be appreciated, absorbed, and interpreted. Immersion in the dance requires familiarity with movement vocabulary, dominant rhythms, and key terminology.

African dance has long been appreciated for its beauty and power. Recently, it has enjoyed a spate of popularity as global travel and connections to ancestral roots have become part of the U.S. national raison d’être. Dance is artistic expression, and so much more. In fact, one can argue that artistic expression is almost incidental and that African dance facilitates the processes of worship, of reverence, of praise, of revelry, of mourning, of transition, and of divination. Dance in most African communities is central to ceremony and ritual. While it is enjoyed and it entertains, it has a more somber and profound duty as it connects people to the ancestors and their spiritual world. The dance body in African dance features long torsos and short legs, not literally but metaphorically, arms often flexed or “akimbo,” knees bent, and feet parallel and flat on the ground. Rhythm, stance, expression, and gestures combine in a layered fashion to create the phenomenon known as African dance. The prominence of the torso is directly linked to its life-giving features, namely the heart and the pelvis. The arms and legs are almost considered irrelevant in African sculpture and in dance: they are a means to an end, supporting the torso and its motion. Arms and legs do not possess life-giving properties, and the prominence of the heart and torso in the cosmology of the spirit is not ascribed to the limbs. (I will say more on this point below.)

Dynamic expression. In African dance, the emotion is connected to the event and not to the specific dance. It is an effective system derived from a society that organizes all of its social and cultural icons and symbols in tandem so that the trigger works the same for everyone. Therefore, the dance is not imbued with the responsibility of dispensing emotion but exists as a conduit for whatever people’s emotional needs may be at a given time.

Articulation. Viewed from the western standpoint of realism and naturalism, African dance seems to be active and energized, with an emphasis on the head and torso. This is in direct opposition to the western focus on prominent and dominant characteristics to the head, head, and torso. In African dance features long torsos and short legs, not literally but metaphorically, arms often flexed or “akimbo,” knees bent, and feet parallel and flat on the ground. Rhythm, stance, expression, and gestures combine in a layered fashion to create the phenomenon known as African dance. The prominence of the torso is directly linked to its life-giving features, namely the heart and the pelvis. The arms and legs are almost considered irrelevant in African sculpture and in dance: they are a means to an end, supporting the torso and its motion. Arms and legs do not possess life-giving properties, and the prominence of the heart and torso in the cosmology of the spirit is not ascribed to the limbs. (I will say more on this point below.)

Polyrhythm/polycentrism. One of the most pervasive and dominant characteristics of African dance is the polyrhythmic/polycentric sense. It has been stated repeatedly that one cannot separate the music from the dance and that their interdependent nature makes any isolated study of one or the other incomplete. Rhythm and movement in tandem are the foundation of the polyrhythms which support the music and the dance. The multiplicity of rhythms
and movements all occurring simultaneously is the single most prominent characteristic of African dance. The negotiation of movement with rhythm interfaced with breaks, slaps, and singing, reflects the sophisticated interdependence and interconnection of music and dance. In Africa, dancers drum and drummers dance— and that’s a fact!

Polycentrism locates a center while propulsive movement explodes from the center and ignites movements in other areas of the body. The multiplicity of movements is orchestrated in such a way that the viewer is able to focus on a center of motion while enjoying the panoply of movements that the dance offers.

**Expressed motion.** Traditional African dances have no definitive conclusions. They are ongoing, organic, evolving, and developing entities with time spans that are fluid and flexible. The dances ebb and flow. Traditionally the dancers rest and then start up again, often after participants eat, drink, socialize, tend to family matters, and so on. Increased urbanization is changing that practice. Prescribed times may be imposed on events, since time is often equated with money. Traditionally, however, dances finish as the events that they are commemorating end. The life of the dance parallels that of the ceremony or ritual. Time in traditional Africa is a conduit and movings that the dance offers.

**Abstraction and representation co-exist in African dances.** Narrative-based and image-laden, African dance is an abstraction of traditional stories, myths, and legends and is representational in that the stories, myths, legends, symbols, and icons are recognizable in some form. Abstraction doesn’t obliterate the essence or idea; instead, it enhances, strengthens, and elaborates on the selected theme. Representation remains an integral part of African dance as it references movements and rhythms and locates them within an African aesthetic. African dance is not self-referential and doesn’t look to any person or thing for its existence. Canonical movements are created based on the significance and prominence of a particular movement in its cultural vocabulary. African dance offers as text rich and varied vocabulary and narratives that are readily transferable and translatable into contemporary expressions.

**Presentation and performance.** Michael Polanyi has stated that the performer knows more than he/she can tell. He explains the intuitive base of knowledge and the accessibility of that base with respect to comprehension. The performer’s awareness of the audience is intuitive. Being intuitive, it may not be accessible to tabulation and measurement, but it is accessible to observation and sympathetic understanding. The dancers know more than they can tell. They know what comes next, and they must not reveal or anticipate the movements or the drama that is to come. They must also gauge the audience in the improvisation section, using what Polanyi calls “appraisal of articulation.” The amount of time they spend in the improvisation phase is determined by the audience and by the musicians. This time is not measured, but it is accessible to an empathetic relationship between the audience and the dancers, which determines the success of the dance. Fanga, the welcome dance brought to America by the anthropologist and choreographer Pearl Primus, is dependent on this empathetic understanding between the dancers and the audience/community.

John Blacking offers the following insight into dancers’ performance: “To be effective in society, dance must mediate between nature and culture in human existence and so be transcendental in context. The intelligence of feeling should inform all action, and the insight and intuition that are nurtured by ‘artistic’ experience are essential for the quality of life; but sequential, linear processing of information is required for many of the techniques of living. . . Witness how frequently outstanding dancers seem to ‘be danced.’” Blacking was talking about ballet dancers, but his statement is apropos of African dancers as well. Indeed, there is an expression that says, “You have got to dance, dance!” In other words, dance has got to get hold of the dancer in order for the dancer to really dance. Audiences are keenly aware of the dancers who are “danced.”
communication over distances, the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} would sometimes return to his ma\textsuperscript{t} with a leaf placed between his lips to show his inability to utter the message that he carried, for he was not supposed to say insulting things to the ma\textsuperscript{t} even if they were the words of another. As a consequence of the European experience, when the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} too frequently returned with a leaf, the Ga decided to modify this custom. A ma\textsuperscript{t} could decide in a given situation to swear an oath that he would not hold the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} responsible for a message that contained insults or abusive words. Then the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} could freely deliver the message, and the Ga were able to communicate with a people who lacked knowledge of diplomacy, respect for the ma\textsuperscript{t}, or both.

The otsaam\textsuperscript{e} is always a junior official; when a body of officials meets without a permanent otsaam\textsuperscript{e} among them, the most junior member of the group serves as otsaam\textsuperscript{e} and announces the group’s decisions to the public. The otsaam\textsuperscript{e} does not come from a particular family or house, unlike other elders; his skills alone qualify him for the position. When he becomes an older man, his high level of intelligence qualifies him to take an active part in the society’s principal deliberative body and even to act as magistrate. On several occasions an otsaam\textsuperscript{e} has also become a lesser priest.\textsuperscript{10}

At this outdooring the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} will lead the procession, occasionally gesturing to ensure that participants are in their proper places at the proper time. In the Philadelphia setting, he will already have done much to publicize the event. He will have reviewed with the building personnel and with the sponsors exactly what is needed for the ceremony. He will open the drink, pass the drinking vessel, hold the bottles, and otherwise assist the individual who performs the ŋkpai or libation. He has expertise in traditional protocols and will signal the beginning and ending of all the stages within the ceremony.

An otsaam\textsuperscript{e} carries a stick called the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} tso, the insignia of his office. The stick is carved of wood by specialized artisans and then, according to tradition, plated with gold, once an abundant resource in the Ga region. The tso represents the authority and role of the otsaam\textsuperscript{e}; its design—an antelope on the back of an elephant—represents the invincibility of the Ga, once a small confederation of people surrounded by imperial powers that could not defeat it and today a small minority playing significant roles in all areas of national life. The otsaam\textsuperscript{e} holds the tso throughout the ceremony, except when both hands are required to perform one of his duties. Ayikumah Adjin Tettey is the otsaam\textsuperscript{e} of the Philadelphia Ga’dangme Association.\textsuperscript{11}

The ŋkpai. “Agoo:” the officiant is asking to open the ŋkpai or libation prayer. “Awom\textsuperscript{e}i ke atamaa!” (Ladies and gentlemen), he might add. “Ame:,” the audience gives its consent. The ŋkpai should begin. “Tswa, tswa tswa om\textsuperscript{e}y\textsuperscript{e} aba!” (Hail, hail, hail, may blessings come!) These lines confirm that an ŋkpai or libration is beginning, and the audience answers, “Hiao!” (Yes!). Throughout the performance of the ŋkpai, drink is poured on the ground as an offering to the ancestors and to the gods. Libations serve many purposes, but the first is to make an offering to the gods and ancestors from this particular event, acknowledging their presence and asking them to give way so that humans can perform the ritual. It is particularized first according to the day of the week. “Mini ashi mee?” (“What day is this?”) “Mini ashi Ho” (“Today is Saturday”), the audience answers. “Nim\textsuperscript{e}i Ho. Na\textsuperscript{e}mi Ho” (“The grandfathers’ [male ancestor’s] Saturday; the grandmothers’ [female ancestor’s] Saturday”), the officiant adds. “Ni\textsuperscript{e}mei ke Na\textsuperscript{e}mi n\textsuperscript{e} ve fe\textsuperscript{e} ny\textsuperscript{e}e ba he da. O nu.” (“Ancestors, all of you come and partake of this drink. Drink.”) Then the ancestors are told the purpose of the event and asked to bless the gathering. Highly skilled orators announce in elaborate detail who is present, who are central participants in the background for the gathering, and the aims of the event.

Ancestors remain involved in the affairs of humans after death transforms them into spiritual beings. They bring prosperity or calamity, depending on the behavior of humans, which includes performing the appropriate rituals at prescribed times and maintaining peace among themselves. The ŋkpai for this outdooring will resemble a prayer of propitiation, asking blessings for those who have gathered and for those who are being celebrated.

Improvisation is a requirement of most Ga artistic expressions. At this point in the ŋkpai the performer is expected to improvise the text, relying on his individual skills and using cultural conventions to guide him.

He asks that all the people of good will who have assembled to ensure the success of the event be showered with blessings. He requests that their good health and welfare be strengthened while they participate in the event and as they make their way back home. The ŋkpai will probably include a statement asking that all be blessed to witness the fulfillment of the promise seen in Mr. Matthews and Ms. Wiggins when they were selected to be asafoats; and asafoany\textsuperscript{e}; the gods will be petitioned to ensure that the efforts of the two will bring prosperity to their communities here and in Ghana. An ŋkpai must also address those who wish evil on the event. Anyone, present or absent, who does not want the aims of the event to be accomplished must be cursed by...
the gods so that his or her evil is deflected.

The call and response is maintained throughout the ṭkpa. Whenever the officiant completes a thought or a sentence, the audience responds “Hiao!” Occasionally, for emphasis, the audience may repeat the affirmation several times. “Hiao! Hiao! Hiao! Hiao!” The audience may also repeat the affirmation whenever the improvising officiant needs to cover pauses and awkward moments or repair errors. (This is not unlike the practice of improvising jazz soloists and ensembles.) Ga is a language in which tone has semantic value, and at high points in the oratory the speech becomes more like melody. Good orators almost invariably lift the recitation up to that level. And then comes the phrase, “Tswa! Omanye: abal!” (Hail! May blessings come!). He ends the ṭkpa: “Hiao!”

**Presentation and formal naming of the initiates.**

The next major event at the outdooring will be the presentation of the initiates. Outdooring glosses the Ga term kpodziem or “first appearance.” It marks the occasion on which an individual is initially presented to the public as a new being or in a new role. On the seventh day of life, infants are outdoored. Initiates to new positions are also outdoored according to the same principles. Unlike the ṭmmpowo festival, which celebrates the collective triumph over hunger, affirms the collective identity, and provides ritualized ways of expressing and healing conflicts, the kpodiemm focuses on the individual’s relationship to the society. This includes rights and responsibilities, privileges and obligations. Ms. Wiggins and Mr. Matthews have prepared for their positions by studying Ga culture. They have received new names that the public will not learn until they make their “first appearance” as asafoatɔ and asafoanyɛ at this event. This will be the core micro-event at the outdooring. They will publicly proclaim their dedication to service and people will greet them for the first time in their new roles.

**Greetings, music, dance.** As the new asafoatɔ and asafoanyɛ sit with their elders, people may be asked to come forward and to formally greet them. According to custom, greetings begin on the right side as one faces the group seated. A very formal greeting requires one to shake hands with both hands and proceed from right to left, greeting every individual who is seated, including the initiates. The otsamɛ is there to guide anyone who needs a reminder. Come forward. The new asafoatɔ and asafoanyɛ are eager to greet you!

The initiates will often perform a special dance, holding accessories that are the insignia of their offices. You may also be asked to join them. Afterwards, the many music and dance groups that are part of this occasion will perform.

The colorful, crisp autumn has given way to the purple sunsets and silvery tree branches of winter, and in three weeks Philadelphia will celebrate a new year. Samuel Quartey has increased the Philadelphia gyaase by two more energetic and visionary workers. Back in Accra the first quarter of the Ga New Year, which began with ṭmmpowo in August, has just ended. The Harmattan winds will soon begin to blow from the Sahara, and as Ga people celebrate the monumental first step that this outdooring represents for Philadelphia and for them, it will feel like good news.

— Barbara L. Hampton

**Notes**

1 Many aspects of the growth of the ṭmmpowo celebration in Philadelphia parallel the growth of the Labor Day Carnival in Brooklyn, now celebrated by millions each year, contributing significantly to the average $3.7 billion that New York City earns each year in arts-related tourism.

2 These six towns are: from west to east, Accra, Osu, La or Labadi, Teshie, Nungua, and Tema.

3 Reported from Upstream, the international oil and gas newspaper, through Ghana News Agency at http://www.vibefm.com.gh, (June 15, 2002).


6 Ibid.

7 During the first year that I lived in Ghana (1970-1971), I met a highly knowledgeable elder born in the 1880s who clearly remembered the stories that her grandmother, who also lived into her nineties, had told her about this experience. Naa Dzama Ako kindly shared this knowledge with me, and I was able to collate it with the documentary evidence left in European archives.


9 Frederick Lord Lugard (1858-1945) was British High Commissioner, then Governor, of Northern Nigeria and later of all Nigeria for the periods 1900-1907 and 1912-1919. “The best resume of his policy is found in a set of instructions he issued to his officers in 1906, in which he argues for a single Government in which the Native Chiefs have clearly defined duties and an acknowledged status, equally with the British officials.” However, the concept of rule through existing authorities and existing institutions varied in application. Sometimes it meant that European authority was delegated to chiefs; at other times it meant that Europeans usurped the traditional authority. Moreover, “the chiefs were sometimes accorded a political importance which they had not enjoyed previously or on other occasions they were installed in societies that had no chiefs and where they therefore previously had no administrative purpose... Chieftaincies were abolished where considered superfluous and created where considered colonially useful.” The Ga Mashi major position, created by the British, is an example of the latter strategy, as it was more expedient to centralize authority than to deal with four to seven sets of officials for each of six Ga towns. While African adjustment to European objectives clearly took place, the Ga never abandoned the notion that their paramount collective leader is the Nai Wulowo or priest of the sea; this is evident today in his leadership in every major ceremony in which all Ga participate. Similarly, the durability of the office-based positions, which thrive today, indicates that the Ga were not in total agreement with the British on their use of these positions. Quotations from R. F. Betts, “Methods and Institutions of European Domination,” in Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935, ed. A. Adu Boahen. General History of Africa VII, Paris: UNESCO, 1990, pp. 146-147.

10 For example, Margaret Field, Religion and Medicine of the Ga People, London: Oxford University Press, 1937, reprint, 1961, pp. 28, 80, reported that one otsamɛ in Nungua was the priest for the god Tsawe and one in

[Continued on page 25]
The power of African dance has withstood the middle passage and reemerged to become a symbol of ethnic pride and ancestral reverence across the planet. The dance provides a text that can be "read," empowering artists, performers, and audiences who enjoy the vision, delight in the rhythms, and pay homage to the energy of the universe. The African aesthetic has influenced cultures around the world with colors, textures, movements and rhythms. All the more reason to understand the core elements of what constitutes an African dance aesthetic. Everyone who attends a performance bears witness to the awesome power of the dance. On stage, that power is necessarily harnessed because it is restricted by time, space, and meaning. Unleashed in a ritual context, the dance leads to transcendence and transformation. The polarity of groundedness and transcendence in African dance is remarkable. The dancers move towards the earth in explosive motions and gestures, but their goals are to connect with the ancestors and to transcend the mundane.

African dance is spirit and spiritual. It cannot help itself. It is born out of a worldview that is unified in its vision of life forces. Even as we modify, stage, stylize, and adapt the dances of Africa, the core aesthetic remains and ululates at us to "dance to the ends of the universe."

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**Conclusion.** “Africa doesn’t end where the salt water licks her shore,” as the Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka has so eloquently stated. Ever since Asadata Dafora staged the African opera Kyunfor in 1932 in New York, African dance has been stylized and staged in America on a regular basis by Africans in the diaspora. Many African American artists began to feel that African dance offered an artistic opportunity that reflected the prism of diasporan experiences and perspectives through which to appreciate, interpret, and create a unique heritage. The African American artist was uniquely positioned in African cultural thought because she/he is a mixture of many ethnic groups and nations. This inheritance and historical perspective gives the African American artist a unique vantage point, not wedded to any ethnic group and having the freedom to adopt a pan-African approach. This is a strength already evidenced in the art, theater, music, and dance of African Americans.

The Senegalese, Gambian, Malian, and Guinean dances taught and performed in America bear witness to the diverse techniques that are emerging and reemerging from these cultures. With thousands of dance cultures to draw from, African American artists and choreographers can select their own creative paths. Traditional, neo-traditional, and contemporary dance forms are prevalent, as well as classic African dances that represent the best of a particular society. Above all, the cultures of Africa must be respected, studied, and acknowledged for their artistic complexities and aesthetic qualities.

From 1981-1983, she was the founding artistic director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe. Her scholarship, dance, and choreography have earned her numerous awards and grants. Dr. Welsh is the co-editor of African Culture, the editor of The African Aesthetic and African Dance, and the author of Zimbabwean Dance and The Umfundalai Technique.

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**Notes**

2 Ibid, p. 91.

**Other resources**


Dr. Kariamu Welsh is a Professor in the Department of Dance and Director of the Institute for African Dance Research and Performance at Temple University.
By the end of our meeting, at least two members of Griot Don! have tears in their eyes, reflecting on what African dance means to them. In fact, dance has become a feeling, a way of life, and a way of relating to other African Americans. As we conclude, Ms Duncan turns to me and says, “When members of this group think about what we’ve been through as African American women ... that is part of the reason why we latched on to West African dance. We created this family [Griot Don!] based on our culture, and now we can see kids growing up and being taught by us.”

For Griot Don!—as for Tamara Xavier—dance is a part of the soul and spirit. It is something that they claim as their birthright and their blessing. These young dancers inherited the legacy of legends like Arthur Hall, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus but they are interpreting it for new audiences and a new generation.

—Shawn P. Saunders

dancing in the spirit/continued from p. 13

also yellow, remind us of life’s bitterness. Yellow both speaks to the dualistic challenges one confronts as a female and embodies a larger philosophical principle of the duality of life. And so it is with all of Kulu Mele’s costumes. Whether the dancers and drummers are performing to Shango, Oya, Obatala or Oshun, Esu-Elegba or Ogun, their performance is a total submersion experience for them and often for others who know how to read the subtle symbols being presented. But even for those unschooled in the symbolism, studying with or seeing Kulu Mele or Madame Nash perform is a rich, exciting, and rewarding experience.

The legacy of traditional African and African-derived dance in Philadelphia is alive, vibrant, and reaching out to you. And in the words of the traditional black church “altar call,” let “who so ever will” come and drench your soul in the traditions carried by Madame Ione Nash and the Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble.

—Katrina Hazzard-Donald

Notes

1 An Orisha is an aspect of the force called God. These aspects are often mislabeled as deities, gods, or goddesses. They are similar to and syncretized in the New World as Catholic saints.

Dr. Katrina Hazzard-Donald has been studying dance for more than 30 years. In her book Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture and in articles, she explores the meaning, function, and nature of African American dance. She has worked on public programs exploring African dance and has served on numerous national arts and dance panels. Professor Hazzard-Donald teaches in the Sociology/ Anthropology Department at Rutgers University-Camden.

Dr. Joseph Orraca-Tetteh supports the Folklore Project, Odunde, and Gadangme Association of Philadelphia for having the foresight to bring on a show that recognizes African, African Americans, Asafoatse and Asafoanye of the Ga Nation. Congratulations to the Honorees!

ga outdooring/continued from p. 23

Kpong was priest for the god Nadu.

11 Particular Ga families swear by the hyena when they are required to take a binding oath, and they are never allowed to kill the animal. The Nikoi family in Teshie who worship Klaiy is one such family. There are as many as six other such animals that hold this significance for particular Ga families, Dr. Quartey informs me. According to him, the animal on this otsamm to is an antitope.

Dr. Barbara L. Hampton brings more than 30 years of fieldwork and research to her understanding of Ga music, dance and culture. She has written on many areas of African and African American music and gender. She received her M.A. from UCLA, her M. Phil and her Ph.D. from Columbia University (New York), all in Ethnomusicology. Dr. Hampton is currently Professor of Music and Director of the Graduate Program in Ethnomusicology at the City University of New York.
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Public School Notebook back issues are available at the Folklore Project office. Past themes include multicultural education, student activism, and the state school takeover.

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The Board of Directors of the Gadangme Association of Greater Philadelphia extends congratulations to Christine Wiggins and Alonzo Matthews, Asafoanyε and Asafoatsε, respectively, for their new roles in the Ga Kingdom. We wish them good luck and God’s blessings.

- Dr. Samuel Quartey
- George Quaye
- Joe Bellon
- Samuel Nelson
- Joshua Crabbe
- Emmanuel Newman
- Ayikuma Adjin-Tettey

Have a wonderful trip, lone. You’re our national treasure. We love you.

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- **December 13**
  This Far by Faith by June Cross and Noland Walker, preview screening.
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