Flat feet broad mind: Experiencing West African culture through dance

Kathryn Salley Williamson

The University of Montana

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FLAT FEET, BROAD MIND:
Experiencing West African Culture Through Dance

by
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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in Fine Arts in Integrated Arts and Education

The University of Montana

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Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

7-22-05 Date
Flat Feet, Broad Mind: Experiencing West African Culture Through Dance

Chairperson: Dorothy Morrison

Flat Feet, Broad Mind chronicles the experiences of my final Creative Project for the Creative Pulse Master of Arts Program. The project entailed a study of West African culture through dance.

I received an initial taste of West African dance during my first summer as a student in the Creative Pulse Program in 2002, while enrolled in Dorothy Morrison’s West African Drumming Workshop. From this first experience with West African dance, I knew at a deep level that this was something that belonged, something yearned for and missing in my life. After completing courses in the Creative Pulse Program during the following summer and experiencing the West African Drumming Workshop once again, I proposed a study of dance for my final project.

During this study, I attended weekly classes at Bozeman’s Emerson Cultural Center, from February through May and from September through December of 2004. I also grooved down Main Street during the Sweet Pea Parade with a group of eight other women and a decorated float full of drummers and attended workshops with touring masters from West Africa.

It was through the visit of a master drummer that I realized the unexpected opportunity of traveling to Mali, West Africa. I arrived in Mali on January 1, 2005 and spent three weeks dancing and experiencing the culture.

Following my travels in Mali, I visited an elementary school in Livingston, Montana and discussed West African culture with a third grade class before teaching the students one of the dances that I learned during my travels. The students later wanted to perform West African dance for their school-wide talent show, and I returned on several occasions to help them prepare for their performance.

Through my field study of the culture and dance, I found that for West Africans, experiencing music and dance is not merely recreational activity. Drumming and dancing clearly have a seat at the center of West Africa’s culture, seemingly in contrast with the role of music and dance in American culture.
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Intent of the Project

I received an initial taste of West African dance during my first summer as a student in the Creative Pulse Program in 2002. Enrolled in Dorothy Morrison’s West African Drumming Workshop, I enjoyed the interweaving and layering of the rhythms. This polyrhythmic quality of West African drumming highly stimulated my ears, my mind, and my hands, however it was obvious that my entire body yearned for involvement as well.

I was extremely pleased then, when on the third day of the apprenticeship, a dancer made a guest appearance and taught the traditional movements to accompany our newly learned rhythm. The graceful athleticism and high energy of the dance not only incorporated my entire body, but I quickly discovered that it felt GOOD.

Journal Entry, July 3, 2002:

I loved the dancing. It was exasperating, however--so fast. It seems that the drummer could benefit by feeling the rhythms from the perspective of a dancer and vice versa. I wonder if you have to be an expert before you start dancing with a group. I would like to join a West African dance group.

From the very first experience with West African dance, I felt the movements somehow innately embedded inside of me. I knew at a deep level that this was something that belonged, something yearned for and missing in my life, but this desire did not have the space to surface again until the following summer at the Creative Pulse.

Karen Kaufmann’s course on the Kinesthetic Intelligence and her Creative Movement Apprenticeship reminded me of the neglected urge within to dance.
Journal Entry, July 21, 2003:

My body felt awakened, and I celebrated living in it. I remembered how much I love to dance and began formulating an idea for my final creative project.

After this week, my mind was set on dance for my final creative project. I knew that I needed to focus my attention toward incorporating dance in my life on a regular basis.

When I participated in the West African Drumming Workshop during the following week and experienced West African dance once again, I heard the same call from within. I was not surprised to find that the journal entry from that day clearly paralleled the entry from the previous year.

Journal Entry, July 10, 2003:

I loved the dancing today. How do the dancers learn about which moves go with each rhythm? I want to dance with a drumming group. I wonder if there's a group in Bozeman.

I felt the need to pursue West African dance, however my original final creative project proposal took a much broader perspective. I proposed a study of several types of dance...an exploration and comparison of various types of cultural dance. My professors reviewed this proposal and directed me to narrow my study to one or two forms.

Following this advice, I began by exploring a few different dance styles before settling on one.

I attended a Capoeira class in Missoula later that summer. Capoeira originated from slaves in Brazil, who disguised fighting practice as dance. This dance form did not appeal to me. There was less emphasis on graceful movements than on acrobatic feats of which I was not capable. During the fall, I took six weeks of Argentine Tango lessons at
the Emerson Cultural Center in Bozeman. I did not particularly enjoy the instructor’s style, and during these six weeks, I felt that I achieved little progress.

It was during this period of time that I decided to postpone work on my final creative project and by the same token, my graduation from the Creative Pulse Program. I completed a Master of Education in Elementary Curriculum and Instruction during this time and felt that it was better to focus on one task at a time in order to assure quality and sanity.

West African dance was not one of my initial explorations because it was not available in Bozeman, where I live. During this hiatus from the project, dance instructor, Ginny Watts, and lead drummer, Chet Leach, began offering classes in Bozeman. I saw a flyer advertising the classes (Appendix 1) and began attending in February of 2004.
Accomplishments of the Project

Stage 1: Dancing in Bozeman

I attended weekly classes at Bozeman's Emerson Cultural Center (Appendix 2), from February through May and from September through December of 2004. (Classes were not available during the summer months.) Through this participation, I became a member of Bozeman's West African drumming and dance community.

As with the first couple of times that I danced in Dorothy Morrison's West African Drumming Workshop, I often smiled unconsciously and uncontrollably while dancing. When I danced, I felt radiating joy. At first, each class entailed the experience of a new rhythm, never heard before, new steps, never danced before, a fresh experience. Overtime, my ears became more acute to the rhythms. I distinguished between rhythms more easily, recalling their names, their context, and the traditional steps that accompany them. At the end of each class, we formed a circle, in which each person took a turn dancing solo and interacting with the drummers. With more and more experience, I became willing to participate with my full energy and to experiment with the movements.

During the year, I attended workshops with touring masters from West Africa. Abdoul Doumbia, a master drummer from Mali, came to town with his sister, Djeneba, who taught dance. During this visit, I enjoyed observing and learning West African dance from the perspective of a West African. Youssouf Koumbassa, a master dancer from Guinea, also traveled to Bozeman during the Northern Rockies Bioneers Convention (Appendix 3), and Chet delegated me to prepare a meal for him. I felt privileged to spend time with Youssouf outside of class, when I had the opportunity to
ask questions about the dancing, as well as other West African customs.

As a further part of my involvement in Bozeman’s new dancing and drumming scene, I grooved down Main Street in August during the Sweet Pea Parade with a group of eight other women and a decorated float full of drummers (Appendix 4). Many onlookers commented that we were the best entry in the parade, and our energetic participation persuaded many new people to attend weekly classes.
Expected and Unexpected Results

Stage 2: Dancing in West Africa

"But bear in mind that West African drumming [and dancing] is a way of life. Because it is an oral tradition, it is best learned in the traditional way: by living in the culture and studying with a master" (Hartigan, 1995, p. 14).

By November, I felt well on the way to meeting the goals of my final creative project. I was integrating the movement patterns of a symbol system highly different from my own. I was learning about the significance of each rhythm and dance. I was interacting with the local dance community on a weekly basis. On occasions, I was meeting people from this culture—masters of drum and dance—and spending time with them, observing their ways of movement and talk and dress and even their appetite.

It was through the visit of master drummer, Abdoul Doumbia, that I realized the unexpected opportunity to travel to Mali, West Africa. I finished my course work for the M.Ed at Montana State University in December, which left time during the following semester for travel. I even had a savings account reserved for such an adventure. As with the dancing, which felt right from the beginning, the voices within clearly told me that this trip was important to my soul. I was ready to take the next step in my study of West African dance by going there and immersing myself into the culture. I did not realize the adversity I faced from my family and my culture.

I grew up the eldest child in a white, upper class, traditional family in the rural South. This is a place where barriers exist between male and female, rich and poor, white and black. The whole idea of studying West African dance was a joke to my family and the larger culture that raised me.
Behind my back, my mother commented of West African dance, “You know it’s all sexual.” Every time I mentioned the trip to my father, he reverted to highly insulting and unamusing, “Yum, yum, eat ‘em up,” talk and hypothesized of how I would taste in a “missionary stew.” Another friend remarked that my study of West African dance was congruent to the idea of an African traveling to the American South to study square dancing. I tried square dancing more than a few times, and it was great fun. But it simply did not feel as natural, as meaningful, or as joyful as West African dance.

Although sarcastic comments and behaviors told me that my parents opposed my traveling to West Africa due to racial prejudice against blacks, they never directly admitted this reason. Another clearly admitted reason for their opposition was that Mali is a predominantly Muslim country, and my father reminded me, more than once, of course, “We are at war with the Muslims!” Like so many other post 9 – 11 Americans, my parents were afraid for my safety in a Muslim country, and in retrospect, I am embarrassed to admit that their fear crept into my mind as well.

I had the funding necessary to pay for the trip out of my own piggy bank, however I did not want to go against the will of my parents and cause potential long-lasting tumultuous effects. Family dynamics are indeed intricate and difficult at times. Gradually, I won my parents over by conducting and sharing research on Mali from United States governmental websites, by contacting the Malian Embassy in the United States as well as the United States Embassy in Mali, and by connecting my parents via telephone with people who visited Mali in the past.
Finally, my parents gave their blessing, I made plans, and I was on my way. The date was December 31, 2004. In flight across the Atlantic Ocean, I felt as if I was also crossing into the next year and into an unknown world.

Journal Entry, January 1, 2005:

    About one hour into the New Year. In flight from Atlanta to Paris. Seven hours in Paris—then fly to Bamako, Mali, West Africa. I have been feeling a mixture of fear and excitement for my trip to Mali. The folks at home have been so extremely negative about the idea of traveling to a Muslim country. It has definitely worn off on me and worn me down.

After arriving in Mali, I realized that my fears were needless. For the three weeks traveling there, a community of drummers and dancers surrounded the ten Westerners that comprised our group. They embraced us as their own, and we walked arm-in-arm wherever we went. The people of Mali seemed extremely curious at our appearance, but at the same time, they were welcoming and friendly.

Journal Entry, January 5, 2005

    The people here are beautiful. They stare at us wherever we go as we create great contrast in appearance. I take this as an invitation, and my reaction is usually to stare back with equal curiosity. In doing this, I can always find a smile from children and adults, men and women as we pass.

    We danced at least three hours a day beneath the cover of a mango grove’s large curving branches. Each time we danced, crowds of people, gathered around and either cheered or laughed, depending on how well we danced. We also traveled through remote villages and experienced their customs and dances. I was amazed throughout the journey by the way the people of Mali welcomed us to experience their homes and their customs (Appendix 5).
Stage 3: Dancing at East Side Elementary

In March, after returning from Mali, Wendy Heckles, a third grade teacher at East Side Elementary School in Livingston, Montana, invited me to come and speak to her students. I completed my student teaching requirements for a Master of Education degree with her third graders during the previous November, so I was extremely familiar with Wendy and her students. While traveling in Africa, I sent them postcards chronicling my experiences, and I promised to come back to East Side in the Spring to show photographs and discuss Malian culture.

As a surprise, Wendy did not tell the kids when I was coming, so as they returned to the classroom after recess one afternoon, the students swarmed me with hugs. When they all found a seat on the floor, I greeted them in the Bamana language and explained the meanings of the greetings before the kids learned to say the greetings themselves. I then showed and talked about Mali’s location on a map before presenting a PowerPoint of my photographs. Of particular interest to students were photographs of Malian children, their ways of dressing, toys, school, and other daily activities.

Following a discussion of my photographs, I taught the kids, Fanganin, one of the dances I learned in Mali. Before dancing, we talked about the purpose of the dance—to celebrate a successful harvest or victory in war—and we discussed the ironic meaning of the word, Fanganin. Fanganin means “small power,” while the dancers actually perform with much energy and power. I played a recording of traditional music and demonstrated the steps as the students watched and followed my motions. As evident in Appendix 6, the third graders smiled and enjoyed the energy of the dancing while also concentrating
intently and working their hardest to imitate the steps they observed.

About two weeks after I visited the third graders at East Side, Wendy Heckles contacted me once again via e-mail to inform me that her students were still dancing Fanganin steps on the playground, and they enjoyed teaching the dance to many of the other third graders at recess, as well. She told of an upcoming school talent show in May and of how her students wanted to share West African dance with the rest of their school by performing. Naturally, I was thrilled with this proposal, and I agreed to come again to practice with the students during a couple more afternoons. I also agreed to substitute for Wendy during the week of the talent show, while she attended a daughter’s graduation on the East Coast.

Wendy Heckles’s third grade class was the perfect grand finale to East Side Elementary’s talent show. They were all enthusiastic and ready to perform, and the students looked great in their coordinating outfits. Students wore white t-shirts, and I bought and cut colorful, African-style cloth at a local fabric store, which they used as a sash around their waists over their pants. Two students acted as announcers by speaking about the purpose and meaning of Fanganin before the rest of the class began dancing. I sat on the floor in front of the students and directed with my hands to keep them in sync, and I was extremely proud of the progress they made and the energy with which they performed. Afterwards, many of the other teachers commented on the obvious level of teamwork that students contributed to make their performance a success.
Stage 4: Investigating at the Library

After spending multiple days at MSU's and UM's libraries and on the internet, I was discouraged to find that there were not many resources on West African drumming and dance, but especially on West African dance. My search at MSU turned up virtually nothing, and most of the books at University of Montana's Mansfield Library are from the sixties or before and are histories of West Africa, which make reference to Africans as Negroes or colored people. Unfortunately most of these histories either entirely fail to mention or rarely mention drumming and dancing, which left me asking this question, "How could an author adequately approach the topic of West African history without mentioning drumming and dance?" Although some of the books that I found on drumming were helpful, most of these books only briefly mentioned dancing, which left me asking the question, "How could an author adequately approach the topic of West African drumming without covering the importance of the dancing that always accompanies the drumming?"

Frustrations aside, I found some information to appease (but not quench) one of my main research curiosities about the age of West African drumming and dance. According to Esther A. Dagan, author of Drums: The Heartbeat of Africa, the earliest records of West African drumming and dance come from Arab and Greek travelers there. The first recorded account is from a Greek writer named, Hanno, who journeyed down the west coast of Africa twenty-five hundred years ago (1993).
Stage 5: Presenting for the Creative Pulse

As part of the presentation of my final creative project, I assisted Dorothy Morrison with her West African Drumming Workshop on July 5-8, 2005. During this week, Dorothy taught Creative Pulse students a Guinean rhythm, called *Yankadi*, and I helped by teaching the dance that accompanies the rhythm. It seemed quite fitting that I assisted with the part of the course that caused me to become interested in West African dancing at the very beginning of this path.

During this week, on Thursday, July 7, I gave a presentation to Dorothy’s afternoon class, Thinking in Symbol Systems, in the Masquer Theater (Appendix 7). I displayed photographs and video footage of the experiences of my final creative project. I reflected on my interaction with West African dance and its symbolic importance in the culture. But beyond the dance, I discussed the cultural symbols experienced during my travels in Mali. Following this presentation, we moved to the dance studio downstairs, where, with the help of Dorothy and other drummers, I taught *Sinte*, another dance from Guinea, to Creative Pulse students and other audience members.
Significance of the Project: 
A Cultural Study Through Dance

"Africans dance. They dance for joy, and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time....[T]he West African...expresses every emotion with rhythmical bodily movement" (Gorer, 1962, p. 213).

For West Africans, experiencing music and dance is not merely recreational activity. Instead, the culture reveres both drumming and dancing as, “important channels of communication used to express society’s shared values, knowledge and experience” (Dagan, 1993, p. 14). One of the most important cultural values that I observed in Mali was a tightly woven sense of community. The drumming and dancing, as a group activity, expressed and enhanced this value by involving every person present and even by physically circling community members closely together.

In regards to the passage of cultural knowledge through drumming and dancing, each rhythm that I learned and responded to had an appropriate social context. While in Mali, I learned eight different dances and observed many others, each with its own specific purpose during the year. I learned Girin, a rhythm played and danced for marriage ceremonies, Maraka, also played for marriage ceremonies, along with circumcisions, and naming ceremonies, and Fanganin, (as mentioned before) performed after victory in war and successful farming. I learned Mandiyanin, for which dancers travel from village to village at times of special celebrations, Di da Di, also for happy celebrations, Dansa, a moonlight dance, also reserved for after the rainy season and to celebrate the harvest. And finally, I learned Sanke, a festival dance, and Deku Deku, a military rhythm to which the dance steps resembled marching.
Drumming and dancing clearly have a seat at the center of West Africa’s culture, seemingly in contrast with the role of music and dance in American culture, where many people discounted my study of dance as unimportant, and my family mocked my aspirations. Royal Hartigan, a United States citizen, who traveled and studied drumming extensively in Ghana confirms this viewpoint:

Whereas Westerners tend to think of music, dance and art as enriching and uplifting but essentially separate from, even superfluous to the ‘important’ things in life—making a living, finding a partner, raising children and so on—the arts, and music in particular, are deeply integrated into African society and play a vital role in people’s day-to-day lives (1995, p. 8).

Not only does the role of dance within West African culture deviate from our perception of dance in the United States, West Africans have a clearly different style of movement. Perhaps Geoffrey Gorer, author of the book, *Africa Dances*, puts it best as he marvels, “But, alas, dancing is almost as impossible to describe in words as music; what may be enthralling to see may be more than tedious to read of” (1962, p. 220).

Nevertheless, I will attempt to describe West Africa’s style of dancing.

The movements in the dances that I learned and observed entail rhythmical bodily motion, with large sweeping of arms. Dancers have bare feet, and the feet often keep rhythm, as well, by stomping. It is as if by doing so, the dancer draws energy from the ground, which flows up into the rest of the body and extends out of the fingertips. West African dance involves much hip and shoulder movement, and none of the bodily motions are stiff, but are instead, quite loose and flowing. In the West African style, there is a definite “sound and motion extended dialogue” (Dagan, 1993, p. 36) between the drummer and dancer. A playful competition of sorts occurs as the drummer reacts to
the dancer and the dancer to the drummer. Each individual step has its own meaning, depending on the social context of the dance. Common motions often resemble reaching up toward a Creator, pulling something close to the body from far away, sweeping arms out from the body as if giving of oneself, or enacting daily activities, such as hunting and farming. Above all, for West Africans drumming and dancing are sacred acts.
Personal Effects of the Project

"This is the story of how we begin to remember. This is the powerful pulsing of love in the veins. After the dream of falling and calling Your name out, These are the roots of rhythm, and the roots of rhythm remain."

Paul Simon (1986)

As I reflect upon my time in West Africa, I felt present during each moment in a way that I have never before experienced. I attribute this state of mind to the constant bombardment—the sensory and cognitive experience—of a cultural symbol system completely foreign to my own. Throughout my travels, during each moment, I faced the task of taking in and then interpreting, making sense of, the symbols of this new world. A major component of this involved the integration of new symbols through dancing, experiencing fresh movements, which kept me grounded and present within my body.

Another marvelous effect of plunging so deeply into my study of West African dance is that I can finally answer with confidence a question that I previously faced with uncertainty and self-doubt. Why do I choose to study West African culture and a symbolic movement system so foreign to my cultural symbol system? As an art form, I respect the aesthetic appeal of West African dance. But, when I examine more closely, my interest is not quite as foreign as seems be. The rhythm of West Africa “long ago found its way into Western culture and has been transforming the music of the United States, the Caribbean and South America ever since” (Hartigan, 1995, p. 11). The West African rhythms to which I danced shaped the familiar sounds of samba, merengue, reggae, jazz, and even hip-hop and rap, among many others. In my study of West African dance, I am, indeed, studying “the roots of rhythm.”
But much, much more than this, I study West African dance because it feels natural to me. Like no other form of dance I have experienced, my body and my mind exude joy and pure life force when I am dancing. I believe in the spiritual importance of West African drumming and dancing for both inner healing and connecting with a divine source. Not only have my feet physically changed shape, becoming flatter and wider as a result of this project, my mind and my spirit have become intensely broader.
Bibliography


Appendix 1:
Flyer Advertising West African Dance Classes at the Emerson Cultural Center

Rhythms
African & Belly
Dance Classes
Sept. 13 - Dec. 15

Join Ginny Watts for
African Dance Classes
every Monday night
and Belly Dance Classes
every Wednesday night
starting September 13

Class times are 7:30 - 9pm
$12/ drop-in or 10-pack/ $100

Classes meet at the
Rhythms Drum & Dance Store
at the Emerson

For more information call
580-8229
Appendix 2:
Attending West African Dance Classes at the Emerson Cultural Center
Appendix 3:
Attending a Workshop with Master Dancer, Youssouf Koumbassa
Appendix 4:
Dancing in the Sweet Pea Festival Parade
Appendix 5:
Dancing in Mali, West Africa
Appendix 6:
Dancing at East Side Elementary
Appendix 7: Invitation to Final Creative Project Presentation

Presentation • Discussion • Dancing
with Salley Williamson
"Flat Feet, Broad Mind:
Experiencing West African Culture Through Dance"
1:30 PM • July 7, 2005
Masquer Theater, University of Montana