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### Deepening Multicultural Competencies through Immersion in West African Dance Camps

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# Deepening Multicultural Competencies through Immersion in West African Dance Camps

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**ABSTRACT** Dance camps offer opportunities to refine artistic skills, learn complex routines, deepen personal growth, and celebrate movement with like-minded artists. An in-country West African dance camp experience provides an additional opportunity for deepening multicultural competency for both dance teachers and students by drawing on the richness that a culturally immersed exposure entails, by promoting an intentional reflection on our own cultural socialization process, and by taking advantage of concomitantly rich opportunities for emotional and psychological work. A focused desire to acquire and examine the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs necessary to process the complexities inherent in a dance camp experience will facilitate authentic learning and promote a socially conscious attitude. A culturally alert orientation entails an understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of the West African dance teacher, the dance(s) being studied, and personal behavior. A culturally alert orientation transforms and deepens the subjective expression and experience of West African dance.

The following narrative extracted from my journal provides a glimpse into the first two hours in a West African dance camp:

December 31, 2006: "Wow, these guys are serious about drumming," I thought as I rolled my heavy suitcases past several young Guinean men sitting on or positioned next to their djembe drums. The host explained that they were waiting for the sun to rise. Fatigue from the 2:50 a.m. landing in Conakry, Guinea, from JFK compelled me to sleep as soon as my head hit my pillow inside my mosquito net-protected bedding. Thus, I really did not comprehend the frank forewarning that a celebration was about to begin. The second dawn arrived, I burst awake like popcorn from a supine to a half-sitting position, startled and disoriented. Powerful polyrhythmic beats had raced upstairs and jolted me from my slumber. The sounds were at once explosive, riveting, and overwhelmingly beautiful. It was the beginning of the Tabaski celebration, an important religious holiday observed by Muslims in this community. The event respects the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God. The djembe beats transformed my fatigue into curiosity, happiness, and a desire to move. I smiled, "This is a hundred times better than surround sound in a movie theatre." My roommates stirred and the house awakened. So begins my first trip to West Africa, and it was not quite 5:00 a.m.!

My introduction to West African dance came via the culture. The preceding excerpt reflects the interconnections among assumptions, dance, drum, religion, culture, time orientation, personal expectations, and worldview. The men

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used the drum to herald and usher in an important religious celebration. My orientation to M'Bemba Bangoura's dance camp was a transformative cultural experience that solidified my view on the importance of living in and with the community to fully know and feel how dance and drum are embedded, understood, and appreciated in the culture.

The terms *multicultural competency* and *cultural alertness* are often used interchangeably. Multicultural competency comes from acquiring knowledge, skills, behaviors, and abilities that prepare one to be consistently alert to the cultural dimensions of the lives of others (McAuliffe 2008). Multicultural competency and cultural alertness require an intense personal examination of one's socialization process. They require a conscious decision to employ the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills necessary to be an advocate for social change and justice. Best practices in counseling psychology favor aspirational principles that promote a valuing of diversity (American Psychological Association 1993, 2003; Arredondo 1999; Sue 1998; Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis 1992; Sue and Sue 2008). A culturally alert orientation will enhance the standards and practices of dance education programs; an experience of immersion in a West African dance camp is one path toward this aim.

## WHY DANCE EDUCATORS SHOULD BE CULTURALLY ALERT

Simply put, dance educators should be culturally alert so they can communicate understanding of a performance, a dance, or a student's behavior from an unbiased center. In this article, the terms *teacher*, *educator*, *dance educator*, and *dance teacher* refer to persons who are formally or informally engaged in teaching about dance. The terms *dancers*, *dance students*, and *students* refer to persons who are formally or informally engaged in learning about dance. A teacher can also be a student. Cultural alertness requires an educator to examine his or her own culture, values, and beliefs. If one can identify and articulate the nuances and layers of one's own socialization process and culture, then one is in a better position to identify the complex elements of another's culture. Cultural alertness includes examination of personal biases. Bias remains a complex issue in dance (Gottschild 2003, 2004; Hanlon et al. 2010; West 2005). Bias, the tendency or disposition to lean toward a particular perspective that results in viable alternatives or options being overlooked, is particularly complex in dance, where aesthetic judgments form the inspiration for choreography, choice of dancers, costuming, lighting, and many other creative decisions. These predispositions, if left unexamined, could inadvertently harm a relationship, a dancer's aspirations, a

student's sense of self, or the way a dance performance is evaluated.

Dance educators should be culturally alert so they can promote positive emotional health. Dance educators promote emotional health when students see their culture, history, or stories reflected in dance (Hubbard and Sofras 1998). When dance students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are more likely to be active learners (Zavatto and Gabbei 2008). A culturally alert educator employs a culturally relevant curriculum and engages in teaching that promotes emotional health. The result of applying a culturally alert disposition is a strengthening of the student-teacher relationship and the creation of an affirming, inclusive environment. Culturally alert educators proclaim that there is a place for everyone at humanity's table, and they promote accessibility of the dance art form to students who might think it beyond their reach. Culturally alert dance educators strive to do no emotional, psychological, vocational, or spiritual harm to students. In this context, *harm* refers to the unconscious and unintentional ways in which educators can dull aspirations, limit vocational choices, or emotionally damage students by dismissing or diminishing culturally relevant concerns, needs, or experiences of students. If both of these objectives are met—communicating with students from an unbiased center and promoting emotional health by employing a rich, culturally relevant curriculum—then the likelihood of harming a dance student is lessened.

## IDENTITY FRAMES EXPERIENCE, EXPERIENCE FRAMES IDENTITY

Understanding a person's values, beliefs, and attitudes promotes appreciation of that person's worldview and stimulates a compassionate assessment of how that person has adapted to the environment. Therefore, it is important to know the reflective axis that frames and informs this article. Six factors mold my perspective, values, and beliefs about the utility of West African dance camps. These factors culminate in the belief that these camps can deepen multicultural competency. First, my history and identity as an African American provides me a sense of place and pride. West African dance camps connect me to my heritage by broadening my knowledge about West African culture, art, music, beliefs, and traditions. Second, my recent participation in the National Geographic Project scientifically confirmed my suspicions about my heritage. The National Geographic Project examines human DNA to understand humanity's genetic roots (Shreeve 2006). The DNA results traced my ancestors' migratory past to Central and West Africa. Third, my personal experiences with racism in an academic setting contributed to my desire to visit West African dance camps as way to

recharge, reflect, and cope. These personal experiences with racism made me more aware of how systems perpetuate injustice and how passive witnessing is a common reaction. Visits to West African dance camps allowed me to examine how systems of oppression operate in other countries. The reprieves provided emotional distance and promoted reflection from a new angle. Fourth, my professional identity as a counseling psychologist, with training focused on multicultural or culturally alert counseling, provided a stable platform from which to conceptualize the West African dance camp experience. Fifth, in teaching, I encourage students to immerse in another culture and to reflect and self-examine in the process of becoming more culturally alert and competent. Practicing what one professes improves credibility. For example, I complete the projects that I assign to my students. Sixth, my identity as a dancer informs this article. Therefore, I speak from a voice that is passionate about dance and its ability to promote human development and transformation.

Thus, this article reflects the amalgamation of these identities. It reflects my dance training, which has focused primarily on West African dance as the technical epicenter. It praises a cultural immersion methodology that not only enhances learning, but also raises the bar of what it means to be culturally alert. It also presents an advocacy of multicultural competency standards and self-reflective practices that can enhance dance education.

## WEST AFRICAN DANCE CAMPS

From 2006 to 2010 I traveled four times to West Africa, twice to Ghana and twice to Guinea, to study in dance and drum camps with internationally acclaimed master drummers and dancers. *Comprehensive and transformative* best describes these dance and drum education camps. The organizers and leaders of the experience were country nationals and artists, including M'Bemba Bangoura (Guinea), Fode Bangoura (Guinea), Awal Alhassan (Ghana), and Adjety Adjey (Ghana). The experiences included watching rehearsals of junior and national ballets such as Les Ballets Africains and receiving instruction from a current company member. The introduction to and practice of several dances included Baamaya, Kpatsa, Kpanlogo, Fume Fume, Coucou, Lamban, Soli, Sofa, and Sinte. Typically, these camps include several dance and drum classes daily, along with excursions to cultural events and trips to historical sites. Student dancers are encouraged to cross-train by taking drumming lessons and student drummers are encouraged to take dance lessons. When dancers practice the drumming patterns to the dances that they learn, they enrich their physical training, obtain a different perspective of the dance, mentally rehearse movement, and understand how complex rhythms are interwoven into the dance. Many songs, sung in a

call-and-response format, prelude the dance and drumming. Thus, dancers get a vocal, auditory, physical, mental, and educational experience couched within a social-cultural context approximating the rich historical past from which these dances originated.

Dance camp groups varied from large (25 students) to small (as few as three in one group and six in another), and the programs were typically two to three weeks in duration. Regardless of the size of the group, dancers must be willing to stretch mentally, emotionally, and physically—dispositions that deepen multicultural competency—as they sweat and train in these affable dance camps. I also participated in an independent self-study, working one-on-one with a West African dance teacher and drummer. Although the four dance camps (Alhassan 2010; F. Bangoura 2010; M. Bangoura 2010; D. Nyadedzor, personal communication, December 30, 2007) where I studied take the dancer a step closer to the origins of the dance and infinitely expand appreciation of the art, what I present here is neither a consumer rating of each camp experience nor a comparative assessment of the camp programs. In defining West African dance, I recognize and honor both the traditional and contemporary dance expressions taught at these dance camps. This article summarizes my four West African dance camp experiences by discussing the importance of using the dance camp experiences to deepen multicultural competency for dance teachers and students and by suggesting specific strategies to engender a culturally alert learning experience.

## THE POWER OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE CAMPS TO ENHANCE DANCE EDUCATION

Scholarly discourse suggests the existence of racial mythologies, stereotypes, and paradigms that have contributed to an unenlightened and biased view of Africa, African dance, and African peoples (Atencio and Wright 2009; Gottschild 2003; Mills 1997). Several dance scholars (Asante 1998; McCarthy-Brown 2009; Zavatto and Gabbei 2008) advocate a careful examination of multicultural dance education as it relates to curricular issues or teaching. These scholars have suggested specific guidelines for dance students to cultivate a culturally alert synthesis, appreciation, and understanding of dance. This article borrows from the extant literature on multicultural competency (Pope-Davis et al. 2003; Sue 1998) and scholarly discourse about bias related to the viewing of African dance and African people. This article fuses the notion of incorporating multicultural competency tenets to dance students in a West African dance camp for the purpose of enhancing dance education. This work also stems from observations of self, peers, and colleagues at West



African dance camps, as well as a continuing desire to understand African and African American culture.

In the United States, race matters. The master statuses of race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, disability, and religion determine, to a large extent, the type of experience one has in this country. Historically, the majority of ballet dancers and dance majors have self-identified as White and female (Dunning 1985; Montgomery and Robinson 2002). Current statistics confirm that the majority (68.9%) of awards and degrees conferred in dance by Title IV institutions in the United States are earned by White females (Shedd, personal communication, September 13, 2010; U.S. Department of Education 2009). Knowledge of where one identifies on White racial identity development models (Helms 1995; McAuliffe 2008) can help White students to understand why they might fail to challenge racism (in self and others), understand their own defensiveness or openness to discussions of race, and improve personal racial awareness. Black, Asian, and Latino or Hispanic racial identity models (McAuliffe 2008) might also be useful for similar reasons. Racial identity development models are useful in that they provide insight into the sociopolitical influences shaping identity and assist in understanding cross-cultural clashes and misunderstandings. In navigating a completely different culture outside the United States such as a foreign dance camp, information obtained from racial identity development models can increase self-awareness. Self-awareness is vital to cross-cultural competency; it is a prerequisite for doing no harm to others. West (2005) argued that students come to dance self-aware or not: "To the degree that students have negotiated and distilled life experience, social values, and beliefs. . . they come to dance either empowered or vulnerable" (67). Self-awareness is a type of empowerment, whereas lack of self-awareness is a type of vulnerability. A West African dance camp experience, where issues of race, gender, religion, social class, and disability stare the self squarely in the face, can be an avenue to increase self- and other-awareness and propel students toward navigating uncharted, complex layers of identity.

Clemente (2008) supports embracing dance's spiritual dimensions. In African religious practices, dance is one way to connect to the sacred (Begho 1998). An African worldview and much of West African dance affirms an appreciation of spiritual, philosophical, historical, and sociocultural concerns (Asante 1998). Multicultural competency requires an examination of the spiritual dimensions of the self. The study of and participation in West African dance camps is one step toward accepting the transcendental and cosmological elements in an academic environment.

To counter the dance field's marginalization in administration, education, and policy, Risner (2006) favors a "critical mass in terms of instruction, programs, advocacy, populations served, and commensurate

numbers of qualified teachers" (106) in dance education. Creating and integrating West African dance camp experiences and programs across curricula (e.g., African and African American studies, dance, theater, history, politics, study abroad, women's studies, gender studies) might promote movement of dance from the peripheries of study, policy, and research and include dance in assessment, service, and impact evaluation. The opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration, quantitative and qualitative research, integration of spirituality, and pedagogical as well as personal reflection on hegemonic systems of oppression are extensive. Openness to diverse collaborations and varied streams of knowledge promotes multicultural competency and enhances dance education.

Asadata DaFora, a pioneer in adapting West African dance to Western staging (Lacy 2010) in the late 1920s, is relatively unknown for his contributions to modern dance. The laudable work of living West African expert dancers, including Youssouf Koumbassa (Guinea), Nana Yaw Koranteng (Ghana), Habib Iddrisu (Ghana), Moustapha Bangoura (Guinea), Mamadou Dahoue (Ivory Coast), Babacar Mbaye (Sabar), Ismael Kouyate (Guinea), Mamady Sano (Guinea), Biboti Ouikahilo (Ivory Coast), and Yesutor Kotoka (Ghana), remains largely unrecognized outside of West African dance circles. This lack of recognition can be remedied by exposure of students and teachers to West African dance and West African dance artists through West African dance camp experiences.

An immersing West African dance experience presents ample opportunities for dance students to engage in dynamic discovery of the many layers of the self, spiritually, relationally, ethnically, and culturally. An in-country West African dance camp program provides opportunities for interdisciplinary studies and collaboration. A "study abroad" West African dance camp experience presents opportunities to develop an understanding of various forms, styles, and types of West African dance. West African dance camps offer a formal juncture to meet living, expert teachers. When dance students reflect on their cultural socialization process and enter the parallel doors for engaging in emotional and psychological work, they are better equipped to be racially conscious and politically self-reflective social change agents. They can be advocates as dance professionals who nurture the development and training of the next generation of dance students.

## SNAPSHOT OF A DANCE CAMP EXPERIENCE

The following narrative, excerpted from my journal, provides a snapshot of what was learned about culture, politics, social structure, and traditions through immersion in one West African dance camp experience:

The most recent dance camp experience occurred from mid-December 2009 to mid-January 2010. I lived in northern Ghana with the Dagbamba people, in a the city of Tamale, about a ten-hour bus ride from Accra. I lived in a traditional round one-room house with walls made of sand and gravel and plastered with cow dung. Nimsa tree wood, disliked by termites, sheltered the interior walls. (Reportedly, the wood is used with herbs in an anti-malaria remedy.) The home was warmly situated in the Alhassan family compound, a hospitable, closelyknit family group. Of the many beautiful aspects to this compound, one element of note was the fact that a family member was buried between two homes because, after his transition, he wanted to watch his grandchildren and great-grandchildren at play. The importance of ancestors and the belief that spirits live with and among us is a grounding philosophy of the Dagbamba people. I was reminded of this one morning when I entered my dwelling back-first instead of face-first. I was gently told that I should enter the house eyes forward so that I might be aware of spirits in the room or spirits leaving the room. These beliefs stood comfortably with the Islamic practices of the Dagbamba people. Mornings were greeted with inspired calls for *Salatul Fajr* (worship of Allah between the first light of dawn and sunrise), the baying of goats, the tinkering of pots, and the mumblings of children. Via signlanguage I was instructed to perform a ritual that involves cleaning the hands, face, ears, head, mouth, arms, and feet with water before prayer. I participated in sunset prayers, and although I did not understand Arabic, I enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on the day in the company of women. On most days I wore the salga, a traditional head covering worn by married women. I enjoyed the immediate lift in my presumed civil status. However, one day when I nonchalantly went without the salga, I experienced chastisement by a female community member.

I learned the importance of social greeting in this community, which includes kneeling before elders, especially senior men and chiefs, lowering the head, and participating in a call-and-response salutation that ends with a head nod by the elder. I saw things here that I never saw in the United States. For example, I was impressed by children playing with toys that they had ingeniously made with their own hands. I was awestruck watching a man butcher a cow from start to finish and moved by the fact that prayers always initiated the butchering process. What is important to note is that it was from the experience of being immersed in the dance camp, and being an active community participant, that I learned about the culture, traditions, and social structure of the people.

It was in this robust environment that I learned a very popular social dance called Baamaya. Ayettey's (2008) eloquent description of the Baamaya dance is outstanding. Dancing Baamaya in this community, I had a deeper appreciation of the dance's backstory because I was surrounded by the people and the context from which the story arose. According to Ayettey (2008), the dance reminds the community about their attempt to understand and survive a severe drought that occurred in Dagbon over 400 years ago. I visited present-day cultural elements (the chief, the rice farm,

the market, the village) that comprise the backbone of the story. I could visualize how the footwork is connected to the history of the dance. I could imagine the impact of a drought because I visited elder Alhassan's enormous rice farm. For the first time ever, I touched rice grains from the plant. I understood the importance of this staple to the community, as we ate rice with most meals in the dance camp. I watched the dry, dusty earth form in little clouds around us as we danced. I saw villagers enjoy rest in a bit of shade before they carried on with daily chores. I carried water on my head to the family compound. As the impact of a drought became kinesthetically clear, the elements of the dance made more sense to me. This understanding of the culture, politics, social structure, and traditions occurred not through dance itself, but rather through immersion in the West African dance camp.

## PEDAGOGY AT THE DANCE CAMPS

Pedagogical strategies at each dance camp shared commonalities: typically, two dance and two drum classes per weekday. For example, in Northern Ghana the hot, dusty earth was sprayed with water in preparation for more than 120 children who eventually surrounded the circle where dance instruction was held. Instruction began with a warm-up, followed by a breakdown of dance steps, accompanied by music. Songs were learned in a separate class. In the camps I visited, the following pedagogical format was fairly typical: song instruction, drum instruction, learning how song and drum work together, warm-up, explanation of the dance, breaking down of steps, repetition, and improvisation. In deference to local Dagbamba customs, dance attire covered the thigh area.

In both trips to Guinea, where master drummers coordinated the trip, drum classes were emphasized as much as dance classes. A significantly larger drum ensemble accompanied these dance classes, which created an electrifying energy. In Guinea, a member of the national ballet taught the classes. Teachers often offered solo demonstrations of a dance step or phrase so participants could understand the larger picture of the movement before the individual steps were taught.

Dancers learned and practiced in groups, alone, and with the teacher. Some students wrote down the steps. Some students kept journals, and some made audio or visual recordings of the classes and practiced from those images or sounds. Dancers learned by watching teachers, watching junior performances, and watching the national dance company perform or rehearse. Students reflected on their experiences by talking during dinner, journaling, and, in my case, by offering presentations to student groups on return to the United States.

## APPLYING LEARNING AT WEST AFRICAN DANCE CAMPS TO SOCIAL AGENCY

Reflection can lead to learning; learning can lead to change. This section provides specific examples of how learning at the camp connects to being an agent of social change on return to the United States.

In both trips to Ghana, a part of the dance camp experience was a trip to the slave castles. In visiting historical sites such as the Elmina or Cape Coast slave castles in Ghana, dancers might be astounded by the horrific conditions that enslaved Africans were forced to endure prior to embarking on the Middle Passage, and they might be stunned by the extent of some African leaders' complicity and participation in the slave trade. Processing the emotional slave castle experience is an ongoing task. The wisdom gleaned from this experience is unique to each person. Dance students process experiences based on prior information, their racial identity development, and prior self-reflection of their socialization process.

On the US college campus, I use pictures from the slave castles in lectures on race, class, and gender. Images of the trans-Atlantic slave trade have more impact than words alone. When discussing systems of oppression and resilience, images provide a context. When I share this experience, discuss how it fits into US and world history, and connect it to other systems of oppression, I am acting as a social change agent. When I discuss the beauty, history, and meaning of the Baamaya dance and dispell stereotypes commonly voiced by viewers of the dance, I am acting as a social change agent. Many West African dance artists have technical ability, experience, and community stature equivalent to a master's- or doctoral-level artist in the United States but, because they have no Westernized credential after their name, they are often overlooked, underpaid, or devalued when they seek work in North America. Thus, when I help an artist to design a portfolio that will enhance job searches in a Westernized evaluation process, I am acting as a social change agent.

The process of improving one's role as a social change agent can take some unanticipated forms. When I learned to take a bath using only a gallon bucket of water and an eight-ounce cup, I became more aware of growing international and local conflicts regarding water allocation and usage. Now, every time I take a hot shower in the United States, I am aware of my privilege and the luxury of hot water. This awareness of a simple but meaningful privilege is reflected in a wider awareness of more basic and pervasive privileges. Such privileges include American nationality privilege, heterosexual privilege, social class privilege, able-bodied privilege, male privilege, and White privilege (McIntosh 2003). This awareness enhances my work as an agent of social change.

Immersion in dance camps provides an intimate peek into the life of another. It facilitates my work in communicating effectively, valuing differences, and reducing cognitive dissonance. As multicultural competency increases, the ability to act as an agent of social change increases. Like multicultural competency, becoming an agent of social change is a process, not a goal or a fixed point or an empty box to check on a list. Becoming a social change agent is a life-long commitment to stretch oneself for the purposes of promoting equity and engendering consciousness. One ultimate aim of becoming a social change agent is to utilize budding consciousness for service to the individual, community, nation, and humanity.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCY SUGGESTIONS AND SELF-REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

An underutilized resource, West African dance camps provide an excellent opportunity for professional growth. Dancers obtain intensive and specialized dance training and meet nationally recognized masters. West African dance camps provide many opportunities for cultural growth. Dancers can live in diverse communities, and they obtain exposure to language, history, politics, cultural resources, cultural norms, beliefs, art, dress, food, rituals, and habits. West African dance camps provide opportunities for emotional growth in the areas of emotional self-reflection, values clarification, interpersonal communication, and emotion regulation. West African dance camps provide opportunities for growth in the spiritual dimension of identity. Based on a framework promoting multicultural competency, the following list provides noncomprehensive suggestions of professional and personal dispositions that might enhance a culturally alert orientation when immersed in a West African dance camp.

- *Knowledge: Oppressive Practices.* Dancers should possess and enhance knowledge about how oppressive practices such as racism, classism, ageism, weightism, discrimination, and stereotyping affect them personally and understand how these practices have affected the African cultural group and dance that they study. For example, in one trip to West Africa, some members of the group, who were of African descent, experienced discrimination when being served at a local hotel and restaurant by country nationals. Knowledge of the complex ways that colonialism has influenced and continues to affect the perception(s) that Africans have of African Americans, that Africans have of each other, and that Africans have of White foreigners should complement the dance education curriculum.



- *Knowledge: Cultural Context.* In West Africa, there are religious, healing, harvest, marriage, war, mask, initiation rite, funeral, and naming ceremonial dances. At the dance camps, dancers “greet” various types of dances. In these greetings, dancers are exposed to the personality of the dance, its history, and arrangement. Dancers examine how and in what way the cultural context informs the construction and execution of the dance. Dancers examine how the dance conveys information, then and now, about norms related to status, gender, religion, and identity. Dancers examine how dance and drumming help the country’s teachers maintain connections to self, family, community, and identity. This examination of the cultural context of the dance and the meaning of the dance to the country’s teacher promotes a level of intimacy and connectedness that is emotionally enduring.
- *Skills: Body Awareness.* Costuming, lighting, music, environment, and space are important components of dance; these elements support the dancer, the movement of the dancer’s body, and the choreographer’s vision. In West African dance the dancer is often supported by the drum orchestra, song, attire, intention (the spiritual, religious, or community purpose), and community presence. Depending on region, function, and occasion, the dancer’s body might be partially or fully exposed. The eroticization of the human body of Africans in general (Gottschild 2003; Gould 1985) and in African dancers specifically stems from a deep-seated, racist mythology about Black people. Culturally competent dancers must be aware of how their attitudes, values, and biases influence the aesthetic consumption of and the meaning that they ascribe to African art, African dance, and the African body. Dancers should be aware of how movement of the dancer’s body and use of space in West African dance differs from those considerations in other dance forms. Numerous videos (M. Bangoura 2004; Dahoue 2003; Desmond and Gorham 1987; Koranteng 2002; Koumbassa 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Lacy, Adam, and Underwood 2005; Les Ballets Africains and Queensland Performing Arts Trust 1996; Mueller et al. 2007; Nimerichter et al. 2007) provide insight into the movement of the dancer’s body and the use of space in West African dance. Scholars (Green 1998; Kinni-Olusanyin 1998) have written about the aesthetic of dancing to the drum in West African dance. These articles and videos could be part of a predeparture West African dance curriculum. Although Gottschild (2003) provides an excellent summary of the Africanist aesthetic and the Europeanist aesthetic, an excellent topic of discussion for students at a West African dance camp would be how West African dance differs from other dance forms.
- *Skills: Self- and Other-Awareness.* Multicultural competency in both students and teachers includes awareness of how West African teachers are influenced by historical, political, social, and cultural forces and how these dynamics interact with the visiting dance student’s own history, values, politics, and culture. West African dance and drum teachers do more than impart knowledge, share culture, and teach steps. In these dance and drum camps, occurring on African soil, what occurs between a teacher and student is a complex relationship in which the dynamic spirals of postcolonial oppression and resistance, socio-cultural politics, capitalism, and an unbridled love affair with dance coalesce in a spinning mosaic. This is West African dance: a dynamic process, in flux and ever changing. As these country national teachers change, grow, and collide with dynamic forces, so does West African dance. Cultural competency requires an alertness to this process, humility as it unfolds, openness to change, and a genuine curiosity about what it is like to walk, dance, and drum in the footsteps of the “other.”
- *Behavior:* Dance students should be aware of their social impact on others, including how personal values, personal style, and unconscious beliefs can affect communication. For example, in a group meeting with a Ghanaian country national dance teacher, the saying, “If you shake a North American (US), money will fall to the ground” was shared. This claim was fueled by the behavior of some North Americans who visited the country and by Western media sitcoms and videos. The saying implies that North American Westerners are wealthy, consume material goods excessively, and spend money gratuitously. This notion was complicated by the colonial and capitalist history that North American (US) and northern European nations have dominated in the region. Thus, when dance visitors to West African nations give cash gifts—based on a heartfelt desire to help, an unrecognized desire to rescue, or an unconscious attempt to deal with guilt—it leaves a cultural residue that cannot be undone. Like swimming in precious coral reefs, a seemingly innocuous act, like giving cash, has cumulative effects on both the country nationals and subsequent visitors to the country. This behavior can be examined from the worldview of the country national. For example, Ghana’s per-capita gross domestic product in 2008 was \$716 (U.S. Department of State 2008) and one of its major industries is tourism. Thus, using an emic or country national perspective, one can compassionately understand one West African’s view of Westerners. Using a nonjudgmental attitude and engaging in critical and dispassionate reflection, dance students can generate a deeper awareness of their behavior and social impact on others.



- *Skills: Reflection on the Country National's Perspective.* Country national teachers are processing their experiences of dance visitors, just as the visitors are processing their experiences of the teachers. Many factors impact country national teachers: the desire to provide for family at home and abroad; for some, desperate attempts to escape poverty; the balancing of multiple identities; ongoing racism in the United States and in their home country; immigration issues; sociopolitical changes; and institutional oppression. Thus, dance students could benefit from dialogue with country national teachers about the challenges that the country nationals face as educators, musicians, breadwinners, and (for some) expatriots. As country national teachers process their reactions to these issues, they also process their reactions to ongoing experiences with the visiting dance students. For example, one country national teacher spoke about the behavior of one of his dance students who, despite admonitions to the contrary, wore skirts above the knee in his Muslim community. Another teacher spoke about a male student who fell in love with a country national and chose to stay with her. Appreciating the country national's history, respecting the teacher's perspective, and reflecting on multiple identities can strengthen the student-teacher relationship and enhance the dance camp experience.
- *Skills: Reflective Practices.* It is suggested that, to consolidate these experiences, the participant in the West African dance camp keep a journal, openly discuss concerns, encourage processing of emotional responses, note discoveries and surprises, and mark lessons learned. Dance camp participants can give oral presentations about the experience when they return home, reflecting as much on the emotional element of the experience as on the educational component. Such presentations should include sharing assumptions and biases. The journal should be reviewed periodically to examine whether personal beliefs have changed over time.

## SELF-REFLECTION: THE JOURNAL ENTRY

Integrating cognitive and affective assignments into all aspects of the curriculum can work to increase cultural competence (Spanierman et al. 2008). Affective assignments include regular journaling, pair sharing, and small-group activities. Assignments such as reflective journaling permit exploration about one's own cultural or ethnic group identity. It is important that dance educators honor what dance students share. The following excerpts are from the journal that the author kept during her first dance camp trip to Guinea, West Africa.

January 2, 2007. Had first dance class today. Several times held back my tears of joy. I know my grandmother is dancing with me. Great-great-great-grandmother and all my ancestors, hear my call! I celebrate my homecoming.

January 14, 2007. 7 a.m. I went for a quiet and lovely walk this morning in the area near the hotel Le Flamboyant in Kindia. . . . The countryside was beautiful: tropical trees, papaya, tall and short grasses. . . . The air was cleaner here than in the coastal city. I saw a woman fetching water, men on bikes that looked like they were manufactured decades ago, and several motorcycles. I stood for a long while just looking up at the sky, the sun, the birds, listening to the sounds, watching the water, thinking of my maternal ancestral past. Was she taken by Europeans? Did she duck low in the grass like a deer, hoping to hide? How did she come to the US? Was she sold to another family in Africa first? I stood next to high grass and imagined what it might have looked and sounded like—the capture. How frightened she must have been! I paused in the silence, at the happiness and sadness to be back home—at least on the continent where the old home is somewhere, perhaps deeper within Africa, but nearby, nearer than I have ever been. I wept for my past, my ancestors, and for the present. AND THIS TOO is so bittersweet. It was a slow . . . walk. I continued up to the highway and felt cars speed by.

The following journal entry has no date but was written on the plane in January 2007 while returning to the United States.

Dear Great-Great-Great-Great-Great. . . Grandmother  
 My eyes scan a blue sky  
 Your eyes glimpse a blue sky  
 My choice now  
 You're forced then  
 To cross the sea  
 I fly above  
 You lay cramped below  
 The vast cold sea  
 I in this cabin, with meal and a space  
 A voyage of speed  
 You below in a cramped cabin  
 A voyage of months  
 My turbulents: wind  
 Your turbulents: waves  
 As we cross  
 Do you see? Me?  
 For I think often of you  
 Thank you Grandmother

These journal entries reflect my history as an African American and my reflections on my ancestral past. These entries reflect my desire to follow up on my genographic DNA results and check out how I feel about being “in the neighborhood” of my maternal ancestors. These entries reflect my values and beliefs. When I dance, I dance for, to, and with my ancestors. The notion of connecting to spirit in the dance and the Afrocentric value of ancestral veneration seems “just right” to me.

The immersion experience of the West African dance camps validated my beliefs. Dance educators

who take students for an immersion experience in West Africa should not focus solely on what was learned about the culture, politics, social structure, and tradition through dance. They must encourage students to examine what was learned about the culture, politics, social structure and tradition, and self through immersion in the dance camp experience. Dance educators must encourage students to self-reflect. Multicultural competency requires a thorough examination of what “makes one tick.” Like peeling an onion, multicultural competency requires examination of multiple layers of identity, including one’s spiritual identity, ancestral identity, and emotional identity. It also implies having a clear sense of one’s values, beliefs, and biases. Immersion in dance camps provides an opportunity for personal growth because it includes dynamic opportunities for self-discovery, learning, and reflection in all of these areas.

### IMMERSION FOR ALL

The North American, Philadelphia-based, KùlùMèlé African Dance and Drum Ensemble completed a residency in Guinea. The dancers remarked that being there “helped put the ballet in context” (Croft 2009). A telephone conversation with Ms. Dorothy Wilkie, artistic director of KùlùMèlé, clarified that being in Guinea had helped put in context the *Mali Saïdo*, a ballet that tells a story through dance, song, and drumming. She noted that the term *ballet* is used because the dance is a play (Wilkie, personal communication, September 3, 2010). Like KùlùMèlé, private dance schools, dance educators, and community dance organizations can benefit from an immersed dance camp experience. Integrating with international education and study abroad programs, as well as race, gender, or women’s studies programs, dance majors can take advantage of a study abroad trip similar to that offered to students in other majors, such as language, history, literature, and political science. An interdisciplinary program would allow dance students the opportunity to learn from peers with whom they might not ordinarily come into contact, thus minimizing some of the isolation common to dance teachers and students in upper level courses at secondary and postsecondary institutions. High school summer study abroad programs might allow students to experience a West African dance camp.

In a global economy and an increasingly complex world, merely exposing students to culture does not make them multicultural. Learning about cultures through dance does not necessarily result in an immediate valuing of diversity. Educators cannot assume that exposure to culture alone will lead to a transformative shift in thinking or behavior. Dance educators must help dance students to think about and process immersion experiences in a profound way;

they must help dance students to reflect on their personal assumptions and attitudes while living in another culture. Such reflection enriches the dance curriculum and supports the dance educator’s role as a social and emotional change agent.

Biases, prejudices, assumptions, and beliefs travel in the neurocircuitry streams of the amygdala, the resting place for emotions (Goleman 1997). Processing the emotional responses to “-isms,” focused journaling, and increasing awareness and knowledge are components of enhancing this culturally alert process (Carter 2003; Spanierman et al. 2008). It is not too much to ask dance educators to employ what they know about becoming culturally alert and unlearning prejudice in the service of promoting more socially conscious dance students. Cultural competency is a process, not a goal, a fixed point, or an empty box to check on a list. Cultural competency is a lifelong commitment to stretch oneself for the purposes of deeply connecting with another. The consideration of a meticulously planned and pedagogically sound dance immersion experience, such as a West African dance camp, is a commitment to social justice, equity, and culturally responsible critical self-reflection.

### TRAVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Well-intentioned plans are not immune to glitches. At the end of my first dance camp trip to Guinea in 2007, I observed a trace of political riots and social unrest; at the beginning of my second trip to Guinea in 2009 I beheld the death of President Lasana Conte and the assumption of power by Captain M. D. Camera in a bloodless military coup. It would be grossly inappropriate to deny that safety and security issues might dampen an overseas immersion experience; however, connection with US embassies, reviewing State Department travel advisories, and enlisting other safety precautions can enhance the safety of the journey. Impediments to an immersed West African dance camp experience might include cost, vaccination requirements, fear of flying, lack of emotional maturity, cognitive resistance, or lack of institutional support. Responses to these obstacles include the observation that, other than airfare, on average, the cost of a day in the West African dance camps I visited was far less than that of a comparable program in the United States. Vaccinations can be expensive but illnesses that might result from failure to be inoculated could consume far more time and financial resources. Some insurance programs cover the cost of medications, such as for malaria prophylaxis, and some vaccinations last many years. A baseline level of emotional maturity is required; younger student populations, such as high school students, might require increased adult supervision.

## SUMMARY

When one combines the dispositions of knowledge, self- and other-awareness, behavior, and reflection, coupled with the opportunity to learn and improve performance of West African dance, couched in an Afrocentric context, one can create an educational experience that is truly transformative. In this environment of immersion, dance is not an object of study; rather, dance becomes a cognitive, affective, and behavioral experience enhanced via a relationship with a country national teacher. In this environment, coupled with a culturally alert disposition, the stage is set for a dancer to have a culturally transformative experience, the essence of West African dance. These overseas dance camps can enhance the experience of all dancers and promote academic rigor that contributes to the formation of lifelong learners committed to social justice, equity, and cultural democracy.

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