

Stepping into new places: Migration of traditional Ghanaian dance forms from rural spaces to urban pedagogical stages

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Abstract

In the past, traditional Ghanaian dance forms were exclusively performed in rural communities and within specific contexts that produced and sustained them. Today, however, performances of these dance forms also occur in many more locations, and such performances are on the increase. What accounts for the movement of these dance forms from rural spaces to urban pedagogical stages, where the latter refers to different types of teaching/learning environments? Drawing from concepts in rural-urban migration, I conceptualize traditional Ghanaian dance forms as an entity capable of moving freely, just as people do, from one geographic location and pedagogical context to another. Within this concept, the first section of this paper discusses the political impetus from both colonial and post-colonial governments for initial migration of traditional Ghanaian dance forms from rural spaces to urban pedagogical stages. The second section looks at the emergence of these numerous urban pedagogical stages resulting from the initial migration of traditional Ghanaian dances, whose purpose was shifted with a subsequent change in pedagogy. It also discusses how migration of traditional Ghanaian dances from rural to urban settings has made them less the expressed culture of a small community, and more an expression of a national culture, creating a sense of a unified nation state. The last section of the paper addresses how rural-urban migration of traditional Ghanaian dances has brought about a significant positive transformation of the dance scene in Ghana. Here I focus on how tradition, which is imagined as definite and unchanging, lends itself as a transformative tool.

Keywords: Ghanaian, traditional dance, tradition, migration, urban pedagogical stage

Introduction

As the sun moves gracefully across the sky to its place of rest, making way for the moon to display its splendor, rhythms from high, medium, and low-pitched drums blend with sounds from rattles, bells, and shakers, filling the atmosphere with melodious music. Emerging from all corners of the village, adults, youth, children, and even babies make their way to the celebration grounds to participate in music-making and dancing. This marks a typical scene in most traditional communities in Ghana, a country in the western part of Africa. (Beatrice Ayi, 2012)

Traditional music-making and dancing pervades most rural communities in Ghana. To the Ghanaian, and African in general, dance is a way of life. Kwabena N. Bame (1991) notes that:

Dance forms an integral part of all important facets of [an African's] life: he dances when a baby is born, and when he conducts puberty rites, he dances during marriage and funeral celebrations, religious ceremonies, festivals, and recreation after a day's hard work. (p. 7)

In the past, traditional dancing occurred exclusively in rural communities, and within specific contexts that produced and sustained them. Today, however, performances of these dance forms also occur in many more locations. Drawing from concepts in rural-urban migration, I conceptualize traditional Ghanaian dance forms as an entity capable of moving freely just as people do, from one geographic location and pedagogical context to another. Within this concept, the first section of this paper discusses the political impetus from both colonial and post-colonial governments for initial migration of traditional Ghanaian dance forms from rural spaces to urban pedagogical stages, where the latter refers to different kinds of teaching/learning environments. The second section looks at the emergence of numerous urban pedagogical stages resulting from the initial migration of traditional Ghanaian dance, whose purpose was shifted with a consequent change in pedagogy from instruction through an informal public and communal celebration, to a formal class taught by an individual teacher. Furthermore, it discusses how migration of traditional Ghanaian dances has made them less the expressed culture of a small community, and more of an expression of a national culture, creating a sense of a unified nation state that appreciates its dance forms as symbols of national identity and heritage. The last section of the paper addresses how rural to urban migration of traditional dances has brought about a significant positive transformation of the dance scene in Ghana. Here, I focus on how tradition, which is imagined as definite and unchanging, lends itself as a transformative tool. Nevertheless, issues and questions about dance pedagogy as a result of migration remain to be addressed.

The genesis: Rural-urban migration and the impact of colonial and post-colonial political aspirations on traditional Ghanaian dance forms

Rural-urban movement is the most prevalent type of internal migration in Ghana (Owusu, 1991). Even though there are numerous factors, such as lack of good economic opportunities and peer influence, which may cause rural-urban migration in Ghana, infrastructural development such as roads and telecommunication tend to be at the core of such movements. Rural-urban migration in Ghana is thus made possible primarily by the availability of opportunities that support it. Relating this idea of the connection between availability of opportunity and rural-urban migration, traditional Ghanaian dance, as an entity, did not hesitate when colonial and post-colonial governments of Ghana provided an opportunity for it to migrate.

The colonial era in Gold Coast¹ saw many traditions slide into obscurity, as various institutions made efforts to dissuade the people from engaging in them. Commenting on this occurrence, Kariamu Welsh also notes that many “attempts were made by the British colonial government and foreign missionaries to discourage cultural practices” (2008, p. 25) in Gold Coast. Traditional dancing, which happened to be at the center of all ceremonial practices in rural communities, was misinterpreted as being evil on both religious and secular moral grounds. Despite this pejorative positioning of cultural practices, which includes dance, Cati Coe (2005) mentions that the colonial government “came to see African traditions as the basis on which the progress of the nation could be built” (p. 58). In view of this, the teaching of “a selected and reified African culture” (Coe, 2005, p. 57) was introduced as an extracurricular activity in some

¹ Gold Coast was a colony under British government until 1957, when it gained independence and was renamed Ghana.

missionary schools in Gold Coast.² Additionally, aspirations of the British to continually govern the Gold Coast through indirect rule, coupled with pressure from elite natives, resulted in the establishment of Achimota College in Accra,³ and traditional dances were taught as an extracurricular activity. This marked the beginning of migration of traditional dances from rural to urban pedagogical settings. Achimota College offered “African education” (Coe, 2005, p. 57) to the children of elite natives with the hope of nurturing future African leaders who would be in touch with their cultural roots, as well as have respect for both local authorities (chiefs) and the British colonial government. Many African leaders were nurtured at Achimota College,⁴ and a couple of them, including Kwame Nkrumah, together with other nationalists, fought for the independence of Gold coast.

When Gold Coast gained independence in 1957 and was renamed Ghana, its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was faced with the challenge of governing a country that had been tribally divided due to British colonial rule. In his aspirations to unite Ghanaians and create a national identity, to foster a successful government, and to propagate his idea of African personality, Nkrumah turned to the culture of the people, and specifically to traditional music and dance forms. In 1961, he called for the establishment of two institutes: the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana and the Institute of Arts and Culture in Accra. After a year, IAS created the Ghana Dance Ensemble, and 13 young adults recruited into the company became the first group of students in the dance certificate and diploma programs run by the Institute.⁵ Local priests, master drummers, and traditional dancers from rural communities were invited to instruct and interact with the students. Upon completion of the program, the graduates were made responsible for training generations of students for teaching professions in dance and culture, and this formal way of positioning traditional Ghanaian dance forms facilitated their further migration.

² The selected aspects of culture taught as extracurricular activities in missionary schools were Ghanaian languages and customs. Achimota College was the only government school that focused on music and dance.

³ Accra served as the capital of the Gold Coast from 1877 to 1957 under British colonial rule, and has continued to be the economic and administrative hub since Ghana gained independence.

⁴ Since its establishment in 1924, Achimota College has educated many Ghanaian leaders, some of whom have held the highest office of the homeland: Head of State. They include Kwame Nkrumah, Jerry John Rawlings, John Evans Atta Mills, and the current president, John Dramani Mahama. Other African leaders educated at Achimota include Robert Mugabe (President of Zimbabwe) and Sir Dawda Jawara (former president of Gambia).

⁵ After a year of its establishment, IAS created the GDE, and a section to run certificate and degree programs in dance. A couple of years later, this section was developed into a School of Music, Dance, and Drama. The school later changed its name to School of Performing Arts and currently has three departments: the Department of Music, the Department of Theatre Arts, and the Department of Dance Studies. The Department of Dance Studies currently offers programs in Bachelor of Arts and Fine Arts, Master of Arts, and Master of Philosophy in Dance.

The exodus: Shift of traditional Ghanaian dances and the emerging of urban pedagogical stages

With the shift of traditional Ghanaian dances from rural to urban settings, there has been a corresponding change in the instruction process, and urban pedagogical stages or environments have emerged. Unlike the informal and communal way of instruction in rural areas, which was, and is currently done through observation and participation in community dance celebrations on occasions such as traditional festivals and life-cycle ceremonies, dance pedagogy in urban settings is formal and usually carried out by an individual teacher who devises their own teaching procedures. Thus, many individually instructed urban pedagogical stages, or environments, began to emerge.

Proliferation of pedagogical stages was reinforced by the Ministry of Education's introduction of the Curriculum Enrichment Programme (CEP) in 1983, to "institutionalize the teaching of culture [including dance] in schools" (Coe, 2005, p. 76), as an extracurricular activity and also as a way of expanding Nkrumah's aspirations for national identity. Under this program, all primary, junior, and senior secondary schools were expected to teach traditional Ghanaian dance forms as part of extracurricular activities. Coe notes, however, that under the CEP, most teachers who had no formal training in traditional Ghanaian dances depended on their own initiative since there was no syllabus, and the Ministry of Education only made suggestions. Being an extracurricular activity, traditional dance was not considered an examination subject, therefore, some schools paid no attention to it. In 1987, the Ministry of Education stepped in and provided some support for acquisition of materials, and cultural studies (including dance) finally became a core school subject nationwide, resulting in a further increase of what I call "individually instructed urban pedagogical stages or environments." However, the increase in urban pedagogical stages cannot be solely attributed to the Ministry of Education's CEP since numerous non-governmental amateur and professional dance companies, such as Saakumu Dance Troupe, Kusun Ensemble, Odehe Dance Company, Tiyumba Dance Company, Kusum Gboo Dance Ensemble, just to name a few, also engage in teaching traditional Ghanaian dance forms at various locations, including their rehearsal premises and individual homes. Several non-governmental dance schools, including Odehe Centre, Bizung School of Music and Dance, and Tiyumba African Drum and Dance School, have also been established in the last three decades. With the upsurge in urban pedagogical stages, there is a corresponding increase in opportunities for different Ghanaian dances to be displayed and taught, allowing many more dances to migrate from rural to urban pedagogical environments.

Information from preliminary investigations I conducted in the past year, towards a doctoral dissertation, reveals that teaching Ghanaian dance forms outside the original rural contexts in which they were developed is challenging. For example, participants talked about the difficulty of teaching without the necessary traditional instrumental accompaniment. As a university dance instructor, both in Ghana and in the United States, I have also experienced and observed some difficulty associated with teaching in individually instructed urban pedagogical environments. First, the teacher needs to create a cultural context that is as engaging as the life-giving nature of a rural one, to make the dance form relevant to the students and also give it "life" in an urban pedagogical environment. Additionally, some traditional Ghanaian dances incorporate personal expression and improvisation within the structure of the dance, resulting in creating variations of the identifying nature of the dance form. However, the teacher, instructing alone in the urban

setting, makes conscious and unconscious decisions about how to express the traditional essence of the dance. In this situation students are exposed to only one expression of the dance form, as opposed to the rural setting where members of the community display multiple variations. At the tertiary level where I teach in Ghana, however, I am fortunate to have two or three graduate teaching assistants assigned to my class, and thus as a community of instructors, we offer my students some variations of the essence of the dance forms we teach. This is not the case at both the primary and secondary levels where dance is taught in Ghana.

Despite the difficulties associated with teaching in urban pedagogical environments, to my mind, the outcome is worth celebrating. The continuous commitment to teaching traditional Ghanaian dance forms has offered children and youth an opportunity to experience dance traditions of Ghana, as well as gain adequate knowledge to perform. Traditional drumming and dancing is now more available to schoolchildren and teachers, and “takes place most comfortably outside the normal schedule of the school, in Saturday-night or afterschool entertainments, and in annual national and school celebrations such as Independence Day and prize-giving day” (Coe, 2005, p. 83). By performing on numerous occasions for the larger urban Ghanaian audiences, children and youth complement the efforts made by the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ghana’s oldest and premiere dance company, and many other professional dance groups who showcase various traditional Ghanaian dances on public performance stages. The collective efforts of school children and professional companies have earned traditional dances a place in the hearts of many Ghanaians. Traditional dances are appreciated as a symbol of national identity, and are now “shared with pride under the umbrella of being a Ghanaian citizen” (Romain, 2002, p. 11).

The transformation: Involvement of youth and children in the emerging of a new dance scene

The life of any tradition is tied to its perpetuation, not in a manner that suggests traditionalism or conventionality, but rather one that celebrates tradition for what it is and what it offers. Jaroslav Pelikan (1984), a historian of Christian traditions, writes that “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (p. 65). By this distinction, Pelikan hints at an important point: a tradition that is full of life has the “capacity to develop while still maintaining its identity and continuity” (p. 58). Development and continuity are thus vital to tradition, without which it could slip into traditionalism.

I believe that Pelikan’s (1984) thoughts apply to the Ghanaian dance tradition because a dance tradition that has no hope of continuity is headed in the direction of extinction. The life of the Ghanaian dance tradition is tied to its perpetuation from one generation to the next. In Ghana, most traditional communities consider the younger generation the future custodians of dance traditions of their specific community. Bame (1991) writes that adults in rural communities in Africa (including Ghana) “begin to teach their children how to dance early in life” (p. 8) so that they will be skilled dancers in the future and be able to carry on cultural celebrations through their dancing. Similarly, development in Ghana’s educational system provides an avenue for teaching traditional dances in academic settings. In my view, this complements efforts made by adults in rural communities in equipping the Ghanaian youth with knowledge to move their cultural traditions forward into the future. Thus, academic institutions in Ghana could today be considered “new rural communities.”

With the inclusion of cultural studies in the curricula of primary, junior, and senior secondary schools, the youth of Ghana engage in the perpetuation of traditional Ghanaian dance forms not only to learn the dance forms from the various regions in Ghana, but as Coe (2005) mentions, to also “participate in the state’s effort to maintain and promote national culture” (p. 160). This occurs through inter-school cultural competitions, held on district, regional, and national levels, in which I have occasionally served as either a resource person or as an adjudicator. In my observation, these competitions create communal dance celebrations just like the ones created in the rural communities during ceremonial events.

As a dance teacher and resource person, I have observed that the involvement of youth and children in the perpetuation of traditional dance has resulted in a significant change in the world of dance in Ghana, both in schools and in the larger community. Today, traditional Ghanaian dances are performed on all occasions in academic institutions, from Speech and Prize Giving Day celebrations in primary, junior, and senior high schools, to matriculation and graduation in universities and colleges. In addition, dignitaries visiting Ghana are most often welcomed at the airport by young professional dancers performing the rich cultural dance heritage of Ghana. Furthermore, hotels in the big cities also engage dance groups, usually made up of youth and young adults, to put up performances to liven up their weekends, as well as entertain local and international guests.

Drawing from Felch’s (2005) idea of tradition as a “vital force that propels [new development] into existence” (p. 55), and Pelikan’s (1984) concept of tradition, as discussed above, I propose that the dance traditions of Ghana, made vibrant by the youth of Ghana and numerous dance groups, are a vital force that affects change. Although these dance traditions maintain their identity and continuity and so seem to be fairly unchanging,⁶ considering the enthusiasm surrounding the performance of dances from different regions in Ghana, and the positive responses from Ghanaian audiences, I propose that traditional Ghanaian dances as cultural tools have changed a tribally divided nation into a unified one. My proposition is in agreement with a view expressed by Albert Mawere Opoku, founder and first artistic director of Ghana’s Dance Ensemble, and captured by Coe. According to Coe, Opoku was of the view that “Nkrumah focused on promoting dancing and drumming because it appealed to Ghanaians across linguistic and ethnic boundaries; [he] himself considered it an ideal tool for creating national unity” (p. 62).

Reconsidering the shift of traditional Ghanaian dances and emergence of urban pedagogical stages: Issues and questions

Migration of traditional Ghanaian dances from rural spaces to urban pedagogical stages has produced a significant change in the world of dance in Ghana. Children and youth in schools in urban and in some sub-urban areas enjoy the sense of national pride in the new dance world by being part of annual national events, and district, regional, and national cultural competitions. Ironically, children and youth in schools in most rural communities where traditional dances were created do not have the opportunity to enjoy the sense of national pride in the new dance

⁶ Edward Shils, a sociologist, and David Gross, a historian, both discuss *Tradition* as stable and fairly unchanging. See *Tradition* by Shils (1981), and *The past in ruins: Tradition and the critique of modernity* by Gross (1992).

world. How can children and youth in rural communities be provided with opportunities that give them that same sense of national pride? I am mindful of the fact that transporting the children and youth from rural to urban and sub-urban areas is beyond the means of schools, and Ministry of Education subventions are minimal. Perhaps calling on traditional authorities nationwide for support may help address this issue.

Teaching traditional Ghanaian dances at any level, but more especially at the primary, junior, and senior secondary levels, has always been difficult. As discussed in this paper, one of the issues touches on the improvisational and expressive characteristics of traditional Ghanaian dances, which create variations of the essence of the dance and makes it appealing and engaging. In what ways can a teacher, instructing alone in a formal pedagogical environment, provide variations of the essence of the dance? Perhaps an option to address this issue might be to re-visit the present school timetable and reschedule classes in traditional Ghanaian dances to allow team-teaching. In this way, a community of instructors could be created, and this might become a principle for teaching traditional Ghanaian dances in pedagogical environments.

Studies conducted on migration indicate that belonging and identity are important to migrants.⁷ What identity does traditional dance, as an entity, take on when it migrates to urban pedagogical stages? In what way does it feel a sense of belonging? It is my hope that these questions will find some answers in the not too distant future.

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⁷ Studies conducted on types of, and reasons for, migration in different countries indicate that migrants often draw on their cultural symbols to create an identity and a "home" (a place where they feel a sense of belonging). Music and dance tend to be the key cultural symbols used by migrants, and people who never made time to learn about these art forms while living at home get deeply engaged with them in a foreign land.

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