

# The Saga of African Dance and Black Studies Departments

by

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**Abstract:** In 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which mandated courses on Black and Minority studies into the curriculum on a nationwide basis. Failure to do so would cause the loss of federal funding. At the time, I was an undergraduate student, one of only four Blacks in the department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Brooklyn College. We were questioned by the Chairman to see what courses could be offered by the Department. I suggested African dance. The idea clicked and in 1969, I became the first person to teach African dance in Brooklyn College.

**Keywords:** Africa, percussion notation, dance notation, Greenotation, drum/dance

## Introduction

Movement is an integral part of the daily lives of Africans in Africa. In the lives of African descendants in the Diaspora movement, it also plays a substantial role. I refer to this writing as “The Saga of African Dance” so I can include a number of the topics listed in the call for papers as I write this narrative about African dance and Black Studies Department. This will allow me to discuss the history of African Dance in the discipline of Black Studies from the past to the present. Courses on African dance are not listed as a body of knowledge nor are they required courses in a number of Black/African Studies departments throughout the nation. This may seem odd to a number of people, but students, faculty and all those interested in this subject must trace the path of these courses to reveal their inclusion in the curriculum. As a founding member of the African Dance Movement in Brooklyn and other parts of the Tri-state area, permit me to take you, the readers, back to the beginning. African dance is part of an oral tradition that is handed down between generations by a mouth to ear process. Schools and colleges in Africa did not offer dance as a course of study. In fact, Africans learned their dances in the privacy of their villages. African dance entered the United States and other parts of the Diaspora by the infamous “slave route”.

Courses on Black and Minority Studies were mandated into the curriculum of schools on a nationwide basis with the passage of the Civil Rights Act that was signed into law by President Johnson in 1964. The codicil “with all deliberate speed” was attached so the educational institutions would not drag their feet or establish another “separate-but-equal” fiasco. Those institutions that failed to comply lost federal funding. I, at the time, was an undergraduate student in Brooklyn College and vividly recall department heads scrambling, and searching for courses they could offer to be in compliance with the mandated decree. As one of only four Black students in the Department of Health, Physical Education, Dance and Recreation; we were summoned to the chairman’s office where she picked our brains in search of courses the department could offer. As a student with a dance minor concentration, I suggested they offer courses in African dance. The college was well aware of my involvement in African dance in association with the dance club and other dance activities on the campus. The situation that led up to this was because Black people were protesting the lack of courses relevant to them in the curriculum. There were no courses that addressed the history of Blacks, nor the contribution Blacks made to the development of the United States. African dance had been an integral part of the lives of an enclave of African descendants of New York from the days of Asadata Dafora of Sierra Leone, who was credited with being the first person to bring African dance to the concert stages of New York, namely Carnegie Hall.

The idea of an African dance class was well received, and I was to be groomed to teach the course or courses. This was in 1968, and I was a junior on the campus. For a senior dance project, I choreographed a dance with African motivated movements, taught it to a group of students, and showcased it in the annual dance concert. This routine was applauded and students began to gravitate towards African dance and me. I graduated in 1969 and became the first faculty member to teach African dance on the campus. This is how I was able to bring African dance into the curriculum.

If my memory serves me faithfully, in 1969, there was no Black Studies Department in Brooklyn College or in any other college of the C.U.N.Y. complex. There were only Institutes of Black Studies or African Studies. Institutes could not offer courses of their own, but could ask individual departments to offer courses on Black and Minority Studies on behalf of the Black Studies Institute. One of the requirements to be chairman of a department was the person had to hold a doctoral degree. In 1969, not many Blacks had an earned doctoral degree as departments of African Studies were created at a later date. The first program that led to a doctoral degree in African or Black studies was at Temple University in 1988. By the time Blacks acquired the doctoral degrees in Black Studies, African dance was well entrenched in outside departments and were never fully retrieved by African Studies Departments.

To make matters worse, colleges did not conduct adequate faculty searches to find qualified personnel to teach the subject matter. To compound this situation, there were not many qualified people who could teach this new subject. Faculties were being hastily hired by department chairs just to be in compliance with the mandated decree. The programs in African dance were mandated, but not funded, which automatically placed them on a collision path with existing courses in the curriculum vying for the same limited federal funds. These were some of the situations I faced when I became a faculty member in the college.

## **Background**

Outside departments, such as history, anthropology, health and sociology, that agreed to offer courses on the behalf of the African/Black Studies Institutes were forced into situations where they had to decide what to teach and how it would relate in their area of specialty. I do not know where the initiatives came from as to what would be the substance of each new course offered. In the case of the dance division, I suggested African music and dance because I had seventeen years of experience in the field. I was trained to and had taught dance as a teenager. I had my own percussion notation system and therefore, I was more than qualified to teach my specialty.

I cannot testify as to where other divisions received the initiative for the courses that would be under the aegis of their departments. What I can say is that the entire concept of African/Black Studies was tantamount to the birth of a newborn infant, and that the outside departments were not fully prepared to become instant parents.

These outside departments separated African dance from its music, and created a subculture to blend the new courses into their departments. In other words, they fashioned them into sub-sets of their department. Thus, new subjects arose such as folk culture, dance anthropology, percussion studies, dance therapy and Diaspora studies, to cite a few. Some subjects fared better than others such as Black theater, African/Black History, Black Art and Black Literature because these subjects were supported by a wealth of written documentation. What was most frustrating was that there was no clear path to a Master's or Doctoral degree in African dance. One could earn a degree in dance in anthropology, dance history, or dance in education using African dance as a reference point or launch pad. But, what about an earned degree in African dance where African dance is the focal point and all these outside factors were components thereof? This was the situation I faced when I entered graduate school and I would have to find ways to build and/or strengthen existing dance programs towards an African dance program that led to the master's and doctoral degree with the focus on African dance and its accompanying music.

### **The Shame of Being an Artist or Theater Person in Africa**

Being a dancer, musician or a theater person was frowned upon in Africa. Parents did not want their children to go into the arts or theater. It was said that people who were in the arts, particularly Griots, were denied burial in the cemetery for fear they would contaminate the burial ground. Therefore, they were buried in the hollow of a Baobab tree (Nikiprowetzky, 1963). It was not considered a decent profession for the upcoming elites of Africa. That was in the late forties, and early fifties. A primary example of this was when Maurice Sonar Senghor decided that he did not want to travel in the footsteps of his family and become a lawyer. This decision irked his father so much that he stopped payment of his son's education. In fact, he disinherited his son. Because of this action, Maurice lost his scholarship and had to find a way to pay for his education, as well as to earn a living. It was suggested that he audition for owners of various nightclubs. He did and became a successful entertainer at Rose Rouge nightclub.

During one of my research trips to Senegal, Mr. Senghor and I discussed the attitude of the world towards artists. He asked me had I ever been hungry, or experienced starvation. Of course not, I responded. Times might have been hard in the States after the depression, but my parents always provided for us. I never missed a meal or was lacking for anything. He remarked that when his father withdrew financial support, he was often cold and starving. He added that he did not mind that so much, but the names and insults his father hurled at him were unbearable. It reached a point that his uncle, the future President of Senegal, left France to go to Dakar to speak to his brother.

When he returned to France, the elder Senghor told the younger Senghor, Maurice, that his father maintained a recalcitrant attitude about the theater. Senghor, the statesman, explained that people in high places had children in the arts. He cited how Winston Churchill had a daughter who was also in the arts. But, he could not sway his brother. Ultimately, on a visit to Dakar, Maurice and his father, Jean Latyr, resolved their differences and restored their amicable relationship.

Maurice returned from France to become the first director of African theater at Theatre du Palais in central Dakar. In fact, Theatre du Palais was the first theater built in Senegal in 1954. When a new theater was built, Theatre National Daniel Sorano, Maurice Senghor moved there and spent twenty years in this theater.

It was not until after the successful premier presentation of the National Dance Company of Senegal in October 1971, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, that African people began to realize that being a part of the National Dance Company was indeed a way to earn a living. Their earnings gave financial stability to the families of the artists, and provided an opportunity to travel internationally. Members of the National Dance Company were heralded. By 1974, people were eager to audition to become members of the company. From the successful premier performance, the National Dance Company of Senegal never looked back and became the most revered company ever. Their work is now performed worldwide, and Sabar is now a popular dance form. It took Maurice Senghor approximately eighteen years to bring esteem and respect to the industry of African music, dance and theater. Of all the companies that appeared in the Afro-Asian Festival at the Academy of Music, the National Dance Company of Senegal was so extraordinary that it changed the way African music and dance was practiced and performed. This performance gave African dance international acclaim and respectability. Their performances reinforced and cemented the title of Maurice Senghor as the “Father of African Theater.”

## **African Dance in the Curriculum**

My first concern when I became a faculty member at Brooklyn College was the lack of texts or some form of tangible evidence that could be corralled and used as a text. Any subject in the curriculum that is not supported by written documentation is automatically reduced to the status of a recreational course or practicum for which no credit or one credit is given. Fortunately, for my students, I had more than twenty years of experience in African dance and music, and I was a trained musician and dancer. I also had attributes that no one else had: I had created a system for writing drum music, had studied dance notation, and could read and write both music and dance. African dance was not separated from its accompanying music in my classes. In fact the students had to learn to play the instruments.

I began to gather and compile notes from my years of experience to form the basis of a text. To improve my skills, I went to Africa to study, research and share my knowledge with Africans. I would bring back to my students new dances/music directly from the continent. I even brought traditional instruments so the students could have the opportunity to learn and play traditional African instruments.

It is common knowledge that African music and dance are part of an oral tradition that is passed from one generation to the next by a mouth-to-ear process. Unfortunately, any society that is entirely dependent upon oral communication for the transmission of their culture between generations is doomed to partial failure due to the breakdown of the human memory over the course of time and due to outside interpretation. Consequently, when the elder, holder of this vast knowledge, died, he literally took archives of culture to the cemetery with him where it was buried and lost to the world forever. Creating a text to encompass the oral traditions of African music and dance was needed not only to document the various cultures, but also to provide analysis of and distinction to these cultures. For example, the dance genre known as Ballet has codification and names for each of its movements. It has positions for the feet, as well as carriage for the arms. This type of codification is present in African dance as well, but it is dictated by the music, which governs the dance. To further complicate matters, unlike western forms of movement, the musical accompaniment is percussive, and not melodic. The western world was not versed in percussive music, did not understand, and probably held the opinion that percussive music had no true value, nor did it require serious study. They did not realize that there was a technique to playing drums. The drums were replicas of the spoken language of the people. This meant that there were more than 2000 languages spoken on the continent; therefore, there were an equal amount of drum languages. It was impossible for people of one language group to truly understand the drum music of another group. They could enjoy the rhythm, but not actually translate the message of the drums. For example, the people in Ghana or Nigeria do not understand the music or movement of the Wamakonde people in Tanzania or the Wolof people of Senegal, even though they may enjoy the rhythm of the music and movements of the dance.

To create a text that could encompass all the varieties of instruments and dance movements loomed as a large task. But, I had the essential tools to create it, namely percussion and dance notation systems. In creating the text, I looked to Africans who had documented their work. Neither Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts nor the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture was erected when I began to compile notes on African music and dance. The Schomburg collection was created by, Arturo Schomburg a dark skinned man who wanted to prove that Black people had a rich history. He began collecting articles and books on Black people. This collection was housed in the New York public library Countee Cullen, which was located around the corner from the present site of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. This collection was given to the Schomburg Center in the early seventies.

Therefore, I was struggling trying to locate information on African musicians and dancers. My source of information, or resources came from the International Library of African Music located in Transvaal, Roodeport, South Africa. I even had to keep this source a secret as we, Black people, were advised not to deal with South Africa at the time because of their apartheid practices. I received a list of Africans and others who had done research in African music and dance. I could contact and consult with them about African music and dance. I wrote to a number of them, but did not receive many responses. I labored on, and a text was beginning to emerge.

Writing occurs on a single plane, a linear level and one cannot write the concurrent activity that happens on another plane at the same time. When African dance was introduced into the curriculum, it entered on the “undergraduate” level, which left the graduate students barren. I became a graduate student at NYU in 1969 and desperately wanted someone who could teach me at this level. NYU did not have a program in African dance or music. As the recipient of my first C.U.N.Y. Faculty Research Award, I went to East Africa to study. The principle countries were Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar, and the island of Lamu. I studied with artists in these countries. In 1970, NYU decided to offer a course in African dance. Their initial instructor for the course angered me because I knew the person did not have as much knowledge as I. I voiced my discontent, and was asked to draft a list of potential lecturers. Personnel on the list were auditioned and NYU made their decision of Ali Abdullah, who had spent time in Senegal. Things were set and I pre-registered for the course that was scheduled for the fall of 1971. But, the party reneged and I was asked to consult with artists in Africa. I did and NYU chose Godwin Agbeli of Ghana to teach the course. Although he was not one of my cultural informants, he demonstrated a proficiency in drumming and he would begin teaching in February 1972. He began teaching in the performing arts division where a number of students, including myself, were graduate students. In the fall of 1972, I was able to bring him into Dance Education where he also taught graduate students. This is how I was able not only to introduce African dance on the undergraduate level, but on the graduate level in the CUNY complex, as well as in private universities. Word spread and I was able to enact African dance in several other colleges including Bloomfield College in Bloomfield, New Jersey. I even taught in a number of these colleges and universities myself.

## **A Textbook for African Music and Dance**

To create a text that could encompass all the varieties of instruments and dance movements was a large task. But, with the percussion notation and dance notation systems, I knew I could accomplish this undertaking. As the recipient of three C.U.N.Y. (City University of New York) faculty research grants, I continued to go back to Africa to study, first to East Africa, and then to West Africa. The essence of these trips is chronicled in my autobiography *No Longer An Oral Tradition: My Journey Through Percussion Notation* (Green, 2010), so I do not intend to rehash them in this article. In order to have a foundation for the text, I needed to establish the classification of African music because African music is the foundation of African dance.

The classification of African music was gleaned from the writing of Akin Euba. As dance is not separate from the music, I deduced the categories of African dance (Green, 2008) from the classification of African music. Only the first two classifications of African music truly defined African music. These classifications were Traditional and Neo-Traditional.

## **The Relationship of African Music to Dance**

The relationship of African music to African dance is a topic that is paramount to the understanding of African dance. There is no dance in Africa that is performed without some form of music, even if it is the voice or simple hand clapping. I reiterate no dance in Africa is performed without music. It is most unfortunate that a large percentage of the westerners do not understand the importance of African music to dance. In the writing of G. Niangouran-Bouah, *Introduction a la Drummologie*, (Niangouran-Bouah 2008) he explains the role of music as the total experience that includes one's genealogy, history, language, politics, religion, and all aspects of man and his artifacts – his culture. In fact, African music is referred to as the language of the dance.

When Agbeli came to NYU, he initially told the students that they would not progress until they learned to play the instruments such as the bell, rattle and drums. We did and were all better students for this experience. It gave us a greater understanding of the relationship of the music to the dance, which is sadly missing from a number of African dance classes today. I primarily learned from Africans in the bush. In each of these situations, I learned the music before the dance. Although drum language is rapidly disappearing, we still have drum onomatopoeia, the imitation of the drum sounds. At times when instruments were not available, I learned entire dances through onomatopoeia. Therefore, the pedagogical style of teaching African dance by Africans in the bush is to teach the music first. Personally, I believe the best training one can have is bush training as training in schools and colleges, even in Africa, are often subject to and regulated by the colonial education system. Africans did not learn their music and dance in this fashion and therefore have difficulty imparting it to others in the colonial setting. For example at NYU, the teacher would demonstrate the rhythm, and give them the onomatopoeic phrase. Using the phrase, the students were able to grasp the rhythm.

## **Classification of African Music**

According to Akin Euba (1970), "Music, as it is practiced in Africa, falls into five main categories: traditional music, neo-traditional music, Westernized pop music, Western pop music, and Western "conservatory" music (there seems to be no better term for what is also inaccurately called European "classical music")." In creating a textbook on African music, my focus was predominately fixed on the first two categories representing the traditional music, whereas the third category was more social in nature than traditional. The remaining two categories are not typically African, but are western and imported into Africa.



In the beginning, before I went to Africa, my affiliations with African musicians came largely from Nigerians and Ghanaians. A Nigerian student gave me a journal and stated that I would probably be interested in the contents. I do not recall the name of the journal, but the issue contained excerpts from a person's thesis or dissertation. One of the articles in the paper was "words that do not exist in African languages." Some of the words he listed were "slave," "tribe," "music," and "dance". He documented that each of these words existed only in the languages of the colonizers. I was stunned to see "music" and "dance" on the list. The paper explained that word used to describe sounds instruments produced when played as "musique," "Muziki," and "music." Each of these words was from the languages of the colonizers. The terms used to defined movement to music were listed as "ballet," "danse," and "dance." Again, each of these words was from the languages of the colonizers. Then, my thoughts reflected on an article by Keita Fodeba (1959) entitled "The True Meaning of African Dances." In this article, Keita Fodeba defined African movement as a spontaneous emanation of the lives of African people. It is ironic that westerners have defined African movement as dance, but bitterly question the use of the word "ballet" in the title of a number of African performing troupes, such as the National Ballet of Senegal or the Guinea Ballet. Consequently, the definition I used in creating the textbook are deduced from Euba's classification of African music, I termed it Categories of African Dance.

## **Categories of African Dance**

*Traditional African Dance:* The oldest and most indigenous form of African dance is Traditional dance. There is an inseparable relationship between the dance and the music. The music to these dances is rooted in drum languages, which are replicas of the spoken languages of the people. Therefore, the category of Traditional African dance has as many different "Tradition" as the spoken languages of the people. These dances are based on activities that the people choose to remember wherein they create and set the movement to their music. A happening or event must occur before a dance can be created.

*Neo-Traditional Dance:* This form of dance includes all dances that make use of elements of Traditional dance, but not necessarily in the same context as they are found in the traditional culture. Traditional dance performed outside the context of social ceremonies. Some examples are folk operas, auditorium performances, class and other forms of entertainment. Therefore, when you see the National Ballet of Senegal or Guinea Ballet on stage, those dances are essentially Neo-traditional dances as they have been altered to fit on the proscenium stage. The dances have already been taken out of their context of the traditional setting. Since they are based on a happening that the people choose to remember, they are pieces of history reenacted through movement, communicated by the musicians and acted out by the dancers.

*Westernized Popular Dance:* Dances in this category have combined movements of African dance with non-African dances, using instruments that are not African, or combining western instruments in the ensemble. In this category, one loses the relationship between music and dance since the instruments can no longer instruct the dancer what movements to make. The melodic style is closer to that of western music than African music. This category includes a number of African social dances such as Juju music, Highlife, and Senegalese Mbak. In these social orchestras there is a mixture of instruments such as western guitars, keyboards, and horns.

*Borrowed Western Dance:* Music in this category includes Rap, disco, and Hip-Hop. The dances associated with these forms of music are borrowed from the western world and imported into Africa.

*Conservatory Dance:* This category of dance includes ballet and modern, which are European forms of movement that are imported into Africa.

## **The Influence of Individuals on African Dance in the US**

Enclaves of honest students interested in African dance always existed in cities with large, Black populations. New York City was the hub of such an enclave since the days of Asadata Dafora. Besides Asadata Dafora, the person credited as the first to bring African dance to the shores of the United States; there were several people who had an influence on the art form. During the period of 1940 to 1970, an individual with a strong influence on African dance was Katherine Dunham who always had “star” power. She had starred in Hollywood movies, such as *Stormy Weather*, where her choreography had a prominent role in the movie. She soon became the most sought after teacher of African dance.

Others in the field such as Pearl Primus, who went to Africa and brought back the celebrated “Welcome Dance” from Liberia called “Fanga.” This was the most popular dance during the fifties and sixties. The Derby sisters, two of Pearl Primus’s principle students, taught the works of Pearl Primus far and wide. About this time, the word “primitive” was becoming associated with African dance. The dance world did not know how to classify African dances from the continent, and thus the term primitive was used to distinguish it from the works of Katherine Dunham because Katherine Dunham was light skinned and Pearl Primus was dark skinned. Katherine Dunham was an American and Pearl Primus hailed from the West Indies. This is the old “divide and conquer’ scheme often practiced as a part of the racial division.

Alice and Gus Dinizulu created a group, which first performed the works of Asadata Dafora, and then the dances they learned as they traveled throughout Ghana. I came into African dance in the fifties to show them that African music could be written. In the sixties, I would begin to reveal how African dance could also be written. The Ladzekpo brothers were teaching Ghanaian music at Columbia University. Godfrey Sackeyfio, the former lead dancer of the Ghana National Dance Ensemble from the University of Legon, taught dance here. He was also a student of Labanotation. Professor Opoku, head of the Dance division at the University, was here and later, took a position that led to a Master's degree in African dance at SUNY Brockport. In the late fifties, Michael Babatunde Olatunji began to gain popularity in African dance with selections such as Batakoto.

## **The Influence of a Specific Group on African Dance in the US**

The field of African dance and music would continue to grow. But, without a shadow of a doubt, the strongest contribution of a specific African group that had a tremendous influence on the development of African dance was The National Dance Company of Senegal, under the direction of legendary Maurice Sonar Senghor. In their premier performance in October 1971 at the Afro-Asian Festival held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, this group stunned the world of dance. This company completely changed the way African dance was viewed, performed and taught in the United States.

Even though the Guinea Ballet was the first African company to come to the US, they did not have the magnetism that the Senegalese had. They came in 1959 when we, as Black people, were still wallowing in the dissension of "separate but equal" school systems, and general inequality everywhere. The population interested in African dance in 1959 was limited to the enclave of die-hard enthusiasts. The Guinea Ballet could not speak English, and we could not communicate with them. The critics tried to assassinate them culturally by branding them as savages because the girls dance with their breasts exposed.

When the Senegalese came in 1971, the tide had changed and courses on Black and Minority Studies were included in schools and colleges throughout the country. Several of us had been to Africa, including Senegal. Even though the Senegalese Company, with the exception of a few, did not speak English and could not read nor write in any language; their director spoke English and served as spokesman for the group. The population of people studying African music and dance had increased multifold. The National Dance Company of Senegal introduced to the public a number of instruments not known before such as Leket, La-la rattle of the Peuhl acrobats. The groups of musicians and dancers were the Wolof, Mandinka, and Diola. N'Deye Coumba, Lamine Diallo and Ibrahima Guisse, were the three master players of the Djimbe drum. They held the audience spellbound from the beginning of the show. The master drummer of the Mandinka group was Mamadou Ly who played the Sabaro drum. Idrissa Gueye led the Wolof drummers on the Sabar (Nder) drum.

The dance Sabar would excite the dance world and become the rave. It overtook modern and ballet as a dance form. The Bougarabou drums are a set of four drums played by one player, Tombong Goudiaby. There was the Kora player, Djimo Kouyate; singer, Fatou Thiam Samb; and the haystack-masked figure that grew and diminished danced by Ibrahima Cisse. Chakaba, the stilt dancer, was another favorite. Most certainly, the Djimbe drums would grow in popularity. In 1971, few people were proficient in Djimbe drumming, but today; the Djimbe drum has eclipsed the Congo drum as the drum of African recognition. There was something for everyone in the Senegalese company. There has never been another company that has matched the performance of the National Ballet of Senegal. Now the music and dance of this company are performed on a nationwide basis.

### **The Influence of a Specific African on African Dance in the US.**

Maurice Sonar Senghor, creator of the National Ballet of Senegal, rendered the strongest individual influence on African dances as we know and perform them today. His influence on African dance was far reaching in style and presentation, probably because he was a theater major. He was also influential due to his affiliation with music and dances of The Guinea Ballet in France in 1952, and later, the National Dance Ensemble of Mali that was created when there was a federation between Senegal and Mali. Mr. Senghor was also theater director first at Theatre du Palais, and later at Theatre National Daniel Sorano. At Sorano, he created three more companies: A second Dance company, the Lyric and Instrumental Ensemble, and a Dramatic Troupe. He would spend twenty years at Sorano before retiring. The wealth of his contributions to the African dance world exceeded those of Asadata Dafora because of the number of ethnic groups and variety of dances, music and instrumentation of these various groups.

In my opinion, Maurice Sonar Senghor possessed the greatest theatrical and choreographic mind ever. He wrote his autobiography that was published in 2004. It was published in French. Unfortunately, the majority of his followers who were mesmerized by his works do not speak French, but English. I fault his publishers for not realizing the value and market for this body of work in the English-speaking world. In fact, it was, if my memory serves me faithfully, in the late eighties when a group of African American female educators came to Senegal and were despondent after visiting the “slave house” on Goree Island. They were speaking about it and someone directed them to me. One of the questions they asked me was “How did I deal with such a horror”?

I began my reportage by stating the enslavement stripped us, as Black people, of everything; that slavery was the most devastating atrocity ever inflicted upon Black people. To me, slavery was the African holocaust, or Maafa, which in Kiswahili means great suffering and irrefutable loss of seismic proportions. I began to speak about Mr. Senghor and how he became spokesman against colonialism in Senegal by making it known to the audiences during his nightclub act in Paris. Although the audience became sympathetic to the plight of Africans, the French felt it was an insult to them.

Therefore, the police would constantly disrupt his nightclub act and drag him off the stage in handcuffs. They took Mr. Senghor to the police station where they beat and kicked him without mercy, leaving him battered and bruised with his eyes almost shut from the torture. After hours of torture, they would toss him out on the street where Mr. Senghor stumbled to find a cab to take him home.

These Black American educators were thrilled to hear Senghor's story. They remarked that they personally never knew anyone who fought against colonialism, and that Mr. Senghor's story should be part of our history books. They were inquisitive and wanted to know was he still alive. I responded "yes." They asked to meet him so they could talk to him. I arranged the meeting and it was in this meeting that they suggested Maurice Senghor write his autobiography. It would be a few years later before Maurice Senghor finally put his pen to paper.

## **Clarification**

The genres of tap, modern, jazz and hip-hop dances all fall outside the borders of Traditional and Neo-Traditional dance. They are basically western forms that are borrowed and imported into Africa. In conversations with several artists who grew up in the same time frame, it was evident that a number of us began our careers in dance with the study of tap dance. Music and dance were activities that our parents bestowed upon us as a way to keep us out of "harm's" way and off the streets. We probably were drawn to Tap dance because of the rhythm; but also in the early days, it was the genre most available to us in our communities. I recall the famous and most celebrated tap dancer, Bill Bo-Jangles Robinson, who had a studio on Fulton Street, Brooklyn in the area that now houses Boys and Girls high school. I often heard that the rhythm of tap dance were the same rhythms played on African drums. However, as an ethnomusicologist, I have never seen research documents to support this theory. That does not say that it is not out there, but it may exist in a place where the connectivity between the two cannot be written about because of its oral nature. You will notice that I have separated African dance from Black dance because according to the classification of African music, and the categories of African dance, they are separate and distinct genres.

Ailey is not a technique. Alvin Ailey, the most celebrated Black dancer of our era, uses the Horton technique for his choreography. Lester Horton, who Alvin Ailey studied with in California, created the Horton technique. The most popular dance of Alvin Ailey is Revelations based upon the Bible, and the Black church experience. Ailey brought his talents to New York in the sixties. Brooklyn College was the recipient of Ailey's dance as Jimmy Truitte, of the Ailey Company, taught courses in the Horton technique in the college. Other classes on the Horton technique were held in the Hanson Place Church, Brooklyn. I personally appreciate the Horton technique because I believe it flows well with the Black body type, and the subject matter of the dance was relevant to the Black experience.

Katherine Dunham created her own approach to Black dance known as the Dunham technique. It was based upon her experiences first in the U.S., and later in the Caribbean, particularly, Haiti. She received the Rosenfeld Grant to study dance in Africa, but was advised by anthropologist Melville Herskovits, that it was too dangerous for a single woman to cross the continent of Africa. Therefore, she went to the Caribbean to study dance from descendant Africans who were enslaved in the Caribbean. Katherine Dunham was a student of anthropology and had earned a degree in anthropology. Miss Dunham formed the first all Black dance group. Her credits include the Broadway stage, operas, and movies. Syvilla Forte's studio located in the forties in the City was a place where the Dunham technique could be studied in the absence of Dunham herself in New York City.

## **Racism**

This country was birthed and nourished on racism, both covert and overt. It is omnipresent. Indeed, there have been changes as Black people have more opportunities than our ancestors. Racism is so entrenched in the populace that Whites are unaware they harbor these factors. Racism is also firmly established in institutions, colleges and universities. Colleges have had to face legal challenges of charges of institutional racism. I grew up in the sixties, one of the most turbulent times for Black people in decades. In retrospect, our lives were not as turbulent as those of our ancestors. Always remember to give thanks to them for surviving so that we could be. Be proud of our ancestors; guard your heritage and do not become complacent. Be it known that things do get better, but we have to fight for it. Do not let racism be an albatross around your neck. Find a way to go around, over or through it. Remember, African music and dance is your birthright, your heritage, and no one else's.

It never ceases to amaze me that outsiders have the audacity to waltz into African Studies, dictate the terms, and establish themselves as authoritative leaders. During my tenure in this newly formed field of study, I recall how they rejected my work and me, not only because I am Black, but a Black woman. I would be remiss if I did not stress that sexism also plays an enormous role in this scenario. One would expect racism, but sexism is a thicker sinister thread woven deep within the fabric of racism with the deliberate intention of denying a woman her just due. But, I have been preaching this from my earliest recollection. They are both menacing forces of alienation designed to make women feel disaffected and valued for a subservient role to the male species.

Sometimes, one needs to hear from women who served as firsts in the field. I recall when I met Katherine Dunham at a conference in which we were both participants. She attended my presentation and I hers. Afterwards, we had a long conversation at lunch. My work was different from hers. Her words were encouraging for me to continue to do what I was doing. I also worked with Pearl Primus in the early seventies when African dance was gaining popularity in schools and colleges.

We performed at different locales in Brooklyn, Pearl Primus always referred to me as “that one from Brooklyn.” As faculty members of the CUNY complex, Alice Dinizulu and I reconnected. As members of the Council of Elders of Dance Africa, we often discussed the problems of African dance we experienced within the education system. She was a strong supporter of my work, and encouraged me to continue giving presentations. It is always gratifying to hear and be encouraged from the sisterhood.

I did also receive encouraging words from a few men in the field. There was a time when an authority in the field did not respond to my letters of inquiry, and I had to use a man to corral the attention of the authority figure. This was the case in Ghana when I wanted Professor Nketia to know of my work I told Professor Opoku and he instructed me to send the material to him, and he would forward it to Professor Nketia. He assured me that I would have a response from Professor Nketia and within a short period of time, I had my response. Today, Professor Nketia is a strong supporter of my work. On the French side of Africa, I received words of acclaim for my work from Maurice Sonar Senghor who immediately brought it to the attention of the musical director of Senegal who responded enthusiastically. As I said when I addressed dance, I was welcomed. But, when I addressed African music, it was often a struggle to get men to listen.

## **The Future of African Dance in Academia**

What I envision for the future of African dance in academia is the complete revamping of the art form, by first reuniting it with its music. Dance in Africa does not exist without some form of music, and the two must be studied together. The O.A.U. suggested that my work be adapted and installed in schools throughout the continent of Africa. This definitely needs to be implemented. This industry also needs to be supported with a textbook. My work has given African music the scientific basis it formerly lacked. Now, it needs to be disseminated throughout the continent. A university, or some form of educational institution dedicated to the preservation of African music and dance, needs to be established in several areas on the continent of Africa. To establish archives of written African music and dance, Africans, themselves, must bear the lion share of this undertaking, as they are the task force to capture this music from the villages. Black/African Studies Departments outside Africa will have to reform themselves so they can reclaim African dance from outside departments such as anthropology, sociology, behavioral studies, folklore, diaspora studies and weight loss programs, to cite a few.

I recall conversations I had with Dr. Margaret Mead when she told me that I should be steadfast and not switch to anthropology or sociology because my work in African music and dance had to be the foundation upon which to build. She added that my work was seminal, providing the foundation from which music and dance would flourish.

## **Doctorate of Arts Program**

It was the primary focus in my mind that my work would give the field stability by providing the scientific basis it formerly lacked. My work would enable African music and dance to stand on its own strength, leading to a Master's and doctoral degree in the area of specialty. Dr. Mead's words encouraged me to work towards this goal.

In the late seventies and early eighties, Professor Opoku would establish a program of African dance that led to a Master's degree at SUNY (State University of New York) Brockport, New York. The program was well received wherein the students participated in off-campus performances. In the early eighties, I coordinated a program around them including an exhibit of my work including African instruments, different Kente cloths, and other prints and jewelry designed by Dr. Selina Ahoklui of Ghana. It was held at Adelphi University, New York. This was a time of reunion, as we all knew each other from working in Ghana and in the U.S.

Unfortunately, when Professor Opoku retired, the master's program in African dance, ceased to exist. This causes me to reflect on the interdisciplinary factors involved in creating a successful program that leads to a master's or doctoral degree in the field of African music and dance. As Dr. Mead said, my work should be the foundation of this endeavor. African music and dance in Africa functions as an interdisciplinary unit. To have a program in African music and dance that functions successfully outside Africa, it must function as an interdisciplinary unit not as a sub-set of an alien or foreign discipline.

I am reminded of the Doctorate of Arts degree that was originally created as an alternative to the doctor of philosophy, and doctor of education degrees. The Doctor of Arts program was originally conceived to prepare college teachers. This is a critical issue in training of educators as lecturers in college as they approach the material from an entirely different point of view. Speaking as one who has taught on both levels, there is quite a difference between teaching in college and high school.

In the late sixties, Carnegie Mellon Institute began to offer the Doctorate of Arts degree in mathematics, history, English and fine arts. If my memory serves me faithfully, the Doctorate of Arts program came to NYU in the early seventies (1971), but it was applied to Jazz music, a sub-set, in which the university had some knowledge. My point is it should have been offered in African music and dance. But, NYU did not have any knowledge in this area, nor was there a "jury of one's peers" in this area so they could not assess work in this area. It infuriates me that they chose to do nothing when they could have had a strong program leading to the Master's and doctoral degree in the interdisciplinary field of African music and dance.



While in college, I was faced with the responsibility of developing curriculum, designing courses and writing a text; I created a course of study specifically designed for master's and doctoral degrees in African music and dance based on the interdisciplinary nature of the field, as it exists in Africa. This is the last chapter written in my autobiography, *No Longer An Oral Tradition: My Journey Through Percussion Notation*, which was published in July 2010. The last chapter is predicated upon the publication my textbook *Greenotation: Manuscripts of African Music and Dance*, as the syllabus for this once barren field of study, and what I believe needs to be done to give this field of specialty the recognition it righteously deserves. This would bring unity to a field that is still in chaos wallowing in the pathology of self-limiting neglect. It has been over forty-one years and African music and dance is still basically an oral tradition.

African dance should be housed under the Department of African Studies, but it should be housed as an integrated art form wherein the dance is not separated from the music. It should no longer be an oral tradition, but should have notation as the source of written documentation. Any subject that is not supported by a textbook is not considered a valid course in academia. There should be courses that lead to the master's and doctoral degrees exemplifying the intrinsic value of the art form African music and dance, not as a dusted off sub-set of another discipline.

There should be a textbook that defines the music and the movements, so every student can read and define the music and movement with the same clarity that a dictionary defines its words. In this manner, every teacher and student will have an equal opportunity to experience African music and dance for its intrinsic value, and not experience African movement and music as a rehashed sub-set of another discipline. I learned the majority of African music and dances in the bush not in colonial structured classes. From my experiences, traditional African dance, as performed in the bush, is linear and uniform. But, yet, there is greater spontaneity. When the drummer signals, "make a turn," all the dancers turn. There is no signal to tell half of the dancers to turn, and the other half not to turn. Nor is there a signal "for canons," "rounds," "peel-off," or "symmetrical and asymmetrical" positions. All of these are part of the theatrical format that must be staged and injected into the dance presentation to give it the theatrical format to be effectively presented on a stage.

At present, there exists a plethora of people doing their own thing under the broad category of "West African Dance," African people dance throughout Africa, not only in West Africa. In actuality, West African Dance is the theatrical repertoire of the brilliant Maurice Senghor who studied all aspects of the theater. He created and gave the world African dance as a theatrical format in 1952 in France. Mr. Senghor has to his credit the Ballet National of Keita Fodeba, and the National Dance Company of Senegal. When there was a federation between Senegal and Mali, he created the National Ensemble of Mali. When he was director of Theatre National Daniel Sorano, he created the Lyric Ensemble, Dramatic Troupe, and the Second Ballet Company of Senegal. In my opinion, out of all the legends I worked with in this area, Maurice Senghor was the most successful in presenting African dances from the bush to the proscenium arch stage. He was born into a prominent family, and his uncle was the first president of Senegal, which gave him greater mobility than others.

I reiterate, New York was introduced to African dance as a theatrical presentation of Senghor's brilliance in October 1971 with the premier performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He revolutionized African dance in a single performance. Today, dance departments are fewer in number than they were in 1970, while African dance is increasing on campuses and Sabar, as a dance form, has surpassed the study of modern and ballet. Unfortunately, interest in African dance is not accruing from a standpoint of advantage, but from a pseudo interpretation of the repertoire of Senghor that focuses on the countries of Senegal, Guinea and Mali.

## **Recapitulation**

I have addressed a number of the points stated in the call for papers. I have identified why African dance is surprisingly not part of Black Studies Departments throughout the nation.

- In the beginning, when courses on African dance were first offered, they were spanking new courses with few qualified personal to teach the courses.
- Faculty searches were sketchy because they did not have the expertise to be able to conduct adequate searches.
- As the courses were new, African Studies or Black Studies Departments had not been developed.
- Creating Institutes of African Studies was the quickest way to initiate headquarters for the new subject matters.
- Institutes cannot offer courses on their own, but can ask existing departments to host courses on behalf of the African Studies Institute.
- With the exception of Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Jr., a former Tuskegee Airman, there were virtually no holders of the doctoral degree that I am familiar with in this new area of study. By the time African Studies/ Black Studies Departments were established, the courses were well entrenched in outside departments and never retrieved by Black or African Studies Departments.
- In general, African music and dance were separated and taught individually. There were a few exceptions to this, namely my classes and the classes at NYU organized by Dr. Roscoe Brown with me as the faculty search person. We brought in a musician from Africa to teach the classes and he taught the music and dance as conterminous parts of the whole.
- A pedagogical style to teach Africans/Black dance was never truly developed by the majority of faculty members how had to play "catch-up."
- African dance was, and still is largely, an oral tradition without written text or guidance. Without a written textbook, people were free to do their own thing and what was most popular or flamboyant "ruled." Therefore, the term West African Dance developed.

- The term West African Dance covers dances from Senegal, Guinea and Mali of West Africa. Essentially, the single thread between these three countries is Maurice Sonar Senghor, who as Africa's first theater director gracefully staged the dances of these three countries beginning with the Ballet of Keita Fodeba in 1953 in Paris; the creation of the National Ballet of Senegal. When there was a brief federation between Senegal and Mali, he created the National Ensemble of Mali.
- According to the Map of Dance Regions of Africa stretching from Cameroon to Senegal (commonly referred to as the Black Coast Region), there are five distinctive classes of movement styles from Nigeria to Senegal with a number of subdivisions therein.
- Although African dance has surpassed other forms of dance as a course of study and is enjoyed worldwide, it is Sabar, the national dance of Senegal that rules this territory.
- What is thwarting the advancement of African dance, as a viable course in academia, is the lack of written text, a way of writing these dances so everyone who reads them will define the movements with the same clarity as a dictionary defines its words.
- Also, the greatest hindrance is the lack of musical ability on the part of the dancer and dance teachers.
- There is no one technique that can define African dance from all the regions of Africa as dance is based on the music, which is based on the language.
- Hip-Hop, Modern, Jazz, Tap and Black dance all fall outside the two principle classifications of African dance and have to be treated as such.

The presence of racism and the presence of white supremacy in the world of dance is a topic that is too broad in scope for this paper. From my experiences and the experiences of others who grew up in the same time period, we were virtually excluded from the world of dance. To dance on the Broadway stage was an unfulfilled dream to many of us. Because of our color, not our skills, we could not become a Rockette as it was said that we would spoil the color line.

In conferences when I would make a presentation, they tried their best to uproot me when they learned that I could notate African drum music. They would interrupt my presentation with trivia. Finally, one of the professors stood up and told them to "shut up." The professor added, in his opinion, I had the best presentation in the conference and that he had paid to hear me and not them. The next day I saw the agitators in the hall and they told me "you are good, we could not throw you off your topic." I responded that I thought the purpose of the conference was to share knowledge. I let them know that I did not appreciate what they tried to do.

There are a number of Caucasians who believe that if it is not ballet or modern, then it is not dance. At first, Caucasians did not want anything to do with African dance, but today they are in schools both here and in Africa studying African dance. I do not wish to paint all Caucasians with the same broad stroke of the paintbrush, but some come into class and try to tell the teacher how he should teach the course.

I reiterate to elaborate on this subject would take a few encyclopedias and still not thoroughly explain this attitude. As a pioneer in the post-signing of the Civil Rights Act Movement that brought African Studies into the curriculum, and being involved in music and dance all my life; and as the creator of Greenotation, a novel system for writing African music and aligning it with the corresponding dance movements, I have addressed these issues from experience of having lived, worked, studied and researched these events as they occurred. The majority of my training is first hand, not tertiary. I conclude that I have had the distinct privilege of working with a number of the founders and legends of the post-colonial cultural awakening movement throughout Africa from Tanzania to Senegal.

## **A Few Closing Words**

In conclusion, I state that the sixties was a violent and chaotic decade that brought many changes, particularly in education. Black undergraduate students, on a nationwide basis, called for courses that were relevant to them. After years of protesting, “sit-ins” and a five-month strike, the first Black Studies Department was created at San Francisco State University in 1969. Courses therein included history, politics, literature, religion and sociology.

The east coast was a little behind the west coast in matters Black and African. In fact the movement started in California and eventually worked its way to New York. In 1969 I became the first person to teach African Dance in Brooklyn College, a facility without an African Studies Department. Most of the courses in Black/African Studies programs were taught on the undergraduate level. This left the graduate level barren. At NYU, I was able to introduce African dance on the graduate level by bringing in a personality, directly from Africa, to teach. The students benefited widely from this experience as they learned to play the instruments as well as dance. Therefore, it is my informed opinion that this is the best way to teach African dance. All schools, colleges, and universities should adhere to this format.

Almost two decades later, in 1988, Temple University established a Department of African Studies that led to the doctoral degree. What about the people who were caught up in between? By the mid-seventies, a number of us were approaching middle age and our concern turned to secure jobs that were pensionable. Those of us who followed job security are now retired. Those, who did not, are now over seventy years old struggling to earn a living. They often come to New York City in search of a “gig.” Because they were caught up in between, they purchased doctoral degrees from paper mills, such as Hill University.

It seems to me that Temple University needs to offer African dance with music and notation that leads to the doctoral degree. Colleges such as the CUNY and SUNY complexes need to offer these courses too. I began a program at the University of Ghana to teach the students to write Ghanaian dances on the computer, align it with Greenotation, and to create an archive of notated scores of African music and dance. It was very well received, but the job is not finished.

In the eighties, I collaborated with Mr. Senghor to create an Academy of Performing Arts in Dakar, Senegal. The hub of this facility would be the teaching of Greenotation and Labanotation. The Senegalese musicians welcomed the opportunity to become certified in these programs. A few of Senegal's leading musicians remarked to me that in spite of their talent and skills, some European institutes often asked for written documentation of their skills. This program received the attention of universal organizations for funding. It is unfortunate that the Senegalese government did not follow through. Senegalese living in New York who realized the value of the program, rallied to put the program back on track. Sadly, the leader of this group, who worked for the United Nations, was killed on assignment in Africa. This was a devastating loss to us. The situation in a number of African countries that were once free of conflict, are now besieged with sporadic clashes of violence or coup d'etat.

The situation of African music and dance becomes more beleaguered as time goes by. It has reached the point where it may coax me out of retirement. Hopefully, I will be able to ask a few friends who have the qualifications, to join me so we can accomplish this in the shortest amount of time. With all the technology that is available today, once the initial training and certification is established, subsequent sessions could be done through distant learning. I am only one person and I cannot be in more than one place at a time. I would like to see the realization of my vision of a performing arts academy as part of the CUNY and SUNY complexes as well as other schools, colleges and universities throughout the nation, in concert with African schools, colleges and universities throughout the continent just as the (O.A.U.) Organization of African Unity, recommended upon reviewing my work. This would be the fulfillment of my dream, a dream that the ancestors chose me to do.

Iwo la fi s'agba  
Iwo la fi s'agba  
Iwo la fe se

B'eni kan se kandu, kandu, kandu  
Iwo la fi se

You have been elected as the leader  
You have been elected as the leader  
You are the chosen one.

In spite of rivalry and opposition  
You are the chosen one.

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The voice of the ancestors speaks through the drums. The drums have spoken. They have chosen me. And I answered the “call of the drums”. The ancestors called me to return to Africa to transfer African music and dance into written documents.

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